

Media Industries and Media Studies: Getting in the Picture

When I informed my students on the first day of class that we would be examining *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* this semester, students exhibited a range of responses. None resonated as loudly, however, as the absolute refusal to step into the theater to see the film. “Disney is the devil,” while not directly stated, seemed to be the reigning sentiment for a few particularly vocal students. For these students, an outright refusal to see it overwhelmed any discussion of whether or not there may be something innovative about *HSM3*, which at its heart is a corny, overly chaste musical set in high school.

Yet, there is something unique about the film’s origins. Both of the first two films in the *High School Musical* franchise were launched originally on the Disney channel before bringing in billions of dollars in revenues from the sale of DVDs, soundtracks, and *High School Musical*-related merchandise. The company’s decision to alter the successful format by releasing the third film in the theater is risky; it is an unproven venue for the multimedia franchise. However, the cross-media nature of *HSM* seen in earlier iterations as well as Disney’s diverse and powerful holdings across media are both factors that portend strongly for the film’s upcoming theatrical release.

When I see something like *HSM3*, then, I cannot help but think that we are too focused—both in our teaching and in our research—on individual projects in a specific medium rather than the larger spectrum of the media. Will there be a self-contained, two-hour experience in a movie theater for *HSM3*? Absolutely. But to reduce *HSM3* to that singular experience seems to miss the point entirely—where it comes from and what it is hoping to achieve. The film is part of a multimedia phenomenon, which even includes its own reality show on ABC. The show, *High School Musical: Get in the Picture*, is, ostensibly, a search for talent to feature in the film’s closing credits—not the film itself, but its credits. In addition to this basic function, the reality show is also a promotional event for the feature film’s late October theatrical release, an opportunity for cheap but original programming during the summer months for ABC, and another means of extending the *High School Musical* brand, this time into prime-time network television. All of these aspects of *HSM: Get in the Picture* substantiate the need to examine corporate products through the lens of multiple media.

While the *High School Musical* franchise is not alone in raising these issues, it is a particularly instructive example of why our examination of contemporary media texts requires a larger view grounded in industry studies. *High School Musical*’s relationship with other key Disney products, including *Hannah Montana* and *Camp Rock*, are crucial to understanding the phenomenon. The surprising success of the concert film *Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert Tour* earlier this year, to the tune of \$65 million at the domestic box office, certainly eased any fears that a television property would not play in the film arena. Likewise, the marketing of *Camp Rock* as *HSM*’s franchise successor on the Disney Channel has already proven to be successful, with nearly 9 million viewers watching its premiere in June.

Disney's decision to gamble on the fate of one of its biggest properties is especially instructive for us as scholars since it pushes us to rethink some easily assumed logic about corporate franchises. What is the relationship between franchises and television? Are television franchises the same as their feature film brethren? What are the strengths and drawbacks of launching a franchise on television as opposed to in the theaters? What methods are available for us to study television franchises? And, perhaps most importantly, how are the economic imperatives for television affecting the development of franchises?

HSM3 is a clear indication of how corporations are changing to integrate multiple media from the onset of pre-production, sometimes years before a film actually hits the theaters or a show arrives on the air. Our challenge as scholars and as educators, then, is to figure out how to address this increasingly convergent world. As a franchise, *HSM3* is not about being just a film, but part of a larger, corporate text. It is a business model, carefully coordinated and planned by Disney, to take advantage of as many media outlets as possible. To fully understand it, then, requires us to look beyond that (possibly) dreaded two-hour experience in the theater and examine its many facets. For scholars, it poses a tough question: how do we examine *HSM3* if it is a process rather than a product? Indeed, how do we insert ourselves into that constantly changing picture?