

# the EMPIRE Deep Dive

IN OUR REGULAR SERIES, WE EXPLORE  
A SLICE OF CINEMA LORE

THIS MONTH

## THE AD-LAND ALL-STARS

WORDS ADAM SMITH

 THE RED DRESS

THE REVOLUTION STARTED WITH A KEBAB.

Sometime in the early 1970s, three men met in a Turkish restaurant in London's Fitzrovia and set in motion a train of events that would change Hollywood forever. David Puttnam, Charles Saatchi and Alan Parker were all former colleagues at the legendary advertising agency Collett Dickenson Pearce. In the previous decade, they had been key in upending the then moribund world of commercials, transforming it from a dull cultural backwater into a white-hot creative powerhouse.

CDP had produced some of the most memorable print and TV commercials of all time. The long-running Cinzano campaign, in which Leonard Rossiter dumped vermouth over Joan Collins with the satisfying regularity of Wile E. Coyote falling off a cliff, and Hovis' sentimental trip down a cobbled Northern street to the strains of a brass band, were both from CDP. Happiness had become a cigar named Hamlet, and Heineken refreshed the parts other beers couldn't reach, all thanks to their world-beating creative teams.

And now, together with a small group of fellow ad-men — Ridley and Tony Scott, Hugh Hudson and Adrian Lyne — these three CDP alumni were about to take everything they'd learned in ad-land and apply it to the movies. The results would be a host of films that would define Hollywood for a decade and beyond. *Alien*, *Flashdance*, *Top Gun*, *Midnight Express*, *The Hunger*, *Blade Runner*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Bugsy Malone*, *9½ Weeks*, *Chariots Of Fire* — all would have the creative DNA of these London advertising men wound inextricably through them.

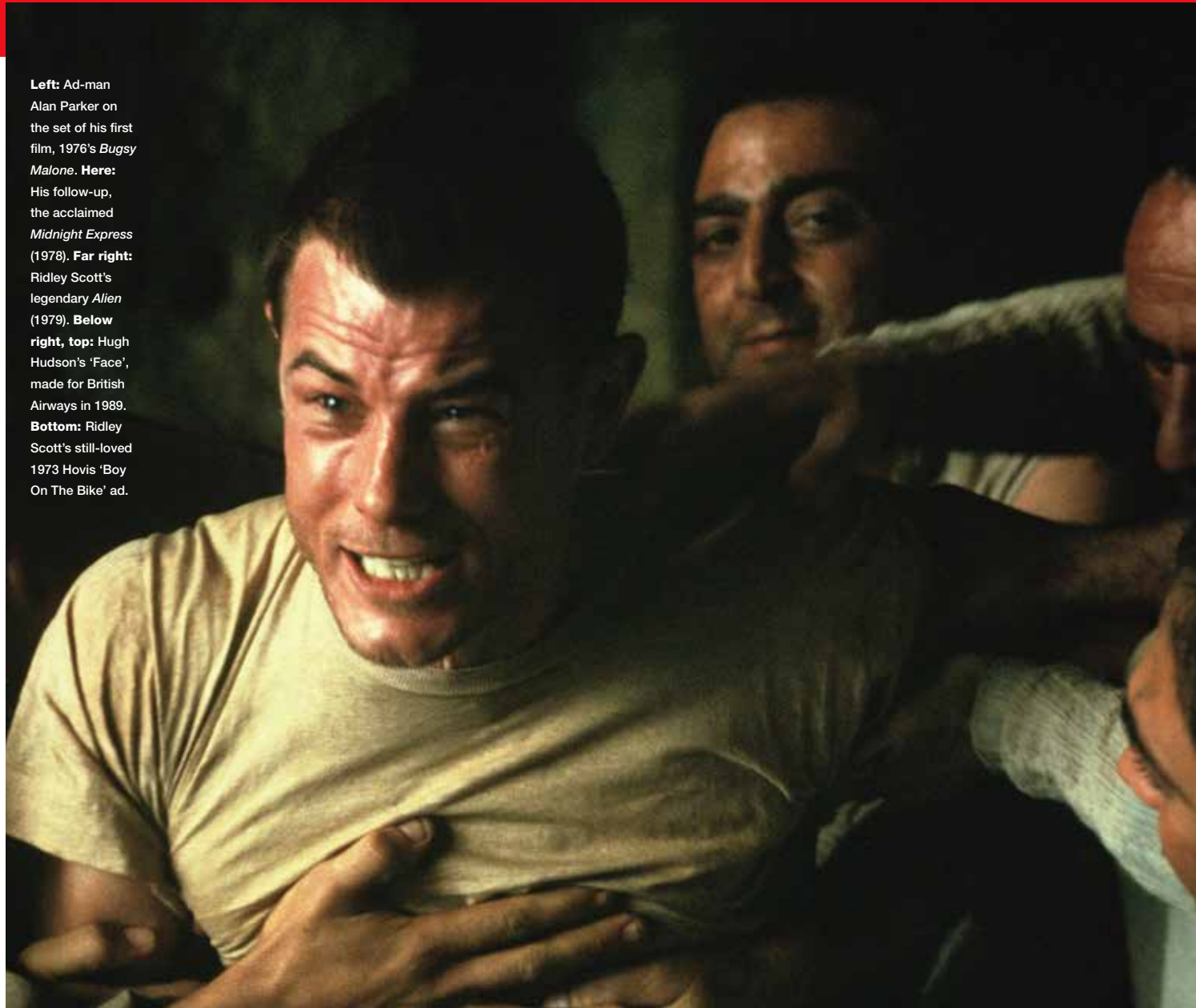
But that was in the future. When Parker sat down at the Kebab & Hummus on Charlotte Street, he was a flourishing commercials director with his own company and had, perhaps, expected nothing more than a pleasant reunion — maybe a re-run of the legendary lunches that CDP had become famous for, boozy epics that often stretched into the evening, occasionally into next week.







