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How Long Is a Good Story? Compressed Narratives in British Screen Advertising Since 1955

Emily Caston

Abstract: *The 60-second commercial has held a privileged status with the British television advertising industry since 1955. Recent scholarship in the useful film paradigm offers a promising starting point to analyse the design craft of the industry, as does scholarship on early advertising film. But in order to fully understand the evolution of this privileged status it is necessary to understand the conflicts that drive the different sectional parts of the tripartite supply chain and the organisations that regulate the design such as the Advertising Producers' Association and Design and Art Direction Awards. It is also necessary to understand the use of certain devices film directors use in this compressed narrative form. Textual density is a primary one. Narrative in screen advertising remains under-researched. This article examines a range of commercials from the 1960s to the 2020s which utilise these devices to engage audiences in stories that sell brands, demonstrating some of the varied and transmedial way that narrative works across different categories of product and multi-media campaigns.*

In 2016, Paul Bainsfair, then Director General of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertisers (IPA), told me that “The 1954 Television Act was in many ways the most significant event in the history of British Advertising in the twentieth century.” Following the launch of ITV shortly afterwards, a cluster of production companies specialising in television commercials emerged in London’s Soho. That cluster still exists today, producing digital screen advertising (Caston “Pioneers”; “Screen Advertising”). The purpose of this article is to identify and explore some key terms for understanding the content produced by that cluster since 1955 as a *design craft*. My discussion centres on the concepts of narrative and duration. It was prompted by encountering concerns articulated around 2013 that the television commercial format of sixty seconds would not survive the migration of audiences to digital platforms (Trott, “Just”). It was feared that the 60-second commercial would be doomed to be relegated to the dustbin of twentieth century artefacts, along with cassette players and dial telephones; longer formats of sixty and ninety seconds could become products of a bygone age of interruptive advertising to a domestic captive audience at a time when audiences shifted to subscription-based content services such as Netflix and Amazon. This was triggered by a trend towards using “cutdowns” in the late 1990s, which intensified after the launch of Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Instagram in 2010, Snapchat in 2011, and TikTok in 2016. Digital ushered in shorter durations than the 10-, 15- and 30-second cutdowns: 6-second ads became common on YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat in 2017. The question this raised for me was about how this impacted the craft of filmmaking in advertising, and what significance it held for existing scholarship on screen advertising.

Several scholars have studied the particular form of screen advertising resulting from what Raymond Williams termed the “flow” of (linear) television broadcasting in the pre-digital period. John Ellis proposed that we examine commercials as “allusive, synoptic and dense” (97). Amy Sargeant, Alison Payne (“It”, “Growing Practice”) and Jez Stewart have provided a

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crucial historical analysis of the political context and production practices of the first decade of British television commercials. Nixon offers a historical and internationally comparative analysis of British advertising as a whole (*Advertising Cultures; Hard Looks; Hard Sell*). *Hard Sell* provides one of the most systematic overviews of the formal genres in which early television commercials participated from 1951 to 1969. The essays of practitioners David Bernstein and James Garrett on post-1955 interruptive television advertising, first published over thirty years ago, and the work of Winston Fletcher provide essential insights into understanding the context of British production in these decades. On the later British period, Amy Sargeant has analysed 1970s tropes (“Hovis”), Joan Gibbons the work of Tony Kaye, Tom von Logue Newth production in the 2000s, and Jeremy Orlebar looks at the 2010s, touching on the John Lewis’s Christmas campaigns studied in this article. Alongside recent industry-focused publications on the “promotional industries” by Paul Grainge, Grainge and Catherine Johnson, and Helen Powell (“Promotional Industries”), these are important steps forward for screen scholars working on a topic that used to be the terrain of cultural studies (e.g. Nava et al.; Dickason), business studies (Pratt; Grabher; Schwarzkopf), marketing studies and psychology (Stern, “Classical”; “Who”).

By design craft, I mean that screen advertising is produced to fulfil a functional brief, guided by a set of historically variable generic and aesthetic rules usually allied to the category of product or brand. The paradigm which offers the greatest potential to elucidate this is “useful film” (Acland and Wasson; Orgeron; Vonderau and Hediger; Florin et al., *Films*; Florin et al., *Advertising*). The design paradigm places advertising closer to fashion, interior design and architecture than the so-called “free art” paradigm in which film studies was based (Grieverson, “Cinema Studies” and “Discipline and Publish”; Kellner). Evidence for the presence of the design paradigm within the industry lies in the launch, in 1962, of the Design and Art Direction Awards (D&AD) and subsequently of the trade paper *Campaign* in 1968. Both laid the basis for the refinement of the industry’s skills in screen *interruptive* advertising as a design craft. If we scholars were to set out to establish a paradigm for the critical appreciation of screen commercials, we should probably study the crucial roles of these organisations and other awards bodies such as the British Arrows and Advertising Producers’ Association (APA) Awards, many of which function also as education and training bodies.

