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Blockbusters for the YouTube Generation: A new product of convergence culture – Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller

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Abstract: While scholars have paid much attention to YouTube in a Web 2.0 environment, the YouTube blockbuster is yet to be discussed as part of this convergence culture. It differs from transmedia storytelling in that no single company owns or controls the characters or concepts. Once users have elevated videos with rich narrative qualities to the heights of fame within YouTube and other virtual social networks, they are taken from the YouTube archive by global commercial media and given new exchange values in traditional media forms such as books, films, television shows and ancillary products, using fragmented classical narrative techniques to do so. This paper traces the history of the blockbuster as a way of large commercial media adapting to social and technological change after World War II, to its refinements in the 1970s to cater for younger audiences and changes in the media landscape, to its most recent incarnation in YouTube. We argue that the economic and cultural values of the blockbuster are being transformed and refigured by the new form it has begun to take within convergence culture.

Introduction

Susan Boyle is a dowdy, middle-aged Scottish singer with bushy eyebrows and frizzy dark hair. She was the “fairy tale for the YouTube generation” (Wooley, 2010) in 2009 and now has one of the world’s fastest selling debut albums of all time. The story began when Boyle surprised audiences with her faultless rendition of _Les Miserables_’ “I dreamed a dream” on the hit reality television show _Britain’s Got Talent_. The _Washington Post_ later reported that the judges and audience were “waiting for her to squawk like a duck” (McManus, 2009). Within hours of her performance, a snippet of footage was uploaded to YouTube by a computer user and shared among millions of people throughout the world. Another piece of footage, uploaded by the producers of the television show, has received almost 100 million hits. Boyle is now one of the world’s most recognizable faces, with guest television appearances, stories in newspapers and magazines, books and record deals. Ironically, the 48-year-old songstress had never heard of YouTube before her performance. She told one interviewer: “I hadn’t even seen a computer…Google what’s that? Is that some kind of gargle?” (Wooley, 2010).

This paper argues the Susan Boyle phenomenon is an example of an emerging media form – the YouTube blockbuster. Just like its cinematic forerunner, this is an example of large
commercial media adapting to social and technological change. The two forms retain much in common and we will highlight the work of Marco Cucco (2009) to outline these similarities. Importantly, however, we aim to show how the two models differ within a convergence culture. The traditional blockbuster model developed by Hollywood in the 1960s and 1970s depends upon corporate media investing significant economic capital to produce and market a product with an expectation it will appeal to mass audiences and generate huge profits. Its production has always been controlled by single media conglomerates which make the final decisions on plot and character development as well as licensing agreements for ancillary products. Elana Shafrin (2004) argues that in recent times cinematic blockbusters have been “infused with new modes of authorship, production, marketing and consumption” (Shafrin, 2004, p.261). She uses case studies of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* and George Lucas’ *Star Wars* franchises to discuss how a growing number of “active” or “participatory” fans (Jenkins, 1992) exhibit a sense of ownership that includes an investment in the creative development of these productions. Shafrin shows how internet clubs and websites have provided venues for fans to establish connections to Jackson and Spielberg and their evolving franchises through social gossip, artistic production and political activism.

