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Product Placement as a Useful Film Catalyst—*You've Got Mail* as a Useful Film

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Abstract: The thesis is guided by the idea of Charles R. Acland and Haidee's introduction to the study volume Useful Cinema, which states that useful cinema has been around since the dawn of cinema and is the preferred tool for serving different social, political, and financial etc. spheres of interest and conveying their messages. In the thesis, I argue that product placement essentially acts as a catalyst that transforms the given film in which it is placed into a useful film. At the same time, product placement is genre-sensitive, so the group of genres that are suitable for brand integration is limited. In my case study, I aim to demonstrate how Nora Ephron's romantic comedy You've Got Mail can act as a useful film through product placement.

Keywords: useful film, product placement, genre-sensitivity, romantic comedy

Introduction

In *Utility and Cinema*, in the introduction of the volume entitled *Useful Cinema,* Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, the editors, analyze useful cinema as a category that has existed since the dawn of cinema, coexisting with the aesthetically examined (feature) film, and argue that it is "a body of films and technologies that perform tasks and serve as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital."[1] This definition essentially assumes a purposiveness, an intention behind the moving image, which dismisses Kantian disinterestedness and argues that film is an important and preferred tool for serving different spheres of interest and conveying their messages. One only has to think of the most radical examples—Mussolini's now iconic phrase "cinema is the strongest weapon", or Lenin's statement that cinema is the most important of all the arts—which have seen cinema as the flagship of ideological communication and the most effective means of advancing the cause of new political arrangements, rather than as an aesthetic value.

'Aesthetic, social and political capital', as it can be read in the above quoted sentence from Acland and Wasson's introduction. But what about the role of financial capital, economic advantage and material gain? 'Moving images serve an expanding range of corporate [...] functions'[2], they state in their study's first paragraph. Indeed, the promotional film spot has a role to play as a tool for a company to make a profit, and has been around since the dawn of the moving image. With the advent of the Gutenberg galaxy and the printing press, advertising

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1 Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, *Useful Cinema*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 3.
2 Ibid. 1.

and publicity already appeared in the 15th and 16th century[3], but in the modern sense of the term, institutionalized advertising dates back to around the end of the 19th century, when there were already agencies and trademarks were widespread.[4] This is probably the reason why, immediately after the emergence of the moving image, examples of product placement can be found, which is either embedded in a work of art as a "useful" element or, depending on the success of the process, is even integrated into it.

Product placement in cinema

In a 2006 study, Newell, Salmon, and Chang[5] traced this marketing strategy back to 1896, when a short film commissioned by the Lever brothers, *Laveuses,* was shown in which the Lumière brothers promote washing with Sunlight soap. From the 1920s onwards, it was common to see snippets in films promoting tobacco, alcohol, soft drinks or motor vehicles,[6] but product placement became a common practice in the film industry from the 1940s onwards.[7] The turning point in the regulation of product placement came with Spielberg's 1982 film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, in which the main character, a young boy, sweet-talks the alien with Reese's Pieces sugar jelly. Following the film's release, the candy company Hershey's increased its sales by 65%. In response, somewhat belatedly, the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (ERMA) was formed in 1991 to establish a binding code of ethics for product placement and to review product placement practices.[8]

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3 David H. Tucker and Philip Soundy Unwin, *History of Publishing.* https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing

4 Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3., 3–5.

5 Jay Newell, Charles T. Salmon, and Susan Chang, "The Hidden History of Product Placement," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 50, no. 4. (2006), 575–594.

6 Susan D. Geringer, Michelle Rovella, and Rudy Sanchez, *Viewer Perception of Product Placement in Comedic Movies*. 37. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301957423_Viewer_Perceptions_of_Product_Placement_in_Comedic_Movies

7 Michael A. Wiles and Anna Danielova, "The Worth of Product Placement in Successful Films: An Event Study Analysis," *Journal of Marketing* 73, no. 4. (2009), 44.