The “useful film” historians have made important progress to facilitate such an endeavour, not least because they have drawn our attention towards the larger corpus of work produced by the industry rather than a handful of iconic/canonical/ground-breaking works attributed to almost exclusively male and white “auteurs” (Gibbons; Twitchell; Von Logue Newth; Scott; Delaney; Rutherford). As Yvonne Zimmerman has said,

The academic predilection for the exceptional in advertising, for innovative advertising campaigns, advanced aesthetics, and the signature of acknowledged authors is paired with little interest in the overwhelming number of upfront, dull, boring, and often annoying commercials that we come across anywhere and any time. (“Early Cinema” 40)

She points out that focussing on the latter category of works could “provide new insights especially into phases of continuity and stability in the history of advertising media and screen cultures at large” (“Early Cinema” 40). However, whilst Bo Florin and others are surely onto something important when they write that useful films “are better explained in terms of use and functionality rather than meaning or style” (*Films* 4), there is a risk that we focus on one type of usefulness to the exclusion of others.

In this article, I identify and examine two elements of this design craft: the *compressed narrative* and the *privileged 60-second commercial*. My goal is not to advance a comprehensive theory, but some insights (based on archival research and qualitative interviews) which recognise the artistic, social, political and economic conflicts within this industry about how to be useful. It is constituted by a supply chain with a complex “tripartite structure” of brands, agencies and producers, which evolves and shifts over time (Clulely; Fletcher). There has to date been little academic analysis of the political economy in this supply chain, partly because of the difficulties scholars face in gaining access to closed communities (Ortner) to deploy ethnographic research methods (Caldwell). The relationship between the sectors is managed by contracts negotiated by professional trade associations: the Advertising Producers Association (APA) and the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), in the manner studied by Richard Caves in the creative industries as a whole.

The 60-Second Commercial

Partly because of the prominence attached to stories, the 60-second commercial quickly came to hold a privileged status in British screen advertising after the launch of ITV in 1955. It was the duration (or “the format”) that directors sought to be asked to direct, and the duration in which we are most likely to find the combination of spectacle and narrative of which Leon Gurevitch has written. One of the successful directors I interviewed said, “The kind of clients I work with always want a 60 second.” In the 2020s, it would generally be the luxury consumer clothing, sports goods, Christmas commercials and Superbowl ads which would commission 60-seconds. The aspiration of directors was to work with brands commissioning a 60-second master or longer. These were brands committed to the craft of filmmaking. Ridley Scott’s Hovis “Boy on the Bike” (1973) advert was 57 seconds. Levi’s “Laundrette” (1985) was 60 seconds or thereabouts. Benson & Hedges “Swimming Pool” (1978) was 90 seconds; Carling Black Label “Dambusters” (1989) was in 90-, 60- and 30-second versions; Hamlet “Photo Booth” (1987) was 60 seconds; Heineken “The Water in Majorca” (1985) was 60 seconds.

The significance of the 60-second commercial may conflict with received academic wisdom. Jez Stewart tells us that in 1955, the 30-second spot became the average on British TV (61). Many of the famed commercials of the 1970s such as the Smash Martians commercials (BMP), for example, were 30-seconds. Equally in the 1980s, famed campaigns for Cornetto, Cadbury’s Milk Tray and Nescafe were screened as 30s. Jack Dee John Smith commercials of the 1990s were mainly 40s with some 30s. The copywriter worked with the art director in fashioning the story. From the late 1980s on, audiences became used to even more truncated cutdowns of the 30-second master. The 10- and 20-second (derivative) cutdowns became more common for audiences and by the mid-1990s, 43% of all screen adverts shown in the UK were under 30-seconds long. By 2008, durations under 30 seconds accounted for around 75% of all commercial airtime (Barnett).

Why then do I say that the 60-second commercial has a privileged status? There are several reasons. Firstly, a cursory look at the archives of screen advertising content such as the British Film Institute (BFI) and History of Advertising Trust (HAT) will reveal huge numbers of 30-second commercials. But these were not necessarily the master formats, often just cutdowns of longer durations which were aired on British TV less frequently and for which we cannot locate archival masters. Secondly, many agencies and production companies fought for the 60-second commercial because it was the longer duration they believed that allowed film to do its job. Bernstein tells us that it was not at all a given that the 30-second duration would

become the norm. When commercial television was first launched in Britain, filmmakers opted for the 60-second duration. The SR Gibbs “Ice Block” spot (1955), the first broadcast on ITV, was 60 seconds. Other countries remained at 60 seconds. In the USA, agencies traditionally commissioned a 60-second plus a 30-second cutdown. But according to *Campaign*, it was between 1956 and 1958 that the industry shifted to the 30-second norm because the Independent Television Authority (ITA) imposed a limit on the volume of advertising permitted on commercial TV to initially six minutes per hour (“50 Years”). Associated Rediffusion (broadcasting in London) changed first, reducing the time slot that could be purchased by ad agencies down from 60 to 30. This duration was imposed on a reluctant generation of creatives.

