Chapter 2

Media branding and the entertainment complex

The history of modern entertainment branding is inextricably linked with the Disney Company and its transition in the 1950s from a studio specializing in cartoon animation to a company whose activities would take place within, and in many ways herald, the postwar integration of leisure markets, connecting movie production to developments in television, tourism, theme parks and consumer merchandise. The symbol of this transition was of course Disneyland, the first fully designed theme park that, in emulating the educational principle of world fair expositions and in exorcizing the unruly pleasures of urban attractions like Coney Island, signalled a new type of suburban amusement for middle-class American families. Opening in 1955, the park would form the cornerstone of Disney's entertainment empire. It would also consolidate the name of the company and its association with the paternal figure of Walt Disney. This was achieved through dedicated strategies of cross-promotion, 'Disneyland' fashioned both as a theme park and as a television programme running on the ABC network that Walt himself would host. Organized around the same four divisions as the park – Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland and Tomorrowland – the television series was an exercise of brand marketing. While the Disney Company had been associated with the production of safe and wholesome family entertainment since the 1930s, these were parsed as edifying values as the company planned for the diversification of its activities. Christopher Anderson writes: 'In uniting the TV program and the amusement park under a single name, Disney made one of the most influential commercial decisions in postwar American culture. Expanding upon the lucrative character merchandising market that the studio had joined in the early 1930s, Disney now planned to create an all-encompassing consumer environment that [Walt Disney] described as "total merchandising"' (Anderson 1994: 134). It is in this form of proto-synergy – including the rhetoric of 'total' experience associated with the consumption of movies, their products and associated leisure attractions – from which modern principles of entertainment branding would emerge.

To speak of entertainment branding is to recognize, first and foremost, the particular status that cultural products, specifically the pre-eminent mass amusement of motion pictures, have historically assumed as commodities. If, as Jane

Gaines argues, the film industry is a prototype for other cultural industries, being the first to institute a modern star system and to provide opportunities for advertising tie-ins and product placement, she also suggests that film is a strange and atypical commodity on its own terms (Gaines 2000). Film is difficult to define as a commodity because it is, at the same time, both a product and an experience; it is a physical roll of celluloid and object of transaction between producers, distributors and exhibitors, but also a leisure activity based upon the selling of time and attention. Latterly, this relationship has been materialized into purchasable, collectible, and more fully manipulable objects such as video and DVD. However, a core ambiguity lies at the heart of the commodity status of motion pictures. Thomas Elsaesser puts this well when he suggests that Hollywood has long been defined by the struggle to decide what its key business is. He writes: 'The history of Hollywood could be written as the successive moves to install and define the *commodity "film"*, while at the same time extending and refining the *service "cinema"*' (Elsaesser 2002: 14). From its beginnings, film has differed from other commodity types in the particular conflation of its status as product and service, commodity and experience. The rapid way that motion pictures are consumed and are required to be unique, matched with acute uncertainties about how any single film will perform in the market or be confirmed by audiences, has worked to produce particular conditions for managing risk in the proverbial manufacture of dreams.

Ever since film emerged as a mass entertainment in the first decades of the twentieth century, the motion picture business has sought to control its own industrial vagaries. It has done so through the formation of production and distribution oligopolies but also, at the level of competition between dominating firms, through a range of branding strategies adapted from the advertising industry. These strategies were rationalized when the motion picture industry standardized film as a product in the 1910s and began to concentrate on high-cost feature films that required individual treatment in terms of their advertising. As explained by Robert Cochrane, vice-president of Universal in 1927: 'We cannot standardize our pictures as a soap manufacturer standardizes his soap. They must all be different. So must all our advertisements. We may standardize "brand" advertising, but each film presents a new problem' (cited in Staiger 1990: 6). It was in this context that company names such as Biograph or Pathé, which had initially formed the basis of a movie's brand appeal, were subsumed in the 1910s and 1920s by specific product features such as stars, plots, genres and spectacle. According to Gerben Bakker, the large sums paid by the early Hollywood studios for stars and stories (specifically, adaptations of novels and plays) were part of a process of establishing movies as instant and self-standing brands. He suggests: 'The main value of stars and stories lay not in their ability to predict successes, but in their services as giant "publicity machines" that optimised advertising effectiveness by rapidly amassing high levels of brand awareness' (Bakker 2005: 76). This awareness could extend across products (the image of the star becoming tradeable within and between different films) or could otherwise deepen the life cycle of a single product in the form of licensing agreements and merchandising tie-ins with retail manufacturers and department

stores. In each respect, strategies of branding were intrinsic to the development of film as a mass cultural industry between the 1900s and the 1940s, basic to the function of the Hollywood studio system in selling and promoting its wares.

With the breakdown of this system in the immediate postwar period, the function of branding changed. The Paramount decrees of 1948 brought about seismic shifts in the industrial organization of the motion picture business. Divesting studios of their theatre chains, the decrees ushered in a period that, in combination with the rise of television and the boom in postwar leisure consumerism, saw Hollywood struggle with plummeting box office revenues. While this led to new interdependencies between film and television, it also signalled the rise of fewer but more expensive films, inaugurating a blockbuster economy with an inflationary logic that would define Hollywood's output from the mid-1970s. Despite changes in the industrial climate, entertainment branding retained important continuities with the studio system in its focus on stars and stories. The value of 'name' actors and directors and the significance of 'pre-sold properties' still largely determined the branding of individual film events. However, an important underlying difference resides in the crucial shift in power relations that took place in the American film industry between the 1950s and the 1970s. This signalled Hollywood's transition from a studio system where moguls exercised significant control over production rosters and technical and creative talent, to a package-unit system where studios came to finance and distribute film projects put together by agents. As Edward Jay Epstein writes, 'The main task of today's studios is to collect fees for the use of the intellectual properties they control in one form or another and then to allocate those fees among the parties – including themselves – who create, develop and finance the properties' (Epstein 2006: 107). The result has been to redefine the significance of brand names. In the bidding wars and deal-making processes that underwrite the landscape of contemporary film, the brand name of the star, the director, the film property or concept, has become central to competition between rival studios as they seek in their role as distributors and financial 'clearinghouses' to cohere the temporary networks of money, talent and labour that form to make and market a film.[1]

Loosened from the binds of studio contracts, the struggle over brand names has given enormous power to elite stars and directors, who often form their own production companies (such as Mel Gibson's Icon Productions and Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment) to rent out their acting and publicity services. In a series of ways, the rise of agents and the move to a package-unit system has given branding new currency in the way that stars and directors have become their own marketable sub-industries. From Elizabeth Taylor to Arnold Schwarzenegger, stars have increasingly sought to license their image rights and protect their public personas, just as star directors have nurtured their own trademark status.[2] The names of 'Alfred Hitchcock' and 'Steven Spielberg', for instance, have both come to signify brands that have been commercially leveraged within the context of developments within the New Hollywood era. While the cultivation of Hitchcock's creative persona in the 1950s gave rise to the television series (and silhouette title

sequence) *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, orchestrated by the industry power broker Lew Wasserman and produced by a subsidiary of the MCA talent agency, Spielberg parsed his particular brand identity in the early 1990s into the foundation (and fishing cloud logo) of the privately owned studio DreamWorks SKG. From the selling of suspense to the marketing of spectacle, public image has become a vehicle of 'commercial auteurism', to use Timothy Corrigan's term (1998), a form of brand value that has served, not least, to author(ize) texts and ventures beyond the exclusive control of the major studios.

