Introduction

‘Industrial film’ is rich with surprise, and its share of paradox. To the uninitiated, the very words (rather like ‘business archives’) suggest dust and boredom; yet sceptics can fast become zealous converts when shown actual examples. Normally ephemeral in origin, a good, and even a bad, industrial film can exert truly timeless appeal. Often doggedly practical, it can yet intrigue the most abstract of intellects. An adequate understanding of its meaning can prove as stubbornly difficult to grasp as its outward form is apparently simple to perceive. And the history of all these films put together presents us at once with epic sweep and the dazzling detail of myriad micro-studies. Last but not least, a pattern familiar to archivists: the scale of the surviving artefacts is in inverse proportion to the level of close attention they have attracted. The industrial film was, and remains, an exceptionally prevalent form, yet only recently have systematic attempts to understand it begun.

This article marries a high-level summary of the history of industrial film in Britain, citing topics meriting further research, with a similarly broad analysis of the archival issues that this history has bequeathed. Informing both strands is an acute sense of what has been most missing from approaches taken to date: a synthesis of perspectives mirroring the very synthesis on which the filmmaking itself is predicated. An industrial film is the product of a relationship between a client (a corporation through its representative) and a supplier (the designated filmmaker, who may or may not be a professional, and may or may not be part of the same organisation). So the wider story of industrial films is the product of the history of business and industry at large coalescing with the evolution of the film medium itself: its technology, its culture and, not least, its own industrial set-up.

Despite the obviousness of these facts, retrospective scrutiny of the industrial film has usually been either from the business-centric perspective or, more often, from the filmic one, rarely synthesising the two. Business historians, if considering films at all, tend to assess individual cases only,
risking misunderstanding the scope and constraints of film at the time of their production. Film historians, conversely, have underplayed the importance of commissioning organisations and have too often appreciated industrial films not on their own terms, but for their position within received histories of film more generally. This has caused gaps and distortions. The good news is that there remains plenty of time for historians of different fields to share analytic tools and pool insights. Correspondingly, when grappling with pressing practical implications, the corporate archivist and the moving image archivist stand to benefit from collaboration: increasingly so, as both struggle with falling funding.

**Terminology and scope**

Study of industrial film further struggles with problems of definition and ambiguous terms of reference. Does ‘industrial’ in this context refer primarily to a film’s subject matter or circumstances of production and distribution? We lean heavily to the latter position, meaning, for instance, that a television documentary shot inside a steelworks does not qualify as an industrial film proper, while a documentary or a drama whose on-screen subject is but loosely connected to, but which was entirely funded by, a corporation does make the grade. As does a film expressly designed for use by industrialists even if not commissioned by them.

The problem for this view is that ‘the industrial’ was a term familiar to the early film trade, for whom it did clearly imply industrial subjects, even if not industrially commissioned or used. Further, these ‘industrials’ exerted great influence over the form and content of later films that do conform to the more precise definition. Another difficulty is the common connotation of ‘industry’ with some, rather than with all, economic sectors. For our purposes, any industry, heavy or light, blue collar or white, may be associated with industrial film. Most industries have been. But across much of the mid-twentieth century, ‘sponsored film’ was the term that encompassed this full range of commissioning. Industrial film meant for many a mere subset, concerned with heavier industries. Further complicating matters, sponsored film, so far as the movie business was concerned, was at this stage a virtual synonym for documentary: sponsorship then being the default funding model for documentary films, as opposed to documentary television funded by its broadcasters. Another challenge is to relate and demarcate the industrial film and the commercial. At a relatively early stage, screen advertising developed into a distinct cultural form and virtually an industry in its own right. Finally, innumerable
films, that are not adverts, continue to be ‘sponsored’ by British industry, yet all three terms, ‘sponsored’, ‘industrial’ and ‘documentary’ have ceased to be applied to them since the late 1970s. The disappearance of that once prevalent term, industrial film, except when referring to past production, partly reflects the decline of those very sectors connoted by ‘industrial’: Britain’s manufacturing base. It also reflects a change of medium. ‘Corporate video’ is the familiar common term for today’s industrial film, though one unloved by its producers, aware of its pejorative associations. Practitioners prefer, simply, ‘visual communications’. But in one last semantic twist, these are understood to include other media besides recorded moving image. On such shifting ground, the best we can aim for is to balance rigour, pragmatism and as much elegance as we can muster: a trade-off likely to resonate with industrial filmmakers down the ages.

**Beginnings, 1896-1929**

The four decades of screen history constituting the era of silent cinema illustrate the incompleteness of our picture of industrial films’ history. They are highly visible in most histories of ‘early film’ (the term used to describe pre-1914 film) but are incompletely understood, then largely absent from most accounts of the later, 1914-29, period of silent cinema, despite having probably been produced on larger scale then than before.²