The YouTube blockbuster is different because its character and plot development is not determined by a single media conglomerate, nor are the licensing agreements for its associated merchandise. It begins with huge interest within participatory media culture before the corporate media make any significant investment and it is dependent on both “bottom up” participatory culture as well as “top down” corporate media (Jenkins, 2006, p.242) to drive its production. Media scholars including Tiziana Terranova (2000), Andrew Ross (2009), Robert Gehl (2009) Banks & Humphreys (2008) and Banks & Deuze (2009) offer different perspectives in the debates surrounding co-creative labor and free labor, who controls content and information flows, who benefits and who profits. There is not space to work through these arguments here. YouTube does, however, provide an example of these complex, yet interdependent co-creative relationships as it thrives on its ability to function as both a business and cultural resource. YouTube has its own brand channel, provides transparent advertising platforms and offers advertising placements in frames on the site, but with its catchcry “Broadcast Yourself™, it also provides a global stage for creative expression and is celebrated for its participatory culture. It allows everyone with an internet browser to produce, share, find and watch videos stored in its vast digital archive. It is the free, participatory culture of YouTube that is so attractive to “top down” corporate media. It offers a symbiosis with new media, as well as opportunities to build on YouTube success with a range of narratives and products. The YouTube blockbuster is unique within convergence culture as it has progressed from transmedia storytelling, the term used by Henry Jenkins (2006) to describe the ways in which the movie blockbuster production process changes when multimedia platforms are used to tell and sell a story. This paper also argues that a common feature of both old and new blockbusters is the use of narrative, even though it may be constructed in different ways. While classical Hollywood theorists claim narrative has been lost in the industrialisation of film culture, we will argue it is what helps bind new and old media in the production of the YouTube blockbuster.

**Blockbuster production: A brief history**

The term “blockbuster” is a synonym for something big and is commonly used to describe any cultural product that is a hugely popular commercial success, from art exhibitions to novels. However, it is most closely associated with film where the term was originally coined to describe a big budget production with mass popular appeal.
Cucco (2009) traces the blockbuster’s evolution in Hollywood to the 1940s and ‘50s when the industry was in a state of a crisis brought about by the large-scale, post-war demographic shift towards the new suburbs where there were very few cinemas. The baby boom reduced cinematic consumption, and the birth of new media competition, especially television (Cucco, 2009, p 217), left movie houses struggling to attract audiences.

In the Studio Era of the 1950s and ‘60s Hollywood enjoyed some successes with films including *Ben-Hur, Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Sound of Music*, but it was in the 1970s that it appeared to have found a concrete solution to its crisis with the release of films such as *The GodFather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1976). These were big budget films that recorded phenomenal takings at the box office – *Jaws* alone grossed $470.6 million in its initial release worldwide and cost $7 million to produce (Box Office Mojo, 2010). No three films had ever made so much money more quickly (Bordwell, 2006). They heralded the birth of the Hollywood blockbuster and provided a successful business model for media conglomerates to create big and expensive productions that could appeal to mass audiences and generate massive profits. According to film historian Thomas Schatz (2002), the emergence of the blockbuster signified what the New Hollywood was all about, that is “the studio’s eventual coming-to-terms with an increasingly fragmented entertainment industry – with its demographics and target audiences, its diversified multimedia conglomerates, its global markets and new delivery systems” (2002, p. 185). The rise of the blockbuster was met with strong criticism that such films signified the death of classical narrative and that Hollywood was relying on spectacle and special effects alone to tell and sell a story. Filmmaker Jean Douchet claimed post-classical cinema had given up on narrative and the image was “designed to violently impress by constantly inflating their spectacular qualities” (Buckland, 1999, p 178). Schatz says film became: “…so fast-paced and resolutely plot driven that character depth and development are scarcely on the narrative agenda and this emphasis on plot over character marks a significant departure from classical Hollywood” (Schatz, 2002, p. 194). Justin Wyatt (1994, p. 18) argues the cinematic blockbuster can be summarised on one sentence or image, usually called a logline, to make it easier to market. He gives examples from the 1980s including *Flashdance* (1983) and *American Gigolo* (1980), which were designed around the public’s taste and market research, and required a simplification of narrative in favor of the image as major appeal.

