

commercials as a fine art

Most filmmakers aspire to practice their art freely, to be gainfully and regularly employed, and to reach a wide public.

Fritz Spiess has succeeded on all these fronts. He spoke at length to Patricia Thorvaldson who prepared the following article with him.

interview and transcription by

Patricia
Thorvaldson

Fritz Spiess was born in Germany into a family of photographers. When he was 16 years old his father gave him a book on filmmaking which immediately prompted his first film, a 45-minute documentary on one of the famous church choirs of Leipzig. Later he completed a three-year apprenticeship in photography with a celebrated portrait photographer of the day, Tita Binz, graduated Master of Photography from the Photo School of Munich in 1949, and started his own commercial photography studio in Heidelberg, Germany.

In 1951 he came to Canada. After two years in commercial photography he became one of Canada's first television commercial film cameramen. He has been Director of Photography on well over 2,000 commercials during his years with Caldwell Studios, Robert Lawrence Productions, TDF Film Productions and most recently with Bob Schulz Productions in Toronto. In the past few years he has also been directing an increasing number of commercials.

Almost all his commercials have been noteworthy for their extremely sophisticated, and often ingenious and inventive, techniques. He himself displays the respect for the tools of his trade which always distinguishes the highly accomplished craftsman.

Patricia Thorvaldson was editor of the National Film Board publication Pot Pourri from its beginnings until this summer when the NFB decided to cease publication.



Sketch by Jaan Pill

"Even if one has worked with an agency for a long time somebody might ask: "We know Fritz Spiess can photograph green peas, but can he photograph stainless steel?" Requirements tend to become very specific in the commercial field and cameramen run the risk of becoming typecast. By keeping in touch with the latest technical developments in the industry and by not being afraid of trying out and acquiring new and unproven pieces of equipment and processes I constantly try to fight this danger of becoming typecast. And I must admit that judging by the wide variety of assignments I get, I don't seem to have run into too much trouble in this respect.

In photographing TV commercials I believe in using a variety of styles, whatever seems best suited for a particular commercial. But then, once the choice of approach has been made and agreed upon one has to maintain that style of lighting, camera moves and so on, not only for the 60 seconds of this one commercial, but possibly for other commercials of the same product, in order to maintain a uniform look to the whole campaign. Then, just when you think you have done just about every style possible, along comes a storyboard for a new commercial which requires a different approach again. Now, we all wish we could come up with something really new every time we are facing a new problem, but there are only so many ways, even though the possibilities of different combinations of known techniques are almost endless.

Almost all the commercials I have worked on over the years have been 30 or 60 seconds in length, and in most cases comprising both English and French versions. On the average it takes a 10-hour day for the actual shooting, and often longer. In fact, with all the regulations governing commercial production in Canada it often takes weeks before a commercial is approved in script form, and before it can then go into production and get released, finally, for the air. Sometimes changes have to be made even after completion because regulations change. And besides, various government offices have different interpretations of certain regulations too, like the beer spots, for example, where you can show only so many bottles or glasses of beer in one province, and so many in another, but in no case can any person ever be seen drinking beer.

Each commercial production is always very much a team effort and there has to be great flexibility on everyone's part. It quite often becomes very much a give-and-take situation, particularly when budget considerations enter the picture. But everybody, from the writer right through to the film editor, contributes and gives something to the production. In 99 percent of the cases the agency does the writing and comes up with the ideas for scenes and settings. If locations are required, and if time and budget allow, we go out together with the people who originally conceived the idea and scout for suitable settings. And sometimes one finds something at a location which is much better than one could possibly have dreamed of ahead of time. We had one situation a couple of years ago where we walked into an old kitchen and there was a skylight in the ceiling. Well, who would have ever thought of building a skylight into an old kitchen if we had constructed the set on the soundstage. But there it was. And it was genuine, and it was marvellous for me to work with. I now had a natural light source right there within the scene and I could build my lighting around it – something I wouldn't have thought of otherwise.

