

# **MEDIA EDUCATION** **FOUNDATION** **STUDY GUIDE**

## **BEHIND THE SCREENS:**

**HOLLYWOOD GOES HYPER-COMMERCIAL**

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## NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content—and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them—the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of discussion questions.

**Discussion Questions** provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

## **PRODUCT PLACEMENT: Advertising Goes to the Movies**

"As discussed, I guarantee that I will use Brown & Williamson tobacco products in no less than five feature films. It is my understanding that Brown & Williamson will pay a fee of \$500,000."

-- Sylvester Stallone (Letter to Associated Film Promotion, April 28, 1983)

"When a star uses a recognizable product, people in the audience will pat themselves on the back and say, 'look how smart I am—I'm using the same thing as the hero in the movies.' If it's something they haven't consumed recently, it brings it back to top of mind."

-- Gisela Dawson, President of Catalyst Group (quoted in ERMA brochure)

"Feature films saw the value of brand-name identification....The film viewer just didn't buy into the reality of a Brand-X soap on top of the sink anymore."

-- Barbara Maultsby, VP of production UPP Entertainment Marketing (Quoted in Codrington 1997)

"There is plenty of qualitative research on the efficacy of product placement and viewers' recollections."

-- From the ERMA website

"Industry research has shown that audience recall of product placements is two and a half times greater than those of TV commercials."

-- Quoted in Jacobson & Mazur, p. 69.

"Product placement is less intrusive than paid ads because the products are so realistically used....It's subtler than commercials, and while the scenes may seem fleeting, TV syndication, reruns, and home video give them a far longer viewing life. What's more, because they're part of the show, they won't get zapped."

-- Patti Ganguzza, VP of entertainment marketing AIM Promotions.

**Notes to instructors:** This topic might be best addressed by first having students find their own examples of placement. See, for example, the appendix of movies made by Columbia during the period of Coca-Cola's ownership. Alternatively, it might be more productive (and provocative) to have them review a few of their own favorite movies (especially those they remember from their childhood). Fantasy and animated movies are unlikely to be useful sources, whereas live-action comedies, thrillers and adventure movies have, historically, been more likely to carry placements.

Recent examples that were too new to be discussed in the video include *Mission to Mars* (2000) (particularly a scene involving an in-flight emergency in which Coke is the hero). Also see *Cast Away* (2000): The "teaser" preview for this movie is positively saturated with FedEx props. Listen out for Hanks mentioning the FedEx tagline – repeating the tactic used at the end of *Runaway Bride* (1999) (see clip in *Behind the Screens*). *Bowfinger* (1999) has FedEx as the emotional core at the beginning and the end of the movie (the latter is in *Behind the Screens*). *The Matrix* (1999; not in the video) has a relatively subtle FedEx placement when Keanu Reeves is in his office cubicle. Finally, the recent remake of *Hamlet* (2000), starring Ethan Hawke, struggles under the weight of many, many placements. Watch for Sam Shepard as the ghost walking through a very familiar soda machine, and a rendition of the "To be or not to be..." speech in a Blockbuster video store.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the decision made by some filmmakers to use placements in their films? Why, or why not?
2. Why might someone find product placement to be either misleading or deceptive?
3. Does the use of placements distract the viewer from the actual content of the film? Find an example that, in your opinion, supports this point - and one that doesn't. Discuss with a classmate the reasons for your choices – and see if she/he agrees.
4. Is there an acceptable and ethical way for advertisers and filmmakers to market products to movie audiences? If so, what is it?
5. Should audiences be asked to choose between a thirty second commercial presented before the movie and thirty seconds' worth of placements built in to the movie itself? Which would you choose? Or how about higher ticket prices? (See Nebenzahl 1993)
6. If you were a film director, and an advertiser offered you \$75,000 to place a product within your movie, would you accept? If so, on what conditions?
7. Were you aware of product placement as a practice before you watched this video? If so, has your opinion of it now changed at all? Why or why not?

8. What do we mean when we say a film is "realistic?" (Perhaps think of an example, and think back to how you felt when you saw it.) Do you think placements can make a film more "realistic?" How?
9. What added value might brand managers be hoping for when they place their product in (a) a science fiction movie, (b) a contemporary comedy for families with young kids, (c) a violent action thriller? Can you think of products that would look or sound odd in any of these three genres? Why might this be so?
10. You're at the movies with some friends, and you notice a placement that is so obvious that it spoils the experience for you. Discuss what action you might take to register your disapproval (a) at the theater, (b) at home, (c) at school.
11. Take a look at the appearance of FedEx in the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away* (2000), or the use of Coke during an in-flight emergency in *Mission to Mars* (1999). How might these stories and scenes have been written to avoid such overt product references, while avoiding the need to use a less "realistic" prop such as 'brand X'?
12. Compare the appearance of recognizable brand names in Stanley Kubrik's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and the sequel *2010* (1984) – which had nothing to do with Kubrik. Mark Crispin Miller has suggested that, in the first movie, Kubrik was making a point about the future pervasiveness of corporatization, whereas the sequel is simply a product placement bonanza. For Miller, a strong indicator of the relative priorities of movies such as these is whether they have happy endings – and the degree to which they present difficult or disturbing questions for their audiences. Investigate and analyze Miller's argument. (See Marich 1984; Miller 1988)

## MAKING MOVIES FOR MARKETERS: Cross Promotions, Merchandising & Tie-ins

"When filmmakers care most about the products they hawk, audiences will stop caring about the films.... The more a movie resembles a plaything or a theme park ride, the more easily it is cloned and copied until it loses any compelling spirit of its own.