A number of agencies continued to commission 60-second commercials on the basis that this was the optimum duration, persuading their clients to invest in the more expensive format. For creative director Dave Trott, the 60-second commercial was one of the most important factors in British television advertising history:

Frank Lowe insisted CDP do 60-second TV ads, while the rest of us were forced to do 15-second ads, because we got more spots. CDP did fewer ads, but their ads dominated the medium, whereas we ran lots more ads but were much less visible. We were doing the same as those guys that spent lots of time making fake coins. We were thinking small because it seemed obvious. Which is why CDP was voted the best UK agency of the entire 20th century. (“Use”)

The agency to which Trott refers, Collett Dickenson Pearce & Partners (CDP), was a British advertising agency which played a leading role in the cultural development of London’s creative industries in the 1960s and 70s (Salmon & Ritchie); the agency’s commercials were celebrated for their innovative sense of humour and use of narrative, and the company provided a launch pad for the successful careers of many figures from David Puttnam to Frank Lowe. Examples of the 60-second commercials scripted and commissioned by CDP in this period are: Parker Pen “Over A Barrell” (1979); Fiat 132 “Sports Car Club” (1977–78); and Benson & Hedges Special Filter “Swimming Pool” (1978), directed by Hugh Hudson, which ran at 90 seconds.

The significance of the 60-second commercial has to do with the interruptive, storytelling ambitions of the craft. Many creative teams (including creative directors) and production companies believed that the longer duration allowed them to maximise the chance of audio-visual storytelling to impact audience’s behaviour. When financed by the agency to establish his own film production company, Alan Parker continued to make the longer duration spots for CDP. Parker’s “Cockburn’s Special Reserve” (1980) was a 60-seconds multicharacter conversation piece dealing with social class. Heineken “Galley Slave” (CDP, 1979), was a 60-second spot within the “Heineken Refreshes the Parts Other Beers Cannot Reach” campaign. Parker also made a series of 60-seconds for the Sunday *Daily Express* based on special features. His spot for Supersoft conditioners “Coming Attractions” (1976–77), a parody of *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970) and other 1970s romantic and horror feature films, runs at just over 60. The 30-second commercial was perceived as a trickier storytelling format with lower cultural value. Once a director had “progressed” to the ranks of 60-second clients and scripts, it was unusual for him or her to accept 30-second scripts. Ringan Ledwidge was unusual in selecting 30-second campaigns as an established 60-second director. His three commercials for Tomcat “Dead Mouse Theatre” (2015) illustrate this, along with his shocking 30-second story film

“Think! – Crash” for the Department of Transport (2004); his idents for Radio 6, such as “First Dance” (2003), and Radio 1 with “Police” (2000), further evidence his skill in shorter lengths.

If repetition was the primary goal of the client and agency, 30-second slots made sense. The brand could afford a higher number of exposures of a shorter duration. The 30-second commercial was used because it was deemed one of the most economical ways to achieve frequency in the target audience in the 1980s: the goal was for a spot to be seen three times over a four to six week period of time, and the cost of booking that airtime on TV was less than booking the airtime of a 60-second commercial. The Hamlet and John Smith campaigns were cleverly originated concepts for the compressed narrative form of 30 seconds because so many used the single shot form, ironic and comedic, drawing on styles intrinsic to the craft skills developed by Buster Keaton and Charles Chaplin in the manipulation of viewer perception and emotion through frame composition. An effective commercial drew the conclusion from the viewer, “Ah, that’s canny” – in the sense of “shrewd”, “skilled” and “clever”. But their premise could also work in a 60-second. Hamlet “Photo Booth” (1986) works so powerfully because at a full 60 seconds, it feels like an expanded narrative for an audience trained in film interpretation at 30 seconds. Gregor Fisher tries—and fails—to get a set of good photographs in a booth to the tune of Bach’s “Air on the G String”. The additional time of 30 seconds is intrinsic to the narrative exposition of the character’s internal emotional story.

Making longer commercials did not in itself increase the exposure to audiences on an interruptive linear advertising model. In fact, it reduced the exposure of the audience to the longer master. Blackcurrant Tango’s “St George” (HHCL, Colin Gregg, 1996), which ran at 90 seconds, for example, was shown only ten times on national television (mainly in the commercials breaks of *TFI Friday* on Channel 4) because the agency judged that this would be more effective than a higher frequency of shorter commercials. The rationale behind investment in a 60-second commercial was that the quality of the exposure is greater, and therefore that fewer exposures of a higher quality are more effective than more exposures of a 30-second or 20-second cutdown. The view amongst agency creatives articulated by Dave Trott in *Campaign* was that the longer 60-second commercial format facilitated greater emotional investment by enabling the director to engage the audience in the story of the characters. It therefore had a qualitatively greater impact than the 30-second format, and was more likely to translate into positive feelings towards the brand, if not necessarily immediate sales purchases. Thus, the 60-second was based on a theorisation of the film–audience relationship, rather than a simple mathematical equation based on number of exposures to the message. Some brands valued engagement over exposure; sometimes agencies considered this a conflict. Longer slots were more expensive to purchase from broadcasters. Longer commercials were also significantly more expensive to produce, so client costs for the production company would have to increase as well. Directors and producers are paid on number of shoot days rather than percentage of below-the-line budget. Brands who invested in engagement and the longer format include Hovis, Guinness, Levis, Stella Artois, John Smith, John Lewis, and the agencies included CDP, BBH, HHCL and St Lukes.

