



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

Shail, R (2022) Film in the Workplace: Exploring the Film Holdings of the Marks and Spencer Company Archive. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 19 (4). pp. 536-553. ISSN 1743-4521  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2022.0646>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/9024/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

---

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

© Edinburgh University Press 2022 This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Edinburgh University Press in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*. The Version of Record is available online at: <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/10.3366/jbctv.2022.0646>

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

## **Film in the work place: exploring the film holdings of the Marks and Spencer Company Archive**

**Robert Shail**

**Abstract:** This essay explores the possibilities offered to researchers by the film holdings which can be found in archives that exist outside of the more conventional, subject specific film archives in the UK such as those held by the British Film Institute. The Marks and Spencer Company Archive exists principally to hold the company records and related materials illustrating the history of one of the UK's most successful and long-established high street retailers. Although their film holdings are extensive, these materials are somewhat tangential to the main collection and might not be a source typically recognised to date by film scholars. Such collections exist in a number of commercial and public sector organisations. The essay details the holdings, arranging them into significant groupings and analyses their style and content with particular attention to their potential status as history on film and as film form. In doing so, the essay posits the opportunity to consider further exploration of film holdings normally thought of as outside film scholarship and the value of more utilitarian forms of filmmaking than usually found in entertainment cinema or art cinema.

**Keywords:** film archives; industrial films; corporate films; retail history; fashion; Marks and Spencer.

As Patrick Russell suggests on the British Film Institute's (BFI) *Screen Online* website, 'the story of the industrial film in Britain is rarely told' (Russell n/d). His article goes on to indicate how this scholarly neglect is in contrast to the actual scale of production in this area

which begins in the early 1900s and continues to this day, covering a striking range of content and forms. Russell points to many of the best-known examples such as the work of British Transport Films or the National Coal Board Film Unit; the work of the former has already been released in a number of DVDs from the BFI. However, these examples typify what might be seen as the high end of the market – films produced for large corporations, often publicly owned, with reasonable budgets and, on occasions, ambitions towards artistic achievement and technical innovation. The influence of the British documentary movement and specifically the well-known and celebrated work of the Crown Film Unit or the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit are an obvious benchmark. What remains particularly neglected are the more workaday contributions of innumerable filmmakers, often semi-professional filmmakers and company employees, who produced highly practical examples of industrial filmmaking for varied companies whose ambitions were rarely artistic. As Russell suggests, the post-war era has been marked by the need to meet ‘many more functions: training, health and safety, industrial relations, sales, recruitment, public relations and company news’, resulting in ‘a significant growth in the number of films targeted solely at employees or shareholders’. The latter is a highly appropriate description of the many films produced for the high street retailer Marks and Spencer.

The work of the GPO Film Unit or British Transport Films is known to many as the archives of these organisations were well maintained and placed in the hands of the BFI for preservation and wider distribution. The work is catalogued and publicly accessible. However, this is not the case for many archives of industrial filmmaking which remain locked within the walls of individual companies. In addition, such materials seem to have been viewed as especially ephemeral in comparison with financial records, for example, and have consequently frequently been lost or become dissipated by neglect. The film holdings contained in the Marks and Spencer Company Archive present what may well be a typical

and previously unconsidered example which highlights the ubiquity of such holdings, as well as their comparative neglect by scholars. This essay sets out to closely examine these holdings to bring to light one of the most neglected areas of filmmaking in the UK. These films are, admittedly, frequently mundane and yet a great deal of time and effort was spent making them, they obviously were deemed worthwhile by their producers, and many individuals saw them. They represent a view of filmmaking as a process that is almost completely divorced from our familiar conceptions of film as entertainment or art. Even the description of ‘documentary’ seems somehow not fully accurate in encapsulating an attitude towards film rooted in notions of utility. In one of the few essays to even touch lightly upon this area, Leo Enticknap shows how the ‘institutional conditions under which producers operated made short films uneconomic’ in the UK, meaning that the producers of industrial and corporate films were often frustrated documentarists who had found another avenue of income generation in a market where short non-fiction subjects were viewed as low cultural form (2000: 208). My own research into the Children’s Film Foundation showed that the companies supplying them with product were often also engaged in making documentaries, travelogues and industrial films (2016). And yet, as Patrick Russell suggests of the industrial film more generally, the work produced in this area has much to fascinate ‘Marxist, Monetarist and Keynesian cinephiles alike’. There is also much here that tells us about film materials hidden in archives which inadvertently disguise their own significance.

