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Greatest Hits of Product Placement

By STUART ELLIOTT

WHEN the 77th annual Academy Awards were presented last night, there was no category for best product placement in a film. But a monthlong series that begins on Friday on the Turner Classic Movies cable television network suggests there perhaps ought to be for the 78th.

The series, called "Product Placement in the Movies," examines how advertisers have arranged for filmmakers to include their brands and products on screen. The series, scheduled for the four Friday nights in March, is composed of 11 films, from familiar titles like "The Seven Year Itch" and "Urban Cowboy" to less known ones like "That Uncertain Feeling" and "Three Guys Named Mike."

The series is timely because product placement and other methods of embedding advertising within programming are growing more popular among marketers. The goal is to find the most effective ways to reach consumers, who are increasingly able to elude commercials and other traditional interruptive sales tactics by using digital video recorders.

For those marketers and movie buffs who believe that product placement began in 1982, when the Reese's Pieces brand of candy sold by Hershey was featured in "E. T.: The Extra-Terrestrial," the series provides a surprising corrective. It turns out that Madison Avenue and Hollywood have been working together in earnest since the 1930's - and in some isolated instances, evidence indicates, even before then.

"I learned a lot in putting this together," said Charles Tabesh, senior vice president for programming at Turner Classic Movies in Atlanta, part of the Turner Broadcasting System division of Time Warner.

"We're always looking for interesting aspects of film history, and this is one that seemed unique," Mr. Tabesh said. "Films are pieces of art, but there's such a strong commercial element, too, and it's important to explore that."

The series is part of efforts by Turner Classic Movies to attract viewers by presenting movies linked by common themes. For instance, Claudette Colbert films will be shown on the four Monday evenings in March, and the night of March 24 will be devoted to five political thrillers in a row.

The idea for a series devoted to product placement, Mr. Tabesh said, came from Jay Newell, an assistant professor at the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University. The films were selected based on research by Mr. Newell at places like the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

"I would look at a movie to see if there was a product or brand, then dig into the archives to see if there was a paper trail" between the marketer and the movie studio, Mr. Newell said in a telephone interview from campus in Ames, Iowa. The research uncovered a trove of evidence of product-placement agreements made beginning in the 30's, he added, by major brands like Bell telephones, Buick, Chesterfield cigarettes, [Coca-Cola](#), De Beers diamonds and White Owl cigars, with major studios like Columbia, MGM and Warner Brothers.

In some instances, Mr. Newell said, the deals he found were less brand-specific, like one from the 30's involving makers of venetian blinds seeking to popularize their product, then favored by the wealthy, with mass audiences by "working with Hollywood designers to get venetian blinds in homes" of working- and middle-class movie characters.

The earliest example of product placement Mr. Newell said he found involved films from 1896 created by Auguste and Louis Lumière for François-Henri Lavanchy-Clarke, the Swiss representative for the Sunlight brand of soap sold by Lever Brothers (now [Unilever](#)). One film shows a cart bearing the Sunlight name parked on a street, Mr. Newell said, and another shows "people doing their wash."

Also fascinating, Mr. Newell said, are "the product placements that didn't happen." For example, he said, he read a letter in Alfred Hitchcock's files from "when he was doing preproduction on 'The Birds,' " in which North American Van Lines offered trucks for "a scene where the people under attack leave town."

Mr. Newell said he was frustrated that in many cases he was unable to determine whether a product was included in a vintage film "for verisimilitude or because someone had a vested interest in getting the product in front of the camera."

Film fans may forever wonder why in a scene in "Double Indemnity" that takes place in a grocery store, the director, Billy Wilder, had some products like Green Giant vegetables facing the camera while others were turned around, obscuring their labels. And why in a scene set in a kitchen in "All About Eve" are boxes of Sunshine Hi-Hos and Sunshine Grahams visible on a shelf above Bette Davis?

To help explain product placement to viewers, Mr. Tabesh said, Turner Classic Movies will run shorts before and after the films featuring a longtime specialist in the field, George R. Simkowski, president of a company in Norridge, Ill., named Let's Go Hollywood. Mr. Simkowski will discuss the practice and present examples.

"My first product placement was for the Bob Hope movie 'Bachelor in Paradise,' " Mr. Simkowski recalled in a telephone interview from Burbank, Calif., where he was visiting studios last week to help place products on shows like "E.R."

"I was the advertising manager in Chicago for Webcor, the phonograph and tape-recorder maker, and a guy from MGM called me and said, 'We need a tape recorder as a prop,' " Mr. Simkowski said, adding, "And I said, 'What's a prop?' "

Forty-four years later, Mr. Simkowski will help cable viewers spot the products placed in the 11 films, like a bag of Bell potato chips in a scene from "The Seven Year Itch," from 1955, featuring Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell.

"Now if you ask me, this was not a great placement," Mr. Simkowski declares in one of the shorts. "You can't see the logo, and besides, with Marilyn holding the product, who's really looking at the chips?"

Asked for his favorite career placement, Mr. Simkowski said it was getting a Budget rental truck into a scene in "Home Alone" in which John Candy and a polka band give Catherine O'Hara a lift home.

"Not only was it a great scene," he added, "right after that, people called Budget and thanked them 'for getting that poor woman home,' as if it really happened."

The other vintage films in the series and the products placed in them are: "Arsenic and Old Lace," 1944, Bell telephones; "Father of the Bride," 1950, Coca-Cola; "Gold Diggers of 1935," Buick; "Love Affair," 1939, pink champagne; "Scarface," 1932, White Owl; "That Uncertain Feeling," 1941, De Beers; "Three Guys Named Mike," 1951, American Airlines; and "You'll Never Get Rich," 1941, Chesterfield.

The series concludes on March 25 with the two most recent films, both from 1980, which are indicative of elaborate, modern-day deals with the products placed more overtly. One, "Urban Cowboy," features multiple placements for beer brands like Budweiser, Coors and Lone Star as well as Stetson hats.

The other film, "Superman II," included a score of appearances for Marlboro cigarettes that were deemed so obtrusive for a movie appealing to children that they helped inspire restrictions on placements of tobacco products in films.

"They made up cigarette trucks for the movie with Marlboro logos on them," Mr. Tabesh said, laughing, "which don't even really exist" because such identification could inspire hijackings.

Asked if there was a movie he wanted to include in the series but could not, Mr. Tabesh replied ruefully: "If I had 'E. T.,' I would play it. That would have been the final one of the festival."