The Compressed Narrative

The 60-second commercial held a privileged status amongst creatives and filmmakers because it was deemed to hold the best potential for a *compressed narrative*. In scholarship focused on early cinema congregating around the work of Tom Gunning, there has been an increasing focus on narrative and the spectacular. Jeremy Groskopf tells us that by 1916, the

“spot commercial” or “one-minute movie” was firmly established as a standard format in British cinemas, making advertising part of early institutionalised film. I follow Paul Cobley in distinguishing between a story (what happens to a character or characters), a plot (a series of events) and a narrative (the way in which that story and those events are communicated to an audience) (4; Florin et al., *Films 2*) remind us that, at the turn of the century, screen advertising contributed “to the creation of cinema spectatorship in the first place”, a point applied to British case studies by a number of scholars (Strickland; Curtis et al.; Cook and Thompson; Gurevitch; Foutch; Farmer; Taylor, “Written” and “Fascinating Show”). Many of these scholars have also noted the prominence of story and narrative in these early commercials. Gurevitch and Charles Musser, indeed, single out the film *A Romance of the Rail* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) as the first example of a communication process—now commonly found in contemporary advertising—in which viewers are credited for their consumer savvy and flattered for their capacity to decode advertising in a way that “ordinary” adverts are less willing to take for granted (Gurevitch 2). Scott Bukatman detects a tension between the focus on narrative and spectacle within film studies as a whole, arising from this shift in focus to early film and non-mainstream fiction film, whilst both Jennifer Edson Escalas and Barbara Stern (“Classical and Vignette Television”; “Who”) have raised the profile of narrative in marketing studies, making this a potentially important case study for understanding narrative in advertising.

There is evidence that agencies and directors began to think about commercials as stories early on as a format for British television advertising. The agencies quickly learned that, “[i]f you are interrupting a story with a story of your own you had better make sure that your story is better than the one you are interrupting” (Bernstein 267). This was partly because the pressure was on the advertising industry not to make commercials that looked like commercials: “At the launch of ITV, the American style of TV advertising was seen as demonstrating a model of loud selling and haranguing salesmanship, aspects of commercialism that the British Parliament had been eager to avoid in the 1954 Television Act” (Payne, “Like” 10–11). The many different genre of “stories” and “films” deployed by the first generation of writers and filmmakers ranged from the “splice of life” stories of the 1950s and 1960s such as the “Life with Katie” commercials run for Oxo by JWT often in 60- and 90-second formats to the Alan Parker’s commercials for Birds Eye “Dinner for One” (CDP, 1970–71) spot inspired by David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945), and Birds Eye “Supermousse” (CDP, 1981) inspired by *Oliver Twist* (David Leane, 1948).

In the later decades of the British television commercial, spectacle and visual effects are prominent devices used within the narratives to communicate stories to audiences, in a manner ostensibly consistent with that highlighted by Gunning and Gurevitch on spectacle in early film and screen advertising. British television commercials such as Jonathan Glazer’s “Surfer” advert for Guinness (1998) and Paul Weilland’s “Points of View” spot for *The Guardian* (1986), are both “stories” using the voiceover narrative structure with a single lead character and a single plot. Both use spectacular devices as narrative techniques to communicate story. In “Points of View”, an edit from one point of view is the crucial narrative device used to communicate the character of the skinhead (an altruistic citizen acting to save the life of a suited office worker, rather than a thief). The story of “Surfer” centres on a group of surfers, waiting for the perfect wave (a metaphor for waiting for the slow poured pint of Guinness). As the wave arrives, the crashing white horses turn into actual horses. In both the spectacle is intrinsic to the narrative, but only in “Surfer” is the spectacle intrinsic to the character’s story; in “Points of View”, it is intrinsic to the narrator’s meta-story in which the “hero” character is *The Guardian* (rather than the skinhead). “Surfer” won a Yellow Pencil for

Cinema Commercial, Black for Direction, Wood for use of Music, Black for Commercial over 60 seconds, Wood for Editing, and Yellow for Special Effects. In awarding Yellow Pencils for Cinema Commercial and Special Effects, the 2000 D&AD panel also clearly recognised the commercial as a work of excellence in the spectacular narrative.

But from 1955 onwards, the screen advertising production industry became versed in what I call *compressed narrative*, which did not rely on spectacle alone. Bernstein writes that when the industry settled on 30 seconds as the principal master duration (from which a 15-second cutdown would be taken), agency copywriters and film directors had to tell stories quickly; they had to train audiences to guess what had happened in the past (without showing what had happened), and guess what would happen in the future (without showing it). By contrast, in episodic television drama which had thirty minutes rather than seconds, writers were more prone to write “in real time”, with far greater, lengthier exposition. Bernstein argues that this had a fundamental, lasting impact on audiences’ film culture in Britain beyond the domain of advertising itself, generating a film audience highly skilled in interpreting narrative devices to unpack complex story elements. The editing of *The Guardian* “Points of View” is a case in point because it uses a time-efficient “compressed” narrative device for the exposition of the concept of “bigger picture” in journalism. I use the concept of compressed narratives in this article to make the point that *some* of the stories post-1955 were sufficiently complex, multifaceted and long that they could have been narrated as feature film stories; they are stories that could equally have been narrated for a two-hour theatrical slot. Amongst writers and producers and in the film production industry is the question of length. Is the story a series? A two-parter? A ten-parter? A feature, or a short? The question in advertising is not how long is the story, but can you tell the story in thirty or sixty seconds? What are your narrative techniques, and how skilled are you at compressing narrative?