8 Susan D. Geringer, Michelle Rovella, and Rudy Sanchez, *Viewer Perception of Product Placement in Comedic Movies*. 37. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301957423_Viewer_Perceptions_of_Product_Placement_in_Comedic_Movies

Product placement or brand integration is a marketing strategy whereby a product or service is embedded in a particular media narrative (newspaper article, book, film, etc.).[9] In this paper, I will focus exclusively on film, and look at the criteria that a film product placement must meet and how product placement can convert even a popular feature film into a useful film.

While the Hershey's story mentioned above is clearly a success story, product placement is still a shaky ground for both companies and filmmakers today. For the former, product placement is a dubious proposition because at the moment of the agreement with the film they do not know whether the film in which they want to insert their product will be successful, and unlike commercials, the sales generated and the resulting revenue are not as accurately measured for the various film brand placements.

The role of the genre

Product placement in film is genre-sensitive as Wiles and Danielova pointed out in their study. In films depicting violence, for example, it is important to avoid associating the product or service with a negative emotion in the mind of the viewer, nor is it appropriate for a company to use brand placement to suggest that it is legitimizing the aggressive content presented in the film. Surprisingly, it can also lead to rejection if a company seeks to place a product in a critically acclaimed piece of cinema, thereby subverting audience expectations, breaking a purely aesthetic experience, alienating the audience with a consumer message. Audiences in search of artistic value believe in the ethos of art, and consider film to be outside the horizon of commercial goals.[10] It is therefore easy to conclude that popular film culture is the most suitable medium for product placement.

But as has been pointed out, this practice does not fit into all genre frameworks. A 2008 study led by Sung and de Gregorio revealed that comedies are best suited to convey a brand message due to their wholesome conclusion and a narrative that evokes positive emotions and laughter, but dramas, adventure films and even action movies with their immersive plot have a similar potential. Animated films, science fiction, political and historical films are the least successful in this area. Although no specific study has been carried out into why the following genres are inappropriate for these purposes, empirical evidence suggests that, while in animated films the violent consumer socialization of children is to be rejected, and in science fiction films, which look to the future, the promotion of a company that wants to generate

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9 Namita Bhatnagar and Fang Wan, "Is Self-Character Similarity Always Beneficial? The Moderating Role of Immersion in Product Placement Effects," *Journal of Advertising* 40, no. 2. (2011), 39.

10 Wiles, "The Worth of Product Placement in Successful Films," 48.

profits in the present is unacceptable, political or historical films based on actual events are not expected to serve any economic interests, otherwise the credibility of the world they are intended to portray is damaged.[11]

The suitability of comedy for product placement seems obvious in the light of the above. The brands in question intend to evoke positive feelings and associations in the viewer, and comedy logically provides the right context for product placement, while its narrative is also highly persistent, engaging and involving.[12] Humor is an important element of the genre, and although there has been much research on it in advertising and marketing, it has not been extended to product placement. Duncan has found that the use of humor in advertising can train memory and attention, increase the effectiveness of the message being communicated[13] and increase liking and acceptance of a brand. It is no wonder that consumer messages are most often smuggled into comedies.

Alongside the genre, a hero who is appealing, with whom the viewer can strongly connect, and this deep sense of identification can also trigger and enhance receptivity to the products used by the hero, is just as important. In their study, Bhatnagar and Wan distinguish two types of information processing: systematic/central and heroic/peripheral. While the former refers to an approach where the viewer has a more developed motivation and information processing ability, carefully examining the arguments of a message and making a conscious decision when making a judgement, the latter is the opposite, where viewers rely more on simplistic information—for instance on a character—to make a decision, are intuitive, emotionally attached to something or someone, e.g. they find a good-looking hero more sympathetic. Product placements and brand messages are also more appealing or widely accepted by this type of viewer.[14] And if the viewer can resonate with the hero, discovering similarities in his or her own character, they will be more easily immersed in the story and find a brand message more relatable.

