

Movies, Myths & Messages



How entertainment is creating a global Brand

Culture: Linking and sequencing the emotional experience of a great story, well told, with latent & perennial cultural themes.

By: Ken Markman

Every great civilization leaves a legacy. The truths however, are so distorted that we cannot differentiate them from the systematically disguised symbols and myths we have created. The American legacy is no different. It is being written and it's not about what you think or where historians might attempt looking for it.

Perhaps we should all take the day off and go to the movies and experience a medium that has, since its invention, established itself as the most democratic, defining and unifying amusements.

Joseph Campbell, the sage-story-architect for George Lucas and so many would-be screenwriters in Hollywood said: “Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind.”

Movies as Mythic Messages

Simply, movies are mythic messages that bond culture. They imprint a dialogue of images on our emotions. We trade upon their meaning. They echo our existence, express what we see, think we know or wish to be. But why, he asks, is mythology the same everywhere beyond the trappings of costume? What is the secret to this timeless vision?

The answer rests in “Storytelling!” said veteran film executive Peter Guber. “From cellular memory at the ancient campfires 20,000 years ago, to celluloid memory of Wyler and Warner’s 1900s, to our digital twenty-first century, the only uniting principal in the whole food chain of technological advancement is paradoxically the poet.”

The artist’s role, according to Campbell, is to capture the mythology of culture. And the motion picture, while many consider it uniquely American, profoundly captures the pursuit of the American ideal: Self expression.

These narratives that celebrate the human spirit may sometimes be as obscure as anything the magical realists ever devised. Yet, precisely because of their audacious reach beyond the moment--and their ability to popularize what you thought was hip or elegant, relevant or beguiling as cultural expression--the American story is so powerful a message, that it has transcended its usefulness beyond simple human experience to vital human condition.

Motion picture messages have stripped literature, classic music, theatre and advertising as the authority to set not just an American identity but also a global cultural agenda. Entertainment has become the “primary value of American life...the values of that life are dramatic and sensationalized as narrative structures,” writes Neal Gabler in his book, *Life the Movie—How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

America the movie!

America is no longer a country but a multi-trillion-dollar brand; essentially no different than Coca-Cola, McDonalds or General Motors. The American legacy is a culture no longer created by the people. Rather, our stories are experienced in movies and expressed through our brands instead of being passed down within families and communities.

“Imagine a company so sprawling,” states Robert Passikoff of *MediaLife*, an electronically delivered media magazine, that a brand so powerful, a presence in the world so dominant, an organization so filled with *hubris*, “that it claims the right to be considered a mass medium as well as a product.”

Product(s) as media? Passikoff continues, saying that “Coca-Cola recently announced that because its earnings, exposure and image were so overwhelming, the brand’s very size made it a *de facto* marketing channel... the Coca-Cola brand--is no longer just a dose of sugared, carbonated water but a full-fledged mass medium according to Steven Heyer, Coke’s president and COO.”

Because so many U.S. businesses seek the “**E-factor**” (wanting to be engaging, entertaining and emotionally connected to consumers) other brands won’t lag far behind. “When the White House decided it was time to address the rising tides of anti-Americanism around the world, it didn’t look to a career diplomat for help,” says Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Instead, in keeping with the Bush administration’s philosophy that anything the public sector can do the private sector can do better, it hired one of Madison Avenue’s top brand managers.”

Think of it. Motion pictures as media; creating an audience so vast and immediate in it must constantly be fed or seen or risk invisibility.

American Entertainment: The Brand that Bonds

If entertainment is our bond and America is a brand then American entertainment is the brand that bonds us together.

We talk about movies as experiences, music as media, cars as fashion, and consumer products as friends. We are a culture of overlapping visual brand messages. We map our reality in settings where symbols are text and images are language. We think in pictures...interpreting the world hyper-textually and

through free-association forming a seamless visual habitat where everything is moving and reconnected in the context of the viewing consumer.