One obvious way of thinking about compression is linear temporal compression. Ringan Ledwidge’s commercial for Hovis “Go on Lad” (2008), which narrated 122 years of British social history in 122 seconds, is an example. The commercial narrates a simple story of a boy running home from the shop, having purchased a loaf of Hovis bread. His journey through streets, squares and alleyways takes him through the major events of the last century—from the suffragettes and the First World War to the Blitz and the 1980s Miners’ Strike. The full version of the commercial continued to air in cinemas for four weeks, with 90- and 10-second cuts appearing on television into early 2009. The commercial closed on a shot of the boy’s hand reaching for a slice of the Hovis loaf over the tagline “As good today as it’s always been”. For cinephiles, the last line signalled reflection on Ridley Scott’s famed “Boy on Bike” (1973) for Hovis. Hovis’s use of heritage and narrative, revived for the remastering and re-release of Scott’s commercial, has been documented in the trade press (Watson) and analysed by academics (Powell, “Affect”; Sargeant, “Hovis”; Spittle).

Another way to consider compression is through the deep visual compression of a complex story with subplots. Dougal Wilson’s “Monty the Penguin” (2014) is a case in point. Made for John Lewis’s 2014 Christmas campaign, the spot was part of the genre of “event advertising”, a new wave which began in Britain in 2008 with the Christmas campaigns for supermarkets and department stores: often theatrically ambitious compressed narratives with higher-than-average budgets, given a “base format” duration of at least sixty but often ninety seconds. The primary story of “Monty the Penguin” is of a young boy, Sam, who interacts with his soft toy Penguin as if it were a sibling. It’s a coming-of-age story about a young boy maturing into an adult: becoming aware of the “grown-up” love of his parents; and becoming empathetic and sympathetic to the separate and different needs of other people (the “Christmas

spirit” of altruism). It’s a story, narrated through a plot, in which a main character is exposed to three trigger events before experiencing the full personal character transformation which also results in the transformation of the supporting actor, The Penguin, and closure. The plot takes place in twelve diegetic locations (house, back garden, bus, two parks, snow park, shopping street), over twenty-three set-ups (probably many more, because this is a logistical question about the commercial was shot). I counted fifty cuts in the live action section of 120 seconds. The commercial involves a large number of characters including Sam and The Penguin, the two lead characters; Mum, Dad, Loving Partner Penguin, Loving Elderly couple on the shopping street, and all the extras in the various locations, as well as the characters in the archive TV footage. In order to avoid the shot-reverse-shot sequence and bombard the viewer with too many cuts, Wilson often covers emotional cause and effect interactions between Sam and The Penguin with a tracking shot, pan or zoom out—this also creates a warmer feel and interconnected sensation between Sam and his Penguin that captures the magic of their connection: until the final sequences when Sam’s interpretation of his Penguin’s distraction attains slightly sharper camera moves and edit points.

Interpreting a compressed commercial narrative is different to interpreting a feature film or television drama because it centres on *frame density*. John Ellis has described television commercials as “allusive, synoptic and dense” (97). They “exhibit a textual density that would be impossible to achieve in the linear narratives of programmes. Designed to be seen again and again, they are able to yield their meanings slowly” (96). The repetition of commercials, he writes, is “intrinsic to their appeal; the details of its execution can be relished on repeated viewing” (96). The slightly different term “frame density” is a compelling concept that captures the exposition of story in a static frame as the eye travels across the different elements of the composition, rather than the exposition of story through consecutive shots cut together by an editor. In her analysis of British Victorian domestic instructional narrative paintings, Julia Thomas writes that in “reading” these paintings,

[t]he viewer is no longer a passive recipient of the painting, but a detective, whose job is to interpret the symbols, expressions and actions, in order to construct the story. Narrative painting depends upon and empowers its spectator, encouraging him or her to work at the image, to take a part in unravelling its meanings. (30)

As the decades progressed, and screen advertising audiences became more and more film literate, the filmmakers could confidently compress, omit, or allude to vital bits of information whilst assuming that the audience would “fill in the gaps” or “piece the story together”. “Monty the Penguin” is an example of a commercial packed full of classic film devices.