-- Janet Maslin (New York Times, May 2 1999)

**Note to instructors:** In this section of the video, we use a comparison between Dreamworks' *Prince of Egypt* (1998) and Viacom's *The Rugrats Movie* (1998) to illustrate the advantageous use of multiple media outlets *within the same conglomerate* to "pump and promote" a new movie. Although the domestic box office for both films was eventually a little over \$100 million, *Rugrats* – which cost Viacom only \$20-25 million to produce – became profitable in its first weekend. (*Prince of Egypt* is reported to have cost as much as \$85 million to make, made \$14 million when it opened, and took months to break even.) While both films had separate ad budgets of around \$30 million, much of *Rugrats*' promotions were free, since they came through Viacom affiliates. The movie also received \$70 million in additional ad support from Burger King, Ford, Campbell's soup, ad Kraft foods. These included tie-ins to existing products (wagons; macaroni and cheese, etc.) and merchandise such as Burger King wrist watches (the fast food company experienced record levels of traffic in its restaurants because of the watches).

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the quote, above. Do you agree with Maslin's point?
2. What sort of audiences are tie-ins and merchandising most geared towards? Why?
3. Can you think of any ideas for movie scripts that clearly don't lend themselves to theme park rides, video games, and toys – but which could be appealing to younger viewers?
4. Keep a journal, noting every time you hear or see a reference to an upcoming movie. For example: posters or trailers at the theater, ads in newspapers and mentions on TV or on the Web. Also try to be aware of more subtle references (friends talking about the new movie, items of news that seem to relate to it in some way, people using a catch-phrase or character's voice from the movie, etc.). How long before the movie was actually released did the references or mentions start? What percentage of these are clearly *paid* promotions? Ask your friends or classmates when and how they first heard about the movie in question. Try using a large sheet of paper to map out as many of these references, mentions and sightings as possible, linking them together where appropriate. Perhaps use one color for paid promotions (ads, trailers, tie-ins with breakfast cereal manufacturers or fast food restaurants) and another color for informal mentions (friends talking, younger siblings playing, chat rooms on the Web, overheard conversations).

## HIJACKING THE MOVIES: Hollywood in an Age of Conglomerates

"To be honest with you, there doesn't seem to be any correlation between quality and attendance."

-- Edgar Bronfmann Jr. at a Business Week conference in January 1999 regarding his shake-up of Universal Studios, owned by Seagram.

### Discussion Questions

1. Define the term "Media Conglomerate." What effect do these formations (e.g. Time Warner/America Online) have on the entertainment industry?
2. In what unique kinds of ways is a media conglomerate like Disney able to "hype" its movies? Does Disney simply make better films than, say, Dreamworks?
3. Why did *Time Magazine* publish a cover story about tornadoes at the same time the movie *Twister* was released? (Less obviously, what might the connection be between the *New York Times* publishing a cover story about "Dinosaur DNA" being discovered just as *Jurassic Park* was released, and printing a front page story about an asteroid that was supposed to be heading for Earth around the time *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* were released?)
4. According to the video, how have recent trends in media ownership affected film criticism? Do you agree with Professor Miller's statement that, "It is impossible to be a critic and a promoter at the same time?"

## LIMITING STORIES: Making Movies in a Hypercommercial Age

"Profit, not culture, drives show business: no business means no show."

-- Eileen Meehan (1991, p.48)

"Foreignness ravishes the American palate, especially now, in the frantic summer-spectacle season, when some of us long for a new tempo, a new way of seeing—a few deeply felt images instead of thousands of flashing, meaningless ones."