### **Marks and Spencer and its archive**

The broad history of Marks and Spencer is known to many in the UK as a classic exemplar of entrepreneurial success and the brand itself is one of most familiar on the British high street, affectionately referred to as ‘Marks and Sparks’. Its beginnings lie with the penny bazaar established by Michael Marks (born Michal Marks), a Jewish migrant from Poland, in

Kirkgate Market, Leeds in 1884. By 1894 he had joined forces with Thomas Spencer, a cashier from Skipton who invested in the nascent business leading to the formal establishment of the Marks and Spencer Company in 1903. Over the next twenty-five years the business expanded to have stalls in markets all over the north of England and then graduated into high street shops. In 1928 they created their own in-house brand name of St Michael, named in honour of Michael Marks, to retail a wide range of household goods but particularly food and clothing which they obtained from UK suppliers. By the 1960s it was the most successful high street retailer in the UK with an annual turnover of £201 million (Briggs 1984: 9) and in the mid-1970s it expanded into a number of other European countries, building a reputation for reliability, customer service, and reasonably-priced quality, albeit that its very consistency of product also resulted in it becoming a byword for conservative shopping. By 1984 the turnover was £2000 million and 14 million people shopped in its stores each week (Briggs 1984: 11). Management largely remained within the family, with Michael Marks passing it on to his son, Simon Marks who was Chairman for nearly fifty years, before his brother-in-law, Israel Sieff took over in 1964 to be followed in turn by his son, Marcus in 1983.

Since the late 1990s when it experienced a major dip in its financial returns, the company has undergone a rather bumpier ride with various attempts to revamp its image in more contemporary and fashionable ways, sometimes followed by a reversion to its tried and tested image of reliability and service; the early narrative of these difficulties has been outlined in detail by Judi Bevan in her book, *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer* (2007). Its more recent financial returns have shown it continuing to struggle with the decline in British high street shopping in the face of the rise of the internet.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the company probably still occupies a fairly unique position in the imagination and affections of the British public as the place where they continue to buy their office suits and their underwear.

The company's archives are housed in the Michael Marks Building on the campus of the University of Leeds near the city centre. This is a major national archive with over 70,000 items collected together dating from 1884 onwards including documents and reports, advertising materials, photographs, packaging, and clothing. It's home to a permanent exhibition which is open to the public – 'Marks in Time' – as well as staging regular events, school and college visits, and access for more extensive research projects. It continues to collect items and document the business and social impact of the company. It ranks as one of the largest and most important collections of its kind, documenting over 100 years of social change in the UK seen through the lens of retail. The collection is of particular interest to those concerned to investigate the history of retail in the UK but also has obvious attractions for students of fashion. The Archive's website gives access to the collection's online catalogue which allows researchers to search from thousands of items which have digital records.

### **The films**

The online catalogue of the Marks and Spencer Archive can be easily searched using a straightforward key number coding to identify film sources. A search on this basis produces just over 900 separate items listed. Each item has two identifying code numbers, a short title, date, a breakdown of the number of elements in that item, the physical medium involved, and an outline description which is typically just one or two sentences. Some titles are taken directly from the film – *Seeing is Believing: Training in CCTV* (PG10/1/10)– whilst others are just descriptive: *Food Division Spring Conference, Financial Assistant's Copy* (P10/1/37).<sup>2</sup> A number of films only have the generic title of *Marks and Spencer*. The vast majority of items date from the second half of the 1980s, through the whole of the 1990s, and into the early 2000s. There are a few items outside of this period with just one or two more

recent ones, a handful from the 1970s, and the occasional one from the 1960s; the earliest is from 1963. About a quarter of the items have no date recorded but it is often possible to find this on the film itself or at least to make an approximation of the year from watching the film. The number of elements in a film is usually one but occasionally the catalogue item is broken into a small number of parts. The source media for most of the items is VHS videotape and this is usually the original media used to make the film as well. However, some items from the 1970s and earlier have been transferred to video probably from 16mm film and then digitised. The overwhelming majority of the tapes have been digitised but some do remain only viewable on VHS which can be arranged with the Archive. Company Archivist, Kathryn Carter advises that there are a smaller number of films, mainly adverts from the 1960s, which are still stored in their original film cans: 'The earliest films in the collection are reel films of M&S cinema adverts from the 1960s. These have all been digitised for access purposes, while the original reels are stored in canisters in a temperature and humidity controlled strongroom, in the event that re-digitisation is ever necessary in the future'.<sup>3</sup>