The cinematograph is itself a latter-day product of the energies released by industrial revolution. Though several inventive people were experimenting with photographic reproduction of moving images through the late nineteenth century, France’s Lumière brothers are credited with inventing ‘cinema’ by first projecting such images to an audience in 1895; they, and several indigenous competitors, brought cinema to Britain the following year. Famously, their first projected film had shown workers leaving their Lyons photographic factory, instigating the infant medium’s association with industry at its very birth. Innumerable British ‘factory gate’ films were being made a few years later, the most celebrated today being those of Mitchell and Kenyon which exemplify what, we can conjecture, was a characteristic relationship between early film and industry. What caused these local commercial entertainments to be made was the commissioning of their producers by exhibitors, not by the companies whose front-gates and employees appear onscreen. Yet the firms’ cooperation must usually have been necessary. In speculating about their motives for giving it, we may find in these ‘proto-industrial’ films some root causes for industrial film proper to emerge.
The same observation is applicable, with varying degrees of confidence, to larger swathes of factual film as it had already by then grown, rapidly and worldwide, out of the Lumières’ pioneering filmmaking. Following their examples, most early non-fiction films are structured either around an event, a place, a journey or a process. Industry was central to the last of these, to which we will turn shortly, but the first three were all inflected by filmmakers’ attraction to the industrial scene. Their productions were as likely to document ‘events’ of industrial as of royal, local or cultural interest, while ‘place’ films (the roots of travelogue) quickly came to include spectacular features of the industrial landscape, at home and (particularly in colonies) abroad, as much as natural ones. The most famous of early cinematic ‘journeys’, meanwhile, were ‘phantom rides’ filmed from fronts of trains or atop trams. These presumably necessitated logistical arrangements with the operating companies or their staff. Nevertheless the details of the interplay between industrialists and producers remain largely unknown. In the case of events, places and journeys alike, mutual opportunism was probably the rule, direct commissioning the exception (the earlier the date, the more so). Some business archives may contain pieces of paper telling us more.

Certainly, early film in Britain was predominantly either producer or exhibitor-led, and seminal production companies like Paul’s Animatograph Works, the Warwick Trading Company, Cricks & Sharp, the Hepworth Manufacturing Company, the Charles Urban Trading Company and Urban’s later firm Kineto, were responsible for making most of the films described above. Moreover, much of their earliest non-fiction work, the phantom rides being a good example, was more about exciting their viewers visually than engaging them with its subject: part of what the film historian Tom Gunning termed, in an influential phrase, ‘the cinema of attractions’. Although films were often presented by ‘lecturers’, the introduction of intertitles in about 1904 played a significant part in realising the potential of film as an informative medium, immediately making it more attractive to industrialists. The earliest surviving film in the BFI National Archive catalogued as having been commissioned by industry was produced that very year. Significantly, it did not have an industrial ‘subject’; it was a travelogue, *Scenes on the Cornish Riviera*, sponsored by the Great Western Railway. The railway industry was moving on from facilitating filmmakers phantom-riding their trains, to paying them to render appealing cinematic visions of the places those trains were headed. What became a deeply-loved genre of industrial film reached its zenith in
British Transport Films’ (BTF) post-war work for the nationalised network. Railway operators, indeed, are among the most crucial players in the industrial films story. As we turn to the ‘process’ film, we find numerous titles taking us from *Building a British Railway* (1905) via *Making a Railway Engine* (1909), to *Making a Modern Railway Carriage* (1912) up to *Building of a Locomotive at Crewe* (1920), and beyond.

Of all the emergent genres, the ‘process’ film is the one in which the presence of industry in modern life is most inescapable. These were the films whose cameramen took their equipment past factory gates, to shoot in their interiors, summoning the magic of their medium to compress manufacturing, refining or assembly processes, usually hidden from public view, into mere minutes. In film distribution catalogues of the time, these were referred to as ‘industrial subjects’, ‘industrial scenes’, or, for short, as ‘industrials’. As with the other genres, the balance between information and visual sensation is uneven and hard to be sure of in hindsight, and likewise the contractual relationship between filmmaker and factory owner. In Charles Urban’s 1909 catalogue, for example, over a dozen films are flagged as ‘courtesy of’ institutions, but whether ‘courtesy’ amounted to the same thing in every case, and how often money changed hands, remains stubbornly opaque. Undoubtedly, though, these ‘virtual’ factory tours promised the same intangible commercial benefits as real onsite tours, on a vaster scale. They testify to high standards of quality control, in an industrial era in which once-close connections between producer and consumer had been severed. A final scene showing the product being distributed, sold or consumed became a common convention.

Though film historians have paid process films some useful attention, understandably their concern has been more with their evolutionary role in the early development both of the film industry and the documentary form, than their representation of the industries themselves. One such film, *A Visit to Peak Frean and Co’s Biscuit Works* (1906, produced by Cricks and Sharp ‘by permission of’ Peak Frean) has become a textbook classic, being one of the lengthiest and most elaborate of early industrials. In particular, it is often pointedly contrasted with *A Day in the Life of a Coalminer* (1910, by Kineto, ‘courtesy of’ not the colliery but the London and North Western Railway), the later film adding greater human interest to the overwhelmingly mechanical emphasis of the earlier. Yet this very case demonstrates the symbiosis of corporate and film history. Peak Frean’s archivist affirms its evidential significance, for example, the number of people employed in any job at any one time and the variety of delivery
vehicles used, when read in tandem with paper documents. But she further confirms that paper evidence suggests that it was commissioned and paid for, not merely assisted, by Peak Frean, for its 50th anniversary. These facts should necessarily inflect the film historian’s interpretation of the film, and actually reinforce its importance to film history, which in turn gives the corporate historian valuable clues to the company’s self-image.

Film writers have done less analytical work on what might appear a subdivision of process film, but is actually arguably an elaboration of the ‘event’ film. Such a film, rather than depicting standardised repeatable industrial processes (often by filming out of sequence and using deliberate staging), observes at selected junctures a single one-off industrial venture. A brilliant, spectacular example is Kineto’s SS Olympic (1910), capturing stages of the construction of the Titanic’s sister ship at Harland and Wolff in Belfast. Such ‘project’ films enjoyed their own long, productive life in sponsored film-making. It may be argued that while the process film is uniquely cinematic, uniquely dependent on film’s power to telescope time, the project film directly builds on nineteenth century industrial photography and lithography by adding chronology and movement. The relationship between industrial film and earlier industrial media is another barely-studied subject.

