

POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Story Ever Sold

Morgan Spurlock is the somewhat goofy documentary filmmaker who made his name in 2007 with his semi-spoof and cautionary tale “Supersize Me,” wherein he survived on nothing but McDonald’s cuisine for months until his health began to seriously deteriorate. The nuttiness of his premise, nonetheless, left a residue of real concern about what we as a culture are doing to our selves with fast food. Well, folks, he’s done it again in his new exposé “The Greatest Story Ever Sold,” taking on the ever-growing glut of corporate sponsorship—and especially product placement—in our popular culture.

Here again, Spurlock plays the naïf, wondering out loud if he could make a documentary with commercial potential like the big Hollywood flicks, to wit a “doc-buster.” He then sets out to test how far he can go with product placement (now called “brand integration” in advertising jargon) in motion pictures by finding enough real-life companies (22 of them) to underwrite his new film by offering them blatant chances to appear in it.

The film shows Spurlock touring the country to find backers. With his film budgeted at \$1.5 million, he is especially eager to find a company that will shell out a million bucks, for which they will get their company name above the title. Getting “big” corporate names proves elusive. One hilarious sequence has Morgan phoning a string of prominent firms and getting elaborate turndowns on the phones from PR people and company staffers, who say this project is “just not for them.”

His successes are somewhat vagrant, corralling miscellaneous products like Amy’s Pizza, Merrell’s footwear, the island of Aruba, Ban deodorant, even a strange soap company, Mane ‘n Tail, which makes shampoo for humans—and horses! His first real breakthrough is a contract with Sheetz, the gas station/convenience store company. He visits the family Sheetz in Altoona, PA, and they give him a nice check on condition that he shoots their facilities as often as possible—and only buys Sheetz gasoline. Which he does.

The real kicker, though, is his connection with POM Wonderful, the 100 % pure pomegranate drink. The owners of POM, based in Los Angeles, look understandably skeptical when he makes his pitch, but they fall for Morgan and his quixotic idea and decide to take a chance on him. They agree to the \$1 million sponsorship and, thus, get their name above the title (see full title above). They also expect Spurlock’s documentary to make \$10 million!

Whether he knows it or not (and I suspect he does), Spurlock has made a “meta-film,” where the “meta” means one thing all about another thing, or a self-reference. His film, if this is not too confusing, is one convoluted film product placement about product placements. Think of it as a kind of Moebius strip that curls around and comes back upon itself. A strange thing happens as you get into the film: as Spurlock pitches to one sponsor after another, you realize that every scene he is crafting is aimed at actually plugging the sponsors he eventually gathered. As he contracts a new company, that company’s products start to show up in unobtrusive, then obvious, ways. Thus, when you see him tying on his Merrell shoes or getting gas at a Sheetz outlet, you realize

that these were segments used explicitly in his film because they ultimately helped **finance** his movie. Does this make your head swim? You really don't have to think too hard about it, because much of what he does in garnering his sponsors is quite entertaining.

And, as in "Supersize Me," Morgan Spurlock is making a larger, more serious point with his shenanigans: the tremendous creep of commercialization in our society, making almost anything for sale or rent. Talk about meta...we are already doing advertising about advertising, when companies plug their upcoming plugs for the Super Bowl--ads about ads.

If you need just one current example of this phenomenon in the film business, I can refer to the new comedy "Arthur," just released in April. It's a film (only tepidly amusing) about an irresponsible drunk, but it is just as much about the booze Arthur drinks. One premium bourbon, Maker's Mark, is the product that is overwhelmingly placed, getting just as many close-ups and almost as much screen time as the ingénue in the movie. I wonder what they shelled out to appear in "Arthur"?

(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 88 mins.)

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