Despite the significance of creative talent to the way that brand names function within the contemporary Hollywood system, my concerns in this chapter are less with stardom and celebrity image than with the development of branding as a *business model* in the age of the vertically integrated entertainment conglomerate. Following on from a wave of mergers in the 1960s between film studios and large manufacturing and service industries, this concentrates on the 1980s and 1990s. This was a period during which key changes in the media environment, including the accelerated conglomeration of the film industry and the emphasis placed on exploiting motion pictures across diversified business structures, helped to reformulate the economic and textual status of film as a commodity. Here, we return to the emblematic (although not strictly conglomerated) case of Disney.[3] Describing Disney's television texts of the 1950s, Christopher Anderson suggests that programmes such as *Disneyland* were 'propelled by a centrifugal force that guided the viewer away from the immediate textual experience toward a more pervasive sense of textuality, one that encouraged the consumption of further Disney texts, further Disney products, further Disney experiences' (Anderson 1994: 155). In seeking to integrate different segments of commercial culture after the war, Disney sought to establish an inhabitable world of corporate-cultural signification that targeted the family audience through a range of mutually interlocking products and services. Such principles of cross-promotion would return with a vengeance at Disney in the 1980s under the helm of Michael Eisner. After a period of corporate stagnation in the 1970s, Eisner helped steer Disney's revival in ways that were both informed by, and informing of, an industrial and regulatory climate defined by mergers and acquisitions, and that would concentrate the possibilities of new ancillary and global markets. It is not my intention to rehearse the details of what is, by now, a well-told story of corporate and technological change, of leveraged corporate deals and the emergence of pivotal technologies such as cable, home video and personal computers (see Prince 2000: 40–141). Instead, I want to draw from it those elements that comprise, and define, the gestalt of 'total entertainment' to which branding has become lynchpin and signature key.

The law of synergy, the language of the franchise: branding comes centre stage

> I'd never heard anyone talk much about 'the brand' before Frank [Wells] and I arrived at Disney. To me, a brand was a marking that you put on horses and cattle. Brand management sounded very austere and serious – something that people did at Procter & Gamble, but perhaps not in a creative business.
>
> Michael Eisner (1998: 234)

In evaluating the significance of his role at Disney, Michael Eisner considers the state of the Disney brand name at the time of his arrival in 1984. Acknowledging the unusual potency of the name 'Disney' to signify and promise a certain kind of experience – what he associates with 'wholesome family fun appropriate for kids of any age, a high level of excellence in its products, and a predictable set of values' – Eisner also writes in his autobiography of a brand that had become 'awkward, old-fashioned, even a bit directionless' (Eisner 1998: 234). It was in this context that Disney's new management team, including Eisner, Frank Wells and Jeffrey Katzenberg, sought to refresh the brand, exploiting the company's valuable assets while extending and diversifying the business. 'Our job wasn't to create something new, but to bring back the magic, to dress Disney up in more stylish clothes and expand its reach, to remind people why they loved the company in the first place' (ibid.: 234). Eisner was not the first to import the concept of brand marketing to the 'creative business' of entertainment. Walt Disney had already made significant headway in the 1950s, the same period that Procter & Gamble had begun to organize its product engineering process according to marketing principles. However, the new team at Disney was instrumental in refining the strategies of cross-fertilization, or synergy, which would be widely emulated as a branding model in the 1980s and 1990s.

According to Michael Wolf, the key to a successful brand is the way that it 'captures the psychological and emotional turf of a particular cultural value' in order that it may be universalized (Wolf 1999: 251). Branding, in this sense, is a question of the degree to which a product or company can naturalize an emotional relation or set of values. In Disney's case, this process has long been organized by the rhetorical 'magic' and 'innocence' attached to values of the family, in particular the white, nuclear, middle-class family. As with all claims to universality, the Disney brand is far from innocent in its articulation of cultural and social relations. For Henry Giroux, Disney values are ideologically invested in a series of ways, such that 'Disney's power and reach into popular culture combine an insouciant playfulness and the fantastic possibility of making childhood dreams come true with strict gender roles, an unexamined nationalism, and a notion of choice that is attached to the proliferation of commodities' (Giroux 1995: 46). While Giroux is rightly aware of the complex, contradictory and potentially subversive way that Disney products may be experienced and consumed by audiences, questions remain about the enchantments of Disney culture and the way that its range of texts and pleasures help serve, and mystify, an aggressive corporate-consumerist agenda. It was the very success of this agenda, however, that drew attention within executive boardrooms and the marketing and entertainment trade press. The company's remarkable turnaround in the 1980s and 1990s – moving from an under-performing studio propped up by theme parks to a global entertainment juggernaut – presented a compelling business model for others, a multitude of companies in the nineties, according to Michael Wolf, 'recognizing the need for an emotional connection' that might underpin their organizational activities. For cultural and consumer businesses alike, Wolf wrote, 'everyone is trying to create a brand. Actually, everyone is trying to be Disney' (Wolf 1999: 224).

What does it mean to be like Disney? For the contemporary motion picture business it has meant pursuing the international family audience. Peter Krämer makes the point that, since the late 1970s, Hollywood has been shaped by the 'return of the family audience' (Krämer 2006). This has been governed by demographic shifts. With the sizeable baby boom generation reaching parenthood in the 1970s, spawning a bulging generation of 'echo boom' children (born between 1977 and 1995), there emerged in America a powerful prospective family market (see Allen 1999). This inclined the major studios towards the 'Disney model', moving away from dependencies on the youth market and 'returning family entertainment to the centre of their transnational multimedia operations' (Krämer 2006: 188). From *Star Wars* to *Shrek*, *Home Alone* to *Harry Potter*, family entertainment has been at the forefront of Hollywood's contemporary industrial strategies and branding efforts. Disney has been attuned, in this regard, to wider transitions in the composition and construction of the domestic and international movie audience. This is especially marked as the film industry has sought formulas that will cross over markets in a territorial as well as a textual sense, building franchises that can span multiple regions, outlets and audience constituencies. It is in the management of this process, however, that Disney has really shaped the mainstays of brand practice in the entertainment industry, bringing together promotional synergy with ruthless assertion of intellectual property rights.

Within Eisner's regime, the role of synergy was formalized in the 1980s, signalled not least by the creation of a vice-presidential position responsible for its implementation. Increasingly, synergy lay at the heart of Disney's identity as a major entertainment and media company. As Janet Wasko explains, Disney's success, which gained purchase in the second half of the 1980s, was linked to a number of calculated strategies. Together with limiting its exposure through cost-cutting measures and the creation of corporate partnerships (such as the ten-year agreement signed in 1996 with McDonald's, the fast food chain paying $100 million for exclusive licensing of all Disney features), Disney increased film production, it successfully revived its animation business, and it moved to exploit a host of ancillary markets. This ranged from the release on home video of classic titles drawn from its animation library, to the creation of branded ventures – including Disney Stores, the Disney Channel, EuroDisney, Disney Theatrical Productions, Disney Cruise Lines, and so forth – that would extend and consolidate the

company's stake in leisure attractions, consumer products, television and theatre (Wasko 2003: 28–69). While Disney's creation of Touchstone Pictures in 1984, its purchase of Miramax in 1993 and the pivotal acquisition of ABC/Capital Cities in 1995 (giving the company a major news and entertainment network as well as the premium cable brand ESPN) demonstrate a concomitant desire to broaden the company's range of products and distribution channels, Disney's brand empire was borne of a single name. This would differ from global media companies like Time Warner and the News Corporation that were more decentralized in their organizational structure and in their management of brand assets. As Michael Eisner explained in the company's 1995 annual report:

