

# Orphans Project Write-Up: *Master Hands*



<http://www.archive.org/details/MasterHa1936>

## Introduction

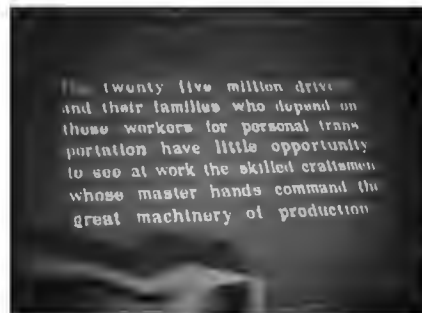
The primary avenues of research that we have chosen to pursue for the purposes of this project fall into the following categories: 1. Chevrolet's film based advertising campaigns – industrial films and their usage, 2. the creators of *Master Hands* – Jam Handy, cinematographer Gordon Avil, and the Detroit Philharmonic, and 3. labor issues relating to Chevrolet – particularly the strikes that occurred in 1937, just after the 1936 film release.

## The Film Itself: A Brief Outline

*Master Hands*, partially due to its Library of Congress endorsement as a valuable work of art, has become the prototypical example of the industrial [art] film. It portrays the workers of the Chevrolet factory as master craftsmen in an artistic style reminiscent of contemporaneous German propagandistic films by Leni Riefenstahl. It provides brief introductory intertitles and sparse commentary, focusing instead on shots of workers in action and machines in motion.



Leni Riefenstahl in action.



MH intertitle

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The Creation of *Master Hands*

The film was produced, under the direction of Jam Handy, by Jam Handy Organization, which produced scores of industrial films, many for Chevrolet. Cinematography is credited to Gordon Avil, apparently one of Chevrolet's frequent film directors, also known for TV series such as *Zorro* and nominated for an 1967-8 Emmy for cinematography in an episode of TV series *Hogan's Heroes*. Music direction is credited to Samuel Benavie, who later worked with Avil and Jam Handy Organization on Chevrolet film *American Harvest*. The music for the film is attributed to the Detroit Philharmonic Orchestra (the Detroit Symphony Orchestra has long been in the pay of GM, suggesting that this Orchestra or one like it provided the music for *Master Hands*).

[Jam Handy Organization: <http://www.archive.org/details/ProfileJ26> ].

[Jam Handy, see Linda Robinson Walker in Michigan Today 3/95:  
<http://www.umich.edu/~newsinfo/MT/95/Mar95/mt2m95.html> ].

[Gordon Avil IMDB filmography: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0043138/> ].

Chevrolet Industrial Films

Although the Library of Congress may have had multiple justifications for considering *Master Hands* to be a unique work of art, the film was certainly not the only one of its kind, or even Chevrolet's only attempt at the industrial art film. Chevrolet has frequently used film as an advertising tool and as a vehicle for product placement. In the Jam Handy Organization film *Helping You Sell*, and in other promotional and sales instruction materials we get a sense of the ways that these films were used. The films' primary purpose appears to have been to help the salespeople and dealerships to widen their audiences by appealing to the community through the medium of film.

The Complete Package

In an article on Jam Handy, we find the following description of Jam Handy Organization's procedures:

“General Motors executives picked Handy to develop filmstrips for GM subsidiaries—films that could have subtitles printed on them, and be stopped to allow discussion. Skip Wendt, a filmmaker who was employed by the Handy Organization in the 1960s and '70s, said that for the introduction of a new model Chevrolet, Handy's group would produce separate packages of materials for dealers, salesmen, mechanics, and customers--

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brochures, manuals, pamphlets, filmstrips, everything--to teach about the model, and to fire the enthusiasm of the staff.”

[Linda Robinson Walker in Michigan Today 3/95:  
<http://www.umich.edu/~newsinfo/MT/95/Mar95/mt2m95.html>]

Here we get a sense of a full scale promotional apparatus – every angle has been considered and every sales possibility pointed out to employees and sales representatives of all sorts. The film medium has clearly been integrated into the performance of salesmanship.

### Strategic Film Markets

The meta-advertising Jam Handy Organization film *Helping You Sell* mentions at least four different community markets that may be appealed to through films. The film illustrates a marketing strategy consisting of appealing to: 1. Students in high schools and universities who influence family car choices, 2. Organized groups and clubs that draw in businessmen and professionals, 3. Factories, mills and industrial organizations that employ potential buyers, and 4. Families through showings at Community Theaters. Again, the Jam Handy Organization leaves no stone unturned in appealing to all segments of the population through their various compulsory and community organizations.

