

The Faces and Stakes of Brand Insertion

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Introduction

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Product placement was created very confidentially in western countries in the middle of the 18th century, that is to say when commercial labels were born. To summarise what its various definitions have in common (Balasubramanian 1994; Chan 2019, 321; Lehu 2009; Lehu and Bressoud 2008; Snyder 1992), one might say that it consists in integrating the name of a product – or a brand, product and brand placement being often used as quasi synonymous phrases in academic literature (Bressoud and Lehu 2008, 102) – in a work of art. Although it was initially a fringe practice that most often came for free, product placement developed over the ages and from one place to the next. Today, product placement is associated with sponsoring, and it is sometimes described under the euphemistic label *advertainment* (a portmanteau word merging *advertisement* and *entertainment*). More often than in the past (Bressoud and Lehu 2008, 101; Russell and Stern 2006, 7), it seems to form part of a lucrative agreement motivating various employment strategies for product placement that can be placed on a continuum starting from covert influence at one end and ending with awareness and brand loyalty at the other. This suggests that there are many functions attached to product placement strategies, and that even in the cases when the purchase act is not the main objective of the operation, some sort of financial transaction is by definition always included.

In light of the above, it is to be noticed that product placement includes two subcategories that have emerged over time to eventually juxtapose and even sometimes oppose each other: free product placement and its lucrative version. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to consider that product placement is always and exclusively used to turn a profit — it would amount to ignoring its origins as well as its current heyday. Indeed, as Árpád Ferenc Papp-Váry and Veronika Cserényi explain in the present volume, product placement is in a certain sense an evolution from TV advertisement for the 2010s. While traditional advertising, and especially 30-second TV spots, currently experience increasing difficulties, product placement offers an alternative advertising practice that happens to be booming. In this regard, product placement is in keeping with the

various layers of meaning of the term “publicize” — to publicize an entity (a place, a person, a cultural piece, a product or a service); to use of a series of means to make a product or a brand known for commercial purposes.

As free product placement is motivated by no financial interest, its practice lets the artist deal with the brand as s/he likes. Located as it is at the frontier between tribute and provocation, and posing as it does that a veristic quest can take the appearance of the quirky reuse of patterns, it can take multiple forms and convey a plethora of emotions: from the most neutral to the most paroxysmal, from the most enthusiastic to the most deleterious.

Conversely, founded as it is on an exchange of good practices, the profitable version of product placement generally establishes a system in which both partners benefit from the operation. In this case, more or less juicy contracts may be signed, which may entail less freedom for the creator in his or her way of handling the brand.

Product placement also exists across multiple media platforms. Literary, musical and pictorial works, live shows, Internet videos, games and radio and TV programs, social networks, TV series and films can all be concerned with product placement, and all trading sectors contemporary to works of art can be placed in works as brands or products: accessories and vehicles, food and clothing, new technologies and transport companies, medicines and cosmetics, but also items from the hotel and restaurant industry, there are forms of art and entertainment, and even geographic territories.

In addition to the financial aspect that can be a characteristic of product placement, it can be motivated by the increased verisimilitude with which it endows the work in which the product or brand is placed. Indeed, conveying as it does a context or an imaginary world, a brand comes with social, cultural, aesthetic, temporal, geographic, ideological and even religious connotations which enrich or enlighten all or part(s) of a work of art through the simple semiotic action of including a consumer item that will be received as readily identifiable.

Since researchers do not necessarily have access to documents related to product placement, or because some agreements are kept secret, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a brand placement is part of a financial arrangement, especially when the work of art in which a brand is placed is old. However, some of the chapters featured in the present volume demonstrate that over time, the art amateur got more and more used to it while backstage, the bond between brands and artists got stronger and stronger to the point of sometimes even making them inseparable.

A Note About the Methodology Implemented in This Volume

Given the wide range of approaches of product placement exemplified in academic literature, a few details concerning the present volume's specificity are in order. To summarize: this volume seeks to complement extant studies of product placement strategies, most of which "measure the effectiveness of product placements in terms of how well they are remembered" (Russell 2002, 307), by introducing a methodology more systematically related to the field of cultural studies, especially where the reception and impact of product placement are concerned.