The descriptions vary considerably but are usually brief and provide bare details. Some are one sentence and the longest stretch to four or five. For example, *Lifting the Lid* (p10/1/14) is described as 'Produced by the Public Affairs Department, this is a training VHS aimed at stopping internal dishonesty and theft. Presented by Richard Kershaw, the VHS looks at how a person maybe given opportunities for dishonesty'. Others move beyond being simply descriptive of content and provide some context, such as the venue or location, or details on the film's production. *Now you see them, now you don't* (p10/1/8), for example, is produced by the Simmons Consultancy. They can provide some useful data on the background to the film but are more often just descriptive. A good number have no description or the duration is simply recorded.

The catalogue is certainly a work in progress but it does reveal the consistent nature of much of the material. This can be divided into a number of key headings which are used here to analyse the films themselves in more detail: training films; films that cover statements made by management; store openings; celebrity visits; Christmas related; and fashion. There are few miscellaneous items outside of these headings but these six do account for the vast majority of the films. The groupings also mirror quite closely those identified by Patrick Russell in his *Screen Online* piece as typifying the post-war British industrial film. One notable absentee from the catalogue is the vast majority of adverts made for British television on behalf of the company. Archivist Katherine Carter confirms that although there is some paperwork indicating discussions with filmmakers and marketing staff at Marks and Spencer regarding the planned content of advertising campaigns, the films themselves are not held by Marks and Spencer. In addition, no extensive or comprehensive paperwork records relating to the film holdings exist.

### **Training**

A sizeable proportion of the Archive consists of training films aimed the company's own staff. Many of these are basic and utilitarian in their approach to filmmaking but some make attempts to respond to the considerable potential for inducing boredom in viewers by introducing narrative elements, humour or celebrity presenters: *Be Alert with Danny Baker* (P10/1/12) is a prime example of all three. This eleven-minute film dates from the late 1980s – the catalogue isn't any more precise – and was produced by Wadlow Grovesnor International. The BFI's database shows that the company produced corporate films for a number of clients including the National Farmers Union and the British Heart Foundation in the 1980s. Danny Baker is seen sitting in a darkened film studio with a television set at his side. He addresses the camera directly to outline the appropriate safety measures for handling



cheques and cheque cards, something that immediately anchors the film in the 1980s. The talk is illustrated by several re-enactments of scenarios staged in Marks and Spencer stores but clearly using actors. There are a number of strained attempts to make this more engaging with humorous asides from Baker and the slightly bizarre appearance of Shakespeare's ghost – his image is to be used as a safety feature on cheque cards, we are informed. The excitingly titled *Shrinkage, it all adds up* (P10/1/62) from 1984 is in a similar vein, with actor Rodney Bewes again in an empty studio addressing us about the needs for vigilance when working at the till. He is filmed with a simple two camera set-up cutting between wide shot and close-up and the 24-minute talk is illustrated with cutaways to re-enactments. Again, these are staged with actors while Bewes continues the voiceover. All the sound on these inserts has clearly been added in postproduction including background chatter and even the sound of tills operating. The film was made by WSTV Productions and the BFI database again shows a company operating in the 1980s and 1990s producing work for the Manpower Services Commission and British Nuclear Fuels, among others, indicating the crossover between corporate films and sponsored documentaries.

*Now you see them, now you don't* (P10/1/8), again from the 1980s, tries for drama rather than humour, with a series of interviews with apparent thieves intercut with shots of them in action on the shopfloor. The interviewees, obviously actors, range from a professional criminal who details all the failings and carelessness he encounters from staff, to an older woman who resists the temptation to steal due the vigilance of other Marks and Spencer staff members; the criminals are shown to be consistently selfish and heartless in regard to the effect they might have on company employees. A courtroom scene shows that they will receive the appropriate retribution. Interestingly, there is a clear attempt to convince staff members that there is no reason to have any sympathy for thieves. A number of films in this category adopt an even more functional approach in their content. *A Case for Cleaning*

(P10/1/7) from the 1990s depicts a manager supervising two maintenance staff as they go about cleaning a fridge unit – all of them actors. Even here there is an attempt, however basic, to vary the presentation with zooms and contemporary music (synth pop, in this case) and even a little humour with a speeded-up section accompanied by an approximation of the *Benny Hill Show* theme tune.

