

**The Medium is the marketplace:  
Fictional-brand fandom and reverse product placement**

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When I was six years old, my father sat me down to watch the short **1956 film *The Red Balloon*** directed by Frenchman Albert Lamorisse about the unconventional tale of friendship between a young boy and a large, red balloon. In the same way that *Toy Story* would anthropomorphize gangly cowboy dolls and slinky dogs some 40 years later, Lamorisse's film succeeded in imbuing an inanimate object with emotional resonance – eliciting in the viewer the same sense of crushing sadness and heartening elation normally reserved for the likes of a *Gone with the Wind* or a *Casablanca*. I returned to the film recently as both a nostalgic trip down memory lane and to introduce it to my own children, curious to see whether it would have the same effect on them.

I'm pleased to say that it did.

“No ideas but in things” said the American poet William Carlos Williams, and it's clear to see how film-makers have exploited the evocative power of objects ever since the Lumière brothers used an oncoming train to make audiences jump out of their seats in 1895.

As a primarily visual medium, film uses sequential still imagery to evoke emotional responses to a given narrative. Key to this emotional connection is the use of objects to support character development and help drive a story. Some objects are richly symbolic, others are purely entertaining and yet others have transcended the boundaries of the screen; acting as shorthand for an entire film and often becoming themselves icons of popular culture. Dorothy's red slippers from the *Wizard of Oz*, **Marilyn Monroe's billowing white dress in *The Seven Year Itch***, **Harry Callahan's .44 Magnum in *Dirty Harry*** – all can stake a claim as cultural artifacts that help to define character and narrative.

Film posters, tasked with grabbing attention while attempting to make clear both the story and genre often use objects as an abbreviated language. Would Stanley Kubrick's ***Full Metal Jacket* poster** work with anything other than the darkly ironic soldier's helmet, or the **poster for *Rosemary's Baby*** be as effective without the ominous silhouetted pram in the foreground? Quite possibly, but would they be as memorable? Probably not.

Since its inception, film has often relied on objects to create lasting and indelible impressions on audiences. The silent era of film was marked by distinctive characters that were defined in part by objects, such as Charlie Chaplin's bowler

hat, cane and oversized shoes or Harold Lloyd's round spectacles. Props too would be used by these same characters to create some of the most memorable scenes in movie history, such as the clock from which Harold Lloyd dangles in *Safety Last!* or the floating globe that **Charlie Chaplin teasingly plays with in *The Great Dictator***.

The presence of a simple, tangible object can also often lend a film gravitas, as is the case with *Metropolis*'s **Maria the robot** or *Back to the Future*'s DeLorean shaped time machine, and – in keeping with the literary plot device of a MacGuffin – provide the driving motivations for an entire story (think the **glowing briefcase from *Pulp Fiction* [itself heavily inspired by the 1955 film *Kiss Me Deadly*]** or the Maltese Falcon from the film of the same name). These objects act as characters in themselves – magnetic 'totems' that are as integral to a film as setting or sound.

The visual iconography of objects also contribute to their film's respective legacies and fan followings, often providing myriad commercial opportunities for people able to harness their pulling power. The web is littered with fan sites selling all manner of merchandise adorned with images of ***The Terminator*'s T-1000**, ***The Lord of the Rings*' One Ring** or *Lolita*'s heart shaped sunglasses. The online gadget and game retailer Firebox even sells ***Cast Away* inspired 'Wilson' volleyballs**, which - while seeming like an odd choice of object to extol, makes total sense when you consider the emotional resonance of the ball to the film's central character and to the audience's sense of empathy. What images of Che Guevara or Bob Marley plastered on posters have done to popularize revolutionary ideals, so too have images of Jason Vorhees' hockey mask (*Friday the 13th*) or Freddy Kruger's bladed glove done for fear of the bogeyman.

Artists too have immense fun with film objects such as New York based Ji Li whose online game 'Famous Objects from Classic Movies' requires players to guess the name of films from a single silhouetted image.

