

It's Like a Movie, But It's Not

By Neal Gabler

With summer comes the annual ritual of the Hollywood blockbuster, aimed primarily at teenagers, and with the blockbuster comes the annual ritual of complaining about it.

Critics usually focuses on the thin plots, the lame jokes, the lack of characterization and the bombast of special effects. As they see it, many films now use an aesthetic sleight-of-hand that substitutes volume, speed, size and other neurological overloads for the more traditional satisfactions of entertainment, allowing viewers to expend a minimal amount of emotional energy. These are faux movies, and are about the only kind most teenagers respond to. They are also Exhibit A of a larger phenomenon: the illusion of entertainment.

For decades, cultural observers have been saying Americans live in a world of their own illusions, built to their specifications and designed to replace the disorder and discomfort of the unmanaged reality people were once sentenced to. As Umberto Eco wrote, "American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake."

Entertainment, especially film, with its blend of the real and the fantastic, has long been implicated in this shouldering aside of the genuine. But though entertainment is often blamed for this trend, it is also seemingly immune, because you cannot make a copy of a copy. You know that the French pavilion at Disney World's Epcot is not a real French bistro. But what would an imitation movie or TV show even look like? To talk about facsimiles of entertainment doesn't make sense.

Over the last few years, however, something has appeared that not even the most prescient cultural theorists anticipated. The television producer Phil Rosenthal calls it the "illusion of entertainment," and it is just that - a form of entertainment that looks and sounds like conventional entertainment but is not, any more than Epcot's Paris is Paris. Something vital is missing.

In most entertainment, the audience responds emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, even physically. There is a level of engagement, and we usually judge entertainment on the basis of how much engagement it elicits. At its simplest, as in so many teenage movies, the illusion of entertainment eschews other forms of engagement for purely physical effects. At its more complex, engagement is replaced by another mechanism entirely. Instead of character development in movies or full-bodied jokes in situation comedies viewers get a set of signals, a kind of code, that advises them how to respond without having to expend the effort, however minimal, that real entertainment demands. You see or hear the signal and you respond as if you were getting the real thing. Or put another way, you are given the form and you provide the content.

Just compare a conventional entertainment, the director Frank Capra's "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," with its latest avatar, Adam Sandler's "Mr. Deeds" - by no means the most egregious offender. Both films tell the same story of a naïf who inherits a fortune and is taken advantage of by urban sharpies. But that's where the similarity ends. Capra's classic is heavily plotted, quiet and often tender; leisurely paced, its comedy character- and plot-generated. You must watch and listen closely to enjoy it. Mr. Sandler's movie is more skimpily plotted, loud, often violent and frenetically paced. Its comedy is virtually all non sequiturs - a disappearing butler or a gangrenous foot that is only funny because we know it is meant to be, not because it is inherently humorous. Even the romantic scenes are romantic only because viewers know they are supposed

to he, and drippy music signals that they are. Mr. Sandier is working the code. He's stripped Capra down to the absolute basics of form and then added noise and speed.

In mathematics there is something called a derivative - an expression that stands for another set of expressions. The illusion of entertainment is a kind of cultural derivative. You watch most television sitcoms and, just by the rhythm of the banter and the laugh track, you know how you are supposed to respond, whether the jokes are funny or not. Sitcom writers call this "likeajoke" because it has the form of a joke without the content. Or you go to a big commercial movie, and just by experiencing the rapid cutting and thumping music you know how you are supposed to respond, whether the action engages you or not.

In effect, these entertainments exist largely as a system of reminders of what we once experienced when we watched real entertainment - movies and television shows that engaged us and made us feel.

Of course, some may argue that the illusion of entertainment is just another name for bad or formulaic entertainment, and the signals and codes are the cultural syntax that everyone grows up with. But the illusion of entertainment is not a matter of quality, it is a matter of kind - of a different way of processing what we see. Even bad conventional entertainment operates on the principle of engagement; it is just that bad entertainment doesn't succeed in engaging.

As for formulas, while most people are familiar with narrative patterns and understand what they convey, there is a big difference between old formulaic entertainment and the new illusion of entertainment. Formulas are designed to elicit predictable responses through predictable means - predictable because they have worked in the past. You show an audience an attractive young man and woman who playfully bicker at the beginning of a movie and it roots for them to wind up together at the end. Or show a bully pushing around a decent fellow and viewers root for the latter to defeat the former. The audience reacts not because it knows the formula - it reacts because the formula knows the audience.

The illusion of entertainment doesn't put the audience through those paces. Being a derivative, it is far more emotionally economical. It gets its predictable responses by cuing the audience in how they are supposed to react. And it can do so because the audience, after years of watching movies and TV shows, is now hard-wired to respond. Virtually all Americans have internalized the code. They are sophisticated enough to know that a certain cadence of speech means funny and a certain editing pattern means action and certain saccharine music means melodrama. They don't need the whole apparatus of entertainment anymore, or even formulas. The illusion of entertainment is a shortcut - entertainment lite.

It is not an altogether unsatisfying shortcut either. Just as Mr. Eco said that Americans prefer the fake to the real, so many prefer the illusion of entertainment to the real thing. The illusion of entertainment cannot provide all the pleasures real entertainment does, but it is far less demanding and challenging. It is also more accessible, and since it lets viewers essentially fill in the blanks themselves, it is more certain in its results. In fact, many people, especially young people, are now likely to judge a movie or TV show by how effectively it provides the forms and activates the codes.

Not surprisingly, this has been a boon to the entertainment industry. Why struggle to write real jokes when you can write "likeajokes" and get the same effect? In doing so, however, producers of entertainment have not, as some critics assert, necessarily suffered a failure of talent or intelligence. Rather, they may have made a discovery and then exploited it. Just as the makers of kitsch, which is the illusion of art, learned to produce, in the critic Clement

Greenberg's analysis, the effect without the cause, so have the makers of the illusion of entertainment learned how to produce the reaction without the reason for it. When the audience so embraces this, one cannot really blame producers for attempting to perfect it.

Obviously, no work of popular entertainment is entirely illusory yet. But real entertainment is endangered - and not only because the illusion of entertainment is flooding the market. An entire generation has now grown up with the illusion of entertainment. It has grown up with the codes, with "likeajokes" and "likeanaction," and scarcely knows what real entertainment is - which is why the illusion of entertainment is targeted at the young. For them, the codes are not reminders; they are the thing itself

It is bizarre to think that conventional entertainment may someday become a relic with even the old formulas attenuated into signals. Yet that is the future we are edging toward - a future where entertainment is created by people who don't care about engagement for people who don't even know what engagement is.

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