A few of the films in this category lean more towards informational documentaries. Two films listed as *Food and Textiles Quality Control* (P10/1/2) depict the work of employees in the Marks and Spencer labs who develop new products in food or clothing, sample goods for quality, investigate customer complaints, or ensure health and safety guidelines are being followed. Although more scientific in approach, these films can still be revealing. There is an obvious gender division on display between the scientists played by men and the product testers who are female. The company agenda is on display in a consistent subtext that what is being depicted clearly indicates the high standards being set and even from a filmmaking point of view there are attempts to include some visual panache in the use of long tracking shots that snake through the labs. The film is again commissioned from WSTV by the Marks and Spencer Training Department.

For those interested in retail history, the expansion of Marks and Spencer into European markets is indicated in films like *Los Tiempos Cambrian – Marks and Spencer y el Euro* (P10/1/148) which is shot in Spanish and deals with the introduction of the Euro currency. Produced by The Edge it still resorts to the familiar attempts at comedy with actors appearing as a number of caricatured customers who fail to grasp the implications of the new currency. The generic model remains very consistent: an authoritative presenter/voice-over, illustrative cutaways, a strongly reiterated message about what staff are to do, and attempts to leaven the latter with humour.

## Management

A number of films in the archive either depict events involving the company management or are direct messages from them to employees. The direct form of address is typified by *Peter Salsbury, Message to Staff* (P10/1/11) which opens with an explanatory title card: 'Chief Executive – Talking about the Business – Results Day – May 1999'. Little attention is given here to presentation or filmmaking. Salsbury delivers his talk from his desk speaking to an unseen person slightly off camera. There are occasional cutaways to the shopfloor but the camera set-up doesn't vary other than a gradual zoom from wide to close-up. The ten-minute film seems to have been made in-house and is unimaginative in its approach. Again, for historians of business and retail, the talk is decidedly downbeat, recognising the company's decline in sales and suggesting a return to its core values rather than chasing new fashions.

Other films in this category are simply recordings of more public statements. *Press Conference* (P10/1/4) is an 84-minute video of Salsbury and his all-male management team announcing the end-of-year results for 1998-99 to a room full of journalists. There is a simple two camera set-up and no postproduction other than basic editing. Again, for business historians there is further evidence of the concern over declining performance. More revealing is a recording of the *Managers Meeting Dinner* (P10/1/44). The filmmaking is perfunctory and sometimes barely competent but we get a glimpse into the managerial culture of February 1984: a smoke-filled room of mainly middle-aged men, much clubbable banter, jokey anecdotal speeches, the obligatory standing ovation, and a general display of backslapping. There are many films which record other events such as the Annual General Meeting.

Rather more ambitious in projecting a corporate image is *Service, the Priority*, a twelve-minute film from 1979 which intercuts a staged interview between BBC newsreader Kenneth Kendall and the then Chairman of Marks and Spencer, Sir Marcus Sieff, later Lord

Sieff, with shots of Sieff walking around a store talking to sales staff – all female. There are staged interviews with ‘customers’ all too obviously played by actors discussing the service they have received, good and bad. The film is at considerable pains to illustrate the hands-on approach to management taken by the company with Sieff’s declaration that he intends to keep dropping in to check on the shopfloor and monitor service standards personally. Again, the film has been commissioned, this time from Eric Parsloe Industrial Communications. Parsloe was a major figure in the production of corporate films, founding the Epic Group in the 1970s and subsequently chairing the multimedia industry body the British Interactive Media Association.

Other social events involving senior staff members are held in the collection such as *Marcus Sieff 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party* (P10/1/685) which is a simple, single-camera recording of festivities with a lengthy succession of guests arriving at the formal event, the subsequent dinner and speeches. The speeches are understandably sentimental and humorous by turns and the lengthy recording is of interest largely for the glimpses of notable guests such the Duke of Edinburgh and the Social Democrat MP David Owen.

Clearly the potential interest in these films is largely confined to those researching business and retail practice in the UK – there are many film recordings of Annual General Meetings - as well as for those interested in the specific commercial history of the company. However, the films do inadvertently depict social trends with the stark gender divisions on display, as well as some marked class distinctions.