### Film Genres

According to the same film, the genres of Chevrolet industrial films include: the industrial (the narrator includes *Master Hands* in this category), films explaining processes, films animating or illustrating new technologies, animated films, and newsreels bringing you the latest Chevrolet trivia and entertainment. There is no direct indication as to whether specific genres target specific audiences, however it seems likely that animated Cinderella films were directed more toward families than toward mechanics. Likewise, films about sales were probably not directed toward the consumer.

### Other Chevrolet / Jam Handy Films of 1936

In 1936 Chevrolet and Jam Handy Organization also produced such illustrious films as *Formations*, about Cinderella’s Chevrolet that takes her home safely after the ball, *When You Know*, about how safe driving is when you know how to do it properly, and at least half a dozen episodes of the recurrent *Chevrolet Leader News*, the newsreel update showing how Chevrolets can even be used as a platform for diving or as a fishing net.

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These newsreels can be considered early examples of product placement (or propaganda), as they were shown before commercial films in the same manner as other historical (non-industrial) newsreels appeared prior to the featured attraction. Chevrolet newsreels often served as a format for stunts and exciting or bizarre new uses for Chevrolet cars. In one reel, we see a turtle tied to the top of a car for structural purposes, in another a car surviving a fall off a cliff or a leap through a ring of fire.

Related Chevrolet Films

Jam Handy / Chevrolet films more closely related to *Master Hands* include the 1936 animated Technicolor film *A Coach for Cinderella* in which gnomes and small creatures design a Chevrolet for Cinderella using flowers and other all natural materials. This animated film produced the same year as *Master Hands* deals with similar vehicle construction themes.

The 1937 sales film *Helping You Sell* includes footage of *Master Hands* and other contemporary works. This industrial sales film instructs viewers on the usage of Chevrolet's industrial art films in selling cars.

*American Harvest*, a 1955 industrial film, concerns ores and natural materials taken from American soil and how workers use them in constructing Chevrolets. This film reunited *Master Hands* cinematographer Gordon Avil with *Master Hands* music director Samuel Benavie. While the earlier film avoids overt mention of workers organizing, this film contains blatantly anti-strike / anti-union messages.

“And all these ores for all these many metals call for many men to dig them from the earth and bring them forth. Any natural lack or artificial shortage may stop the entire economic parade.” –*American Harvest*

Henry Jam(ison) Handy:

Maverick Jamison Handy, founder of Jam Handy Organization, had a number of careers aside from industrial filmmaking. As a result of his work with the *Chicago Tribune*, he was kicked out of the University of Michigan for writing an exaggerated newspaper article about a professor. He was subsequently blacklisted from any further university career, at least until the conferral of his honorary doctorates of education from Detroit Institute of Technology and Eastern Michigan University. He spent a number of years as a journalist before breaking into instructional and industrial filmmaking. He is also known as the Olympian who won medals 20 years apart – one at age 18 (a swimming

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bronze in 1904 in St. Louis) and one at age 38 (a bronze for team water polo in 1924 in Paris).

Gordon Avil

Gordon Avil served as cinematographer for Chevrolet films *Master Hands* (1936) and *American Harvest* (1955). He made a career of industrial films, b-movies and prominent TV shows. His cinematography for TV series *Hogan's Heroes* won him an Emmy nomination. He worked with musical director Samuel Benavie and Jam Handy Organization on both Chevrolet films. Although the purpose of the Chevrolet films clearly involves selling cars, both films are quite striking in the artistic way that they present their subjects. *Master Hands* resembles an art studio exhibition or a behind the scenes look at found sculpture more than it does an industrial car sales promotion, and *American Harvest* hovers somewhere between environmental documentary, geological instruction and social commentary on men at work. From a cinematographic point of view, the films can easily be termed art works. Avil clearly presents more with his camera than a simple message about consumerism. Chevrolet and Jam Handy Organization obviously intended these films to speak to as wide an audience as possible, and the films, despite moments of self-consciousness about being industrial films, do convey a feeling of encapsulating something more.

Industrial Propaganda

The social and economic tenor at the time of the Great Depression, when *Master Hands* was produced, make the work critically important to historians and archivists as well as to the general public. In the early 1930s Adolf Hitler realized the powerful potential of filmmaking as a tool to influence the political opinions of a vast number of people. He recruited the young filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, who crafted for him "The Triumph of the Wills" a clarion call to follow and support the ideals of the Nazi party. Her use of dramatic and breathtaking cinematography coupled with potent editing, helped Riefenstahl to resurrect the 'propaganda' film and bring it into international mainstream culture. (Riefenstahl below) (Triumph of the Will)



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U.S. Government Propaganda Films

The U.S. government would later hire veteran Hollywood movie director Frank Capra to create the “Why We Fight” series; an equally manipulative and one-sided look at the policies and tactics of the U.S. armed forces. But while Hitler manipulated the mainstream cinema by outlawing specific artists and the exhibition of their work, the U.S. government would soon learn not only to create their own propaganda films but would also require the Hollywood studios to infuse these politics into American mainstream cinema. Hollywood’s acceptance of these mandates would prove to be a most important tool in rallying Americans during times of war. The American-made works would not join the ranks of what was considered ‘propaganda’ until years later.