Art direction plays a crucial role in these compressed narratives. By art direction I denote the colour and textual palette of the entire visual construction of a commercial. Ringan’s “Go on Lad” illustrates this, relying almost wholly on wardrobe, set design, props, makeup and special effects to narrate the 122 years of history. The narrative begins in 1886, with an over-the-shoulders view of a boy in a flat cap and brown jacket buying a loaf of bread in a bakery, following which he’s chased into an alleyway where he passes a poster about the Titanic. Effects achieved by The Mill postproduction and skilful editing by Ledwidge’s editor Rich Orrick enabled the compression, but much of this was within the art direction. Many screen industries tend to foreground a certain screen craft. Previously, I’ve argued that music video was an editor’s craft because of the primacy of the relationship to the music and absence of a script and dialogue (Caston, *British Music Video*). Partly as a result of its development as visual mode of communication that expanded with the printing press, and partly because of the short

durations permitted to the industry by film and TV regulators, screen advertising is an art directors' craft. It foregrounds art direction, a craft that has attracted surprisingly little academic historical scholarship but one which is far greater than the output of the production designer or art director and her team: art direction as a concept encompasses the work not only of the art director / production designer but the cinematographer, the costume designer, the make-up artists and so on. These creative crew work with the director to ensure the image is synoptically dense, like a Victorian painting, with intense layers of meaning in colours and objects of the scene. The need to compress narrative has meant that every prop, every colour choice or texture choice for wardrobe and art department conducts greater narrative "work" in the compressed timeframe of the screen advertisement than is conventionally expected in other screen.

Music also works hard in the delivery of a compressed narrative. Originally cut to The Jam's "A Town Called Malice", during production the team commissioned indie band Working For A Nuclear Free City to create a new soundtrack for "Go on Lad". Another commercial directed by Ledwidge illustrates the work that a music soundtrack can achieve. For Ledwidge's spot for Audi's "Clowns" (BBH, 2017), BBH commissioned a new recording of Steven Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns" by Faultline with Lisa Hannigan. The commercial ran in a series of 60- and 120-second spots. The skill of the director is to use music to foreground the crucial information for the dominant narrative to be understood on a first viewing, and to "hint" at sub-narratives through subtle cues both in the instrumental music and lyrics. The premise was that the technology of the new Audi was so good that it was "clown-proof". The danger of such a message was that it risked alienating Audi's potential clientele by painting them as idiot clowns. Lisa Hannigan's vocals alongside Sondheim's lyrics accentuate the beautiful humanity of the clowns. In the detail of their facial expressions and subtle reactions to each other, Ledwidge construes them as utterly loveable. There is a complex dance between the lyrics of a song which describe a romantic relationship and a different story to that narrated by the commercial. Not only does it stimulate meanings, but it also stimulates pleasure, constructing an interpretive space for the audience to inhabit and engage in pleasure-based contemplation repeatedly, noticing subtle new details each time. Pleasure and reinterpretation are intrinsic to the form. The kind of work required to appraise the intensive relationship between music and picture in the commercial has recently been undertaken by Mark Brownrigg and others in relation to TV idents, and by Bethany Klein in her detailed and thorough examination of the history of advertising and popular music; her analysis of VW's use of Nick Drake is particularly pertinent (44–8).

Density, the Campaign and the Genre

In considering "repeatability" we should consider the role of the media planner, agency producer and the overall campaign. Screen advertising is created by media planners—historically "invisible" women workers at advertising agencies—who devised the timings and exposure of the commercial within a larger multimedia campaign. The campaign is a carefully planned programme of audiovisual encounters over six to twelve months during which audiences are exposed to a carefully timed schedule of cutdowns and masters, alongside print, outdoor and (in the old days) radio. Ellis's emphasis on the television programmes excludes the broader temporal campaign context of this campaign. To focus solely on the commercial as the "unit of analysis" obscures that audience interpretation of the narrative occurs in relation to information, narrative content and emotional impact derived from other media sources before during and after exposure to the commercial. As Gurevitch observed, screen

advertisements not only deploy narratives within their diegesis but they also operate as narrative forms across the temporal frame of a continually developing campaign, in which new ads may be considered new instalments in an ongoing narrative (150).

The extent of repeatability demanded by particular commercials varies by the category of product being advertised. In many FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) commercials, it is repeatability, product exposition and market positioning that are crucial, not beauty or narrative spectacle. British audiences of daytime television are familiar with commercials for toothpaste, vacuum cleaners and stairlifts for the elderly which are dubbed into different languages with no attempt made by the client to hide the lack of lip sync and to hide poorly designed sets, low art-department budgets and actors lacking acting skills. Here, Ellis's view of all commercials that "[t]heir repeatability depends on the attainment of a few seconds of textual perfection ('not a hair out of place')" is misplaced (98). It is likewise misplaced his assertion that '[c]ommercials, and indeed interstitials more generally, are deeply concerned with the generation of a sense of beauty' (98). At best, Ellis' theory is supported by a genre of "beauty" commercials such as those for shampoo and moisturizer, for which production companies have a list of specialist "beauty" directors of photography; many of these fulfil his theory that commercials undertake two types of textual work, "an activity of explanation ('this is what this product can do') and [...] an activity of aestheticization" (98).

But categories of product are associated with different genres of screen commercial, only a very small percentage of which are concerned with textual perfection and beauty. The British Arrows—formerly the British Television Advertising Awards (BTAA) and launched in 2017 after a merger with the Craft Awards—is an advertising awards body in London; like the D&AD, it employs a design critique to award different genres in advertising. A "design critique" refers to analysing a design, and giving feedback on whether it meets its objectives. The British Arrows holds separate categories for brands because comparing a butter commercial with a sports brand would be unproductive. The British Arrows does not suffer from "the academic predilection" identified by Zimmerman ("Early Cinema" 40); it recognises that whether "excellence" has been achieved depends on what a commercial is supposed to "excel" in, and what the "design brief" from the client has been. Not all clients believe that a 60-second high-end narrative commercial is right for their product: it would be the wrong kind of marketing, and could necessitate a hugely expensive budget, film director and production budget with the wrong skillset and creative ambitions for the task. Genres of commercial have evolved for certain categories of product. Following Zimmerman, I define "genre" as "a formal or structural category that includes films that share a story formula, narrative convention, a particular milieu, specific character and conflict constellations, or specific emotional and affective constellations" ("Early Cinema" 23).