**Left:** Ad-man Alan Parker on the set of his first film, 1976's *Bugsy Malone*. **Here:** His follow-up, the acclaimed *Midnight Express* (1978). **Far right:** Ridley Scott's legendary *Alien* (1979). **Below right, top:** Hugh Hudson's 'Face', made for British Airways in 1989. **Bottom:** Ridley Scott's still-loved 1973 Hovis 'Boy On The Bike' ad.



But David Puttnam had grander plans. And he was about to unveil them. "Tell him, David!" Charles Saatchi gushed as the threesome sat down, before ignoring Puttnam and telling him himself. "We're going to discover you!"

"Why don't I discover you," replied Parker, with a little of his reflexive chippiness.

"Alan, we're going to change your life. We're going into the film industry," Puttnam said. "You're going to write a script, Charles is going to write a script. I'm going to get the money together."

"But I've never written anything longer than 30 seconds in my life!" Parker objected.

"That doesn't matter," Puttnam said. "We believe in you."

Parker mulled over the offer. He'd fallen into directing pretty much by accident in the first place. He'd been, at heart, a copywriter, a crafter of vignettes about frozen burgers or sherry that resonated with mass audiences, that *connected*, in a way adverts had never done before. Then again, 30 seconds, and an hour-and-a-half... what's the difference?

Maybe this film idea had something to it.

**W**hen David Puttnam had arrived at CDP in 1962, British advertising was a backwater, a home for second-raters, also-rans and misfits, and a career that you didn't boast about having fallen into. "If you had any kind of education you went into the theatre or you went into television or business. Advertising was just rather vulgar," Parker told the BBC in 2002. "But that's what led to the revolution. We had very little education, but advertising was incredibly egalitarian." As Puttnam said: "None of us had been to university, we didn't have a degree between us. But we were smart. We understood the world we were living in."

Back in the '50s and early '60s, advertising was often an afterthought. Space in magazines or on billboards was bought and then filled with not much more than a black-and-white shot of the product, the price, and a line of copy that was, at best, the result of half an hour's light writing over lunch. But, led by CDP's legendary creative director Colin Millward, Puttnam, Parker and Saatchi brought unprecedented creativity, wit and focus to the industry.

Parker's ads, which filled the glossy pages of the newly minted Sunday supplements, were

bold, funny and talked to the reader in an unprecedented, familiar, friendly way. "The last of the big suspenders," ran the headline for Pretty Polly hold-up stockings ("And there's no suspender like no suspender"); "Iced Cream" was his line for Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry, accompanying an unthinkable shocking shot of the then resolutely middle-class tippie with a couple of ice cubes plonked in it. "I've spent a decade putting this product on a pedestal and now you're selling it off the back of a barrow," a delighted Millward told Parker, as sherry sales shot through the roof.

