

By T. Rob Brown, 2014

The Nostalgia Industry: How Michael Bay sells toys to adults

“...the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 1)

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, the *Transformers* films (2007-2014), directed by Michael Bay, might seem like two-hour commercials for the Hasbro toys that bear that namesake but the product placement in these films is extremely more diverse and digs deeper than most consumers might realize. From Bay's start in advertising to his long and continued history with major corporations, such as General Motors, this paper will look at this cinema mastermind's influence over his audience through the use of nostalgia. While the films might appear to target a younger audience to create demand for the toy line and cartoons, their PG-13 rating and more mature nature would suggest otherwise.

TRANSFORMERS BACKGROUND

Transformers is an entertainment franchise, including a product line of toys, cartoons, comic books, graphic novels, games, and a wide variety of other merchandise. The franchise is owned by toy and game manufacturer Hasbro in the United States and Takara Tomy in Japan and made its first appearance under the Transformers name with the release of “Generation 1” (retroactive term) in 1984 which existed until 1993 when “Generation 2” was released.

Typically, the franchise pits the “heroic” Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, against the “evil” Decepticons, usually led by Megatron. Both are interstellar metal species that have a robot form and at

least one other form. For most Autobots, that second form is usually an automobile. Decepticons are more varied in their second form, but some type of jet plane seems to be one of the most popular forms.

The Transformers was a children's animated television show, produced by Sunbow Productions and Marvel Productions, that began in 1984, often viewed as a vehicle to sell the toys. Later, the show was produced by Hasbro Productions.

The first theatrical release *The Transformers: The Movie* was an animated film released in 1986 by De Laurentiis Entertainment Group. Directed by Nelson Shin, this film featured vocal performances from Orson Welles, Robert Stack, and Leonard Nimoy. This included the Optimus Prime quote to Megatron, just before their climactic battle, "One shall stand, one shall fall." (*Transformers* 1986)

While the Transformers franchise went through several different animated television titles throughout the years, which continue into 2014, it wasn't until 2007 that Autobots and Decepticons would return to the silver screen for robotic combat. Paramount and DreamWorks Pictures hired Hollywood director Michael Bay, working with producer Steven Spielberg, to spearhead the first of a series of live-action films starring Shia LaBeouf and Megan Fox. (*Transformers* 2007)

MICHAEL BAY: AUTEUR OR NOT?

After graduating from Wesleyan University film school, Michael Bay journeyed into the worlds of music videos and advertising. "He created music videos for Tina Turner, Meat Loaf, Lionel Richie, Wilson Phillips, Donny Osmond, and the Divinyls." (Fontana 1) Next, he created commercials for Nike, Reebok, Coca-Cola, Budweiser, and Miller Lite. This background in advertising with major clients taught Bay much of what he needed to learn in order to create effective product placement.

In a scene from *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), the fourth film in the live-action franchise, Autobot leader Optimus Prime transforms into his second form as a tractor-trailer; as he drives away, the bumper sticker "Got Ammo?" is clearly visible. This is a nod to the "Got Milk?" advertising campaign which Michael Bay directed in 1993. (Fontana 1)

“No one is officially responsible for what he thinks. Instead everyone is enclosed at an early age in a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other such concerns, which constitute the most sensitive instrument of social control.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 16)

Bay takes part in the social control through his professional associations in advertising and the entertainment business. Bay received numerous awards for his advertising films including the Directors Guild of America's Commercial Director of the Year honor in 1995. He also served as the president of The Institute for the Development of Enhanced Perceptual Awareness, which produced commercials and music videos.

Bay's feature film directorial debut came with *Bad Boys* (1995) starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence. He went on to direct *The Rock* (1996) next, starring Sean Connery and Nicolas Cage.

“All his films up to and including *Armageddon* (1998) made him the youngest director to reach the billion dollar mark world wide.” (IMDB 2014)

His past work and success set him up for the opportunity to helm the *Transformers* movie franchise when the studios were seeking a leader for its 2007 release.