The First World War necessarily distorted the natural development of the industrial film though by no means arrested it. Consider, for instance, 1917’s A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker, apparently an example of official propaganda borrowing the conventions of industrial film (as essayed in Day in the Life of a Coal Miner). Or the same year’s The Production of a Map (more in line from the Peak Frean film), filmed at the works of the George Phillips company, who may have sponsored it. In cinema histories, the First World War also conventionally divides the era of ‘early film’ from silent cinema’s maturity, lasting until its demise in 1929-30. One of the effects has been to push the industrial film of the period further into the background than its earlier manifestations. Yet it was probably a pivotal period: the scale and complexity of corporate filmmaking undoubtedly increased, its character crystallised and, importantly, a sponsorship as well as a production infrastructure began to emerge.

Much more research is needed before we have even an adequate sketch of these seminal developments but a few facts are immediately clear. Factory and process films remained prevalent, from occasional major industrial documentaries like Lever Brothers’ Port Sunlight (1919) and
Imperial Airway; The Work of the British Airways (1924, another state-sponsored ‘industrial’) to innumerable minor ones, bearing titles such as The Manufacture of Top Hats (1923), All About Witney Blankets (1924) and The Production of The Times (1927). Industrial projects continued to be photographed, as in Construction of Imperial House (1928). Many films were produced by companies like Pathé and Gaumont, the giants that had superseded the cottage industry pioneers, and working more often than them under direct sponsorship. But there also seem to have been smaller, little-documented production companies specialising in corporate commissions, as well as growing signs of industrial companies sporadically producing their own films. Across all three cases, industries due to become later mainstays of sponsored filmmaking were making their screen presence felt. ICI and Lever are good examples, and so, in the state sector, are post and telecommunications: The Romance of Postal Telegraphy (1922), and Union of Post Office Workers (1927), a rare and ambitious union-sponsored film and, in the private, the oil industry, The Story of Oil (1921), The Persian Oil Industry, (1925).

We have already seen an instructive example of a film from the earlier period coming into sharper view when looked at simultaneously as an artefact of film and of company history. The same applies to these later productions, less well-known to start with. Standing back to survey the whole of the silent period, deeper questions arise about the representation of the national economy on screen. The period of significant structural change with its shift from the old staple sectors towards newer mass-production consumer industries is writ large in the industrial film, albeit the white-collar world is less visible. Early and silent film evidence the continuing cultural hold, as well as the cinematic magnetism, of the male-dominated brawn-and-steam industries that made Britain the first industrialised nation, but they mark, too, the growth, and strong motives for using film, of lighter industries manufacturing consumer goods. As the course of industrial spending on film is charted through later decades, such battles between sectors for economic supremacy are further and more vividly visible.

The 1930s
The 1930s was the first decade of sound cinema. Actually, silent films didn’t entirely disappear, though silent cinema did. In the industrial and educational fields, some of the more modest films continued to be released without sound for use on 16mm silent projectors. Most histories, though,
Stills from *A Visit to Peak Frean and Co's Biscuit Work* (above) and *Drifters* (below), (*BFI Stills Library*)
have fixated on the most strikingly ambitious of the era’s sponsored films rather than on tracing patterns among what may have been more typical product. There exists more commentary on commissioned films of this era than on those of any other, but commentary that has skewed the history of industrial films as such, being more concerned with the place of a small number of them within another history, that of documentary.

In almost all studies of factual film, the period 1929-45 is dominated by the ascent of the British ‘documentary movement’ associated with John Grierson and a coterie of colleagues. The vast majority of their films were sponsored by state or industry. Being prolific writers, the theory as well as practice of making films under sponsorship imbued their working lives, and continues to inspire debate today. Grierson launched his ‘movement’ from within the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), a state organisation with an industrial role, when he made *Drifters* (1929), not actually the first film about industrial fishing, but one applying to the conventions established by earlier examples a consciously modern aesthetic, influenced particularly by Soviet cinema. In 1933, the EMB’s film unit was transferred to the General Post Office (GPO). The GPO Film Unit is famed to this day for classics like *Night Mail* (1936), very definitely, among other things, an industrial film. The movement also spawned the world-renowned Shell Film Unit in 1934, and its members took further sponsorship from such as Imperial Airways and Vickers Armstrong, the Travel and Industrial Development Association and the British Commercial Gas Association. The latter notably furthered the concept of ‘enlightened sponsorship’ by funding the most significant social documentaries of the day, only obliquely related to their members’ core business, films like the ground-breaking *Housing Problems* (1935) and *Children at School* (1937).8

The benefits and drawbacks of sponsorship to documentary purporting to creative ambition and political engagement have since been argued every which way: usually seeing things from the viewpoint of artist rather than patron.9 There has been relatively less effort given to understanding ‘movement’ documentary from the perspective of its paymasters in public and private industry.10 A still more serious problem is that the attention grabbed by the documentary movement has obscured how much industrial, and documentary, filmmaking was going on outside the movement throughout the 1930s. An urgent research task is to quantify its scale and begin to comprehend whether and how it differed from what was coming out of the movement, in practice rather than in movement theory. The documentary movement has often been noted (and critiqued) for romantic
as well as ideological and aesthetic attraction to masculine manual industries, though not to the complete exclusion of others. However, to uncover more fully the scope of different industries’ representation on the interwar screen, we may be best off starting not with the films but by listing Britain’s important industries and companies and working out, from there, what role film, alongside other media, played for them. This is a task that corporate historians and archivists are better placed to lead than their film counterparts.