Study the Masters

Lighting is really the beginning and end of all photography. Not only does the light which is physically hitting the emulsion cause the exposure on the film, but it also creates dimension. By studying paintings of the Old Masters throughout history it is interesting to observe how the light source

illuminating the subject has been changing from century to century. In early paintings there is no discernable light source at all and as a result these early paintings appear two-dimensional. Eventually, however, as history progresses, one becomes aware of a distinct light source in the paintings which adds depth and roundness to the subject matter. And finally, a startling three-dimensional feeling is achieved by moving the main light source right into the painted scene as in the work of some of the later Italian painters. The same effect too, can be seen in Zeffirelli's recent film **Jesus of Nazareth** which is, in many sequences, and particularly during the Last Supper scenes, brilliantly lit from within.

You see, without lighting you are just taking polaroid snapshots. Lighting remains always my special concern. It is the most important tool a cameraman has available to create a mood and enhance a story, and this is true for feature films and commercials alike.

Some commercials are called, in the trade, an editor's dream, because there may be 6000 feet of film shot which have to be edited down into a 30-second commercial. And some other commercials are a director's dream because of their reliance on careful casting and on a strong perfor-



**"... Capture one for yourself today.
The exotic bird.
The 1974 Pontiac Firebird..."**

The firebird commercial was the most expensive commercial I ever worked on. It was nearly the end of the car. The stunt driver misjudged the speed by half a mile... the jungle sequences were shot in Florida... it was hellishly hot... we actually built a jungle with plants we rented from a garden shop... we built a dolly track all around and painted it green... the plywood alone was \$750... we had to cut out all extra light in order to create the moody feeling we required... we had the car lifted up... we found a plant with leaves big enough to hide the mechanism underneath... we shot the hoop jump at the Toronto airport... but that's a whole other story.

The cost was never worked out but that job was in the \$35,000 to \$40,000 range. "Firebird" ran in the States as well as in Canada, which was very gratifying. It doesn't happen very often that a Canadian commercial is adopted by the States.

—Fritz Spiess



"I do enjoy working with beautiful people like Elke Sommer"

mance by a well-directed actor or actress. Well, there are other commercials which we call the cameraman's dream because they require complicated camera moves and tricky lighting and there isn't much for a director to direct. For example, the subject might be a kitchen appliance. So in cases like this the cameraman becomes also the director. It is, in fact, a trend right now in the States to have more cameramen-directors in commercial productions. And in the last few years I seem to be getting more and more of that sort of thing to do myself.

I have also been working a lot more on special effects. Sometimes special effects are a gimmick, but in most cases they are a necessary part of conveying a story. One of the more recent commercials I worked on involved shooting a complete 60-second sequence of special effects – TV sets floating and assembling in space – and at the same time photographing and directing a star like Elke Sommer, all in one uncut sequence. It was a wonderful challenge. We had to come up, in the optical house, with a lot of new combinations of otherwise long-known optical processes and devices, and it all worked out to a very successful commercial. And I do enjoy working with beautiful people like Elke Sommer.

But to me the most convincing commercials are the straight demonstrations of a product, like a man shaving in 60 seconds. No special effect in the world can give a better demonstration than somebody shaving before the camera, in 60 seconds, without any cuts. This, to me, is the ultimate in selling a product. But then I wouldn't want to do that kind of commercial every day either. As I said before, the interesting thing for me about commercials is the wide variety they offer.

Someone once stated that film and television have become the church of the twentieth century. I agree with that statement, and feel that advertising through commercials on television has a great responsibility. I personally have no scruples about selling soap or whatever other product I am filming. We need soap. What we don't need is all the violence on TV and in film these days. Take two recent pic-

tures, **Black Christmas** and **Black Sunday**, for example. I was asked to see both pictures at special preview screenings. In both instances I left the theatre thinking to myself, "Well, I'm glad I'm not working on that sort of thing." Because I do not believe in selling violence.