However, the message can be repeated not only once, but several times, in a repetitive manner, in order to emphasize the message. In this case, however, there is a chance that the recipient of the message will become accustomed to the stimulus, and the boredom, annoyance or frustration that results may have the opposite effect, repelling or alienating the viewer. Social scientists have found that, depending on the type of product presentation—

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11 Y. Sung, and F. De Gregorio, "New Brand Worlds: College Student Consumer Attitudes toward Brand Placement in Films, Television Shows, Songs, and Video Games," *Journal of Promotion Management* 14., no. 1–2. (2008), 85.

12 Bhatnagar, "Is Self-Character Similarity Always Beneficial?", 46.

13 C. P. Duncan, "Humor in Advertising: A Behavioral Perspective," *Academy of Marketing Science Journal* 7, no. 4. (1986), 285.

14 Bhatnagar, "Is Self-Character Similarity Always Beneficial?", 40.

nuanced or pronounced—it can reduce or increase feelings of boredom or discomfort.[15] The fact that the message conveyed by a particular product placement has a different impact on each recipient also makes it difficult to assess the overall effect. The only element that can be specifically captured and studied is the financial background behind the practice, which provides quantitative data for analysis, but is negligible for our analysis. And even if there is no factual data available, it can be stated by empirical means that product placement is not only a useful practice for companies to make a profit, but also a practical one for constructing and transmitting consumer awareness, for example sustainable, ethical, environmentally and socially conscious consumption, etc., and can therefore, in my opinion, be considered a useful film element for both sides (producer and receiver).

Product placement in practice: a case study

In the above, I wanted to outline my belief that product placement in feature films, with the marketing objectives it serves, reinforces the category of useful film and can be seen as a specific strategic element that enhances the effectiveness of its messaging. The aim of this paper is not only to summarize all these film language tools, but also to show how they work in a film that can be considered almost prototypical in terms of the features listed. Not only does Nora Ephron's romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* incorporate the aspects discussed above—popular film, comedy, humor—but, in addition to developing its plot along the lines of a highly spectacular product placement, promoting the services of a specific company, in this case America Online, it also creates an archetype of the modern woman, and, beyond the product, propagates a new social practice, a new way of life. The aim of this article is not only to show the traits of product placement in this film, but also to demonstrate through this example that a romantic comedy can also contain useful cinematic elements.

Nora Ephron's film, which transposes Ernst Lubitsch's successful and beloved 1940 classic romantic comedy *The Shop Around the Corner* (based on the original play entitled *Parfumerie* of Miklós László) into a modern setting, not only highlights a product placement, but also makes America Online's online mailing system the main channel of communication between the two protagonists, effectively organizing the entire narrative around product placement. The time of the action can be estimated to be around the time the film was made, around 1998, when AOL had already celebrated its fifteenth anniversary, the World Wide Web had been around

[15] Pamela Miles Homer, "Product Placements: The Impact of Placement Type and Repetition on Attitude," *Journal of Advertising* 38, no. 3. (2009), 22.

for almost a decade—and had been available to the masses since 1991—the first laptops had been in operation for ten years, and more and more people were using computers not only for work but also for their private lives, and taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet. The typical dial-up Internet signature is repeatedly echoed in the film, signaling the transition between the two worlds—the cyber one and the real one—, just as the mail system calls out to its user and informs him or her that "You've got mail!" The internet interacts with reality, an extension of it, an alternative reality that can be built from nothing, where you can be yourself, hidden behind a username, and reveal your deepest thoughts.

The opening of the film is itself an homage, a visual confession to online space. With a single click on the desktop of our widescreen computer, a window opens up to reveal the entire cyber universe, and out of the schematic space emerges the city, which the film assumes to be the center of the world: New York. (Especially Manhattan and the Upper West Side. Ephron's ode to New York is in some ways akin to Allen's *Manhattan*.) Only one more click separates the viewer from a bird's-eye view of the digitally reconstructed and thus duplicated sphere, which will serve as a living space for the two protagonists in both analogue and virtual versions. The male protagonist, Joe, even identifies himself in his username—*NY152*—by his location in space, using his real-world coordinates to create his online persona.