### **Store openings**

There are a fewer number of items in this category but they do show a range of dates and locations. *Modern Shopping, Belfast Store Opening* (P10/1/168) is one of the earlier items in the archive dating from September 1967. Shot in black and white, the film opens with a

montage showing shots of Victorian Britain, shuttling through a map of new stores opening across the UK, to a montage of the building and fitting out of the Belfast shop. Accompanied by a cheerfully brassy score we see the public thronging the various departments, followed by a series of vox pop interviews with happy customers. The film is clearly intended to be shown in Belfast and acts as a kind of promo for the new store with product lines shown and an emphasis on the use of local produce.

*Store Openings in Germany* (P10/1/201) is another film that reflects the expansion into European markets in the 1980s. The nine-minute film opens with handheld shots of a store opening in an unidentified German city with no voice-over and little editing. The timecode is visible giving the impression of raw footage awaiting postproduction. There are interviews with a British spokesperson explaining the importance of the new markets in Germany, along with others featuring German staff with English subtitles added. The film was made by Bulletin International. *Cheshunt Store Opening* (P10/1/196) is a slickly produced promo made by Pullman Video in 1988 with a montage of external and internal shots of the new store, with generic pop music for a soundtrack, title cards, and some use of postproduction effects to transition between shots. Towards the end of its seven minutes it morphs into an advert for the new home delivery service.

Unfortunately, holdings in this area are slightly disappointing and consist mainly of extended adverts with little sense of locale. Only the Belfast film succeeds in capturing a feeling for period and place with a real sense of excitement.

### **Celebrity events**

This is a further area with only a small number of films, although the content can be revealing. *Prince Charles in Brixton Store* (P10/1/206) is virtually a fly-on-the-wall reportage of the royal visit. Filmed in 1982, it consists of a just over thirty minutes of handheld footage

following Prince Charles from his arrival in the store to his subsequent departure amidst crowds of onlookers and reporters. There is very little postproduction work other than a few cuts and the camerawork is often poor, with use of unfocused zoom. However, we do get to see the visit in some detail as he goes to the staff canteen, talks to managers, visits a training session, and talks with staff in the warehouse and shopfloor. Lord Sieff is visible in the background of some shots and Prince Charles is greeted with gifts at every stage of his walk around. The general tone is deferential, as might be expected from a company whose public image was essentially conservative and which liked to position itself in the public imagination as part of the established fabric of British life. There are a few vox pops at the finish with staff and customers all of whom are highly pleased with the visit. The film is a remarkably intimate one, although, sadly, much of the dialogue is inaudible.

In a similar vein is *Thatcher at Marks and Spencer* (P10/1/785) in which the then Prime Minister visits an unnamed store. Filmed by Telecine Ltd, the occasion has a rather patriotic tone with the store decked out in a large banner reading 'British goods mean British jobs' alongside a large Union Flag. Marks and Spencer were typically seen in the public sphere as a culturally British brand and, albeit unwittingly, the association with a business-minded Conservative PM seems appropriate to their establishment image. Characteristically shot with one handheld camera and diegetic sounds, with little postproduction work other than simple editing, we see the PM meeting staff in the company of Lord Sieff and showing a great deal of interest in specific items of clothing, quizzing staff about prices and materials while being followed by a veritable scrum of press reporters. Her tone is consistently positive and enthusiastic. The film concludes with a number of press interviews, some of which appear to be intended for ITV News. Despite her attempts to draw clear analogies between the efficiency, success and intrinsic Britishness of Marks and Spencer with her own

government, this doesn't stop one reporter from trying to draw her to comment on the impending General Election and her chances of success.

By contrast, *The Princess Royal in the Soviet Union* (P10/1/74) is simply an off-air tape of a BBC documentary covering the visit of Princess Anne to the Soviet Union in June 1990, the first British royal to visit since the revolution. The recording seems to have been made simply because of a tiny section where Princess Anne goes to Kiev to see a new shopping development featuring a number of British high street brands, including Marks and Spencer, along with an exhibition showing examples of British industry and scenes of 'typical' British family life. The recording is a curiosity as there is no evidence of the company's press office routinely recording news items that cover Marks and Spencer, a task often undertaken for large corporations.

