“Around the Corner”:
How Jam Handy’s Films Reflected and Shaped the 1930s and Beyond

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This thesis titled

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How Jam Handy’s Films Reflected and Shaped the 1930s and Beyond

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Between 1935 and 1941, the Jam Handy Organization in Detroit produced a series of 111 general-interest soft-sell advertising shorts for Chevrolet. Looking at a cross section of these films and other selections from Handy’s influential oeuvre, which varied in style from newsreels to cartoons to scientific demonstrations, I will analyze how they reflect dominant ideologies of industrial capitalism, how they function formally within discourses of advertising, and how they work to construct spectators as consumers. I contend that through these ephemeral films we may better understand the range of cultures and ideologies struggling for dominance during the Great Depression, as well as gain insights into the meaning of the 1930s with respect to its effects on the 1950s and beyond.

Approved: __________________________________________________________

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Henry Jamison Handy was born in 1886 in Philadelphia, the youngest of seven children. From an early age, he was a larger-than-life figure: after finishing elementary and high school in only eight years, he was kicked out of the University of Michigan in 1903 for writing satirical libel about a college professor. He became the inventor of new swimming strokes that helped him set world records, he won two Olympic bronze medals 20 years apart (a length of time recognized by Ripley’s Believe-it-or-Not), he wore specially-tailored suits made without pockets (he found them distracting), as head of an eponymous company (The Jam Handy Organization) employing hundreds of people for decades in Detroit, he chose, for years, to have no office, and if business took him coast-to-coast, he was known to swim in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in the same day. The life of Jamison “Jam” Handy is woven out of a combination of legend and aggrandized facts. His sartorial peculiarities and his natatorial proclivities do little to underline the true significance of his life’s work. Jam Handy never did much to discredit the legend because he was a crafter of legend. He was also a storyteller, a pusher of opinion, a promoter, a persuader, a propagandist, and a shaper of ideas.

Jam Handy was a salesman. And though his tools for selling may have included “hundreds of road shows, thousands of films, and millions of slides” (Estell), his contributions as an industrial and advertising filmmaker have only surreptitiously stood the test of time. Rick Prelinger, archivist and owner of original prints of many Jam Handy productions, writes, “Everybody that does sales media is influenced by this man’s
films and innovations – whether they know it or not” (qtd. in Estell). At times in his life, he was recognized as “one of the most respected names among visual-communication companies” (New York Times 63), “a standard against which other commercial filmmakers come to be defined” (Brunner 12), and “obviously a pioneer” (Leslie). His films, the record of a third of a century of American advertising practice, carry a great breadth of innovation within them and are important within the spheres of rhetorical technique, historical cultural studies, media studies, and film.

The Jam Handy Organization was founded in Detroit, Michigan, in 1911, and by 1936, Handy had in his employ “400 people, including eight directors and twenty-eight writers” (Brunner 7). This number swelled much higher in the coming years and even included the hiring of two full-time orchestras to keep up with the demand for incidental music for the films. At this time, the Jam Handy Organization’s largest account was with the Chevrolet side of General Motors. For Chevrolet, Jam Handy produced 111 films between 1935 and 1941 as part of what was termed the “Direct Mass Selling Series.” The series was comprised of newsreels, instructional shorts on safe driving, informational shorts on how certain pieces of technology (either directly or indirectly related to cars) work, and light-hearted color cartoons for children. Though the Jam Handy Organization made a variety of films for other companies before and after World War II, as well as hundreds of training films for the U.S. government during World War II (certain sources put the number as high as seven thousand (Lippe)), the Direct Mass Selling Series was uniquely devised to be shown to “undifferentiated audiences” (Prelinger) in both movie and newsreel theaters. Paramount distributed the series, and though some films may have been created in Hollywood, most were made in Detroit or on a location dictated by the
film’s subject. The “Chevrolet Leader News” newsreels were a human-interest newsreel series, similar to the now-lost “Laughs and Flashes” series, as well as several other similar advertising newsreel packages produced by Ford and Goodyear (Prelinger). The cartoons have some entertainment value, but much of it has dimmed over the years. The most compelling and important films in the Direct Mass Selling Series were those advertising shorts (nearly all one reel in length) that masqueraded as informational or documentary films. Here, the soft-sell held sway. And though the patriotic politics or heavy-handed lessons that these films sought to teach are far from subtle, Chevrolet products themselves were often integrated slyly and deftly.

For a man whose company employed so many people and whose films were seen by millions over the course of decades, essentially no significant scholarly writing exists on Jam Handy’s films. In the words of Rick Prelinger, whose personal interview time and factual expertise were of great assistance during the writing of this project, “There’s nobody that knows very much” about the particulars of what went into creating the Direct Mass Selling Series, be it the relatively simple question of who – by name – actually directed these films, or the more complicated question of who had creative control over them. Though Prelinger posits quite emphatically that “It was Handy” as producer who not only had final say but also had many ‘first-says’ regarding the content of these short films, this fact is not definitively known. As producer, Handy had the right to, and sometimes did, reject films from distribution. The films that were distributed – over a hundred in this series, but thousands over the life of the company – mostly bear a
recognizable, though not completely unified, creative signature. Whether this amounts to auteurism or imposed uniformity is hard to know in the case of Handy’s work¹.

It is relevant to review a few of the details of Jamison Handy’s life and inspiration before proceeding. Handy related many of the details of his life in an interview he made with Bob Leslie of WWJ-TV in Detroit in 1961, and further facts can be cobbled together from various newspaper articles and interviews. Son of newspaper editor and toastmaster Moses Handy, Jam’s rapid childhood education was accelerated by an obsession he had, at the age of seven, for repeatedly visiting the World’s Columbian Exhibition, where he learned much of what he knew by reading the exhibits. According to Prelinger, his “rhetoric of presentation,” “science museum aesthetic,” and whole “visual consciousness” was thus formed in the year 1893 at the World’s Fair. After being kicked out of the University of Michigan and turned down by eight other colleges over the libel scandal mentioned above, he left college forever and went to work full-time for the Chicago Tribune, where he was already a correspondent. At the age of 19, he got an editorial on the importance of pictures in textbooks published in the newspaper, to the mild dismay of local educators. While his assertion that education can occur more easily and more effectively through pictorial aids is hardly revolutionary today, this belief influenced the strong visual sensibility in his films. Talking heads are rare in a Jam Handy Picture. Though there is never a lack of voice-over, the guiding narration is almost always accompanied by a supporting image, some of which are of an innovative quality.

¹ As such, throughout this thesis I will use the name “Handy” as a shorthand metonym for the Organization, since it would be improper to credit Handy alone.
Handy learned a new job every two weeks working at the Tribune. As an advertising editor, he discovered the principle that effective advertising depended upon much more than the ad itself and the circulation of the newspaper. Working on the principle that “if the salespeople knew more about what was being offered in the ads that possibly they might be more enthusiastic and more informative when they were asked questions” (Handy), Handy expanded the scope of newspaper advertising far beyond the range of the printed page and established a standard that carried through his days as a filmmaker. Before film became a practical selling tool, Jam Handy and his Organization relied mainly on in-person presentations using slides and filmstrips. Handy even invented a portable projector for his salesmen to use.

The two key principles that got Handy into the world of filmmaking were these: “What goes in one eye doesn’t go out the other,” he once said, referring to his belief that ears were unable to carry any communication completely (though he added, “I believe in ears, I wear them”); and “I believe in motion pictures, but I believe in the motion pictures in people’s minds.” If motion pictures could be used to stimulate the imagination, to more effectively communicate ideas, to aid the salesman in the business of “informing and enthusing,” (Handy’s description of his own work), then in Handy’s mind they were an invaluable tool. “The cinema,” he further said, “is merely a means of putting motion pictures in people’s minds.” Though he would have rejected the title of documentarian (a fairly new word at the time, anyway), it is clear that plenty of Jam Handy’s productions share much in common with documentary and are ancestors of many kinds of motion picture media that still exist today, including commercials, industrial films, training films, classroom films, instructional films, and even news films.
Regardless of the pioneering influence of Handy’s rhetorical style and methods, Jam Handy productions are viewed by the casual film-watcher of today as, at best, cultural memes of kitsch or signifiers and metonyms of a strange, alien value system. Their inflated style must be etched on our DNA somewhere, for we recognize the Handy signature without blinking, and often without realizing that these films had filmmakers and were not simply conjured in midair out of national pride in the “American Dream.” If his films are shown today, it is almost always in one of three contexts: in derisively-contextualized clips; in comedy, especially the cult-favorite cable show “Mystery Science Theater 3000,” where Jam Handy shorts (such as “A Case of Spring Fever” (1940), as well as shorts made by many other producers, such as Sid Davis and Coronet Films) are both celebrated and ridiculed in good-natured fun; and, to more serious viewers, online in the Prelinger Archives section of the Internet Archive (archive.org/prelinger).

The first two venues emphasize unintentional comedy. True, there is plenty in Jam Handy that is overstated to the point of laughability. To watch a film like “To New Horizons” (1940), a dreamily-narrated and panoramic overview of the General Motors exhibition at that year’s World’s Fair, is to stare in awe at the audacious hopes that (some of) those living in 1940 had for the future. The film concerns itself with a series of miniature displays meant to depict the world as General Motors’ engineers envisioned it would appear in 1960. The film is enhanced not as much by the wrongness of its predictions as the bloated rhetorical language the narrator uses to make these predictions. The voice describes the “World of Tomorrow” as “a world with a future in which all of us are tremendously interested, because that is where we are going to spend the rest of
our lives.”2 As the quiet contemplative vibraphone soundtrack swells into a massive string and wind orchestra, the narrator speaks these gallant words:

“Every forward outlook reminds us that all the highways of all research and all communication, all the activities of science, lead us onward to better methods of doing things, with new opportunities for employment and better ways of living, as we go on, determined to unfold the constantly greater possibilities of the world of tomorrow, as we move more and more rapidly forward, penetrating new horizons in the spirit of individual enterprise in the great American way.”

The screen fills with animated art-deco-style futuristic colors and shapes, and over a cartoon rendering of the exterior of the General Motors display shining as brightly as a rising sun, the words “Without END” appear in place of the standard “The End.”

In fairness to the film, this kind of rhetoric is not substantially different from the kind President Roosevelt served up to the American people when he framed “freedom from want” as the “enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living” (qtd. in Cohen 56). But Edward Brunner points out that “the only position never inhabited by the present-day viewer is that of the gullible audience-member who would take [the film] at face value” (Brunner 6). It is impossible to view a film like “To New Horizons” without irony. But it would be to our advantage to take an interest in what these films, as ambassadors of several aspects of the culture of the 1930s, can reveal to us today. It would be to our advantage to understand how they were viewed, and how they were meant to be viewed, at the time of their release. This is precisely the project of my research: to contextualize the films to understand how they functioned.

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2 Perhaps you recognize this quote as eerily similar to Criswell’s opening monologue in Ed Wood’s 1959 film Plan 9 from Outer Space.
From the beginning, I have argued that Jam Handy’s work had unassailable impact on the industry. Leading professionals agree, and the quality of the work justifies the impact it had. And yet, these films (and current industrial and instructional films) are not acknowledged as significant cultural forces, despite the fact that many viewed them. Perhaps it is because they are not and were not thought of as shared experiences the way Hollywood film and television were. These films were not advertised – they, after all, were advertising – and thus we forget that many people shared the experience of seeing them. Without reviews (for who reviewed interstitial promotional films, designed merely to bridge the time between features or newsreels?), statistics on release patterns, or any firm idea of audience numbers, it is impossible to study Handy’s work according to any reception-based model. Even though they were never the films that audiences specifically sought out, given the time and effort put into them and the sheer number of titles, it can be surmised that millions saw them anyway, perhaps incorporating the films’ messages into their subconscious minds. Since these films had impact, let us examine how and to what extent, situating them within discourses of advertising practice and formal structure, Marxist historical analysis, and Feminist theories of the spectator.

Handy’s films stand at the center of a whole galaxy of issues and fields of study, including advertising, documentary, the Great Depression, discourses of Americanism, capitalism, consumerism, and populism, science and technology, art and commerce, conservatism and abundance, mass-production and mass-consumption, industry, sexual and racial representation, and the building blocks of film itself, from special effects to animation to editing to the interaction between sound and image. And, of course, the automobile. “No product,” writes Robert McElvaine, “was more representative of the mass consumption culture” than the automobile (10). Lawrence Levine adds that “the
automobile was only the most visible and dramatic symbol of the new forces that were eroding traditional standards and modes of action in religion, morality, familial patterns, life styles” (197) in the 1920s, and its effects were just as significant during the Great Depression. And even if Handy’s faux documentaries (as Brunner calls them) and soft-sell advertisements have been sullied and complicated by their entanglement with consumerist ideologies, simply watching them proves they have aesthetic and formal traits that are delightful in their own ways. Handy’s films are both art and consumerism, a novel blend which may not have been possible to create in any other moment in our history.

A key irony in Handy’s work is the clash of politics and form. Ideologically, Handy, as I will endeavor to show, held an abundance and prosperity mindset from the 1920s, a view of women and gender roles from some decades before that, and a simplified conception of capitalism that had more in common with Say’s (discredited) Law of Markets than anything resembling the emerging Keynesianism. But as a metteur-en-scene he was bold, employing a full range of special effects, traditional and stop-motion animation, sophisticated mobile camera and POV structures, and a surreptitious “soft” approach to selling that, even if he did not invent, he certainly perfected.

Furthermore, even when the ideology is simplistic and contradicts and threatens to nullify the more expressive form, the form is never completely overwhelmed; more complex readings are possible, and the voice-over does not always have the last word. Regardless of their ideological baggage, their seemingly built-in ephemerality, and their substantial kitsch, these films can still be viewed and enjoyed today. Their “watchability” is hardly a point of critical departure, but it is a feature that should not be completely ignored.
Whether these films could be easily watched was, after all, a key feature in their construction.

In my study of Handy, I will outline the key topical obsessions and formal traits within Handy films; I will discuss and apply various theories of advertising to Handy’s work; I will examine Handy’s co-opting of emergent populist discourses in the 1930s and situate the intentional muddying of progressive discourses in relation to protecting existing dominant models of industrial capitalism; I will examine how exclusions of difference and an enforcement of consensus operated in these films; I will describe the prevailing industrial-centered view of history, uncovering the hidden assumptions beneath the promises; I will identify a system of disavowals and displacements in the sponsored film and analyze how they operated; I will analyze images of the New Woman and domesticity in Handy; I will examine the varying ways in which Handy’s and other sponsored films constructed spectators as consumers; and I will offer avenues of resistance. Finally, at the risk of committing the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, I will argue that the culture of the 1950s contains the final indication and expression of the meaning of the 1930s. If Handy’s films were all veneer and all lies, then the shape which consumerism and American culture took in the 1950s was partially determined by mass acceptance of the values which industrialists, the government, and their mouthpieces were proclaiming throughout the Great Depression.