In the meantime, from the production perspective it is evident that the mainstream cinema industry, building on its 1920s experience, supplemented commercial production of newsreel, travelogue, natural history, and educational films with industrial commissions: non-fiction filmmakers at Pathé, Movietone and Gaumont-British all made their share of sponsored films. But smaller independent companies, specialising in corporate commissions, also developed. For example, Publicity Films straddled the boundaries of straight advertisement and longer-form industrial film, as in its many films for Cadbury Brothers. There also seems to have been expansion of specialist production outside London, evidenced for instance by Birmingham Commercial Films, several of whose process films sponsored by Midlands-based firms remain extant. Meanwhile the capacity for industry to make its own films was clearly growing. To give one example, the London Midland and Scottish Railway set up a film unit in 1934, an example copied by some of the other railway companies. ICI’s film unit, formed in 1929, vies with the EMB as the first serious in-house producer, and, since it would last for decades, with Shell for longest continuous run of internal corporate production.

The story of industrial filmmaking during the Second World War mirrors that of national industry itself. Substantially diverted from what it would have been doing otherwise, and brought under partial government control for a situation of total war, this unique situation nevertheless provided it with new opportunities, whose long-term significance played out post-war. The GPO Film Unit moved directly into government, becoming the Crown Film Unit (CFU) at the Ministry of Information. The Ministry’s propaganda needs outstripped the CFU’s capacity, however, so the number of independent producers actually increased. This vibrant expansion laid much of the foundation for the post-war boom in private sector industrial filmmaking. During the war, of course, most private corporations stopped sponsoring films altogether, while those that continued, like Shell, did so by turning production over to the war effort, making yet more government
propaganda and information films. ICI is again an interesting exception, continuing to make films on science subjects such as colour theory, more obviously relevant to the sponsor’s interests than the war effort.11

Film preservation
The interwar and war years have another sort of significance: the birth and growth of the film preservation movement, without which much of the documentary and industrial filmmaking produced hitherto would not exist now. Though the Imperial War Museum had founded the world’s first film archive in 1918, inevitably its focus was on official (more recently also on amateur) production. But now, in 1935, the British Film Institute (BFI) founded its National Film Library (today the BFI National Archive), distinctive among most continental and North American film archives that emerged in the same period for taking ‘the film of record’, including the industrial film, as seriously as the art of feature film.

It is often claimed that 20 per cent of all films, and 50 per cent of all silent films, are irretrievably lost. The pioneer film archivists recognised that the cinema industry barely appreciated the value of its own past products, still less did most industrial filmmakers and sponsors. They were also aware of film’s fragility: a plastic whose deterioration begins the moment it is produced. Particularly worrying was cellulose nitrate, the base for all 35mm film stock, not only unstable but highly inflammable. Though a few of the least ambitious of 1930s industrial films were produced on 16mm, based on seemingly less unstable ‘safety’ acetate, many more were produced on the higher quality 35mm gauge.

Film archivists like the BFI’s Ernest Lindgren not only began collecting such films but evolved practices to protect their contents. A vital distinction was made between viewing copies and preservation masters to be handled as little as possible. The ideal masters were original cut negatives, followed by intermediate ‘pre-print’ elements and finally by prints. The greater the number of generations away from the original negative the more visual information had been lost. The stunning clarity of the Mitchell and Kenyon films partly depends on their having survived as original negatives (undiscovered until the 1990s). Few other films of their time were as lucky, and many later ones likewise. To give one prominent example, by the time prints of Night Mail were properly archived, its negatives were already lost.

The very drawbacks of nitrate proved advantageous to public-sector film archives, with no acquisition budgets but desirous of building up good preservation collections. Industrial films well illustrate this. A good number
of those dating from the 1930s and before were deposited with the BFI by corporate archivists, specialists with paper and other non-moving media. It’s unlikely that many nitrate films still remain in corporate archives (if you have some, contact a film archivist today!). What they may contain is untapped evidence for films that never made it to any archives and duly ceased to exist.

**The heyday: 1945-70**

The golden era of industrial film was the post-war period to about 1970. Until recently, film historians largely overlooked this fact, precisely because they judged the documentary movement to have then been in decline. In fact the period represented its fusion with other branches of sponsored filmmaking, together with their increasing spread and fragmentation across all industries. Britain was now the leading exponent of industrial movie-making worldwide, its films made on unprecedented scale by more producers for more sponsors in more sectors than ever.12

In addition to limited opportunities in cinemas and on television, a huge, vibrant ‘non-theatrical’ circuit now existed, for 16mm projection to a mind-boggling range of general and specialised audiences. It was served by hundreds of film libraries, many of them distributing prints at no cost to renters.13 Their films now received substantial, if specialist, media coverage, on City pages, where most broadsheets ran a regular industrial films column, and in dedicated journals like *Film Sponsor*, *Industrial Screen* and the long-running *Film User*. Organisations representing the industrial films scene developed, notably the Scientific Films Association and the British Industrial Films Association, eventually merged as the British Industrial and Scientific Films Association (BISFA), which ran huge annual competitive festivals of industrial films.