## **Christmas**

There are a range of items in the Archive that relate to Christmas indicating the importance of the festive period to the company. The notable omission, as previously mentioned, is the inclusion of any actual television adverts for Christmas. The solitary exception is *Christmas Adverts* (p10/1/587) which seems to be an off-air recording of two adverts, one a celebrity crammed promotional for party snacks, the other a rather racy advert for the Salon Rose lingerie collection. A slight variation on this is provided by *In Store Christmas Video* (P10/1/177), a curious montage of stills made by WSTV to promote the opening of a new upper storey at an unnamed shop, including Christmas ranges; the film was presumably screened inside of the store on television monitors. *Getting Fit for Xmas* (P10/1/378) combines reportage with staff morale booster and elements of a training film. Made in 2003, it covers the 'Christmas Sales Conference 2003' which appears to be an annual fixture. The main event is a slickly presented show in a conference venue with various managers giving

pep talks to the audience of staff focusing on maximising sales. The style is rather American and evangelical in tone, quite different from any other work in the collection from earlier periods. Nonetheless, there are a number of veiled references to the tough market conditions prevailing. There are also some musical sections showing new ranges for Christmas including a lingerie show. These sections are intercut with interviews with customers talking about what they expect from Marks and Spencer at Christmas and a montage set to music showing the shooting of Christmas adverts. One sequence shows David Beckham promoting the company. The whole thing is sharply edited at 14 minutes and functions both as a promo and as a film clearly aimed at lifting the intensity of activity among staff at a crucial time for sales.

Christmas is also clearly a time for casting off restraint. *Spoof Christmas Store Crush* (P10/1/491) is a rather outrageous one-minute parody clearly intended for the consumption of M&S staff only. Using some smartly produced postproduction effects, Marks and Spencer stores are seen tumbling out of the sky and crushing their high street rivals below, so that Asda, Sainsbury, et al, are flattened and replaced by the falling M&S outlets, rather like some alien retail invasion. There are no credits but this was clearly not to be seen by anyone outside the company. In a similar vein but even more elaborate, and resembling an end of year, in-house panto, is *Christmas, Looking back over the Year* (P10/1/191) from 1996. Produced by The Edge, it presents a series of sketches mocking various aspects of life at Marks and Spencer which seem to have been generated by staff suggestions. After an introduction by a Father Christmas in sunglasses, we see two clueless young managers discussing their range of 'Lycra turkeys for Christmas'. The annual Christmas sales conference is parodied with a montage of clips, a sketch featuring a malfunctioning coffee machine is accompanied by 'Satisfaction' by The Rolling Stones, while other scenes parody *Mission Impossible* and a scene featuring a woman stuck in a lift with boring male managers



is underscored by the *Benny Hill* theme music. Other targets include management spiel about sales and recent cuts to the travel budget. A humorous commentary takes place throughout and the end credits thank various staff members for the contributions and reassure everyone that any monetary proceedings will be going to Cancer Research. Presumably the film was commissioned for the staff Christmas party. What it inadvertently communicates is the degree to which all large organisations become somewhat hermetically sealed, with only other staff members in the know. Here, we feel rather as if we have been let in on a private joke.

## **Fashion**

Probably the largest category of films in the collection is that of fashion-related items. The majority of these are given over to recordings of catwalk shows for the press or public. *Hong Kong Fashion Show and Magazine* (P10/1/128) is a 30-minute film of a 1996 show staged in a Hong Kong shopping mall with the public in attendance. Filming techniques are basic with a fixed position camera panning and zooming to take in the movement of the models. There is no postproduction work or even any edits. Instead we have a recording of the fashion show which uses Asian models (male, female and children) sporting summer wear in western styles and a voiceover in the venue in both English and Chinese introducing the various ranges. *Fashion Themes 1984* (P10/1/105) is a press show in the UK in what appears to be a large space in a gallery or museum. There are multiple camera positions and some elaborate dolly shots down the length of the catwalk. Contemporary pop music is used and these are clearly professional models. Each range is introduced by a title card. Credits tell us that this was produced by The Visual Connection for the Marks and Spencer Press Office. The production quality of these films varies considerably. *Autumn Fashion Press Show* (P10/1/104) is much

more basic with poor sound and image and basic cutting between two camera positions used to simply capture the catwalk show.