> We are fundamentally an operating company, operating the Disney brand all over the world, maintaining it, improving it, promoting it and advertising it with taste. Our time must be spent insuring the Brand never slides, that we innovate the Brand, experiment and play with it, but never diminish it.
>
> (Eisner, cited in Collette 1998: 128)

Eisner's assessment is revealing of the degree to which 'the Brand' is conceived of as a 'living entity'. Despite the growing difficulty of Eisner's imperial management style after the death of Frank Wells in 1994 and the poor performance of Disney film and media ventures at the start of the twenty-first century, what Eisner and others called the 'Disney Decade' of the 1990s carried a lesson, demonstrating, quite simply, the necessity to exploit and extend the 'totality' of the brand in cultural space.[4]

Just as significant as the formalization of synergy in this respect was 'the need to pay more attention to protecting the brand ... to think more rigorously about what represented an appropriate use of the Disney name and characters, and what seemed excessive or gratuitous' (Eisner 1998: 239). Primacy was given, in other words, to issues of copyright and trademark protection. This has become a defining concern of the Disney Company, enforcing intellectual property rights or lobbying for their extension at every possible turn. This can be understood within a global moment where copyright trade, including the pre-sale of rights to films, images and characters, has become a leading export sector for countries such as the United States. In 2001, revenues generated by the principal copyright industries (film, broadcasting, music recording, computer software, advertising, newspaper and book publishing) contributed $531.1 billion to the US economy, accounting for 5.25 per cent of gross domestic product (Wang 2003: 28). It is in this context that Disney, along with other major entertainment companies and trade organizations such as the MPAA, have sought to shape intellectual property law for its own needs, drawing where required on arguments of American national interest. That Jack Valenti should describe the battle over digital piracy and unauthorized copying in the early 2000s as a 'terrorist war' is indicative in this respect, elevating the moral language of 'robbery' and 'theft' to new heights of industrial-cum-national panic (Streitfeld 2002: 12).

Disney has sought to extend and exploit the judicial enforcement of intellectual property law in two key respects. At one level, it has tried to protect the company's exclusive right to reproduce works for which, in copyright law, Disney is seen as the 'author'. As copyright law protects authored works for a designate period of 75 years – including cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and feature animation such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) – Disney has lobbied to extend legal protections in order to prevent its properties falling into the public domain. This culminated in the Copyright Extension Act of 1998, a Congressional bill that extended copyright protection for an additional twenty years, rescuing Mickey from his original copyright expiration date of 2003. As significant in legal terms, however, is the function of trademark law under which Mickey also falls. This offers protection to rights in the sign (a name or a symbol) as indicating the source of goods for sale. There is no time limitation in this case and, with the judicial extension of state anti-dilution laws in the US (increasing legal protection against the 'dilution' or 'tarnishing' of a trade name), holders of trademarks have been able to prevent 'misappropriation' wherever they seek to find it (Coombe 1998: 67–73). These issues play into wider debates about the affirmation of proprietary rights within (trans)national legal regimes, and the struggles that take place over the use and meaning of commodified texts. In Disney's case, changes in copyright and trademark law since the 1970s have served to ensconce the brand, regulating and repressing threats to its commercial aura in ways that not only suggest a legal system poised to protect prominent corporate symbols, but that support Shujen Wang's claim that 'in the new global informational economy of signs, intellectual property has indeed become the real property' (Wang 2003: 30).

Disney is emblematic of the emergence of branding as an entertainment business model. However, its activities must also be set within wider shifts in the cultural industries during the 1980s and 1990s, deregulation and technological change catalysing what Jennifer Holt calls 'a sweeping realignment of the corporate terrain' (Holt 2001, 2003). This turns centrally on the rise of the entertainment conglomerate, the creation of Time Warner in 1989 becoming its pristine expression. Based on the growing significance of entertainment to Wall Street investors, built on the rollback of anti-trust legislation and designed to exploit the collapsing horizontal and vertical boundaries of the media system, conglomeration has transformed the contemporary entertainment environment. Most significantly, it has seen the rise of a new media oligopoly whereby a small number of global corporations – Viacom, News Corporation, NBC Universal, Time Warner, Sony, Disney, Bertelsmann – manage vast entertainment empires, controlling within the United States alone 96 per cent of film rentals, 98 per cent of advertising revenue on prime-time television, 80 per cent of pay television subscribers and 70 per cent of broadcast television viewing (Epstein 2006: 83).

In popular accounts, such concentration of power is often understood as an expression of competition between moguls (Wolf 1999; Epstein 2006). In this corporate struggle of wills, the attempt by Steve Ross (founding CEO of Time Warner) to exploit the power of vertical integration by owning entertainment

content and cable delivery is matched by the desire of Akio Morita (founding CEO of Sony) to connect stakes in hardware and software in selling home entertainment to consumers. Meanwhile, the global ambitions of Rupert Murdoch (founding CEO of News Corporation) to extend his media holdings through international control of news outlets, networks and satellite broadcasting is duplicated in the attempt by Ross and Sumner Redstone (founding CEO of Viacom) to assemble ever-widening global interests in film, radio, television, cable, print journalism, sports teams, theme parks and new media. The corporate realignments of the 1980s and 1990s are of course not reducible to individual personalities. However, the period witnessed the innovation and implementation of particular business strategies that moved, or were steered, in a similar general direction: towards global economies of scale and scope, towards the strategic marriage of content and distribution, towards the importance of the home audience and, as a function of the above, towards the strategic value of film in driving ancillary and cross-promotional opportunities.

The new emphasis on branding emerged as a feature of the changing structures of the entertainment complex; it became a means of tapping into volatile and differentiated global markets while, at the same time, connecting and recycling content across multiple media platforms. With technologies of communication such as cable and home video helping to subdivide media audiences and with entertainment conglomerates focusing both on mass markets and narrow but high-spending niches, the will-to-brand developed in line with the institutionalization of market research. According to Justin Wyatt, one consequence of the first wave of conglomeration in the film industry was the growth of statistical marketing research in the late 1970s. This process, developed as a means of rationalizing corporate decisions about what and for whom movies should be made, helped to reconstruct the movie audience into a series of target markets. In particular, Wyatt concentrates on the example of 'high concept' film (typified by a series of movies made by Paramount in the 1980s such as *Top Gun* (1986)) that were inspired by the aesthetics of music video and were marketed to youth audiences through a range of affiliated media, notably soundtracks (Wyatt 1994). As in the case of high concept, synergy was never the exclusive preserve of Disney. Rather, it developed within a period of corporate restructuring where branding sought to respond flexibly to audience taste and to synchronize a range of products for maximum commercial gain.

