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CINEMA

A Reflection on How the Film Industry Promotes Itself

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Introduction

Cinema-going as a social phenomenon is over 100 years old. Such was its exponential growth in the first few decades that what started out as a pragmatic way of demonstrating new moving-image technologies very quickly mushroomed into a hugely popular leisure activity attracting tens of millions people per week in the US sector alone (Balio 1976: 75). In the process, an institutional infrastructure grew up to streamline the commercial exploitation of this new mass medium of entertainment. This chapter sets out to reflect upon this exploitation by considering how the film industry has promoted itself from the 1930s to the present day; like all good yarns with plenty of twists and turns, it is always best to start with the basic 'setup'.

The challenge for all in the industry is to get films financed, promoted and put in front of a large audience. This translates as the three-branch division of the film industry, one that has remained intact since the earliest days of film exploitation. This three-branch division is made up of distribution (marketing, promotion, sales), exhibition (cinemas) and production (manufacturing). Money changes hands at every stage, with promotion focused mainly at the distribution and exhibition ends. For this reason, it is these two branches of the film industry which will be the main focus of this chapter. Today, very large distribution firms take the biggest slice of each pie. As financiers-cum-distributors, they dictate for the most part the financial details of a film's production, exploitation and rental to cinemas – namely, who gets what of the box office receipts. The chapter moves historically through three key economic phases of the US (global) and UK film industries, starting just after infancy and adolescence (1895 to circa 1925), by which time the film business had evolved a 'mature', integrated economic structure. The three phases of our study are the 'Studio Era' (late 1920s to 1950s), the 'TV Era' (1950s to 1990s) and the

'Digital Era' (1990s to present). Snapshots will be taken at key points *en route*, with case studies pulled out to highlight the salient points of each stage.

The Studio Era (late 1920s to 1950s)

By the late 1920s/early 1930s, five 'studios', known as the 'Big Five' or the 'Majors', effectively controlled the US and Canadian market. These companies were Warner Brothers, Fox (in the mid-1930s reorganized and renamed Twentieth Century Fox), Paramount, Metro Goldwyn Mayer and Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO, through which Disney distributed: see below). The Majors were vertically integrated (owning their own production facilities, marketing/promotion organizations and cinemas), and operated as an oligopoly (a group monopoly). The 1930s and 1940s were decades when up to 100 million cinema tickets were sold in North America each week. Collectively, the Majors accounted for around 75 per cent of film rentals to cinemas in the US sector, this despite owning only 15 per cent of US-sector cinemas. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, the cinemas that the Majors owned were deluxe single 'screens': large 1200-plus capacity houses, in the best urban and suburban locations in the US and Canada. These houses naturally had high ticket prices and in an era before TV, there was no problem filling seats. Frequent film goers were understood in that era as people going to the movies five times or more per week and films were needed to satisfy their insatiable appetites. If individual members of the 'studio' oligopoly could not supply the huge numbers of films required to fill these deluxe cinemas 52 weeks of the year, and they couldn't, the Big 5 collectively came up with a simple solution to maintain control and maximize profits. They filled their slots as much as possible with each other's films. It was a trade-off: 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.'

Secondly, 'independent' owners of big-revenue deluxe cinemas (i.e., those not owned by the Big Five) had their hands tied. If they wanted the Majors' films, they were forced to take sight-unseen blocks of 'studio' films or they would be denied the films altogether (a practice referred to as block-booking). By this point along the food chain there was little left of the market to carve up, but three smaller US film companies owning no cinemas, Columbia, United Artists and Universal (known as the 'Little Three'), accounted for a further 20 per cent of cinema rentals. This left a meagre 5 per cent of rentals for even smaller domestic distributors and foreign companies (Gomery 1986: 11–18). During the 1930s, rentals of films of the Big Five and the Little Three dominated international sectors as well, particularly in Europe and Japan. The Hollywood oligopoly was very successful in setting up international marketing operations to promote their films, and because the films had usually made back their cost in the US sector already, all was profit. It is estimated that one half of the box office rentals for US films was generated in overseas markets in peace time during the Studio Era (Gomery 1986: 12). Thus, the Majors set in motion a huge revenue stream that was tightly under their control. Systems of economic control tend to be self-reinforcing and by virtue of their films beating the competition with bigger budgets and bigger star names, secured

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through long-term contracts, the Majors further consolidated their control of the marketplace. Simply put, their films were the ones that the public generally saw, were familiar with and wanted to see: brand loyalty through apparent consumer choice.

Yet, despite a less than crowded leisure industry at the time, film companies were not automatically assured an audience. They had to build one utilizing various marketing tools: promotion (paid advertising that is produced by the film company itself), publicity (free advertising through, for instance, the planting of stories in newspapers and fan magazines), tie-ins (mutually beneficial promotional liaisons between films and other consumer products, often filtered through personalities) and merchandising (where manufacturers pay a film company to use a film title or image on their products).

Case study 1: Warner Brothers, MGM, Twentieth Century Fox and Disney: Hollywood promotion, stars and the Studio Era

Even before the 1930s, marketing was a well-embedded procedure in Hollywood. To promote the latest production of its biggest star, the dog Rin Tin Tin, Warner Brothers distributed promotional materials for *Where the North Begins* (1923) to theatre owners, including ads, guidelines for publicity stunts, including stopping pedestrians on the street, and stories to plant in local newspapers. Merchandising, too, was piloted in the exploitation of the dog, with endorsement deals with Ken L-Ration, the first commercial dog food in the US (OrLean 2011: 36, 38).