*St Michael's Ladies Fashions* (P10/1/102) is a little more ambitious. It opens with a documentary section showing the models being made-up and getting dressed backstage intercut with stills. Some postproduction effects have been added to liven up the image-making. However, after this opening we are back to the familiar capture of a catwalk show from the autumn of 1984. The majority of these films are from the 1980s or early 1990s.

*White City Fashion Shows* (P10/1/621), from 2002, offers a further variation with a show that features staff members as the models. Women feature in one film, men and children in a separate one. The choreography is kept simple but there is a refreshing variety of body shapes at odds with the usual professional models. The staff even model some risqué underwear which is saved for the finale. Filming remains very functional.

The most elaborate event is *Charity Fashion Spectacular* (P10/1/124). An opening title card tells us that 'every spring and autumn for 20 years the Marks and Spencer Charity Fashion Shows toured the UK and Europe. This is a 79-minute record of a show from their final season (Autumn 1986). The show itself has considerably higher production values than usual, with dancing, striking sets, a light show and a compere. Some models are staff members. Filming is again minimalistic with a mastershot taken from the centre aisle and cutaways to one camera which is used for closer shots.

Through all of these films, the principal interest lies in the changing fashion styles that illustrate shifts in public taste across the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Miscellaneous**

There are a number of interesting items which don't fit into any specific category. These include occasional promotional films aimed at encouraging staff participation - essentially

internal adverts. *Savings Related Share Option Scheme* (P10/1/49) is typical of this style, being a highly functional fifteen-minute promo for what is effectively a form of staff savings scheme. There are a number of others that promote things like the Marks and Spencer pension scheme. The curious element in this film is that Marks and Spencer have ‘borrowed’ and slightly adapted a film actually made for the equivalent scheme at the Halifax Building Society. It’s a rather engaging animation. Sadly, there are no credits but it bears all the hallmarks of Cosgrove Hall. *Children’s Promise* (P10/1/620) is also slickly produced using a number of television celebrities and advertises a charity project for vulnerable children released in the run-up to the millennium in which Marks and Spencer is one of the main sponsors. Made by the Billco Group, it’s a 60-second television spot. It’s noticeable that the production values are higher in these films made in partnership with other organisations as part of a national campaign.

The misleadingly titled *Chairman’s Pay Rise*’ (P10/1/143) actually turns out to be another internal promo showing the company’s new staff forum to discuss ways of developing their presence in Europe. Members take part from all over the UK and meet for their inaugural discussions in London. The film combines observational footage of roundtable debates, interviews, and documentary elements showing a location-finding trip to an unnamed German city and a planning meeting in Hamburg. The credits name the staff members and there is discussion of how to market distinctively continental products to UK customers. Interestingly, the film was made by the Marks and Spencer Communications Department in partnership with a private company, Creative Communications, and the European Council to be shown on Marks and Spencer TV; I could find no other reference to this outlet. The film displays huge enthusiasm for the European Union and the possibilities it opens up.

Whilst these one-off films offer interest, it's striking how much of the back-catalogue falls into the previously described categories.

### **Assessing the Archive as history on film**

It's clear that a great deal of the historical interest generated by the Archive falls outside the area of 'film as film', as Victor Perkins might have put it. This is an assessment that might be made of many industrial or corporate archives where films constitute a tangential or liminal element in comparison with the main collection of documents, products and papers. These are collections where the films have been stored as part of a wider remit to record business activities. Here film has a function that sits within those wider parameters and which doesn't lead them. However, many of the UK's regional film archives contain much material of a similar vein shot by amateurs or others whose intention was to use film principally as a recording device or a promotional tool. The Yorkshire Film Archive in York, for example, includes the collection of films from the Rowntree company archives which has similarities with the holdings at Marks and Spencer.

Nonetheless, these films contain a good deal of historical material of relevance to researchers, even if that material was collected accidentally, as it were. The major area of interest here probably lies in the large number of films which record fashion shows over a period of forty years. The main holdings of the Marks and Spencer Company Archive are already used considerably by fashion students and related researchers; they include fashion products. These films supplement those materials providing a barometer of changing fashion styles, albeit filtered through the very particular branding of Marks and Spencer. The second major area of interest is in providing a record of the business history of the company with many films devoted to recording business meetings or press conferences. The ups and down of the Company's financial fortunes are captured here, again through the particular prism of

the Company's own self view. Within this area of business history is a subset of information that relates specifically to the changing position of retail within British public life, evidenced by the store openings and visits by royals and politicians. For those wishing to understand more fully any of these areas from the 'inside' there is much here of value.

