English

ENG 111 – 12G

Investigative Essay

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Product Placement

by

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If you’ve been watching television or going to the cinema regularly you may have noticed that more and more products are either being used, mentioned or seen in many of the scenes that you’ve been watching. Filmmakers control everything that appears on the screen and it’s not by accident that these products are appearing. It’s called product placement. It has its origins in the very early days of television and it’s coming back.

The first product placement was seen in the 1951 film African Queen when Katherine Hepburn threw Humphrey Bogart’s bottle of Gordon’s Dry Gin overboard. In the 1950’s many television shows were named after their sponsors, and so shows such as “Texaco Star Theater”, “The Colgate Comedy Hour” and “Kraft Television Theater” appeared. These would often feature a segment where the characters would extol the virtues of the sponsoring company’s products. The tobacco company, Philip Morris, spent $30,000 a week sponsoring the I Love Lucy show and the stars, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, were often seen smoking their products. In 1958 investigations into the rigging of game shows began. Sponsorship became strictly regulated and the practice of product placement declined. (Twenty One 2).

People see 714 television commercials a week, that’s over 37,000 a year, (Zarchikoff 1), which cost, in 2001, over $46 billion for American businesses to produce. (Domestic1). The problem for advertisers is that people are suffering from “commercial overload.” When the commercials come on, they find other things to do, mute the sound, “tune out” or “channel surf”. If people are using a video recorder, they fast-forward. Television advertising rates increased by over 20% between 2000 and 2001, (Kern 2), and newer technologies such as TiVo, DVR (Digital Video Recorders) and PVR (Personal Video Recorders) mean that commercials can be skipped altogether. According to Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University in New York, this has Madison Avenue “scurrying around for some solution to the insoluble problem of technology which will soon make it unnecessary to sit through a commercial. The best way is to get the product directly in the show.” (Goodale 1).

It seems they have. In the 1980’s only five companies specialized in product placement, today there are over a hundred. (Timmerman 2). There are several advantages as to why a company should consider product placement. The most obvious is that the viewer can’t ignore them without missing the plot. A study by Brigham Young University seems to suggest that the retention of the audience for the product is higher than in other forms of advertising. (Maynard 2). There are other advantages: films reach a global audience, more people are going to the cinema and renting or buying videotapes and DVDs (Digital Video Disks), thus increasing the audience. People can also see the product in use, usually by a celebrity, giving the product some sort of status and an endorsement. (Product 2).

It needn’t be expensive either. Because of the restrictions bought about by the 1950’s game show scandals, an estimated 90% of movie and almost all television product placements involve no exchange of money. (Bassett 1). Companies like Apple and Ray-Ban do not pay for inclusion in films, (McCarthy, Dot-Coms 3), yet Ray-Ban reported that sales of its Predator 2 sunglasses tripled to $5 million after they were used in the film Men in Black. (Bassett 1). Mars Inc. was approached during filming of ET to provide M&M’s for the film; they refused. (Powell, Gail 1). The producers turned to Reeses who supplied Reeses Pieces gratis and saw their sales increase by 65%. (Bassett 2).

Things are changing though. Ford paid roughly half the $500,000 an episode that No Boundaries cost to produce; Revlon reportedly paid between $3 million and $7 million to be featured in ABC’s All My Children (Powell, Betsy 2), and Mercedes Benz is reputed to have spent $2 million getting their cars seen in Jurassic Park 2 and $40 million for Men in Black 2 (Wheeling 2). The cost of product placement seems to be rising. Product placement spots were being sold for $1 million for the first season of Survivor. By the time the second series was being prepared the cost had jumped to $12 million. (Kern 1).

Apart from the money, the film and program producers also get something else. They may require a certain product to set a scene or to say something about a character. As Bruce Helford, executive producer of The Drew Carey Show says, “If someone wants to step up and pay for my show, it doesn’t bother me to find a way to put their product in my show…. Using real products certainly makes the shows more realistic.” (Goodale 2).

There are dangers in product placement. In the reality show Big Brother 2, a contestant threatened another with a knife. Buick had already pulled out of the show but said, “As a responsible company we don’t want to be associated with any type of violence.” (McCarthy, Ads 2). However, in the film Nurse Betty, a Buick Le Sabre was used to run someone over. In the reality show Temptation Island 2, four married couples are “tempted” by twenty-six single people. Quaker Oats, one of the shows sponsors pulled out, and the American Family Association is threatening to boycott any other company advertising on the show. (McCarthy, Ads 3).

Large corporations own many of the television networks. Walt Disney for example owns ABC. This means that some product placement deals can become very involved. Bothel Biomedical has been providing $25,000 SonoSite ultrasound machines for NBC’s “ER” since 2000. NBC is owned by General Electric, who have started production of their own ultrasound machines, and have started applying pressure to NBC and ER’s prop masters to use their machines. Bothel was hoping that SonoSite would be profitable by 2001 but is still making a loss. (Timmerman 2).