“DreamWorks and Paramount think they have something more than a kiddie pic or a nostalgic tribute—execs feel that the pic, which launches July 3, is a four-quadrant summer joyride. The question is how to market the film to those four groups. As director Michael Bay deadpans, 'I definitely didn't make a toy movie.' The studio marketing execs are selling the movie as more than a toy knockoff, talking up spectacular special effects, a fast-moving plot and humor.” (McClintock 1)

Despite his claim of not making a toy movie, “Bay earns 8% from toy sales and other merchandise tied to his *Transformers* franchise...” (Graser 1) On the other hand, debate continues on rather Bay should be considered an auteur director.

“...auteur theory asserts that directors are the primary creative agents in the production of films. It also asserts that certain directors are able to transcend the commercial limitations imposed by the film industry and impart their own unique and personal artistic visions in their films (Stoddart 1995).”

(Allen & Lincoln 877-878)

Allen & Lincoln further state that films made by auteur directors bear great artistic merit compared to most other directors. (878) They also attribute auteur theory's appeal to "...the romantic assumption that one person, namely the director, is ultimately responsible for the aesthetic merits of a film," and "...because it invites comparisons among the films directed by the same director." (890)

"I'm a critical whipping boy,' Bay says, almost proudly. 'I don't know if this film [*Transformers* (2007)] will change that perception. But the thing is, my grandfather was a stone-washer of jeans. He said, 'If you want to make money in this world, whether you make jeans or whatever, you sell to the middle of the country.' I don't make movies for critics. I make them for crowds that laugh and applaud at the end. But I'm very much an artist,' he adds. 'Those robots, every detail; every detail of each movie that I work on, I'm involved in. And at least I have a style. So many directors don't, so...'" (Strauss 1)

David S. Cohen of *Daily Variety* writes, "Action auds adore him. Fussy cineastes revile him. Hardly anyone in either camp puts much thought into assessing his work. But even some critics—who regard him warily and risk ridicule from their peers if they praise him—are coming to admit that, love him or hate him, Michael Bay needs to be taken seriously. 'He's an auteur through and through,' says Scott Foundas, contributing editor for the highbrow *Film Comment* magazine. 'You know within a few seconds of watching his movie that it's a Michael Bay movie and beyond that there's no question that he's influenced the visual language of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster in a major way.'" (1)

Variety senior film critic Justin Chang told Cohen, "There are a million hacks in Hollywood but there's only one Michael Bay." (1) Foundas continued to tell Cohen that superhero and comic book movies have replaced the tradition of the biblical epics. (1)

Two of the things Bay is sometimes criticized for are his use of rapid camera movements and quick edits. Foundas said that's not so unusual. "There's a lot of directors historically who like to move the camera a lot. They just tend to do it in one take instead of these short edits,' he says. 'But maybe he's kind of like Marcel Ophuls on methamphetamine.'" (Cohen 1)

TRANSFORMERS AT THE BOX OFFICE

“...its deliberate acceptance of the public's needs as recorded at the box office...” (Adorno & Horkheimer 9)

Hollywood looks primarily at box office results to determine the viability of sequels. *Transformers* (2007) raked in \$709.7 million worldwide. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) brought another \$836.3 million worldwide to the table. The third installment, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) shoveled in a massive \$1.1 billion worldwide. The first three movies created a smorgasbord totaling \$2.6 billion in ticket sales alone. (Lang 1)

“While determining consumption it excludes the untried as a risk. The movie-goers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a bestseller.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 8)

Ticket sales, though, are just the icing on the cake compared to the \$7 billion in merchandising, which includes video games, another \$740 million in home entertainment, through the sale of 55 million units of Blu-rays and DVDs (one of the top-ten selling franchises), as well as attracting 55,000 riders per day on Transformers-related attractions in three Universal Studios resorts (Orlando, Hollywood, and Singapore). (Lang 1)

Amusement parks are another place where Hollywood directors, like Bay and Spielberg, are adding a little dessert to the table. For 20 years, Spielberg has kept a lucrative deal with Universal. “...in return for his consulting on new rides, pays him 2% of all park receipts and concession sales, skimming \$30 million-\$50 million off park profits each year...” (Graser 1) Likewise, Bay helped develop the Transformers attractions for Universal. “In fact, the director says he returned to help the fourth *Transformers* because of the long lines generated by the theme-park rides.” (Graser 1)

MERCHANDISING: TRANSFORMING VISUALS INTO PROFITS

“It is important to note that cultural value is distinct from economic value. Sociologists typically

view cultural value in terms of cultural legitimacy.” (Allen & Lincoln 874)

According to Adorno & Horkheimer, the pleasure industry influences the consumer with the ideology that “One simply 'has to' have seen *Mrs. Miniver*, just as as one 'has to' subscribe to *Life* and *Time*.” (20) It could be said this type of influence also applies to the *Transformers* films, creating a desire for toys, automobiles, and other products. The fans feel they “have to” get the new Optimus Prime figure, comic book, or game.

