FILM CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

ADVERTISING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCREEN CULTURES

BO FLORIN
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Amsterdam University Press

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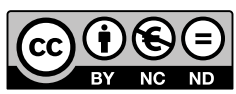
The publication of this book is made possible by a grant from the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, P13-1261:1)

Cover illustration: © bpk-Bildagentur / Charles Wilp

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 915 3
e-ISBN 978 90 4854 156 0
DOI 10.5117/9789462989153
NUR 670



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Introduction

Bo Florin, Patrick Vonderau and Yvonne Zimmermann

> *The real business of the historian of advertising is more difficult: to trace the development from processes of specific attention and information to an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion; to relate this to changes in society and in the economy: and to trace changes in method in the context of changing organizations and intentions.*
> Raymond Williams[1]

As an aesthetic, industrial, and social practice, advertising has played a pivotal role in shaping the history of virtually every modern communications medium. In its ubiquity and everyday ephemerality, avant-gardist designs and persuasive rhetorics, advertising over the course of the last century has become the epitome of modernity as much as of pop culture; it is inextricably linked to capitalism, material cultures, lifestyles, and media histories. Accordingly, a rich body of scholarship has evolved within the humanities that aims to capture and explain this role advertising appears to have in culture and society. A major cluster of studies has described advertising as an institution that is both distinct and unique in its capability to shape human consciousness.[2] In line with the institutional view on advertising and its underlying sociopolitical concerns, other scholars have attempted a more theoretical description of advertising as a social practice of language,

1 Raymond Williams, 'Advertising: The Magic System', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 170.

2 See, for instance, Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978); Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York/St. Louis: McGraw-Hill, 1982); or Kevin Hetherington, *Capitalism's Eye* (New York/London: Routledge, 2007).

Florin, B., P. Vonderau, Y. Zimmermann, *Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021
DOI 10.5117/9789462989153_INTRO

signification, and ideology.[3] Still others have provided important cultural histories of consumerism and advertising.[4] Within film and media studies, however, advertising has not developed into a distinctive disciplinary field.[5] Somewhat surprisingly, what seems to mark advertising as an object of scholarly inquiry when it comes to film and cinema first and foremost is this object's apparently elusive or shape-shifting character.

The relation of advertising to moving pictures has often been claimed to be parasitic in nature. By the 1980s, it had become a cliché of mass communication research to describe ads as 'parasitic upon their surroundings

3 For instance, Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication* (London: Methuen, 1982); Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992); Greg Myers, *Words in Ads* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994); Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Spaces* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994); Charles Forceville, *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (London: Routledge, 1996); or Lars Hermerén, *English for Sale: A Study of the Language of Advertising* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1999).

4 See, among others, Merle Curti, 'The Changing Concept of "Human Nature" in the Literature of American Advertising', *The Business History Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 335–357; Jackson Lears, 'Some Versions of Fantasy: Toward A Cultural History of Advertising 1880–1930', *Prospects* 9 (1984): 567–593; *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: Vintage, 1984); Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Stuart Culver, 'What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows', *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988): 97–116; William Leach, 'Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire', in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880–1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 99–132; Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2006); Marina Moskowitz and Marlis Schweitzer, eds., *Testimonial Advertising in the American Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); or Stefan Schwarzkopf, 'Discovering the Consumer: Market Research, Product Innovation, and the Creation of Brand Loyalty in Britain and the United States in the Interwar Years', *Journal of Macromarketing* 29, no. 1 (2009), 8–20.

5 Notable exceptions include, among others, Malcolm Cook and Kristin Moana Thompson, eds., *Animation and Advertising* (New York: Palgrave, 2020); Ralf Forster, *Ufa und Nordmark: Zwei Firmengeschichten und der deutsche Werbefilm 1919–1945* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2005); Jeremy W. Groskopf, *Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising* (Georgia State University: unpublished manuscript, 2013); and Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

and other genres'.[6] The trope of a host–parasite relationship can already be found in industry discourse decades earlier, and in ways that evoke correspondences to contemporary 'media infection' theories.[7] Recently, media historians have again taken up the term, stressing that films commissioned for advertising, public relations, and other purposes do not constitute a genre but are a 'strategically weak and parasitic form' that adapt to any organizational purpose they aim to fulfil.[8] While thought provoking, this position has been criticized for downplaying the strength or persistence of sponsored arrangements, and for failing to account for the mutuality in the relationship.[9] In opening this book and its explorations of advertising's role in the transformation of screen cultures over the past hundred years, it is thus reasonable to think through this and other conceptual frameworks that research has frequently been locked into. What do we mean by 'advertising'? Is advertising everywhere, and is it the same everywhere? Is it related to modernity? Is advertising an institution? A genre? An archival object? A cultural practice of language, signification, and ideology?