The 1930s were a battleground for a host of revolutionary as well as conservative ideas, and throughout the moment of the Great Depression in America, the precise meaning of the culture of the 1930s was unclear. By focusing on Jam Handy, an under-studied and sidelined relic of that culture, I hope to take at least a small step toward elucidating some of the broader meanings of this decade of crisis and change.
Chapter 1: The Form

Handy as advertising: formal analysis, trends, montage, technology, and commodity aesthetics

As I proposed in the introduction, Handy’s films stand at a confluence not only of issues but also of styles. They are at once documentaries and advertisements, newsreels and selling films, cinema-of-attractions spectacles and informational presentations, occasionally narrative, occasionally animation, often involving special photographic effects, and difficult to unify except under the broadest of umbrellas. In this chapter, I will focus on analyzing the form and function of the most common subset of Handy’s mass-produced single-reel promotional product: the science/technology demonstration film. Along the way, I will expose the range of styles with which Handy, his directors, and his technicians experimented, I will attempt to describe in concrete terms the earmarks of form used by Handy while distancing such descriptions from auteurist readings, and I will analyze some of the tools, such as a modified form of montage.

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3 John Mercer, writing in the 1970s about informational film, prefers a psychological system of classification that groups advertisements under the subheading “persuasive film” with propaganda films and documentary films (Mercer, 3). Here, the perception of the nature of documentary film is limited to “actuality filming and persuasion,” with the further explanation that “it is the nature of documentary to be one-sided” (Mercer, 9-10). Richard Barsam distinguishes documentary film from “factual film” by saying that documentary necessarily carries a message and that “the filmmaker who works in this form wants to use cinema for purposes more important than entertainment or even an effective blend of entertainment and instruction. He wants to persuade, to influence, to change his audience” (Barsam, 4). By this definition, Jam Handy’s films, which are clearly advertisements given to the kind of glittering generalities endemic in propaganda films, are also documentaries, not because they film actuality, but because they are pointedly persuasive. Other commentators, such as Edward Brunner, prefer instead to label Handy’s work “pseudo-documentaries” (Brunner, 10). True, Handy’s films are sponsored films through and through, and true, the footage in Jam Handy films is often staged. There is exception to this, however, such as the footage of the “sign monkeys” replacing lights in “Behind the Bright Lights” (1935) or the footage of the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, which was filmed on the behalf of U.S. Steel (not Chevrolet) for the 1937 film “Bridging San Francisco Bay.”

4 This term, of course, originates in the work of Tom Gunning.
editing, that Handy and his organization adopted to preach the gospel of industrial capitalism. I will finally deploy several histories of advertising practice to contextualize and begin to explain the effect of these films in terms of wider discourses of Marxism and the commodity.

Let us begin with the most salient feature of the films of the Direct Mass Selling Series, the 111 films which the Jam Handy Organization produced for Chevrolet between 1935 and 1941. The films are almost always dominated by voice-over (always male) presenting glorified spectacle to the galloping refrain of gilt-edged and shameless ad copy. The quote from “To New Horizons,” used in the introduction, is typical. Certainly, the rhetoric is often overblown. Edward Brunner justifiably labels Handy’s work “insuperably vacuous” (Brunner 24), a reaction that many modern audiences have. In Mr. Salesman, an art-book collection of images from Jam Handy filmstrips, author Diane Keaton\(^5\) holds Jam Handy’s selling photographs as “particularly responsible for the mess of our lives,” further calling them “worse than sad,” “scary,” and a “rule book on how to lose your soul” (Keaton 3-4). I, too, have a gut reaction against many of the practices of selling and salesmen. It is uncomfortable to watch several of Jam Handy’s films on general selling tactics and principles. One of them, 1947’s “Man to Man,” features a surreal image of Elmer Wheeler, introduced as “America’s Number One Salesman,” holding a rifle and instructing his listeners, “Don’t sell the steak; sell the sizzle.” Wheeler goes on to say, “You must learn how to synchronize your sizzles with showmanship. Back up your words with actions and gestures.” This is something that Handy believed as gospel. His showmanship is among the best of the early sound era,\

\(^5\) NB: Not to be confused with the Oscar-winning actress.
and even if his films had no more value than outdated spectacle, they would still be worthy of study.

Consider the technical wizardry that plays a significant role in nearly every Jam Handy film from this period. First, there is animation. Though some of the shorts, such as “A Coach for Cinderella” (1936) were intended primarily for children, and thus feature full color animation and fantastical characters, the cleverness of a scene in which the forest creatures construct a car (a turtle’s shell stands in for Chevy’s “Turret Top,” fireflies become headlights, and flower petals become wheel spokes attached to caterpillar tires) should not be underestimated. Animation plays a smaller but just as significant role in many other informational films. In “How You See It” (1936), for instance, the operation of a motion picture projector (complete with Latham Loop and rotating shutter) is first animated to illustrate how it works; then it is shown live. Occasionally, animation is matted over top of live-action footage and seems to interact with it. This technique was used in non-Handy feature films such as Anchors Aweigh and Song of the South, but it was used a full decade earlier in “We Drivers” (1936), where the reckless and prudent sides of a man’s personality are personified as conflicting cartoon characters giving him advice on driving, and in “A Case of Spring Fever” (1940), in which a wise-cracking cartoon coil spring wreaks havoc when a man wishes that there were no longer any springs in the world. The technical aspect of these innovations came courtesy of Frank Lyle Goldman, who had once worked with Max Fleischer (Prelinger).

“We Drivers” also features a scene of double-exposure (used quite a bit in Handy films), in which “momentum,” personified as a giant, smiling, bearded man, threatens to push a fast-moving car off the road. Elsewhere in this same short, an image insert is used
as the dream balloon (or mindscreen) of a man whose thoughts drift from driving. John Mercer, who overlooks Jam Handy in his book *The Informational Film*, remarks, “I have been unable to find a flash to imagination in an informational film, but the chances are that it has been used” (Mercer 85). Here his intuition extends beyond his research, for Handy used this technique frequently. Split-screen cinematography also makes several appearances, as in “The Other Fellow” (1938), where Edgar Kennedy (quite humorously) plays five different characters who look up and down at each other, Brady-Bunch-style, at one point in the film. This film, it should be noted, also makes good use of the Kuleshov effect in scenes where Kennedy “meets” and exchanges glances with himself.

Special photography, too, was used frequently, as in “Behind the Lens” (1940) (time lapse and stop motion), “Here’s Looking (1939) (fish-eye lenses), “Precisely So” and “Seeing Green” (both 1937) (stop-motion animation), “Inside Information” (1941) (x-ray photography), “Test Tube Tale” (1941) (microscope photography, or “cinemicroscopy,” as the film calls it), and “White Magic” (1941) (infrared photography). Between shots, Jam Handy’s editors used a variety of optically-printed wipes and dissolves, some of which were surprisingly geometric, and one of which even functioned as a form of advertising itself. In “Helping You Sell” (1937) and elsewhere, an iris wipe in the shape of the Chevrolet bowtie logo is used as a transition between several shots.

Though the 1930s may be considered a moment of artistic crisis for film, so abruptly and uncomfortably forced to learn to talk, the Jam Handy Organization nevertheless were able to develop a new and dynamic film grammar based wholly on the wedding of sound to image. Their explorations of sound and image (even into the very
nature of sound and image, as in “How You See It” (1936) and “Back of the Mike” (1938)) are at least on their surfaces rich and vital creative excursions. Handy and his hundreds of collaborators were experimenting with possibilities, all the while writing their own rules through trial and error. Handy’s willingness to use nearly any method to enhance the rhetorical power of his films is just one component of his sales philosophy. The specific philosophy and purpose behind the Direct Mass Selling Series is stated in the 1937 non-theatrical short “Helping You Sell,” which explains to company insiders the limitations of print advertisement and salesmen to effectively cover all parts of the selling process. The narrator explains that in those areas where selling as a process can be standardized, it should be, not only through films, but also with presentations made to audiences such as schoolchildren and factory workers. As stock footage of a bridge under construction appears on screen, the narrator barks, “With this new method, we are bridging the gap between advertising and retail selling,… building up influences within the community which no dealer can create for himself,… [and] helping to sell great masses of people in the way they like to be sold.” By making these presentations to the masses, the narrator explains their goal to sell not only to buyers, but also to “those who influence buying decisions,” which reveals that Handy understood that marketing to children can be a potent tool. For this, he used cartoons, as well as “all the spectacular resources of sound pictures.”

But if the end goal was nothing more than the promotion of Chevrolet, and if indeed the filmmakers at the Jam Handy Organization had so many “spectacular resources” at their disposal, then why do these films often relegate Chevrolet to a supporting role? Some of the films, after all, do not even mention the name “Chevrolet,”
and those that do usually restrict it to the opening credits. Rick Prelinger explains this tendency by saying that it was Jam Handy’s belief that “if the film didn’t have explicit advertising, it was much more likely to be successful theatrically,” and then, later on, to be repurposed for educational or vocational use in schools and other venues. None of this would have been possible had any of the films had explicit advertising. Writes industrial filmmaker and author John Burder, “The soft-sell film immediately has an advantage” with an audience, because it is more able to make the audience believe that it “is worth watching” (Burder 63). Others go farther, calling this technique a “double-disguise,” purposely duplicitous and made “to appear as if it was a production undertaken simply to entertain the audience, precisely to mask the fact that it was film with a sponsor” (Brunner 20). To achieve this end, the clear and obvious goal of selling cars is always displaced onto another object or concept.

Ostensible objects of focal displacement could be practically anything related to automobiles, communication, or engineering, such as modern highway construction or the flashy sophistication of a giant lighted sign. When displaying the wonder of new roads (“Conquering Roads” (1937)), the roads are traversed, it seems, by only Chevrolets; the bumpy back roads shown for comparison serve as an opportunity to underline the cars’ steering and handling capabilities. In the case of the sign (“Behind the Bright Lights” (1935)), the sign is itself an advertisement for Chevrolet, which gives the filmmakers plenty of time to show the advertising slogan “knee-action ride” and continually flash the Chevy bowtie logo under the guise of explaining aspects of the sign’s operation.
Thus, in “Behind the Bright Lights,” the selling subtext is promoted to the level of the text. The reflexivity of a soft-sell advertisement about a hard-sell advertisement is not unique in Handy; another of his early films for the Direct Mass Selling Series, 1935’s “Sky Billboards,” which is about airplanes skywriting advertisements, is just as much about the spectacle of aerial acrobatics as it is about valorizing the words being written, which include slogans like “Turret Top” and “Shockless Steering.”

“Behind the Bright Lights” and “Sky Billboards” exemplify the interesting but formally uneven films from early in the Series. Soon, Handy and his Organization moved from films about advertisements to broader interest topics. In his 1961 interview with Bob Leslie, Handy recalled that from an early age he was “much interested in the general subject of communication, especially from the receiving end.” Perhaps appropriately, then, a series of shorts followed about this topic: “How You See It” (1936) and “Behind the Lens” (1940), which concern filmmaking, “Back of the Mike” (1938) and “On the Air” (1937), about radio, and “Spot News” (1937), about wire photography. Car-specific aspects of science, engineering, and technology were the dominant topics, however. In a short time, the Direct Mass Selling Series came to be typified by a system of spectacle and have-you-ever-wondered hooks designed to engage, rather than simply wash over, the viewer. In “Conquering Roads” (1937), for instance, the film opens with an attention-grabbing image of a man driving a horse-drawn wagon down a city street surrounded by Chevrolets. Apart from efficiently introducing the topic of modern road engineering (to accompany the “modern motorcar” driving on it), the announcer’s question, “What’s wrong with this picture?” deftly assumes that technological modernity

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6 A full list of Handy’s films about filmmaking, lenses, or special cameras would be much longer.
equates with improvement and progress and is fundamentally American. Soon films like “Free Air” and “On the Air” (both 1937) could begin with a purely narrative hook and withhold the arrival of the announcer for a full four minutes (half the film’s running time) or more.

Handy once said that it was his business to “accelerate education,” or “to make education painless.” In the service of that (somewhat specious) goal, a well-defined form began to emerge. Handy’s method of “education” consistently breaks down into five steps. Using an exemplary Handy film, 1937’s “Around the Corner,” they are:

1. Delight the viewer with spectacle (be it a stunt, a demonstration, a moment of comedy, a celebrity, or simply a beautiful image; in “Around the Corner,” it is a team of motorcycle stuntmen fresh from filming the Hollywood picture *The Informer* performing figure-eights and balancing acts), then
2. Through a “guided montage,” alert the viewer to a problem, issue or, at the very least, a subject (the motorcycle riders line up and turn a corner, illustrating that the outside rider, like the outside wheel on a car or wagon, has to go farther on a turn, but still needs power from the engine), then
3. Through a scientific-minded demonstration, explain the inner workings of the subject or document a solution to the problem (a pair of disembodied hands construct, in a series of measured and elegant steps corresponding to the process of innovation, a crude and then fully working differential),
4. Integrate the product to be sold or promoted into the subject, or surreptitiously indicate how that product solves the problem (the differential is shown in operation on a Chevrolet car, and then, through improvements in gear design, diagrams and models illustrate how the drive shaft has been lowered out of the way for added elegance, convenience, and leg room), and, finally,
5. Without overstaying the audience’s attention span, hastily bookend the film with another moment of fanciful spectacle or a whimsical view of the future (a man and a woman with an excellent sense of balance run in place on cylindrical blocks attached to the rear wheels of a car as it turns a corner, reinforcing that one must run faster than the other; the spinning bow-tie logo appears to orchestral fanfare).

Put more succinctly, Handy’s method closely follows the long-established rules of effective public speaking or salesmanship: Grab the audience’s attention, introduce and
develop an idea, propagandize or make a point, and end strongly. With voice-over
guiding perceptions and shaping interpretations\(^7\), the viewer begins to accept the
authoritative presentation style in the first few moments of these films, and is, perhaps,
unlikely to take a critical or resistant perspective when the films begin to focus on
Chevrolets. Since the same authority is used to teach about wire photography as to extol
the virtues of “new, modern motorcars,” the undiscerning viewer is more likely to accept
both as fact.

The early difficulties of synchronous sound may have helped to develop the
reliance on voice-over and the montages of images without diegetic audio component.
The narration and the images are to a high degree redundant, communicating the same
flow of ideas simultaneously. Together, the narration can be seen as a guide or a gloss on
the images to ensure that the chain of thought and argument is maintained. For example,
consider the opening scene in “Helping You Sell,” which was not shown to the general
public, but which exemplifies a technique which is present, in lesser and varied degrees,
in many of the other films. In this opening scene, the viewer is first greeted by the sight
of a fisherman struggling to catch a single fish on an isolated lake. The next shot is one
of a fishing boat on the ocean hauling up what looks to be an entire school with a giant
net. The film cuts to the image of a farmer plowing a field with a single plow pulled by a
team of oxen. This scene is suddenly overtaken by a higher-angle shot of a man on a
large farming machine, plowing a much larger area evenly and with less effort. Finally, a
shot of an antiquated and time-intensive method of automobile construction is replaced
by a high-angle shot of an impressive assembly line. From there, shot after shot of

\(^7\) As it does in every non-cartoon that I have seen except “Back of the Mike” (1938).
parking lots full of beautiful new Chevrolets float across the screen. Though there is voice-over narration throughout this scene, a person unable to hear it would hardly miss the meaning. “The mass method,” the narrator booms, “is the profitable one.” The mass-production ethos of the assembly line is thus even applied to sales and, by extension, to Handy’s own filmmaking. This may instantly disqualify him from auteur status (a weak theoretical model to begin with), but it clearly does not nullify his rhetorical cleverness.