Adorno & Horkheimer also emphasize that the culture industry uses entertainment to influence consumers. (9) This can be applied effectively to product placement.

Transformers: Age of Extinction (2014) came bearing a price tag in excess of \$210 million and that's after calculating all of its rebates (product placement). “But the action franchise is a cash cow for Paramount Pictures and Hasbro, with its armies of Decepticons and Autobots selling billions of dollars' worth of movie tickets, DVDs, toys and videogames. The franchise's worldwide success also demonstrates the increasingly global nature of the movie business. With *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*...China contributed a whopping \$168.2 million to the bottom line.” (Lang 1)

While the *Transformers* movies fall under the guise of art, they are purposed (from the get-go) by Michael Bay as tools of the culture industry to fuel his own agenda as well as Hasbro's merchandising efforts.

“...art becomes a species of commodity instead, marketable and interchangeable like an industrial product.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 20)

In “The Culture Industry,” Adorno & Horkheimer describe the events surrounding Toscanini's radio concert, which was heard without charge and without commercial interruption. (20) “The illusion was made possible by the profits of the united automobile and soap manufacturers, whose payments keep the radio stations going...” (20)

For Michael Bay's *Transformers* films, it is General Motors (GM) and other automobile manufacturers, as well as a variety of other products, who sponsor the cinema works through paid

product placement. The films are, in part, vehicles to sell vehicles.

In *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) alone, there are numerous elements of product placement (looking past the obvious product placement of the *Transformers* themselves). Within the film, a variety of automobiles are featured with logos prominent on screen.

The most blatant product placement in the films are the Autobots. The most prominent of these is Bumblebee, who takes on the secondary form of various Chevrolet Camaros throughout the series of films. When first seen, Bumblebee is a classic Camaro (*Transformers* 2007) but ends up becoming a sleek Camaro prototype that would eventually become the 2010 model sold by GM. This is also the first instance where the films subtly infer, “newer is better.” GM wants to promote new car sales—they make no profit from used car sales.

In the most recent film, they just come right out and say it during an exchange of dialogue between technology mogul Joshua Joyce, played by Stanley Tucci, and lead character Cade Yeager, played by Mark Wahlberg.

“What's with this vintage crap?” Joyce asks Yeager upon seeing a classic Camaro version of Bumblebee (in disguise). “We're not scanning collector car junk...we make poetry here. We're poets... Let's get this pathetic thing out of here.” (*Transformers: Age of Extinction* 2014)

While this enrages Bumblebee, who later knocks down one of Yeager's man-made Transformers, and seems to serve the narrative, but does not. Bumblebee's tirade does nothing to propel the plot of the story other than to reveal his own vanity. Hiding beneath the facade of narrative is a statement telling viewers to go buy a new car and get rid of their “crappy” old car. This is the agenda of the automobile industry.

Bay chooses to use weaker visuals of Bumblebee in classic Camaro mode but more dramatic and “sexy” visuals when he's in prototype or modern Camaro form. Bay uses low angles to show off the vehicle's sleek design, slick paint job, and details. Often, these shots include blocked backgrounds (smoke, shallow depth of field by the camera lens, or other obscuring methods) so the car jumps right

out as the dominant visual element—preventing the viewer's eyes from seeing anything else. These shots are intended to create a desire in the viewer to want to possess that model car.

The intent of the often-used expression “sex sells” applies to *Transformers*, according to the article “Technomasculine Bodies and Vehicles of Desire” by D. Harlan Wilson, who looks at erotic delirium in the 2007 film.

