9 PRODUCT PLACEMENT

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9.1 Products are movie stars

Demolition Man (1993), a futuristic comedy-thriller starring Sylvester Stallone, is set in a world with only one kind of restaurant. As explained by Sandra Bullock, 'Taco Bell was the only restaurant to survive the Franchise Wars. Now all restaurants are Taco Bell.' Of course, European and Asian viewers were unfamiliar with Taco Bell, but that didn't matter because they heard Sandra Bullock say that 'Pizza Hut was the only restaurant to survive the Franchise Wars . . .' In the European prints, the dialogue was redubbed and the restaurant scenes were digitally altered to replace Taco Bell's logo with Pizza Hut's. Both Taco Bell and Pizza Hut are owned by PepsiCo.

Few viewers of *Demolition Man* will be surprised to discover that there was a cross-promotion deal between Warner Brothers and PepsiCo. However, they may not realize just how pervasive such *product placements* are. Almost every time a recognizable brand appears in a movie, and especially when the brand plays any kind of role, the placement will be the result of an arrangement between the film-maker and the company. Sometimes, the arrangement involves money changing hands (Philip Morris paid $350,000 to place Lark cigarettes in the James Bond film *Licence to Kill*, 1989), and sometimes it involves cross-promotion (Apple computers spent $15 million promoting *Mission Impossible*, 1996). The arrangement can also be less formal, with companies giving freebies to film-makers which then end up on screen. *Broken Arrow* (1996), for instance, showed a lot of Adidas shoes

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because one of the producers wanted some expensive Adidas for his collection. Because most countries have laws forbidding product placements on terrestrial or network television, the informal arrangement is most common for TV product placements.

Although product placement has been around for a long time, it has seen a tremendous growth in significance over the last 15 years. The watershed occurred in 1983, with the release of *ET, the Extraterrestrial*, one of the highest grossing movies of all time. The producers initially asked Mars/M&Ms for permission to use their candy for a scene in which Elliot lures ET from his hiding place. Concerned about their image, M&Ms refused, and so Reese's Pieces (a peanut butter flavoured candy rarely seen in Europe) was chosen instead. Bolstered by an advertising campaign promoting 'ET's favorite candy,' sales of Reese's Pieces increased by 66%.

Since *ET*, product placement has become a standard feature of the movie landscape. Some brands are ubiquitous. Ray Ban sunglasses have managed to perch their glasses on the noses of a host of film stars, both in Hollywood and abroad. *Risky Business* (1983), the film which made Tom Cruise a star, also made Ray Ban Wayfarers the coolest sunglasses around. Even the film poster showed Cruise wearing a pair. Tom Cruise went on to become a bit of a Ray Ban model, wearing them in *Top Gun* (1986) and *Days of Thunder* (1990). The heroes of *Men in Black* (1997) were, as Will Smith sang in the popular title song, 'Black suits with the black Ray Bans on.' So much Coke and Pepsi are consumed in movies that avid filmgoers could be forgiven for thinking that they are the only (nonalcoholic) drinks in the world. *Murphy's Romance* (1985) was set in a small corner store dominated by Coke logos, and contained dialogue discussing the virtues of Coca Cola. The hero of *Big* (1988), one of the films that made Tom Hanks a megastar, has a Pepsi machine in his room. These two forces collided in a recent remake of *Flipper* (1996). In the film that you saw, Flipper and the young boy play with a Pepsi can. In the film as originally shot, they played with a Coke can but when Pepsi-owned Pizza Hut entered into a promotional deal with producers, the scene was reshot. McDonald's has also been busy, specializing apparently in intrusive placements in mediocre films. One of the most tedious placements of all is found in *Mac and Me* (1988), which has many heartwarming scenes filmed at McDonald's as well as a cameo appearance by Ronald McDonald himself, who also featured in the poster. The only earth food on which the ET-like hero of *Mac and Me* can survive, incidentally, is Coca Cola. McDonald's restaurants serve Coca Cola. The first several minutes of *Bye Bye Love* (1995) also plays like a McDonald's commercial. *The Flintstones*' (1994) favourite restaurant was Rocdonalds.

Relatively inexpensive goods like soft drinks, fast foods and (even) sunglasses are not the only products to appear. Complex, expensive and high-tech items such as cars and computers are particular favourites, both on the part of marketers and film makers. In *Under Siege 2* (1995), Steven Seagal's thwarting of terrorists was assisted by the Apple Newton that he used to keep in touch with his superiors. In *Die Hard 3* (1995), Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson, while engaged in a furious car chase, note with relief that their Mercedes has an ABS breaking system. *Jurassic Park* (1993) featured Ford Explorers, but these were replaced with Mercedes in the sequel, *The Lost World* (1997), when Mercedes offered a better deal. In a tribute to the power of product placement, Mercedes actually manufactured 65,000 special edition sports-utility vehicles as a tie-in to the movie. In *Get Shorty* (1995), John Travolta drives an Oldsmobile Silhouette which he refers to as 'the Cadillac of minivans' (both Cadillac and Oldsmobile are owned by General Motors).