This results from the observation that such an angle has so far been neglected by scholars. Not only has product placement been studied mainly from the perspective of its ability to offer benefits to brand owners or advertisers (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016, 4), but even when focus has been shifted from the development of product placement strategies to their reception, the practice has been studied from the perspective of its effects on viewers seen as potential purchasers of the indirectly advertised product. While this marketing angle is acknowledged in this volume, it is often neglected compared to perspectives pertaining to the critical theoretic branch of cultural studies and perspectives borrowed from the sociology of consumption. This is not due to a lack of interest for the abundant marketing literature on product placement, but the result of an attempt at shifting perspectives on product placement. This accounts for the low number of references to marketing literature on product placement in this volume. Indeed, the methodology herein mobilized by the authors intends to deal primarily with the effect of product placement on the cultural production in which the marketing strategy appears. We consider this angle to complement the one that is often used in academic studies of product placement, most of which seek to assess the efficacy of the strategy, while including to that effect statistical evaluation of the strategy's ability to prompt or deter the act of purchasing some product.

For this reason, the reception and impact of product placement are deemed to be essential to the authors' scholarly treatment of the topic. Yet even more crucial to the contributors of this volume is the aesthetic and narrative integration of the product placed in the cultural productions under study. Consequently, when the impact of the placement is mentioned, it is to be understood as an intended aesthetic impact at least as much as a prompt to buy a product. The latter angle is indeed already prominent in academic literature on product placement (Bressoud and Lehu 2008, 103). Similarly, when the effect of product placement is addressed, it is from the perspective of its influence on culture at large (for instance, the acceptability level of brand placement in popular culture productions may be found to be higher than for the products of so-called high culture, and so on and so forth). For the same

reasons, the generic phrase “product placement” is used throughout the volume for the sake of easy identification, and it should be understood from the outset that it encompasses variations on the practice introduced by brand management advisers (on terminological nuances, see Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016, 3).

Despite the methodological specificities above, the editors of this book firmly believe that media studies audiences, and possibly even marketing studies scholars or researchers, may learn from some of the findings presented here, as the effects of product placement strategies can also be considered to be intrinsically related to their type and level of narrative and aesthetic integration. Since this issue is at the core of the volume, the chapters it features cover a wide array of cultural productions and media practices, whose perception as types of mediation may be affected positively or negatively (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016, 3), if there is an impact at all. Nevertheless, the main emphasis is placed on the presence and nature of product placement in the stories that feature brands or products.

It is also to be noted that the studies featured in the volume cover a wide historical span, thereby acknowledging the presence of product placement as one of the oldest marketing tricks ever to have been exploited, and as a result, providing genealogical tracing of the practice across periods and media platforms. Interestingly, this perspective on product placement leads to an unconventional, and we hope pioneering, perception of product placement not just as a marketing strategy, but also as a marker of the evolution of cultures. Indeed, the angle on product placement that is used by the authors triggers the rediscovery of placement as a marketing trick turned cultural trait or trend: the genealogy of placement presented here speaks to its level of integration in contemporary cultural productions, and may help account for the now widespread acceptance of product placement strategies as beneficial both from the perspective of commercial operations as from that of narrative and aesthetic innovation.

The next asset of this perspective on product placement is that, in keeping with the results of cultural studies as a practice, it tips the scales in favor interpreting culture as commercially induced and, of course, materially produced. Indeed, product placement has been shown to benefit the film industry as well as consumer brands (Chan 2019, 322), in addition to being generally well received by audiences (Vaerenbergh 2017, 151), which testifies to the importance of jointly studying the process of making films and the films themselves. From this viewpoint, product placement can be seen as a strategy that sells by promoting narrative realism (Russell 2002, 306-7), by triggering mythmaking or mythologizing mechanisms of the kind described in the works of Roland Barthes. In other words, product placement can be considered to