By the 1930s, big money was beginning to change hands, with large contractual agreements being signed between the Majors and consumer-product manufacturers. MGM is a good example to cite because of all the Majors, it had the most to gain by effective marketing. Of all the Big Five, it had the least number of cinemas. This meant that building brand loyalty and renting its films to non-MGM cinemas were particularly important issues in MGM's corporate survival. It is no coincidence, therefore, that its marketing arm became recognized as the industry leader, both nationally and internationally, during the Studio Era. In March 1933, MGM signed a \$500,000 tie-in contract with Coca-Cola, where Coke ads would employ pictures and endorsements of MGM stars, with notice of recent film releases. In the same year, Coca-Cola delivery trucks across the country carried billboards advertising the studio's biggest production, *Dinner at Eight*. It would seem that the contract also allowed for product placement in the films themselves, as evidenced in two 1938 blockbusters (or 'A' films, as they were referred to then). MGM's first Technicolor feature, the musical *Sweethearts*, uses the new colour process to mark the debut of the red 'Drink Coca-Cola' neon sign in Times Square. Elsewhere that year, in the more macho surroundings of *Test Pilot*, Spencer Tracy is heard ordering 'Two Coca-Colas please.'

The corporate logic behind branding has always been that consumers (here read filmgoers) 'attach' themselves to a brand because of what they hope it says about

them, a form of fantasy or, to use a Marxist concept, a form of false consciousness, where economic and social relations in bourgeois societies are rendered false to individuals. For female spectators of the 1930s and 1940s, MGM fostered this aspirational culture through its very strong roster of female stars. To promote the MGM brand, the studio saw to it that its films became showcases for fashion, furniture design and cosmetics. An amusing example of this is related by Charles Eckert (1978: 6) who cites a story from the *Saturday Evening Post* (18 May 1935) tracking the merchandising history of a dress designed by Adrian for Joan Crawford in the 1932 film *Letty Lynton*. The MGM copyright of the design, noted for its big stiff ruffles outlining the shoulders, was marketed up and down 7th Avenue, starting with high-end manufacturers and ending with mass production firms. By 1935 the dress had reached the other side of the Pond, dominating even the cheap *prêt à porter* shops of Paris, much to the chagrin of the writer on the *Saturday Evening Post*. Eckert ends his article with the wry observation that Hollywood in the Studio Era 'did as much or more than any other force in capitalist culture to smooth the operation of the production-consumption cycle by fetishizing products and putting the libido into ... advertising' (Eckert 1978: 21).

Still, during the 1930s, the public appeal of child actress Shirley Temple, then the world's biggest star and 'the' icon of Depression America, was exploited to the full by Twentieth Century Fox, her studio, to promote its brand. A merchandising deal was struck with Ideal Toy and Novelty Company to produce the Shirley Temple doll, available in 13 different sizes. Despite the dire state of the economy in the mid-1930s, 0.5 to 1 million of these dolls were sold, launching a multi-million dollar toy bonanza. Specific tie-ins, linking consumer products with particular films, to promote both were also launched. For example, print adverts for the Packard motor car were linked to the release of Temple's *Captain January* (1936). By the following year, the Disney studio was signing 70 (merchandising) licensing agreements to coincide with the release of its first animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938). 'Snow White toys, books, clothes, snacks and records' were manufactured to coincide with the film's opening (Schlosser 2002: 40). To use James McNeal's term, the 'Kid Kustomer' had come of age (cited in Schlosser 2002: 44). Disney and Twentieth Century Fox had proven that allying themselves with reliable children's and adult's consumer goods, reflecting solid American family values, only reinforced their corporate brands and paid handsome dividends to shareholders.

Case study 2: The UK's vertically integrated Rank Organization takes on the Hollywood oligopoly during the Studio Era

The only 'Major' vertically integrated film company in the UK during the Studio Era was the Rank Organization. Its attempt to break into the US market from the mid- to late 1940s is the most striking example we have of a non-US film company trying to build an American audience for its films during the Studio Era. However, Rank's attempt, despite some limited success, ultimately proved to be a

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failure and was all the more disappointing given Rank's economic clout in the US. The company was enormously powerful, in the same league as the US Majors. It had a controlling interest in Universal, which gave it access to the cinemas of the oligopoly. However, despite all these advantages and Rank spending enormous sums on its prestige films, few of its films found favour in the US. When they did (as did *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Henry V*, both 1945, and *Hamlet* and *The Red Shoes*, both 1948), it was because they featured stars known to Americans, had excellent production values and were marketed carefully and at great cost as 'road show' (special event) presentations (Curran and Porter 1983: 164–178). However, these marketing strategies were too expensive and unrealistic to adopt universally and Rank's gate-crash experiment was over by the end of the 1940s.

As a footnote to the Studio Era, the construction of a 'trust' such as the Majors' oligopoly, where a group of companies operate together in the marketplace to control a commodity, was/is entirely illegal in the US. The reason usually given, however, for its resilience is the federal government's reluctance to rock the boat during the Depression (1930s) and World War II (1941 to 1945). Hollywood movies were needed to boost morale. However, by 1949 the game was up. An anti-trust suit was brought by the Justice Department against Paramount Pictures. The court found in favour of the Justice Department, against Paramount. The terms of the court order (or 'consent decree') agreed between the plaintiff and the defendant were the selling off of Paramount's cinemas and an end to block booking. Subsequently the other Majors also settled with the government. The monopoly was over.