Most recently, Cucco (2009) has outlined three distinctive features of the cinematic blockbuster which we argue apply to the YouTube blockbuster as well. They include a high economic investment using both technology and human resources; a promise of a “spectacular” or something that is “must see”; and an ability to supplement the earnings from its audiovisual receipts with receipts from merchandising (Cucco, 2009, pp. 219-222). We will consider how each of these features applies to the YouTube blockbuster in this paper, beginning with the third feature – merchandising potential. This is best understood by considering how the blockbuster and ancillary products first came to co-exist. Instead of competing with television, the blockbuster of the 1970s embraced it as a tool for massive advertising. The release of *Jaws*, for example, was preceded by a large-scale television promotional campaign to entice audiences. Gomery (1998) says the huge success of *Jaws* proved saturation advertising was the strategy that would redefine Hollywood (Gomery, 1998, p. 51). The print campaign featured a poster depicting a huge shark rising from the water towards an unsuspecting swimmer, while the radio and television ads exploited the well-known *Jaws* theme music (Schatz, 2002, p. 191). Bordwell (2006) argues that by the early 1980s, merchandising was added to extend the lifespan of the story beyond the cinema,
so tie-ins with fast-food chains, automobile companies and lines of toys and apparel could keep selling the movie.

Scripts that lent themselves to mass marketing had a better chance of being acquired and screenwriters were encouraged to incorporate special effects. Unlike studio era productions, the megapicture could lead a robust afterlife on a soundtrack album, on cable channels and on video cassette. (Bordwell 2006, p.3)

The blockbuster strategy flourished within a new media environment where conglomerates controlled how and when a story could be produced and promoted across a range of mediums from television to the internet. Jenkins (2006) calls this “transmedia storytelling”. He uses the example of the 1999 Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix*, which gives audiences pieces of the story and narrative through films, books and video games. Jenkins argues that within this idea:

Each medium does what it does best so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics and its world might be explored and experienced through game play…such a multilayered approach to storytelling will enable a more complex, more sophisticated, more rewarding mode of narrative to emerge within the constraints of commercial entertainment (Jenkins, 2006, p. 105).

Although the story is told across mediums, Jenkins argues that transmedia storytelling still depends on a central media company selling the rights to unaffiliated third parties to manufacture products while licensing limits what can be done with the characters or concepts to protect the original property. The production of most ancillary media is achieved by a combination of labor but ultimately the licensor has “the power”, for example the production of “tie-in novels” (Clarke 2009) depends on freelance and supervisory labor but the licensor has ultimate control over timeframes, characters and narratives. This marks the most fundamental difference in the evolution of the YouTube blockbuster because no single company owns or controls the characters or concepts.

**Beyond transmedia storytelling**

Cucco (2009) outlines the use of high economic investment using both technology and human resources as a feature of the blockbuster. To understand how this relates to the YouTube blockbuster, we must acknowledge the identities and forms of agency that underpin the success of products of convergence culture such as YouTube. While there is not space here to look closely at this debate, scholars have tended to focus their discussions on the political economy of media production or classical development versus dependency theories (Jenkins, 2006; Banks & Deuze, 2009; Gehl, 2009). There was always a clear division between the role of the producer and consumer in the traditional market-driven cinema model, but that division has blurred since the “people formerly known as the audience” began creating content, uploading photos and videos and sharing information online. Croteau (2006) suggests “mega media products, along with other forms of traditional media, will increasingly be competing for attention with a constantly changing population of literally millions of media producers” (Croteau, 2006, p. 343). The YouTube blockbuster highlights this interdependency. As van Dijck (2009) observes; “YouTube’s role as an internet trader in the options market for fame is unthinkable without a merger between old and new media” (van Dijck, 2009, p. 53).
The production of the YouTube blockbuster depends on a variety of human resources, motives and objectives. They include those responsible for hosting YouTube, the people who upload content online and those who view and pass on links to popular footage via email, blogs, websites, telephone and word of mouth. Global commercial media are also involved, and their role includes extending the life of YouTube footage beyond the online archive by creating new plot developments and ancillary products of their own.

In her research to assess the future of Web 2.0 social networking sites, Kylie Jarrett (2008, p. 132) highlights that it is the appeal of, and control provided by community structures rather than corporate intervention which is fundamental to the success of sites such as YouTube. Burgess and Green (2009) describe a continuum of cultural participation in YouTube where:

…content is circulated and used without much regard to its source, it is valued and engaged with in specific ways according to its genre and its uses within the website as well as its relevance to the everyday lives of other users, rather than according to whether or not it was uploaded by a Hollywood studio, a web TV company or an amateur video blogger (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 57).