Festival categories indicate the diversification of the films’ functions, crystallised into all the main categories that still exist today: training, health and safety, industrial relations, sales of products and services, recruitment, public relations, company news and corporately sponsored public information. The growth of films for purely internal distribution and viewing by employees, rather than the public, was a particularly important feature of the period: comparison and contrast between the inward- and outward-facing films of the same companies is of course one of the most entertaining and instructive research tasks presented by corporate film. Yet the post-war years were also the heyday of the external ‘prestige’ film. Wealthier firms sponsored truly high quality filmmaking, often covering
Adverts from a 1957 edition of *Film User (BFI)*

subjects tangentially related to central business objectives, so as to acquire kudos from their sheer excellence. Several titles were Oscar-nominated,
and BP’s fiction featurette, *Giuseppina*, originally commissioned to smooth the sponsor’s route into the Italian petrol market, actually won an Academy Award in 1959, as did BTF’s natural history film *Wild Wings* in 1966.¹⁴

Sponsorship now finally matched production in elaborate organisation. Indeed the power to determine the subjects and messaging of industrial films now decisively shifted from the latter to the former. Many organisations now employed ‘Films Officers’, usually in their Public Relations department, their remit determining policy and budgets for film commissioning, production and distribution (there may be much valuable, undiscovered paper evidence for their activities in corporate archives). Some, like movement veterans Edgar Anstey, head of BTF, and Donald Alexander, his counterpart at the National Coal Board (NCB), or like Ronald Tritton at BP were eminent figures indeed. Internal units proliferated – BTF, the NCB’s, the continuing units at Shell and ICI, new

Cinema lobby card for BP’s film *Giuseppina* (BFI)
ones at Dunlop, Vickers, Laing, Costain, Courtaulds, Fisons, and Rentokil. Other companies developed long-term relationships with independent producers. Others still ran a diversified slate, alternating producers project by project.

Generally, we may divide sponsors into major, mid-range and minor ones. The majors included the great state corporations and major private ones like Shell and BP, ICI, Unilever and Ford. Such sponsors commissioned continually, developing a familiar, respected house-style, each ending up with literally hundreds of films in their back catalogues. Mid-range sponsors included smaller oil companies like Esso and Mobil, the ascending nuclear industry, steel firms like United Steel and Richard, Thomas & Baldwins, construction companies like Costain and Laing, Wimpey and John Brown, and such varied companies as United Dairies, Joseph Lucas, Mullards, Vauxhall and Whitbread. Such groups either sponsored on large scale but on relatively modest budgets, or commissioned lavish films but only on an intermittent basis. The minor sponsors included large corporations whose use of film was unambitious as well as intermittent, and small ones which could only expect to deploy the medium in highly localised circumstances. Additionally, trade bodies increasingly turned to sponsorship: the British Iron and Steel Federation, the Brewers’ Society and several marketing councils provide good examples. The British Productivity Council, on which both sides of industry were represented, sponsored some of the most heavily booked films of the day, such as Introducing Work Study (1955). Trade unions, in their own right, remained conspicuously inactive.

On the production side, besides the internal units, there were now many ‘documentary’ companies, specialising in sponsorship, both by government through the new Central Office of Information and, more lucratively, by industry. Increasingly, the distinction between producers with documentary movement roots and those with more commercial origins ceased to be meaningful. More importantly, a loose distinction between majors, middling and minor producers mirrors the hierarchy among their clients. A company’s positioning was often indicated by how much of their production was on 35mm and how much on 16mm. The top tier of production has now begun to be researched in some detail. Examples of major 35mm London producers for which outline company histories now exist include World Wide Pictures, the Realist Film Unit, the DATA cooperative and the Film Producers Guild. The Guild was one of the largest production consortia in the world and its members included Greenpark
Productions, Verity Films, Technical and Scientific Films and the animation unit Larkins Studios. The names of mid-market companies, which might use 35mm, 16mm or both, are known, but fewer of their histories have been researched (names include, among very many others, the likes of Random Film Productions, Ace Film Productions, Editorial Film Productions, the Cresswell Film Unit and Samaritan Films). These, too, were predominantly London based, though several were to be found in Glasgow and other regional cities.

Serious research has barely even begun on the ‘minors’, those much smaller local producers, confined to 16mm and often also involved in stills photography, that are likely to have existed on large scale in the period. Complementing the work of the Imperial War Museum and BFI, from the late 1970s a network of regional film archives developed that today covers Scotland, Wales and all of the English regions. By means of illustrating how ripe the regional dimension is for future research, consider Newcastle’s Turners Film Productions, an ultra-prolific mid-market producer whose work is currently being catalogued and preserved by the Northern Region Film and Television Archive (NRFTA), while its paper records are at Tyne and Wear Archives & Museums. According to an NRFTA archivist, their collection includes no fewer than 7,200 items which, he argues, are ‘remarkable in two ways: [they] document… the great explosion in access to filmmaking equipment [and are] a valuable historical record of the waning of traditional heavy industry on Tyneside, and the expansion of Eastern high-tech businesses on the industrial estates of the North East… and the lengths gone to by municipal development agencies to promote the region in the face of economic change’.

Indeed, seeking macroeconomic patterns in post-war film production generally, its mixed-economy model is immediately obvious, as is the continuing on-screen presence of the old industries (temporarily buoyed by war and then nationalisation), and the rise of their competitors in fields like petroleum, electronics and pharmaceuticals. It would appear that the equally important growth in service and financial sectors continued to be under-represented, though there are important exceptions. The British Insurance Association had massive non-theatrical and TV hits with the films *Six Candles* (1960), *Suspects All* (1964) and *The Stable Door* (1966), imaginatively dispensing public information about safety and security, and the Midland Bank’s concurrent *Meet the Midland* (1963) and *A Letter for Liz* (1965) were similarly popular.