The TV Era (1950s to 1990s)

By the mid-1950s, the film industry was struggling. The Majors had been forced to sell off their cinema chains by the US government. Competition to get films into cinemas was now rife and 'Independents' (independent production companies) were beating the Majors at their own game. They were simply quicker on their feet than the large lumbering studios as the Independents had little in the way of fixed costs to pay for (such as a 24/7 studio infrastructure) and could therefore make films faster and cheaper. They could hire what they needed on a film-by-film basis, such as ex-'Studio' stars who had been released from their long-term Studio contracts, and pay them through incentives such as percentage-of-profit deals instead of upfront salaries. Ironically, their cost-cutting, their renting of studio space and their general flexibility made independent producers very attractive to the Majors, who by the mid-1950s were lining up to finance and distribute their films.

In the end the big bugbear was not the consent decrees but TV. It had usurped film as the leading medium of mass entertainment by the mid-1950s. The film industry went through a period of denial, trying to convince itself that the humble TV set could never compete with the majesty of cinema, particularly with an

industry investing in widescreen, stereophonic sound, 3D and colour. But cinema profits continued to fall dramatically. By 1956, weekly film attendance figures in US and Canada were half what they had been at their Studio Era peak, down to 46.5 million (Bernstein 1957: 2). The Majors, whose corporate boards were largely made up of ‘old boys’ from a bygone era, were missing the point: the bigger picture. Social habits had changed since the war. People who had ‘never had it so good’ were having children, moving to the suburbs, enjoying being at home, DIY-ing. They were choosing to spend their leisure time differently.

Eventually the film industry responded accordingly and in 1956, Columbia, Twentieth Century Fox, MGM, Warner Brothers and Universal released many of their pre-1948 features to TV. In 1958, Paramount followed suit and sold 750 features to the Music Corporation of America (MCA), a major producer of (filmed) TV programming. By 1959 MCA had purchased Universal, thus setting in motion the beginning of a multiplatform marketing/distribution system for film. By the mid-1970s, new distribution windows had arrived in the form of the videocassette recorder and cable television. By the mid-1980s, cable pay-per-view and cable premium channels were added to the list of distribution windows (Balio 1990: 235–256).

Henceforth, the TV Era exploitation of film, with its increasing emphasis on new distribution windows, was marked by a shift in corporate strategy of the Majors to the role of financier-cum-distributor. Only they had the experience and money to market and promote films globally in a new cross-platform marketplace. They therefore came to reassume the dominant role in the film industry by determining a film’s finance (expenditures, marketing, distribution deals with producers) and a film’s exploitation.

First, in cinemas:

- determining whether a film’s run was exclusive (a film screened in one theatre) or multiple (a film screened at a number of theatres simultaneously) or saturation (a film screened in upwards of 1000k screens at the same time);
- setting the agenda for the length of the film’s engagement in particular cinemas, the agenda for a cinema’s advertising campaign and the financial spilt of box office takings.

Then in down-the-line distribution windows:

- By 1990, the typical pattern of release for a ‘blockbuster’ (a big budget film), usually an adventure film genre appealing to the frequent film-goer, a 16- to 24-year-old male, looked something like this:
- theatrical window: 0 to 6 months;
- video window: 6 months + (open ended);
- pay-per-view window: 9 to 12 months;

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- cable TV: 12 to 30 months;
- network TV: 30 to 60 months;
- syndicated TV: 60 months +.

The theatrical presentation would continue to remain the most important distribution window because of the prestige afforded to a film's theatrical release: premieres, press junkets (post-screening one-on-one publicity interview marathons between the media and a production's director and lead actors), critical reviews, industry awards, all increasing the value of the film with respect to other distribution windows (rental agreements, etc.).

Case study 3: *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) – Twentieth Century Fox marketing team respond to the challenge of TV: Iconic stars

By the early 1950s, the strategic advantage enjoyed by the Majors during the Studio Era was over. There was no longer a guaranteed market for their films. They had to compete with independent productions for cinema slots while at the same time having to meet huge fixed studio costs which the Independents didn't incur. Meanwhile, American audiences were staying at home and watching TV in ever-increasing numbers. In response, film companies focused their energies on promoting the difference between their screen product and the (free) TV one. Indeed, it would be a few years before the Majors changed strategy and started doing big business with TV. Twentieth Century Fox's 1952 solution to TV was its widescreen process, 'Cinemascope', accompanied for the most part by colour and stereophonic sound. Its films were now going to be events, with marketing/promotion as important as the production values. The company's big summer release of 1955, *The Seven Year Itch*, was shot in Cinemascope, colour and recorded in stereo, as one would expect. What was less expected was the astute decision by the studio to turn the location shoot into a marketing bonanza.

The script called for the film's star, Marilyn Monroe, to be photographed on location outside a cinema in Midtown, Manhattan. What made this particular 15 September 1954 shoot most unusual was that several hundred press photographers were invited along to help promote the event, particularly Marilyn's white dress billowing above a subway grating. After the shoot, Fox selected its best production stills to be used for press releases or to be blown up as posters for cinema marquees. For the 1955 summer premiere of the movie, a huge four-storey version of one of the billowing-dress stills was selected as the logotype for the film (a graphic that gives 'identity' to a brand, in this case Twentieth Century Fox). The monumentality of widescreen, of poster, of star all came together as mutually reinforcing elements to create an iconic stamp for the movie. With the huge blow-up of the billowing dress hovering over many of the nation's ticket booths, the film's box office was outstanding: the gross figure in the US/Canada sector alone was \$12 million (IMDb).

