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# The Origins and Evolution of Corporate Sponsored Film

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# The Origins and Evolution of Corporate Sponsored Film

By  
Clara Noelle Boesch

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Senior Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for  
Honors in the Department of American Studies

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## Abstract

BOESCH, CLARA N: The Origins and Evolution of Corporate Sponsored Film

ADVISOR: Professor Andrew Feffer

In my thesis, I investigate the thematic and stylistic evolution of corporate sponsored film as a result of the economic and technological changes that occurred pre-and post-World War II. As indicated by its name, “a sponsored film is a moving picture, in any form, paid for by anyone controlling its content and shown for public entertainment or information.<sup>1</sup>” Naturally, films sponsored by corporate entities encompass a range of themes and styles. However, economic and technological shifts throughout America’s 20<sup>th</sup> century have resulted in consistent patterns that chronologically define corporate-sponsored films. This is especially prevalent with corporate-sponsored films of the pre-World War II and post- World War II eras, when, arguably, sponsored films reached their height as tools of public relations.

In my first chapter, I explore the origins of corporate sponsored films during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, developing out of the simultaneous advancements in photography and the growth of big business. Hailed as a tool of accurate documentation, photography inspired the work of Edwaerd Muybridge, who famously photographed the “flying” gallop of a horse. Others, such as Etienne-Jules Marey and Edward Taylor, applied photographic methods to record industrial processes in hopes of making them more efficient. As technology advanced, industry used moving pictures to record labor processes and as a means to communicate to its employees. Soon, production houses specializing in

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. Print. pp. xiii.

sponsored-film production arose, such as the Jam Handy Organization and the Ray Reid Film Company. As new sound and projection technologies developed in the 1920s, corporate-sponsored film became an established genre with its own thematic and stylistic conventions.

In my second and third chapter, I discuss the evolution of sponsored film from its proliferation in the 1920s to its “golden age” in the 1950s, noting that the genre’s themes and styles have evolved in conjunction with changes in the nation’s economy and technological advancements. In the second chapter, I analyze corporate sponsored films of the pre-war period. During the 1920s, newly expanded corporations realized the value of film as a tool of public relations. Corporations first tried to use films such as *The Home Electrical* (1915) and *A Car for Every Purse and Purpose* (1926) to impress audiences with their grand scale and product offerings. As the Depression era set in, corporate sponsored films projected more humanized, neighborly images in films like *Fashion’s Favorite* (1940). In the third chapter, I analyze the changes in the genre that occurred after World War II. Following a period of slow production during the war, the sponsored film genre was reignited and revolutionized in the years of post-war prosperity. Television was a popular new means of distribution, and the themes and styles of sponsored film of the time responded accordingly. Films like *The Best Made Plans* (1956) and *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (1956) exemplify the diminished advertising, Hollywood-style spectacles, sophisticated narration, and futuristic images that made sponsored films popular for television audiences.

Though possibly one of the most extensive genres in cinematic history, corporate sponsored films have been largely untouched by both historians and film critics. This

thesis explores the origins and evolution of corporate-sponsored film resulting from the technological and economic climate of the nation from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. It references the works of a few specialists in the field such as Rick Prelinger and Walter Klein, among others, as well as contemporary publications such as the trade journal *Business Screen*. In addition, it critically analyzes corporate-sponsored films from the pre- and post-war periods to identify the evolution of thematic and stylistic changes over time.



## **Chapter One: From Photography to Big-Business: A Technological and Economic Overview of the History of Corporate Sponsored Film**

Though the commonly accepted end of the industrial revolution in America is considered the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, America's industrial power certainly did not stop expanding at that time. From the railroads and mining towns of the West, to the influx of immigrant laborers and the growth of urban centers in the East, industry in America was quickly propelling the nation to its position as a major world power at the turn of the century.

Among the countless technological advances made during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the revolutionary new process of photography was perhaps one of the most influential on the cultural scene of the United States. The earliest photographic images were daguerreotypes, created by skilled experts on chemically treated, light sensitive metal plates. It was not until 1880 that George Eastman entered the photography business with the goal of making the photographic process available to the American consumer. From 1881 to 1883, the Eastman Dry Plate Company produced and sold dry gelatin plates, which could be stored for long periods of time. His product was commercially successful, as amateur photographers did not have to mix the light sensitive chemicals coating the photographic plates themselves.

By the fall of 1884, Eastman had developed the roll film system, which further fueled the accessibility of widespread amateur photography. The system included a new form of rolled film, a "holder mechanism" for the film within the camera, and a developing process



on photographic paper instead of metal plates<sup>2</sup>. By 1888, he put his inventions on the market with the introduction of the Kodak Camera. The small and portable device, whose slogan was, "You press the button, we do the rest", brought the company an eleven fold increase in its sales between 1889 and 1904 (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>.

As the accessibility and ease of the photographic process developed, the expanding industrial world took advantage of the properties of the new medium. With such a realistic form of documentation, accurate research could be conducted about topics at the forefront of industrial growth, such as workplace technique and efficiency. At the height of America's industrial development, Frederick Winslow Taylor conceptualized "Taylorism", a theory of scientific management that timed, analyzed, and systemized labor processes. In 1883, he devised a method of studying the rates of industrial production using a stop-watch. Performing his research in a machinist's shop, he broke down the laborers' tasks into parts, timed them, and added them back together. With this technique, he could calculate the "maximum possible output from any given worker" in a specific period of time<sup>4</sup>.

About a decade before Taylor's stop-watch studies began, Edwaerd Muybridge was utilizing photography to accomplish similar deconstructive studies of movement. Between 1877 and 1879, Muybridge was working on the Stanford Project, which included a now-infamous challenge between Muybridge and Leland Stanford, the former Governor of California. Stanford, who could not believe that a horse remained suspended in air while it was running, commissioned Muybridge to photographically document the galloping of a

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, Reese V. *Technology and the Market: George Eastman and the Origins of Mass Amateur Photography*. Baltimore.: Society for the History of Technology, 1975. Print. pp .7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Elspeth H. *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print. pp. 7.

horse. Muybridge took a series of photographs as the horse galloped over a track, triggering wires in succession that sequentially activated the shutter of twelve cameras. Projected in sequence, these photographs give the illusion of the horse's gait, and indeed disproved Stanford's hypothesis that a horse was never fully suspended in air (Figure 2). The project not only settled the argument, but also impressed the world with the capabilities of photography to uncover what is hidden to the eye. Muybridge continued to study other figures and movements during these years, taking a series of photographs recording the San Francisco Olympic Club athletes in motion, and well as images of himself chopping wood<sup>5</sup>.

"Muybridge's accomplishments in using photography to capture the body's movements provided the visual groundwork for later investigations of...industrial efficiency", inspiring other researchers such as Frenchman Etienne-Jules Marey, to photographically study industrial work <sup>6</sup>. Marey's interest lay in the possibilities of chronophotography, a photographic process that resulted in a single image with multiple exposures. Recording images of work processes, Marey's chronophotographs conveyed a primitive sense of motion through time. A 1894 chronophotograph captured the motions of a hammering blacksmith in a single image (Figure 3).

In 1906, Taylor adopted the use of imaging to aid his studies of industrial efficiency. A report he compiled in 1906 entitled, *On The Art of Cutting Metals*, illustrates the processes of steel working through close-up photographs of materials, tools, and procedures (Figure 4). However, the photographs show the limitations of the medium as a

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Elspeth H. *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. pp. 10. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 11.

tool of depicting labor<sup>7</sup>. Because of the slow shutter speed of the camera, the steel worker's swinging tools are blurred, and their details had to be redrawn after printing. In addition, there is no sense of time between the series of images, hindering the viewer's accurate understanding of the steel-working process.

Photographic data as a means of recording mechanical processes and analyzing their efficiency introduced the industrial world to new benefits of visual communication. However, it was the simultaneous development of film as a novel medium of communication and entertainment, along with the nation's rapidly expanding manufacturing and technological industries, which led to a significant and lasting relationship between film and industry.

Cinema as a form of mass entertainment owes its foundation to the development of film technologies during the turn-of-the century that made film accessible to wide audiences. Thomas Edison's invention of the kinoscope in 1893 was among the first inventions to bring film viewing to the public. Running perforated film strips past a lens, the kinoscope projected one-minute motion pictures through a small viewfinder. Known as a "peep show" viewing machine, working-class viewers enjoyed kinoscope projections in storefronts, arcades, and theaters.

Film historian Robert Sklar notes that, "the two decades from 1890 to 1910 span the gap from the beginning of motion pictures to their firm establishment as mass entertainment; they were also the years when the United States transformed itself into a predominantly urban industrial society"<sup>8</sup>. The popularity of the "movies developed during

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print. pp 3.

critical years of change...when a new social order was emerging in the modern industrial city”<sup>9</sup>. After hours of labor each week, the urban working-class looked for new sources of leisure in their city environment. Entertainment was found at amusement parks, sporting events, museums, and, eventually, in movie-theaters. By 1896, large-screen projection was established, and Americans could enjoy cinema as a social form of leisure. The predecessors of modern movie theaters were vaudeville stages, which put together short films consisting of exciting scenes of waves crashing, racing trains, and exotic locations.