paradoxically work working at the level of the superstructure, to take up Marxian terminology, through a mode of integration that strengthens the tenets of capitalism – while debunking them in utterly postmodern fashion. Indeed, even when product placement is perceived as the trigger of aesthetic distance (by noticing the placed product, the viewer's immersion in their consumed fiction may sometimes be abruptly interrupted), this participates in the elevation of the practice to the ranks of a critical art form. Incidentally, this angle provides a convenient solution to one of the obvious issues of product placement for fiction, which is to make it obvious that the aura of the work of art has been sacrificed on the altar of its commodification. To conclude this section on methodology, one may assert that the above acknowledgement of the compatibility between product placement and postmodern fiction is the best symptom there is of its integration in culture, which comes in addition to its enduring place among top-of-the-range marketing strategies.

Chapter Breakdown

In the first chapter, “Ad prose or fictomercial? Brand placement in literature,” Sandrine Villers explores the genesis and the evolution of brand placement in literature, its different faces and stakes. She also shares her experience as an author using brands in her writing. After a thorough investigation of the strategies and stakes of brand placement in literature, Villers sees the practice as likely to grow in the future, since “it has exploded in the fields of sports, music, video games, social networks, TV programs and movies while traditional commercials and ads have been more and more ignored by the public.”

In chapter 2, “When a picture is worth a thousand ads: product placement in plastic arts,” Sandrine Villers goes on with a study of product placement in the plastic arts. The field has almost been completely ignored, despite the fact the presence of brands could already be noticed in painting as early as the 19th century in Europe. The presence of brands in literature, however, has recently started to raise some interest among scholars — and journalists — and the attention has increased especially where movies and video clips were concerned. This may be because brand placement now increasingly involves huge financial arrangements, thus arousing passions, speculations and countless comments. Many critics and artists, for example, consider that when there is a contract between the brand and the creator, the latter feels less free in his or her work. Some speak of corruption and even prostitution, considering that the artist has become a puppet submitted to the brand. Even though product placement in the plastic arts does not lead to this kind of judgment, the author shows that a financial transaction is nevertheless often involved. It is even quite the contrary in some cases.

In chapter 3, “Watch it, repeat, share it — music video and social network sites as behavior influencers,” Boris Chapoton shows that if we consider the growing presence of images in people’s lives and particularly among the younger generations, the first music video played on the first musical television channel MTV in 1981 “Video killed the radio star” could be interpreted as a prophetic song. Among the entertainment media, music is the most used by teenagers and watching music video is their first online practice ahead of watching series and movies. For Chapoton, the link between the music video’s popularity among the younger generation and the spending power of these young consumers has been easily made by marketers and producers. Chapoton gives a synoptic view of the combination of music videos and advertising. Used primarily as a way to promote and maximize the sales of a single, video clips could be defined nowadays as a mix of advertising and art that could be sometimes confusing. In 2014, for the Football World Cup, the video clip “La La La” performed by the singer Shakira became the most shared advertisement because of its collaboration with the Activia yoghurt company, Danone. The music video/advertisement spot was viewed more than 430 million times on YouTube and generated more than 5.8 million shares for this same year on social networks. As Chapoton then notes, the digital era that has emerged with the Internet and the social networking sites then created new opportunities for marketers: not only can they advertise their products directly on people’s screens, but people can become a media in return to promote products towards their peers as well by sharing or talking about the products they use. Because of these new practices, a new way of making money has emerged for those who became “social influencers.” The same as for music videos, either these influencers are paid to promote a product, or they receive gifts from companies; some reportedly do not need any incentive from companies, adding a kind of “realness” to their videos. The professional influencers earn money from the views they get for their videos (e.g. \$1 per 1,000 views) but apparently, they mainly earn money from the product placement they agree to include in their video. Chapoton then goes on to study the effects of these developments. Because of the possible influence that could be in place within these new types of marketing practice and product placement, new regulations are considered. For example, when money is received by someone to advertise a product, recommendations edited by the advertisement companies advise to mention any sponsorship in a transparent way. In like manner, in entertainment contents like movies and music videos, some products like tobacco and alcohol are forbidden especially when dedicated to minors. However, Chapoton shows, online practices differ from one country to the next and lines are still blurred when it comes to regulation.