In April 2001, the NBC show Will and Grace featured one of the actresses wearing a Polo brand shirt. Viewers were invited to buy the shirt at $52, $15 from every sale would go to “support programs dedicated to raising cancer awareness.” A spokesman said that no money exchanged hands. Five days later 5,000 shirts had been sold, raising $45,000 for cancer awareness. Polo is 50% owned by NBC, who no doubt claimed their share of the remaining $110,000. (York 1).

Things could get even worse though. In 1996 Reebok and TriStar Pictures got into a legal battle over the film Jerry Maquire. The complaint against TriStar by Reebok was 24 pages long. (Court 1). Reebok had asked that the film contain a full length commercial for them. It was eventually edited out of the movie, but an insult by one of the characters about Reebok remained. Reebok and TriStar eventually settled out of court with TriStar reportedly paying $10 million - $12 million to Reebok. (Bassett 2).

So where does this leave the viewer? The money going into these programs and films arguably makes them bigger and better as well as more realistic. There are people in the industry who want to protect the audience from too much blatant advertising. Stuart Gordon, who co-wrote Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, and who was executive producer for Honey, I Blew Up the Kids says, “You can save on the budget by taking products, but you don’t want to turn your film into a commercial.” (Lovell 2). However some products are now getting more screen time than most extras. (Providence 1). The film You’ve Got Mail features AOL for its entire length, the first twenty minutes of Cast Away features Federal Express and in What Women Want a major part of the plot is Mel Gibson working on an advertising campaign for Nike. Anyway, people like writer Shinan Govani dismisses the whole idea of advertising, as he says, “Anyone who goes out and buys a toothbrush just because he saw Sandra Bullock holding it is a simpleton. So is anyone who signs up with AOL simply because he wants to find the gal [sic] of his dreams.” (Govani 2)

In the future we can expect more programs and films that feature products and more whose plots depend on them. Products such as TiVo, PVRs and DVRs may allow us to skip adverts but not when those same devices are used to send information about us to the advertisers. Choice TV has already worked with General Instruments to produce a box that target zip codes for specialized advertisements down to a ten-block radius. In 1998, 650,000 of these units had already been sold and a further 15 million were on order. (Pavis 1). It is thought that by 2006, 244 million homes will have this technology. (Olsen 2). Virtual Advertising can digitally remaster programs so that different products can be featured. Think that sounds far fetched? The system was tested in 1999 by PVI when they inserted digital advertisements for Coca Cola, Evian and Wells Fargo into Seven Days, and digital advertisements are already being inserted into syndicated reruns and sports programs. (Pennington 3). Gary Ruskin, director of Commercial Alert, thinks that this will turn TV into a “cesspool of aggressive commercialism.” (Weintraub 3). We shall have to wait and see.

**Appendix - Examples**

Some films and television programs, the products and brands that appear in them:-

24 Dell Computers

African Queen Gordon’s Gin First product placement

AI: Artificial Intelligence Dell Computers

Air Force One Budweiser

Ali Everlast

All My Children Revlon

American Gigolo Giorgio Armani

American Psycho Jean Paul Gautier

Anastasia Chanel First ad in animated film

Not paid for by Chanel

Any Given Sunday Protein Plus Bar

Armageddon BMW, Swiss Army sunglasses

As the World Turns Proctor & Gamble

A Time to Kill UPS

Austin Powers AOL, Heineken, Starbucks, Virgin Airlines

Back to the Future Pepsi

Bat Man Apple, Taco Bell

Becker Proctor & Gamble

Big Brother 2 Buick

Blade Runner Atari, Bulova, Budweiser, Schlitz

Boogie Nights 7-Up, Chevrolet, Coca Cola, Fresca and Polaroid

Bowfinger Daily Variety, Federal Express

Boys Don’t Cry Redi Whip

Bridget Jones’s Diary Coca Cola, Ford, Haagen-Dazs

Buffy the Vampire Slayer Canada Dry

Cast Away Federal Express

Charlie’s Angels House of Pancakes and Sizzler

Crocodile Dundee Philip Morris

Dawson’s Creek J.Crew clothing

Deep Blue Sea Sony

Demolition Man Taco Bell

Die Hard Hostess Twinkies, Philip Morris

Dirty Deeds XXXX beer

Drew Carey Ramada, VW Beetle

ER Apple, Bothell Biomedical, Ramada

Erin Brockovich Coffee Beanery

ET Reese

Enemy of the State BMW

Evolution Head & Shoulders

Eyes Wide Shut Band-Aid, I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter

Face Off Chiclets

Family Law Canada Dry, Proctor & Gamble

Father of the Bride Coca Cola

Final Destination 7-Eleven

Footballers’ Wives Porsche British TV series

Forrest Gump Dr. Pepper

Ghost World Pacific Theaters

Go Bose Audio

Golden Eye BMW, GMC, Mercedes Benz

Goldfinger Aston Martin

Good Will Hunting Dunkin’ Donuts

Hannibal Frigidaire

Harry Potter Coca Cola $290 million tie-in

Hedwig and the Angry Itch Gummy Bears, Milky Way, Necco Wafers and Tootsie

Rolls

Home Alone American Airlines, Budget Rent-a-Truck

Home Alone 3 Casio, Fisher-Price, Ford, Nissan, Nortel and Sony

Honey, I Blew Up the Kids Lotus, Oshkosh B’Gosh, Reebok

Honey, I Shrunk the Kids Cheerios, Little Debbie cookies

Horseplay Lion Nathan beers

I Am Sam Starbucks

Jungle 2 Jungle American Airlines

Jurassic Park 2 Mercedes Benz

Keeping the Faith Pepsi

King of Queens Proctor & Gamble

Lethal Weapon 4 GMC, Pontiac

License to Kill Philip Morris

Little Nicky Popeye’s Chicken

Magnolia Miller Beer

Me, Myself & Irene Coca Cola

Melrose Place BMW

Men in Black Ray-Ban

Men in Black 2 Mercedes Benz, Rockport Shoes, Sprint Electronics

Minority Report American Express, Aquafina, Ben & Jerry’s, Bulgari, Burger King, Gap, Guinness, Lexus, Nokia, Pepsi, Reebok, Revo, Toyota and USA Today. – Not bad for a film set in 2054, 52 years in the future.

Miss Congeniality Dell Computers

Mission Impossible Apple

Mission Impossible II Avis

Murder in Small Town X Taco Bell, Jeep and Nokia

My Best Friend’s Wedding Marlboros

Natural Born Killers Coca Cola

No Boundaries Ford

Notting Hill Cocoa Puffs

Nurse Betty Buick Le Sabre Used to run someone over

Nutty Professor II Coca Cola

One hour Photo Canada Dry

Pacific Heights Orkin Pest Control

Panic Room American Safe Door Company

Pearl Harbor Coca Cola, Pepsi

Practical Magic GMC

Providence Dell Computers

Push, Nevada Toyota and Pepsi

Rain Man KMart

Risky Business Ray-Ban

Rush Hour Mercedes Benz

Rush Hour 2 Budweiser, United Airlines Plane provided free

Scary Movie Norge refrigerators

Seinfeld Coca Cola, Heinz, Junior Mints, Snapple

Seven Days Coca Cola, Evian, Wells Fargo Testing of digital

Ads in 1999

Sex and the City Apple, Heineken

Shipmates Carnival Cruise Lines

Small Soldiers Hasbro Toys

Smokey and the Bandit Pontiac

Someone Like You Dell Computers

Spawn Kawasaki

Starship Troopers AT&T

Stepping Stones Coca Cola

Straight Story Miller Beer

Survivor Budweiser, Cingular, Coors, Doritos, Dr Scholl, Frito-Lay, GMC, Mountain Dew, Reebok, Sierra Mist soft drinks, Saturn cars, Target and Visa

Swordfish Heineken, Dell Computers

Taxi Driver Doritos

The Agency Dell Computers

The Amazing Race American Airlines

The Caretakers Pepsi

The Client Mercedes Benz

The Deep End Sparkletts Water

The Eyes of Tammy Faye L’Oreal makeup

The Faculty Tommy Hilfiger

The Fast and the Furious Pizza Hut

The Firm Red Stripe

The General’s Daughter Sony

The Green Mile Moon Pie

The Guiding Light Proctor & Gamble

The Horse Whisperer Equisearch

The Hurricane Miller Beer

The Insider Sony

The Kiss Ford

The Matrix Cadillac, GM, Nokia, Ray-Ban

The Muppet Movie Philip Morris

The Nugget KFC Free KFC for cast and

crew

The Perfect Storm Budweiser and Pepsi

The Runner Pepsi

The Saint Volvo

The Shipping News Miller Beer

The Sopranos Heineken, Mercedes Benz

Three Kings Slim Jim

Tomb Raider Eriksson, UPS

Tomorrow Never Dies Avis, BMW, Brioni, Ericsson, Heineken, L’Oreal, Omega, Smirnoff and Visa

Town and Country Kellogg, Mercedes Benz

Toy Story Mr Potato Head

True Lies Marriott

Tumbleweeds RC Cola

Wayne’s World Nuprin and Pizza Hut

West Wing Dell Computers, Fresca, Panda Express

What Lies Beneath Nikon

What Woman Want Nike

Who Framed Roger Rabbit Philip Morris

Who Wants to be a Millionaire AT&T

Will and Grace Polo clothing NBC own 50% of Polo

With a Friend Like Harry Mitsubishi

Wonder Boys Dell Computers

X Files Dell Computers, Oldsmobile, Omega

You’ve Got Mail AOL, Apple, IBM

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