Critics at the time were quick to put the enormous popularity of *The Seven Year Itch* down to Marilyn's performance/star image. That image, which was greatly enhanced by the billowing-dress photo, was marked by the sociocultural context of its making: a mixture of the new liberated female subject, borne out of the experience of young women during World War II, and a hyper-feminine persona/body-object of the 1950s, a product of the censure of the Eisenhower Era. Already, in 1953, the publication of Alfred Kinsey's candid 'scientific' report on American female sexuality had appeared. That same year, a nude photo of Marilyn, taken in 1948, was used as the centrefold in the first edition of *Playboy* magazine. The billowing-dress Marilyn logotype taps into this zeitgeist. In marketing terms, Twentieth Century Fox was consciously building its brand on 'pillars', branding strategies, values and audience demographics that exploited tensions evident in the social discourse of the age. As 'the' female body image of the 1950s, Marilyn's figure moves across film and print media, seemingly free to express itself, while at the same time encoded by the censure of post-war patriarchal advertising. This logotype is truly an American myth in the making, apparently reconciling social dilemmas that cannot be reconciled in real life (Dyer 1987: 19–66).

Over time the billowing-dress logotype has been reproduced so much that its meaning bleeds way beyond the film that generated it. As a linguistic sign, its meaning is at once very dense and very diffuse. To some it clearly denotes Monroe, to others it connotes aspects of 1950s American media and advertising, and to others broader aspects of gender politics. The list goes on and on. It might be useful here to refer to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, where in his analysis of postmodern consumer society he argues that 'endless networks of media and advertising images. ... precede any reality to which they might be said to refer' (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 280). Applied to this example, an online search today for the Marilyn logotype will likely take us on any number of digital 'journeys' to a huge variety of sites. Very quickly, a search for the billowing dress can generate almost 'endless networks' of signification, with no obvious beginning or end, no clear point of source and no end point. Networks of signifiers are generated that have no clear referent.

Case study 4: *Jaws* (1975) – Hollywood film promotion and distribution: The dawn of a new era

In 1973, two independent producers working out of Universal Pictures, Richard Zanuck and David Brown, acquired the screen rights to *Jaws*. By early 1975, Universal (the financier-cum-distributor of the film) was collaborating with Bantam (the publisher of the paperback version of the book) on a highly innovative promotion to accompany the imminent publication of the paperback and the release of the film. Both film distributor and paperback publisher immediately recognized the mutual benefits of a joint promotion strategy. For both, the end goal was the exploitation of the *Jaws* brand to the full. To achieve this, a

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cross-media logotype was developed, designed to appear on the cover of the paperback and on all the film's advertising. Later, producers Zanuck and Brown 'embarked on a 6-city tour sponsored by Bantam Books' to promote the publication of the paperback and to build audiences for the soon-to-be released film (Daly 1980: 114).

It is difficult to label *Jaws* a blockbuster exactly, as it wasn't funded as such from the onset; but once the book was established as a bestseller, the film's release was handled as if it were. What Universal came up with for the film's release in June 1975 was to mark the dawn of a new era in the promotion and distribution of Hollywood's 'big' films. For the first time the exploitation of a movie incorporated a 'wide' release pattern in cinemas, opening in 464 theatre screens on 20 June 1975 across the US and Canada. This was accompanied by a nationwide media campaign on a massive scale: in the days leading up to the film's release (specifically 18 to 20 June 1975), Universal funded a media blitz of approximately 25 30-second ads per night on primetime TV. The logic behind the strategy was to create maximum visibility for the film as quickly as possible in order to recoup production/distribution costs as soon as possible. It is clear that the strategy paid off handsomely. '*Jaws* made 14 million dollars its 1st week in release ... [and] as of September 5, 1975, Universal declared *Jaws* the all-time box-office champion' (Daly 1980: 124–125).

The *Jaws* figures in summary are as follows:

- production costs: \$8 million;
- pre-opening marketing/promotion costs: \$1.8 million (including \$700,000 for 18 to 20 June TV blitz);
- opening weekend: \$7,061,513 (US: IMDb) (22 June 1975) (464 screens);
- theatrical gross: \$430,510,134 (worldwide: IMDb).

Universal also exploited tie-ins and merchandising to increase profits:

In eight weeks over a half million *Jaws* t-shirts, 2 million plastic tumblers, and 2 hundred thousand soundtrack record albums were sold. *The Jaws Log*, a quickly produced paperback about the making of the film, sold over 1 million copies in the first month

(Daly 1980: 137–138)

Even allowing for the fact that not all of the promotion strategy was new, what is clear from this case study is that *Jaws* marks the birth of the Modern Era in film marketing and promotion. What was truly innovative about the strategy was the combination of pre-opening cross-media branding, TV blitz marketing and saturation booking. Previously 'big' films had opened in exclusive runs in deluxe locations only – for example, Times Square, New York, and Leicester Square, London. This basic structure has remained the cornerstone for blockbuster promotion campaigns ever since.