Some Basic Distinctions

A way to begin our exploration is to counter the suggestive, but misleading, metaphor of the parasite with a simple distinction. Advertising and advertisements are two different things. In a traditional industry view, the first is a type of marketing communication distinct from other types, such as packaging or sales promotion. For the purposes of our book, 'advertising' can more broadly be defined as an institutionalized *process* that goes along with a

6 See, for instance, Arthur Asa Berger, *Television as an Instrument of Terror: Essays on Media, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1980), 143; Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 133–134 [quote taken from this source].

7 Groskopf, *Profit Margins*, 54. Trade journals such as *Exhibitors Herald*, *Moving Picture World*, *Sponsor*, *Variety,* and others frequently brought up the term in either defensive or accusing ways, at least since the 1920s. More recently, Pinboard-founder and blogger Maciej Cegłowski noted, 'Advertising is like a flu, it always changes in order to avoid resistances', (http://idlewords.com, last accessed 5 April 2021).

8 Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, 'Record, Rhetoric, Rationalization: Industrial Organization and Film', in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 46.

9 Bert Hogenkamp, 'A Strategically Weak and Parasitic Form? Reflections on the History of Corporate and other Useful Media in the Netherlands', talk delivered at the Faculty for the Humanities, Vrije Universitet Amsterdam, 6 November 2015.

set of partly codified *practices* and a host of cultural *forms* designed to inform or persuade larger groups of people. That is, to advertise means to engage in a process that is organized according to specific rules, norms, and standards stabilized over time. This includes trademark law, for instance, given that demand for goods implies that such goods can be properly distinguished. It also includes more local or temporal frameworks and forms of boundary work; over much of the past century, advertising was organized in a way that loosely regulated who could call themselves advertisers and charge for their services as such, as richly documented in historical trade papers, for instance. Processes change, of course, and their institutional character may be more or less explicit, but they certainly are neither arbitrary nor do they change at will. Practices of advertising were manifold, but codified in the sense as to adhere to rules of thumb within the advertising industry, and to more general social, ethical, and legal standards; just think of the ways historical divisions of labour between various related practices worked to differentiate advertising and public relations, for instance. The very fact that industry actors still easily settle on the above definition of advertising as a type of marketing communication demonstrates the degree to which such divisions of labour have become axiomatic over the years.[10]

Distinct from advertising as a process, yet intimately related to its logics is a multitude of cultural forms that surround, accompany, guide, or irritate us almost everywhere we go. Traditionally defined, such 'advertisements' are paid communications intended to inform and/or persuade people. As such, ads are inextricably linked to media in the sense of technical means of mass communication: print, radio, television, cinema, and the internet. Media format, programme, store, and disseminate advertisements but have traditionally neither paid for nor produced them. This is the task of advertisers and agencies, respectively; agencies specialize in producing advertising campaigns, while retailers, manufacturers, governments, and various other actors may act as advertisers in commissioning them. A lot of the confusion regarding advertising, including referrals to its allegedly parasitic character, seems related to this tripartite relation between advertisers, media, and agencies, with only the latter principally engaged in advertising as profession and exclusive source of revenue. Historically, mass media have developed different styles of address and may target promotional messages to all, to some, to the few, or to no one in particular. The mass delivery of ads also has great diversity in time and space, scale and speed. Finally, and most

10 Winston Fletcher, *Advertising: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

importantly, media differ markedly in their capacity to carry classified and display ads.

Simply put, there are ads that people look for (*classifieds*), and ads that look for people (*display*).[11] Classified advertisements, those found in newspapers or on the internet, rely on people perusing them for information for which they are actively searching. Display ads, on the other hand, must catch the attention of people initially not interested in their messages. Cinema and television, as well as radio or posters, are almost exclusively designated to carry display advertisements. Our book primarily deals with film, but display ads and related media technologies have historically encompassed posters and print alongside a broad variety of moving pictures, such as flip-books, mechanical trade cards, lantern slides, slide projections, cartoons with cinematic narratives, outdoor animated billboards or light bulb installations, television broadcasts, streamed video, and more.