Competition Is the Game

There is a lot of criticism heard about people working in the commercial field. But the point is, we live in a competitive world and we all have to face it, particularly the people who want to make films other than commercials. To make a feature film, for which hopefully at least two or three million people will want to give up their free time and spend their money to see, seems to me the most competitive thing in the world. Making feature films is like playing Russian roulette in reverse – only one in six makes it. It's so competitive that anybody who talks against the competitive society shouldn't be in the business of making films. It also strikes me as somewhat contradictory when I see feature films, made by people who don't believe in working on TV commercials, nevertheless advertised on TV in commercial form.

Commercials are, by nature, very competitive, both in their concept and in their production. They do try to influence people, of course. That is the whole purpose of a commercial. It is a strong statement with a definite point of view. A commercial is basically a piece of propaganda. Some of the best documentary (**Triumph of the Will**) and feature (**Potemkin**, **Birth of a Nation**) films have also made very strong one-sided statements and have even been political propaganda. And I do think that when I make a commercial for a particular product I am also making a much more honest statement than in the wishy-washy interview style of filmmaking, which supposedly is truthful, where you ask people's opinions and then make darn sure that in the end you do not offend anybody, that it all comes out 50-50, and that enough people have spoken for the subject in question as against it. I did a lot of soul-searching some years ago and I believe what I am saying here. If a manufacturer brings out a new or improved product I believe he must be prepared to stand up for it in the competitive marketplace. By advertising it, then – especially on TV alongside commercials showing similar products – he already risks unfavourable comparison by the public at an early stage. Yes, of course, sometimes a need for something that did not exist before can be created by commercials, but I do believe that people can think for themselves. They know what the purpose of a commercial is and anybody who doesn't want the product doesn't have to buy it. For that matter nobody has to buy a TV set in the first place.

The Bread and Butter

Commercials are the hub of the film industry in Canada and most of the film crews and technical people who are working on the occasional feature film are the very ones who otherwise earn their living working on commercials. Without this large pool of freelance people who, through their unions, can be called upon as required, we wouldn't have a film industry in Canada at all. The same thing holds true for the sustaining of laboratories and optical houses. The commercial industry keeps them going. It seems, when a feature film goes through the lab, that a great deal of extra attention is paid to the processing of it. But many of the commercial production houses have, for years now, been shooting the equivalent of at least three or four feature films a year. In fact there are so many production houses in Can-

ada now specializing in commercials that it would be interesting to add up the total of their combined, exposed, yearly footage.

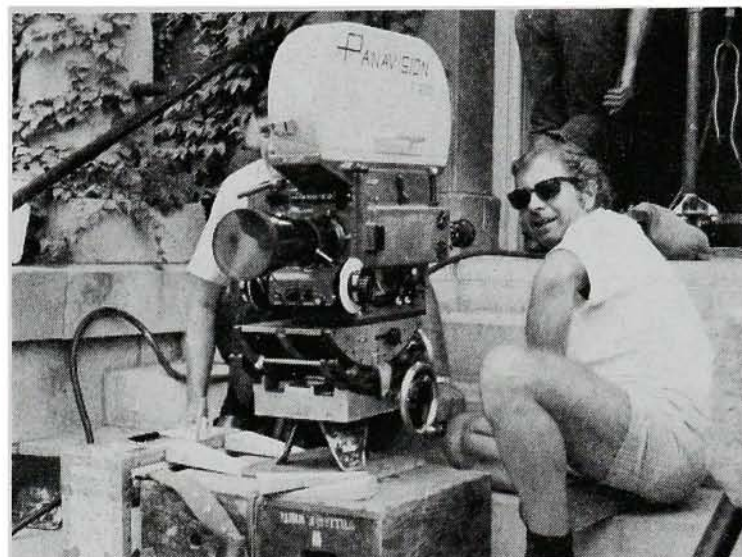
I am not frustrated doing commercials, although many people think I ought to be. Look at the available budgets, for example. What one usually has to work with as a cameraman photographing commercials is comparable only to big features. That's in terms of production money spent per minute of final film. And by that I mean actual money for crews and equipment, not considering any star fees, of course. So why should I be longing to do cheap features if it doesn't give me the scope to do what I can do in day-to-day commercial production?