To me, this use of conflicting images to show progress and make a definite ideological point is reminiscent, whether directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, of Soviet dialectical montage. As in Eisenstein’s famous conception, the images we see are a collision, in this case between old and new ways of doing things. But they are also, amazingly, in alignment with Pudovkin’s plea that images on opposite sides of a cut be linked by the cut, since, after all, they present two ways of accomplishing the same activity. With the narrator ever-present to shape the perceptions of the viewer, this “guided montage” (my term) gains even greater force as an argumentative tool. And once the metaphorical relationship is established through image and oratory at the beginning of the film, it can be used as a controlling metaphor for the entire film.

But notice what Handy has done: the direction of the dialectic has been reversed. This version of history has turned history on its head, making it the story of the capitalist, rather than the worker. By showing blacksmiths on a continuum with mass-production industry, the worker’s struggle is actually surreptitiously brought underneath the umbrella of the capitalist’s “struggle,” which makes it seem that what benefits Chevrolet will automatically benefit those who work for Chevrolet. The corporate ideology behind
Handy’s films is fundamentally suspicious of the worker, arguing at one point that before assembly-line methods were standardized, quality of goods “varied with the… honesty of the individual.” The further implication, of course, is that industrialists can be trusted, simply because of their mass-production methods. Thus, the worker, coded as the dishonest thesis, collides with the antithesis of modern mass technology, is actually defeated in the synthesis of “the mass method.”

We will later see the degree to which these nuggets of the industrial ideology, so contrary to worker-centered discourses of the 1930s, became more and more dominant in postwar America. Handy, of course, was not solely responsible for this. Writes Lawrence Levine, “The ads of the thirties often reflected the trend toward consumption mobility which was to become so important in the decades after the Second World War” (Levine 223). Later chapters will also develop and extend another pattern illustrated by Handy’s use of montage. Handy’s films, and probably other advertising films like them, tended to appropriate and co-opt signifying strategies, rhetorical models, and political ideologies from unrelated or even opposing discourses and reshape them or even invert them to fit Chevrolet’s selling needs.

Handy films even use contemporary Hollywood techniques in this oppositional way. Lary May writes in his study *The Big Tomorrow* that “[Frank] Capra and others also used a mobile camera to enter inside the frame to create a story where the characters engaged in a process of discovery rather than reinforcing known truths” (83). But Handy’s film “To New Horizons” (1940) is structured around a similar forward-moving POV, but in the obvious service, as we will see later, of reinforcing phallocentric patriarchy as located in the agency of the automobile. If the choreographies of Busby
Berkeley provided, as May writes, “a communal dynamism where change and movement brought things together in a mutual reinforcement of renewal and vitality” (83), then how can one characterize the very different use of such choreography at the start of “Around the Corner”? Handy’s deft re-appropriations prove that no technique has immanent meaning. Just as the guided montage of “Helping You Sell” conveys the opposite message to the dialectic of Eisenstein’s montage, arguments for techniques used in Capra and Berkeley collapse when one compares their use to similar tricks with opposite meanings in contemporary Handy films.

Granting this, there was very little truly novel or unlikely in the films produced by the Jam Handy Organization. Corporate sponsorship was common at the time these films were made. Erik Barnouw points out that a litany of companies sponsored series of films, among them Standard Oil, Ford, Goodyear, and, topping his list, Shell, who began producing films in 1933, the same year Jam Handy produced his patriotic epic “The Triumph of America” for Chevrolet. I mention this alignment because the celebrated Barnouw makes no mention of Handy or Chevrolet8. Still, his insights are useful, and the rhetorical model of Shell’s films, which have been favored by film history over Chevrolet’s, nonetheless applies in the case of Handy. “Long range promotional value” (213), writes Barnouw, could be inferred from the way the subjects of the films related to the product the promoter was selling. Hence, a film like Louisiana Story, sponsored by Standard Oil, put oil drillers center stage in a tale of the bayou country. However, the sponsors, as one might expect, just as frequently made it a point to avoid any possible

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8 He also fails to mention Wilding Picture Productions, which made notable films for Dodge and Chrysler, as well as many others.
negative impact of their products. Thus, oil and lumber companies depicted themselves as “apostles of unspoiled wilderness” (Barnouw 221). Nearly a dozen of the Direct Mass Selling Series consisted of films emphasizing safe driving practices; by extension, a car maker could thus present themselves as a guardian of traffic safety.

These are the kind of disavowals which characterize the sponsored film. They have much in common with the exaggerations, false promises, and lies that have plagued advertising from its very beginning. Raymond Williams writes in his essay “Advertising: the Magic System” that advertising was not considered “respectable” throughout the nineteenth century, since it was perceived as having developed “mainly in relation to fringe products and novelties” (Williams 327). But in the first three decades of the twentieth century, advertising came to be seen not only as a legitimate profession, but also as “a public service, and a necessary part of the economy” (329). And just after this, the moment into which the Handy soft-sell was born, advertising became self-aware and self-consciously calculated to engage or amuse; the 1930s saw “the development of a knowing, sophisticated, humorous advertising, which acknowledged the scepticism and made claims either casual and offhand or so ludicrously exaggerated as to include the critical response…. Thus is became possible to ‘know all the arguments’ against advertising, and yet accept or write pieces of charming or amusing copy” (331). In keeping with their time, Handy films do frequently have an amusing veneer that protects them from being rejected outright.

Even if we take at face value Raymond Williams’ claim that “Advertising is also, in a sense, the official art of modern capitalist society” (Williams 334), this does not necessarily imply that arguments should be made for Handy’s admission into the canon,
whether that argument is predicated on sincere auteurism or ironic kitsch. I do believe Handy’s work can be enjoyed both ironically, unironically, and apart from academic study, but this also implies nothing. Neither finding a point at which an object of study confirms norms and proclaiming “quintessential!” nor finding a point at which it breaks them and screaming “iconoclast!” or “innovator!” is good scholarship. Scholarship is not about fandom, but sobriety, complexity, and furthering the discourse. Williams, thankfully, suggests such a further course of action. “It is impossible to look at modern advertising,” he writes, “without realizing that the material object being sold is never enough.” Here is where a study of Handy could more productively begin. Williams continues, “we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance” (Williams 335). This is what Handy did through the skillful displacement of the soft sell. Most of Handy’s ballyhoo, spectacle, and showmanship is irrelevant to the message “Buy Chevrolet,” but none of it is irrelevant to the deeper messages of modern industrial values wedded to conservative social values, of the valorization of capitalism, masculinity, and domesticity during their moments of “crisis,” of championing the abundance values of the 1920s, and of conflating certain elements of the past and a very specific agenda for the future into an umbrella of consensus and middle-class WASP values. I will develop and explain all these ideas in the next chapter. Without watering the soil of these broader values, the seeds of the message of the moment, “Buy Chevrolet,” would never take root.

Was Handy a genius for noticing this? Or was he merely unconsciously mass-producing a value system commonly held by the powerful rich and their mouthpieces in the 1930s? I have cautiously argued up to this point that Handy was an innovator with a very personal system of stylistic earmarks that ran through his films like bright creative
signatures. But it is possible to argue the opposite; namely, that Handy was a cog in the very machine he was praising, mass-produced just as his films about mass-production were mass-produced, and that as a cog his awareness or unawareness is irrelevant, and that his so-called “innovations” were shared by many other advertisers of the day.

Though Brunner calls the address of a Handy film a “double-disguise,” to me, they seem instead to function on three distinct levels. At the surface level of the text, Handy addresses a topic of broad interest, such as how movies work, or what the world would look like without springs. By Handy’s design, and following his dictum that films without overt selling were likely to be more successful with audiences, this level appears to be the message. Viewers of the day, and certainly now, are likely to notice that immediately beneath that, the second level hides a more specific message devoted to selling Chevrolet cars. Thus slogans, bow-tie logos, and the cars themselves are inserted motivically into films that appear to have been made with benign intentions. The third and final level, the hardest to detect, promotes a pervasive ideology of consumerism as an axiomatic assumption of capitalist society.

Consider how these three levels interact in a typical science-demonstration film, 1940’s “Behind the Lens.” The film begins by grabbing the audience’s attention with an invocation of the “mythical kingdom” of Hollywood, but saying that “a new era in motion pictures has been born.” “Now the camera is seeing things for science,” the narrator explains, and a parade of time-lapse films, slow-motion films, and schlieren (heat wave) photography follow. “The scientific motion picture camera,” it shows, is able to capture the growth of dandelions, a cat turning over in midair, or a woman doing handsprings and backflips in loose-fitting clothes in an open field. But just as soon as we
have enjoyed this spectacle, a jagged wipe replaces the image with a camera mounted on a cutaway car, analyzing the operation of its shocks and brakes. In its remaining minutes, the film illustrates, accurately or not, how these photographic tricks have been able to serve the technological needs of the automotive industry. Chevy cars, naturally, are used for the test models, and the bow-tie logo appears, without fail, spinning in the end credits. But the film is also suffused with an ideology that values the “needs” of industry and articulates technology as existing in dominance over pure science. The apparent hope of the surface level (the scientific demonstration) must be understood as existing in a hegemonic relationship with the other two levels, which exert unseen control over it and threaten to enslave or ultimately nullify its message.

The science (and Handy’s understanding of the motion picture camera as a scientific apparatus) may be accurate and intriguing, but in these films it operates as a red herring to the struggles of the Depression, and its use confirms assumed industrial-capitalist ideologies. Handy films always express pure science in terms of a use and exert a redefining force over its use (thus transforming science into the embodied form of technology). Science exists to serve the interests of capital. Taken in excerpts, many Handy films can be redeemed as harmless (which they mainly are anyway), or even positive and hopeful. But the use of science alters and jeopardizes any such reading.

Furthermore, it must be noted that these films express science in terms of a vague, but definable, narrative structure. Handy’s narratives of science invariably reach climax and denouement reified in the form of technology. The abstract hope and wonder of physics are inevitably corralled into a commodity, subjugated under and valued according to their perceived usefulness within a limited system of industrial capital. This, therefore,
implies a commodity aesthetic computed in relation to science, wherein the allure of science functions merely as foreplay to the spectacle of technological commodity.

Here, the writing of Wolfgang Haug has particular resonance. In his *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (first published in 1971 as a late capitalist critique, and thus giving a much wider perspective to the advertising systems surrounding Handy’s day), he writes that “all available aesthetic devices” are employed to create a brand name as a monopoly, to create a commodity “in the image of the consumer’s desires,” and then divorce that image from the commodity for the purpose of creating an advertisement (24-5). Though Handy’s films, as has already been stated, transcend mere advertisement, we can still see how, through the framing and editing apparatus of film, certain parts of the car representing a reified hope in progress are isolated in the frame, and the Chevrolet bow-tie logo follows along as an ever-present reminder of the brand. Haug explains what happened next in advertising: competition of use-value was done away with entirely, artificial obsolescence began to be built into commodities, and useful technological innovation was sidelined to the “aesthetic innovation” necessary to create in the brand name an “aesthetic monopoly” (40-1). These trends, though certainly glimpsed in Handy’s 1930s work, would not begin to dominate advertising until the 1950s. For even if it is hidden beneath slogans like “knee-action ride,” the sci/tech address of Handy films does attempt to emphasize use-values, at least in terms of comfort, safety, and efficiency through visual demonstration. If the trend in the 50s and 60s was to mobilize “the anxiety potential” (43) for the purpose of disquieting consumers into buying newer and slicker products, then Handy is the reverse of this. What sold during the Depression was
anxiety relief and fear relief, at which Handy aims squarely; he peddles hope, and the hope, at least from his perspective and Chevrolet’s, was not always insincere.

Haug disagrees, offering this phantasmagorical description: “An innumerable series of images are forced upon the individual, like mirrors … In these images, people are continually shown the unfulfilled aspects of their existence. The illusion ingratiates itself, promising satisfaction,” but ultimately leaving consumers lacking “the bare necessities of life (use-values)” (52). If the promises in advertising, as Haug argues, are incapable of satisfying and actually designed not to satisfy, then regardless of whether they are stated positively (in terms of hope) or negatively (avoidance of anxiety), Handy’s hope-hawking can only ultimately be negative. But I believe Handy is more complex. If his films can be cordoned off into parts and the science-technology narrative torn away, then there is still some hope to be found in the pure beginnings of many Handy films. Before the science is corrupted by being enslaved as a technological commodity, specters of freer and more egalitarian worlds based on modernity’s unsoiled hope in science still exist.

Unfortunately, this “hope” is based on the sacrifice of the individual’s struggle. “People seem to have had their consciousnesses bought off,” Haug writes. “They are conditioned daily to enjoy that which betrays them, to celebrate their own defeat, in the enjoyment of identifying with their superiors” (53-4). I have already discussed how guided montage allowed Handy to create a reverse-dialectic that found its synthesis not in the individual, but in the industrial corporation. As we will see in the next chapter, co-opting of Populist discourse allows the capitalist image-maker further hegemonic control over the worker’s ability to define his own struggle. The notion of hegemony is not, as
Haug points out, “a systematic theory for corrupting the masses,” but rather, “the dialectic of master and slave within the flirtation of commodity aesthetics remains ambiguous” (54). Even if the system is not a master-slave relationship (one would be foolish to attempt to argue such a thing), the system is still predicated on inequality between the capitalist and the worker. The hegemonic relationship is thus made to appear, in the corporate philosophy of Handy’s films, as mutualism or, even more disingenuously, as commensalism, with no benefit to the corporation (as the film “Round and Round” (1939) suggests in its profit-free representation of capitalism) – this is done precisely to mask the probable parasitism lurking underneath.

Once more, I must note that if Handy’s films commit these sins (and they do, to a certain extent), they are still basically harmless. But co-opting can be a long and dangerous chain. Haug warns against artistic readings of anything produced in the service of advertising, writing that attitudes connected with artistic forms “can be exploited by advertising in the appearance of the commodity” (122) to the point that “everything good, noble, beautiful and great, seems to speak for capital. … In this way works of art can become a means, among others, of stupefying the public” (129). But it goes further; Haug remembers that in his own country of Germany “the stage managers of fascism adopted” the forms of expression developed by many generations of the workers’ movement, using them to make “an aesthetic copy of the workers’ movement, adding ingredients of the petit-bourgeois and peasant nostalgia … and they organized it according to the latest insights, applying proven industrial and marketing techniques of social engineering, usually from the USA” (132). This critique bites and chills, especially given that Handy’s multiple-reel propaganda films “The Triumph of America”
(1933) and “Master Hands” (1936) were both flanked in their release by fascist films like *Triumph of the Will* (1934). Self-evidently, not all co-optings and re-encodings of traditional value systems are fascism. But it is easy to see how techniques from Marxism, populism, and even Hollywood can make their way into American advertising and then, evidently, into fascism. The discourses of populism and progressivism, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, are particularly slippery and susceptible to redefinition.

