

Branded entertainment and the commodification of narrative.

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of branded entertainment in Australian film financing and the ethics and acceptability of an unofficial advertising insertion that departs from the traditional screens that are generally reserved for it.

Keywords

Branded entertainment, product placement, advertising, commercialism, audience fragmentation, commodified imagination.

Introduction: background and context

Australian cinema, like most film industries around the world with the exception of India and America, relies on taxpayer funds. This is partly due to the expensive nature of filmmaking and also because often there is often more than just a commercially motivated desire to make a movie. Film meets broader economic and cultural needs, and in recent years, film production throughout the world has undergone significant change. From the demise of film as a captive medium, through to the proliferation of online media and downloaded content, technological advances in production, distribution and exhibition has driven what Connolly describes as a “necessary re-imagining of the film industry” (Connolly 2008, 2). While some national cinemas have been quick to embrace the potential offered by these new innovations, breathing life into US Independent cinema and giving rise to the Dogma movement in Europe, the Australian film industry has focused on lobbying for taxation and other structural reforms. This has led to the introduction of a new offset scheme and the merging of The Australian Film Commission (AFC), Film Finance Corporation Australia (FFC) and Film Australia into one agency, Screen Australia (SA) (ibid).

Even with all the mergers and rebranding, the reality is, the methodology of Australian film production and distribution remains based on an entrenched model that mirrors Hollywood. However unlike Hollywood, which manages to sustain itself commercially, if the FFC is a measuring stick for the commercial performance of Australian film, over its 20-year lifespan, it had a cumulative return of negative eighty percent (Burns and Eltham 2010, p1). From the 248 films including feature-length documentaries and IMAX films, the FFC fully recouped its investment on just 11: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *Green Card* (1990), *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *Napoleon* (1995), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *Shine* (1996), *Sirens* (1994), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *The Wog Boy* (2000), *Wolf Creek* (2005) and IMAX film *Antarctica* (1991) (Groves, 2012).

Screen Australia's policy orientation is framed around 'commercial' screen financing, as clearly outlined in the explanatory memorandum to the Screen Australia Bill 2008.

“Screen Australia's will have a strong cultural focus to its activities in recognition of the strong public value of Australian made films. It will be expected to nurture Australian creative and technical expertise as

well as recognising the importance of building a sustainable industry by supporting and promoting the development of commercial screen content because a strong industry base is essential to deliver strong cultural outcomes” (Review of the Independent Screen Production Sector 2010, 15).

Since its foundation in 2008, Screen Australia hasn't fully recouped its investment on any film (Groves, 2012). Looking at last year's figures, Australian Film accounted for 3.9%, \$42.9 million, of domestic box-office, the lowest percentage in five years. It could have been much worse if not for *Red Dog (2011)*, which contributed approximately 50% with 21.4 million (ibid). Only 1 in 15 Australian films produced, breaks even, or pays returns to investors, though some say the figure is closer to 1 in 22 (ibid). Money of course shouldn't be the only measure of a film's success, but it leaves little doubt at the moment; Australian film is struggling, and disappointingly, broadly speaking, unpopular with local audiences. Holding on to an antiquated methodology of how films should be made and distributed clearly isn't working and hasn't for several years. While the landscape continues to change, driven by advances in technology, we have the opportunity to review the entrenched methodology and reconsider the way we finance, produce, market and distribute films. This is not to say we need to rewrite the rulebook, but perhaps we do need broaden our outlook and consider alternatives to the status quo.

The á la carte communications environment

Traditional forms of advertising are losing credibility and must now look to other potential solutions (Reis 2002, p46). There are hundreds of radio stations and television channels, Internet television and digital radio is blossoming, and we are reaching saturation point in what Reis describes as an 'á la carte' communications environment (ibid). With increasing sales of personal video recorders that can skip commercials and pre-recorded programs distributed via download or on demand, viewers aren't exposed to advertising as they once were. The explosion of media on offer has been accompanied by a fragmentation and dispersal of audience, disrupting the traditional targeting process (ibid). However film production is completely compatible with a fragmented audience because it is not always a question of audience volume, but the captivation and quality of the audience (ibid). Consequently, product and brand placements within films are on the increase, providing an opportunity to bypass this viewer censorship, even in pirated programmes exchanged on the internet (Lehu 2009, 33).