**(play game with audience)**

Highly sophisticated fan art in the form of collectible prints and other published ephemera further demonstrate the marketing potential of cinematic objects, as can be seen in limited edition posters sold by the likes of **US based Mondo and Dark Hall Mansions or Belgium's Nautilus Art Prints**, whose founding partner Laurent Durieux is fast becoming the most celebrated artist on the alternative movie poster scene.

Naturally this fascination with screen objects has attracted the attention of more 'serious' collectors and, ever since the seminal MGM Studios auction in 1970 – in which the studio created a three day film memorabilia auction to clear seven soundstages in an effort to consolidate space – a whole new collectors market

has emerged that previously only existed for a few film enthusiasts. Among the vast array of over 350,000 costumes, film props and related property that went under the hammer at MGM were a pair of ruby **red slippers worn by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*** that sold for \$15,000. To give a sense of how this particular area of collectibles has grown, consider that a second pair of the ruby slippers sold at auction in the 1980s for \$165,000 and the final pair available (of four known to exist) sold recently for \$666,000.

Films are suspended in a timeless realm of magic and wonder, and thus owning a piece of them makes us in some way immortal by association. Similar to the ways in which objects like the Batmobile or Darth Vader's helmet are extensions of the characters which own them, collectors are looking for the closest and most intimate form of emotional connection to a film, and thus – paying such enormous sums for them seems oddly justifiable. The objects are often also direct links to childhood; times in most people's lives less burdened by responsibility and more fuelled by active and fertile imaginations – an idea that was mined for full effect by Orson Welles' use of the 'Rosebud' sled in *Citizen Kane* (1931) or **Alfie's coveted Red Ryder BB Gun in *A Christmas Story*** (Bob Clark, 1983).

Alfie's BB gun – which is the catalyst for much of that film's storyline - thus leads us into the world of more direct brand fandom, particularly where the imaginary is concerned. Films only work if we fall under their spell and suspend a sense of disbelief but also – more importantly - 'buy into' the fictional world that is created, saturated as it often is by a branded landscape akin to ours.

This defictionalisation of imagined objects or hypothetical brands from the films in which they appear into the 'real world' as coveted collectibles and auction house treasures, reveal new meanings of ownership, identification and value – especially when we consider them in the context of an ever more consumer savvy landscape.

Companies too have understood this growing consumer resilience to traditional marketing strategies which has resulted in more sophisticated and subtle forms of product promotion. 'Murketing' – was a term first used by the NY Times columnist Rob Walker in his 2008 book 'Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are' to describe a marketing strategy where the goal is to create a brand identity that seems indifferent to whether the consumer purchases it or not, while simultaneously creating a buzz or "scene" around the product. **Think of Red Bull** which was a little known European energy drink at its outset but which grew in popularity by positioning itself in both the extreme sports and nightlife markets. They managed to stay out of the mainstream by maintaining a hip and exclusive image and would **sponsor skateboard**

competitions as well as nightclub parties, appealing to both segments without appearing to advertise to them.

Red Bull relies on a ground-up marketing approach which galvanizes social groups to create their own meaning around a brand and thus fostering emotional connections through 'idea' affiliations. It's not an energy drink – it's an attitude and way of life.

Alfie's Red Ryder BB Gun also promotes an affiliation but it's one that begins with the thrill of fictional reality. Although the gun existed from 1938 onwards, it's power as a movie prop transcended the actual product to become one associated with Ralphie, the film and fans of the film who want to 'own' a piece of the film's magic.

Since the early days of film, real products have been used to create a sense of authenticity

Slides: The garage (1919) / The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) / The Matrix (1999)

but the use of *product displacement* was necessary often due to trademark restrictions.

Product displacement refers to the removing of trademarked products from primarily visual media in order to avoid the payment of licensing fees, if the trademark owner objects or if the broadcaster would prefer not to publicise a product for free.

Slide: How I met your mother

Product displacement can also refer to brands/companies deliberately modifying their name or logo in an attempt to make people see the logo and realize that the logo/name is not correct. This extra thinking time forces people to register the real brand and can actually be more effective than product placement.