The rhetorical strategies of fascist propaganda can even migrate back toward the center. In 1939, a man named David Smart decided to found Coronet Films (another well-known producer of instructional media) after a visit to Nazi Germany. Writes John Mercer, “He was impressed by the intensive use of motion pictures for propaganda and education by the Nazi regime” (Mercer 23). He was immediately convinced that films could be used in education, and though his contributions were important enough to warrant significant mention in Mercer’s book, Mercer does not even once mention Jam Handy, who had used films for such propagandistic purposes years before and may have, as Haug suggests, helped influence Nazi propaganda. “The Triumph of America” (which only survives in a truncated two-reel version) extols the mass-production might of the United States, insisting implicitly that salvation for all the country’s ills in the Great Depression could be found in ruthless exploitation of natural resources to make more and more cars. In addition to over-the-top fervor and shrewd editing, Riefenstahl’s and Handy’s films also share an element of racism. In an uncomfortable scene that completely derails the film for any present-day viewer, the narrator of “The Triumph of America” invites us to watch African-Americans picking cotton while singing spirituals
which he describes as “the song of the darkies.” It is a jarring moment, but sadly not one unheard-of in American film in 1933. It is also the only depiction of African-Americans in Handy’s Depression-era work.

The hope and glitter of Handy’s films ring hollow when opened to such scrutiny. Nevertheless, I warn against rejecting Handy as a liar, a trickster, or a charlatan. His politics were sincere in themselves, even if they were shaped by forces beyond his perception at the time. Haug gently reminds us that “not everything that is a false illusion is a deception – only most of it” (134). In the next chapter, I will examine how the hollowness of the false illusion expressed dominant ideologies of the 1930s as a defense against the crisis of the Depression.
Chapter 2: The Worker

Handy in historical perspective: discourses of the 1930s and protecting dominant ideologies

“I believe in motion pictures,” Jam Handy said in a 1961 interview, “but the kind of motion pictures I believe in are the motion pictures in people’s minds. The cinema is merely a means of putting motion pictures in people’s minds.” By making this statement, Handy indicated that he believed his work to be much more than simply advertising. His true medium was ideology. In the 1940s, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer proposed that the apparatus of cinema, as it related to mass production of culture in the first half of the twentieth century, functioned precisely as Handy conceptualized it: “The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience…hence, the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality… [and] they react automatically. The might of industrial society is lodged in men’s minds” (34). As an advertiser and a salesman, this is exactly what Handy desired. If we take Handy at his word, we can begin to interrogate the nature of the ideology with which Handy infused his Chevrolet shorts and propose the various effects it may have had on the minds of those viewing these films during the Great Depression.

But as mentioned previously, exploring the mass effects of the Direct Mass Selling Series would be tricky at best; little to no reception data exists, and the mind of the viewer – much less the subconscious mind of the viewer – is difficult to analyze so specifically and so far after the fact. Beyond this, Adorno and Horkheimer are difficult to
apply to Handy. Theoretical frameworks developed for Hollywood fiction films should not be applied to soft-sell pseudo-documentary advertising shorts except with extreme care and discernment. Even if the Culture Industry model were useful, one would have to assume that the imbedded industrial ideology of Hollywood film could have been intentionally inserted into an advertisement with the same effect. Thus, the distinction between Hollywood’s Culture Industry and the Jam Handy Organization is the consciousness of this ideology as a deliberate feature. While Hollywood films of the period may have accidentally included a valorization of the “might of industrial society” by filling their films with lavish sets and glamorous wealthy characters, in Handy and other selling films there is no mistaking the praise of industry as strictly intentional. Thus, a more interdisciplinary historical framework will be much more useful here. I will first take up the work of three cultural historians to help illuminate the ideological conflicts and struggles within the culture of the 1930s; then I will ask what role filmmakers like Handy played in it.

The first is Warren Susman, whose ideas mainly serve as a primer to the cultural landscape leading up to and informing the 1930s. “Simply put,” Susman writes, “one of the fundamental conflicts of twentieth-century America is between two cultures—an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance.” It was, Susman argues, an “ideological conflict,”

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9 I do not feel uncomfortable using the notion of authorial intent in this case, primarily because in no other culture product is the author as prominent as the advertisement. Though the sponsor of the advertisement and the producer are likely distinct entities, a good producer of an advertising film must necessarily enmesh his ideology with that of the sponsor to be an effective emissary of the sponsor’s obviously intentional message. If an advertisement contained no intentional message, it would have no chance of being effective.
a “profound clash between different moral orders, … between rival perceptions of the world, different visions of life” (Susman xx). In the early twentieth century, a new social class began to emerge: salaried white-collar workers, salesmen, managers, engineers, and a full range of other essentially bureaucratic jobs. The values of the “Puritan ideal” had centered on character, hard work, self-restraint, and community and cooperation in the service of social welfare, of “planting of a city on the hill that might become somehow the City of God itself” (Susman 41). The values of the “emerging culture of abundance” were urban rather than rural, and necessitated the discarding of the agrarian vision upon with America had been framed (188). If, as John Maynard Keynes argued, “puritanism...neglected the arts of production as well as those of enjoyment,” (qtd. in Susman 47) then this new culture embraced them. Just as Jam Handy had been in his childhood, “perhaps no previous culture was as significantly shaped by the available communications technology” (Susman xxi). Correspondingly, the abundance ideal came to be personality rather than character, veneer rather than essence, and with the values of mass communication and mass production, the puritan values of thrift and self-denial were cast aside. Progressives latched on to the emerging arts and sciences of modernity, believing that a good society must include what the puritan ideal omitted: “scientific analysis (with the aid of Freud) of the true nature of man and his needs” (Susman 47). But with the well-oiled gears and flywheels of industrial production humming in the 1920s, no longer were needs sufficient to fuel the emerging mass economy; rather, a new definition of “comfort” appeared and many echelons of culture and advertising began “creating wants” and fetishizing both the technology and the idea of progress, then reifying that hope (or cupidity) into an array of new commodities. In Susman’s words,
“the mature capitalism of the new industrial civilization demanded a new ethic, an ethic that encouraged people to buy, a consumption ethic” (187).

The cultural explosion was unprecedented: writes Susman, “a multitude of cultural forms native to this period developed: the comics, the poster, the photograph, the phonograph, the telephone, the radio, moving pictures, advertising, pulp magazines and with them certain genres of fiction and nonfiction stories, and, perhaps most centrally, the automobile” (xxvi). The penetration of Handy’s work into this cross-section of forms makes it all the more worthy of study. It must also not be underestimated that the emergence of socialism as a revolutionary possibility in early twentieth-century America (and with renewed strength in the crisis of the Great Depression) coincided with the media explosion. Susman proposes that socialism in America “broadened the definition of Americanism without significantly altering its fundamental structure or proposing a genuine alternative culture” (84), which is to say, that a few of the idealistic phrases and promises of socialism rubbed off onto American culture, but nothing more – the veneer, but not the essence. Susman adds that “many who might have chosen the socialist way went instead with the hope of a culture of abundance” (xxix). It is thus my assertion that in the muddied media landscape of surface without substance, institutions from government to Hollywood to advertisers to industrialists – all who had something to gain from promoting utopia, regardless of its shape – engulfed the emerging discourses of socialism and populism and progressivism, co-opted bits of the language used to describe them, and rendered them rhetorically indistinguishable from the consumerism that supported the culture of abundance.
Warren Susman writes that in the 1930s “we find, for the first time, frequent reference to an ‘American Way of Life.’ The phrase ‘The American Dream’ came into common use; it meant something shared collectively by all Americans” (154). Idealistic phrases such as this are by nature vaguely-defined, but they also purport to preach something universal. It was not, therefore, incidental marketing strategy for Handy and other salesmen to define the ‘American Way of Life’ not simply in terms of pride and patriotism, but in terms of conspicuous consumption of the products of American industry. If Chevrolets could be fetishized and made to seem indispensible, this would have lucrative implications when the economy eventually recovered. But this was mainly an ideological conflict. If progressives were trying to define Americanism in terms of leftist politics and establishment forces were maneuvering to define it in terms of conservative capitalism, then what arose was dialectical confrontation over who would have the ability to define and describe the culture.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the government, media, and big business were bound together by common interests. Susman writes: “A consumer culture in which advertising had become a crucial element of the economic life” soon saw the advertising men “turn their talents to the uses of the government to create symbolic means of citizen identification with their national administration and its objectives” (204). I get the sense reading Susman that the culture of the 1930s was not a culture defined exclusively by poverty and fear, but one defined by dynamism and hope; that is, that the culture of the 1930s was a culture in flux, and perhaps this flux led to substantial anxiety, but the anxiety desired and produced cultural forms reflecting their desire for hope. The culture of the 1930s was a culture willing to discard ideals built on puritan models and grab hold
of a culture of abundance. And since myths of abundance were in style and selling, anyone who could push an ideology that resembled abundance could also traffic in hope. Thus, the socialist and the capitalist both became purveyors of the promise of tomorrow.

Anyone who has observed the seventy years of history following the Great Depression would be able to surmise that capitalism won this ideological battle. The reasons for this seem simple; capitalism’s plan required almost no ideological or lifestyle change, it promised abundance for all rather than mere sufficiency, and, moreover, the capitalist was the better salesman. The mantra “Don’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle,” could just as easily have been phrased, “don’t sell the ideology, sell the abundance.” My study of Handy indicates that he never minded championing capitalism, because he so consistently misrepresented it. If the essence of advertising is to appropriate images that constitute a point of identification with your target demographic (such as images of the New Woman or notions of an “American Way of Life”) and contort them until they support your ideology, then Handy could easily sell patriarchal capitalism, as long as he made it seem like populism, or abundance, or utopianism. In films like “Easy Does It” (1940) and “Leave It to Roll-Oh” (1940), which I will examine in the next chapter, Handy cracks progressivism in half, grafting together progressive women-as-consumer discourse with conservative ideas of domesticity and feminine weakness, thus confirming patriarchy while taking advantage of (neutralized) progressive language.

In his writing on the Great Depression, Robert McElvaine extends Warren Susman’s ideas by contextualizing the ideological split in the 1930s. Writing in broad terms about class values, McElvaine explains that “as a rule of thumb, working class people have been more likely to hold values centered on cooperation, sharing, equity,
fairness, and justice” than the affluent, who have historically “been more likely to defend
the marketplace as the sole determinant of the distribution of the economy’s fruits”
(McElvaine 6). Put another way, “the self-interest of the wealthy is obviously better
served by keeping things as they are” (7). The discourse of the status quo became a
powerful wedge strategy employed by advertisers as they courted the middle class. As
the United States moved from rural agrarianism to urban industrialism, “an ever-
increasing percentage of its population became susceptible to the vagaries of the market
economy,” so much so that during the Panic of 1893 some of the middle class,
“believ[ing] revolution might be imminent,” “chose to cast its lot with business and dig in
to defend economic orthodoxy” (McElvaine 7). In the wake of World War I, this seemed
to pay off in “the greatest economic boom the world had yet seen” (8). When industrial
values and economic prosperity of the 1920s are considered, it seems that Handy’s
address in his 1930s films, if encouraging further technological innovation, was a
fundamentally nostalgic one. It could be argued that his idea of prosperity was no better
developed than simply a return to the values that created the prosperity of the 1920s, but
ignoring that these imprudent practices led to the Depression.

Lawrence Levine suggests a different reading, pointing out that the 1920s was
already a nostalgic era. Perhaps the industrial conservatives of the 1930s did not actually
pine for a return to the 1920s, but rather simply believed that the 1920s had never really
ended, at least ideologically, and that if the same consumerism were resumed, the
Depression would end. In fact, Handy may not have been nostalgic; nostalgia implies as
a condition for its existence the acknowledgement of sufficient passage of time to
constitute a break. Nostalgia acknowledges that the past has gone. But Handy did not
acknowledge this. Levine writes that “the central paradox of American history… has been a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past” (191). Levine points to the years just after the First World War as evidence of what conservatives in the 1930s were missing, claiming the early postwar years were accompanied by “the national repudiation of every possible form of radicalism” and “reaction against strikes and unionization” (193). Even the 20s-era Hollywood films, which Levine writes “seem on the surface to have been one long celebration of the new woman, the new morality, the new youth, [and] the new consumption patterns that marked postwar America,” inevitably confirmed “the moral standards of the past” (201) by their final reels. Thus, even if the combination of nostalgia and progress was, as Levine puts it, “ambivalent,” the multifaceted reality of the era did include one definite feature: it ensured that its memory would create in the 1930s a decade bloated with the “promise of unprecedented and unending prosperity” (218).

If Handy’s version of hope was predicated on a return to the 1920s, then it necessitated a blanket disavowal of the Depression. In my study of his work, I have found only one Handy film that even hints at the Great Depression, and it is one of the earliest in the Direct Mass Selling Series. Made in 1935, the first episode of the Chevrolet Leader News10 begins with shots of the construction of Norris Dam, a TVA project. The film makes no mention of the New Deal, the people who would benefit from

10 The word “news” completely misrepresents the nature of the series; it is a parade of “Chevy-centric” stories staged for the camera, primarily devoted to auto owners who outfitted their vehicles so that cute furry animals could ride along in the glove compartment or on the hood, or to showcasing women in bathing suits with a Chevrolet placed strategically behind or beneath them.
this dam, or why it was being built. Instead, the camera quickly shifts its focus to a battery of trucks converted to carrying blasted rock away from the site. “Look at the load they put on that Chevrolet truck!” the announcer proclaims, and the Depression disappears behind the false front of a crude advertisement.

Certainly there were pragmatic reasons for an advertiser to not mention the worst economic crisis in the history of the United States. But the reasons for appealing to a pastiche of traditional values and technological modernity rather than genuine progressivism are more complex and require explanation. “New gadgets might be one thing, but a New Woman was quite another. (What, after all, was wrong with the old one?),” McElvaine (11) asks, expressing the feelings held by much of the middle class in the 1920s. When the Depression hit, masculinity entered a period of crisis. “Being on relief stigmatized the entire family,” McElvaine writes, “but most especially the father. Male dominance was endangered in the Depression” (181). In this context of “degradation,” “apathy,” “resentment,” and “self-blame” (176-7), popular opinion coded unemployment as feminization, if not outright emasculation. To support their out-of-work husbands, more women than ever sought employment during the Depression. “It is not surprising,” surmises McElvaine, “that many people came to associate employment of women outside the home with harsh, undesirable economic conditions” (184). Thus, by extension, domesticity came to be associated in the common psyche with prosperity. As the 1930s drew to a close, Handy’s films came to reflect this value; more and more often images of leisure and domesticity defined the address of consumerism. Women in the home (as in “Leave it to Roll-Oh” (1940)), children being entertained by a radio
(“Back of the Mike” (1938)), and men playing golf (“A Case of Spring Fever” (1940)) became more prominent.