The coming of colour television had galvanised the TV market and Parker's scripts were as impactful as his print ads. He wrote little domestic dramas, set in recognisably working-class homes. He mined British class anxieties for Cockburn's Port, putting the steerage passengers alongside the officers in a lifeboat and allowing them to bond over the joys of fortified wine. A commercial for Birds Eye beefburgers, 'Starving Artist', featured a pair of kids with broad Yorkshire accents ("Th'all never be a starvin' artist, this lad, will tha?"), depicting a hitherto unimagined frozen-burger-consuming

world north of Watford.

But he was increasingly unhappy with the quality of the ads being made from his writing. He asked if he could set up a test studio in CDP's basement and try out some new stuff.

"The empty, cavernous space was as big as a car park," he later wrote. "It became our own film studio. It was suggested that, as I had written the scripts, I should be the one who said, 'Action!' and, 'Cut.' Any fool could do that. From that moment on, I was hooked."

Parker the writer had become Parker the director and his test work, the 'basement films' as they became known at CDP, became increasingly ambitious and finally disruptive to an agency that was hardly unaccustomed to chaos. The crunch came when management came back from lunch to find the entire staff downstairs sporting tuxedos and ballgowns, shooting an epic ballroom scene. They suggested that Parker found his own production company. CDP would seed-fund it and bung work his way.

Meanwhile, Puttnam, the account director who had shepherded many of Parker's campaigns to their triumphant success, had his



**Far right:** Ridley Scott behind the lens. **Right, top to bottom:** Leonard Rossiter and Joan Collins in Parker's much-loved series of Cinzano ads; Fighter jet? Surely not! Tony Scott's ad for Saab; Clever wordplay in an early Parker print ad for Pretty Polly.



eye on bigger fish. "The British film industry was crap," he told *The Telegraph* in 2017. "The stuff they were producing was shit and I knew it. But then I saw *The Graduate* and I thought to myself, 'I could do that.' There was nothing in that film that required a budget. It was a makeable film. I knew the talents who I believed could write a film like that."

And so there was that lunch. And then there was Parker's feature debut, *Bugsy Malone*, in 1976, a pastiche gangster movie that was as far away from the dreary Brit-flicks of the era as could be. It had an irrepressible sense of fun, and in its twist — all the main characters were played by kids — an ad-man's keen sense for the Unique Selling Point.

It was a hit. And as Parker was borne shoulder-high from a triumphant Cannes screening, a Paramount executive named David V. Picker turned to Puttnam. This guy really knew how to shoot, he said. Did David know of any other ad-men who were as good? >





David did. A guy with an incredible eye who ran a production shop just along the street from CDP. Name of Ridley Scott.

**R**idley Scott had been watching Parker's cinematic ascent with mounting dismay. "When Al got *Bugsy Malone* I didn't sleep for a week," he told the BBC. "I literally got insomnia."

The two were both friends and rivals. "Between Ridley's company and ourselves we scooped up most of the good scripts," said Parker. "If a script opened with, 'We see a beautiful girl running in slow-motion along a golden Caribbean beach,' Ridley would get that. If a script read, 'We see two overweight ladies talking at a lunch counter in Shepherd's Bush,' I would get that."

Scott had arrived in advertising via the BBC, where he'd worked as a set designer and then director while shooting ads on the side. When that proved to be more lucrative than the day job he jumped ship, founding Ridley Scott Associates in the mid-'60s, just as the advertising boom was roaring into life. RSA was an innovation — it pretty much invented the idea of the dedicated commercials director. No longer would ads be made by telly directors slumming it, or film hacks who couldn't get work. They would be fashioned by mini-auteurs using the most cutting-edge techniques.

The first call for talent he put in was to his brother, Tony, a fellow art-school graduate who was still nursing ambitions to be a fine artist. "Ridley said, 'Come and make commercials with me and pay Dad back for eight years at art school,'" Tony remembered. It didn't hurt that his brother suggested that at the end of the year he'd have enough cash to buy a Ferrari.

When clients expressed qualms about getting the junior partner, Ridley secretly promised them that if Tony screwed it up, he'd reshoot the whole thing for free himself. He never needed to. Tony was a natural. His ads were polished, gleaming, all hard edges and pumping sound. A spot for Saab ('Nothing On Earth Compares') featured the car framed against a looming Saab 37 Viggen fighter jet. Shades of things to come.

"I cornered the market in sexy, rock 'n' roll stuff," he told writer Sam Delaney in 2006. "From the start, I had a blast. I had a run of ten years straight making commercials, during which I got the chance to fuck my way around the world. I couldn't believe it."

