Endless Loop

Licensing—the selling of rights to a popular character, name or phrase—has changed the way we experience culture feed.

Licensing is what reluctantly powered Penguins many years ago off the comics page, and what made the ever-too-eager My Little Pony only this summer a mass movie. Home computer software joins the range of outlets for fast-selling pop commodities. While adult software such as a how-to-type-with-Donna and P separating your"9 to 5 Typing" makes for a license, the big market is kids—who can, presumably, be trusted to be unaware of the time before all information was a commodity. Muppets appear in learning software and adventure games, and such software giant kid show names as Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street and Romper Room are cropping up in the software lists. Classic toys such as GI Joe, Hot Wheels and Lite Brite show up in electronic games. Parents may react in saved shelf-space, as software suppliants hard "product." But software designers are impatient for the next twist in the feedback loop; the moment when software creations, such as the Snoopy Troopers, get licensed off the computer screen onto the toy shelves, greeting card racks and Saturday-morning TV.

Video Babble on the VCR

For everyone who thought new technologies would create a richer information environment, there's the VCR phenomenon to contemplate. What's the most common sense use of a VCR? "Time-shifting": taping part of the normal broadcast schedule for viewing at another time. Home video has given second life to shows too defy to survive television (as well as for tried-and-true favorites like Star Trek—a blockbuster at 40,000 sales—and golden-newies like Moonlighting). Video stores are now purveying dead-on-arrival pilots and early death series; whether a show is good or bad doesn't seem to have much to do with its sales, so far. A new video vending machine that lets you preview product in the store may shake the market, however.

VCR as Consciousness-Raiser

Meanwhile, independent producers and distributors, whose precarious financial health is jeopardized by the cheap and copyable videocassette, are regarding the VCR warily. Some ambitious alternative film sites such as Facets-Multimedia in Chicago—whose local home video rentals and national videocassette sales wing has surged in a slow period for software film distribution—are gaining a foothold. The African-American alternative media center App/Stop has had only so-so luck with its home video sales, however. California Newsreel, the San Francisco-based veteran independent distributor with an impressive range of films, on South Africa and on workplace issues, has entered the home video market gingerly, with the aim of turning the machine into an agent of political action. Film critic Sharonne Miller's 60-minute documentary, Witness to Apartheid, for example, is a driving indictment of South African governmental oppression, connecting with the plight of blacks and whites in South Africa scenes of police brutality, and on-screen arrest of the filmmakers themselves. Along with film rentals and sales, the distributor offers a special low-home-video price. The logic: connecting individuals to the film for ongoing organizing and awareness sessions. To help brainstorm social uses for the film, the distributor (at 630 Natoma, San Francisco 94110) also includes a guide suggesting ways to mount a showing and ways to take action—including sending funds to Bishop Tutu—at movie's end.

Update

The TV advocacy ad decries the federal deficit, made by W.R. Grace and rejected by the networks, became a testing ground for the selling of opinion with paid time. Now Grace is trumpeting success in the free market; 150 independent TV stations have picked it up. Some call it controversy. Another brick is coming through the FCC's window. Four years ago that agency lifted the requirement that radio and TV stations be held by the same owner for more than three years—a restriction designed to discourage speculation—and then, watched as a half of the stations in the country went on the block and one-quarter of them were sold within three years (see last week's "Media Beat"). Three Washington, D.C., public interest lawyers have filed a petition at the FCC demanding a five-year holding rule. They argue that the broadcast— who, after all, is gambling with a public resource: the airwaves—is the least likely entity to act fully and faithfully as a public trustee in his community." The petitioners cite a drop in public affairs programming and the threat to any kind of program that doesn't garner top ratings. The petition backs up Rep. Al Swift (D-WA), whose bill calls for reinstatement of the three-year rule. Fast on the heels of the FCC Network, the cable TV industry is threatening to drop the telephone service, so last week's "Media Beat") comes Home Shopping Network, soon to buy 14 TV stations nationally, to be dedicated to its advertisement-programming. HSBN builds on a record of convincing TV viewers over only nine months, to part with more than $100 million for products advertised on the hard-set stations.

By Pat Aufderheide

No one is having more fun than the high-tech in information-free-fall that passes for pop culture these days than Laurie Anderson. You can watch her at it in Home of the Brave, her movie assemblage of performance pieces. And if sometimes the film has the stiffness of filmed theater, most of the time it just lifts the top of your head off. She's like the life of the party, the one who takes it over but lets you have fun too, if you can give up and giggle. Anderson free-associates across the commodified, digitalized universe of daily life.

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Home of the Brave may undercut her pose of postmodern cool, however, Her visual and word play are both high spirited and intelligible. The brilliance of it is more in Anderson's failure to be intimidated by the terms of high-tech information than by anything profound she has to say. Her work is the constant assertion of individual imagination, of the right to say and turn around the terms of systems that seem to deny individual presence.

Taking the open act, in which Anderson plays robot in a scenario doomed by flashing displays of the numbers 0 and 1, "I," symbols of digital information expression. She turns form into substance, associating on "0" as "nothing" and "1" as "everything. It's funny, it's sort of true, and it links the cult of celebrity ('I'm Number One') with the anonymity of the masses. Anderson's robot has found a way to have fun performing—being both celebrity and a mechanical anonymity—on those terms, even if they make the rest of us deeply uncomfortable. In the first scene, she's staked a claim to be a Mad magazine version of Talking Heads' David Byrne. She's an electronic Dadaist who works with the instant conventions of mass media rather than those of the contemplative art world. She jokes in sound, pictures, words and dance with a paradox of image as substance. Geometric designs and cartoons both refer to icons of pop culture and stand alone as Andersonian reality. She imagines a future in which "pictures of people" take the place of people themselves. "I'd rather see this on TV," she says at one point. "It tones it down." The series of performance pieces climaxes with a short story she tells about walking down the street and overhearing a passerby say, "Oh no! Anderson Free-Associates Across the Commodified, Digitalized Universe of Daily Life."

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