Golf, radios, housewives, and automobiles were also inevitably tied to images of middle-class existence. There are several obvious reasons for this. The first is that, self-evidently, those in the middle and upper classes were most able to purchase the automobiles Handy was advertising. Thus, Handy’s (and Chevrolet’s) political conservatism were probably first and foremost motivated by the bottom line. (That said, his films still functioned to foster commodity fetishism in the working classes, perhaps in the hope that they would one day overcome their alienation from the products of their labor and begin to buy.) For the second reason, I turn once more to Warren Susman. Writing on the Great Depression, he says:

“There is a tendency, when treating this period, for historians suddenly to switch their focus and concentrate on the newly discovered poor, the marginal men and women, migrant workers, hobos, various ethnic minorities deprived of a place in the American sun. There is equally a tendency to see the period in terms of the most radical responses to its problems, to see a Red Decade in which cultural as well as political life is somehow dominated by the Left. Yet the fact remains—and it is a vital one if we are to understand the period and the nature of American culture—that the period, while acknowledging in ways more significantly than ever before the existence of groups outside the dominant ones and even recognizing the radical response as important, is one in which American culture continues to be largely middle-class culture” (Susman 192).

If the middle-class was still the largest class, and if it represented the “American Dream” aspirations of the lower classes, then it provided not only a convenient buying pool, but also a group of people that were willing to be thought of in homogenous terms (often computed in the negative; that is, what they were not) and particularly susceptible to having consensus values mapped onto them.
Nowhere in Handy is this more visible than in his films on traffic safety. The films all promote essentially the same things (and are an ideal way to put cars front-and-center in a general interest educational film), but one of the most notable of the series, “The Other Fellow” (1937), approaches the topic in a novel way that sheds some light on the values of the period. According to McElvaine, the dominant popular ideals of 1930s America were still associated with the concept of “individualism,” though the definition of the term was imprecise. In the film, popular actor Edgar Kennedy plays half a dozen different roles, all men driving on the same road, and all having some trouble with the other Edgar Kennedys’ styles of driving. Through the magic of Vertovian montage, the Edgar Kennedys are able to come face-to-face and argue with one another. What “they” discover during their confrontation is a striking visual metaphor for the way community and cooperation were inflected through “individualism” during the 1930s: individualism, the film says, is a personal responsibility to safe driving practices, but it is also a realization that you are “the other fellow to everybody else,” and that safety is thus a community concern. But Adorno and Horkheimer warn that “in the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned” (41). In “The Other Fellow,” the individual identifies with the generality to the point that he *is* the generality. In its visual design, the entire population of “The Other Fellow” becomes middle-class, white, and male, denying the very existence of the “other.” The film nullifies individualism by imagining the individual as a uniform product of mass-production, and it destroys any true notion of community by promoting not cooperation or understanding, but utter sameness. Though the
announcer’s copy may say otherwise, and though the film’s gimmick may be clever, it operates only to enforce unquestioning consensus. Similarly, the safe-driving film “We Drivers” (1936) assumes a unified “we” and proceeds to assume that the consensus that this “we” shares is one of consumerism and the values of industrial-capital. These films created unity by steamrolling out difference. The assumption of a homogenous audience with shared politics prevented the screen from being a space of contestation of values. Instead, it became a space of immediate acceptance of norms.

Insofar as all advertisements seek to homogenize a population through promoting uniform consumption patterns, Handy’s work is no exception. But in his professional life, he personalized the exclusionary approach. In business, Jamison Handy chose never to wear suits with pockets or loud ties, because he found both distracting. In one way of thinking, this was the result of a kind of no-nonsense pragmatism. So if he avoided using actors with mustaches in his films, it was simply to “prevent distraction” (Lippe). But it goes deeper than this. I have already mentioned that I know of only one Depression-era Handy film that depicts African-Americans, and it is in a shamefully racist context. I can think of none that involve the poor, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, or any of quite a few other ethnic minorities struggling for a voice in the 1930s. It is a leap from excluding mustaches to excluding entire races of people, no doubt. Can it be explained simply as an advertiser’s effort, rightly or wrongly, to avoid the distraction of difference? It is no justification, but in a way all advertisements enforce a broad lie when their image of a better world through consumption is predicated on destruction of difference. Handy does not escape blame for this, but he is also not unique.
While the conservative capitalists preached a relatively unified message based on denial, enforcement of the middle, or even retrogression, Marxism struggled to organize itself into a stable discourse in the 1930s. The country was leaning leftward, and Marxism was beginning to have influence, but, McElvaine notes, “each intellectual refashioned the ideas of Marx as he wanted them” (204). Additionally, McElvaine writes that popular values were an “amorphous” blend of “morality, fairness, equality, humanitarianism, compassion, and moral economics” that were generally leftward leaning (223), but, like the intellectuals’ concepts of Marxism, inherently ill-defined, sometimes contradictory, and thus very slippery. “Scarcely anything, after all, is more American than the equations new = good and old = bad” (McElvaine 220); and if progress can be reduced to this binary, then capitalist industry can be made to look progressive by mere virtue of its technology, even if the exploitation and sale of that technology is defined on rigidly conservative terms.

Without a united new ideology, protests against the old seem to have been, in hindsight, destined to fail. In the 1930s, worker unrest heated to a boiling point. “Automobile production brought the assembly line to its epitome,” writes McElvaine (291). “Complete alienation was common among such workers,” he explains, “and with it sometimes came radicalism” (292). In November of 1936, a strike of General Motors workers (some of which were in Chevrolet plants) broke out in Atlanta and spread to Kansas City and Cleveland in a matter of weeks. It hit GM’s plants in Flint, Michigan, on December 30, 1936, with the historic sit-down strike. In terms of the workers’ demands, the 44-day standoff was a success. Unfortunately, others saw the situation differently: “Middle-class Americans, generally sympathetic to unionization in the mid-
thirties, were upset by the sit-down tactic, which they saw as an attack on private property” (McElvaine 295). In this way, they agreed with the opinion of big business. It would be unfair to characterize the middle class as disdainful of the working class, but it would not be unfair to say that any anti-unionism in Handy was constructed specifically to pander to a middle-class audience, an audience whose fears of working-class revolt were easy to activate. Furthermore, it was a great boon to industry when workers who could perhaps have devoted their energies to broader reforms chose instead to focus their time and effort almost exclusively into labor organization. Writes McElvaine, “much Depression-bred discontent was channeled into the development of CIO Unions” (300), which effectively corralled worker unrest into the bureaucracy of an organization. When industrial inventories increased during the further recession of 1937, the strike threat suddenly lost its power and capitalists could go back to effectively ignoring their workers.

If the industrialist’s approach to his workers was generally to ignore them, what approach was taken in the films he sponsored? Simply put, Handy sometimes showed the worker but always ignored his struggle. In “The Triumph of America” (1933), the announcer puts the full burden of hope in the future on the shoulders of American industry, proclaiming, even as the film shows choking black clouds billowing forth from smokestacks, that “no job is too big for American industry.” In this film, as well as in “Helping You Sell” (1937), the progress of history is conceptualized as the progress of industry and is defined solely in terms of how much product could be made. While the focus of “The Triumph of America” was more broadly to illustrate how natural resources are industrially converted into commodities, in “Master Hands” (1936), the aestheticized
focus is on the construction of the commodity. Handy’s often-ubiquitous voice-over is nearly absent in “Master Hands,” possibly allowing for a richer range of readings, even if the trumpet fanfares sound quite a bit like the opening tyranny-of-the-clock theme from Chaplin’s Modern Times (also 1936). Faces and even whole bodies of workers are shown early on (at first, through a curious photographic process that makes them seem like embossed sheets of metal), but soon the shots zero in on their titular hands. The products of labor are valorized, and perhaps so are the skilled hands that produce it, but the worker as a person (beyond being literally alienated from some of the products of his labor at the time) is aesthetically alienated by being banished from the frame. When the frame widens in the last minutes of the film and the score begins to ominously quote Wagner’s Das Rheingold (why this invocation of Germany?), the worker is once again seen in full body framing, but only in the context of the much larger factory and relegated to the role of co-machine. Despite ironies apparently lost and Handy and composer Samuel Benavie, it would be hard to argue that “Master Hands” is a negative portrait. Even if the worker is marginalized in this film about him, the film is nevertheless historically significant (“Master Hands” is Handy’s sole entry on the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry, after all) and it mainly respects the worker’s contributions.

After “Master Hands,” Handy’s next assembly-line film was 1937’s “From Dawn to Sunset.” Whereas the two earlier films had focused on production, “From Dawn to Sunset” contextualized the commodities being created within a broader system of consumption and suburban prosperity, organized around the activities of a single ideal day. This is a key shift, but the film did not abandon any of the false-communal or
pseudo-populist rhetoric of Handy’s other films. A montage of alarm clocks, suburban houses, breakfast, washing up, and “vigorous workmen” departing for work begins the film. Children wave, and a parade of Chevrolets carry the workers to their factories, where “neighborly workmen hail each other with the salute of fellowship.” Here, the film cuts to shots of each of the twelve Chevrolet assembly plants in the country, accompanying each with a series of images designed to praise the surrounding region within a context of nationalism. Baltimore, for instance, is called “The Birthplace of the Star-Spangled Banner.” Men and women are shown reporting to desks or their positions on the assembly lines, but as the announcer describes them as “legions of craftsmen [who] have joined to supply transportation for a nation of individuals,” an image appears on screen that challenges this. For about ten seconds, a wide shot of factory machinery and a shot of dozens of workers walking away from the camera are held in superimposition. Visually, could this overlap have any other meaning but to suggest that workers are not individuals, but rather, machines?

In the post-strike historical context of 1937, the “From Dawn to Sunset” becomes several things: an image of disdain, perhaps; an indication that Chevrolet wished to expunge labor troubles from the public’s memory, certainly; but also something much more. To satisfy America’s “ready purse,” the film proclaims, “new automobiles stream from the factories, spreading pleasure.” While the orchestra plays an arrangement of “We’re in the Money,” an extended montage depicts the distribution of workers’ paychecks, containing “money for themselves and for their families to spend.” Nearly half of the running time of this 25-minute film is devoted not to the assembly line, but to a montage of mass-consumption, illustrated in images of overflowing barrels of food and
endless plenty intercut with landmarks from the twelve plant cities, accompanied by regional musical motifs – a choir sings “On Wisconsin” for the Janesville plant and a banjo plays “O Susanna” alongside images of Atlanta. Chevrolet frames the consumption it facilitates as a public service. “The pleasure of buying, the spreading of money, and the enjoyment of all the things that paychecks can buy are making happy all the thousands of families” and creating “prosperity greater than history has ever known.” Surely Chevrolet did not actually forget that the Depression was still happening in 1937! After a home and hearth montage of reading, card playing, dancing, recreation, and children, the sun sets, and the announcer explains, “as the lights blink out, a day of work, a day of fulfillment, of happiness, and of peace, merges into the assurance of a fuller life in the Great... American... Way.”

Put succinctly, “From Dawn to Sunset” makes a paradigmatic leap in its concept of the worker. For the first time in Handy (though probably not for the first time ever), the film argues that the work of the worker is not to produce automobiles, but that the real work of the worker is to consume. This was the new vision of the worker: not an individual, but a member of a mass populace who could be trusted with a paycheck only if he would spend it. Historian Sidney Fine writes that “the sit-down strike satisfied the urge for recognition of the depersonalized and alienated automobile worker” (qtd. in McElvaine 292), but this was something that Handy and Chevrolet could apparently not tolerate. In response, Handy removed all representation of the worker from the Direct Mass Selling Series. After “From Dawn to Sunset,” the worker was never seen again.

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11 Here the ellipses represent his dramatic pauses.
After the deletion of the worker, Handy and General Motors, set their sights on nothing less than the future itself. Quite a few historians put special emphasis on the 1939-1940 World’s Fair, or “The People’s Fair,” as Warren Susman called it. The fair was full of corporate exhibits, including General Motors’ “Futurama.” Walter Lippmann observed at the time, “General Motors has spent a small fortune to convince the American public that if it wishes to enjoy the full benefit of private enterprise in motor manufacturing, it will have to rebuild its cities and its highways by public enterprise” (qtd. in Susman 225). Susman wonders whether anyone in the original audiences noticed the ironic contradiction.12

The Fair was notoriously under-attended, so Handy produced for General Motors a 20-minute film called “To New Horizons,” which reproduced the Futurama exhibit in Technicolor (it was Handy’s first live-action film in color) in the context of a conceptual “history” lesson to set up the exhibit’s claims about the “world of 1960.” The film opens with the usual orchestral fanfare on an overcranked black-and-white shot of the ocean. Guided by narration, in a series of shots we arrive on dry land. “The promise of distant horizons always has called men forward,” the narrator intones. The first image of humanity we see (after emerging, crawling, even evolving out of the ocean itself) is not of a human, but of a human vessel from the perspective of the person riding in it: a point-of-view shot looking off the front of a canoe with a rifle nestled in the crook of the bow.

12 Handy had done this before for Chevrolet; the mention of the TVA’s Norris Dam without mentioning the New Deal (in the first episode of the Chevrolet Leader News) is one instance. Another can be found in 1937’s “Conquering Roads.” When the announcer says that “In almost every city and county in the United States, great progress in road building is being made by the highway engineers and public-spirited citizens who realize the great contribution that improved highways are making to progress and safety,” he is blatantly disavowing that the government was funneling money into these infrastructure projects; road building was not the work of anonymous private citizens propelled by nothing more than populist gumption.
Thus the film not only places the viewer within a phallocentric system of looking –
indeed, right in the lap or behind the eyes of the Manifest-Destiny pioneer – but it
establishes the automobile as the site of agency for the male seeking progress, mobility,
and new horizons. The POV shots continue as Dvořák’s 9th Symphony (the “New
World” Symphony) plays, transporting the viewer from the inside of a covered wagon to
progressively faster and more exciting automobiles, stopping occasionally to bask in
accompanying images of housework, breads emerging from the oven, and other scenes of
domesticity. With the suggestion of inevitability and boundless possibility wrapped up in
hope in technology, this ride film “arrives” in the Technicolor “world of 1960,” Norman
Bel Geddes’ vast miniature landscape in Futurama exhibit, a utopia redesigned around
the automobile.

Aesthetically, Susman gives a hint regarding the film’s success. Not only was the
original exhibit “among the most popular” exhibits of the Fair (268), but “to many
Americans, movement in space was the equivalent of social mobility,” and “To New
Horizons” satisfied Americans’ “special fondness for vast panoramas of space [and]
movement in space” (263). Both the film and the display activate this kind of imperialist
gaze. High-angle shots of a commodified landscape make the future seem ripe for the
taking. Praising the green trees and pastures in the display, the narrator says that “these
eternal things, wrought by God, are lovely and unchanging.” But only a moment later,
the film pans across models of orchards with each tree in individual glass housings, and
other aspects of farming reduced to technological control. The irony is that GM’s version
of the world of 1960 is markedly unnatural, for not only are the green spaces part of
meticulous urban planning, but Norman Bel Geddes’ display was nothing more than an
artificial model. The world of 1960 which GM proposed was one for industry and the machine first, the people second.

The promises, as positive as they seemed at the time, were, of course, impossible to deliver. And furthermore, there is no indication that those making the promises had any intention of delivering them. But the film’s power to inspire its audience to wonder is undeniable; as Wolfgang Haug put it, “Nobody can outdo capital in fantasies” (Haug 100).