In the fourth chapter entitled “Territory placement in movies,” Delphine Le Nozach explains that like brands, cities and regions build their identities in order to convey values and federate populations. By integrating themselves

into feature-length fiction films, they take the form of product placements and advertisement placements. Le Nozach shows the links between product placement, territory and film direction and analyzes the presence of the territory on the screen, trying to see if this presence influences the creation of the film like a product or a placed brand. Her first case study is the project, *Les Bobines de l'Est* (*The Reels of the East*). This project establishes an unprecedented catalogue of films introducing the territory placements of the region of Lorraine from 1898 to present. Around sixty films are referenced and indexed. They lead Le Nozach to consider these territory inscriptions in film from a semantic and communicative perspective. Her conclusions do not necessarily deal with a particular geographic integration. Consequently, the topic leads the author outside the corpus towards the analysis of other French films. Basing her analysis on interviews with filmmakers conducted over the last ten years, she starts to establish an inventory of the acceptability and use of product placement by French filmmakers and reminds the readers of the diegetic importance of this system for the direction of films. Then, she centers her purpose on the cinematic specificity of territory placement.

In chapter 5, “The Wes Anderson-ification of Advertising,” Julie Assouly conducts a parallel study of Wes Anderson’s films and of his commercials, in which he imports identifiable elements from his cinematic universe. The author sets out to examine the possibility that Anderson could in fact be promoting himself through the commercials he directs — his style becoming a brand he places around the advertised product, in an inversion of traditional placement-on-film strategy. Assouly then seeks to answer the question, “who is the advertiser and who or what is advertised?” to assess Anderson’s ability to “reevaluate cinema’s relation to advertising by refusing to simply sell an item, to some extent selling his own cinematic style and advertising his art of making films.” At the end of a close study of the relation between the director’s ads and his films, Assouly concludes with a reassessment of what blogger Jonathan Bacon described as the “Wes Anderson-ification of advertising,” claiming that Anderson benefited from his contribution to commercials as much as the advertised brands gained from hiring an already famous film director.

In Chapter 6, “*Cast Away* — The growing number of brands as part of the cast in Tom Hanks’ movies,” Árpád Ferenc Papp-Váry and Gerg Novodonszki analyze the links between Tom Hanks and brands. Most viewers associate FedEx, the courier delivery service company, with *Cast Away* as the brand is omnipresent in the movie, in which Hanks plays the leading part. A Wilson volleyball also plays a significant role in the film, while its name is mentioned by the main character several times. However, the two authors do not only study brands as they are featured in this particular Tom Hanks movie, since brands also appear in almost all his works. Through research based on the

complete filmography of Tom Hanks from 1980 to the end of year 2013, they identify a trend in how products are being placed in films, even beyond the limits of Hanks's filmography. Papp-Váry and Novodonszki show, in particular, that the total time of brand placements in the past decades has been increasing steadily, and explain why while in the 1980s and the early 1990s films were full of brands, there were movies in the 2000s that hardly included any brands. Also, they identify numerous examples of active, or even integrated placements, which occurs when brands are not only tools, but are incorporated into dramaturgy. After delving into cases of reversed placement, they study several cases when a fictional, nonexistent brand appeared in a movie, and was marketed later on according to the demand created this way.