Case study 5: *The Crying Game* (1992) – Miramax promotion strategy and the art of building an audience

The marketing/promotion strategy for *The Crying Game* is a classic example of how to build an audience for a low-budget ‘off-centre’ film (mainstream film but not ‘blockbuster’) in the pre-Digital Era. *The Crying Game* was a Miramax ‘pick-up’, a film that it did not finance, but one for which it acquired the US distribution rights after the production was completed. In the spring of 1992, this largely UK pack-of-cards co-production, where each source of funding depends on the participation of the others, was picked up by Miramax for US distribution. The difficult themes of the picture, race, cross-dressing, transgressive sexuality, IRA ‘terrorist’ cells meant that this was a film that was not going to be a straightforward marketing campaign. Miramax had to find the film’s ‘natural’ audience first and then build on that. The UK distributors of the film, Mayfair, had failed to do this by rushing too quickly to a wide release pattern. The net result: the film failed at the UK box office. Miramax would not make the same mistake. The strategy it came up with was to prove so effective that even today elements of it are used as ‘the’ classic model for an off-centre film promotion.

To garner critical interest and to create a buzz around the film, Miramax screened the film at the Telluride, Toronto and New York Film Festivals. It then released it to a limited number of US cinemas at the end of November 1992. To promote the film, Miramax borrowed the one successful element from the UK marketing campaign, enlisting the media in a conspiracy of silence, not to give the film’s secret away. But Miramax added an extra twist: the audience was also involved in the conspiracy. The film was promoted using the slogan: ‘The movie everyone is talking about, but no one is giving away its secrets.’ This both fired the imagination of the film-going public and neatly avoided the problem of drawing too much attention to the difficult themes of the film. The release pattern started very modestly, the film opening in only six screens in the US. But as audience interest mounted, the release pattern went ‘wide’: by early February 1993, the film was playing on 239 US/Canada screens. Later that month, the film received six Oscar nominations: it was now playing on 500 screens. By the week preceding the Oscars, the number of US/Canada screens showing the film was in excess of 1000, such was the momentum of the campaign.

Miramax had originally picked up the US distribution of *The Crying Game* in the spring of 1992 for a paltry \$1.5 million. By 1997, the total gross US box-office figure was around \$68 million (Giles 1997: 50). However, the film’s US success was a hollow victory for the UK producers. None of the monies found their way back to them. Only the US based distributors, Miramax, were the winners.

Case study 6: *Trainspotting* (1996) – building a UK youth audience for an off-centre film

Leaving the miseries of the UK marketing strategy of *The Crying Game* behind, a classic UK/Euro marketing success is the campaign for the low-budget UK

co-production *Trainspotting*. As the film's UK theatrical and video distributor, Polygram, a multimedia Dutch entertainment group, set itself the challenge of widening the film's 'natural' appeal beyond the cult status of the Irvine Welsh book on which the film was based. If the budget of the film was typically low for a UK TV-financed film (Channel 4 and co-producers had spent £1.5 million), the marketing budget was atypically high. Polygram spent £800,000 marketing the film in the UK.

The challenge was to tap the mass youth audience, the 16- to 24-year-old multiplex audience, and a marketing campaign was designed to do just that. Polygram utilized its expertise in the music industry, marketing the film like a record album release. A graphic design team was brought in to create the film's (now) distinctive look, the *Trainspotting* logotype, bright orange graphics/typesetting mixed with black-and-white portraits of the cast. This logotype was ubiquitous in the cross-media exploitation of the film: for cinema release, for the CD, for print-media advertising (e.g., youth 'style' magazines) and for video. By supporting the brand the way it did, it gave *Trainspotting* a strong brand identity. Then the promotional trailer brought the 'accent-on-youth' pillar of the marketing campaign to a crescendo, with its emphasis on the film's humour and Britpop music track. The strategic emphasis on a broad youth market paid off handsomely. The film found its audience and became a major domestic and international hit. The UK box office alone was £12.3 million (IMDb).

The Digital Era (1990s to the present)

Looking back it is easy to see that the Hollywood of the 1950s made the near-fatal error of misreading its business. It wasn't only in the business of making films, but also in the business of providing entertainment and it needed to follow its customers. Had it done so, it might have embraced TV earlier, reconfigured itself as 'multi-media' and seen profits rise. Instead, it stuck rather doggedly to a policy of 'we make movies' (investing in 3D, widescreen and stereophonic sound) and saw profits fall for years (Levitt 2011: 42–43).

By the mid-1990s, however, the Majors as financiers-cum-distributors again dominated the Industry. Distribution windows for film ran from theatrical release, through the video home system (VHS), to pay-per-view cable/satellite, to standard cable/satellite, to network TV and finally to syndicated TV. The year 1996 saw the arrival of the latest tier in home film distribution, the digital versatile disc (DVD). This new digital system was designed to compete with VHS, which it very quickly superseded. As early as 2001 the DVD market was growing at ten times that of the VHS market. Digital technology offered vastly superior image and sound, and increased storage capacity; and DVD was cross-platform, that is to say it could run on multiple types of hardware systems.

Such was the economic importance of DVD that it soon led to a rethinking of the exploitation strategy behind the Majors' distribution of their films. Henceforth there was a closing of the (time) gap between the theatrical release date and the

next, DVD, window. Today the typical distribution cycle for a studio film in the US is as follows:

- theatrical window: 0 to 4 months;
- DVD window: 4 months + (open for an indefinite period);
- video-on-demand (VOD)/pay-per-view window: 5 months +;
- VOD is followed by a premium cable/satellite channel window (for approximately one year), which precedes free-to-air television, etc.