Finally, in appraising the culture of the 1930s, it is necessary to understand how forces larger than Handy and larger than industry played a role in determining the direction of the nation. Warren Susman believes that the whole culture of the 1930s was in some way built on the vision of future abundance, adding that “Franklin Roosevelt’s speeches during the worst Depression times argued for a world of abundance; only some technical difficulties with distribution somehow kept the American people from their rightful share in that abundance” (xxiv). In Congress, the conservatives in the House and Senate “generally wanted to restore America to what they imagined it had been like before 1933” (McElvaine 301). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain that the government at the time had a vested interest in maintaining the “status quo,” even if it meant the most radical social programs the nation had ever seen. In their view, Keynes re-articulated state power and repositioned the state in relation to capitalism. This was done in an attempt to rescue the state from the possibility that socialism and communism might overtake it in the future. If the state could use its power to support capitalism, it could also save itself. Keynes’s goal, simply stated, was “defense against the future, an urgent desire to stabilize the power of capitalism in the face of the future” (Hardt & Negri
39), and thus to buffer the state against the revolutionary progress of history as promised in Marxist theory.

The proof of this can be found in the results of the New Deal. McElvaine summarizes its effects this way: “Of the early measures, the NRA aided big business, the AAA helped large landowners and hurt tenant farmers, the Emergency Banking Act and the FDIC helped bankers and depositors, the HOLA aided lenders and homeowners, the SEC helped stock investors, and the so-called economy bill helped no one” (335). He concludes, and I agree, that “there can be no doubt that the New Deal performed a marvelous job of conservation: it saved American Capitalism at the time of that economic system’s worst crisis to date” (335).

In summary, at the historical moment of the Great Depression, capitalists and the state were each trying to stabilize themselves against a future which could have held their collapse and replacement. They found that this could be achieved by linking ideologies of capitalism with an idealized view of American democracy. To Handy, promoting consumerism, capitalism, and “America” was the same thing. The assembly-line films seemed to promise that mass-production would be able to provide access to commodities and culture for all. If everyone could have prosperity, then it must not be greed. Thus, the assembly line could be made to symbolize cooperation and equality, even though it clearly signified capitalism, a loss of individuality (as stated explicitly in “Helping You Sell”), corporate domination over production, profitability for the corporation but not the worker, and thus also alienation and greed.

One question remains to be answered. How could Handy and other producers like him have disavowed so much and successfully defended the status quo of industrial
capitalism to the 60 to 75 million people who visited the cinema each week in the 1930s? Precisely by constructing the spectator as a consumer within the apparatus of film. It is this process and other issues of spectatorship which I will discuss in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: The Spectator

Constructing the spectator as consumer: disavowal, fetishism, identification, and resistance

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which corporations such as Chevrolet came to view their workers as consumers and in fact considered consumption to be the main “work” of their worker. In this chapter I will describe the ways in which Jam Handy’s films sought to construct the cinema spectator as consumer. First, we will begin with the notion of disavowal and what sorts of images were omitted in these sponsored films. From there we will turn our consideration to the fetishized images of women and commodities that filled in the absence, discuss how selected films specifically constructed the spectator as consumer, and posit avenues of resistance to these constructions.

“Castration, disavowal, fetishism: What are we to make of film theory’s reliance upon psychoanalysis to account for the absence of the object within the cinematic experience, as well as the viewer’s defenses against that absence?” asks Kaja Silverman (97). We have already established that the principal absence in Handy’s Depression-era films was the Depression itself. Handy also disavowed competing politics, racial and social difference, and, by the midpoint of the Direct Mass Selling Series, the industrial worker himself. If on Freudian terms, capitalist industry can be conceptualized as an active, essentially “masculine” force, then any economic downturn that threatens to shut down the pipelines of production and consumption is nothing less than the threat of castration. It follows metaphorically, then, that men thrown out of work felt emasculated
(as discussed in the previous chapter). An “active” man being forced, against his will, into the “passive” station of unemployment became culturally coded as feminized, castrated, stripped of his mobility. Unemployment exemplifies the “lack which must somehow be disavowed,” as Silverman puts it, and any such lack poses a far greater threat to male subjectivity than to female subjectivity (101). It follows, then, that in a very real sense, the image of the factory worker could be seen as signifying something castrate-able. The sit-down strike, which must have subconsciously registered for the capitalist as self-castration of both the workers’ productive power and the industry’s, reignited the industrial castration anxiety which capitalists had been attempting to disavow throughout the Depression by disavowing the Depression itself. But now, the economy was not vaguely to blame, nor was the worker-as-consumer or any other consumer; the workers themselves had temporarily rendered the industry impotent by seizing their own power to shut down (castrate) production. This new threat was too unsavory, so after the obligatory public-relations damage control in the shape of “From Dawn to Sunset,” Handy, by now predictably, removed the worker from the Direct Mass Selling Series.

In place of the disavowed Depression, Handy increasingly filled Chevrolet’s films with images of its opposite: progress, technology, engineering, and a broadly-defined Americanism reified into the product of the automobile. Technological demonstration films allowed each constituent part of the automobile – accompanied by an advertising slogan – to be fragmented from the image of the car as a whole and individually fetishized. Thus, the sluggish economy was replaced by a knee-action spring, the unrest of the worker was swapped out for a spinning brake drum with ridges whisking away
excess heat, and the very real lack of safety and security was replaced by a polished, durable turret-top. In many ways, these fetishized images, as is common in advertising, were constructed to represent the fulfillment of needs torn open by the Depression. The notion that a commodity could fulfill physical or emotional needs is, of course, spurious. But in the economy of representation that Handy employed, the disavowal of the worker’s struggle necessitated the displacement of the worker’s real needs onto the imaginary fulfillment provided by the automobile. The automobile’s exchange value was related to its being seen as a promise of progress but had nothing to do with the worker’s embodied labor or its use value. As discussed earlier, the vision of mobility through space that that the automobile signified promised social mobility, but was fundamentally unable to deliver it.

Remember, for instance, “To New Horizons.” The male gaze writes the history of both the past and the future in this grand automotive cosmology. The car exists, and, indeed, is depicted as having come into being, to fulfill the man’s every conquering desire. Through all of history his questing impulse foretells the automobile, and thus if America is to be a fully realized utopia (that is, a fulfillment of the male gaze and of the phallocentric narrative the film has constructed within its very camera movements), the future must be redesigned around the automobile. Thus, the GM future confirms every possible predictable element: the car, industrial patriarchal capitalism, and a homogenous humanity invisible except where the man is pilot of an automobile. The Jam Handy historiography is always one that justifies the Chevrolet vision of the future. But as Miriam Hansen rightly warns, “the mobilization of the gaze… [which] promises nothing less than the mobilization of the self… is promise and delusion in one. … The
subject consumed is, of course, the consumer” (112), taken in by the spectacle of an “illusive community of abundance” (Hansen 116).

The Handy system of disavowal and fetishism was broader than simply removing the worker and valorizing in his place the product of his labor, the automobile. The soft-sell form itself is also a blanket disavowal, obscuring its true intentions by displacing the film’s focus onto a topic of general interest rather than speaking directly about the product or the sponsor itself. One might counter that the Chevrolet name and logo was always present, and certainly no one in the original audiences could have missed that the film was sponsored. This is probably generally true, but even where the sponsor is avowed, other things are denied. Consider, for instance, the Chevrolet Leader News, a series that exemplifies Handy’s nastiest and most systematic disavowals. In a typical episode from 1937, the stories covered were: fishing for a sea turtle and carrying it home atop a Chevrolet (the announcer makes a pun about a double “turret top” and does an impression of what the unfortunate turtle might be thinking), a Chevy truck pulling a horse trailer in Detroit, a golf instructor teaching women in swimsuits, a converted Chevrolet motor being used to pump water out of aquifers for farming, and two cats “fighting” in a fake boxing ring with dogs positioned nearby as if they were reporters. The thing being disavowed by the Chevrolet Leader News is not Chevrolet, but news! Amid the parade of distraction, red herrings, bizarre non-events, and hollow fluff glazed in strained ad copy, there is no real news in any episode of the Chevrolet Leader News. In fact, eleven of the fifteen episodes I screened featured groups of attractive young women wearing swimsuits for no reason except to function as fetishized spectacle, playing silly games with a car placed nearby, or piled by the dozen atop a slow-moving
auto bound for the beach. The Leader News cannot be accused even of hope-mongering; the films are simply lies.

According to Mulvey, the flip side of such obvious fetishistic scopophilia is voyeurism, and while this mode of male looking is harder to find in Handy, it does exist. In the case of the film “White Magic” (1940), sexually-charged voyeurism is presented as being encoded into the apparatus of cinema when the film demonstrates a camera that can photograph wavelengths of light beyond the visible spectrum. An infrared light is pointed at a seated woman and the room’s incandescent lights are switched off. “To the eye, this girl’s in total darkness,” says the narrator as the film cuts to a shot from the infrared camera, which shows her plainly. “We can even take the young lady’s picture while she’s hiding behind a screen coated with rubber,” the narrator adds, and the film demonstrates this. Thus, “White Magic” re-activates our response to the inherent voyeurism in film’s apparatus when it renews the novelty of the camera by photographing something forbidden, something impossible to see with the naked eye.

From this image of the woman immobilized and objectified in the gaze, let us turn to a brief survey of how certain feminist theories have dealt with the issue of female representation. Ever since Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the theory has often been limited in its further applicability by that key word in the title: “narrative.” The form of many a Handy short, which I discussed two chapters ago, illustrates that while Handy films certainly have identifiable structure and development, they do not possess “narrative,” at least not of the Hollywood variety so often taken presumptively by feminist theorists. In an article from 1972, Sharon Smith writes, “Women, in any fully human form, have almost completely been left out of film.
This is not surprising, since women were also left out of literature” (Smith 14). By seeing film, at least in its early years, as purely an outgrowth of literary tradition and practice, she sets film analysis squarely within a narrative mode. Smith and Mulvey are not alone in this. Doane, Haskell, de Lauretis, and plenty of others also tend to approach the function of the woman within a narrative framework. And though these early theories account for the specificities of film and the image admirably, even their oppositional inheritance of Freudian psychoanalytic models implies a narrative of growth and sexual development that leads to certain codings of the image and gendered identifications with it. This is not to say that feminist theory is useless; it can still be applied, just as long as its application is made with care and a cognizance of its limits.

After all, for some Handy, narrative analysis may be useful. In 1937’s “Just a Spark,” for instance, the bare-bones plot concerns a man hurrying to save his bedridden wife when a forest fire threatens their home. It is a race to the rescue plot right out of Griffith, except that the cross-cutting primarily alternates between the husband and fire fighters, with scant visual attention to the wife. Nevertheless, she is still coded as definitely “passive” (she is even carried out of the house just as it is consumed in flames), but the film is so strongly concerned with male spheres and adventures that the woman is nearly an absence. To draw any generalization from “Just a Spark” would be hazardous, however, since narrative films are rare in Handy. Even the narrative animation and other live action shorts with narrative hooks or narrative elements (such as “A Case of Spring Fever,” “The Other Fellow,” or “Back of the Mike”) should not be analyzed in terms of narrative, because narrative is not often the dominant motivation in a Handy film.
To comprehend Handy’s work and others like it properly, we must pursue non-narrative modes of analysis; theoretical frameworks concerned with reading the image as it relates to theories of spectatorship. When Mulvey proffers the tersely elegant equation “woman = sexuality” (35), she highlights a key trend in image-making that transcends narrative analysis. If women in Handy signify sexuality, or, more obliquely, domesticity, then men signify a range of active heroes such as pioneers, fire fighters, and innovators. The equation is useful for the construction of binaries, but probably not for understanding systems of spectator construction. Mary Ann Doane agrees: “the transformation of the woman into spectacle is easy” (Doane 6), but spectatorship must analyze more than this. To understand the complex topic of spectator inscription and construction, let us contrast two competing models of the spectator.

Lawrence Levine writes that “recent literary theory sees neither the reader nor the text as necessarily controlling but rather places emphasis upon the interaction between the two” (304). There is evidence to suggest that this notion of interactivity applies even more in the public (or counterpublic) sphere of the Depression-era movie theater, and Levine’s notion of interaction suggests a Marxist model of spectatorship. I propose this as an intuitive model because the practice of watching a film, insofar as it is interactive, constitutes a moment of dialectical collision between spectator and film. Unless the spectator and the film are already in agreement (a nearly impossible state of pre-synthesis), then either the film must change the spectator, or the spectator must change the film. An example of the first case is intuitively obvious; this is when an advertisement is able to effectively communicate its message of consumption and commodity fetishism, the spectator is constructed as consumer, and the spectator
instantiates the construction imparted by the film by buying the product advertised. But the second case is more common. In this case, the spectator recognizes the heart of the advertisement’s message and takes a resistant position, refusing to believe the outsized claims or purchase the product. But Handy’s sponsored pseudo-documentaries are not straightforward advertisements; they construct the spectator differently and as such introduce a third case: it is possible for both film and spectator to be changed. And in Handy and other soft-sell films of the kind found in the Direct Mass Selling Series, the interaction between spectator and film is more complex than in an advertisement that contains an explicit call to action. In no Handy film is the spectator asked to buy Chevrolet cars, even if this albeit disguised message becomes quickly apparent or if this subtext is promoted to the text of the film (as in films about advertisements, like “Behind the Bright Lights” (1935)). Moreover, if the resistant spectator were merely to resist the implicit message to buy Chevrolet, he or she might be unlikely to also effectively resist the film’s more subtle, pervasive, and axiomatically-assumed message of consumerism, for every frame in Handy assumes this broader worldview.

Citing research into patterns of cultural consumption from the 1930s to the 1950s, Levine explains that in cultural studies it is better to think of spectators as “not simply recipients but participants engaged in a complex dialogue” (312). He takes specific issue with the “image of the Purely Passive Mass Audience ready to absorb, consciously and unconsciously, whatever ideological message those controlling the Mass Culture industry want to feed them” (296), saying that such an assumption hampers the serious study of
popular culture\textsuperscript{13}. If the foundation of feminist criticism accepts the ideas of Christian Metz, then it assumes an inert spectator, physically and mentally immobilized. Levine argues that such an assumption cannot be made of audiences in the 1930s. If Metz is discarded, then what remains? Simply Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, whereby a spectator is made to desire the commodity by attaching abstract emotional needs to it, independent of its use value.

The notion of fetishism might suggest that the attraction is gender specific, that males are more likely to be commodity fetishists. But this is not the case at all. Charles Eckert records that “consumer statistics widely disseminated in the late 1920s and early 1930s show that women made 80 to 90 percent of all purchases for family use,” including – incredibly – “98 percent of automobiles” (qtd. in Doane 27). If this astounding figure is accurate, then cinematic economies of fetishism and desire do not shut out women; if anything, they are \textit{much} more adept at constructing women as consumers than men\textsuperscript{14}. Is this not in conflict, then, with the basic assumptions taken by feminist film critics, specifically that “the gazes/looks of both characters and spectators are ‘male,’ or, at best, ‘masculine’” (Byars 121)? Mary Ann Doane explains that the critical difficulty in reconciling the ungendered notion of commodity fetishism and the gendered (male) notion of Freudian fetishism springs from a basic misunderstanding of the differing meanings of the word “fetishism.” She writes, “What we tend to define, since Marx, as commodity fetishism is in fact more accurately situated as a form of narcissism” (Doane

\textsuperscript{13} It would, I admit, be difficult to fit Handy neatly into the established notion of pop culture as entertainments that people deliberately sought out, but Levine’s examples are broad enough to allow Handy admission into his theoretical framework.