Product placement had another watershed year in 1997. *Men in Black* has already been mentioned, but the real prize has to go to *Tomorrow Never Dies*, which is notable because of the sheer quantity of product placements and for the amount of money involved. The producers of *Tomorrow Never Dies* made pacts with a massive number of brands: BMW, Visa, Avis Rent-A-Car, Omega watches, Heineken beer, Ericsson mobile phones, Smirnoff vodka, Gateway 2000 computers, and TBS (Turner Broadcasting System). These were not always cash-on-the-table deals, but deals involving cross-promotion and sometimes technical assistance and provision of props (12 BMWs were destroyed during the making of the film). The extent of the cross-promotion was unprecedented. Before the film was released, its 'corporate partners' had produced $100 million in 'free' publicity. This publicity included TV commercials, magazine advertisements and billboards, in which Pierce Brosnan (as Bond) was seen accompanied by a product, such as an Omega watch, the James Bond logo, a film title and its release date. *Tomorrow Never Dies* grossed over $320 million worldwide. The International Licensing Industry Merchandisers Association presented MGM/UA with its 'Promotion of the Year' award for this film – an award won by the previous Bond film, *Goldeneye* (1995). Accepting the award, MGM's executive vice-president for worldwide promotions and corporate sponsorship, said that 'the James Bond brand and its unique appeal has always deserved special attention and, as a result, we approach corporate partnering with particular care. We are especially proud to have earned this distinction from our peers, a professional group who is eminently qualified to judge such a program's effectiveness.'

Product placements are attractive to marketers in part because they provide them with a novel and long-lasting form of advertising. A television commercial or magazine advertisement will be current for a few days or weeks, but a product placement in a popular movie can last for years. People still watch *ET*. Indeed, it is likely to be re-released in a year or so and will undoubtedly bring in several million more viewers and also increase the sales of Reese's Pieces (unless, of course, they are digitally replaced with M&Ms).

Another attractive feature of product placement is that they are not perceived as advertisements, or at least they are not intended to be. Persuasion is much more effective when the source appears to have nothing to gain. Claims made by advertisers are easy to disregard because we know that advertisers will profit from making us believe their claims. If we see an athlete endorsing Nike shoes in a television commercial, we realize that he (it is usually a he) was paid a lot of money to make the endorsement. On the other hand, when products appear in films, we might well believe that they appear there because the stars or directors believe that these products are the best available. Michael Jordan's endorsement of Nike's, for instance, might have been more credible in *Space Jam* (1996) than in his 'official' commercials. A naïve viewer might even believe that James Bond traded in his Aston Martin for a BMW because it was the better car, and not because BMW had deeper pockets.

Product placements are also likely to induce a form of 'unthinking' attitude change. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) distinguish between 'central' and 'peripheral' routes to attitude change. The central route involves careful consideration and weighing of arguments. The peripheral route involves automatic or 'Pavlovian' responding to simple cues, such as the attractiveness or credibility of the message source. Product placement is an ideal medium for inducing peripheral processing. First, placements are unanticipated. Attempts to persuade are less effective when they are expected, because such expectations enable the message recipient to plan arguments against potentially undesirable manipulations. If you are about to hear a message from your sponsor, you have the opportunity to turn away or plan a defence. Second, viewers are usually distracted by all the action in a movie when a product appears, and distraction is another way to ensure peripheral processing.

Product placements are now a major source of financial support for large budget films. Industry members defend their use by arguing that they increase verisimilitude. Rather than showing people using generic and unbranded products, they show them using the same products that people

ıse in everyday life. This argument has little force. First, there are few estrictions on people using real brands in films without making a deal with he brand. Second, product placements are not at all realistic. Veteran ılacement-spotters will know that getting a product in a scene involves a lot ıf cinematic contortion. In *Always* (1989), for example, a mutely lit omantic scene between Holly Hunter and Richard Dreyfuss is dominated ıy an incongruous and brightly lit case of Pepsi. In *Manhunter* (1986), here is a bizarre scene in the coffee section of a supermarket between the ıero and his young son. Every can of coffee in the section is made by 'olgers, and every can points toward the camera. The scene ends with the wo deciding to buy Folgers, because that is the brand that Mother likes. ıuch scenes are commonplace.

The greatest aesthetic problem with product placement is that the ıractice has had an effect on the content of films. Advertisers do not want o be associated with films that make people feel bad, and they (usually) lon't want to be associated with bad events or bad characters. The amounts ıf money involved are so great that advertisers are beginning to dictate vhat happens in movies as well as what products appear in them. *Home lone 2* (1992) was one of the earlier examples of a substantial plot change ıeing suggested by advertisers. In the original script, the child gets on the vrong plane because the airline mixed up the tickets. One of the 31 :orporate sponsors of *Home Alone 2* – American Airlines – didn't like this. n the final version, the child bumps into another passenger who drops everal tickets, and the tickets get mixed up at this point. This illustrates a general rule of product placement: there will be no mechanical failures in a ponsor's car, no viruses in a sponsor's computer software, and no one will :ver receive bad service in a sponsor's restaurant. *Tomorrow Never Dies* is . case in point. There are two car chases. In the first, Bond's BMW is ıursued by several Mercedes (BMW's rival), all of which are trashed. ndeed, they appear to be made out of cardboard. In the second chase, 3ond's BMW motorcycle is pursued by villains driving Range Rovers (a 3MW subsidiary). None of the Range Rovers suffer so much as a scratch.

These plot manipulations may be relatively minor compared to the nfluence that product placement has had on the process of making novies. One trend that has alarmed many serious filmgoers is that movies – ıpart from low-budget 'art' films – have become increasingly simplistic over he years. A comparison between the major Hollywood films of the 1970's ınd those of the 1990's will reveal a pronounced move toward un-:omplicated heroes and villains, an over-reliance on special effects and fast :diting, and syrupy happy endings. Mark Crispin Miller (1990) has proposed

that this has occurred because movies have become, for all intents and purposes, *advertisements*. Movies are evaluated as vehicles for product placements before any deals are made, and filmmakers commonly look for companies that want to make deals before scripts are finalized or any footage is shot. One basis for deciding whether a film is worth producing is whether it is a sympathetic medium for product placement. More and more, therefore, movies show us a world without any problems so complicated that they cannot be solved by using our sponsor's products.

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