1999 to 2004 proved to be the golden years of DVD marketing and sales, with the DVD release of the blockbuster *Gladiator* (November 2000) marking a major watershed. The DVD two-disc set included audio commentary, deleted scenes, a behind-the-scenes documentary, a theatre trailer and a history of gladiatorial games. In anticipation of huge sales, prior to its release date, 2.6 million copies of the DVD were shipped to retail outlets in the US/Canada sector. Eventually, DVD sales reached 4.5 million units worldwide, the best-selling DVD up to that point.

From the vantage point of 2012, pundits now forecast the future of film exploitation with only two main distribution windows: the theatrical window and VOD. DVD sales are falling every year. If the theatrical release continues to be paramount in a film's commercial exploitation strategy, due to the status and prestige associated with a theatrical premiere, its publicity and its critical reviews, it is the wider picture of converging digital entertainment technologies that is the focus of attention for most companies.

The industry more than understands that it is in the entertainment business, all of it: at home, out of the home, in film, TV, games, digital design, animation, digital print, music, merchandising, tie-ins, online, offline, Smartphone, PC and MAC. Financing-cum-distribution occurs across the media technologies, of which (digital) film is but one. Seen in this light, the recent interest in digital 3D technology is not just a re-tread of the 1950s all over again. It is a logical, in many senses ideal, cross-platform technology, equally at home across a range of hardware devices. Today, multi-media conglomerates put big money into attracting their main customer base to the local multiplex, the 12- to 24-year-old male customer segment, who it turns out is also the main customer for any down-the-line associated digital software (Rust et al 2011: 2–3). Any media corporation worth its salt must build a relationship with this viewer-cum-user or 'viewer'. As the courtship progresses, corporate marketing personnel push products and brands, theirs and tie-ins, using the 'nudge factor' or 'leverage'. Much of this is done online. A recent example of such a strategy was the collaboration between Twentieth Century Fox and Rovio, an entertainment media company based in Finland specializing in games for touch-screen Smartphones. The two corporations collaborated on the animated feature *Rio* (2011), with Rovio producing a new version of its popular mobile game *Angry Birds*, now christened *Angry Birds Rio*, to promote the feature film and its own social-gaming business. A tie-in was thus established to the mutual benefit of both corporations, with Rovio's social gaming proving an ideal digital

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marketing tool to promote *Rio* to a viewer generation of movie-goers. *Angry Birds Rio* was launched in March 2011 and the film, *Rio*, released one month later. *Angry Birds Rio* hit 10 million downloads in the first ten days of its launch (nma.co.uk, posted 26 May 2011) and by September 2011 *Rio* grossed \$143,618,384 at the US/Canada box office alone (IMDb).

In the new converging media marketplace, branding and promotion experts have seen their control over the construction of meaning of a film increase. In this panacea of endless media and advertising images, it is the marketing team that has the most to say about modes of viewing and target audiences. This is reflected in rising marketing budgets: in 2008, Hollywood Majors were said to be spending approximately one third of a film's budget, around \$36 million, on marketing a big budget film, more in the case of huge blockbusters.

In his book *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray argues that in the cross-platform digital age, marketing para-texts, the online and offline promotion and publicity materials, the tie-ins, the merchandising, increasingly 'create [film] texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them' (Gray 2010: 6). If there is a triangular relationship between the film, the audience and the industry, Gray argues, then it is the para-texts that 'fill the space between them ... negotiating or determining interactions' (Gray 2010: 23). A case in point is the humble trailer. In a world of converging technologies, the trailer of old is no more. It now occupies a very central role in the promotional packaging of a film. Besides film companies setting up individual websites to promote any new releases, many digital TV providers now offer free VOD movie trailers. The social network sites (e.g., YouTube and Facebook) also circulate trailers and previews. However, Gray goes on to propose a rather depressing scenario for the filmmaker: that with an ever-increasing viewing of para-texts on/offline comes an ever-increasing dissolution of the meaning of the film itself, with the marketing texts replacing it. This is bound to consolidate power even more in the hands of marketing persons who 'pre-purpose and repurpose' the endeavours of directors (Gray 2010: 71–72).

Yet, fans also create their own para-texts: 'criticism and reviews, fan fiction [associated with particular films/ genres], fan film and video (vids) ... fan art, spoilers, fan sites' (Gray 2010: 143). These audience-generated para-texts can either be 'on message' or not, for audiences are very creative when it comes to the business of subverting the meaning of studio product. They can create 'their own genres, genders, tones and styles', carving out for themselves and others alternative paths through movie texts (Gray 2010: 143). Eventually, however, financial power tends to win out. Any audience para-texts that find a wider audience will eventually get assimilated by the industry. This has happened time and time again, particularly with fan sites. Mainstream culture has an uncanny knack of absorbing marginal 'voices' to reinvigorate itself, to make itself more acceptable to its target audience. And when that audience, by and large, is young, this is particularly important for credibility. This is how hegemonic power works: ideological control by consent, not through force. Ideas that are generated outside tend to be

absorbed as fully integrated creative technologies by the industry very quickly (Huysen 1986: 15).

Case study 7: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011) – Harry Potter as the quintessential contemporary brand

1997 saw the UK publication of the first Harry Potter book by J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. By 1999, and the publication of the second in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the Harry Potter cult was born. 'By the third book you had queues [at booksellers], and by the fourth it was starting to feel like those stories of people lining the docks in New York for the next instalment of Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Harry Potter was a game changer. It changed publishing' (Jon Howells of Waterstone's Booksellers, cited in Hoyle 2011: 4). Harry Potter changed more than publishing: the promotion of the books, the film franchise and now the e-books have been an object lesson in cross-platform branding in an era of convergence, with its storytelling myths going viral seemingly 'at the click of a mouse' (Aspden 2011: 11).