It is the historical shifts in the correlation between genres of commercial and categories of product that are of particular interest historians of the screen and historians of society. The 1980s "Pot Noodles" commercials crafted by Mother and directed by Danny Kleinman, for example, innovated by breaking the traditional rules of genre. This was a food product requiring genre marketing not to the 1950s "housewife" but to individuals preparing food outside the nuclear family structure. The Christmas supermarket commercials (Sainsburys, Aldi, Asda, Tesco, Morrisons) are a similar case in point. The spot made by British directors Vaughan and Anthea for Wrangler, "DJ" (1991), is another example; it does not fulfil any of Ellis's theories, drawing on documentary and music video aesthetics for its appeal as an authentic brand for the youth market. Similarly, Tony Kaye's commercial for Dunlop

“Unexpected” (1993) eschews perfection in favour of an intense disruptive iconography that broke the mould of that genre of advertising at the time.

That said, to analyse commercials only as the filmic offspring of a design brief would be mistaken, and this is where some of the useful cinema contributions fall short. Zimmerman writes that “advertising films, like Gebrauchsfilm in general, are not commodities, but instruments in the service of the advertiser” (“Advertising” 24). The danger is that we scholars see the *use* of screen advertisements assessed solely in terms of selling. “Selling *what?*” is one question we might ask. Many commercials centre on brands rather than products, but the determination of brand values and brand narratives is a project on which brands and agencies can spend years and millions of pounds. Brand values are one of the raw materials with which agency writers and filmmakers will work in crafting the commercial, particularly narrative commercials which demonstrate moral and ethical choices. Writing convincing, entertaining and impactful narratives can cause costly collisions with brand values. John Lewis provides several examples. In 2021, it was forced to pull its Christmas commercial by the Financial Conduct Authority because the narrative of “Let Life Happen” incorrectly suggested that its Home Insurance covered deliberate damage caused by children (the story of the script did not necessarily suggest this, but the film made by Tom Kuntz at production company MJZ was judged to do this) (Rawlinson, “John Lewis”). This conflicted with John Lewis’s brand value of honesty. In November, the firm was criticised by the tabloid press which suggested that its Christmas 2015 commercial made in collaboration with Age UK and titled “Man on the Moon” could be interpreted as a “disturbing” narrative about an elderly man and young girl (Hutchinson and Dunne).

“What else are commercials useful for?” is another question we could ask. In his recent book, Steve Harrison cites a number of conflicts within the advertising industry. He argues that, whilst the brand will want to improve the brand profile or sales, the advertising agencies often want to make the best film possible using criteria set and judged by the trade press (*Campaign*, *Creative Review*, *Shots*, and *Nowness*) and awards bodies (Creative Circle, British Arrows, the APA Awards). This may lead to conflicts in creative decision making, potentially exacerbated by the ambitions of the film director to build a showreel for a future career in high-end television drama. The goals of agencies, brands and filmmakers are not always united. Agency producers and account managers are the invisible intermediaries working behind the scenes to align these different objectives into a common purpose. Many directors and agency teams fought for the 60-second duration because they believed that with certain categories of product (and genre of commercial) “meaning and style” did matter as much as use and functionality, contra the suggestion of Florin and others that useful films “are better explained in terms of use and functionality rather than meaning or style” (Vonderau, “Introduction” 4). Categorising advertising as “useful film” must not blind us to the very real sectional interests between the different component parts of the tripartite structure of the supply chain, and the imperative of those working in film to make films *that work*.

In *Can’t Sell, Won’t Sell*, Harrison indeed goes on to look at the progressive and radical mission many advertising agencies and filmmakers have adopted in their work. He argues that, in the absence of other democratic mechanisms to lead brands to improve diversity and climate change, and in the face of their ability to change social behaviour, many agencies have opted to function as that democratic institutions pressuring major brands and corporations to adopt reforming policies in social justice, diversity and climate change. This is illustrated by some of the categories now held by the awards bodies. D&AD gives a Future Impact Pencil Award for “early-stage projects that demonstrate the potential to drive behavioural, environmental,

society or policy change through creativity” (“D&AD Pencils”). A White Pencil is awarded for “exceptional projects that use the power of creativity to drive behavioural, environmental, societal or policy change.” Likewise, the British Arrows has a Social Impact Award (under which Nisha Gantra’s “Wombstories” for Libresse / Bodyform won), as well as Diversity and Sustainability Awards.