Like photography, the growing popularity of film became a resource utilized by American industry. Because of its documentary nature and ability to record movement through time, film “emerged as an important evidentiary tool for workplace rationalization schemes”<sup>10</sup>.

In July 1912, Frank Gilbreth introduced the motion picture to micromotion study. The growing popularity of cinema at the time inspired Gilbreth, to use, “film’s spectatorial pleasures to reintroduce a still more disciplined adherence to industrial timekeeping”<sup>11</sup>. Commissioned by the New England Butt Company, Gilbreth took motion pictures of workers performing tasks in front of a grid background with a clock included in the lower right foreground of the scene. This allowed careful analysis of the motion and timing of the workers. Once the film was shot, Gilbreth’s goal was “editing out “waste” motions recorded on film and then splicing the new, more efficient sequences together”<sup>12</sup>. With the new,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Elspeth H. *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 77.

more efficient sequences, Gilbreth proposed that his films could be projected in slow motion to teach efficient practices to workers.

Corporations interested in recording their labor processes were willing to spend money to produce films that promised to enhance their business practices. Naturally, this resulted in the foundation of one of the largest and most over-looked sub-genres in American film production; the corporate sponsored film.

As indicated by its name, “a sponsored film is a moving picture, in any form, paid for by anyone controlling its content and shown for public entertainment or information<sup>13</sup>”. A 1973 table compiled by *Hope Reports* indicates that business and industry are by far the largest producers of sponsored film, though government, educational, religious, and community organizations make significant contributions to the production of sponsored films as well (Fig. 5). These films are produced either “in-plant” or through independent facilities, and include an enormous variety of productions, ranging from live action, to documentary, to animated works. Some corporate-sponsored films target audiences within the corporation, offering information, education, and training for employees and managers. Others are targeted at wider audiences, looking to create a corporate reputation through public relations messages, and to promote sales of products and services. The presence of sponsored films cannot be overlooked, considering that, “in terms of output, (sponsored) films are definitely among the most prolific formats or genres in film history”, making up 24% of the country’s non-theatrical film productions<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. Print. pp. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Hediger, Vinzenz and Patrick Vonderau, *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009). pp. 10.

Before sponsored film studios developed and took control of the industry, many of the earliest sponsored films were in-plant productions, produced entirely by the parent corporation. One of the earliest such films is, *The Home Electrical*, a promotion of residential electrification that was produced in 1915 by General Electric.

Though corporations produced their own films, the sponsored film industry would not have thrived if, “a number of non-theatrical production houses were not already in business to form the seed bed”<sup>15</sup>. Quite a few non-theatrical production houses were established during the first decades of the century. The Reid Ray Film Company, originally known as Rathes-Seavolt Motion Pictures, was one of the earliest non-theatrical production houses in the country. Established in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1910, the Reid Ray Film Company began by recording scenes of local iron ore mining.

A year later, one of the primary sponsored film production houses in the United States was opened. Beginning as Keely-Handy Syndicate, and then becoming the Newspaper Film Corporation, the production house finally settled on the name Jam Handy Organization, after its founder, Jamison Handy. Son of the Chief of Promotion and Publicity for the World’s Columbian Exposition, Handy’s father allowed him to regularly miss school and visit the fair’s exhibits in 1893 and 1894. After working for a company producing animated technical drawings and filmstrips, Handy served the US government in World War I as an “Americanization consultant”<sup>16</sup>. Working to make news media and educational materials more accessible to the nation’s illiterate population, Hardy promoted the

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<sup>15</sup> Gipson, Henry Clay. *Films in Business and Industry*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1947. Print.

<sup>16</sup> Prelinger, Rick. "Eccentricity, Education, and the Evolution of Corporate Speech: Jam Handy and His Organization." *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009. Print. pp. 213.

increased use of visual materials. By the 1920s, the Jam Handy Organization had become an established producer of documentary filmstrips.

In 1923, after the company gained Chevrolet Motors as a client, Handy established Jam Handy Organization's central headquarters in an old church in Detroit<sup>17</sup>. Within one mile from General Motors, the company's location was ideally situated in close proximity to heavy manufacturing locations. Six-hundred employees worked for Handy's vertically-integrated production studio, which provided production, distribution, and exhibition services. The company had a variety of departments, including animation, developing labs, and two full-sized orchestras. Films were usually showcased in theaters as a supplement to the main motion picture, but sometimes were adopted as educational films to be shown at vocational training schools. For example, the automobile manufacturing process shown in *Master Hands* (1936) "began its life as a theatrical film and later was channeled into trade schools"<sup>18</sup>.

During Jam Handy Organization's earliest years in Detroit, the company primarily produced films about the automobile industry. The films of this time are characterized by the dramatic style of silent film, technical animations, and static shots of urban scenes and machinery. Some of the films at this time, such as *A Car for Every Purse and Purpose* (1926), are ancestors of modern commercials. Produced for General Motors, the film is an overt advertisement that endorses industry and showcases different automobile models to consumers.

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<sup>17</sup> Bird Jr., William L., *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). Print. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Prelinger, Rick. "Eccentricity, Education, and the Evolution of Corporate Speech: Jam Handy and His Organization." *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009. Print. pp. 214.

The Jam Handy Organization “exerted a major influence on the development of the American sponsored film”, in that it diverged from other studios of the same era, which were “engaged in the continuous rationalization of production processes”, and instead, “turned (its) attention to rationalizing internal communication, training, and sales”<sup>19</sup>. Jam Handy worked with a variety of major industrial corporations, such as Dow Chemical Company, the U.S. Navy, and the Department of Motor Vehicles to create public relation films that crafted an identifiable corporate image. According to surviving records in the years between 1930 and 1968 the Jam Handy Organization produced over 7,000 motion pictures and film strips, and inspired the creation of many other sponsored film organizations interested in public relations<sup>20</sup>.

One important contributor to the growing success of the Jam Handy Organization and other sponsored film producers in the 1920s was the expanding distribution of projection technologies. Most films of the time were shot on expensive and flammable 35-mm film. The theaters that could afford to screen 35-mm films were often required to have a license in order to operate 35-mm projectors, due to their risk of flammability. Luckily, the Victor Animatograph Corporation’s release of the 16-mm projector in 1923 revolutionized the country’s exhibition practices<sup>21</sup>. Both 16-mm film and projectors were much less expensive than their 35-mm counterparts, with 16-mm film sometimes as much as two-thirds of the price. Sales of projectors skyrocketed throughout the next decade. In 1934, fifty 16-mm projectors were sold in America. By 1939, 5,000 projectors were sold,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>21</sup> Gipson, Henry Clay. Films in Business and Industry. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1947. Print.



with 4,000 of them going to public venues like schools, churches, and libraries<sup>22</sup>.

Sponsored films now had the potential to reach wider audiences in more intimate, non-commercial venues.

By the late 1920s, the advent of sound in film was another factor that spurred the growth of sponsored film. While filmstrips had become “low-end” technology by this time, the invention of the “talkie” brought excitement back to the film industry<sup>23</sup>. A 1930 issue of *Fortune Magazine* claimed that sound films were, “beyond comparison the fastest and most amazing revolution in the whole world of industrial revolutions”<sup>24</sup>. However, it was not until the 1927 release of the feature film, *The Jazz Singer*, that sound exploded in widespread popularity among the film industry. In the early 1920s, major production companies had reservations about adopting sound technology for their films, worrying about increased production, distribution, and exhibition prices, censorship issues, and a backlash from the public.

In contrast, the fringes of the film industry, particularly sponsored film producers, adopted sound technology more readily than their Hollywood peers. Western Electric, a distributor of sound equipment, targeted sponsored film producers in a 1930 advertisement that proclaimed sound films could, “teach your methods and processes in a manner more understandable and absorbing than ever before”, and will give the “public a compelling story of what is back of your business and how your product is made”<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Bird Jr., William L., *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). Print. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print. pp. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Bird Jr., William L., *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). Print. 122.

Aside from theater exhibitions, one of the largest and most influential venues for early sponsored films were the variety of trade shows and State, Country, and World Fairs popular at the time, where the progress of industry and technology in America was the main focus of their exhibitions. In 1933, 43 companies included films in their exhibits at the Chicago World's Fair, including Northwestern Railroad, Union Carbide and Carbon, Sears Roebuck, and a host of popular automobile companies<sup>26</sup>. By the time the 1939 New York World's Fair was in progress, "films became integral components of (fair) exhibits", with 600 films screened<sup>27</sup>. These films were shown in either open spaces with free sitting and standing room, or in more traditional closed spaces with admission limitations.