By 2001, the film rights to the books had been acquired by Time Warner and the first in a planned series of films was released, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (US title). To promote the film, Time Warner set up a 'marketing council' with AOL, at the time under the same corporate umbrella, to facilitate a synergy of marketing talents across the multimedia conglomerate. Lateral integration of different corporate entities, such as Time Warner and AOL, can extend the global reach of production/marketing/sales/distribution systems of multi-media conglomerates. By definition, it casts a much wider net of power and control over the marketplace than vertical integration, as witnessed in the Studio Era. For *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Time Warner companies handled US TV/cable/satellite promotion (HBO and Warner's networks), the music (issued on Warner Music's Atlantic Records label) and print media promotion (Time Warner's print media empire). AOL, in turn, handled online merchandising (with 90 licensing partners and 700 products), ticket promotions and giveaways (linked to AOL subscriptions) (Grimes 2001: 17).

Since 2001, the further film adaptations and the Time Warner branding have helped to spur on book sales, and Harry Potter has grown to become one of the world's most widely recognized brands. Stephen Brown in his book *Wizard! Harry Potter's Brand Magic* (2005), identifies the answer to this success in the pillars which drive the brand: the stories themselves. In the branding of Harry Potter, marketing persons have exploited the fundamental power of the parables themselves, the myths. This world of Harry Potter is full of 'hocus pocus, good versus evil, a wizard with a big white beard, a baddie, the game of Quidditch, a hairy funnyman on a flying motorbike. And to top it all, a troll ... "snorting" all over Harry's wand' (Barbara Ellen cited in Hoyle 2011: 5). These story elements act as a catalyst for any developing brand story, stories feeding off stories again and again. The

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Time Warner marketing machine has always been sensitive to this. From 2001 to 2011, the cross-platform promotional strategy was designed to promote the films as a developing series and with it a brand that was growing and changing at the same time in the minds of the public. This avoided audience *ennui* early on in the series.

For the eighth, and final, film in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011), the promotion shifted away from the developing-story strategy of previous movies to a focus on the one central marketing point of this last film: to 'move' the audience towards the conclusion of the tale, the final duel between Harry and Voldemort. To this end, ubiquitous in the marketing materials, was one tag line: 'It all ends 7.15', referencing the release date of 15 July 2011. The official website also included a link to an iPhone app that consumers could use to trade spells with each other. This isn't to say that marketing materials for the campaign didn't also refer to earlier campaigns. Posters and banners (released from 28 March 2011), trailers (from 27 April 2011), TV commercials and online promotion all referred back to the logotype of the first film, the Harry Potter lightning flash.

Such was the success of the promotion campaign that the film took more money than any other in its opening weekend, \$168.8 million in the US/Canada sector and \$307 million elsewhere, including \$36.6 million in the UK (Kaufman 2011). But the Harry Potter promotion story doesn't end there. One month before the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, J. K. Rowling announced a move to e-books with the launch of a website *Pottermore* to handle distribution. She had sensibly retained the digital rights to her books and hence was now free to exploit them as e-books. As a strategist, J. K. Rowling has been brilliant. The multimedia conglomerates helped to build up and sustain her brand. Now she leaves them behind. She has even excluded other online stores, such as Amazon and Apple, from selling her e-books. Are we witnessing a successful assault on the power brokers of the media entertainment sector? Maybe, but a word of caution: global media conglomerates have a long history of acquiring successful 'Independents' to expand operations and to knock out the competition. One is left wondering if *Pottermore* will be one more corporation to add to that statistic.

Case study 8: *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and no-budget marketing

Earlier I mentioned the nudge factor, leverage, where film companies try to drum up excitement to build an audience. Social media sites are the main conduit for facilitating this nudge factor today and the marketing history of *Paranormal Activity* makes that point very clearly. This digital film had virtually no budget (\$10,000) but was eventually picked up by Paramount, who thought that audiences might respond to the film if they could only see it. The promotion budget was kept very low, with marketing directed online.

Amy Powell, Paramount's executive vice president of interactive marketing strategies, was given the film to market. Everything about the campaign was

designed to cost as little as possible but to affect the best possible result (Keane 2010). The website featured video comments by horror fans, rather than established critics, so that punters could dialogue with their peers. Written quotes from the Vox pops were then targeted at colleges, a likely audience for such an independent, no-budget horror film. In no time at all the talking-heads videos and the quotes went viral, since each piece of content had a social sharing element. Twitter was also used to post the latest 'sound bite' info on the film, at the time the longest on-going Paramount posting on Twitter. Here Amy Powell's team really excelled because the Paramount postings occurred late at night, after general Twitter activity had trailed off and on-line insomniacs were looking for something to engage with. As the excitement for the film mounted, audiences were nudged online to 'demand' that the film be screened in such-and-such a theatre. The campaign was neatly summarized by the film's sales agent, Stuart Ford, as follows: 'You like it so much? You want it? Then demand it! Tell us where you want it and we'll play it there!' (cited in Maher 2009: 3).