In chapter 7, "The meaning of product placement in *Blade Runner 2049*," Laurent Salters compares the part and the role of product placement in the 1982 *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* and shows that both productions provide a striking shortcut to the evolution that took place in the field of product placement in films. While products used to merely appear in the film's setting, today, they often occupy a central place in the stories. The financial stakes, indeed, are now enormous, sometimes amounting to tens of millions of dollars between brands and productions. Throughout this chapter, the author also examines whether, beyond the simple memory of the logos, there is a way to evaluate the effect of the increasingly prominent placements on viewers. He posits that the viewer's reception can be observed on a more intimate level, going into how product placement can have an effect on the way they perceive a story. On a more metaphorical level, his final analytical thread is concerned with how looking at the *Blade Runner* franchise and its product placement techniques is a way of imagining the future of our society. To Salters, the dystopic universe pictured in both films is that of a world crushed by its excesses; chronic overconsumption and the environmental mayhem that results. The directors of *Blade Runner* and its sequel, respectively Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve, each in their own way excel in using product placement to build up mirrors of our current societies poisoned by its abuses.

In chapter 8, "I'm More of a Corona Man, Myself': The Narrative and Semiotic Function of a Corona in the *Fast and Furious* Franchise," Joshua Schulze starts by reminding the reader that in *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), protagonist Dom Toretto famously explains to Brian, "You can have any brew you want, as long as it's a Corona." According to interviews with the filmmakers, there was no financial transaction between themselves and Grupo Modelo to use their product in the film. His chapter focuses on this peculiar case of brand placement in the *Fast and Furious* franchise, arguing that their appearance is a conscious decision made by the filmmakers, one grounded in narrative and character. The author's aim is to delineate how Corona beers are used and

implemented in the franchise as a whole — for which he introduces theories of semiotics in order to outline how the Corona can be productively read and understood as a recurring symbol. He argues that the franchise's thematic concerns with family, home, and culture, are inseparable from the Corona brand placement. Schulze's arguments are critically supported by the work of Mary Beltrán on the franchise and its relationship to Latinx culture and identity, as well as drawing more generally from literature on brand placement in films, and how it might affect the franchise's seriality.

In chapter 9, "Brand placement and late shows," Pauline Ziserman shows that though they have spread beyond the sphere of network channels to cable television and streaming services, and are now studied for their daily satirical commentary of political news, American late night shows remain, first and foremost, a place dedicated to promotion and advertisement. According to Ziserman, this is true for almost every aspect of these programs: from their guests' interviews — actors, musicians, writers and politicians — who all come to promote their latest projects, to late night hosts' frequent (and variously subtle) advertisement of products and brands, to the shows' regular commercial breaks (which account for millions in ad revenues by selling consumers' attention to advertisers). This blend of entertainment and advertisement, which is designed to make commercials more efficient by having a receptive audience, is what makes late-night television the realm of *advertainment*. However, Ziserman shows that because product placement can affect any sector contemporary to the artworks in which it is added, late-night shows are themselves frequently the objects of product placement. Defined by their names (some of which have existed for several decades: *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, *The Daily Show*), a logo, a jingle and, above all, by a public persona (the host), late-night shows are also brands, Ziserman says, both capable of generating money and / or advertisement. The various means used in these programs to promote, advertise and publicize projects, artists and politicians, are frequently used as well for highlighting a different late-night show. It is not infrequent for hosts to go on the late-night circuit to be interviewed by their colleagues, or to appear in a movie or a series. As a result of this temporary inversion of roles and of the irruption of reality into fiction, Ziserman claims, late-night shows appear to be subjected to product placement in audiovisual creations, therefore strengthening their place in popular culture while extending their visibility to new audiences. Through the study of advertising in late-night television and of these shows' branding, most notably by their hosts' involvement in other audiovisual creations, the chapter intends to explore how these programs are both users and subjects of brand placement. The theory is best illustrated by the case of *The Colbert Report* and of his host, the persona "Stephen Colbert," who, more than any other late-night host before him, has blurred the limits between fiction and reality.