YouTube is owned by Google, yet Google does not charge licensing fees to those who wish to upload content or enforce subscription fees on anyone who wishes to view material on the site. This allows for large-scale site traffic, providing people have internet access and can invest in the necessary equipment for video editing and uploading. It is YouTube’s role as a cultural resource that underpins the success of the YouTube blockbuster. The relatively free, participatory nature of YouTube is what attracts the interest of global media companies seeking to create their own exchange values from popular content. Often the original creator of material is not acknowledged in the archive and if copyright restrictions are unclear, anyone can take advantage of this ambiguity and control the way the content is developed outside of the archive.

This shows that the YouTube blockbuster has moved beyond Jenkins’ (2006) transmedia storytelling, which depends on a central media company driving production. It does, however, reinforce Cucco’s idea that the success of the blockbuster depends on its ability to generate merchandizing and ancillary products. Without this ability, there would be no large-scale investment in popular YouTube footage from global media. This investment can range from deploying resources such as journalists to report on the phenomena for commercial media, to book deals, movie rights or merchandizing.

The ‘Singing Spinster’ spectacle

Boyle’s appearance on Britain’s Got Talent was first recorded and uploaded by computer users. There was no initial large-scale investment apart from the costs associated with the production of the reality talent show, but this hardly compares with the massive budgets afforded to create Hollywood blockbusters. The YouTube users who uploaded footage had made some minor investment with basic computer equipment and internet access to upload content onto what is considered a cultural resource. But there were no special effects or spectacle deployed on YouTube, in fact the footage of Boyle is grainy and poor quality and lasts for less than four minutes. Once footage was uploaded, news within the YouTube community spread like a virus. Boyle became a spectacle through viral videos, word of mouth and email. The first international news reports came after the YouTube footage had received millions of hits. Newspapers across the world were reporting less than 24 hours after
her television appearance of her global success on YouTube with international headlines such as “Scottish spinster a world media sensation” (no author (a), 2009, p. 16) and “Unlikely singer is YouTube sensation” (Lyall, 2009, p. 1).

Large-scale economic investment in the Boyle phenomena was made after the footage was a massive hit in YouTube and corporate media saw value in its production outside of the archive. In the case of traditional media, it provided a chance to “gobble up its most promising prospects” for its own financial gain (Croteau, 2006). Until now corporate media has always had to take a gamble that their large-scale investment in blockbusters will pay off with audiences. They have had to rely on previously successful formulas and market research (Wyatt, 1994). In the case of YouTube phenomena, television stations and talk shows such as Oprah, newspapers across the globe from the Washington Post to The Australian, magazines and book publishers all sought a slice of Boyle only after the footage had been endorsed in YouTube on a grand scale. There were media reports in May 2009 that Catherine Zeta-Jones had asked about the film rights to the singer’s life story and that Oscar-winning film director James Cameron wanted to direct the film (no author (b), 2009, p. 54) Fremantle Media, the producer of Britain’s Got Talent which discovered Boyle, found even it was scrambling to maximise potential from the phenomena and it was only after millions of hits had been received that it negotiated to set up a YouTube channel and sell advertising around official Boyle clips. The Sunday Times of London reported in April 2009 that more than £1 million in potential advertising income had been lost because no deal was in place before Boyle’s ‘I dreamed a dream’ was viewed more than 75 million times.

No single media conglomerate could control the way the Boyle footage was used outside of YouTube. Whereas J.K. Rowling can control the licensing agreements that govern how her creation Harry Potter is portrayed in merchandizing products, sequels and plot development, both internet users and global media can take the story surrounding a piece of YouTube footage in almost any direction they choose.