One of the film's most poignant claims is that the American Online mail system is not only capable of receiving and forwarding emails, but also of creating an alternate reality where people can escape from the problems of everyday life or a dysfunctional relationship. The viewer is not offered a service or a brand name, but the opportunity to change their life, the means to find a soulmate on a silver platter. This is an important rule of product placement, which Ephron understands and uses brilliantly in this film: the product being sold goes beyond itself.

Another perfect example of this is the Starbucks franchise, which is featured several times in the film. Joe philosophizes about the coffee chain as follows: "The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people with no decision-making ability whatsoever to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what the hell they're doing or who on earth they are can, for only $2.95, get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self: Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino."[16] Although Joe is teasing the customers loitering in front of the counter, the message behind his words is clearly the message of Starbucks. He argues that coffee goes beyond itself, that it is not a drink, but the result of a forthright decision, that its characteristics are the consumer's characteristics, that it is a testament to the complexity and diversity of his or her personality. For just three dollars, we can prove to the world how special we are with a single cup of coffee.

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[16] *You've Got Mail,* directed by Nora Ephron, Lauren Shuler Donner Productions, 1998, 0:16:58.

In his article on romantic comedies turning towards consumerism, Thomas Doherty says of Ephron that she is "one of the few rom-com writer-directors actually more interested in romance than shopping."[17] While in the romantic comedies of the classic Hollywood era, the main aim was to evoke the American dream and promote the marital bond—"the propaganda arm of the American Dream machine, Hollywood promoted a romantic fantasy of marital roles and conjugal euphoria"[18]—, over time marriage as the highest form of self-fulfillment was removed from the equation, and the desire for men was joined by the desire to possess material goods, especially fashion items. These films and/or series, made at or after the turn of the millennium—e.g. *Confessions of a Shopaholic, Legally Blonde, 27 Dresses, The Devil Wears Prada, Sex and the City* etc.[19]—tried to offer women social leverage through shopping, to make them look more successful, more attractive and more youthful, which is linked to the third wave of feminism, which celebrated the market and saw the increasing purchasing power as the social empowerment of women.[20] Ephron, on the other hand, has consistently kept away from the fashion industry, and has also dressed his protagonists in clothes that do not emphasize feminine attributes, such as turtlenecks or dungarees, without giving in to the shopping gene or material desires. This does not mean, however, that it has shied away from product placement, nor that it has not, however, criticized consumerism and the violent expansion of American corporations.

In the case of *You've Got Mail,* for example, it is striking that the female protagonist, Kathleen Kelly, is an opponent of so-called 'corporate America' and also the depositary of a purely immaterial idea of love rooted in chivalric poetry. Kathleen is a self-employed, self-reliant woman who carries on the spirit of the children's bookshop she inherited from her mother, The Shop Around the Corner, and prefers quality to cheap, quantity bookselling. She opposes large chain stores that squeeze small businesses and employ workers without the right skills or knowledge. Kathleen is thus consistently opposed to quantity consumption and the all-consuming big business right up to the very end of the film, even if Ephron does not give her a professionally happy release and victory over the big bookstore that moves round the corner.

It is also important to mention that Kathleen, both in physical appearance and personality, provides a framework into which everyone can easily fit, and hence her suitability for product placement. In contrast to romantic comedies, often directed by men, in which the femininity of the female protagonist is very strongly articulated in her outward features, Meg Ryan's

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17 Thomas Doherty, "The Rom-Com Genre and the Shopping Gene," *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 2. (2010), 26.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 P. Maclaran, "Marketing and feminism in historic perspective," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 4, no. 3., 462–469.

Kathleen wears mostly pastels and earth tones, her cleavage never peeks out from under her blouse, and she wears very conservative, sometimes girlish clothes. The same can be said of her movement, which also somewhat infantilizes her, or her short hairstyle, which gives her a rather boyish look. There is nothing extravagant about Kathleen's appearance, nor about her personality. Her character has universal values that most people would follow, such as respect for tradition, a steadfast belief in unconditional love, hope for happiness, and confidence in the rewards of hard work. These are attributes considered universally good that everyone can easily identify with. Both in her modest appearance and in her traditional values-based internal qualities, she may be sympathetic to the heroistic/peripheral information processing type defined by Bhatnagar and Wan.[21] As soon as the viewer sees that this sympathetic lady's life has been positively changed by AOL's mail system, he or she is more convinced of the service.