Slide: Scrubs

This morphing of the real and fictional would later give rise to more subversive uses of product placement often as a form of critique on the absurd nature of branding itself. Examples of this are the parodic Simpsons products such as 'Duff beer and Krusty-O's, the Mooby's restaurant chain in Kevin Smith movies or Big Kahuna burgers and Red Apple cigarettes in many of Quentin Tarantion's movies. These products and brands tend to be appealing partly because they are inherently fake and often encompass an artistic jab at our marketing saturated world.

Things become even more murky (and interesting) when we consider that fans of these films are simultaneously endorsing something and smirking at the idea of wearable endorsement at the same time.

Artists like [Shawn Wolfe and Dana Wyse](#) have made work that sits very much at the edge of this brand subversion – focusing on the often empty promises that products or brands make, using – in Wolfe’s case – not only the language, but the sophisticated visual language of a full marketing campaign, going so far as to actually make a product that has no purpose other than to emphasise its pointlessness. [Slide: Remover installer/pills](#)  
(Wolfe’s anti-brand, Beatkit and its main product the Remover Installer, which began life in 1984 and expired according to plan in 2000.)

In my recently launched illustrated film magazine *Beneficial Shock!* we run a series of mock-ads for sometimes obscure film objects which supposes that these are real products going or already gone to market. Although this series is in the realm of the imaginary it’s not that dissimilar to other examples discussed and suggests that if enough people want something to exist, it very well could.  
[Slides: voight kampf machine / overlook hotel / devil’s tower](#)

While Marketing is more focused on indirect brand affiliation and anti-brands are methods often used to skewer or criticize our heavily branded world, fictional branding is mostly used in an effort to re-inforce the connection between the fan and the movie world created, demonstrating that even fake brands have real business potential once they become household names.

It’s one thing to wear and endorse a fictional brand you know doesn’t exist such as the Red Apple cigarettes or a T-Shirt emblazoned with the Tyrell corporation logo but the business potential mentioned above really comes into play when marketers are willing to take huge risks on transitioning fake brands into real products or assets. Brands such as the [Bubba Gump Shrimp Company](#) chain of restaurants (43 and counting) and [The Mighty Ducks hockey team](#) were directly created by marketers in response to the success of the films these fictional brands appeared in, acting in effect as **Reverse Brand Marketing**. In the case of *The Mighty Ducks*, after the 1992 film was a hit, Disney agreed to own an expansion Hockey League franchise in Anaheim, and they tied it into their movie in a piece of cross promotion. [Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory](#) (the film) only exists because Quaker Oats wanted to launch a Wonka confectionery line.

Due to the near-collapse of the U.S. film industry in the late 1960s/early 1970s the system was wide open for new companies to get involved in making films through financial support. The 10 year old daughter of a vice president for a

large production company convinced her father to make Roald Dahl's book 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' into a film. This vice president convinced his boss to approach the advertising executive of the Quaker Oats company who were coincidentally interested in a project that could help promote a new chocolate candy bar that they were developing. That is why the name of the film was changed to Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, as Willy Wonka - and the wonka bars specifically - was what Quaker wanted to advertise.

While the film was a commercial flop on initial release sales of the candy bars were good and a whole new brand was developed that was reinvigorated by the original film becoming a cult classic and Tim Burton's reboot released in 2005.

Products such as the 'Talkboy' created for the film *Home Alone 2* were manufactured for sale following the film's success as did Staypuft marshmallows which were inspired by the film Ghostbusters.

These types of products and brands are salient examples of the impact of the fictional world and remind us that all brands inherently reside most powerfully in the imagination and connect with us most strongly through our emotions. Films in essence work on an emotional level and so have a head start in creating a 'brand awareness'. Reverse brand marketing simply harnesses this emotional connection to a film's overall brand or sub-brands and objects that make up parts within the whole.

It seems that Albert Lamorisse too was fully aware of the power that objects can have on us when, in 1956, he dreamed up the idea of an unconventional but lasting friendship between a young boy and a red balloon.

Thank you.