Before the Second World War, sponsored films shown at fairs mainly focused on mechanical processes as an indication of the strength of industry. Car manufacturers such as Chevrolet and Ford sponsored films illustrating new automobile construction processes, employing the newest of film production technologies. *Rhapsody in Steel* was a Ford film that first utilized stop-motion techniques to demonstrate the construction of an automobile. The film was shown at the Century of Progress exhibit in 1934 and drew 5,000 viewers daily<sup>28</sup>. *Precisely So*, produced for Chevrolet in 1937, also utilized stop-motion techniques to record the seemingly unaided construction of automobiles. *In Tune With Tomorrow*, and *New Dimensions*, produced in 1939 and 1940 respectively and shown at the New York World's Fair, used three-dimensional effects and Technicolor to emphasize the manufacturing process of a Plymouth Sedan<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

An important realization that corporations made from the success of films at fairs in the 1930s and 1940s was the, “need for an interpretive ‘humanization’ of business to labor”<sup>30</sup>. Audiences who had experienced the industrial process films created in the prior decade were now looking for dramatic films more similar to those shown by Hollywood producers. Understanding that film was an important method of modern communication when, “Fireside Chats over radio were not a practical medium”, corporations quickly shifted their approach from demonstration to dramatization<sup>31</sup>. Especially in the post-war period, sponsored films became increasingly more creative with their narrative elements, transitioning from fact-based demonstrations of manufacturing techniques and prowess to entertainment-based dramatic narratives that subtly advertised products and ideas.

“Sponsored motions pictures...(began to) dramatize the inadequacy of radio talk and the static demonstrations of manufacturing processes that had once defined the industrial film” by creating more developed plots and characters<sup>32</sup>. *The Middleton Family at the World’s Fair* (1939), produced by Westinghouse, is an example of such a film. Advertisements for the film were distributed in magazines months before the film’s release, showing images of a “mythical, ‘typical’, family” on a visit to the fair<sup>33</sup>. Through these storyline and advertising techniques, Westinghouse hoped to reach “a possible 12 million people seven times” during the week-long New York World’s Fair<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

The popularity of fairs and trade shows, “held way until specialists made television their promotional medium of choice in the early 1950s”<sup>35</sup>. With the growing prevalence of television, the sponsored film industry felt an increased pressure to be desirable “filler” in between television programming. This intensified the preference for more dramatic films, modeled after the styles of popular Hollywood movies. Previously, sponsored film followed conventional production practices. Everything, “was scripted chronologically, so viewers wouldn’t get confused...no shot lasted fewer than seven seconds...(and) every item in the manufacturers catalogue got some exposure”<sup>36</sup>.

As television became a portal of entertainment for the masses, sponsored films had to update their production styles to meet the criteria of 1950s entertainment. In addition to conveying the message of its benefactor, sponsored films had to be, “creative, sensitive, written like a short story, paced like a theatrical drama, inquisitive like a post reporter, and full of the heady qualities of the feature film”<sup>37</sup>. Popular themes of the time such as family life and technology became the narrative framework for many sponsored films of the period. For example, AT&T produced *Once Upon A Honeymoon* in 1956 about a stylish young couple that showcases new home décor and appliances.

Television fueled the continued growth of the sponsored film industry throughout the 1950s. Realizing the financial potential of corporate-sponsored film, official reports began documenting and analyzing the statistics of the industry. In 1954, the *Dollars And Sense of Business Films* study was carried out by the Association of National Advertisers in New York. The report gives over 128 pages of information on the positive effects of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>36</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. Print.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

television on film distribution and the qualities that make sponsored films successful on television<sup>38</sup>.

Historian Walter Klein captured the dynamic history of the industry when he said, “I realize that every five years is a generation in sponsored films”<sup>39</sup>. The rapidly developing cinematic technology of the past century, along with the country’s ever-evolving industrial scene produced a powerful genre of film with a rich history. From the analytical goals of early sponsored film, to the endorsement of manufacturing, and finally, to the production of dramatic narratives, the study of sponsored film reveals much about the role that visual media continues to play in our corporate nation. In comparison to the technological growth of film, the advances made in today’s digital world offer virtually limitless possibilities for the visual art of corporate sponsorship.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, vii.

## **Chapter Two: Cinematic Public Relations Campaigns: Pre-War Corporate Sponsored Film**

The first chapter of this thesis explores the historical origins and development of corporate-sponsored film as a result of the nation's economic climate and technological growth. This chapter will more closely analyze the thematic and stylistic patterns established in corporate-sponsored film during the years leading up to World War II.

As innovative film technologies developed during the 1920s and 1930s, large-scale corporations began to recognize the advantages of close communication with the public. Naturally, the growing popularity of film made it a preferred medium for businesses to present favorable narratives. As a result, the changing corporate atmosphere throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a great impact on the subsequent evolution of the sponsored film genre. Following World War I, corporations utilized sponsored films as a means to impress the public with their growing public presence. As the Great Depression hit the nation, sponsored film styles quickly shifted to project a view of the corporation as an empathetic entity with whom the disillusioned public could identify and in turn, could trust.

### **Sponsored Film of the 1920s**

During the 1920s, large industrial firms began to expand in the roaring market that followed the increased production demands of World War I. From the 1870s until the late 1920s, "major corporations were in the process of shifting from family firms or companies based on the leadership of a single dominant family entrepreneur to modern

bureaucratically managed entities”<sup>40</sup>. It is at this time that industrial giants such as General Electric, General Motors, and U.S. Steel achieved an international scale.

Along with this shift in business structure came a new distance between the business and the public. As individualized, family-owned businesses gave way to multi-location, bureaucratic giants, the public no longer had direct access to business personnel, information, and processes. The anti-trust legislation of the period only added to the suspicious reputation of large-scale corporations as immoral and lacking transparency. Businesses looked to build their public presence, impressing Americans with the global extent of their outreach while simultaneously rebutting their impersonal, bureaucratic reputations.

To counteract their opaque and impersonal reputations, corporations of the period developed new “communication strategies to address workers and the public”<sup>41</sup>. Initiated to address the latest issues faced by large corporations, most public relations specialists before and during the 1920s worked to craft an image of the corporation as a member of the community. Using themes of family and neighborliness in sponsored film and various other forms of media, corporations attempted to connect with the public.

### **The General Electric Family**

One of the earliest sponsored narrative films employed as a means to craft corporate reputations is *The Home Electrical*, released in 1915 by General Electric. By the

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<sup>40</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998. 44. Print.

<sup>41</sup> Prelinger, Rick. "Eccentricity, Education, and the Evolution of Corporate Speech: Jam Handy and His Organization." *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009. 211. Print.

second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, General Electric had suffered from major political setbacks and needed to repair its public image. In 1911, the company was challenged by a federal antitrust prosecution, but managed to avoid any serious legal ramifications<sup>42</sup>. However, the company did suffer from negative public attention because of its reputation as a leading “power trust” of the time<sup>43</sup>.

The company produced *The Home Electrical* as part of a larger campaign to show the many ways electricity can be used in the home. This served a dual purpose for General Electric, as it both advertised the variety of electrical appliances offered, as well as used the theme of the family, home, and community to appeal to the public. The film’s narrative follows Mr. and Mrs. Wise as they give a tour of their new “electrical home” to Mr. Newhouse, a man Mr. Wise met admiring electrical heaters in front of a shop window. Mr. and Mrs. Wise, who are aptly named for their sensible choice in electrifying their home, are eager to showcase their electrical vacuum, fan, sewing machine, toaster, and washing machine to Mr. Newhouse, who is interested in electrifying his own “new house”. Throughout the narrative, there are close up shots of Mr. and Mrs. Wise demonstrating various electrical appliances that focus on their automated nature. In addition, shots of dialogue frequently show a housemaid in the background using new electrical tools to clean the house (Figure 6).

As gracious neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Wise serve as metaphors for the friendly and innovative image desired by General Electric. They welcome Mr. Newhouse to take a lovely tour of the home, including the kitchen and bathroom, and offer him a family meal. The

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<sup>42</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998. 150. Print.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



family dynamic is further emphasized by the housemaid, an efficient member of the household, as well as the moment when Mrs. Wise must get up from the meal to care for her baby. The neighborliness between the men continues at the end of the film, when they share cigars together. The film closes with a title card reflecting the film's display of products as well as its connection to community and family values. Quoting Mr. Newhouse as he leaves the Wise home, it reads, "I enjoyed seeing (their) equipment and appreciate (their) hospitality". The neighborliness and family orientation of the film is an important style choice, reflecting the company's desire to change the public's perception.

### **General Motors "Around the World"**

The success of the Jam Handy Organization, one of the best-known corporate film production companies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was rooted in the concurrent growth of General Motors during that time. By the 1920s, General Motors had acquired smaller automobile and appliance companies, incorporating them as divisions such as Chevrolet, Buic, Cadillac, Oakland (later Pontiac), Frigidaire, and Delco Light in regions throughout the globe.