\textsuperscript{14} Though, clearly, the cinema was not the only force that helped make women the primary consumers of the era.
This is related to the central argument of Doane’s *The Desire to Desire*: if the gaze of cinema is male and the bearing of the look or the act of looking is the phallus in cinema, then the female spectator cannot identify directly with either the male subject on screen or with the masculine-inscribed “look” of the cinema. The avenues of cinematic desire being fundamentally phallocentric, the woman can only desire to desire. With respect to her image on screen, she can either identify masochistically with its objectification and commodification, or she can recognize the woman on screen – and every other passive object – as an image of herself and desire them narcissistically. This narcissism relates directly to consumerism: “The cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror” (Doane 33), and the woman spectator is “encouraged to align her gaze with that of the consumer” (Doane 2). In short, when the passive spectator of cinema is also a woman, she is forced into identifying narcissistically with her own passive image on screen. Deprived of the phallus and thus the look, she cannot desire directly, but can only desire to desire. Thus, twice passive, secondarily desiring, and even doubly-identifying (with the image and the figure of narrative movement, as de Lauretis suggests (91)), the woman spectator is rendered immobile, needy, and bound to the image – the perfect consumer.

Advertising exists to construct the spectator so as to strip him or her of power. This is easy in the case of the woman spectator, since the apparatus already strips her of the gaze. The difficult work of the advertiser is to strip the male of power (feminize him) and force him to overidentify with the image. This is done in rather excessive ways by conflating the objectified fetishizable image of the woman on screen with the object of the commodity. Hence, piles of women perched atop Chevrolets on a beach are among
the earliest images in Handy’s work. But through the male logic of possession, even this oversexualized image of the objectified woman may still only construct the male as consumer of image of the woman, but not of the automobile. Despite its sexist address, the image of women atop a car may still more easily construct the woman spectator as consumer. Here is why I believe this: there are two kinds of objectified passive objects on screen, women and the automobile, and this introduces a choice. If the woman spectator has no sexual reason to desire herself, besides narcissistically, she may very well displace her narcissistic desire onto the figure of the automobile, if only to relieve her of the subconscious tension of desiring an image that more indexically resembles herself.

Let us consider now three examples of Jam Handy films that feature women in prominent roles. The first, “Easy Does It” (1940), confirms the gender roles and hegemony deemed essential to traditional American life by pretending to overturn them. This film repeatedly calls women “the weaker sex” (in feigned jest) and then proceeds to extol them by “scientifically” quantifying exactly how much work women do during a day of household chores. “A day’s ironing takes about as much muscle as bricklaying,” the announcer proclaims. The housework justifies an exploration of how much work is required to shift gears in an automobile and whether the (all male) scientists at Chevrolet might not be able to engineer some labor-saving devices in the gear shift. If automobile advertisements from 1910-1920 had engaged discourses of the New Woman in specific and forward-looking ways, then “Easy Does It” encourages a retreat. According to E. Michele Ramsey, these earlier advertisements “personified the automobile as a woman’s ‘friend’ that would guide her through the challenges presented by her movement into the
public sphere” (93-4). But in “Easy Does It,” the woman is not deemed capable of successfully negotiating the mobility offered by the automobile without technology making things easier on her, even if in the home her labor is equal to that of a bricklayer. Throughout the film, the machines of domesticity are fetishized, confirming traditional roles unaltered and unquestioned. Just as “domesticity was updated for an age of technology and consumption” in the mainstream cinema of the 1920s (Hansen 120), in Handy’s continuation of 1920s ideology, domesticity is restricted in terms of technology and consumption.

The message of “Leave it to Roll-Oh” (1940), while seeming to promote leisure and opulence, is nearly identical. The film opens with a male technician from “Roy’s Robot Repair” fixing the control panel for “Roll-Oh,” a purposely-ridiculous human-sized robot¹⁵, in the presence of a wide-eyed and befuddled housewife. After reducing complex technobabble into binaries of “good” and “bad” for her, he remarks that now that Roll-Oh is fixed, her “domestic problems are completely solved.” At the push of a button, Roll-Oh waters plants, lights candles, or answers the door, scaring away delivery boys. Not only does this film deride female labor in the home by making it seem so simple to replace, but it, once again, restricts women’s access to technology and abundance to narrowly-defined domestic spheres. The film may be tongue-in-cheek and quite funny, but dismissing it would be unwise. To read this film and others like it as kitsch is to attempt to rob them of their validity as cultural documents, or at least to denigrate the power they had within their historical context. But when viewing attentively, one realizes the extent of the ideological anxiety that informs “Leave it to

¹⁵ Though the technician pronounces it “robit.”
Roll-Oh,” anxiety which the humorous veneer hides only too well. This film is so worried that domesticity might one day collapse that it applies technology to constructing a monstrous machine that, along with other gadgets, contains a vacuum and a can opener, and is as such the technological embodiment of the function of the woman within domesticity. The film constructs domesticity by constructing an object that enacts all the tasks of domesticity – a commodified servile body objectified by the apparatus of cinema in precisely the same way as is the image of the woman on screen. If the image of the woman was at risk of no longer signifying domesticity, then this film constructed a domesticity-machine to act out her assigned role and thus confirm it.

My final example could occupy an entire chapter unto itself, if only to catalogue the outrageous chauvinistic interpellations found therein. The film is called “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” (1940), and it sets out to voyeuristically explore the world of fashion modeling through the controlling point-of-view of a narrator after a few women on the covers of fashion magazines come to life and talk to him. In the lobby of a local modeling agency, the secretary shows the behind-the-camera narrator a book of modeling photographs. She points out, with overt fetishism, exactly which fragmented elements of these women’s bodies are desirable to different advertisers. Amid the narrator’s unendingly boorish patter, the models are shown being photographed along with automobiles, as though we are getting a backstage look into the world of advertising. As the crusty photographer frames the shots, it becomes clear that he is not only again fragmenting the bodies of models, but is also selecting and fetishizing parts of the cars, from pedals to steering wheels to gear shifts. The woman is merely an accessory to the automobile, a completely passive object within the film’s visual economy (the
photographer even poses her legs for her), and valued for nothing more than her to-be-looked-at-ness, to borrow Mulvey’s term. In this film, all is commodity, all is appearance, and all is fetish.

The male gaze of cinema and the phallic look of the male protagonist are collapsed into one, leaving the spectator no choice but to look through his eyes and, by extension, to embody his voice. At one point our POV protagonist even attempts to stand on his head, at which point the camera cants, dizzyingly and humorously, 180 degrees – upside down. What might be so astonishing and perhaps disgusting about “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” is that it lays bare the very process of constructing the woman as an object, of fragmenting her body and commodifying its constituent parts, but does nothing to question it. The reflexivity of this film’s interest in image construction is not in problematizing or questioning the process. Instead, it seems to be exposing the process for the purpose of celebrating it. Each girl on each magazine cover exists for a single feature of “unusual form and beauty,” the film explains, be it “a beautiful head of hair ... perfectly formed hands ... correctly spaced eyes ... or even white teeth.” In a way, the film is a challenge to Mulvey, who once proclaimed that “analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it” (16). Mulvey’s famous pronouncement feels drained of its power when considered against a film that examines pleasure simply to reinforce it. This is more astonishing when considering that the beauty of the women in “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” is allowed no independent value. They are instead subjugated to reifying the

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16 In a way, though, this is consistent with Handy’s other work. After all, to reveal how a differential works (as in “Around the Corner”) is not to question the process of its construction, but rather to celebrate the innovation. The work of the women in “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” is to be looked at, and the film celebrates their skill at objectifying themselves. If anything, “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” should be grouped in with the technology demonstration films of Handy’s catalog.
notion of pleasure within the commodity of the automobile. Staring down the barrel of the male gaze, the on-screen woman’s value is computed only in relation to its perceived usefulness by the advertiser. Audience consensus in this is not only assumed, but demanded. The “three different looks associated with cinema” are collapsed into one, allowing for every woman on screen to truly become a “static, one-dimensional fetish” (Mulvey 25-6).

At the risk of belaboring the point, “The Girl on the Magazine Cover” makes identification with the look of cinema essentially impossible for a female spectator, since the very male-ness of the gaze—through the voice, through the point-of-view, and through the wandering objectifying eyes (the camera “gets distracted” by a beautiful woman walking past at least once and pans away to watch her)—is so ruthlessly enforced. Thus, the masochism of identifying with the image of oneself as commodity, simultaneously experienced with the narcissism of desiring oneself as the commodity, is the only option for the woman spectator of “The Girl on the Magazine Cover.” Forcing the woman into such a precarious position worked well for Handy; perhaps to avoid the inherent masochism the woman spectator may have retreated into identification with the images of automotive technology on screen as a relief from focusing on the image of the commodified woman. By setting up a dangerous binary of identification – either the objectified woman or the objectified product of industry – the spectator was likely to choose to desire the object she could buy, if only because its “buyability” represented taking back a little (artificial) power on her part.

This notion of grasping for any kind of control, even control that only confirms the hegemonic power which the capitalist wields through the cinema, brings us to the
final project of this chapter. As paradoxical as it seems, the spectator actually has many avenues of resistance. Though textually inscribed by the advertisement, the spectator also holds the power of erasure, if he or she chooses to exercise it. This possibility of rejecting the image springs from the very emotion the film wishes to activate: desire. Any kind of active desire runs the risk of breaking the spell of the immobilizing apparatus. Thus, if the film at hand produces in the spectator active desire, there may arise along the unpredictable volitional avenues of desire further possibilities and other choices, of nondesire, of rejection, and of resistance. The resistant spectator is a conceivable byproduct of a spectator made to desire.

Miriam Hansen, exploring how early film exhibition transformed the space of the cinema into an alternative public sphere, writes that while film was, in its early years, “a more participatory, active form of response,” later in the silent era it was transformed and “the implementation of the rule of silence… contributed to the cultural homogenization of a mass audience” (Hansen 95). Certainly, Handy’s mass approach to selling continued this trend of uniformity in exhibition practice. By individuating responses, I believe that the homogenous film product and the “rule of silence” increased the rhetorical power of film. When any audience stops interacting with or resisting a film and becomes the “passive” spectator assumed in apparatus theory, people lose their voices and the film’s voice gains ascendancy. But when the mob’s calls demand the last word, the movie loses its power. And there is evidence that the unrest of the Depression combined with other factors reactivated and reinvigorated resistant spectatorship.

Once again, I will quote Edward Brunner, who writes, “The only position never inhabited by the present-day viewer is that of the gullible audience-member who would
take [Handy’s films] at face value” (Brunner 6). But I wonder: did the viewers of the day necessarily take them at face value? Detroit, where these films were made, was a center of the consumer movement and a site of labor strength and solidarity. Lizabeth Cohen records that in Detroit in 1935 a consumer group of women “in the white working-class district of Hamtramck so successfully organized a meat boycott to secure a 20 percent price reduction that all butchers closed down ‘because there’s no one to sell to,’ according to the president of the Hamtramck Butchers and Grocers Association” (Cohen 37). Nationwide, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs had over two million members. “Not since the demand for suffrage,” wrote one observer, “have women been drawn so closely together on a common issue” (qtd. in Cohen 33). In January 1940, the heads of the seventeen leading consumer organizations in the country were all women. The numbers and political force of these sophisticated, empowered women contradicts a reading of the era that sees the public as essentially gullible and endlessly moldable.

At the time, famed director Frank Capra remarked that the “man in the street has had so many dogmas crammed down his throat that he is prepared to revolt against current underestimation of his intelligence. He’s fed up” (qtd. in May 85). According to Capra, politics, patriotism, big business, and advertising were all subjects “ripe for ridicule.” Looking at patterns of radio listenership, Lawrence Levine concludes that even when it came to commercials, “passive acceptance was not inevitable” (303). He gives several examples of listeners simply shutting off the advertisements; one anonymous interviewee simply said, “Advertising makes me so darned mad. They talk to you as if you were a child of six.” Wolfgang Haug writes that propaganda only triumphs “when the wage-dependent masses accept it, and thus their own fate as a class, as natural” (105).
But in the context of strikes and the emergent populist discourses, quite a few workers did not accept this fate. They may have likewise resisted the hollow rhetoric of the Direct Mass Selling Series.

The question therefore arises: was anyone taken in by Handy? I still propose that the answer is yes, but only in very specific way. When, for instance, in “Streamlines” (1936), the narrator speaks of “the modern motorcar” instead of mentioning Chevrolet by name, this is not merely a constraint of the soft-sell form, but rather a promotion of broader forms of consumption beyond (though certainly including) Chevrolet. Were the message only applied to Chevrolet cars, a spectator would have been able to more easily resist it. However, to reject the message of “Streamlines” would be the same as rejecting – outright – scientific progress, technology, automobiles, and even the notion of being a consumer. A rejection of this magnitude may have necessitated immediate revolution, a step few in the 1930s were willing to take.

Thus, even spectators who resisted the sponsor-centric messages still ingested, perhaps unquestioningly, the notions of consumer capital upon which they were built. Thus, even if Chevrolet may have failed in any markedly unique way to construct citizens as consumers of their own products, the rhetoric of consumption espoused by Chevrolet and numerous other companies likely did take hold.

“Once a movement can be viewed retrospectively its story can be told, but how it should be told could still be considered,” Laura Mulvey writes. “It seemed as though narrative patterns and expectations of endings had become inextricably intertwined in history as in fiction” (159). Mulvey was writing about the rise and fall of feminism as a movement, but her words could easily apply elsewhere. The 1930s should not be
considered a closed decade; nor should any period in history. It does not have one “narrative” thread, but many, and if artificial closure could be imposed upon the threads of the 1930s, I believe that the 1950s hold the key to their resolution. In the previous paragraph I suggested that capitalist mouthpieces were capable in the 1930s of implanting or reawakening consumerist desires which the Depression had threatened. In the conclusion, I will examine the 1930s within the context of a forward-looking history that proposes that the 1950s contain the ex post facto proof of the meaning of the 1930s.
Conclusion

Taking Handy into the 1950s and beyond: Lessons from twentieth century America

So far, I have used the word “consumer” and “consumerism” without defining them, though, in general, I have meant them in a vaguely negative sense of commodity fetishism, implanted wants, and buying to satisfy industrial overproduction. However, consumption is not necessarily a negative term, and Lizabeth Cohen writes in her book *A Consumers’ Republic* that the definition of the term “consumer” is historically specific, has changed over time, and was a site of particular contention between citizens and corporations in the 1930s. She sees the notion of “consumer” as oscillating between two ideas, that of the “citizen consumer” and that of the “purchaser consumer.”