With the help of technology, messages are everywhere; they're immersive and intrusive. They engage and entertain us. They're on movie screens, TV screens, computer screens, Game Boy screens, personal electronic-organizers and telephonic images connecting us across continents and cultures...seamlessly and invisibly. These messages bond culture, become our stories, our mythology, our identity and in many ways, our future.

The content and messages from these screens, found in every setting and use, direct us, inform us, amuse us, shape us and without our conscious awareness... they brand us, creating common interests that are more powerful than politics, borders, location or demographic. Common interests form ideology.

Movies as Vehicles of Entertainment and Change

Intentionally or unavoidably they become part of the zeitgeist due to their coincidental arrival at a precise moment in history when their themes play into current events and capture popular culture. Motion pictures are powerful because they brand culture. By fusing our emotions to their messages they brand us when we are most vulnerable: coming of age; during the nation's worst economic depression, the world's most devastating wars, and history's greatest periods of affluence, exploration, conquest, political unrest or our most vivid visions of life, love, death and the future.

It's not hard to notice the connection in the disconnect. According to Elizabeth Guider of *Variety*, "The anti-Americanism that has swept across Europe, ripping especially hard through France and Germany, appears not to have turned into a rejection of American pop culture." Quite to the contrary she continues, "Europe's culture mavens may still lament the creep of American commercialism, but... when they go home they flock to the entertainment they embrace, *Spider-Man* and *The Lord of the Rings*, whatever their provenance."

Movies: An American Social and Cultural Tradition

Nick Clooney, former host of cable's American Movie Classics, brother of the late singer/actress Rosemary Clooney and father of television and movie star George Clooney, recently commented on his book, *The Movies That Changed Us: Reflections on the Screen*, that from *Stagecoach* to *The Graduate*, movies have helped to shape our world.

Clooney states that a social and cultural tradition is created as, "millions of us, sitting in the anonymous darkness every week--double feature, a short, a cartoon, and a newsreel came out of each movie slightly changed." Maybe it

was, “as simple as a crush on an impossibly attractive star... a reinforcement of some attitude... the changing of an opinion... a melody or a dance routine. Perhaps it was only a different way of talking or combing your hair, or holding your cigarette, or crossing your legs.” Whatever it was, it remains today.

In 1912, five million Americans a day went to the movies. In the 1920s, a decade spawning silent films, 31 percent of all the men, women, and children in the United States went to the movies every week. In the 1930s, with the advent of sound and color, that number skyrocketed to a staggering 73 percent. According to *Weekly Variety*, in 1929, the average person went to the movies 40 times a year, 4.9 million tickets were sold and ten years later, *Gone with the Wind* sold 202 million tickets--nearly double that of *Titanic*.

Throughout the 1940s, 60 percent of America attended the movies and even after the advent of television in the 1950s, more than 40 percent of us slipped into a darkened hall every week, in the hopes of being swept away.

“The engines driving our popular culture,” declares Clooney, “were the movies.” What were they teaching us? “Simplistic lessons that we took to heart. We were looking for consensus. We yearned to be defined as Americans. Not hyphenated Americans. We hoped--believed--we were inventing a new person.” And like most us, we embraced them, at some level, believing in them for the rest of our lives.

It is precisely from this cultural collectivism that cultural consumerism is coded, linking mass communication and mass marketing with mass consumption. No previous century has witnessed as potent an interaction between innovation, self-expression, and commerce. Motion Pictures set our cultural compass, identity and agenda today: They are the archetype of *brand-culture* commerce.

By extending the emotional experience, motion pictures are the message-drivers of global consumer commerce; connecting brand messages with consumers in an enterprising business of re-invention and unquestionable influence.

We make money, not at that box office (knowing that motion pictures today offer among the lowest returns on investment in show business) but from myriad distribution channels, generating multiple revenue streams.