Screen Ads as Analytical Category

While our own specific focus in this book is on filmed advertisements, a case could be made to employ a more general term such as *screen ads* to denote a recurring set of moving image formats used for display advertising. The notion of screen ads opens an analytical space for examining interrelations between television spot commercials, lantern slides, digital video, ads screened in public spaces or as part of theatrical entertainment programming, and other display advertisements that use both movement and images. One may rightfully object that history demands a distinguishment between all these media and formats, given that a glass slide with minimal animation as seen in the US in the late 1910s might have little or nothing in common with a Chinese YouTube advertorial made in 2020 or a German television spot from the 1970s. We do not debate the need for such careful differentiation; hopefully, our book contributes to this differentiation. Our point rather is to propose thinking of screen ads as both a *conceptual space* and a *dominant form* when writing histories of display advertising, as we aim to do in this book.

Opening up the notion of screen advertisement as a conceptual space means to include moving images that are usually seen as marginal to or outside of advertising in the sense of an institutionally sanctioned, and partly legally codified, process. Screen ads include a diversity of forms spread out

11 Fletcher, *Advertising*, 23.

across a *spectrum of more or less direct, theatrical, or institutional modes of filmed advertising*. For instance, trademarks may appear in direct or indirect ways on-screen, that is, through forms that link a product to a film with or without overtly calling attention to product qualities or price. Brand placements in film are not what would traditionally be considered advertising, however. This distinction between a paid, unambiguous announcement in a communications medium, and other, partly freely given, forms of promotion is of course related to the division of labour in the industry, with direct and indirect advertising developing as separate professional fields. Yet there is also significant overlap over time that requires closer scrutiny. Speaking of screen ads in an analytical sense, rather than relying on the traditional industry understanding of display ads, allows for the tracing of these and other historical connections. The term may also help in discovering, or emphasizing, interlinkages between cinema and television, for instance. Taking film as a starting point, we suggest to approach 'cinema' as an open system, one whose institutional borders were both clearly defined and then soon quickly contested. As an instantiation of 'useful cinema',[12] screen ads stimulate us to ask questions about clients and addressees, about recurrent rhetorical forms and their re-versioning over time, about non-theatrical screenings and manifold relations to print, radio, television, and digital media.

While our book does not aim to cover the broad entirety of this spectrum, a guiding principle for our work was to abandon the conventional delineation of the field by medium, country, or period. Instead, our research moved laterally, shedding light on advertising's specific objects, screens, practices, and intermediaries. The intent here was to follow the 'object lessons'[13] of specific products advertised in moving image media, or the careers of such objects across campaigns as much as the work of ad agencies or the specific functions of moving images in a given context. We found it more enlightening and useful to move inductively across the spectrum of direct/indirect, institutional/non-institutional, and theatrical/non-theatrical forms of film than to stick to already known national 'pioneers' and proponents. In addition to such a lateral view, we also understood our work as explorative in the sense of probing various approaches, rather than developing a consistent

12 Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

13 See Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 86–92; and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

or prescriptive model for future research. Here, to think of screen ads rather than advertising film allowed us to discover and trace genealogies and connections across media, countries, and periods that may otherwise be hard to observe.

At the same time, however, screen ads are also associated with a dominant form of film-making for good reason. In many ways, the spot commercial is the epitome of display advertising. Here, it is worthwhile to return to the metaphor of the parasite, because it obscures what has made the spot a dominant form. To think of filmed advertisements as parasites means to emphasize their allegedly weak, mutable, and ephemeral character. From an archival perspective, commercials and other moving image ads are indeed often considered as part of the category of ephemeral films, alongside industrial, educational, and other instances of non-fictional film-making. Ads have instrumental, rather than cultural, value; they are short lived, confined to a specific pragmatic purpose for a limited time; their aesthetic is characterized by a non-mutual, dependent relationship to other cultural forms; and since they are not intended to be retained or preserved, they tend to disappear after initial distribution. And yet, the metaphor of the parasite misses the fact that screen ads, as epitomized by the spot commercial, may take on a stable, enduring form. In fact, what we know today as the commercial advertising 'spot' developed in the early 1910s out of the theatrical exhibition practice of glass slide adverts, or 'slide-vertising'. By the late 1910s, short theatrical advertising 'trailers', or spots, had fully developed into their actual form in the US and Europe.[14] The spot commercial thus is neither weak nor ephemeral, but surprisingly robust in both its key parameters (e.g., length, structure, trademark mention) and perlocutionary functions (i.e., to induce a particular response in viewers). As an analytical term, 'screen ads' contributes to shedding light on such stability.