Whatever the organizational particularities of a conglomerate in this restructuring process – brand synergy being applied most successfully within Disney's integrated corporate structure – the move towards media consolidation in the 1980s and 1990s had a profound effect on the motion picture business. Indeed, as the film industry was taken up and reconfigured within a burgeoning global entertainment sector, the importance of movie-related brands and licensed merchandise grew exponentially, central to a regime where the creation and control of intellectual property formed, and continues to form, a core strand of corporate profitability. In economic terms, film has become less important as a discrete

commodity than as a brand platform that can be transfigured across industries and cultural fields. In the telling words of Aida Hozic, film has become the 'epiphenomenon of its alternative identities: it is not film as the mechanical reproduction of reality that is relevant, but film's permutation into consumer goods, travel options and software programs' (Hozic 2000: 216). This describes the sum and substance of the film franchise. As a term borrowed from consumer and fast food industries, a franchise in this case denotes the partnership between Hollywood, as the owner of a business system offering a branded product or service, and the network of individuals licensed to sell that brand in accordance with the system's regulation of trademarks, logos and intellectual property rights. While the history of the movie franchise can be traced back to the lucrative developments in merchandising associated with *Star Wars* (1977), the increasing need for movies to become a hub of commercial opportunity and brand exchange via product placements, merchandising, licensing, promotional tie-ins and ancillary media moved the logic, as well as the language, of the franchise to the heart of the motion picture business in the 1990s.

It is in relation to the franchise that proclamations about the transformation, even the death, of cinema have been made. Robert Allen, for example, suggests that shifts 'from audience to markets, from film as celluloid experience in a theatre to film combined with so many other manifestations over a longer period of time ... not only alters the logics by which films are made and marketed, but also alters what film "is" in an economic sense and, by extension, in both an ontological and epistemological sense as well' (Allen 1999: 119). Coterminous with the decreasing significance of box office revenue to a film's overall profitability, Allen makes the point that film is 'no longer reducible to the experience of actually seeing it'. This speaks of a key alteration within the tradition of cinema and cinematic performance: of the blurring boundaries of commercial and audiovisual culture and of the interpretive status of film as text and event. In this, film is no longer simply a screen experience but something apprehended and understood through a wide environment of cultural encounters, such that the screen experience may not always even be a beginning or end point. If, as some argue, theatrical film is one long marketing device for a range of ancillary products (videos, DVDs, soundtracks), extra-textual experiences (theme park rides, video games) and non-filmic consumables (toys, soft drinks, fast food), then branding has become the lynchpin of a new gestalt of 'total entertainment', central to a consolidated media moment transforming the status of the motion picture as commodity and aesthetic object.

It is the nature of 'total entertainment' that I want especially to explore. My intention, so far, has been to sketch the development of branding as a business model in the entertainment industry since the 1980s. This has been coextensive with changes in the contemporary media environment, brought about by transitions within industrial, technological and legal infrastructures that have both reorganized corporate relationships according to the laws of synergy and centralized control over rights. To understand the significance of brand culture for the emerging global image business, however, it is necessary to account in more detail

for the gestalt of 'total entertainment'. This term can be understood in two distinct ways. Firstly, it can be seen as an industrial principle, describing the attempt by global media conglomerates to create an expansive entertainment and communication environment in which they have a disproportionate, near total, stake in terms of ownership and control. Secondly, it can be thought of as a particular form or horizon of cultural and textual practice, growing out of the permeable boundaries and newly 'immersive' modalities of commercial entertainment media. The term that captures best these parallel, although by no means complicit, industrial-aesthetic logics is that of 'convergence'.

While convergence became synonymous with a host of dizzying corporate theories in the late 1990s, a byword for the combining of information and entertainment services on broadband networks, there is something in the term's more general suggestion of connectivity that gets to the economic and epistemic crux of total entertainment. According to Henry Jenkins, understanding the 'cultural logic of media convergence' requires that two seemingly contradictory trends are kept in mind at the same time: the 'alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media' that has taken place in recent decades and the capacity of new media technologies and an expanding range of delivery systems to enable 'consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways' (Jenkins 2004: 33). Rather than develop monolithic theories of media hegemony or audience sovereignty, Jenkins finds in convergence a process marked by ambivalence; it signals a transitional moment where the proliferation of media channels and the portability of new computer and telecommunications technologies have given power to media giants but have also reshaped relationships between consumers, distributors and producers in unforeseen ways. The impact of digital file sharing on the music industry (and to a lesser extent the film industry) is perhaps the most obvious illustration of these equivocations. If, as Jenkins suggests, convergence represents 'a reconfiguration of media power and a reshaping of media aesthetics and economics', I want to examine how transformations in the media landscape have been felt and addressed by a major studio. My aim is not to dismiss the evident monopolization of media power by the likes of Disney and Time Warner. Rather, I want to acknowledge Michael Wayne's point that 'the simple demonstration of the tendency towards monopoly does not really grasp the processes by which this is achieved or the contradictions and tensions this involves' (Wayne 2003: 83). As a means of focus, I will concentrate on Warner Bros., the key company of Time Warner's 'filmed entertainment' division.

Trajectories of total entertainment

> Warner Bros. is now a total entertainment company, made up of movies, television, video, consumer products, stores, international theatres and international theme parks. We've fulfilled our original game plan to build a broad-based entertainment company that doesn't rely on any one business in any given year.
>
> Robert Daly (Time Warner 1997: 19)

Exactly twenty years after Steve Ross turned Warner Communications (WCI) into the prototype for the modern entertainment conglomerate, owning Warner Bros. and a host of cable and media concerns, Ross levered a deal that would transform his company into a global media player. This came as the result of the $14 billion marriage between Time Inc. and WCI in July 1989, the most widely discussed and highly trumpeted media merger to occur in a period where size had become the quintessence of corporate survival. According to company statements, the decision by Time and Warner to unite was born of a mutual need to compete internationally: to participate in the globalization of media industries and to achieve 'a major presence in all of the world's important markets' (Time Warner 1989: 1). With subsequent mergers with Turner Broadcasting Systems in July 1996 and America Online in January 2000, Time Warner sought to assert control of production (content) and outlets (distribution) across a diversified range of entertainment media. With bulging assets in publishing, cable, music, film, television, sports teams, retail outlets, theme parks and new media, Time Warner became the epitome of the vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerate, a formidable, if financially burdened, corporate force committed to the synergies of multimedia investment and to ever-deepening global market expansion.

Warner Bros. became the heart of the conglomerate's 'filmed entertainment' division in this context; it belonged to one of several core units that, after the AOL deal, also included 'networks', 'music', 'publishing', 'cable', and 'America Online'. Rather than inherently collaborative in nature, the major companies that constitute these operational divisions – Warner Bros., New Line, Warner Music, HBO, CNN, AOL, Time Inc., Little Brown, to name the most prominent – have invariably functioned as semi-autonomous fiefdoms. This remains especially true of Warner Bros. Made up of film, television, animation, video, consumer products, international theatre, online and comic sub-divisions, and overseeing Warner Music, Warner Bros. was managed by Robert Daly and Terry Semel until their retirement in 1999. In this year, the combined filmed entertainment division (made up of Warner Bros. and New Line) accounted for 29 per cent of Time Warner's revenue, representing the largest source of revenue for the company as a whole. While this percentage would drop slightly after the AOL merger – contributing $8,759 million to AOL Time Warner's total revenue of $38,234 million in 2001 – filmed entertainment has always weighed substantially on Time Warner's corporate balance sheet (Balnaves *et al.* 2001: 63; Wasko 2003: 62). The pressure to maintain performance levels in this corporate context, however, and to find adaptive strategies for a changing entertainment marketplace, has served to transform the business of film and television in a number of key respects. With the decline in the traditional importance of box office revenue and the rise of the multichannel environment, attempts have been made to find successful business combinations

that can maximize performance in and between the fluid markets of the so-called 'post-cinematic' and 'post-network' age.