YouTube says in its corporate website that every minute a mind boggling 13 hours of video is uploaded and attracts millions of users and viewers. To understand why Boyle has become a YouTube blockbuster we must identify the qualities that make her ‘I dreamed a dream’ stand out from the millions of other video clips in the YouTube archive. The Boyle footage has attracted 300 million hits worldwide and its rich inter-textual narrative appears to differentiate it from other highly popular videos such as “Where the Hell is Matt”, which is not well known to traditional media audiences but has attracted more than 25 million hits and appeared on YouTube’s list of most popular clips. We argue that strong narrative qualities can elevate certain YouTube footage to blockbuster status. International audiences can identify with the story and the corporate media can use the narrative to extend the footage’s appeal beyond the YouTube archive.

Cucco emphasises that a common feature of the blockbuster is the need for a spectacle or something that is “must see”. The spectacle of the YouTube blockbuster is not the footage itself, but the hype created around the footage. We argue this is achieved through narrative techniques, which critics say has crumbled under the industrial weight of the blockbuster.

There are several noteworthy scholars who argue that contemporary Hollywood blockbusters still have narrative structure intact, regardless of quality. Kristin Thompson (1993) examined dozens of post 1960s films such as Jaws, Alien (1979) and GroundHog Day and found dense plot developments, rather than incoherent and fragmented ones. Schauer (2007) further
argues that transmedia storytelling has the potential to improve upon the standard film narrative rather than fragment it to the point where it becomes obsolete. He argues that his study of *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* was an important example of transmedia storytelling as ancillary products were part of director George Lucas’s marketing strategy from the beginning, but that the film still displayed strong connections to narrative.

The use of classical narratives within the global media has also been noted by scholars, particularly within the field of media and journalism. Traditional narrative themes are often used in news stories where journalists portray the hero, the villain, the damsel in distress. Bell (1991) calls journalists the professional storytellers of our age: “The fairy story starts: ‘Once upon a time’. The news story begins: ‘Fifteen people were injured today when a bus plunged’.” Stories define actors moving through sequences of events filled with victims, villains and heroes (Woodward, 1997). Propp (1975) is well known in media studies for identifying recurrent patterns, set characters and plot actions in all fairytales. The main characters include villain, donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. More recently, Booker (2004) has outlined seven basic plots that are structural transformations of ancient tales: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, rebirth, comedy and tragedy. Carroll (2001) identifies and explores key stories or archetypes at the source of Western culture from the virtuous whore; the troubled hero; salvation by a god; soul-mate love; the mother; the value of work; fate; the origin of evil; and self-sacrifice.

In their research on news reporters’ use of YouTube, Hess and Waller (2009) argue that journalists create disjointed and hybrid narratives to extend the appeal of YouTube footage for their audiences. The way the news media use classical narrative and archetypes to create new exchange values from YouTube deserves attention, especially if we consider narratives in the media as simply a way of selling something (Fulton, 2005).

This paper aims to highlight that a strong connection to classical narrative is emerging as a key feature of the YouTube blockbuster. The story of Susan Boyle bears strong resemblance to those themes identified by Booker such as rags to riches and the classic folk tales Cinderella and Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Ugly Duckling*. The global media identified these themes and many stories retain some of the narrative structure of these tales with headlines such as “A life lesson on looks turns into the fairy-tale ending” from the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Sunday Times* in Singapore headline “Beauty in ‘Ugly Ducking’ Susan Boyle”. This extract from the British *Daily Mirror* also highlights the way the news media developed a storybook theme:

…The only man (Brian) to have kissed singing sensation Susan Boyle claimed yesterday it would be a privilege for any lucky guy. The *Britain’s Got Talent* wonder –nicknamed the Hairy Angel – now has millions of fans worldwide but revealed she has never found a man to love or kiss. “I never knew her to have a birthday party because she was busy caring for her mother,” Brian said. Brian also told how Susan, born with learning difficulties, was targeted by louts. He said: “They would call her names, throw snowballs at her door and dare each other to knock and run away”. (*Daily Mirror*, 2009).