“*Transformers* does sport its fair share of innuendo and even an explicit reference to masturbation, but it's made for a teenage audience, rated PG-13...Nonetheless *Transformers* accomplishes a similar task, using the technologies of the automobile and violence as instruments for unbridling human sexuality...*Transformers* explicitly implicates the audience, fetishizing the actual vehicle as metaphoric (and *metamorphic*) vehicle while providing scopophilic agency for viewers.” (Wilson 348)

“There's no denying it: The *Transformers* movies have an erotic auto fixation. But what carmaker wants its sleekest vehicles to be publicly pulverized on screen? According to franchise director Michael Bay, all of them. 'The first time, I had to beg for vehicles,' he says. 'But now—I am not kidding you—every car company says, 'We will fly out any car to show you so it can be in the movie.' With one catch, he adds: 'As long as it's one of the good guys.'” (Breznican 1)

Bay knows this and even uses his power to influence GM itself. “GM is actually shrinking the Camaro now, and we were like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa.' So we worked with the designers making it wider and neater,' Bay says. 'I told them, 'Be prepared—customers are going to want this.'” (Breznican 1)

GM's relationship with Bay extends much farther back than the first *Transformers* film. During production of *The Island*, GM supplied a futuristic Cadillac. Again, during *Bad Boys II* filming, GM supplied a Hummer H2. Representing both GM and Bay, Hollywood's William Morris Agency brokered the deal to include GM automobiles in all of these films. (Graser & Stanley 1)

“The movie title itself is a very strong communication device for the transformation of our company for delivering outstanding products in the marketplace,” said Bob Kraut, director of GM

brand marketing and advertising. “It really represents the product renaissance. Thank God there's a movie called *Transformers* that we can play in.” (Graser & Stanley 1)

GM officials said they no longer wanted to just supply vehicles but for them “to be central to the plot or to be characters.” (Graser & Stanley 1) “‘The cars are integral to the story,’ Kraut says. ‘They generate attention. It's a story of good versus evil. Our cars are the good guys.’” (Graser & Stanley 1) “‘It will be one of the major films next year,’ Kraut says. ‘Its demographics match up well with some of the demographics that we want to attract.’” (Graser & Stanley 1) GM officials also admitted they plan to use the film's title to promote their own vehicles and “boost its image to consumers.” (Graser & Stanley 1)

In the 2007 film, GM vehicles played the following characters: Chevrolet Camaro as Bumblebee, Pontiac Solstice as Jazz, Hummer H2 as Ratchet, and GMC TopKick as Ironhide. Not only was GM promoting its current and future vehicle sales by brokering the deal with Bay, but it opened up another avenue of merchandising—a *Transformers* Special Edition of its Camaro.

Chevrolet's Camaro was introduced in 1966 and had a 35-year production run with four different body designs. It ceased production in 2002. Due to the success of the prototype Camaro that was Bumblebee in 2007, Chevrolet brought back the base model Camaro for retail sale in 2010 at a \$30,000 sticker price. (EGM CarTech, August 2009: 1)

The first *Transformers* Special Edition Camaro was released in 2010. This was also one of the rare instances when a car maker would make an announcement at San Diego's Comic-con. (EGM CarTech July 2009: 1)

“‘When the first *Transformers* movie was setting box office records, we had countless customers asking to purchase the ‘Bumblebee’ Camaro,’ said Karen Rafferty, product marketing director, Chevrolet. ‘Now, they can buy one with the new Camaro *Transformers* Special Edition. Streets all over North America will be buzzing in no time.’” (EGM CarTech July 2009: 1)

The 2010 Special Edition package cost Camaro buyers \$995 (sticker price) as an upgrade

option. It included a rally stripe, a couple Transformers logos and Autobot emblems. (EGM CarTech July 2009: 1) In 2012, GM offered another Special Edition Camaro but the package increased to \$3,000 for the upgrade option. This newer version of the package included a rear spoiler and leather interior. (EGM CarTech 2011: 1)

“There is no doubt that Michael Bay's *Transformers* series has played some role in helping the Chevrolet Camaro become America's best-selling sports car for 2010 and 2011.” (EGM CarTech 2011: 1) “The *Transformers* franchise has helped introduce Camaro—and Chevrolet—to a whole new generation of fans,' said Rick Scheidt, vice president of Chevrolet marketing. 'Its role in the films helped make the Camaro the best-selling sports car in America, and one of the best-known cars of any kind around the world.’” (EGM CarTech 2011: 1) EGM CarTech further reported that Chevrolet had sold 40,275 Camaros in 2011 while Mustang sales were only at 30,206. (1)