If synergy has become the watchword of this endeavour, it can be understood not simply as a matter of increasing and exploiting the earning potential of particular intellectual properties, but, more precisely, as a strategy of managing risk. By Robert Daly's account, transforming Warner Bros. into a 'total entertainment company' was an attempt at corporate synergy designed to hedge the liability of market squalls, of not relying 'on any one business in any given year'. This need was particularly acute in the 1990s given the rising costs of movie production and the fact that studio profitability was ever more dependent on ancillary revenues such as licensing, video and DVD. As Richard Maltby suggests of the film business, 'While the media mergers have most commonly been accounted for in terms of the synergies they produce, synergy is actually a rationalization of what is in reality a largely defensive commercial practice aimed at spreading the risks of ultra-high-budget movie production into the lower-cost businesses downstream' (Maltby 2003: 211). This defensive principle underwrites other kinds of synergistic expansion. In television, for example, the creation of broadcast networks such as the WB – launched in January 1995 anticipating the removal of the 'Fin-Syn' rules[5] – helped guarantee an internal window for programmes bought and produced by Warner Bros. As a means of cross-promoting media content on a ready-made network, the WB also helped protect the studio from threats of exclusion by the big network gatekeepers (NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox) able, for the first time, to broadcast their own in-house programming (Collette 1998; Holt 2003).

Describing synergy as a 'defensive practice' is not the same as defending it as a practice. The logic of synergy, like that of convergence, is linked to the concentration of power enabled by a deregulated media system where news and entertainment sources and distribution channels are now owned by a few giant conglomerates. In this context, branding provides a way for corporations to differentiate their content offerings and consolidate footholds in the entertainment marketplace. As Time Warner's 1995 annual report made clear, 'brands build libraries, libraries build networks, networks build distribution, distribution builds brands'. By this logic, branding is a means of acquiring competitive advantage by controlling and extending copyright properties (*The Sopranos*, *Batman*, *Larry King Live*) across an integrated system of production/delivery with a corporate brand value of its own (HBO, Warner Bros., CNN). In the words of chief executive Gerald Levin, Time Warner's 'powerful synthesis of branded content and branded networks – the world's most trusted sources for news and entertainment – ensures that we will continue to lead the competition' (Time Warner 1995: 3). As a corporate strategy, branding attributes value to products and platforms in ways that help aggregate multiple niche audiences and establish a basis for industry expansion.

The example of the WB is suggestive here. Along with the creation of studio stores, theme parks and multiplex venues in the 1990s, all extending 'Warner Bros.' as a brand signifier (discussed in Part III), the WB used the studio's brand name to penetrate the burgeoning multichannel environment. With major cable

networks such as NBC and CBS wrestling with dramatic losses in market share during the nineties, and with a host of networks like HBO, ESPN, and MTV creating powerful niche constituencies in their place, television networks developed a range of brand strategies in the resulting competition for audiences (McMurria 2003). From promotional campaigns and network tag lines to channel 'idents' and revamped logos, network branding was fuelled in great measure by what John Caldwell calls 'the growing sense that there was simply not enough of an audience to go around, that is, not enough to share (profitably) with all of the competition'. As he suggests, 'branding was the first of many tactics that exploited the instability of the televisual form in the age of digital' (Caldwell 2004: 57).[6] In this case, the WB used the studio's initials and a dusted-down cartoon character (Michigan J. Frog) to signal its emphasis on family entertainment. According to one marketing executive, the WB was designed to 'complement what Warner Bros. means to the public and what the stores have done for the image of the company' (cited in Flint 1995: 14). In key respects, the WB was an instance of Warner's strategic emulation of the Disney model in the 1990s, pursuing young viewers through teen dramas such as *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2001) while targeting children through its 'Kids WB' programming block. It is not my intention to outline the complex history of network broadcasting in the 1990s, or indeed that of the WB before its incorporation into the CW Network in September 2006. What *Variety* described as the 'frenzy of network branding' (Levin 1995) in the multichannel environment does begin to raise questions, however, about the relation of brand practice to transitions in the media environment, specifically the way that entertainment companies like Warner Bros. have sought to expand revenue opportunities through flexible corporate frameworks that concurrently pursue broad national/global markets and specific niche audiences.

If vertical integration is 'simultaneously driven by segmentation and unified vision, broad range and specific demographics' (Holt 2003: 11), the WB is an example of corporate attempts to cross-promote and 'window' products for a narrowcast market. For critics such as Jeffrey Sconce, this has given rise to particular textual strategies. Specifically, he considers how programmes such as *24*, *Star Trek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have sought to foster 'intensified viewer involvement' as a response to the need to compete more aggressively for audiences. For Sconce, 'US television has devoted increased attention in the past two decades to crafting and maintaining ever more complex narrative universes, a form of "world-building" that has allowed for wholly new modes of narration and that suggests new forms of audience engagement' (Sconce 2004: 95). This speaks of a nascent principle of immersion in cultural production, achieved in television both through cumulative series architecture and the spawning of books, websites, chat rooms and phone messaging. More recently, this principle of immersion has been accelerated by multiplatform media properties like *Big Brother* and WB's *Popstars*, reality formats combining television programming with websites, podcasts, e-mail updates, print publications, even music production and concert venues. For John

Caldwell, these examples represent forms of 'convergence television', typifying the new migratory patterns of industrial texts and the impetus to 'calculate, amass, repackage, and transport the entertainment product across the borders of both new technologies and media forms' (Caldwell 2004: 50, 2006). Of interest here is the precept of textual 'inhabitation' and 'interactivity' that has become linked with the branding of commercial entertainment. While Sconce associates 'world-building' with the pursuit of specialized television audiences, a textual effect born of particular institutional instabilities in the multichannel era, a similar impulse to cultivate total environments (as consuming experiences) governs Hollywood's franchise strategy in relation to the global mass audience.

As a 'defensive practice', franchising can be understood as a response to institutional instabilities within the film business during the 1990s stemming from escalating production costs, declining box office margins and the persistent pressure on studios to fulfil the goals of shareholders. With US theatrical rates-of-return falling from 31 per cent to 23 per cent between 1988 and 1999, and dipping as low as 8 per cent between 1996 and 1998, Hollywood was struck mid-decade by an incipient feeling of crisis (Pokorny 2005; Connor 2000). This was catalysed by anxieties about the requirement of $100 million movies to 'open big' on first weekends. The perception of a movie's 'success' or 'failure' at the US box office could, of course, be deceptive. Decline in the importance of domestic theatrical rentals during the 1990s was matched by the increased significance of international and ancillary revenue. While the domestic box office could still potentially determine a film's earnings in other markets, the importance of global/ancillary revenue meant that even the most spectacular box office disasters could prospectively turn a profit. *Waterworld* (1995) and *Godzilla* (1998) are examples in kind, Tom Shone calling the latter 'the world's first $375 million flop, which is to say, no flop at all' (Shone 2004: 272).[7] In addition to a film's residual earning capacity, major studios took measures in the nineties to distribute the risks associated with high-budget films, limiting their exposure through co-production deals and spreading investment across a portfolio of projects whereby successful films, invariably 'tent-pole' movies, would pay for the losers.