Branded entertainment

Branded entertainment or product placement is a supplemental revenue strategy not so new to the world of film, but one that at present rarely factors into Australian film financing. It is often represented as dirty and deceitful and has even been called 'prostitution of the screen' (Lehu 2009, 17). James Grant Hay from 'In Shot,' an Australian company that specialises in branding explains, "Product placement in the Australian motion picture industry is still in its infancy because producers look to the public screen funding bodies first" (Hay, ABC Radio National, 2011). When asking the question: Can branding and product placement contribute significantly to the financing of an Australian film? the intention is not to deceive audiences with subliminal advertising, or provide a 'fix all' solution to the current box-office

dilemmas. Nor enter into a cultural policy debate about existing financing structures, because the truth of the matter is, making Australian films is a complex process and needs taxpayer support. The purpose behind this research is to embark on an alternative path and discover what benefits, compromises and sacrifices might be made when working with commercial partners. If successful, perhaps it can work in conjunction with current schemes to reduce dependence on subsidy, improve financial recoupment for Producers, and introduce options to help sustain the local industry.

For some, seeing brands everywhere is a source of irritation. Others find it amusing trying to spot them. There are those who blank them out as little more than a part of the consumer backdrop of life. Love them or hate them, product placements are nonetheless increasingly a part of our daily lives. They are progressively becoming a principle strategy for advertisers and increasingly producing entertainment, financed by, or in conjunction with a brand. Hollywood has understood for a century the advantages that can be gained from associating films with brands. In 1916 LKO/Universal produced *She Wanted a Ford* where the brand explicitly featured in the title. Alfred Hitchcock subtly used Gordon's gin in *Blackmail* (1929). In *The Big Sleep* (1946), car brands Packard and Plymouth are not only seen, but also find their way into the script. The New York Times in *Dr Strangelove* (1964), Marlboros in *Superman II* (1980) and Budweiser in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). It confirms a long history and that there is no discreet model for how placements can function, but rather, multiple possibilities (Galican 2004, 20).

The technique of product or brand placement brings together a cinema project and an advertiser for financial, technical or logistical help. (Lehu 2009, 8) The impact that a placement may have on its audience is affected by the manner of appearance. In order to exist, a brand must be known, not necessarily by everyone, but to those who are likely to buy its products. It must be placed in a strategic location that will enable it to connect with its potential audience. Hollywood cinema is often condemned for the growing visibility of brands, but for the most part, audiences accept it and don't class the movie as an advertising object. The key is that the product or brand must be integrated into the film through characters and also play a role within the context of the story. There are four basic types of appearance that are usually detectable: classic, institutional, evocative and stealth placements.

- Classic placement is where the brand or product appears in the camera's view. Anything is really possible for this form of placement that makes few demands as to the form. It can range from a pair of Converse sneakers worn by Will Smith in *I, Robot* (2004), through to a supporting role alongside Steve McQueen in *Bullit* (1968), played by his Ford Mustang GT (ibid).
- Corporate placement prioritise the brand over the product, because brand placements bring benefits to all the products and in some instances is more durable than a product. In *Minority Report* (2002), brand advertising can be seen for Reebok and Pepsi Cola, but not their products (ibid).
- Evocative placements are more discreet in that the brand does not appear, nor is it clearly seen onscreen. In these cases, the product itself is unique enough in its design to be recognizable. The Rubik's cube is one example, or even the

walking piano which features in the film *Big (1998)* can be classed as an evocative placement because it is unique to the store (ibid).

- Stealth placements are highly discreet, almost undetectable and well integrated into the scene. They usually only received a mention in the credits, but their inconspicuous nature means that they risk going unidentified. These placements can be costumes provided by designers, but are not specific enough for them to be identified, or even cosmetics the makeup artists use on the actors (ibid).

The PQ Media agency calculated that for the United States, investment in product placement had risen from US\$190 million in 1974, to 3.4 billion in 2004 (ibid). Ninety percent of expenditure spent on product placement is aimed at television and cinema audiences. With the average cost of producing a feature film climbing, combined with explicit feedback from sales agents that Australian films cost too much to be competitive in the international market (Connolly 2008, 2). Perhaps there is role for placement in Australian film financing where brands can contribute to lowering budgets and the necessary capital outlay for a project, either directly or indirectly.

In a brand-consumerist world, how can we imagine a boxer stepping into a ring without sponsors around him, when the world of boxing to a large extent is financed by these partnerships. There must be rigorous analysis to determine whether a film is compatible with placements, because not all films are suitable and the cardinal error is thinking that you can put an advertisement in a film. The theory behind a successful placement is to achieve natural integration and there are certain principles that need to be applied for it to be done well. Successful placements are first and foremost an exchange whereby each of the parties can benefit. Filmmakers are looking for finance and ways to reduce their costs. Brands want identification and a positive presence onscreen.