As ones of the industrial giants emerging from the era of small, family-owned businesses, General Motors suffered the side effects of rapid growth. Alfred P. Sloan Jr., the president of General Motors at the time, complained of the company's lack of presence after a study in 1924 found that most consumers did not recognize General Motors as the parent company of Chevrolet<sup>44</sup>. Though Chevrolet had become a household name, it was hardly associated with General Motors. To rectify this, Sloan organized a centralizing advertisement campaign headed by Bruce Barton, who would later become a leading figure

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<sup>44</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998. 131. Print.

in public relation campaigns for various corporations throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Barton believed that, “each of (General Motors’) companies is better able to serve by reason of its association with the others” and “its own various components constituted a corporate family”<sup>45</sup>. To increase recognition of General Motors and its associated divisions, he adopted themes of family, kinship, and community in various media, establishing the presence of General Motors in the everyday lives of people throughout the globe. Film became an important media for Barton, who worked with production studios to craft specific images to project to both public and corporate audiences.

Realizing the potential of film to communicate its new image, General Motors contacted the up-and-coming production studio, Jam Handy Organization, in 1923<sup>46</sup>. Under the management of Jam Handy, the company “felt committed to bridging the gap between corporations and the public”<sup>47</sup>. After procuring Chevrolet Motor Company as its first major client, Jam Handy Organization relocated to Detroit in 1924 to be nearer to the General Motors headquarters. Surviving records indicate that Jam Handy produced its first film for General Motors in 1926 with, *A Car for Every Purse and Purpose*, a silent film showcasing the cost and quality of the different models of automobiles offered by General Motors’ various divisions.

The film is meant to associate General Motors with its various popular divisions in order to make General Motors a more commonly acknowledged name. It follows a simple structure, visually demonstrating the various divisions of General Motors and the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 136 & 139.

<sup>46</sup> Prelinger, Rick. "Eccentricity, Education, and the Evolution of Corporate Speech: Jam Handy and His Organization." *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009. 213. Print.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 215.

automobiles provided by each. The film begins with a title card reading, “There’s a General Motors car or truck to meet every need of every buyer of commercial transportation everywhere”, and then transitions into a string of sequences focused on each division and car model. Each division begins with a title card stating the name of the car manufacturer, underscored by a phrase about the cost and quality of the automobile model. Screens like, “Cadillac – Standard of the World”, “Buick - When Better Cars Are Built, Buick Will Build Them”, “Chevrolet – Quality at a Low Cost”, and “Oldsmobile – The Fine Car of Low Price” are followed by static shots of cars driving and happy passengers. The five minute film concludes with the direct, explanatory title card, “These are the cars and trucks produced by General Motors”, marking it as a showcase for the company’s popular divisions and products.

The Jam Handy Organization continued promoting General Motors in film. *General Motors Around The World*, another one of its earliest sponsored films on record, was released in 1927. Also a silent film, it uses entrepreneurial language in its title cards, bustling shots of cities throughout the world, overlaid logos, and interactive images of maps to craft an image of General Motors as a major presence touching the daily lives of people, all over the world.

The 50-minute silent film opens with a title card proclaiming the extent of General Motors’ outreach. The second sentence reads, “Over a million persons get their livelihood from enterprises under its sway” ...”its products bring pleasure and comfort into the lives of untold thousands in all parts of the world”. It transitions to show the busy cities in both America and throughout the globe, with people traveling by car on crowded streets,

interspersed with facts about the company. Next, a long segment of animated maps furthers the point that General Motors has an impressive global influence (Figure 7).

General Motors uses specific visuals and diction in the film to impress audiences with the strength of the company. For instance, about halfway through the film, images of charts and graphs appear with statistics explaining the strength of the company in business terms and numbers. For instance, a graph shows the increasing number of General Motor employees with the overly superfluous explanation of how the “expansion and intensification of organizing efforts has called for a corresponding growth of strength in personnel employed” (Figure 8). Next, we see a complex flow chart mapping the “sources of supply parts and materials” to “export and dispatches” to assembly plants, to “dealer and distributor organizations” to the “export consumer market”(Figure 9). The language used in the film targets a business-minded audience, heightening its perceived prestige for shareholder, potential shareholders, employees, and the general public.

### **Sponsored Film in the Depression Era**

By the 1930s, the economic climate of the nation had shifted in such a way that corporations that had been concerned about making their presence more known to the public had to now consider the negative light cast on business. The experience of the Depression and the governmental response shifted blame to big business for the collapse of the economy. Large-scale corporations felt vilified, making corporate leaders highly critical of the New Deal. They believed that government intervention was undermining the recovery that they assumed could be achieved by the free market, and corporate reorganization and consolidation.

As a result, businesses sought to craft new images for themselves, as public relations “had become clichéd and ineffective in containing”, what they felt was, “the anti-corporate liberalism of the New Deal”<sup>48</sup>. Now, new public relations campaigns were developed to respond to perceived anti-business sentiments, “assuage fears”, and “advocate for public reliance on free-enterprise capitalism...and corporate paternalism”, which had to downplay the abstract, highbrow concepts that characterized their early public relations.<sup>49</sup> In place of those earlier campaigns, corporations now purported a reputation as humanistic organizations that could be trusted. Massive public relations campaigns took off during the 1930s, downplaying the government’s role in healing the economy by painting an image of the corporation as one of the people, understanding of economic hardships. Barton, whose advertising skills were employed by many businesses at the time, explained to corporate leaders that, “Industry and politics, at the moment, are competitors for the confidence and favor of the same patron...the public”<sup>50</sup>. His words convinced firms of the, “need to hire the expert storytellers of the public relations firms and advertising agencies”, and to adopt greater use of non-print media, such as cartoons, radio, and film<sup>51</sup>.

Finding greater inspiration in the newscasts screened before featured films than in Hollywood, corporate sponsored filmmakers of the period adopted, “the acquisition of a “new vocabulary” of colloquial and poetic speech that was expressed in lecture-style

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<sup>48</sup> Bird Jr., William L., *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Sullivan, Sara. "Corporate Discourses of Sponsored Films of Steel Production in the United States, 1936–1956." *The Velvet Light Trap* 72.Fall (2013): 34.

<sup>50</sup> Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998. 202. Print.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

narrations. In addition, to console the Depression-inflicted public, corporate sponsored films continued to use themes of family and the humanization of labor to compete with the comforting fireside chats offered as solace by FDR.

### **DuPont's "Better Things for Better Living"**

One of Barton's major projects of the time was the "positive image campaign" of the DuPont Chemical Company in 1935. With the slogan, "Better Things for Better Living...through chemistry", Barton's goal was to show how chemistry constantly touched the lives of everyday people. Though Lamont DuPont, president of the company, was hesitant to commit to a large scale public relations campaign, Barton convinced him to "demonstrat(e) its contributions to the economies" of local areas through exhibits, ads, radio shows, and films. A close comparison of the films produced by DuPont throughout the 1930s reveals DuPonts' early reluctance to accept Barton's advice, and the eventual shift to the new cinematic styles portrayed in corporate sponsored film.

In 1936, DuPont released *Wonder World of Chemistry: A Film Story of Better Things for Better Living*, which remained rooted in the earlier style meant to impress the audience with the business' large scale. The 18-minute film focuses on the amazing innovations that have arisen due to science and chemistry. The global reach of the company is established in the opening sequence, which shows dripping test tubes imposed over a model of the globe.

The narration in *Wonder World of Chemistry: A Film Story of Better Things for Better Living* is structured as an "illustrated lecture" that factually states its message in a straightforward, newscaster style, accompanied by relevant visuals. While this style of narration

places authority with the narrator, it removes any personal connection between the narrator and the audience. Instead, the newscaster-style of “illustrated lecture” narration that is present in *Wonder World of Chemistry: A Film Story of Better Things for Better Living* retains the impressive attitude that sponsored films of the 1920s projected<sup>52</sup>. The film begins as the narrator proclaims in a booming voice with very little inflection the superiority of DuPont’s chemical accomplishments over nature, stating that, “the forest, the air, and the sea were called upon to contribute” to the achievements of science. In addition, the narrator explains DuPont’s contributions to the still-wrecked economy, assuredly stating in his booming voice that the company was continually, “creating better opportunities for employment” for Americans.

The visuals in the film are heavily focused on the products created by DuPont, at the expense of images of humans interacting with them. The narrator invites the audience to look at the “better things for better living” created by DuPont, then silently waits as the camera pans over images of chemical cans, knives, scissors, firearms, and dynamite (Figures 10 & 11). Not only are these items that DuPont may have avoided a few years later as America entered World War II, but they are also items with which many Americans of the time might not immediately identify.