GM Speaks

*“What’s good for GM is good for the country.”*  
--Charles Wilson, former CEO, General Motors  
from Who Built America? Volume Two:

Big Business and the American Infrastructure

*“We must bear in mind the obvious fact that our education institutions, the schools, the Daily press, the radio, etc. are all controlled by Big Business – by that small section of the population which suffers little from the hardships of depression and war. As a matter of fact, depression and war are the result of the part Big Business plays in our economy. Does it stand to reason therefore that their controlled institutions will teach us how to change it?”* Carl Johnson, columnist “The Searchlight” (March 1, 1945)

Propaganda Film Upholding the “American Way of Life”

*Master Hands* was produced by General Motors after this wave of socially conscious filmmaking began to make an impact on audiences all over the world. Besides Riefenstahl’s work that glorified the Nazis, itself a threat to the American way of life, General Motors was likely also concerned with the ‘subversion’ they saw at home in the likes of Charlie Chaplin’s work. In 1936, just a year after *Triumph of the Wills* made its debut, United Artists released *Modern Times*, a Chaplin comedy that satirized the growing industrial revolution. The film was labeled as ‘communist propaganda’ by critics because of its depiction of labor and management and its criticisms of the capitalist system. Because of the large audience Chaplin could draw now at the peak of his career, big business in the United States had good reason to question whether the film could

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sway popular opinion towards the growing labor movement and union actions beginning to occur across the country in various sectors of industry.



Charlie Chaplin at work



Filmic Influences Evident in *Master Hands*

Ironically, like both *Triumph of the Will* and *Modern Times*, *Master Hands* is intensely influenced by the first great propaganda film, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, released in 1925 and credited by historians as a prime motivation in organizing the Russian people to revolution. *Master Hands* is clearly a work that uses these other films as models to manipulate the opinion of General Motors' increasingly agitated workforce and, maybe more importantly, to affect public opinion through public relations.



*Battleship Potemkin* Images





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UAW Targets Flint's Fisher I

Only several months had passed since General Motors produced *Master Hands* when the first 'sit-down' occurred at the Fisher I automobile body factory in Flint, Michigan. The United Auto Workers (UAW) had targeted Flint as central to the GM facilities.

Preventing Removal of the Dies

The strike soon spread to a second factory in Flint, Fisher Body II, located nearby. The workers staged a 'sit-down' to prevent the company's removal of the huge dies critical to the factory's production. By literally sitting down and occupying the factory the union members were able to ensure the dies couldn't be moved to another location. After the UAW union leader Victor Reuther was sent to Flint, GM got an injunction against strikers from a Circuit Court judge (Edward D. Black). Black was soon revealed as the owner of over \$200,000 in GM Stock and was disqualified from any involvement in the hearing. 'Sit-downs' spread to other GM factories across the U.S.

Months of striking led the workers to create an infrastructure. The "Master Hands" of Chevrolet turned to master organizing.



*Handy circa 1930 with his children (l-r) Chaille, Sarah and Jamison Jr. Handy received honorary doctor of education degrees from Detroit Institute of Technology and Eastern Michigan University. Detroit honored him with a Jam Handy Day in 1961.*

*Master Hands* in Historical and Social Context

Through all of this related material we can begin to get a sense of why and how *Master Hands* was created and how it functioned in a broader context. The film was clearly aimed at selling cars and promoting the production processes at the Chevrolet manufacturing plants. The film makes use of some of the most prolific talents from the industrial film sector and seems to shy away from overt commercialism or mentions of workers organizing. In looking at some of *Master Hands*' contemporaries, both in the international film sector and within Chevrolet's own industrial film production, we can



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see that this film is both, as the Library of Congress suggests, a unique artwork, and as suggested by *Helping You Sell*, one in a series of many propagandistic and commercialist media efforts on the part of the company. The participants in the film also possess this quality of catering to more than one master – cinematographer Gordon Avil with his multiple genres, Jam Handy with his various careers and hobbies, and his history of skewed “reporting,” and the Detroit Symphony – an artistic organization fully funded by a car company. As we see in this film, art and industry make strange bedfellows, and sometimes even commercialism can produce fascinating aesthetic creations.