The educational intent behind the product placement in Ephron's film, which is primarily aimed at a female audience, is therefore clear: Kathleen opens up her laptop, dials up the internet, clicks, types and writes emails with ease. As one employee of the AOL's film collaboration explained: "That made us proud that AOL is becoming a feature in people's lives, and the Internet and the online world is not simply a 'thing;' it's a natural part of people's lives."[22] But is it really part of every person's life? Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny's article *Gender and the Internet* summarizes at the beginning that the initial users of new technologies are usually young, educated, mostly affluent, urban men who are not members of any minority. In addition, several studies have shown that far fewer women than men used the internet in the mid-1990s, when it became available to all.[23] Kathleen's main role is to present she can handle technology with a naturalness that anyone, any woman, can imitate.

You've Got Mail had not even arrived in cinemas before it became a national press issue that the film was actually raising awareness of the usefulness of the internet, as well as entertainment. "This deal gives AOL the opportunity to present their service to an audience of [female—ed.] moviegoers that may or may not be familiar with AOL and to showcase how their service works and the benefits of it"—said Dean Ayers, then President of ERMA, on the collaboration.[24] The film will therefore bring intellectual benefits to the audience through a new perspective and, not least, financial benefits to the company in question.

After all, Ephron's film does not even try to hide this. In the month before the premiere on 18 December 1998, there had been speculation in the pages of *Wired* in the wittily entitled

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21 Bhatnagar, "Is Self-Character Similarity Always Beneficial?", 40.

22 *You've Got Product Placement.* https://www.wired.com/1998/11/youve-got-product-placement/

23 Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny., "Gender and the Internet," *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 1. (2003), 111.

24 *You've Got Product Placement.* https://www.wired.com/1998/11/youve-got-product-placement/

article, You've Got Product Placement about the size of the deal that the film's studio, Warner Brothers, and AOL had struck.[25] Jupiter Communications' head of online marketing strategy, Evan Neufeld, estimated the deal at between three and six million dollars. The publicity and hidden marketing opportunity has naturally caught the eye of several companies, with Apple and IBM each offering a computer to appear in the film: Meg Ryan's character uses a Macintosh PowerBook, and Hanks' character uses an IBM desktop computer to write beautiful love letters to each other.[26]

For in this film, computing and the internet are presented in a new function, as a new media space for modern love, anticipating the online dating and dating apps that later burst onto the scene. If no romance is to take root in the real world, it's time to give the internet a chance, where anyone can turn out to be your soulmate. "Someone you pass on the street may already be the love of your life," the film's poster proclaims, and the first scene of the comedy reveals Kathleen and Joe walking past each other, unaware that they are each other's most trusted confidants in the virtual world. Perhaps the most important message of the film is best captured in the word "anyone." Anyone can find love in the online space, anyone can take advantage of the internet, anyone can easily operate such a seemingly complicated machine.

Kathleen's partner, Greg, a journalist of *The Observer*, a caricature of the urban liberal intellectual obsessed with old typewriters and rejecting all modern devices, repeatedly voices his technophobia and reports with disbelief that in Virginia all workers had to delete the solitaire program from their computers because no one had worked for six weeks. In this gesture, he sees the end of Western civilization, and despite all the arguments, he flatly denies that humanity owes anything to technology. He says to Kathleen at the beginning of the film, with a mocking and slightly dismissive edge, "You think this machine is your friend, but it's not."[27] Only to find out by the end of the film that technology, and AOL's mail system in particular, can open the door to unexpected human connections. The two men symbolically represent two worldviews: Greg is the rigid, stagnant, unadventurous figure, while Joe embodies the exciting future, open to technological innovation. The qualities of the two men also serve as value judgements, the film clearly takes the side of Joe, and his transformation from anti-hero to hero is also a triumph of technology: the former object of the viewer's aversion—computing and the internet, or Joe himself—now represents a brighter future.