For the 2014 film, Bay signed Lamborghini on board so its Aventador could become Lockdown, a new bounty hunter in the franchise. “He's just a bounty hunter, so they were okay with that,' Bay says with a laugh.” (Breznican 1) A 2014 Freightliner Argosy was signed for Galvatron (a reincarnated Megatron). “They spent literally a million and a half dollars designing [it], and they paid for it,' Bay says. 'They see the value of what this movie does for the car world.’” (Breznican 1)

“Advertising is its elixir of life.” “Only those who can pay the exorbitant rates charged by the advertising agencies, chief of which are the radio networks themselves; that is, only those who are already in a position to do so, or are co-opted by the decision of the banks and industrial capital, can enter the pseudo-market as sellers.” “Because the system obliges every product to use advertising, it has permeated the idiom—the 'style'—of the culture industry.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 22)

Product placement throughout the 2014 film is painstakingly obvious. Logos are never partially present—they are either dominant in the frame or non-existent. For example, when Joyce's luxury car pulls up at his place of business, the camera comes to rest for an extended moment with the Rolls Royce logo dominating the frame. Holding this shot as long as Bay did serves no narrative purpose in

the film. The brand name of the car is not necessary to see that Joyce is excessively rich and powerful. This has already been established in the film. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

“To catch customers' attention, advertisers have adapted a new way of promoting brands and products, called product placement. Sometimes product placement is a result of business between advertisers and television program producers or movie producers (Karrh, 1998; Russell & Belch, 2005). For instance, the advertiser provides a service or a product in exchange for media exposure in a television show or a movie.” (Kwon 1-2)

When Yeager's daughter Tessa Yeager, portrayed by Nicola Peltz, and her boyfriend Shane Dyson, portrayed by Jack Reyor, go shoplifting for supplies there is an interesting situation regarding product placement. Dyson holds up a pair of binoculars in the store, the camera shot clearly shows the Bushnell brand name. But when they return and dump their ill-gotten gains out on the table, none of the other product logos are visible. Every single bottle or product is turned away from the camera to hide the brand names. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

In a subsequent scene where one of the previously-shown bottles of protein powder is finally displayed facing the camera, a small shot glass blocks the logo from being visible to viewers. This might lead one to believe this manufacturer did not make their product-placement payment. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

On the wall in Joyce's office, there are photos of Joyce that mimic the famous Apple Computer advertisements of Steve Jobs in creative style, black and white, composition, and subject matter (Joyce bears a, what is likely intentional, resemblance to Jobs). While not as blatant, these images help promote Apple Computer. “In the most influential American magazines, *Life* and *Fortune*, a quick glance can now scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial picture and text.” (Adorno 22) In another scene, Joyce uses a human-made Transformer technology to create a pair of Beats Audio speakers in his hand, the logo is prominent in the closeup shot. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

“One of the most significant examples of product placement in the advertising industry is the

appearance of Reese's Pieces candies in the 1982 film *E.T.*, which resulted in a significant sales profit (Karrh, Frith, & Callison, 2001).” (Kwon, 3) A 65% increase in sales, according to Bovard (1), who also noted that “automaker BMW paid \$3 million to have James Bond dump his traditional Aston Martin for the BMW Z3.”

Even the action sequences in *Transformers* are not free of product placement. During one of the battles, a Bud Light truck gets hit in the middle of an intersection. There is a long tracking shot in the aftermath that shows all of the Bud Light bottles everywhere, labels clearly visible. Bay goes so far as to even have Yeager pop the top off of one and drink the whole thing right there in the middle of a battle. Not only is this obvious product placement, but one could also arguably go so far as to call it product endorsement. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

“On the other hand, consumers want to buy products that their favorite television show characters used (Morton & Friedman, 2002).” (Kwon 7) “...research data shows that positive portrayals of products in movies can positively affect consumers' decisions to purchase the placed products, while negative portrayals lead them to discontinue use.” (Kwon 21)

In another battle scene, a double-decker bus that bears a giant Victoria's Secret advertisement, is in the middle of fire and explosions where everything around it is destroyed except for the logo—which is never even slightly obscured by the smoke and fire. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

“Current product placement strategies are not just putting a Pepsi can in the background. Production studios and advertisers keep creating sensational ideas for product placement strategies. In movies, actors drive sponsored vehicles, use sponsored cell phones and computers, all of whose brand names or logos are clearly visible to the viewers.” (Kwon 3-4)