The citizen consumer model was promoted by grassroots consumer interest groups as a way of challenging the dominance of industry and demanding lower prices, higher quality products, and safety standards. Though certainly inflected by the context of the Great Depression, the citizen consumer model generally promoted thrift, economy, and restraint – more or less a throwback to the puritan ideals as outlined by Warren Susman. By contrast, the idea of the purchaser consumer sprang from abundance ideology and expected buyers to buy in service of industrial production. This model, promoted mainly by captains of industry, saw consumption as the duty of each private citizen to create prosperity. As these models competed, and as industrial capitalists strove to win converts to purchaser-consumer values, paradoxes arose. For instance, Cohen writes that even during the hard times of the Great Depression, many Americans came to think of themselves as consumers and “became much more self-conscious about
their identities and interests as consumers” (31). And yet, others, like Robert S. Lynd, pointed out a simultaneous feeling of helplessness, that the consumer “stands there alone,” he wrote, “a man barehanded, against the accumulated momentum of 43,000,000 horse power and their army of salesmen, advertising men, and other jockeys. He knows he buys wastefully, ... that his desires and insecurities are exploited continually” (qtd. in Cohen 19).

It is in this context that Cohen brings up Handy’s 1937 film “From Dawn to Sunset,” discussed in some depth two chapters ago\(^\text{17}\). She intuits several valuable insights about the film, especially in the way it frames workers as consumers, but Cohen, without a knowledge of the larger context of Handy’s work for Chevrolet, fails to notice just how much the film represents a key shift from factory- and worker-centered films to consumer- and commodity-centered films. Beyond putting a positive face on relations between Chevrolet and the UAW, the film indicates “the company’s confidence in consumers as the savior of the nation’s economy” (20). Here, Cohen states the central claim of both her book and this chapter: specifically, that “the new expectations that Americans developed during the Great Depression for how consumers should contribute to a healthy economy and polity would leave a legacy for World War II and the postwar era” (20).

First, Cohen argues, workers around the country arguing for eight-hour work days and minimum wages did so principally to attain “a fair shake at consumption” (22), and in the 1920s, consumer credit and installment buying fueled these new wants. As more

\(^{17}\) Of the key cultural historians used in this project, Cohen is the only one to mention a Handy film. She neglects to attribute it to the Jam Handy Organization, but this can be forgiven.
workers thought of themselves as consumers, a discourse of “the consumer” sprang up and quickly came to be used by the government and others as invoking “public good” and the “needs of ordinary citizens” (22). More crucially, however, the entrance of notions of the consumer into populist discourse gave the government a way, within the language of populism, to defend capitalism. As big business perceived that in the popular psyche a binary was developing between the industrial producer and the consumer, they strove to construct an ideology which conflated the interests of business and the common citizen. With notions of the “living wage” already defined in consumption terms (39), this project became easier. As war loomed in the late thirties, capitalism, and with it conspicuous consumption, came to be seen as the only sure defense against the unsavory poles of either Communism or Fascism. As the narrator proclaims in “From Dawn to Sunset,” “the purchasing power of pay packets” was promised as being able to fuel “a prosperity greater than history has ever known.” Referring to this line, Cohen almost gives Handy credit for predicting the future when she writes, “Chevrolet hinted at what would become a new orthodoxy in the postwar era: that purchasing power might do more than stabilize a stagnant economy in depression. It could create historic levels of economic growth” (60).

The purchaser consumer idea lacked popular traction in the 1930s, but by the 1950s its shortcomings in activist allure were overcome by postwar patriotism. The finer points of the distinction between citizen consumer and purchaser consumer (not quite so difficult to discern in hindsight) simply broke down as the discourse became muddied by national politics, advertising, and voter disinterest. It all happened in nearly the same way populist discourses were muddied by a variety of forces – Handy included – in the
1930s. During wartime, according to Cohen, the Office of Price Administration and other defense agencies had already begun to “construct a political culture that bridged the gap between citizen consumers and purchaser consumers” (75). When citizen consumers were encouraged to buy war bonds, it was in anticipation of a “postwar utopia abundance” in which they would finally be able to be purchaser consumers (70). And in postwar America, a number of factors conspired to kill the citizen consumer movement. No longer was the female consumer advocate seen as a voice of moral authority; the new norm in the 1950s became the “male purchaser-as-citizen” (147). The Office of Price Administration was killed in Congress as politicians on the right and the left “endorsed the importance of mass consumption” (114) and began to legislate an emerging consensus. Even Life Magazine framed mass consumption as a “civic responsibility” (113).

Amid the promises of affluence, the citizen consumer movement and mentality was seen as irrelevant to the new economy. Their moral and egalitarian claims were consumed by “the Consumers’ Republic itself, which promised that consumers’ purchasing power would improve the lives of all Americans” (130-1). Now, instead of focusing on product safety and fair prices, industrialists and the government alike directed their efforts into salesmanship; in particular, investigating “how the individual consumer’s subjective frame of mind boded for the nation’s economy” (133). The influence of Handy and others like him can be seen in all of this: the valuation of advertising and appearance over improved product, the enforcement of consumption as a right, a norm, and a duty, the misplaced hope in continued economic growth to “sow the seeds of national egalitarianism” (129) even if there was no mechanism in place to
functionally ensure this, and the further unequal treatment of women and minority
groups. If the public ignored persisting social injustice, it was because, as McElvaine
writes, World War II “stretched beyond their limits the capacities of most Americans for
selflessness” (322). Many were simply too caught up in their own prosperity.

Cohen writes that patriarchy resumed both *de facto* and *de jure* dominance in the
1950s. The GI Bill and other veterans’ organizations treated women unequally, more
men were accepted into colleges than women, property ownership became unbalanced,
and the tax code not only assumed that women should be homemakers, but monetarily
rewarded households composed according to the traditional model of the man as
breadwinner and the woman as housewife. Thus, Cohen wonders why, “when the
transformations of depression and war might have encouraged alternatives” (146), that
patriarchal orthodoxy was renewed, normalized, and enforced.

The answer is simple, and it is expressed in nearly every Handy film in the Direct
Mass Selling Series: patriarchy and traditional capitalism never actually died.
Industrialists did not view the Depression as a crisis for the worker, but rather as a crisis
for *themselves*. Those in government and industry during the Depression, no matter what
sort of words or rhetoric they used, believed that a reconfirmation of the status quo was
the only solution. They naturally rejected any new political or ideological model that
threatened their dominance. Thus, Handy disavowed both the Depression *and* the notion
that unchecked consumerism helped to cause it.

With the status quo of capitalism and consumerism rescued and reconfirmed in a
big way by the kick-start that the War had given the American economy, Handy
continued in his postwar films the trend he began in his Depression-era films. In 1956’s
“American Engineer,” the centrality of progress to America’s prosperity is taken up again, this time in Technicolor Superscope compositions as good as any David Lean epic, and activating just as much scopophilia. The film opens on a shot of a rotating satellite dish pointing toward a sunset. One of several narrators warmly entreats, “Listen— to the sound of the sun and the stars: sound picked up from outer space by radio telescope for some earthly usage still unknown.” Later, over shots of a dam, the narrator says, “the roar of rushing water was once just a sound, a waste of turbulent energy, until its challenge was transformed into a source of hydroelectric power.” The narrative of all science as being meant and destined for technology, of all resources as being meant and destined for industry, is the same as it was in the 1930s. There is some change, however; among an otherwise uniform white male parade of engineers and scientists, the film does include one or two images of a woman chemist and another of a black male physicist. I am not confident that this represented legitimate progress in the context of Handy, but it does express that America had made some strides, even as it confirmed tradition in other areas.

Cohen writes that the money spent on advertising tripled between 1945 and the end of the 1950s, hitting a figure of $11 billion (301). But the Handy brand of the long-format cinema soft-sell was on its way out, even as his Organization produced some of their finest works in the 1950s. Television and “narrowcasting” replaced the appeal to “undifferentiated audiences,” and in industry the principle of “encouraged product obsolescence” (typified by wings on cars and changing hemlines in fashion) came to take the place of genuine innovation related to use value (Cohen 293). Considering the landscape of advertising that replaced Handy and his ilk, films like “American Engineer”
and “American Look” exude a confidence and espouse a vision of the past that I find in many ways preferable to the present.

My nostalgia aside, there are indications of the present that can be found all the way back in Handy’s Depression-era work. I have called this thesis “Around the Corner” for several reasons, not the least of which is my particular affection for Handy’s film of that name. “Around the Corner” is a film that illustrates the inner workings of the differential, that device on the rear axle of any car that allows the wheels to turn at different speeds while still providing power from a single drive shaft. The film is about science and spectacle, certainly. But it is also about one source of power driving a system unequally, and it is, perhaps more graphically, about the result of such inequality: perpetually going in circles. This is not to say that Handy’s images are suffused with the same nihilist meaning as those now-classic Herzogian scenes of trucks driving in endless circles, eating up their own tracks ad infinitum like the mythical Ouroboros, as seen in Even Dwarfs Started Small (1970) or Stroszek (1977). However, the backward-looking systems of economic inequality that echoed through Handy and the halls of Congress in the 1930’s are the direct progenitors of the world’s current global economy of inequality.

From the passenger seat, a U-Turn or even an endless circle can appear to be forward progress, as long as speed and the direction of angular momentum are kept positive. The final image of “Around the Corner” – before the spinning bow-tie logo and Handy’s credit – is that of a man and a woman running atop rotating logs attached to the wheels of a Chevrolet car driving in such an endless circle. For me, it is a potent image of Sisyphean absurdity; it symbolizes an endless cycle of debt and consumption, “progress” as an inequitable system of flywheels and treadmills spinning quickly, almost
unstoppably, keeping the human workers in a constant state of breathless catch-up, but ultimately going nowhere. And Handy, after a fashion, hides this truth under a razzle-dazzle score and the guise of science, and has a little sadistic fun with the image.

Each chapter of this thesis endeavored to peel another layer from Handy’s work: the first looked at the surface of the advertisement and its form, the second analyzed the imbedded gospel of consumption, and the third examined the way the surface representations functioned to reach out of the films and construct spectators in the films’ own image. These layers were always in dialogue with one another, and, as we have seen in this chapter, the dialogue of form and function of media, government, consumption, and economic ideologies shaped the twentieth century in profound ways.

There are thus many avenues for further research along these lines (and I do not simply mean the analysis of other Handy films). Feminist criticism is, for the most part, still shackled to narrative or formal models that do not allow for productive interrogation of other film disciplines. On a related note, one of my advisors incidentally observed, “That’s so Commie,” in reference to the excessive image valorization in Handy’s 1950s films. If the late Handy images evoke Communism and early Handy editing patterns evoke co-opted montage, and yet they both functioned exquisitely well to extol the values of the capitalist system, then what does this say about our critical approaches to inherent meaning in the image? Certainly we cannot surmise that Eisenstein and Handy are not different, or that American Republicanism and Soviet Dictatorship of the Proletariat are equivalent state systems. What is lacking is a total theory of film able to link form to function, content to context. Handy’s work is difficult to place because, as I stated at the outset, it stands at the confluence of so many historical, cultural, and formal issues. I
have spent two years and more looking at Handy’s films, and whenever I get to feeling
that the work is sufficient unto itself – that “it is what it is” – another theoretical model
falls into my lap and causes me further critical headaches. I like Handy’s work in nearly
every way, but I am also constantly confronted by the notion that I should somehow be
appalled by it. Thus, I even need a model to conceptualize my own reaction to these
films.

There are other important resonances in Handy. I believe he was speaking
genuinely when “The Triumph of America” proposed that “no job is too big for
American industry.” If nothing else, recent history has shown us that the abandonment of
production in favor of service and financial industries set our economy up for collapse
and recession. Even General Motors, after exporting jobs out of the country and cutting
its interest in research, development, and the type of innovation Handy and Chevrolet had
consistently lionized decades earlier, fell prey to our current economic downturn and is,
as I write this final chapter, headed toward bankruptcy court. When we consider that in
Handy’s day Chevrolet was an industry leader and worthy of accolades for its production
and innovation, one has to wonder whether the cynicism that led us to abandon this
patriotic model was, in fact, a cure worse than the disease. Then again, late capitalism is
a step even further away from Marxist/Communist models, not toward them. Though
America got richer after the Second World War, equality was not achieved. McElvaine
writes that Keynesianism “offered a temporary way out of the Depression, but by itself it
could provide no permanent solution. The fundamental problem in the economy
remained maldistribution of income” (330). If the values of “sharing, compassion,
service to others, [and] self-denial” were discarded by businessmen in the 1930s as
“get[ting] in the way of the pursuit of success in the marketplace” (340), then it is no wonder that Americans structuring their lives more and more around consumption in the 1950s adopted new avaricious values. If in the 1930s middle-class Americans identified with the Joads of *The Grapes of Wrath*, then “in the seventies and early eighties they aspired not only to keep up with the Joneses but to try to catch up to the Rockefellers” (342). Can we blame Handy for this or even attribute a part of the blame to his work? Perhaps not, but we can certainly see, in the metonym of Handy, the rising influence of consumerism and greed as central tenets of American culture, tenets that have been poisoning us ever since.

Michael Moore, another commentator<sup>18</sup> interested in the history of General Motors and Chevrolet, once noted that his hometown of Flint, Michigan, was where the United Auto Workers “was born” in the 1936-37 sit-down strike. That strike began on December 30, but only a single day later it had already begun to spread to other plants around the country. On December 31 workers at the Norwood Assembly in Cincinnati, Ohio—*my* hometown—became the first to join their comrades in Flint and shut down production (Fine 146). Both the Flint plant and the Norwood plant were among those shown on screen in Handy’s film “From Dawn to Sunset.” On August 26, 1987, the last Chevy car rolled off the line at the Norwood Assembly. When the plant closed, over four thousand workers lost their jobs. More than twenty years later, that day is still known locally as Black Wednesday. One of the stranger episodes of the Chevrolet Leader News, dating from 1936, depicts a peculiar off-roading contest in which a variety of automakers (apparently) raced through Kentucky, vying to be the first to arrive in an unnamed village.

<sup>18</sup> It was difficult to decide which noun to use here.
in the Cumberlands. The narrator explains that Chevy got there first, and the village was named after the winner. The Norwood Assembly was torn down years ago and the site is now occupied, principally, by a call center for Convergys, a self-described “relationship management” corporation in the telecom service industry. Over seventy years later, Chevrolet, Kentucky, has kept its name and is now easily accessible by US Highway 421.

I write these anecdotes to relate a simple truth. American industry, the automobile, Chevrolet, and even Jamison Handy left long-lasting, perhaps indelible marks on the landscape of this nation. In some ways, the effects of the ideology, the films, and the advertising have lingered longer than the industry. It may be tempting to read the passage of history deterministically or fatalistically, as though the present is the inevitable product of the past and that at no point was any other present realistically possible. What Lizabeth Cohen reminds us in her writing on the 1950s is that quite a few legislative manipulations and media trends conspired to give us the present we have. Other worlds were always possible. Even with respect to our present situation, “the transformations of depression and war might have encouraged alternatives” (146). Why are we not taking them?

Despite powerful media messages implying the contrary, we have the power to resist runaway consumerism and unchecked borrowing practices. Though the 1930s were a decade of depression and crisis and insecurity, they were also a time of popular solidarity, of common problems and goals, and of, momentarily, the possibility of a different tomorrow. Just as then, different tomorrows are still available to us. The lesson passed down from Jam Handy is that we become what we consume, and that what we consume consumes us. Let us therefore blaze paths of resistance.
All Jam Handy films screened for this project were accessed online at archive.org/prelinger.

My complete corpus of Jam Handy films (80 titles total):


Sources Cited:


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