The 60-Second Commercial in the Digital Era

Despite initial fears, the 60-second commercial has endured, and is indeed being displaced by longer formats. Cadbury’s “Gorilla” (2007) was dropped at 90 seconds, and became the industry’s most shared commercial. It is used as a case study to demonstrate that the longer duration works online and that cutting down the length of commercials prevents them from being crafted as self-sufficient engaging films. Current evidence suggests not only that the 60- but also the 90-second commercial is increasing high-end luxury goods advertising (in contrast to FMCG). In February 2016, Instagram began to show 60-second adverts on its platform, having previously only shown clips in maximum durations of 15 and 30 seconds. Guinness was the first brand to launch a 60-second ad on Instagram in the UK. TikTok subsequently increased the maximum duration from 15 to 60 seconds (and since then longer). An investigation of US advertising found that, between 2014 and 2016, the incidence of the 90-second commercial grew by 12% whilst the 60-second fell by 3%. The 15-second also grew by 12% (Hayes). Research conducted by Pearl and Dean in 2007 suggested that this was important within cinema as well (Barnett). Focus groups found that cinema-goers consistently preferred 60-second ads over 30-second ads (Barnett). Respondents noted that longer ads had a more positive effect on perceptions of brand image than the shorter commercials.

Recent examples of commercials longer than 60 seconds illustrate that neither the concept of “narrative” or “story” are fixed universal formulas in screen advertising, but evolving and political terms tightly enmeshed in the political economic structures producing them. The contemporary “decentralised” narrative of much advertising made by women targeted at women illustrates this. Libresse / Bodyform’s recent campaign (AMV 2018–2020) is a series of short advertising films created to facilitate women’s voices. Libresse made headlines with “Blood Normal” in 2017, the first period product ad to feature a red-coloured fluid. Kim Gehrig, at Somesuch, directed “Viva La Vulva” (2018), a 3-minute film, set to the track “Take Yo Praise” (Camille Yarbrough, 1975) which shows a series of colourful objects resembling female genitals (including a grapefruit, conch shell and fortune cookie) dancing and singing along to the lyrics intercut with shots of women examining their bodies. In “Wombstories” (2020), Canadian director Nisha Gantra worked with an all-female crew to make a mixed-media live action / animation film following the paths of a number of different women from one struggling to conceive using IVF treatment to another, an older woman going through menopause, and a young girl getting her period for the first time. This decentralised narrative structure is in stark contrast to the singular auteur narratives of many women-targeted commercials from the 1950s and 60s. Signalling the shift within the industry as a whole, the campaign was the Grand Prix winner at Cannes Film Craft Lions, won a gold Lion in Branded Content and a Silver Lion in Direction and Film Craft: Use of Music/Sound.

British screen advertising 1955–2020 utilises a wide range of narrative structures and devices, and the full impact of the transition to digital platforms on those is not yet fully obvious. Gurevitch is however surely right in arguing that the workings of narrative in screen advertising remain under-researched, particularly in relation to theorising around transmedia

narrative theory (147). The Nescafe Commercials of the 1980s utilised a dramatic episodic structure of Charles Dickens's early novels which were printed in short excerpts in the press. The concepts of "voice", "address", "time", "characterisation", "leitmotif" and "mood", all central to most discussions of narrative and story in screen content, don't necessarily play out in the same way in advertising. One of the most conspicuous ways in which scholars might advance their understanding is in relation to production. Within a commission to make a 60-, a 15-, 2 x 10- and 6 x 5-second commercials, a film director is expected to have a unique set of audio-visual composition skills in narrative communication that directors of mainstream film and television high-end drama will not. The shorter formats are truncated but have to be scripted, shot and edited to make engaging films in their own right. The need to craft a story that worked in multiple length versions simultaneously required an agility from film directors and scripting agency teams not necessitated for most television and theatrical content. Deeper understanding of the design paradigm of post-1955 screen advertising can be found in the industry's "peer review" (for want of a better word) organisations, the D&AD, British Arrows, the APA Awards, the Creative Circle Awards (an organisation founded in 1945, awards made since 1986), *Shots*, *Creative Review* and *Campaign*. In the post-digital era, *Nowness* has occupied a central curatorial space that would enable us to map and chart the shifting boundaries between advertising and other short form content such as branded art and fashion film.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the 60-second commercial has held a privileged status within advertising agencies and production companies in British advertising since the mid 1950s because it was seen as giving creatives the best opportunity to exploit the narrative potential of film to sell brands and products to audiences. Agencies and directors fought for the opportunity to direct 60-second commercials over and above shorter durations. Despite forecasts that the 60-second commercial would not endure on digital platforms, it has done so, and indeed longer durations have emerged. Duration has been a somewhat neglected topic in the literature on screen advertising but my research on the British screen advertising industry since 1955 suggests that focussing on it might assist scholars in analysing the delicate and political relationship between spectacle and narrative central to the study of short-form content. Attention might also be fruitfully paid to the small handful of brands who have invested heavily in exploring the medium of *film* as narrative. Examining not only the screen content but the institutions that produce and regulate the production of this content, such as those trade associations, awards bodies and trade press cited here, will be crucial. How long is a good story? It's not the story itself which has a length, but the narrative. Screenwriters, directors and producers use textual audio-visual density to turn stories into narratives of fixed lengths. They do so according to the stipulations of their trade bodies, platforms and funding contracts. The curation of stories into timed narratives is at the heart of this.

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