Far from all post-war industrial films remain extant, but virtually all
individually significant ones survive, and the survival rate among the rest is higher than for any previous (or subsequent) period. Nitrate film was phased out in 1951, 35mm stock henceforth being manufactured, like smaller gauges, on acetate. Unfortunately, acetate was later discovered to have its own severe archival drawbacks: its tendency to give off acetic gases, triggering ‘vinegar syndrome’ prophesying destructive deterioration. Its replacement, polyester film stock, has been proven to be much more robust, but in recent years film archives have moved away from the ‘duplication’ model of transferring the contents of at-risk films from one piece of stock to another, the scale of the necessary work vastly exceeding its affordability. The trend has been towards greater investment in good passive conservation, entailing lower and lower temperatures, humidity levels and fluctuations.

Corporate archivists are advised to test for stability any post-war 35mm films in their care (and any films of 16mm and below, regardless of date), and also to consult with film archivists so as to establish their uniqueness. They ought also to find out whether any films sponsored by their firms, even if not in their own onsite collections, have made it into public sector film archives, whether deposited by their predecessors or arriving there from other sources such as distribution libraries, production companies or laboratories. In many cases, their knowledge of the sponsor’s history may provide their film counterparts with information that will greatly improve dating and cataloguing. In some cases, there will be good grounds for project-based collaboration, involving joint investment in creation of digital access copies and a proactive access programme. What should never be contemplated is the disposal of film elements following digital transfer: even the highest quality digitisation, which is beyond the financial reach of most archives anyway, cannot yet replicate the photographic quality of film. And despite its instability when inadequately stored, film kept in ideal passive conservation conditions is thought to have a lifespan of hundreds of years.

**Industrial to post-industrial: 1970 to present**

It is worth asking why the post-war shifts in the patterns of British industry seem to have been inexactily tracked by corporate filmmaking. Perhaps it is partly that heavy and manufacturing industries were simply more visual: more cinematic. But it may also reflect the more generic, sector-wide, skills required by the burgeoning white-collar industries, making sponsorship by individual firms less cost-effective.

This thesis is bolstered by an important little written-about trend of the
period that advanced in the 1970s. In the previous two decades, the growing fields of safety and management training quietly birthed a new model for commissioning business films that. Steel firm Richard Thomas and Baldwins were unintentional pioneers with their film *The Man Who Stops Accidents* (1954) in which several categories of industrial accident are diagnosed and their prevention promoted. Though aimed initially at steelworks, the content was generic enough to be used in other contexts: the film became popular among safety trainers across British industry. The same became true of ICI’s *Black Monday* (1962), dramatising a research lab disaster. Through the 1960s, the Rank Organisation Short Films Group, the new industrial films arm of the Rank films empire, took this concept and ran with it, by investing Rank money in generic training films offered for rent or sale to any interested companies. This was industrial film funding turned on its head: pictures that weren’t sponsored and were designed expressly to turn a profit rather than as loss leaders. The pattern proliferated in the 1970s, at a range of new companies. Notably, the ICI Film Unit was renamed Millbank Films, reinventing itself as an independent producer of generic safety and management training. More famously, Video Arts, founded in 1972 by TV people led by John Cleese and Antony Jay, forged a lucrative business out of such novel training films as *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* (1976), for which high fees were commanded. This emerging sector, its influence on business films and even on workplaces themselves cries out for close study. But we can be sure that this new breed of industrial film wore the whitest collar yet.

Even without such fragmentation, the 1970s proved an increasingly disastrous decade for traditional sponsored filmmaking. Recession-hit industries cut their film spending, major producers and films officers retired, died or ran out of steam, non-theatrical film exhibition started to crumple and public cynicism hardened towards state and capitalist corporatism alike. Of the films still being made, a far higher proportion were now being shot, even by the largest producers, on the less expensive 16mm stock, but the arrival of even cheaper if less expressive technology in the form of video cameras and tape caused further anxious uncertainty in the business. The very notion of enlightened ‘sponsor’ was in decline, replaced by harder-headed, tighter-fisted ‘client’.

Essentially, the 1970s was a transitional decade, in which the established form of industrial documentary was slowly dying, while alternatives remained in their infancy. The final demise of 16mm as a viable mass-communication tool occurred in about 1986. By then, it was mainly schools
rather than workplaces that were holding on to the remaining projectors. In
industry, videotape had already, by then, won the battle with film as
primary distribution medium and, increasingly, as production medium too.
Older production companies that survived, like the highly agile World Wide
Pictures, did so by switching almost entirely to video: those that didn’t
got to the wall. Meanwhile new small companies popped up, staffed by
generally younger filmmakers and technicians with none of their older
counterparts’ background in sponsored documentary. ‘Prestige’ films had
vanished and the emphasis had shifted overwhelmingly to small-budget
productions with highly targeted aims and audiences, much more often now
employees than general public. Far fewer commissioners were specialist
audio-visual officers, more of them being personnel, marketing or
recruitment officers only sporadically turning to moving image media.
Meanwhile, the very balance of industry itself was undergoing a paradigm
shift: the Thatcher government’s rewriting of the rulebooks for economic
policy and organisation.

It may come as no surprise that, beyond such broad statements, this
relatively recent era of tumultuous change should prove to be the least
documented of any in the history of industrial film. Virtually the entire
period needs to be reconstructed from scratch. As always, there is a strong
case for collaboration between corporate and film archivists, and in this
case the corporate archivists may be better placed to take the lead. This is
partly because so little video from the time actually survives, so corporate
paperwork may offer better evidence for business’ moving image
commissioning than surviving images themselves.