By all accounts, 'risk' is a relative term in the motion picture business. While strategies of diversification have tempered the commercial instabilities of the industry, the fact that a very few successful films make up a studio's earnings – a billion-dollar blockbuster can transform a studio's annual performance single-handedly – has given rise to the feverish preoccupation with 'megabrands'. As Richard Maltby suggests, 'the integrated entertainment marketplace is most receptive to multi-media franchises, and once the majors created a corporate structure designed to maximize the benefits of synergy, they found themselves inevitably obliged to develop products capable of "synergistic brand extension"' (Maltby 2003: 211). As he goes on to suggest, however, franchise movies have their own risks. While the demands of techno-spectacle have continued to spur massive cost inflation, franchise movies may exhaust themselves in the market or simply fail to launch a resonant brand identity that can underwrite a film's calculated

commercial afterlife. This creates a precarious situation where, even with the aggressive pre-selling of licensing rights and blanket pre-release publicity, big-budget films can still threaten to incur monumental losses for studios and their partners. These were issues facing Robert Daly and Terry Semel at the end of their tenure at Warner Bros.

For much of the early 1990s, Warner Bros. relied on movies with established stars like Clint Eastwood and on proven formulas such as the *Lethal Weapon* and *Batman* series. It effectively specialized in star-driven, high-budget movies, a strategy that maintained Warner Bros. as one of the top two performing studios for much of the 1980s and early 1990s. The dismal theatrical performance of *The Postman* in 1997, however, combined with stuttering sequels such as *Batman and Robin* (1997) and *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), precipitated a box office slump that led to a re-evaluation of the studio's roster and marketing approach. One Hollywood executive surmised: 'the most successful films recently have been in the $70m–$100m range, and that is what Warner does. The problem is, it has been putting the wrong kinds of pictures in that budget level' (Hazelton 1998). Finding the right picture became a priority in this context. Striving to invigorate its output of movie blockbusters by recruiting talent from the realm of independent cinema – the Wachowski brothers moving from the low-budget *Bound* (1996) to the heights of the *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003), Christopher Nolan and Bryan Singer translating their 'indie' pedigree to *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Superman Returns* (2006), respectively – Warner Bros. also sought to extend more fully the economic-aesthetic logic of the franchise. In short, it sought to invest in films with commercial 'world-building' capacity. While these tendencies were first signalled in *Batman* (1989), which was the studio's inaugural franchise blockbuster directed by Tim Burton, Warner Bros. intensified its concern at the turn of the millennium with serials, spin-offs and genres that were based quite specifically on the filmic realization of a pre-sold, inveterately marketable, narrative universe. This governed the studio's primary investment in animation (*Looney Tunes, Pokémon, Scooby Doo*), fantasy (the *Harry Potter* franchise, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), comic book adaptations (*Batman Begins, Superman Returns*) and science fiction (the *Matrix* trilogy). Seeking films that could be targeted at the global audience and that could mutate into other products, Warner Bros. amplified its stake in movies that could imagine inhabitable worlds (and generate licensable characters) for children, teenagers and adults alike.

The origins of this impulse go back to *Star Wars*, what Scott Bukatman describes as 'less a movie than an extended multimedia universe' (Bukatman 1998: 248). Marking the arrival (or revival) of a cinema defined by spectacular excess and sensory involvement, *Star Wars* is a key instance for Bukatman of the means by which film can expand beyond the screen, 'something to inhabit rather than watch'. If the act of play is central to 'the expansion of cinema into a more environmental and ambient form', the logic of convergence, as witnessed in the television industry, has facilitated patterns of play *across* media, movies giving themselves to expansion not simply through toys and merchandise but through active interrelation with other cultural forms. Concerned with shifting

formations of audience pleasure and 'gameplayer agency', P. David Marshall associates this with 'the new intertextual commodity'. Specifically, he outlines a mode of cultural production based on structured forms of interactivity designed to meet, and take advantage of, the permeable boundaries of film, television, publishing, consumer products, websites, video and computer games. Describing the 'intensification and elaboration of the intertextual matrix' that accompanies multimedia events, he writes:

> The culture industries are providing a circumscribed agency for the new audience by providing complex patterns of engagement and exploratory architectures. Wedded to this development of the complex and new intertextual commodity is the expansion of the pleasure of anticipation through more elaborate strategies of product promotion. Various forms of promotion are aligned with providing background information on cultural forms that are designed to deepen the investment of the audience in the cultural commodity.
>
> (Marshall 2002: 80)

If we accept Marshall's portrait of the entertainment industry as one defined by the attempt to generate depth of engagement with commercial media, presuming as it does a more active spectator who can (and will) follow new forms of transmedia flow (Jenkins 2006), it is perhaps not incidental that one of Hollywood's most self-consciously immersive and 'exploratory' films of the nineties should be called *The Matrix* (1999). Just as television has sought to reinforce viewer commitments through niche strategies of network branding and narrative 'world-building', Hollywood has been quick to establish its own spectacles of total entertainment as a means of deepening the significance of film events for the global mass audience. It is in this respect that we might turn by way of illustration to Warner Bros.' most distinctive franchise project of the 1990s and to a film that in many ways captures the episteme of total entertainment at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Brand regimes: enter *The Matrix*

> We know we've bought something cool. We don't know what it is.
>
> Warner Bros. executive to the Wachowski brothers
> (*The Matrix* Revisited 2004)

For Warner Bros. production executives such as Lorenzo di Boniventura, *The Matrix* was a speculative investment in bringing something 'innovative' and 'cutting-edge' to the studio. Not insignificantly, it was put into production in 1997, the same year that Warner Bros. experienced a significant slip in its market share. As a cinematic object, *The Matrix* is much discussed, generating a raft of popular and

academic literature about the film's relation to computer games and kung-fu choreography, its premillennial sensitivities, as well as the transmedia storytelling represented by the franchise phenomenon as a whole (see Clover 2004; Gillis 2005; Jenkins 2006). While *The Matrix* lends itself to critical readings of various kinds, I am particularly interested in the film's inscribed status as a cinematic brand. Arguing that *The Matrix* is most significantly 'about life as we lived it around 1999', Joshua Clover identifies a contradictory impulse in the film that reflects uncertainties about the power of technology and spectacle within its contemporaneous visual digital moment. He contends that the film is 'a historic advance in digital entertainment that is unpacifiably anxious about the dangers of digitality; it's a critique of spectacles that is itself a spectacle' (Clover 2004: 15). If this suggests a residual ambivalence about the status of big-budget Hollywood movies at the end of the nineties – blockbusters becoming a growing focus of cultural and economic life in their global mobilization of images, goods and hyperrealized fantasies – one might extend Clover's paradox by saying that *The Matrix* is a critique of branding that is itself a pervasive media brand.