In chapter 10, “Old brands come to life: Historic product placement in the light of *Mad Men*,” Árpád Ferenc Papp-Váry and Veronika Cserényi examine the relationships between brands placed in TV series and viewers. Their case study is AMC’s *Mad Men*, a series which takes viewers to the 1960s, offering an insight into the life of a fictional agency called Sterling Cooper. The era depicted is particularly interesting for the present volume, because it is the golden age of television advertisements and advertising agencies located at Madison Avenue as well. Placement is thus present on two different levels. Viewers see Sterling Cooper employees working on the briefs of well-known brands, presenting their ideas to the clients, and in so doing, indirectly praising them for us at the same time. On a plainer level, the brands, whether they still exist or not, are visible on screen as a result, whether within or outside of the posters designed by the show’s admen. For this chapter, the two authors re-watched the seven seasons of the series and harvested all the brands mentioned and the context in which they appeared. They are thus able to explore the impact a series can have on advertisements, and the effect of “historic placement” — placing still extant or by now extinguished brands in a fictional show that reconstructs their original social and historical context — on both the show, and the advertised brand itself.

Based on the list so far, one may observe that the main focus of product placement analyses featured in this volume is twofold. First, many studies address narrative strategies and how they are impacted by or benefit from product placement. Second, most other studies tackle the perception of product placement by people working in the film or TV industry, from advertisers to filmmakers or TV showrunners. Analyses in this second category show that some take exception to the practice, while others embrace it in the aim of merging it into their creative processes.

Comparatively, scholarly works paying attention to the perception and reception of product placement by target audiences is in shorter supply. This can be explained in different ways, as the last two chapters in the present volume will confirm. The first reason is that, because product placement has to ensure return on investment, it is very likely that both advertising and film or TV production companies conduct impact studies — or use the ones conducted by academics. However, it is difficult to go beyond the level of a mere assumption. Additionally, those studies supposedly involve brain imagery imported from the world of traditional advertising. As such, they are likely to be kept secret in order for the advertising brand not to lose its credit with viewers on accusations of manipulation. The second reason is that making sense of how viewers respond to product placement is no easy task. Audience ratings may be used as a marker, but they deal with specific programs rather than with specific scenes within programs (those in which a product may be

placed). Besides, in the specific field of online television, it is notorious that companies such as Netflix do not make any audience rating figures available, keeping them confidential in order for no other company to be allowed to use their tried-and-true strategies.

In chapter 11, “Impacts of brand placement on a TV series consumption experience: the teenager’s case,” Marina Ferreira Da Silva and Pascale Ezan show that brand placement is increasingly used to communicate with teenagers. TV series are considered by announcers as a particularly attractive medium, because they are an important part of the young people’s cultural practices. Indeed, TV series take up a large amount of teenagers’ time and imagination. They use them not only for entertainment, but also to shape their identity, as coping mechanisms when sensational entertainment is involved, and as sources of youth-culture identification. Yet, there is a lack of research about the effects of this communication tool on this population. The aim of the chapter is to deepen readers’ understanding of the effects of product placements on teenagers’ TV series consumption experience. It is based on interviews with practitioners (TV series producers, advertisers, product placement agencies. . .), in-depth interviews and group discussions with teenagers. The pattern of results highlights a very strong acceptability of brand placements, which can be considered as a part of youth culture. Products and brands may help adolescents interpret the personality of the fictional characters. Adolescents believe that having brands in TV dramas is a way to root entertainment in our era, as brands are omnipresent and provide welcome realism. Brand placements, the authors finally claim, are particularly important for girls who love TV series, because they take the fictional heroines as role models, and attempt to imitate them through both their behavior and acts of consumption.

In chapter 12, “Product placement as trans-media operation,” Sébastien Lefait first pays special attention to the perception and reception of product placement by target audiences, to identify a trend he describes as “product placement bashing.” He then claims that as product placement is increasingly spotted and exposed by Internet users, brands need to devise new strategies. One of them is to take the time-proven techniques of product placement out of their traditional environment, i.e. films or TV series, and use them in the context of traditional commercials. The assets of the strategy, Lefait claims, result from the straightforward quality of the process—unlike traditional product placement, the cases studied here are commercials that apparently do not try to hide their commercial purposes—and from the importation of the aura of the cinematic world into the supposedly pedestrian world of regular advertising. Finally, the author refers to Adorno, Benjamin and Barthes, to place the analyzed trend within the wider context of the history of cultural hegemony.

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Note on Contributors

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