Paramount listened keenly to its online audience, and the subsequent roll-out exhibition strategy, starting with a limited US run on 25 September 2009 at 12 screens in college towns, followed by a wide national release on 16 October 2009, worked brilliantly. The film went on to gross \$193 million worldwide at the box office (IMDb).

Case study 9: Gwyneth Paltrow – celebrity lifestyle guru for the Internet age?

In an age of information overload, consumers appear to be cutting to the chase and aligning themselves 'with a personality who thinks like them and can make recommendations' (Jacobs 2011: 1). Now, more than ever, 'the "real world" becomes constituted in terms derived from the "star world"' (Tudor 1974: 83). In his book *Stars*, Richard Dyer (1979) postulates that the star-persona is constructed by the industry through four categories of 'text': the films in which they appear, the critical reviews, the promotional materials and free publicity. If this remains generally true, in recent years celebrities have been afforded a space to break free somewhat of the constraints imposed on them by media conglomerates. Social media sites that they set up themselves offer them more control over their personae and afford them a more 'direct' connection with their audiences.

Gwyneth Paltrow is a case in point. In 2008 she set up www.goop.com to offer advice under the tagline 'Nourish the inner aspect'. To date, Goop.com has signed up 150,000 subscribers who log on for advice under the headings: Make, Go, Get, Do, Be and See. The game plan would appear to be for Paltrow to make money from her online brand by 'transform[ing] followers into customers, through product lines, advertising and e-commerce' (Jacobs 2011: 1). In the far-off days of the Marilyn logotype, such (relative) economic control was unimaginable for a star due to the industry's stranglehold over promotion and publicity. This is all well and

good; but at the end of the day, the website is still about making money at the consumers' expense.

Case study 10: *The Guardian* newspaper in 2011 – building a UK audience through cross-platform state-of-the-art applications

(Based on an interview with Robert Ingram-Smith, head of international business development at *The Guardian*, London, 5 July 2011)

This case study has been chosen because it neatly summarizes recent convergence strategies by a media organization whose fingers are in many pies and whose website, *Guardian Online*, now has 52 million unique users per month, one third in the UK, one third in the US and one third in the rest of the world. The strategic moves made by *The Guardian* in recent years are clear evidence of a shift to cross-platform exploitation, to a move beyond a news perspective, and to engage with young audiences for whom the pecking order is the mobile phone first, then digital (PCs/ MACs), then print. As I write, *The Guardian* is working on a consortium 'film' pilot project called *Interesting Stuff*. The project is based in Cornwall and south-west England, and harnesses digital technologies to deliver combinations of film, arts and editorial content to audiences in social venues, on mobile phone devices and in the home. Some research and development funds have been made available through the European Union Media Programme. *The Guardian* partners for *Interesting Stuff* are Twofour (based in Plymouth), working in TV/film production, broadcast media and educational resources; media interests in Italy, Denmark and the Czech Republic, providing film content for the pilot; and Golant Media Ventures (London based), the engineers of the project, responsible for knitting together all the parties involved. The heart of the project is exploring solutions for delivering film and ancillary content cross-platform.

The editor of *The Guardian* has coined the term 'mutualisation of content' to describe *The Guardian's* policy of collating content in the era of convergence. Each *Guardian* journalist is effectively a content curator, collating, for example, the most interesting blogs and Facebook pages in their subject for *Guardian* readers and audiences online. In many senses, *Interesting Stuff* is best understood as a manifestation of this curatorial role. *The Guardian's* function in the pilot is to bundle up packages of content from inside or outside the organization that are essentially supplementary reading either ahead of, or after, watching the film. A film set in Cornwall, for instance, might be assembled as a package with a whole raft of content that is about Cornwall, or about the author of the book on which the film is based, or interviews with actors who have appeared in the film. *The Guardian* might arrange to screen the film in a social venue and, ahead of time, direct punters to a portal page who will then pull down content that sits outside the film. It's rather like a tie-in, but taken to the next level. And what are the commercial advantages to be had for *The Guardian*? Firstly, if the audience is large enough for *Interesting Stuff*, *The Guardian* can charge higher advertising rates; secondly, the

corporate marketing people can then make capital from the increased visibility of *The Guardian* brand.

Conclusion

This chapter has been a reflection on how the film industry has promoted itself since the Studio Era. During the 1930s and 1940s, power was consolidated around five vertically integrated Majors who largely controlled the marketing of film. Later, in the TV Era, the Majors maintained a grip on film promotion through their reconfiguration into financiers-cum-distributors and by eventually linking up with other media, especially TV. In fact, by the 1980s, the concept of the autonomous film company was a thing of the past, with the Majors by now absorbed into much larger, laterally integrated, multi-media empires. This is the point at which we see the explosion of multi-platform marketing and distribution of film.

In the Digital Era of online technologies, the opportunities afforded by cross-platform marketing and promotion have increased exponentially. In this new digital world, marketing has gone 'viral'. Much is made of the democratization that the Internet has brought. This may be true in terms of audience interactivity and agency, but at the same time lifestyle ideals have moved from the movie theatre, to the TV, to the DVD, to the PC, to the Smartphone.

The mainstream film industry has always been driven by an ethos of spinning dreams for profit; but now ego-ideals are fed to us through a plethora of marketing avenues undreamed of a few decades ago. If 'ethical' multi-media groups such as *The Guardian*, owned by a charitable trust, can be relied upon to keep in check the worst excesses of promotional culture, others cannot. In those cases, consumers are ever vulnerable to the new digital onslaught of viral commodity fetishism.

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