British journalist Nicci Gerrard wrote a comment piece shortly after Susan Boyle was reportedly admitted to a celebrity rehab clinic after suffering an emotional breakdown in June 2009 (Cooper, 2009). In her article, “The Susan Boyle fairytale was just a fairytale” she writes:
Even this small human tragedy can be easily turned by those so adept in the manipulation of individual stories to fit the required narrative. In fact, it makes it even more gripping. You can be pretty sure that soon, brave Susan will be back — just in time for her album and autobiography (released before Christmas) … it’s actually nowhere near enough to have talent; you have to have a story. You have to be on a journey. You have to have suffered (makes you heroic) and you have to be redeemed (gives you that essential happy ending). You have to be able to cry and make others cry.

Conclusion

Only rare YouTube moments are imbued with qualities that not only attract millions of viewers, but have the potential as bankable products for media conglomerates that can ultimately propel them to blockbuster status. This paper has focused on Susan Boyle, but there are other examples of this new form of blockbuster, such as “Christian the Lion”, which possesses the same kind of rich, universal narrative qualities as the Boyle story. This YouTube blockbuster captures a tale of remarkable love between beast and man in just a couple of minutes of low-quality, grainy 1970s footage in which the lion embraces its former owner. It has spawned best-selling books for children and adults, documentaries and massive international news media coverage and commentary.

The global reach of popular YouTube footage is unprecedented and YouTube phenomena such as the Susan Boyle footage can attract as much, if not more attention from fans and audiences than some of Hollywood’s most famous actors. Martin Conboy (2002) says the popular press survives on its ability to maintain a dialogue with contemporary cultural trends. So it comes as no surprise that YouTube, a new form of popular culture, attracts interest from global commercial media.

The YouTube blockbuster shares some of the features of its cinematic forerunner – most importantly, it has the “must see” quality that Cucco describes. It also attracts massive global audiences, offering opportunities to reap big profits from merchandizing and spin-off media products. But the nature of the hype that traditionally surrounded the blockbuster has been transformed and democratised by new media communities and technology. It is no longer a case of marketeers rolling out slick promotional campaigns designed around public taste and market research to build expectations for months before a blockbuster is released. The circulation of viral emails and links from social network sites alert increasingly large networks of people to the existence of “must see” YouTube footage and they are able to access it instantly. In the process, both the economic and cultural values of the blockbuster are being redefined. It was once under complete corporate control, big budgets and big profits were its hallmarks and slick production, spectacle and special effects were the drawcard. The YouTube blockbuster is first and foremost under YouTube user control, it’s relatively cheap to produce, the nature of the “spectacle” has changed and production values are relatively unimportant. Narrative is in the ascendancy.

The global commercial media is still coming to terms with the latest transformations of the media landscape in which corporate control is slipping. As in the post-war period and again in the 1970s, creative industries must find new ways to profit. The Susan Boyle blockbuster is an important example of the media redefining itself by finding ways to meet the challenges posed by the new cultural forms, delivery systems and diversification Web 2.0 presents. YouTube users make large investments of human capital and small investments in technology at the front end of the YouTube blockbuster, but media spectacle and big profits are still
possible for the global commercial media when it takes the guaranteed popularity of a YouTube clip and can spin it into traditional media products such as news, documentaries, books, films and audio recordings.

But the YouTube blockbuster is a fragile entity and models of storytelling in convergence culture are evolving as rapidly as the technology itself. YouTube is both a business and a cultural resource co-created by its users and the larger in scale and demographic reach, “the more that is at stake and the more significant the tensions between labour, play, democracy and profiteering become” (Burgess & Green, 2009, pp. 35-36) Already there have been disputes over claims of copyright infringement with Viacom, and most recently Warner Bros’ battle over music video clips. It is YouTube’s role as a cultural resource that underpins the success of the blockbuster. If corporate interests intervene, for example, through the introduction of subscription fees, then the community framework which supports the blockbuster will surely weaken.

The blockbuster phenomenon highlights the synergies between new and old media in a convergence culture. No one can predict what the next blockbuster will be, nor can they orchestrate it, but what is certain is that unlikely stars will continue to be rocketed into this new media stratosphere such as the “Hairy Angel” Susan Boyle.

References


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