-- David Denby (*The New Yorker*, June 2000)

### Discussion Questions

1. What factors, other than "a good story, well told," do the big studios now look for in movie scripts?
2. What elements - other than story - are necessary in making a box office hit?
3. Do you believe the statement that "Most new films are just old films with a twist?" Do today's Hollywood films indeed lack creativity? In his illuminating article on the politics of screenwriting, plagiarism and copyright, Friend (1998) observes that the movie *Die Hard* (1988) is merely a remake of *Rambo* (1987), with the action moved from Vietnam to a high-rise office in Los Angeles. Further, he claims that *Speed* (1994) is simply *Die Hard* "on a bus"; *Air Force One* (1997) is *Die Hard* "on a plane", *Cliffhanger* (1993) is *Die Hard* "on a mountain", *Under Siege* (1992) is *Die Hard* "on a boat" and *Speed 2* (1997) is *Die Hard* "on a bigger, slower boat." (p. 54) Either develop a critique of Friend's argument, or find your own examples based on another popular movie that, like *Rambo* and *Die Hard*, was successful at the box office. (Of course, the author is not necessarily arguing that the screenwriters on these movies consciously stole their ideas from *Rambo* or *Die Hard*; rather, his examples illuminate the degree to which Hollywood depends on *formula*.) Finally, remember to go *back* as well as forward in time when looking for examples. To illustrate: you may well find movies made well before the 1980s that also involve the same basic premise.
4. Do you agree with Professor Miller's statement that *You've Got Mail* represents "the death of a genre?" Explain.

## APPENDIX

### **Films produced by Columbia Pictures under Coca-Cola's ownership (1989-1992).** *(Compiled by Nate Buynicki)*

1. Annie (1982)
2. Gandhi (1982)
3. Hanky Panky (1982)
4. Monty Python Live at the Super Bowl (1982)
5. Silent Rage (1982)
6. Tempest (1982)
7. Things Are Tough All Over (1982)
8. Tootsie (1982)
9. The Big Chill (1983)
10. Blue Thunder (1983)
11. Christine (1983)
12. Educating Rita (1983)
13. Krull (1983)
14. The Man Who Loved Women (1983)
15. Spacehunter (1983)
16. Spring Break (1983)
17. The Survivors (1983)
18. Against All Odds (1984)
19. Body Double (1984)
20. Ghostbusters (1984)
21. Hardbodies (1984)
22. The Karate Kid (1984)
23. Mickey and Maude (1984)
24. Moscow on the Hudson (1984)
25. The Razor's Edge (1984)
26. Sheena (1984)
27. Soldier's Story (1984)
28. Starman (1984)
29. Agnes of God (1985)
30. The Bride (1985)
31. Crimewave (1985)
32. D.A.R.Y.L. (1985)
33. Fast Forward (1985)
34. Fright Night (1985)
35. Jagged Edge (1985)
36. Just One of the Guys (1985)
37. Murphy's Romance (1985)
38. The New Kids (1985)
39. Perfect (1985)

40. Silvarado (1985)
41. The Slugger's Wife (1985)
42. St. Elmo's Fire (1985)
43. Sylvester (1985)
44. White Nights (1985)
45. Charing Cross Road (1986)
46. Armed and Dangerous (1986)
47. Big Trouble (1986)
48. Crossroads (1986)
49. Desert Bloom (1986)
50. A Fine Mess (1986)
51. Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life is Calling (1986)
52. The Karate Kid, Part 2 (1986)
53. Out of Bounds (1986)
54. Quicksilver (1986)
55. Saving Grace (1986)
56. Stand By Me (1986)
57. Violets Are Blue... (1986)
58. Where Are the Children? (1986)
59. The Big Town (1987)
60. Cudzozienka...aka The Stranger (1987)
61. Happy New Year (1987)
62. Heaven (1987)
63. Hope and Glory (1987)
64. Housekeeping (1987)
65. Ishtar (1987)
66. La Bamba (1987)
67. The Last Emperor (1987)
68. Leonard Part 6 (1987)
69. Roxanne (1987)
70. Someone to Watch Over Me (1987)
71. White Mischief (1987)
72. White Water Summer (1987)
73. The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1988)
74. Little Nikata (1988)
75. The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking (1988)
76. Pulse (1988)
77. Punchline (1988)
78. Rocket Gibraltar (1988)
79. School Daze (1988)
80. Stars and Bars (1988)
81. Things Change (1988)
82. A Time of Destiny (1988)
83. To Kill a Priest (1988)
84. Vibes (1988)
85. Vice Verca (1988)

86. Zelly and Me (1988)
87. Casualties of War (1989)
88. Ghostbusters 2 (1989)
89. Immediate Family (1989)
90. The Karate Kid 3 (1989)
91. Miracle Mile (1989)
92. Old Gringo (1989)
93. Physical Evidence (1989)
94. Welcome Home (1989)
95. When Harry Met Sally... (1989)

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## Internet Resources

Brandweek: <http://www.brandweek.com/>

*Web site for ad industry trade journal of same name. Marketing, product placement etc. in film TV industry frequently discussed.*

Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association: <http://www.erma.org/>

*Trade association of product placement professionals consisting of placement agencies, film studios, and production companies.*

Film.Com: <http://www.film.com/>

*Reviews, news, interviews, festivals.*

Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/>

*A comprehensive resource for film and television including history, biographies, box office, and talent information.*

Hollywood Reporter: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/>

*Film and TV industry news, box office, business, etc.*

Motion Picture Association of America: <http://www.mpaa.org/>

*The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and its international counterpart, the Motion Picture Association (MPA) serve as the voice and advocate of the American motion picture, home video and television industries.*