Hugh Hudson, an old Etonian with a taste



for the epic that he would later indulge with the disastrous *Revolution* (1985), was another among the new RSA intake. His cinema spot for Benson & Hedges, 'Iguana' — a surrealist epic shot in the Arizona desert involving geckos, rattlesnakes and a helicopter transporting a giant pack of fags à la Fellini — was a debacle to shoot, and at over £100,000 the most expensive commercial ever made. The execs at CDP pondered whether he'd gone mad. Stunned cinemagoers, meanwhile, put down their Kia-Ora and actually applauded. For British Airways' 'Face', he marshalled hundreds of extras who slowly formed into a face and then the airline's trademark globe.

With the huge success of RSA, commercials auteurs began to emerge elsewhere. At Jennie & Co over on Beak St, Adrian Lyne had started out as an inept account exec. "I kept all this foreign currency in my drawer and whenever the door opened it used to fly all over the place," he told the advertising podcast *Stuff From The Loft*. Perhaps to protect the company's finances, he was rapidly promoted, despite never having been behind a camera in his life. But once he called, "Action!" he revealed himself to be a master of propulsive energy, even if he did occasionally refuse to put a product shot in his masterpieces.

Wild, impulsive and undoubtedly possessed by genius, Lyne was temperamentally very different to the other new commercial auteurs. If Ridley did 'sumptuous' and Alan did 'story', Adrian was the high priest of 'cool and sexy'. His commercial for Brutus Jeans ('Jeans On') is a symphony of denim-clad derrières, enthusiastic crash-zooms and precision cuts.



Clockwise from top left: Ad-men nurturer David Puttnam clutches his Oscar for *Chariots Of Fire* (1981); Hugh Hudson's *Greystoke, The Legend Of Tarzan, Lord Of The Apes* (1984); Tony Scott's *Crimson Tide* (1995); Tony on set of 1986's *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise.



Above: Adrian Lyne brings all the sass and sex of his TV commercials to the big screen, here in 1986's *9½ Weeks*. Left: Lyne with Michael Douglas and Glenn Close while making pop-cultural touchstone *Fatal Attraction* (1987).



But it got fucking killed. It took me three more years to get another movie after it."

**B**y the mid-1980s, the British ad-men's invasion of Hollywood was all but complete. Tony Scott had overcome the disappointment of *The Hunger* to deliver

*Top Gun* in 1986, a hymn to the aesthetics of advertising. Ridley Scott had changed the way we imagined the future in his (appropriately advertising-drenched) *Blade Runner* in 1982. Adrian Lyne applied his peerless commercial gloss to *9½ Weeks* (1986) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and Alan Parker delivered *Angel Heart* (1987). What all these movies shared was an incomparable visual style, and a dedication to showing the audience a good time, a Hollywood virtue that had been all but forgotten amid the previous decade's angsty, anxious cinema.

Not everybody was happy with the way things had turned out. For David Puttnam, it represented a kind of betrayal. When he had started out, had looked at *The Graduate* and thought he could make films like that, he hadn't imagined that the generation of directors whose careers he had in many cases nurtured would decamp to LA and make movies featuring pumping rock soundtracks, jets and bunny-boilers. "I got slaughtered," Tony Scott remembered. "*Top Gun* represented everything bad that had ever been done in cinema. David Puttnam said that. He was meant to be my buddy and the fucker sank me!"

But not only had they defined Hollywood in the 1980s, they had forged a path from commercials to the big screen that future generations of directors would now regularly tread. Jonathan Glazer, Michael Mann, David Fincher, Michael Bay, Sofia Coppola and Spike Jonze all cut their teeth on commercials. For good or ill, Hollywood had bought what this scrappy band of British ad-men were selling, wholesale.

Then again, everybody always did. ●

# GO FIGURE

THE AD-LAND ALL-STARS' VITAL STATS



**2,000**

Number of commercials made by Ridley Scott before he made his feature debut with *The Duellists*

**10,000**

Number of children Alan Parker saw during casting for *Bugsy Malone*



**4**

Iguanas that died (due to cold weather) during the filming of Hugh Hudson's Benson & Hedges ad

**28**

Percentage of adults who voted for Hovis' 'Boy On A Bike' as the best advert from the 1970s in a 2018 *Marketing Week* poll, securing it the number-one spot



**1**

Number of times Ridley Scott's ad for Apple Macintosh ran on US TV (during the 1984 Super Bowl)

**20,000,000**

Copies of the soundtrack to Adrian Lyne's *Flashdance* sold worldwide