### **DuPont’s New Image in *Fashion’s Favorite***

The impersonal, authoritative narration and product-centric visuals that DuPont utilized in 1936 evolved into a more personal and humanized style of film by 1940 with the

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<sup>52</sup> Sullivan, Sara. "Corporate Discourses of Sponsored Films of Steel Production in the United States, 1936–1956." *The Velvet Light Trap* 72.Fall (2013): 35.

release of *Fashion's Favorite*, produced by Caravel Films. The 32-minute film highlights the qualities of Rayon that make it such a useful modern material. The topic alone invites audiences to connect with the film on a more personal level than with DuPont's earlier release. The filmmakers chose to focus on Rayon through images of fabrics and fashions, which are more widely identifiable than the chemicals and ammunition of *Wonder World of Chemistry: A Film Story of Better Things for Better Living*. Associated with the glamour of emerging Hollywood, fashion was a much more culturally digestible topic (Figure 12). In additional contrast with this earlier film, *Fashion's Favorite* has a more colloquial narration style to draw the audience in further. While still in an "illustrated lecture" style, the narrator, "takes the point of view of a fictional agent," specifically, "a tour guide leading the audience," through the processes and products of Rayon<sup>53</sup>. This is accomplished through the narrator's "rhetorical flourishes", as well as his dialogue.

The most immediate difference between the narrator of *Fashion's Favorite* and *Wonder World of Chemistry: A Film Story of Better Things for Better Living* is in the quality of voice. The colloquial narrator of *Fashion's Favorite* speaks in a more conversation style with variations in inflection, quite unlike an announcer or newscaster. Often, his quality of speaking becomes rhythmic and poetic, such as when he describes the qualities of Rayon fabric, saying, "Today no other textile fiber makes so many types of cloth as rayon. Sheer fabrics, heavy fabrics, rough fabrics, fabrics that are bright fabrics that are dull, fabrics that wash perfectly, fabrics that dry clean beautifully, that are cut, tailored, and fulfill every other textile duty for which it is suited".

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 37.



Not only does the narrator's style exemplify DuPont's more humanized approach to sponsored film, but also does his dialogue. The dialogue's focus is removed from DuPont's industrial products, and instead "express(es) admiration for the process and the workers"<sup>54</sup>. For example, played over a shot of a factory, the narrator comments that, "within these walls work craftsmen for whom quality is a creed". Later, he describes how factory machinery, "frees hand and eye for still greater skill and precision" by the workers themselves, and compliments "the extreme degree of skill and care employed" by the, "exacting technicians" who make Rayon.

DuPont exemplifies the resistance of some corporations at adopting and transforming public relation campaigns. While corporate sponsored film was originally a perfect medium to impress the public with a grandiose corporate image, the Depression-era ushered in a more personal style of filmmaking that emphasized the corporate connection to the average American's daily life. As sponsored film continued to grow as a genre, it was soon evident that fostering positive corporate images through cinema was the way of the future.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## **Chapter Three: The Post-War Influence of Television on Corporate-Sponsored Film**

This chapter outlines the thematic and stylistic changes that occurred to the sponsored-film genre in the post-war period. As America entered World War II, corporate film production diminished as the country focused its money and efforts on the war. The government sponsored films about domestic military industrial production, daily contributions to the war effort by those on the home front, and optimistic depictions of the lives of soldiers in an attempt to boost the nation's morale. However, corporations were afraid to create films about their industrial affairs, lest it appear to the public that they were profiteering. Though some corporate-sponsored films were produced during America's participation in World War II, large-scale sponsored film production reached a slow period.

The prosperity brought by the end of the war in 1946 renewed sponsored film production in revolutionary new ways. As sponsored-film expert Rick Prelinger proclaims, "the late 1940s and 1950s were the golden age of the sponsored-film", due to America's post-World War II societal changes and the continuation of new technological developments<sup>55</sup>. The largest influence on sponsored film in this climate was the rise of television as the most far-reaching medium of communication. Corporations were no longer restricted to showing their films at specific venues such as theaters, fairs, trade shows, and corporate meetings, which limited their audiences. Instead, television could

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<sup>55</sup> Prelinger, Rick. *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*. San Francisco, CA: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006. vii. Print.

allow corporate-sponsored films to reach recently returned veterans and their new families throughout the entire nation every day.

The growth of television occurred soon after the end of World War II. By the mid-1940s, industrial factories that no longer had to produce military materials could now mass-produce television sets for returning veterans and their new families<sup>56</sup>. While televisions were first considered luxury items, they quickly became products owned by everyday Americans. For example, only 8,000 televisions were in use in 1946, while over 10 million were in use by 1950<sup>57</sup>. Five years later, there were over 37 million televisions in use in America, mostly concentrated in the Northeast<sup>58</sup>.

During the latter period of the 1940s, the number of television stations available increased and became more stable. In 1948, approximately seventy stations existed across most of the major cities in the country<sup>59</sup>. By the early 1950s, this number expanded as television became a widespread medium of communication, with various smaller towns and cities creating their own local stations. During this time, “its was reported that 60% of families changed their sleeping patterns because of television, 55% altered their meal times, and 78%” began using television as “an electronic babysitter”<sup>60</sup>. Early television

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Curran, James, and Michael Gurevitch. *Mass Media and Society*. London: E. Arnold, 1991. Print.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. New York: Oxford Univ., 1990. Print.

<sup>60</sup> Curran, James, and Michael Gurevitch. *Mass Media and Society*. London: E. Arnold, 1991. Print.

stations were solely available in black-and-white, though some charged a fee for colored broadcasts until the wider adoption of color television in the late 1950s and 1960s<sup>61</sup>.

Early television programming took inspiration from radio and cinema. The first programs grew from radio shows, often incorporating elements from genres such as westerns and crime thrillers. In addition, cartoon shorts such as those that were shown in between features at movie theaters were broadcast. By the mid-1950s, Disney became the first major film studio to enter the television industry, producing shows such as *Disneyland* and *The Mickey Mouse Club*<sup>62</sup>. Soon, new genres influenced by the unique qualities of television had developed. For example, in the 1950s, sitcoms became a new popular genre suited especially for television. Shows like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver* became immensely popular because of their use of physical comedy, which could not be communicated through radio<sup>63</sup>.

### **Sponsored Films of the Post-War Era**

Corporations took advantage of this new and popular method of communication, quickly making television the primary method of distribution for sponsored films. Sponsored films from before the war period were readily available “fillers” that corporations were more than eager to broadcast on television<sup>64</sup>. However, regulations made stations extremely selective about the material they would air. As a result,

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<sup>61</sup> Havalovich, Mary Beth., and Lauren Rabinovitz. *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.

<sup>62</sup> Curran, James, and Michael Gurevitch. *Mass Media and Society*. London: E. Arnold, 1991. Print.

<sup>63</sup> Havalovich, Mary Beth., and Lauren Rabinovitz. *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.

<sup>64</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. 33. Print.

corporations were “keenly interested in what stations want(ed)”, and began tailoring their new films to cater to television’s demands<sup>65</sup>.

One of the most transformative requirements television placed on sponsored film was the removal of any explicit advertising, and instead emphasizing “‘public service’ films that advanced corporate goals without dwelling on mission and products”<sup>66</sup>. A 1953 article in *Business Screen* titled “Audiences, U.S.A.: Editorial Foreword to a *Business Screen* Report in Current Trends in Sponsored Film Distribution”, stated that “films acceptable to t.v. program directors must necessarily be of excellent professional quality, with a minimum of direct advertising, and a basic subject theme of real public interest.”<sup>67</sup> This eliminated many of the pre-World War II films, with their overt corporate discourse, as acceptable options to be screened on television. Instead, corporations had to create new, subtle films that diminished the role of the sponsor, while retaining focus on goods, services, and public image. In addition, to appeal to television programmers, corporations presented their films as “free films” or “free-loan films” rather than “sponsored films”, in order to reduce the presence of the sponsor and encourage the television station to take advantage of their ready-made films.

Television’s impact steered sponsored film away from advertisement to more conventional cinematic styles. In 1954, the Association of National Advertisers published a study entitled *The Dollars and Sense of Business Films*, revealing their predictions for the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Prelinger, Rick. *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*. San Francisco, CA: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006. vii. Print.

<sup>67</sup> "Audiences, U.S.A.: Editorial Foreword to a Business Screen Report in Current Trends in Sponsored Film Distribution." *Business Screen* 2.14 (1953): 33.

impact television would have on the sponsored film industry<sup>68</sup>. The study analyzed 157 sponsored films that were in circulation in 1954<sup>69</sup>. It acknowledged the changes that were taking place within the genre, noting that, “vast progress has been made since the end of World War II by social and psychological scientists in studying audience reactions and the factors contributing to effective film production”<sup>70</sup>.

Sponsored films of this period adopted the cinematic styles of Hollywood that were becoming canons of filmmaking. Sponsored film expert Walter Klein describes how, “the new sponsored film was creative, sensitive, written like a short story, paced like a theatrical drama, inquisitive like a post reporter, and full of the heady qualities of the feature film”<sup>71</sup>. Sponsored film producers in New York “enjoyed a creative efflorescence, moving into innovative, sometimes even experimental, filmmaking”, while those in Los Angeles “capitalized on local access to high end production services and created some big-budget productions, a few with major stars”<sup>72</sup>.