Not unlike Bay's film *Armageddon*, there is a subplot where the main character (in this case, Yeager) doesn't like his daughter's boyfriend (in this case, Dyson) and they bicker/disagree throughout the majority of the film but make up in the end. In the 2014 film, the boyfriend is Irish. Racial insensitivity aside, Yeager calls Dyson “Lucky Charms” numerous times in the film. He could have

called him “four-leaf clover,” “leprechaun,” or numerous other Irish racial slurs but instead chooses the name of a brand of cereal (which ironically is not from Ireland). This too, though, has a product placement feel to it. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction*, 2014)

“Not only are advertisers spending enormous amounts of their budgets on product placement but production studios also heavily rely on these deals as one of the major sources of funding (Bensinger, 2008). The global market for product placement is annually increasing and marked approximately \$7.5 billion in revenues in 2006 (Graser & Stanley, 2006). In 2009, advertisers in global market spent more than \$3 billion on product placement in movies, internet websites, videogames, television shows and other media channels. Although their budget was decreased due to extreme reductions in brand markets' budgets, this number is still to be expected more than double by 2014 (Hampp, 2010).” (Kwon 6)

To promote the 2014 edition of *Transformers*, Bay's marketing team chose movie posters that feature Optimus Prime riding on the back of a giant Tyrannosaurus Rex robot (known as Grimlock). Due to the fact that Grimlock and the rest of the Dinobots don't even appear in the film until 133 minutes in of the 165-minute film, one would liken this move to be a cash grab on Hasbro's part to sell new Dinobot toys.

Often, the consumer is aware of these product placements but chooses to overlook it, perhaps to make an attempt at enjoying the work. “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.” (Adorno 24)

Bay doesn't haphazardly add product placement into his films, it's a well-thought-out process planned before the shooting schedule starts. In the 2007 film, Yahoo, Apple's iPod, and Microsoft's Xbox were integrated into the script itself.

“The script was designed to incorporate some of these things,” *Transformers* producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura told *Advertising Age*. “...as opposed to jamming a soda machine in somewhere after the

movie's done. Hopefully smart filmmakers will start [talking to promotional partners] earlier. The earlier the dialogue begins, the sooner they can integrate you in ways that are legitimate as opposed to being thrown in there, which is where product placement becomes problematic.” (Lehu 120)

Lehu further states that integrating advertising into story and plot “has been confirmed on numerous occasions by academic research to offer a potential impact much greater than a simple appearance in the background of a set. It is still necessary, however, for what is written in the contract to appear onscreen. Not only can the director wish to change the screenplay during filming and possibly thereby alter how the brand is integrated, but he/she may also ultimately decide, in the editing suite, that the scene in question is not interesting (anymore), or that it breaks up the rhythm of the film. Cue deletion, pure and simple!” (120)

There was a problem that arose just before the release of the recent film due to product placement gone wrong. Chinese advertisers, the Chongqing Wulong Karst Tourism company, reported to *The Atlantic* that they were unhappy with how they were portrayed in the film *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014). (Kuo 1)

“Chinese companies who paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to have their brands featured in the latest *Transformers* movie...are complaining about the lackluster product placements, and at least one is suing Paramount Pictures, the U.S. studio that co-produced the film. The troubles facing the makers are a sign that one of the main sources of cinematic funding from China may not be the easy source of money that studios had hoped for—even for a movie that is on course to become China's highest grossing film.” (Kuo 1)

Lu Tao, Pangu Plaza's chief executive, told *The Wall Street Journal*, “We were cheated.” (Burkitt 1) Pangu Plaza is a Beijing luxury hotel that was “...unhappy that it was only featured for a few seconds and threatened its own lawsuit—until Paramount rushed over a replica of the Transformer character known as Bumblebee and arranged a last-minute premiere.” (Kuo 1)

Bay and Rob Moore, Paramount vice chairman, successfully smoothed things over with Pangu

Plaza officials by praising the hotel. “The deal to feature Pangu's distinctive property in the film was originally made last year and valued at roughly \$1 million, a person familiar with the arrangement has said.” (Burkitt 1)