In my opinion the weak point in Canadian feature film production has been the lack of good scripts. Several years ago I spent a couple of weeks in Hollywood, mainly at Universal studios. I was fascinated by this "factory" turning out weekly TV programs like sausages. And I thought their sausages were bloody good indeed. I tried to find and see the formula behind it all by asking a lot of questions of a lot of people, and I found that even scriptwriters use a lot of patterns and formulas. There are many little tricks the commercial writer knows, and as a professional he uses that knowledge as a tool for structuring and pacing a plot. He does not complain about being restricted to exactly 26 minutes for each weekly program, the same way as poets in the past did not question that the classic form of a sonnet always has 14 lines.

Limitation can be a challenge. It requires discipline to creatively express oneself despite prescribed restrictions. Take Michaelangelo, for example. He first and foremost thought himself a sculptor, but the Pope, with whom he worked, told him, "Paint that ceiling!" Having overcome his initial reluctance and doubts he painstakingly completed that most remarkable masterpiece using the sculptor's eye to add a three-dimensional depth to the painting on an otherwise dull, flat ceiling. And today this achievement is what Michaelangelo is most famous for.

Modern Art

So if people say "Gee, I am an artist. I can't possibly let myself down by doing anything commercial," I think they are really kidding themselves. If you look at the great artists of the past and read about their lives you will discover that they did not consider themselves artists in today's sense. They were artisans and craftsmen doing mostly precom-



Fritz Spiess at his best, behind a camera

missioned work, often under long contractual commitments. And they kept working because they needed the money. J.S. Bach had to support a very large family. His contract with the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig stipulated regular new compositions for the weekly church cantata performances, and to supplement his income he also did some compositions for weddings and other secular occasions. And if he didn't get his work for the church done on time, he didn't hesitate to add new words to the music he had previously written for another occasion. The opening chorus of his famous and seemingly so sacrosanct Christmas Oratorio was originally part of a wedding cantata.

I am often asked whether I think TV commercials are a new art form. Well, my answer is that if whoever asks that question accepts a poster painted by Toulouse-Lautrec as art, then he or she would also have to consider an ad for Chanel No. 5 as art as well. Like the commercials on TV, posters, by the very nature of their design and intended use in display, are advertising and so ultimately selling something. But does that fact exclude them from being art? Is Toulouse-Lautrec an artist when he paints a conventional painting but not when he paints a poster?

Commercials are propaganda – in the wide sense of the word as I like to apply it. So are posters. I believe that commercials are the posters of the television age.

"Any work worth doing is worth doing well." That is what I repeatedly tell young people who want to learn their craft. I am often asked about various techniques – how to light for different situations, how to control color, how to create certain special effects. In meetings of organizations such as the Canadian Society of Cinematographers we all freely exchange new ideas and technical innovations and developments. I am always prepared to freely pass on my experiences when someone asks me. And I do not feel I am giving any exclusive secrets away because, first of all, many of these so-called secrets were already known 10, 20, or even 30 years ago to cinematographers who, equally freely, passed on their knowledge to me, and secondly, because no two situations are ever really alike. One can learn from many different sources, and one should, and has to, learn all the time. But it is important to remember that ultimately one is completely alone to make the final decision about which approach in style and technique to choose for tomorrow's assignment.

In all these years of being active in commercial photography I have never forgotten the words of one of my teachers: "Few people know how much one has to know in order to know how little one knows." □

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