Ten years after the release of *Star Wars*, director Mel Brooks in 1987 takes aim at this consumer-centric paradigm...and the industry’s relentless exploitation of entertainment, with his movie, *Spaceballs*; a sardonic satire of George Lucas’ trilogy and the parody of other science-fiction movies from the 1970s and 80s when shilling the importance of merchandising....*Spaceballs* the pen, the t-shirt...

The full power of popular culture parody is captured when Brooks makes one of his funniest acting appearances as Yogurt, a send-up of Yoda in Lucas’s sequel,

The Empire Strikes Back, when he declares: "May the schwartz be with youuuuuuuuuuuuu... Never underestimate the power of the Schwartz!"

The Rise of the Franchise

Contrary to popular belief, Lucas did not invent movie or character licensing. Modern entertainment licensing began in the 1930's, paralleling the growth of the motion picture, when a trusted aid of Walt Disney, Kay Kamen began entering into licensing agreements for Mickey Mouse.

A manufacturer asked him if he could use Mickey to help sell his product. He decided on a royalty rate or payment of 5% of the manufacturer's wholesale sales. The rationale was a function of a simple formula: since sales reps typically received a sales commission of 5%...he thought Mickey was entitled to the same. So began the business and the payment of royalties. Not much has changed.

One of the first to embrace mass media messaging and consumer consumption was Edgar Rice Burroughs who wrote 74 books, sold 100 million copies and created one of the most iconic and enduring archetypal characters: Tarzan. "Pulp" fiction met celluloid. The result was a prophetic and explosive alchemy, producing licensed products from bread, ice cream and chewing gum to bathing suits.

From 1962 through 1969 we witnessed the most dramatic change in the industry since the advent of sound, when 82% of all of the privately held, mogul-run-studios were busy being assimilated by sprawling conglomerates, which were in turn being run by equally as mogul-corporate-chieftains, whose enterprises spanned disparate empires. Hollywood then is Corporate Hollywood now.

"Marketing," a new term in principle and practice, found in the lexicon of studio advertising (newspaper), publicity and exploitation (promotion) departments, was the result of a shape-shifting landscape driven by the power of a new medium of communication, television, and a more discriminating consumer.

In the 70's novelty gave way to the 20th Century mantra: "*The more I make---the more I sell.*" So pervasive were the choices, that uniqueness gave way to commodity. It wasn't until the 80's, that "marketing" was replaced with "branding" and its magnified and pervasive reach across pop culture issued in the mantra propelling today's global business.

Yes, we learned from *Star Wars* but it's from the 80's *Batman* from Warner Bros., *Lion King* from Disney and *Jurassic Park* from Universal in the '90s and today's *Spider-Man* that we recognize the cyclical franchise "linking" multi-media and multi-experiences with the "sequencing" of: motion pictures and DVD releases with sequels and television series, electronic games with the internet,

and theme park rides, Broadway plays and studio stores with retail boutiques and consumer products.

The franchise established itself as a *Holy Grail*, equally adept at allowing conglomerates to integrate their disparate divisions, while establishing an economy-of-scale for asset managers, marketers and purveyors of content. Every entertainment media enterprise scratches and scrolls through its archives for what has the potential to be “re-packaged”; hoping its contracts will allow them to re-connect their content and consumers with perennial, latent or popular cultural themes.

Conclusion

Movies create popular culture. They, beyond sport, are the only collective experience that is a solitary social ritual writes A. O. Scott. “It remains, the exemplary modern cultural activity splicing together individualism and mass culture... This unique ability to be available to everyone,” he says, is “to effect the distillation of reality into image and the transubstantiation of fantasy into fact.”

The fact remains: The movie message brands the popular themes embedded in culture. So implacable is its power that we consume its products because they extend our emotional experience, connecting and reaffirming the identity of the myth we so desperately embrace.

Movies evoke life...if, as Joseph Campbell declares, “Life evokes our character.” This is the legacy we share...an American mythology, told in the movies, leaving a legacy of self-expression.

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