According to Michael Bovard and Jeffrey Murray, product placement can help defray the cost of filmmaking by providing additional revenue. “Most occurrences of product placement are unobtrusive and are rarely noticed by the viewer.” (Bovard & Murray 5-6)

SUBSTANCE AND EFFECT(S)

“It is with good reason that the interest of innumerable consumers is directed to the technique, and not to the contents—which are stubbornly repeated, outworn, and by now half-discredited.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 9)

With four live-action theatrical films, some argue that the *Transformers* franchise is played out. Even Michael Bay himself included commentary on that very same thought process in the newest film. Yeager travels to an old defunct movie theater to buy junk for his experiments. While there, the cinema landlord, played by Richard Riehle, says, “The movies nowadays—that's the trouble—sequels and remakes, a bunch of crap.” (*Transformers: Age of Extinction* 2014)

As an example of the weakening battle dialogue for Optimus Prime, he goes from saying the almost poetic, “One shall stand, one shall fall,” (*Transformers* 1986) to “I rise! You fall!” (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* 2009) to “I'll kill you.” (*Transformers: Age of Extinction* 2014)

One of the discourses regarding the *Transformers* franchise is substance versus special effects. Some would claim Bay's high use of explosions and special effects take over and weaken the narrative while others claim the special effects are what these films are all about.

“In spite of all the progress in reproduction techniques, in controls and the specialties, and in spite of all the restless industry, the bread which the culture industry offers man is the stone of the stereotype.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 15)

According to Nathan Lee in *The Village Voice*, "...Transformers is mercilessly inhuman and completely hysterical from frame one. Director Michael Bay never met a rhetorical apocalypse he didn't love. Dude could film a round of Jenga with greater shock and awe than the collapse of the World Trade Center." (58)

Lee further states that the whole point is a bunch of giant robots fighting each other. (58) But once the reviewer calms down, Lee indicates the only thing the movie seems interested in is showcasing its special effects "...in an impressive, but largely unintelligible, blur." (58)

His review turns into a critical analysis akin to "The Culture Industry": "...Optimus Prime, head of the Autobots, an 18-wheeler tractor-trailer comprising 10,108 moving parts—of which perhaps 500 register to the human eye. I can imagine warehouses full of animators and designers fastidiously constructing these frame-by-frame mutations, ensuring the proper fit and shine of every steel plate, oblivious to the dissolution of their craftsmanship when accelerated into the larger action. 'More than meets the eye' has been delivered far too literally." (Lee 58)

Bay spends more time worrying about the special effects than fleshing out his characters or improving the story's plot. His leading female characters seem little more than sexual wet dreams for teenage boys, rather than well-developed characters. "Sweetheart, your shorts are shrinking by the second," Yeager tells his daughter while the camera shows a closeup of her rear-end. (*Transformers: Age of Extinction* 2014) Meanwhile, the image of Mikaela Banes, played by Megan Fox, dressed similarly, bent over the front end of classic Camaro form Bumblebee to check under the hood, flashes back into the viewer's head. (*Transformers* 2007) As a result, Bay is instead noted for his explosions and his attention to detail.

"Widely known as energetic and often quite manic on his sets, Bay gleefully recounts how he drove the special effects wizards at Industrial Light and Magic nuts with his exacting vision for the likes of Starscream, Bonecrusher and the other alien automatons. 'Let me tell ya, these robots didn't come out good at first,' Bay states. 'It was hard, There were a lot of angry phone calls, like, 'We have to

do better! We have to do better!' They thought they were settling on something and I'm like, 'Nope, this is unacceptable' and I kept pushing and pushing them. But we came up with a really good visual thing. I'd just clip different things from different movies and I would reference those to the animators.'”

(Strauss 1)

Bay's attention to detail possibly comes from his background in high-end advertising where clients can be demanding in how their products are portrayed in film. “[Peter] Debruge [Variety senior film critic] identifies two essentials of the Bay look. First, the surfaces in virtually every shot are burnished to perfection, as in a commercial, where the product being advertised must look its best. Second, every moment is heightened, as if in a movie trailer.” (Cohen 1)

Wilson also acknowledges the “incurably polished, photo-realistic quality, as if freshly washed and waxed at all times, even when battered, and with contours sharp-looking enough to slice cantaloupe at the touch. Their appearance avows one of the dominant purposes of cars in America—as status symbols and enforcers of masculine identity and prosperity...” (351)

In the majority of the films, all of the Transformers are masculine entities who support a patriarchal hegemony. While in robot form, many exhibit a structure reminiscent of a large barbarian with bulging muscles.