For some psychological reason, videotapes always felt more disposable
than film cans: many were simply thrown away, or were left unlabelled on
forgotten shelves. Surviving tapes are susceptible to their own share of
physical and chemical problems, and they too require a good, though less
stringent, passive conservation environment but the real problem for video
is format obsolescence. Ensure a reel of film survives physically and
chemically intact and you can be equally sure the images it carries can, in
principle, be perceived, retrieved and reproduced. The contents of its
frames will be visible merely by holding them to the light, while
determined enough engineers will always be capable of reconstructing
mechanical devices that can put images into motion or copy them onto
some other artefact. The physical and chemical stability of a videotape
guarantees none of this. Not only are the tapes needed but the machines and
the engineers who understand them. In the case of corporate production,
though some higher-pocketed clients paid for productions made at broadcast quality on 2-inch or 1-inch tapes, the first master format really to take off, and prevalent for a good fifteen years from the late 1970s, was the Umatic, a clunky, quality-compromised medium now obsolete with ever fewer machines able to play them. Subsequently, Beta and Beta SP superseded Umatic before a period of stability and good quality in which Digital Betacam (Digibeta) became the industry standard (though DV formats will also have been quite widely used for more localised, low-budget work), before themselves being superseded by High Definition.

Of the hundreds of thousands of master tapes that must few have been made, a tiny proportion has found its way to specialist moving image archives. Two significant exceptions at the BFI are the Umatic collection of the British Coal Television Unit, which replaced its illustrious predecessor the NCB Film Unit following the miners’ strike, and a collection of award-winning corporate videos from the late 1980s and early 1990s, deposited by the International Visual Communications Association (IVCA), effectively BISFA’s successor. Though most other corporate videos have long since been lost, surely a significant number remain in corporate archives or in contracted offsite storage. This era of analogue videotape is the one that most urgently cries for proactive archival research, and investment in preservation which cannot be postponed for very many more years. The main preservation task will be to migrate sound and picture from these original tapes to better supported formats. Digibeta remains viable for the medium term. Data tape storage, such as LTO (Linear Tape-Open) tapes, and equivalent server solutions if adequately backed-up, now offer longer term possibilities. Business archivists concerned about their tape collections are encouraged to speak to the BFI, which runs a specialist video transfer unit, or to regional film archives, some of which have their own range of working obsolete-format machines.

Since the 1980s, the corporate films business has greatly matured. Leading producers like the Edge Picture Company, Crown Business Communications and New Moon Television and, indeed Video Arts (still going after 40 years) and World Wide Pictures (still going after 70!) have now spent years honing both their business models and their creative and technical standards. The IVCA has become a strong trade body. As well as video production companies like those just listed, its membership includes consultancies which undertake both moving image and other types of commissions: live events and multimedia websites are seen as integral to ‘visual communications’. The IVCA runs an annual competition for the
year’s best communications films. Its 2011 Grand Prix award went to a one-minute viral video, at the heart of a Nokia sales campaign, which has attracted over two million viewers online. The previous four years’ winners were, in reverse chronological order, a video-rich interactive website for Channel 4’s schools service, a short witty film for screening before football matches to encourage family-friendly behaviour by rowdy crowds, a graphic and coarse British Army film dispensing road safety advice for squaddies, and an anthropomorphic animation produced and distributed internally at Nationwide in aid of cultural diversity awareness-raising among its staff. These examples illustrate the continuing symbiosis of private-sector corporate communication and public information, and each might informatively be double-billed with older sponsored films, meeting closely comparable objectives in wildly different social and technological circumstances.

Recent technological advances have taken off far more rapidly in corporate production than they have done in the feature film or television industries. Five years ago, virtually all productions were mastered on Digibeta or High Definition tapes. Now, well over half of them are filmed using cameras containing hard drives rather than tapes, are edited on computers, and distributed either on DVD or, at least as often, as files streamed over the world wide web or the client company’s intranet. For archivists, such technological change poses age-old questions. How much of this stuff will survive? Might it remain permanently present, its very production and distribution resolving at the same stroke and forevermore the preservation and access issues that bedevilled the film archiving of earlier days? Or will it accumulate, almost of its own accord, on cloud servers, to be rediscovered a generation later like the film cans discovered in forgotten vaults or closing laboratories in generations past? Or will it all vanish?

Have we entered a golden age, or a digital dark age? The only sensible answer must be the one given by the Chinese communist asked to judge the effects of the French Revolution: It’s too early to say. We can be sure of certain things, though. One is that neither DVD nor streamed files have appreciable archival value. Just as film archivists’ grail was once the original negative, or the master videotape, today’s equivalent is an uncompressed master file. The archivist’s difficulty is in getting access to this file while its whereabouts remain known. If that is done, the file can in principle be copied quite easily, with no quality loss, to preservation media. The BFI frequently contracts with corporate producers to borrow hard

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drives containing selected films and clone their contents for retention on LTO tapes.

Another thing we can be sure of, not just tomorrow but right now, is the value of curation: of researching the landscape of sponsorship and production so as mindfully to assemble collections illustrating the continuing relationship of business and media in these most uncertain times. Should such collecting turn out, later, to have caused more content to survive than otherwise, then so much the better. The sooner corporate and film archives can start pooling their thoughts and resources to implement such curatorial strategy the better.

**Acorn to oak**

There are good reasons for thinking of these films, whether termed industrial, sponsored or corporate, as the very backbone of our national film industry, bread-and-butter for so many of the facilities and personnel it has deployed. They’re likely, in turn, to have made at least as great a contribution as feature films and television to the national economy itself.17 Along the way, they illustrate corporate strategies, organisation of workplaces, the relationships between managers, employees and consumers as no other genre or medium can. The journey from ‘industrials’ through ‘documentary’ and ‘industrial film’, via ‘corporate video’ to viral ‘visual communication’ online, from nitrate to acetate, analogue tape to digital file, has been one of constant, dizzying change. And yet... its essence is curiously timeless. Viewed from a high enough vantage-point, the whole intricate story appears as but the unfolding of a simple, single idea, that the modern workplace and moving image media are natural partners.