In different ways, the spectral, and spectacularly visualized, world of *The Matrix* returns us to the altered logics by which movies are made and marketed, and to the ontological and epistemological definition of what contemporary film 'is' or takes itself to be. There are three ways in which *The Matrix* is an especially suggestive illustration of the brand regimes of total entertainment at the close of the nineties. The first two relate to questions of style and storyworld. Undoubtedly, a key source of brand identification for *The Matrix* was its distinctive visual look. From the spectacle of 'bullet-time' to the sleek costuming that gave sartorial cachet to shades and leather trench coats, the film was influenced by, and influencing of, the surrounding culture of advertising and fashion. Its visual register 'jacked in' to the world of branded lifestyles. While bullet-time techniques (of circling objects and bodies stilled in flight) had been used previously in advertisements for Smirnoff and The Gap, Pamela Church Gibson observes that the simulated reality of the Matrix was 'designed and presented using many of the visual conventions associated with commercials, fashion shoots and even catwalk shows' (Church Gibson 2005: 117). She suggests that the pleasure of costume spectacle in the grid of the Matrix, linked to the display of cars, cellphones and other lifestyle products, indicates the complete immersion of Hollywood in fashion and style, even as the film establishes this world as something to be demystified. Although it is commonplace for Hollywood movies to impress a marketable look through product styling (the raining green code of *The Matrix*) and fashion-inspired images (the battle-ready figures of Neo, Trinity and Morpheus), the identity of the film was based on the extravagance of its 'cool' visual appeal.[8] As Claudia Springer writes, *The Matrix* 'not only looks cool, it is also about the attainment of cool, about the transformation of a geek into an icon of incomparable cool' (Springer 2005: 89). The film becomes a performance of style in this respect; the fashioning of identity is played out in a gleaming and spectacular world which the film critiques but emphatically plays within.

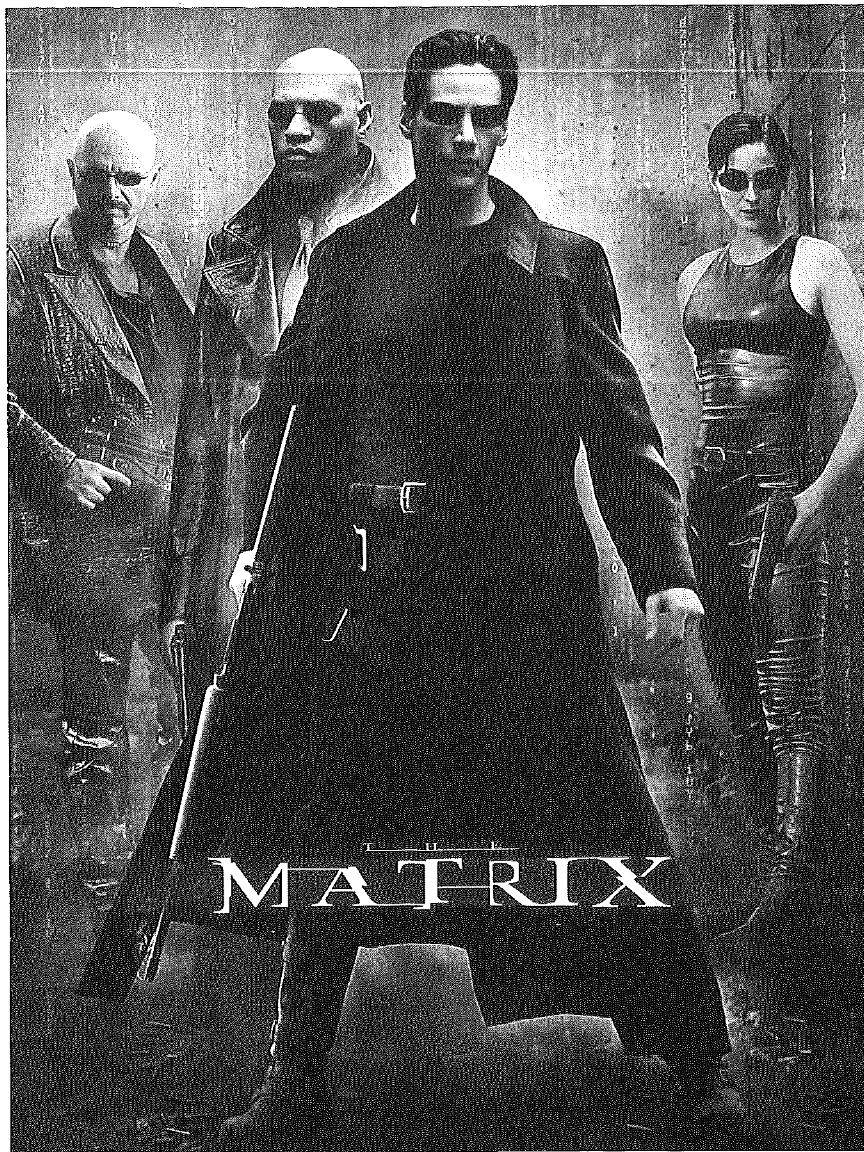

Figure 2.1 Media 'cool' and *The Matrix* brand (1999). Courtesy of Warner Bros. and the Ronald Grant Archive.

At one level, *The Matrix* ministers to the politics of style, taste and youth subculture in its calculated cool factor; it solicits cult fascination amongst its digitally savvy, brand-literate target audience. The film invokes a host of philosophical allusions, however, in ways that also seek to extend the popularity of *The Matrix*

beyond a core young male audience. The official website 'whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com' featured lengthy discussion about the film's representation of the world, servicing a highbrow fan constituency enthralled to its metaphysical overtures and express postmodernism. That *The Matrix* should reference Jean Baudrillard through a momentary glimpse of his classic work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1983) is unsurprising given the tendency of the film (and series) to wear philosophy on its sleeve. It also marks the ambiguity of the film's relation to brand signification, however. While visually steeped in codes of advertising and fashion, the film constructs a mythos based on struggles fought within and against the phantasmagoria of signs. In his gloomy predictions about the 'death of the real', Baudrillard reserves special antipathy for branding. He suggests 'the lexicon of brands ... is doubtless the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals. And "loyalty" to a brand name is nothing more than the conditioned reflex of a controlled affect' (Baudrillard 1988: 17). *The Matrix* gives allegorical freight to this vision of control. Literalizing a world experienced entirely through code, it offers up the nightmare that Naomi Klein finds in nineties-style branding, a situation where marketing mavens take the cultural and social experiences associated with products 'out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality' (Klein 2000: 29). Envisioning the triumph of the (commodity) sign, the world of the Matrix can be seen as the ultimate brandscape, the struggle of Thomas Anderson/Neo representing the interminable struggle against a world of (capitalist) simulation.

And yet, here the paradox of *The Matrix* becomes fully evident. While both the style and storyworld of the film, at some level, mediate contemporary brand culture, it becomes itself a branded cinematic object par excellence. As Jonathan Romney observes of the franchise: 'The most glaring paradox of the *Matrix* project, of course, is that while it proposes a fictional programme for liberating ourselves from a dominating system – implicitly global capitalism and the entertainment complex – there isn't a single commercially available piece of the puzzle that doesn't somewhere bear the inscription "© Warner Bros"' (Romney 2003: 27). This describes the aggressive proliferation of the *Matrix* name in the marketplace, the success of the first film (grossing $450 million) creating the impetus for two high-budget sequels and a number of textual permutations. The latter would include a heavily marketed series of anime stories relating to the world of the *Matrix* called *The Animatrix* (2003), a comic series, a computer game titled *Enter the Matrix* (2003), the multiplayer game *The Matrix On-Line* (2004) and a host of licensed products. Together, these would generate complex narrative interplays, *Matrix*-based stories developed in and across a network of texts. Creating a world in which contexts, characters, events and back-stories are realized through 'multiple degrees of iteration across all the different media, crossing boundaries of both media and versions of stories' (Wood 2005: 15), the *Matrix* franchise was distinctive in the way it encouraged audiences to participate actively in a transmedia environment.[9] This can be seen as an expression of aggressive franchise commodification by Warner Bros., but also something more. The visual and narrative 'architecture' of the

Matrix series was informed by a concept of immersion responsive to shifts in the media landscape. Specifically, it expressed a particular re-thinking of content brought about by the convergence of media ownership and technology at the end of the 1990s. This figured centrally around the capacity of digital binary code to unify media commodities of all types (Murray 2005). With digital technology reducing the costs of creating, storing and transferring content from one format to another, the *Matrix* franchise was emblematic of the increasingly liquid nature of media content and the attempt by Hollywood to harness and protect its stake as an anchor, or entry-point, to branded media experience.

