

## A Cinematic Soap Opera: Lever Brothers and the Use of Cinematography as a Promotional and Marketing Tool

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Unilever's company historian claimed that radio and cinema advertising was not part of Lever Brothers/Unilever until the late 1930s (Wilson 1968). Despite the paucity of surviving archival sources it can be proved, however, that the company engaged with the new medium of cinematography from its earliest days. François-Henri Lavanchy-Clarke (1848-1922), who was coming towards the end of his life and reviewing his contribution to the development of cinematography as a marketing tool in Lever Brothers, proclaimed proudly to William Lever (1851-1925), the British soap manufacturer, "I procured you the first cinema". This was in 1896, only months after the Lumière brothers perfected their techniques.

Lever is renowned for his innovative approach to advertising and marketing and as a pioneer in creating brand identity, but what is not so well known is that he was one of the first businessmen to recognise the value of film as an advertising tool. It can even be claimed that a Lever Brothers' product featured in the first ever example of product placement on film. Lavanchy-Clarke saw the promotional and marketing possibilities of cinematography from its very beginnings and persuaded Lever of its potential efficacy, utilising his connections with the Lumière brothers to source the equipment and make promotional films for Lever Brothers. Lavanchy-Clarke started with a spectacle at the International Exposition in Geneva in 1896, using a film of his own family washing clothes in a tub in their garden with boxes of *Sunlight Soap* placed prominently in the foreground. The first screening attracted 70,000 people. He secured preferential rights from the Lumières for Lever Brothers and Nestlé in England. This innovative joint enterprise included the filming of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession which was shown in theatres across the land and followed by other commissioned footage such as the university boat race, which garnered much positive press coverage for Levers and Nestlé.

Lever and Lavanchy-Clarke parted company in 1899, but Lever Brothers continued to explore the medium of film. It was used, not just for advertising, but also as a promotion and educational tool, with regular film shows in Port Sunlight. Film became such an integral part of firstly Lever Brothers', and then Unilever's, promotional and marketing campaigns that a cinema was incorporated into the London head office and other Lever offices around the world. The company also continued to be inspired by new innovation within the field, which reflects Lever's innovative approach to advertising overall. They moved into cinema advertising as purpose-built cinemas started to appear and used hand coloured film in the early 1920s to advertise the benefits of using *Twink* clothes dye.

America was the source for much of Lever's inspiration in advertising and marketing and he was amongst the first to introduce many new promotional techniques from America. Although Europe provided the initial catalyst for his interest in cinematography in the form of Lavanchy-Clarke and the Lumières, as the film industry developed in America Lever's attention turned there. Lever Brothers was swift to recognise the promotional value of "exploitation campaigns" and "tin-ins". The Mack Sennett produced comedy *Molly O'*, starring Mabel Normand, was thought to be the most thoroughly exploited film of the age at the time of its release in 1921 and Lever Brothers created a linked campaign for *Lifebuoy* soap on trams in over 200 American cities using Mabel Normand's name and image. Building on this success, J Walter Thompson created the *Lux Soap* film stars campaign, using the slogan "Nine out of Ten film stars use Lux Toilet Soap". The idea of celebrity endorsement harked back to the late nineteenth century press advertisements, but now using a new medium and aimed at the new cinema-going audience. It was one of the first efforts to link a brand with the cinema on such a large scale and was so successful that it ran for decades using the stars of the moment.

In spite of the scarcity of archival material, this paper will demonstrate that Lever Brothers was active in the use of cinematography from the mid 1890s, reflecting Lever's innovative approach to advertising and promotion. It will examine Lever's relationship with Lavanchy-Clarke and the network of people involved in the film industry with whom the company worked. It will look into what drew Lever to the use of film and how the company then went on to use the medium as part of its marketing campaigns, placing it ahead of many of its competitors, whilst also casting light on the culture of early film

advertising as it transitioned from more traditional forms of showmanship to more modern concepts of public relations.

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