Finally, the films also capture, albeit inadvertently, elements of Britain's social history during the period. When researching my book on the Children's Film Foundation, their films, often shot around the street of London, caught on film changing youth fashions and the rapidly altering cityscape of London, if only as backdrops to the films' narratives. Here again, for example, we see glimpses of a nation embracing inclusion within the family of European nations, with changing tastes in food evident as a result. At the same time, the films also capture the continuing motivations of national self-interest and economic promotion within this context.

### **Assessing the Archive as film**

An archive of this kind raises unusual questions for the film historian. The major British film archives, such as the national collection held by the BFI, are typically devoted to films whose principal intentions are to entertain, to achieve artistic status, record reality, or a combination of any of these. Such films have an obvious claim to value. However, the films in the Marks and Spencer Company Archive were not made to entertain, even if they contain some occasional ventures in that direction. They do not aspire to art and their recording of reality is heavily skewed towards other functions. Functionality and utility are the central drivers here. Consequently, these films often operate on the most basic aspects of film technique and form. The camera is usually fixed with movement limited to simple pans or handheld work necessitated by function. Tracking shots barely ever occur. Lighting is usually taken from what is available naturally. Sound is carelessly diegetic or added in postproduction in the

form of explanatory voiceover. Music is highly generic and characterless. Curiously, this utilitarian aesthetic begins to emerge as a distinct signature of this form of corporate filmmaking.

However, certain generic traits do also emerge. The training film, ubiquitous in corporate filmmaking, is invariably highly functional leading to the potential for inducing boredom in viewers who actually need to learn from these films. Consequently, this group of films adopt a number of strategies to illicit engagement, from celebrity presenters to humorous commentary, to some basic elements of narrative construction designed to draw viewers in; a clear example of using a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. The films of management meetings, celebrity visits, store opening and press conferences return cinema to its very earliest function: the simple recording of what is in the direct field of vision in front of the camera. There is something of the Lumiere Brothers, or even Andy Warhol's later exercises in blank observation, in simply fixing the camera to record an endless stream of guests at a public event or a succession of corporate speeches. Other films sit more firmly within the context of promotional materials, utilising a series of more deliberately manipulative strategies to convey a positive company image or message. Here we see greater use of narrativisation and postproduction in an attempt to mimic the methods of more mainstream filmmaking. At the same time, the business agenda is more overtly on the surface than might be found in other forms of advertising. A tension can sometimes be felt between the drivers of utility and the temptation to draw on narrative cinema to soften the edges of what otherwise seems minimalistic filmmaking.

These observations open up the possibility that corporate and industrial cinema, collected in numerous untapped business archives across the UK, could be an area for further fruitful investigation, both as history captured, however inadvertently, on film and, most surprisingly, as film in its own right.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Marks and Spencer Company Archive, Leeds, and specifically Kathryn Carter, for their invaluable and kind assistance in enabling this essay to be researched and written.

## References

- Bevan, J. (2007), *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*, London: Profile Books.
- Briggs, A. (1984), *Marks and Spencer 1884-1984*, London: Octopus Books.
- Enticknap, L. (2000), 'This Modern Age and the British non-fiction film', in J. Ashby and A. Higson (eds), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, London: Routledge.
- Marks and Spencer Archive website: <https://marksintime.marksandspencer.com/home>.
- Russell, P. (nd), 'Industrial and Corporate Films', *Screenonline*,  
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/964488/index.html>.
- Shail, R. (2016), *The Children's Film Foundation: History and Legacy* (London: Palgrave/BFI).

Robert Shail is Professor of Film and Director of Research at Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University. He has published widely on postwar British cinema, gender in film, and on British film directors. His research also includes children's media and comics.

This essay is dedicated in memory of the author's mother, Jean Shail, who worked for many years at the Marks and Spencer store in Broadmead, Bristol.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the company's current financial returns see:  
<https://corporate.marksandspencer.com/annualreport>.

<sup>2</sup> All films from the Marks and Spencer Company Archive are identified by their reference number in the archive catalogue.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Carter, Marks and Spencer Company Archivist, interviewed by the author, 18 October 2021.