The most effective sponsored films created for television utilized more complex narratives that typically featured young, stylish couples in domestic spaces, and escapist themes that emphasized dreams and leisure time away from work. In addition, sponsored films made for television were crafted as Hollywood-style spectacles, using music, dance, dazzling mise-en-scene, and most importantly, color film, to impress the audience. *The*

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<sup>68</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. 32. Print

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Association of National Advertisers. *The Dollars and Sense of Business Film: Study of 157 Business Films; a Report on the Production and Distribution Costs of Representative Advertising and Public Relations Motion Pictures*. N.p.: Ssociation of National Advertisers, 1954. Print.

<sup>71</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. 26. Print

<sup>72</sup> Prelinger, Rick. *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*. San Francisco, CA: National Film “Preservation Foundation, 2006. vii. Print.

*Dollars and Sense of Business Films* mentions the exploding popularity of color televisions stating, “color films are favored nearly four-to-one. With color television now materializing, this ratio can be expected to swing even further in this direction”<sup>73</sup>. Finally, they almost universally incorporated images of technology as symbols of American progress. The study proposed that these elements be compiled into a guide for the production of successful sponsored film, titled *A Checklist for Producer and Sponsor Responsibilities in the Production of Motion Pictures*<sup>74</sup>.

### **Covert Advertising in *Midwest Holiday***

One of the most well received films of 1952 was *Midwest Holiday*, a 27 minute film sponsored by Standard Oil Co. of Indiana and produced by Wilding Picture Productions that exemplifies the new style of sponsored film that grew out of the post-war rise in television. Unlike earlier films sponsored by the oil industry, *Midwest Holiday* hardly makes any reference to its sponsor, Standard Oil. The sponsor’s name on the opening and closing title cards are the only overt indication of sponsorship the audience receives. Instead, the film uses popular narrative trends, Hollywood-style spectacles, and the theme of progress to support a covertly positive image of its sponsor.

Despite the lack of overt advertising for Standard Oil, the film’s narrative provides a theme of the Midwestern soul that encourages travel and settlement in its oil-rich lands. Dale, the film’s protagonist, narrates most of the film as he is telling his boss about his

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<sup>73</sup> Association of National Advertisers. *The Dollars and Sense of Business Film: Study of 157 Business Films; a Report on the Production and Distribution Costs of Representative Advertising and Public Relations Motion Pictures*. N.p.: Association of National Advertisers, 1954. Print.

<sup>74</sup> Klein, Walter J. *The Sponsored Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1976. 33. Print.

vacation in the Midwest. He describes how he meets Connie, a painter, who is travelling with her father. The group visits various sites together, and the couple eventually falls in love. Originally intent on moving to Paris, by the end of the film, Dale confesses that, “there is something alive right here in the Midwest”, and that it is where he “wants to put his roots down, to work and live”.

Throughout the film, Connie and her father represent the “grassroots” quality of the people in the Midwest, which Dale ultimately declares as superior to the lifestyle he would have found in Paris. Connie captures the “scenes and hearts” of the places they visit through her paintings, while her father makes astute statements such as, “You don’t realize how big this country is till you get around and see it,” and “(The Midwest is) the grass roots, the real heart and soul of America.” By the end of the film, Dale, as well as Standard Oil’s intended audience, realize the joy of travelling and the American spirit that can be found in the oil-rich fields of the Midwest.

The dialogue provided by Connie’s father not only highlights the qualities of the Midwest, but also promotes a theme of American progress that is often present in sponsored films of the time. For instance, a sequence of scenic shots is cut with a shot of Connie’s father looking out of the passage window, remarking on the progress of America. He states, “Once upon a time these rivers were our only highways. Now we have highways all over the country. We drive our own cars. Get on a train, a plane. We go from one end of the country to another, and nobody says we can’t.” In another sequence of travelogue shots, he comments on the luxuries offered by today’s modern automobiles, saying, “life must’ve been pretty rough in those days. How’d you like to travel around behind two



oxen?" This image of a progressive American was pleasing to a nation recovering from war, and as such, was a successful approach when creating sponsored films for television.

*Midwest Holiday* is essentially a travelogue, showcasing spectacles such as scenic views of Midwest landscapes and tourist attractions for the television viewer. Just a sample of shots include a great variety of panoramas such as oil pumps, wheat fields, the Mississippi River, Mount Rushmore, Lincoln's birthplace, and a statue of Mark Twain. Other sequences are shot from the dashboard of the car, giving audiences what must have been an exhilarating thrill of travelling on the open road (Figure 13). The images are enhanced by the fact they are filmed in color, a novel sight for many television viewers at the time.

### **Women Audiences and *The Best Made Plans***

*The Best Made Plans*, sponsored by the Dow Chemical Co. and produced by Dallas Jones Productions, was released four years after *Midwest Holiday* and exemplifies the themes and styles consistent with post-World War II sponsored film as well. Like *Midwest Holiday*, *The Best Made Plans* has no explicit advertising. However, its plot heavily utilizes "clear plastic film" in such a way that it cannot escape the viewer's notice. Saran wrap, a Dow Chemical product, was newly invented, and the film showcases the many ways it can be used in- and out- of the home. *The Best Made Plans* follows a day in the life of housewife Ann and her family. Ann is faced with countless tasks to do around the house, using Saran wrap to store foods in her new freezer, cover dishes for an outdoor picnic, and wrap clothes for travel and to keep them dry and clean. Daughter Cathy makes birthday decorations with Saran wrap with the help of a grandmotherly neighbor. Meanwhile, her

husband Jack is home on a vacation from work. He attempts to put a fresh coat of paint on the garage door, but gets distracted by begrudgingly doing chores for his busy wife. At one point, he notices the Saran wrap his family is using and uses a piece to cover his open paint can while he chats with the next-door neighbor. Though no overt statements are made, the product is clearly identifiable and implicitly advertised.

The spectacular features of *The Best Made Plans* meant to capture the attention of audiences are apparent, though subdued in comparison to films like *Midwest Holiday*. The film has bright Kodachrome colors, and includes intimate, close-up visuals that demonstrate the possibilities of Saran wrap. For instance, multiple shots show Ann learning how to make perfect wrapped packages of burger patties, steaks, chicken, and frozen baked goods from the freezer sales representative (Figure 14). Later, close-up shots demonstrate Mrs. Henson teaching Anne to wrap candies in Saran wrap to create decorations for her upcoming birthday party (Figure 15).

The film's themes of the progress of technology, strict gender roles, and hardworking domestic women are common in television and cinema of the time. *The Best Made Plans* is primarily set in a domestic space, a feature that perhaps stems from the sitcoms that originated at the time as a new popular television genre. Dow Chemical portrayed the freezer and Saran wrap as symbols of technological progress, hoping television audiences would emulate the stylish couple's home. Like *Midwest Holiday*, the entire cast is white, representing the ideal American family of the period, and the young couple follows strict gender roles.

In addition, the women in the film are portrayed in a sympathetic, positive light, meant to appeal to female audiences.

That women, primarily homemakers, are the target audience of *The Best Made Plans* is evident through the positive characteristics ascribed to mother as well as the dialogue of the film's narration. Though characters sometimes converse with one another, a male narrator often comments on the scenes and sometimes even speaks for the characters. His commentary sympathizes with the Ann, who does housework for much of the film. For instance, after learning techniques to store food in her freezer all day, then preparing dinner, Ann covers her dishes with Saran wrap to protect them when she takes them outside. The narrator explains to the audience the convince of Saran wrap, while also noting the inconvenience usually placed on homemakers by stating that now she, "could relax with the rest of the family rather than running in and out" to transport food.

Dialogue in the film emphasizes Ann's cleverness and hard work, which helps her to provide for her family. At one point, the freezer sales representative assures her of her freezer purchase, saying that, "there's really no end to the savings, convenience, and enjoyment of quality food when you know how to get the most out of your freezer" ...which lets her, "stock up when prices are low." In addition, the film portrays women as nurturing and creative. For instance, Ann busily serves her family by cooking, cleaning, and packing, but is also capable of spontaneity, and appeases her flustered husband. Additionally, Mrs. Hensen's grandmotherly character helps Cathy with her creative decorating project.

At the end of the film, the narrator notes Ann patience with her husband, Jack, who had been constantly complaining during his vacation from work. Jack is on vacation from work, and scoffs when his wife asks him to ice Cathy's birthday cake, help make decorations, and visit her sister's newborn child. When his "best made plans" to paint the garage go awry, Jack is much less flexible than his wife. The narrator compliments Ann on

completing her daily tasks, “even though Jack liked to make a big production out of the whole thing.” Women faced with hours of housework and ungrateful husbands could identify with mother and admire her well-mannered character.

### **Musicality and Materiality in *Once Upon a Honeymoon***

Corporate-sponsored films reached their epitome as examples of television entertainment in works like *Once Upon a Honeymoon*(1956) and *Design for Dreaming*(1956). Both films use themes of escape and materialism, as well as musical styles and exuberant mise-en-scene to enthrall the audience.