About This Book

While there is no historical reason to emphasize stasis over change, given the multitude of forms that display advertising nevertheless has taken on over time, there certainly is also no reason to use metaphors that do the opposite. In speaking of advertising as parasitic upon media, scholars risk mistaking a cultural category for an analytical one. This book avoids projecting the common disdain for advertising as industrial practice expressed in the

14 Groskopf, *Profit Margins*; Forster, *Ufa und Nordmark*, passim.

parasite metaphor onto analytical categories. While using various terms when speaking of the relation between advertising and moving images, and while doing so from differing perspectives, the following chapters have common ground in taking up the challenge articulated by Raymond Williams in the epigraph above:

> to trace the development from processes of specific attention and information to an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion; to relate this to changes in society and in the economy: and to trace changes in method in the context of changing organizations and intentions.

Taking up this challenge means to think through traditional self-definitions of actors within advertising. It also means to critically engage with existing frameworks, concepts, methods, and materials. The book resulting from these efforts neither presents a comprehensive historical survey nor a definite theory of screen advertising. Rather, it documents the probing, exploratory character of the research on which it is based, with chapters following the individual trajectory its three co-authors pursued over the course of three years, during which they participated in the project Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures (2014–2017), generously funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the Swedish Foundation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

These various research trajectories have been dedicated to broader conceptual frameworks in advertising research and related methodological issues (Patrick Vonderau), to mid-level research on the history of concepts and the way such concepts allow for the integration of the study of screen advertising into cinema studies (Yvonne Zimmermann), and to fine-grained, exemplary studies of materials that document the histories of exemplary campaigns and their contexts (Bo Florin).

In her opening essay, 'Early Cinema, Process Films, and Screen Advertising', Yvonne Zimmermann looks back at early cinema and the entanglements between entertainment, education, and advertising. The focus is on a process film about milk production in Switzerland, which serves as a paradigmatic example for the fluidity of the category of genre and for the typical colour aesthetics of process films that speak of how deeply visual culture and consumption culture were imbricated in ideas of colonialism. The essay takes up notions and frameworks that resonate throughout the book, among them the robustness of screen advertising also addressed in the introduction, and its sited-ness; in other words, its historical specificities

and localized appearance. All in all, this opening essay invites readers to reflect on continuities and changes in advertising and the transformation of screen cultures.

'Approaches and Methods', the first section, then sums up the more conceptually oriented work of Vonderau and Zimmermann. Vonderau's part of this section addresses the way advertising research, perhaps inevitably, tends to get locked into a historical frame (modernity), a social frame (institution), and a legal frame (trademark law and policy) to develop its argument. His first chapter, 'Advertising and Modernity: A Critical Reassessment', aims to deconstruct the category of modernity by confronting a prevailing abstracted view on screen advertising with the contingencies of its archival history. Taking as a case study the 1960s 'cola wars' and the marketing of cola soft drinks, the chapter shows how this competition between Pepsi and Coke related to stylistic innovations such as montage sequences, and what relevant mid-level finds can be made regarding one specific Pepsi campaign of that era without indulging in overly general arguments about modernism or modernity. In 'Advertising as Institution: Charles Wilp and German Television, 1950–1970', a similarly self-reflexive view is proposed vis-à-vis the Charles Wilp Collection at the Deutsche Kinemathek, the museum for film in Berlin, a collection dedicated to the work of one of Germany's best-known (and most notorious) advertisers of the 1960s and 1970s. After critically reviewing the notion of institution as it is used in advertising research, the main part of the text provides a historical account of Wilp's work and proposes a definition of screen advertising and an analytical heuristics for describing moving image advertisements. Vonderau's last chapter, 'Advertising as Commercial Speech: Truth and Trademarks in Testimonial Advertising', explores moving images' promotional relation to trademarks by focussing on American case law and a controversy that surrounded a brief moment in the feature film *The Hangover II* (2011), and presents a typology of moving image testimonials.