Describing the mutability of *The Matrix*, Patricia Mellencamp suggests that the film 'represents a confluence, a grid, of aesthetic and structural forms – theater, film, graphic arts (particularly comic book drawing and stories), television, and centrally, I think, computer games' (Mellencamp 2001: 84). In key respects, *The Matrix* was a reaction to the multi-billion dollar games industry that challenged Hollywood's economic dominance at the end of the 1990s.[10] It is perhaps no surprise given the phenomenal success of games such as *Tomb Raider* (1996), and other titles made for the burgeoning console and computer market, that *The Matrix* should invoke their interactive style. Often replicating the *mise en scène* and point-of-view of digital games, notably in fight sequences and the use of bullet-time, the *Matrix* films establish a graphic architecture with deliberate affinities with the immersive feel and playable aesthetic of contemporary video games. The concept of entering a (virtual) world would translate neatly to the *Matrix* games. However, the principle of textual exploration was not restrained to the activity of gamers and committed fans. It was also figured in the market *The Matrix* helped create, that of DVD.

Joining in partnership with the Japanese electronics giant Toshiba in 1992, Time Warner had a key stake in the development of DVD as a replacement for video. Introduced in 1997, the Digital Video Disc penetrated the market faster than any previous entertainment technology, its self-denoting 'versatility' and promise of superior digital quality positioning itself to become 'an intimate and indispensable part of a high-tech universe of home and personal technologies' (Klinger 2006a: 364). According to Barbara Klinger, the ascendance of DVD, made all the more swift by the economic incentives of cheap manufacturing costs, cost-effectiveness in renting/retailing and the falling price of DVD players, helped redefine 'how movies are offered to and experienced by home viewers'. While Klinger is ultimately concerned with the dynamics of household film consumption, she outlines features of a 'DVD film culture' that has implications for the production and marketing of film itself. The ability of viewers to watch scenes repeatedly through precision time-shifting, for example, has arguably reinforced the importance of generic spectacle (fight scenes, car chases) as well as the minutiae of *mise en scène* (background detail, body display), both increasingly subject to the powers of digital replay and freeze-frame. In a different vein, movies are now routinely accompanied by the production of special editions and 'behind-the-scenes' extras, what Klinger examines as the presentation of 'insider' knowledge about film

technique, meaning and industrial process. The spectacular effects, narrative intricacies, and production history of *The Matrix* gave themselves to home viewing's new invitation to explore, becoming the first runaway DVD hit, selling 1.3 million copies in its first week of release. Joshua Clover writes of the film:

> Successful in the theatre, it was a watershed in the home, essentially inventing a market. This sort of superpresence is far from being solely an economic fact. It chimes rather harmoniously with the script's conception of immanent image projection: like the Matrix, *The Matrix* is the movie that's everywhere, and was designed to be so.
>
> (Clover 2004: 49)

The DVD release of *The Matrix* helped cement the film's status as a phenomenon.[11] It was also indicative of attempts by Warner Bros. to establish the principle of total entertainment for different kinds of viewer, creating 'a unified, expansive sphere that immerses the home viewer, the filmgoer and the gamer equally' (ibid.: 55). Through films, games, DVD and other media – each offering exploratory pathways into the layered totality of a brand/world – the *Matrix* franchise was a calculated attempt by Warner Bros. to establish an 'emphatic sense of presence' in the global media market. This derived from strategies such as the back-to-back global release of the second and third parts of the series (the studio designating 2003 'The Year of the Matrix'), but it also stemmed from the manner in which 'presence' became a question of audience encounter: creating a new depth of engagement through the kinetic visual spectacle of the films themselves, through the navigation of DVD chapters, scenes and bonus material, through storyline iteration across a range of discrete and interplaying texts, through the interactivity of *Matrix* gaming and online fan-writing sites, or through multiple combinations therein.

Distinctive in its experimental transmedia structure, *The Matrix* is suggestive of the way that the 'mass audience no longer refers to one simultaneous experience so much as a shared, asynchronous cultural milieu' (Curtin 1996: 197). In effect, the franchise became a global media event that sought to organize and exploit different points, or vertices, of audience involvement. Simone Murray relates this content strategy to a new enthusiasm amongst global media corporations for 'streaming' branded products. She writes:

> At the core of the contemporary phenomenon of media branding lies the abstraction of content from the constraints of any specific analogue media format. Content has come to be conceptualized in a disembodied, almost Platonic, form: any media brand which successfully gains consumer loyalty can be translated across formats to create a raft of interrelated products, which then work in aggregate to drive further consumer awareness of the media brand. Given the dominance of film divisions within global media conglomerates, the content package driving this process is frequently a feature film. Yet a

key aspect of content's new streamability is its unpredictable, multi-directional impulse.

(Murray 2005: 417)

The unpredictability of 'content streaming' gets to the root of the tensions and ambivalences of media convergence, especially as it bears on the contemporary movie business. While the Hollywood blockbuster may well drive synergistic operations within global media companies, questions remain for studio executives about the place and profitability of film as a self-standing industry: how to manage the rising costs of movies as they seek to compete as must-see 'events', how to respond to changing viewing habits as industrial-textual hierarchies (between film, television, video games, new media) continue to blur, how to manage and control the way that content is anticipated, discussed and downloaded by audiences. The *Matrix* trilogy is in many ways symptomatic of the attempt by Warner Bros. to position itself within a broadening, and ever more complex, entertainment environment. A studio franchise carefully attuned to its own brand status, *The Matrix* is a corporate property revealing the anxieties, as well as the ambitions, of Hollywood in continuing to remodel the motion picture as a multipurpose object.

In this conjuncture lies the status of film itself. That the Warner Bros. logo should be cast in phosphorous green in the title sequence of *The Matrix* is not a frivolity. As the next chapter will show, it speaks to the way that film has sought to announce itself in a changing media world. Despite pronouncements about the end of cinema, by which is often meant the end of a particular type of film (celluloid in matter, narrative in style) seen and experienced in a movie theatre, Robert Allen makes the point that 'movies continue to want to claim the ground of authenticity, as the originating site of experience' to which other texts and licensed products relate (Allen 1999: 120). Despite the way that high-budget films are now leveraged across multiple media platforms and transfigured into a host of non-filmic commodities, movies still seek, in Allen's words, 'to retain their power to enchant'. With box office performance determining the success of a movie's earning capacity in other markets, the event-based promotion of film, and filmgoing, remains critical to the activity of global media corporations. The gestalt of 'total entertainment' has not, in this sense, altered the function of contemporary Hollywood studios in selling the commodity 'film' and the service 'cinema'. Rather, its significance lies in the way that film and cinema have increasingly come to be understood as something environmental, a spectacular experience to enter and inhabit. The manner in which this has been constituted as a specific *brand* experience is the subject of the rest of this book.

Part II

Brand logos