“Often the plot is maliciously deprived of the development demanded by characters and matter according to the old pattern.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 9) “Putting on a show means showing everybody what there is, and what can be achieved.” (Adorno & Horkheimer 19)

According to Wilson, there is a “relationship between the male viewer and the fetishized object: the *car-man*.” (350) He believes male viewers see themselves in the alien object. “Transformers hold the promise of male capitalist 'success,' which may take the form of demolition or prosperity, and which is ideally carried out by means of aggression and violence...” (350)

NOSTALGIA: 'MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE'

“...the creation of a 'nostalgia mode' in the dominant cultural practices of the heritage industry, toy manufacturers, publishers and the media, which invests in myths of childhood purity and innocence, and the more ambivalent use of these narratives by people in everyday contexts in relation to memories of their own childhoods.” (Moran 156-157)

Moran suggests that nostalgia might be a more complex sensation, “less easily attachable to dominant narratives than critics...suggest.” (159)

While Bay has said he wasn't making a toy movie, he did say he wanted to make a movie “that could bring out the kid in you...” (Strauss 1) “‘You can't take it too seriously,’ says the long-haired, wiry-framed director of the new *Transformers* movie...” (Strauss 1) Bay further stated he wanted it to “aspire up” to be “...a little bit smarter than your average superhero movies.” (Strauss 1) “It could be said that Bay usually tends to do that, though he's often been accused of aiming his work toward the lowest common denominator.” (Strauss 1)

“Stewart suggests that the childhood evoked through nostalgia is a chimera—'a lost object we never possessed' (Jenkins, 1998: 4) – Steedman argues that the childhood thus recalled is often the result of a complex negotiation between broader cultural meanings and half-remembered individual experience.” (Moran 161)

For *Transformers* fans, the toys or the adult toys (Chevrolet Camaro) might be the “chimera” they never possessed as a child. The movie brings these feelings or desires to the surface.

“Many of the more fragile and ornamental toys...seem designed...to remind the purchasers about their own childhoods, rather than for use by children themselves. Teddy bears are frequently sold as positional goods, produced in limited editions with certificates of authentication.” (Moran 168)

While Hasbro's *Transformers* toys feature lines *geared* toward children, they also have high-end lines such as collector's editions and the previous *Alternators* lines that are marketed toward older collectors.

Moran believes things that remind people of their childhood are appealing because, “In an era of

geographical mobility, job flexibility, multi-tasking and just-in-time deadlines, it is hardly surprising that childhood should be idealized as a period of life governed by natural rhythms rather than by appointments, schedules and demands.” (168)

“...nostalgia for childhood exists in a variety of forms and across a range of discursive practices—not simply in the products of the culture industry, but in their consumption in everyday contexts by people with specific needs and desires.” “In order to be aware of the importance of childhood nostalgia as a form of 'false consciousness' tied to dominant ideologies, we also need to recognize it as a sentiment that resonates with our own deepest longings for identity, security and belonging.” (Moran 171-172)

Moran states that in his research Stewart argues “the problem with nostalgia is that it is 'desire for desire,' in that the utopian search for reunion with the past comes up against the problem of the past's inevitable unrecoverability. Nostalgia attempts to close the gap between two potentially contradictory beliefs: the notion that 'lived experience' is more real than mediated experience, and the idea that lived experience mediated through narrative can provide a comforting sense of transcendence and closure.” (Moran 159)

CONCLUSION

The money trail leads one to believe these films are actually more directed at adults than children—they're almost like a byproduct in the grand scheme of Michael Bay's plotting. Aside from his 8% revenue enticement from the toys sales, I could find little to indicate that children are his primary concern in the creation of these films. While Hasbro itself may be concerned with its toy sales, Bay would appear to be less than enthused about it. Bay's focus seems to be on the numerous pieces of product placement, especially his work with GM. His own love of fast cars may be an influence in that, in addition to his history in advertising. If he spent as much time on character and story development as he does on integrating product placements in the script, he would become a stronger storyteller. Bay's

fast-paced visual storytelling style does work well in his chosen genre of action films but becomes more flash than substance.

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