In the YouTube era, in which moving image penetrates every facet of society, workplaces included, we finally understand what ‘film’ is about: entertaining the world, yes, but also communicating with, persuading and recording it. In 1909, Charles Urban, American-born pioneer of industrial, and much other, filmmaking in Britain, asserted that:

… while the ‘amusement’ branch of the business will constantly increase, the future mainstay [of film] will be through the development of its most important fields, viz., the scientific, educational, and industrial branches, and in matters of State.18

A century on, the IVCA says:

The UK’s visual communications industry… has a direct turnover in excess of £3 billion, with an impact many times greater than this
figure... It provides business communication solutions, which add considerable value to the bottom line of its client companies, as well as public service information materials, which keep the population at large informed about, and responsive to, a range of social issues ... a sector that shapes perceptions, changes behaviours, engages employees and builds skills.\textsuperscript{19}

It seems highly likely that a vast proportion of this £3 billion worth of content is destined to disappear. Cooperation between corporate and film archives should at least mitigate that loss, reducing its scale and cultivating appreciation of whatever remains.

Notes

1 The title \textit{From Acorn to Oak} is that of a 1938 film for Dunlop marking the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the invention of the pneumatic tyre. Its form is echoed in the names of many industrial films e.g. \textit{From Wool to Wearer} (1913), \textit{From Coal-mine to Road} (1931), \textit{Stone into Steel} (1960) and \textit{Picture to Post} (1969).

I am grateful to my colleague Bryony Dixon, and to Martin Stollery, for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I would welcome feedback, ideas, challenges, responses of all kinds from readers in the business archives profession. Please contact me via .

2 This point is illustrated, for instance, by Rachael Low's classic multi-volume history of British film. Industrial film is strongly present in the narrative of early books, but little-mentioned in the 1920s book which is primarily concerned with feature film.

3 Both films can be viewed on the BFI's DVD anthology of early film, \textit{Primitives and pioneers}.

4 Email communications from Verity Andrews, Archives Assistant, University of Reading.

5 The Olympic film is viewable online at the BFI's website, and on the DVD anthology \textit{Tales from the Shipyard}.


7 Ibid.

8 Most of the major documentary movement films are now available on a series of DVD anthologies as well as online. Three volumes of DVD box-sets of GPO titles were the result of a joint curatorial and preservation project between the BFI, the British Postal Museum and Archives and BT Heritage: a good model for collaboration between film and corporate archives in which joint investment leading to co-branded outcomes yields significant public value.

9 Elizabeth Sussex and Ian Aitken are among the writers who have written approvingly, while Brian Winston has been perhaps the severest critic.

10 This is changing, though. A recently published anthology, S. Anthony & J.G. Mansell (eds), \textit{The projection of Britain: a history of the GPO Film Unit} (Basingstoke, 2011) makes great strides by positioning the GPO’s films within the history of their sponsoring organisation as well as the film industry.

11 ICI also, intriguingly, funded and ambitious and politically engaged curiosity about the history and future of the agricultural industry, \textit{The Harvest Shall Come} (1941), directed by left-wing filmmaker Max Anderson and produced by documentary movement leading light Basil Wright.
The fullest study to date of these developments is P. Russell & J.P. Taylor (eds), *Shadows of progress: documentary film in post-war Britain* (Basingstoke, 2010).

In addition to the private libraries, the Central Office of Information, besides commissioning thousands of films itself for distribution through its Central Film Library, also ran a special library of hundreds of industrial films for which it brought prints from numerous private-sector sponsors for distribution at home and abroad.

Both films can be found on BFI DVD releases.

Britain’s most famous animation company, Halas & Batchelor, was also kept in business mainly by its sponsored work.

Email communications from Edward Anderson, Northern Region Film and Television Archive. He further elaborates, in keeping with themes of this article: ‘Working with historians and archivists will be essential if the NRFTA is to develop a complete understanding of Turners Film Productions’ films. While the films themselves are incredibly lucid narrators of social, economic, and industrial history, considerable contextual research is required to ascertain Turner’s wider importance in British industrial filmmaking. Obtaining funding for this kind of interdisciplinary research will be paramount.’

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And the international economy. This essay has focused on the industrial film in Britain. Britain does have a singular history in this area, but the story of industrial filmmaking cannot be confined entirely inside national boundaries. The comparison of national experiences is another area ripe for future research. American sponsored films have become increasingly familiar thanks in large part to the pioneering work of private collector Rick Prelinger. V. Hediger & P. Vonderau (eds), *Films that work: industrial film and the productivity of media* (Amsterdam, 2009) is a landmark anthology, being the first to put the subject onto an international footing, as well as a theoretical footing. A number of, mainly continental and US, case studies are prefaced with a draft framework for theorising industrial film. The editors argue for close attention to the occasion, purpose and addressee of industrial films, and for ‘serial analysis’ of large bodies of work in order to identify patterns of ‘record, research and rhetoric’. These important notions are arguably necessary but not sufficient, risking being a little too reductive. My emphasis in this article has been on the relationship between the client and supply sides of industrial filmmaking, on how varied those relationships have been and have they have shifted over time.


This quotation is assembled from two separate statements in the *IVCA guide to metrics* (IVCA, 2011), on p.1 and p.21. The claimed turnover approaches the combined turnover of distribution and exhibition of feature films (total film and video industry turnover, including production, being close to £7bn). Thanks to Sean Perkins (BFI Research and Statistics Unit) for this interesting comparative information.