At the same time, it is interesting that one of Ephron's most pointed claims in the film is that through the most modern technological achievements we can find our way back to the traditional, virginal, pure love, rooted in spiritual and intellectual communion, monogamy,

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 *You've Got Mail,* directed by Nora Ephron, Lauren Shuler Donner Productions, 1998, 0:03:26.

purified of carnal desires. "This is possibly the most adorable creature I've ever been in contact with, and if she turns out to be as good looking as a mailbox... I would be crazy enough to turn my life upside down and marry her,"[28] Joe tells his friend, strolling outside the café he is been given as a meeting point for a blind date. (And, of course, it is striking that the happy ending must culminate in marriage, the most traditional male-female relationship.) Joe then asks his friend to peer in the window and give him an idea of whether the lady waiting for him—Kathleen—is attractive or not, and when he gets a favorable answer, he happily dances. This does, however, somewhat nuance the image of a man who is totally unconcerned with appearances and only concerned with inner values.

AOL's service thus does not simply offer the possibility of companionship, but conveys the romanticized message that on the Internet, anyone can be themselves in the purest sense, can reveal their most private thoughts, feelings and fears under the protection of anonymity, and find help for their problems. Even if appearances do matter to Joe, the dramaturgical element that contributes to the purity of love is that the two parties interact merely through words sent to cyberspace, revealing nothing concrete about themselves, thus preserving anonymity, and forming their essence and personality through syntactical structures along different themes, thus offering the most essential part of themselves to the other.

Of course, it is an interesting addition, and somewhat counterintuitive, that the film promotes a large corporation with the product placement that is the backbone of the plot, when the main conflict in the film is the Fox bookstore, owned by Joe's family, slowly taking over and occupying the small privately owned bookstores in New York. In the process, Kathleen's bookstore is falling victim. Ephron applies a special hypnosis with the love thread: while for two-thirds of the film the viewer is intently involved in the Fox bookstore's hostile takeover and tends to dislike Joe, in the final third the love story takes precedence over all other events, so much so that the calamity Kathleen has been forced to endure because of Joe's business is forgotten. The 'small business versus corporate America' storyline is rather awkwardly interwoven, but Ephron resolves this emotional tension in the viewer's mind so that Kathleen at least has time to write children's books and, as she is an expert in children's literature, is offered a job as an editor.

As AOL aims to prove in the film, the internet is open to all and serves as a public space where people can express their opinions and thoughts, under their name or anonymously. Ephron also assumes other areas of the media, the press or, say, television, to be such a space, which ideally, in a democratic state, would give everyone the opportunity to speak. It is also a powerful message of the film, and one that encourages us to cling to the possibilities of the

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[28] Ibid, 0:59:10.

modern world that Kathleen, when she feels threatened, turns to the media and seeks to forge a community around herself. A good cause, people who stand up for it, a free forum: the American ethos is not lost on Ephron's film. To then confess at the end, with barely perceptible, nuanced cynicism: the big fish always eats the small fish, the stronger always crushes the weaker. Although *You've Got Mail* is ostensibly a light romantic comedy, based on the topos of love awakened from hostility, it makes a surprising statement, for it is also a critique of monopoly and big business. This was certainly not commissioned by AOL.

In conclusion, as we have seen through the examples of Ephron's film, cinematic product placement can convert any feature film work with product placement features into a useful film. The 'utility' in this case is not only that the mutual parties (the brand and the film company) can benefit financially from the use of product placement, but also that it can convey content that satisfies an intention or fulfils a purpose (in the case of *You've Got Mail,* the widespread exposure of AOL's mailing system and thus the expansion of its user base.) As a means of induction, it can be argued that, under certain conditions, even a romantic comedy can act as a useful film, since, in the words of Acland and Wasson, *You've Got Mail* also performs a function and serves as a tool in the ongoing struggle for social capital. The film's aim goes beyond the horizon of entertainment or aesthetic pleasure, since its message is intended to teach a lesson to society as a whole, and its message is based on a specific intention. It is an education in Internet use and consumer awareness; an encouragement to be open to modern technology, and a lesson in American capitalism.

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