Released the same year as *The Best Made Plans*, *Once Upon a Honeymoon* adopts similar covert advertising and dramatic narrative, but takes it to a new level through a theatrical musical structure. The film, sponsored by the American Telephone & Telegraph Co. and produced by Jerry Fairbanks Productions, is a musical that promotes stylish new telephones through its storyline. Typical of the genre, the film begins with a young couple just about ready to leave for their long-overdue honeymoon. However, Jeff's boss calls and demands that the songwriter write a new showtune. The couple must put their honeymoon on hold while he struggles to quickly come up with a new song. Meanwhile, Mary wishes for her home to be completely remodeled in the latest fashions. An angel sprinkles her with magic dust, allowing her to visualize her dream home. As she picks up the phone, its clicks inspire her husband's new song. The boss loves the new work, and the couple happily goes off on their honeymoon.

The film is an excellent example of the entertainment-focused productions of the era, utilizing musical, choreographed dance sequences, and trendy set decorations, all

filmed in Technicolor, to capture the attention of the audience. Once again, there is no overt advertising, but AT&T was sure to have telephones prominent throughout the plot. The film's first conflict arises with a call from the Jeff's boss, Mary speaks on the phone with her friend and wishes for new telephones in every room of her dream home, the clicks of the telephone provide a solution to Jeff's writers-block, and the boss is ecstatic when listening to the new song on the speaker phone prominently displayed on his desk. Without the telephone, the narrative could not move forward.

As the title implies, *Once Upon a Honeymoon* uses themes of fantasy, dreaming, and escape to appeal to audiences. The couple is desperate to escape their domestic life on their honeymoon, but they are held back by the Jeff's employment, a sentiment that many couples could identify with. In addition, the angel dust magically materializes Mary's dreams of a new home, allowing her fantasies to come true if only for a brief moment. Housewives, a high proportion of television viewers, could identify with her dreams and escapes from reality.

The film also portrays the assumption that women desire trendy and technologically advanced material goods for happiness. Close up shots show new kitchen appliances, new living room furniture, and new bedroom decorations, all with matching telephones. The wife dances through each room, wearing glamorous new outfits (Figure 16). Her new home is a symbol of technological achievement, especially the accessibility of telephones in every room. Her desires imply that every stylish woman should dream of updating her home as well.

## **Theatrical Styles in *Design for Dreaming***

Similarly, *Design for Dreaming* uses an extreme Hollywood style and themes of dreaming and escape. The musical was sponsored by General Motors Corp. and produced by MPO Productions Inc. Its scenes are reminiscent of car shows, and though they explicitly display General Motors products, they are displayed through a musical style that was acceptable as entertainment. Like the previous films, *Design for Dreaming* prominently features a woman. She is asleep in a theatrically styled bedroom with whimsical lighting, an empty mirror frame facing the audience, and a stylized backdrop of city lights. After gazing through the “mirror” at the audience, the woman flies away to a fantastical dream world, where she picks out her favorite new cars at a car show, explores a futuristic kitchen, and then dances on stage for a large crowd. As an attempt by General Motors to appeal to female customers, the film emphasizes the woman’s enthusiasm for the stylish new cars and appliances, and her carefree attitude encourages women audiences to gain interest in the automobile industry.

However, the film retains traditional depictions of gender roles from the period. As a woman, the main character is escorted throughout the film by a male guide, who explains to her the qualities of each of the cars she sees. The male guide sings to her, describing each car as an item she can collect, saying she “can have them all”. She is impressed with the stylishness of each car, but perhaps more impressed with the latest global fashions worn by the cars’ models, which are described by the guide in even greater detail than the cars themselves (Figure 17). In addition, the futuristic technology of the kitchen, such as the glass oven that bakes and decorates cakes, or the enormous, rotating refrigerator is so incredible that it can only exist in her dreams (Figure 18). By the end of the film, the

woman becomes a spectacle herself, performing modern dance on a stage in a beautiful gown. The film ends as she and the guide drive away down a futuristic, space highway in a new car. The film's highly theatrical style is reminiscent of Hollywood musicals, and was meant to attract attention from mass audiences.

The consistent thematic and stylistic patterns found in the corporate-sponsored films of the post-war period follow traditions established by television. Depictions of gender roles, work and leisure, fantasy, and technology, in flamboyant colors, sets, and narratives, became typical elements of corporate-sponsored films of the time.

## Conclusion

In researching this thesis, I delved into what I believed was a relatively narrow topic in the history of film. What I have since discovered is the incredible breadth and depth of the sponsored film genre that is seldom mentioned in general film history.

Though the nomenclature of the genre is broad, including sponsored film, ephemeral film, or industrial film, its academic attention is quite limited compared to conventional Hollywood genres. Without the recent digitizing efforts of sponsored-film enthusiasts, academic study of the subject would remain difficult. Digital access allows students such as myself an opportunity to gain exposure to the genre and explore the variety of films it includes. Special thanks are given to Mr. Rick Prelinger, for the digital collection of sponsored films offered by the Prelinger Archives, which have been acquired by the Library of Congress in 2002. Over 2,000 films from his 51,000-film collection have been digitized and made publically accessible at the Internet Archives at [archives.org](http://archives.org). Access to these films continues to grow, both digitally, and after Mr. Prelinger and his wife established a library dedicated to the collection in San Francisco in 2004.

The films discussed in this work are representative of the general themes and styles of sponsored film from the genre's birth until its "golden age" in the 1950s resulting from the nation's changing technological and economic climates. However, by no means do these films represent the variety of cinematic themes and styles that exist in the hundreds of thousands of sponsored films produced during that time. Corporate goals and target audiences for sponsored films are incredibly diverse, creating a unique genre that cannot



be steadfastly classified. It is also important to note that while many sponsored films remain highly enjoyable today, many were unsuccessful and unpopular at the time of their release, and their methods abandoned.

In addition, the sponsored films of the 1960s until the present day have their own qualities deserving of academic attention. Since the digitization of film and the rise of the Internet Age, sponsorship is no longer restricted to conventional cinema. Social media accounts on Twitter or YouTube, smartphone applications such as games, and Internet advertisements are new visual mediums employed to attain corporate goals.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Andrew Feffer, for his insight, advice, and optimism while working on this project, Professor Jim DeSeve for his kind words and continued support, and Professor Lorraine Cox for her guidance and commitment to American Studies.

# Images

SALES (IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS), 1879-1904

|  | 1879 | 1889 | 1899 | 1904  |
|--|------|------|------|-------|
| Value of products of American photography materials and apparatus manufacturers* . . . | 0.25 | 2.75 | 7.80 | 13.02 |
| Eastman Kodak sales (U.S.)† . . . . .  | ...  | 0.45 | 2.28 | 5.13  |

\*U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Census of Manufacture, 1914* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 672.  
 †U.S. v. Eastman Kodak Co., pp. 2565-69.