Interspersed are three chapters by Yvonne Zimmermann that relate some of cinema studies' key concepts – 'the documentary', 'self-reference', and the *dispositif* – to screen advertising with the aim to test these notions and frameworks on forms and practices of moving images that have been situated rather at the periphery of the discipline. Zimmermann's first chapter, entitled 'Advertising and Avant-Gardes: A History of Concepts, 1930-1940', looks at advertising as a form of persuasive communication that includes forms otherwise associated with both documentary and avant-garde cinema of the 1930s and early 1940s. Focussing on the (mainly written) work of John Grierson, Paul Rotha, and Hans Richter, the chapter shows how

debates among intellectuals, pedagogues, and artists on both sides of the Atlantic revolved around concepts of propaganda and education to promote democracy. At a politically critical moment, they shared a belief in moving images as powerful tools for shaping the human mind. In Zimmermann's second chapter, 'Advertising and the Apparatus: Cinema, Television, and Out-of-Home Screens', the notion of the *dispositif* serves as a conceptual framework to both theorize and analyse the programming of moving image advertising on three types of screens: cinema, network-era television, and digital out-of-home displays. The chapter shows how screen ads stitch together different forms of intermittent movements – of bodies, images, and objects – and thus help to create flows. Zimmermann's final chapter, 'Advertising's Self-Reference: From Early Cinema to the Super Bowl', takes up the notion of self-reference and redefines it as a particular mode of address. When looked at from the perspective of screen advertising and screen ads, self-reference exhibits the assumed media knowledge of the viewers as much as it displays the medium itself. It thus works as acknowledgement and celebration of the audience's media expertise.

The second section in the book, written by Bo Florin, is dedicated to 'Cases and Materials'. In 'Moving Objects: The Case of Volvo', Florin investigates the concept of mobility on several levels – the movement of cars, the movement of people, and the movement of the camera – and how this concept is launched within the ads along with 'Scandinavian' values. The commercials also point to the basic definition of cinema qua moving images, aiming in turn to move the audience. In 'Cinematic Intertexts: H&M Goes YouTube', Florin studies the designer collaborations of H&M, with a focus on these campaigns at the point of breakthrough for social media. The campaigns as such combine high culture and popular culture, and spans from exclusive consumerism to equal opportunities for all, with the Lanvin collaboration as an early example of 'friendvertising' – and using You Tube as an archive. The third and final chapter in the section, entitled 'Beyond Promotion: The UN Global Goals Campaign', deals with the latter as a particularly interesting example, given the way this campaign did not advertise a product, but rather a policy. Does this change the way of relating to history? Advertising sustainability requires both economic development, environmental protection, and social responsibility. The chapter shows that the launch of this campaign, not least by using Aardman Animations, relies heavily on both film history and the history of commercials.

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The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support from the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, P13-1261:1), which allowed us to conduct the research project on which this book – and many of our other publications over the past few years – have been based. We would also like to thank Charles R. Acland, Cynthia B. Meyers, and Haidee Wasson for invaluable input and advice in the early stages of this project. Our work has been tremendously enriched by the many exchanges and conversations we have had and continue to have with colleagues who joined us in the Screen Advertising Research Network, including Roszita Alexandrova, Lucie Česálková, Sema Colpan, Malcolm Cook, Michael Cowan, Jeremy Groskopf, John Hoffmann, Martin L. Johnson, Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, Cynthia B. Meyers, Karin Moser, Lydia Nsiah, Matthew Ogonoski, Joachim Schätz, and Gregory A. Waller. Thanks to Dan Streible for allowing us to host our 2018 event, The Love that Speaks Its Name: Advertising Film Workshop, in conjunction with the Orphan Film Symposium in New York City that year, and to all additional attendees, including Dominique Brégent-Heald, Joseph Clark, Susmita Das, Jason Cody Douglass, Tanya Goldman, Jelena Rakin, Natalie Snoyman, and Alexander Stark. We would like to thank Julia Noordegraaf for initiating, in 2009, the dialogue between archivists and scholars that prompted our own collaboration. A subsequent conference, Exploring Advertising, was held in cooperation with the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm in May 2012, and we would like to extend our thanks to the participants of this lively event, including Mats Björkin, William Boddy, Mats Jönsson, Martin Koerber, Charles McGovern, Anke Mebold, Sean Nixon, Jacob Östberg, Floris Paalman, Amy Sargent, and Jon Wengström. Thanks are also due to Jörgen Andersson and Jan Nord (Esprit), Andreas Hellström (SWE Advertising Agency), and Stefanie Pahmeyer (BBDO), and especially to research archivist Annette Groschke at the Deutsche Kinemathek. We have been fortunate in having editorial assistance and owe much gratitude in this respect to Heather MacDougall and Tabitha Volohonsky. This book also benefitted from assistance supplied by Amsterdam University Press's expert editorial and production team, most notably Maryse Elliott and Danielle Carter.

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