Ethics and acceptability

The product placement and branding principle rests on the fact that this unofficial advertising insertion departs from the traditional screens that are generally reserved for it, therefore speaking to an audience in a context different from the classic advertising communication (Lehu 2009, 112). Contrary to lot of arguments, product placement is not designed as a matter of subliminal communication. Rather the objective of this approach is to ensure that the brand or product is seen. Although perfectly visible or audible in most cases, branding is not always necessarily consciously perceived by audiences, but can have an impact on their implicit memory (ibid).

Debates from media activists such as Kruckeberg and Starck centre on whether drawing silent attention to a product during a movie is ethical. Advertising is regulated with certain guidelines, but this manner of promotion is more stealthy and unregulated. In Australia, the practice falls under the federal act of the Trade Practices Act and the Advertising Services Act. Because the practice still in its infancy stages, in most cases it comes down to self-regulation meaning the Producer includes brand names that feature in the end credits.

There have been studies such as “Product Placement in Movies: An Australian Consumer Perspective on their Ethicality and Acceptability” by Brennan, Rosenburger and Hementera that show people expect a certain amount of branding in films and storylines, because we use brands everyday. Our contemporary environment is populated by products that are branded rather than being generic, and if there were no brands in *1000*, it would be more conspicuous given the sport is saturated with them. The vital thing is not to go overboard so it jeopardises the creative integrity of the film. If it’s too blatant and the product doesn’t match the character or storyline, it risks breaking the suspension of disbelief. Audiences go into the cinema thinking they’ll believe what is presented on screen for the duration of the film is actual reality, no matter how extraordinary or fantastical the narrative. When filmmakers go overboard with branding, it threatens to break that contract, resulting in resentment.

Commercialism exists in varying socially defined conceptions (ibid). The dilemma is in reaching an agreement about what is ‘excess’ or ‘acceptable.’ The problem is also compounded by a lack of certainty about the consequences of commercialism. ‘Commodified imagination’ is a fundamental argument posed by critics like Miller, Kruckeberg and Starck (ibid). As Miller explains, cinema has the capacity to expose us to a kind of emotional experience we’d otherwise not have (ibid). Product placement is one way in which the forces of commercialisation link themselves to emotional experiences. For example in *Cast Away (2000)* FedEx is a source of comfort, a savior and a link to hope for the lead character played by Tom Hanks. If the lens through which we come to see social worth and happiness is filtered through brands in the stories we tell, at what point do filmmakers stop thinking about their audience as an audience, but as consumers?

Beyond this core concern over deception, the issue surrounding artist’s rights and the influences on creative integrity need to also be carefully examined. When directors and screenwriters are pressured to feature a product or find a way to incorporate a brand, is their creativity being imposed upon? Moreover, is the film itself a compromise because of commercial subsidy? Where is the line when brands want to go to places where it’s not accurate for narrative integrity? Do the filmmakers say ‘We’ll take the money’ or ‘Hang on, this is crossing the line.’ If the filmmakers don’t do it, brands have to take responsibility and preserve the trust that’s given to them by the public (Galican 2004, p107). The mere fact that a product or brand becomes a key role in the budgetary process, one on which the producer relies upon for the completion of the film, makes the issue deserving of scrutiny. Relying on virtue ethics, storytellers and filmmakers must consider that featuring a brand enmeshes entertainment, storytelling, and consequently the imagination in the logic of commodity culture (ibid).

Conclusion

The exact conditions that will ensure or guarantee an increase in awareness of a brand by integrating it into a movie is still being debated. There are too many uncontrolled variables in the model, too much instability in the market. What if the film isn’t a hit and audiences don’t watch it? How do you measure an audiences ability to recognise a brand during a film, and the delay between the recognition that results in he or she remembering it, and a reaction based on that memory (Brennan, Rosenberger and Hementera 2004). Nevertheless, placements and branding are a complex and far-reaching ethical problem. In evaluating placements, we need to ask if we better off in

an increasingly saturated commodity culture, or should it be avoided altogether, or at least acknowledged up front, alerting an audience to its presence.

Australian cinema is struggling in the competitive English-speaking marketplace, both domestically and internationally. Our films must go up against big blockbusters, as well as lower budget 'indie films' with known actors and name directors (Connolly 2008, p3). For all the criticism concerning commercialism and producing films that never met an audience, the 10BA era of financing during the 1970's and 80's still produced many popular and internationally successful films through private investment. Notably, *Mad Max (1981)*, *The Year of Living Dangerously (1982)*, *The Man from Snowy River (1982)*, and *Crocodile Dundee (1986)* (Burns and Eltham 2010, 4). The local audience share of Australian cinema during the 10BA period was the highest in post-war history (ibid). Returning to a percentage of market-driven films, financed by commercial investment methodologies like branding and placement, will perhaps provide more funding options and pathways for filmmakers to face the challenges ahead, and anew the popularity of Australian films with local audiences.

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