Figure 1

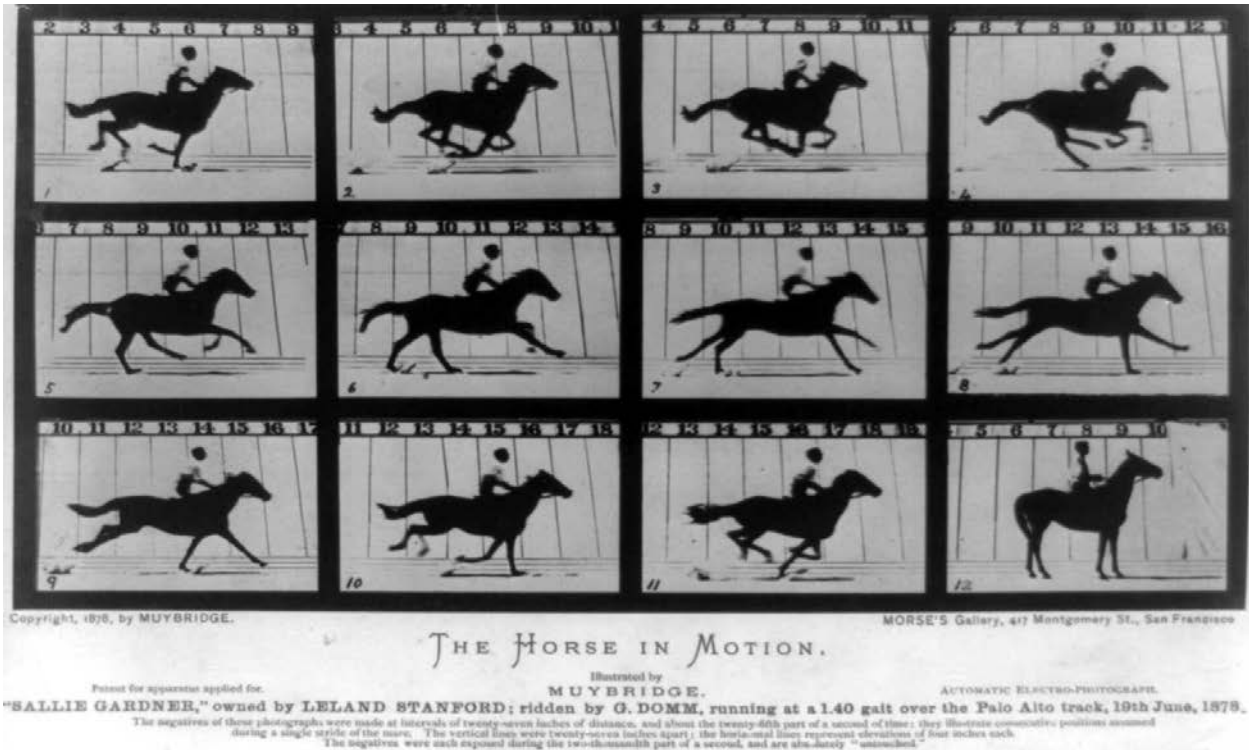


Figure 2



The 1934 Hope Report

| Produced by         | Number of Sponsored Films | Spent on Production | Spent on Prints     | Spent on Distribution | Total Spent          |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Business & Industry | 2,265                     | \$49,100,000        | \$41,600,000        | \$ 9,200,000          | \$ 99,900,000        |
| Schools             | 80                        | 900,000             | 1,000,000           | 100,000               | 2,000,000            |
| Colleges            | 105                       | 1,400,000           | 800,000             | 200,000               | 2,400,000            |
| Government          | 1,120                     | 20,700,000          | 15,700,000          | 3,000,000             | 39,400,000           |
| Medicine & Health   | 290                       | 5,600,000           | 4,200,000           | 500,000               | 1,700,000            |
| Community Agency    | 170                       | 2,000,000           | 1,100,000           | 700,000               | 3,800,000            |
| Religion            | 30                        | 500,000             | 700,000             | 200,000               | 1,400,000            |
| <b>Totals</b>       | <b>4,060</b>              | <b>\$81,300,000</b> | <b>\$65,400,000</b> | <b>\$14,200,000</b>   | <b>\$160,900,000</b> |

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

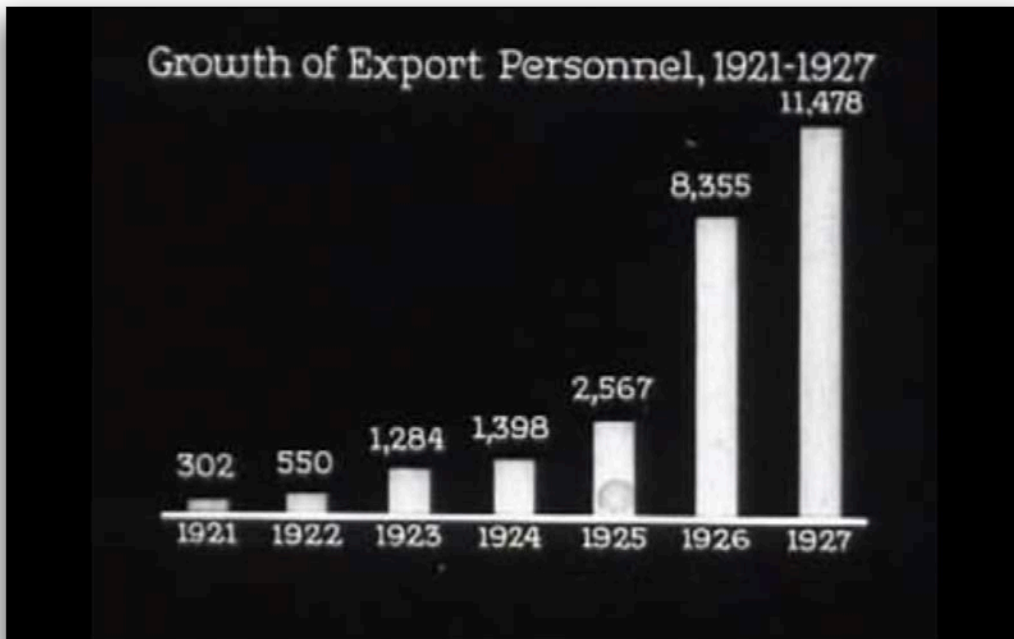


Figure 8

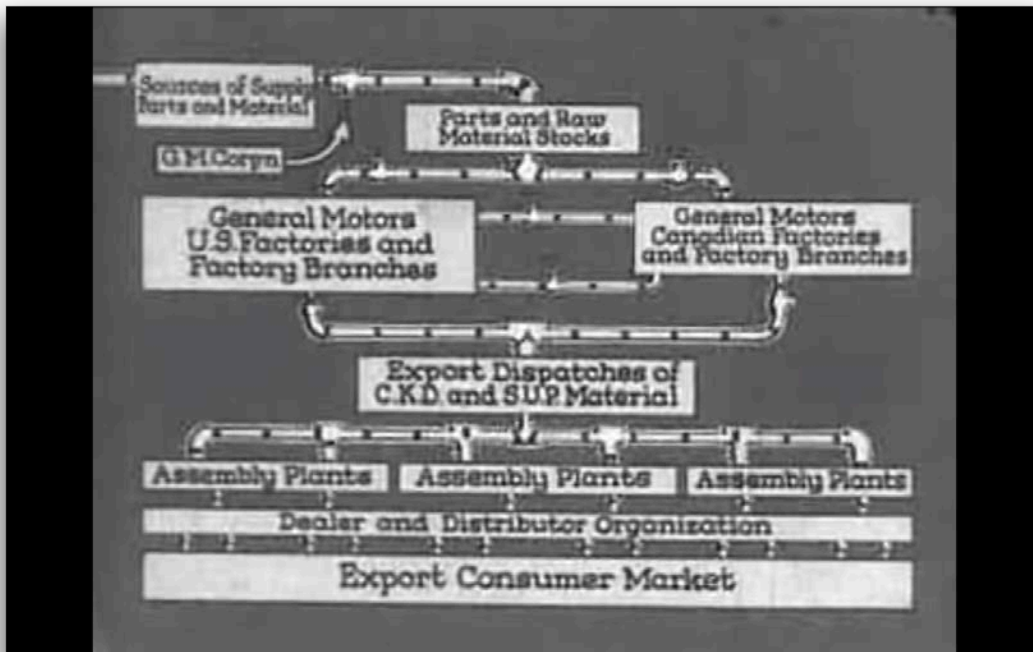


Figure 9



Figure 10



*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*





*Figure 13*



*Figure 14*

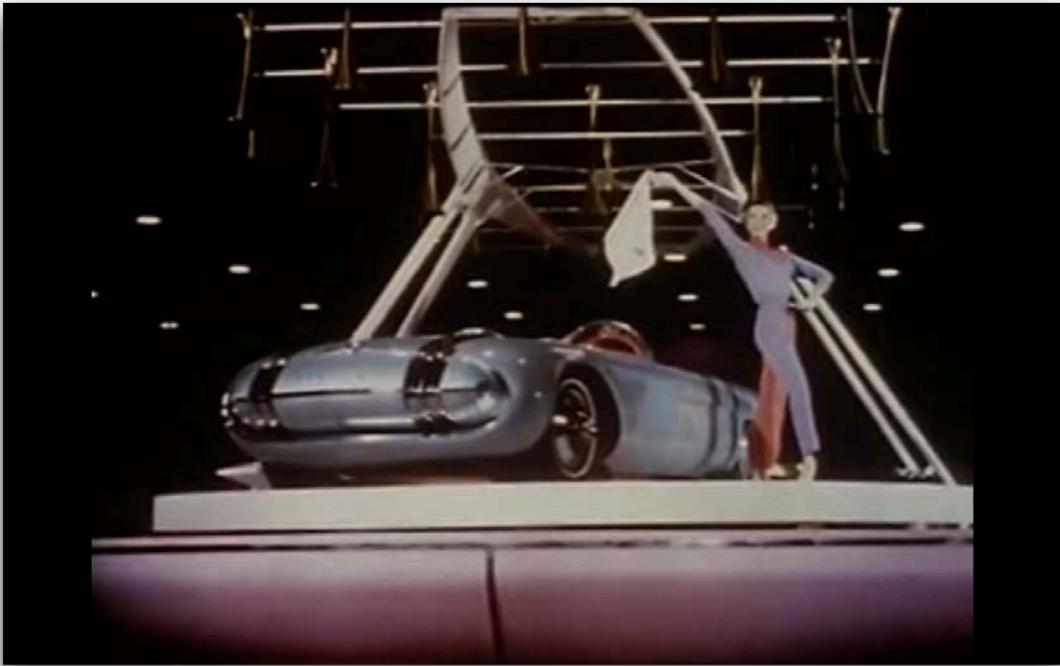




*Figure 15*



*Figure 16*



*Figure 17*

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