

## Movie Trailers and the Creation of Meaning

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Culminating with *Time*'s announcement that 2006's "Person of the Year" was "You," much of the hoopla surrounding Web 2.0's multiple sharing sites, such as YouTube, iFilm, and MySpace, has focused on how they challenge corporate culture and logic, opening up cultural production, authorship, and distribution to seemingly anyone. Certainly, as Viacom's 2007 \$1 Billion-plus lawsuit against YouTube parent company Google made clear, many of these sites allow—or *encourage*, as the Viacom suit alleged—consumers to circumvent copyright law as the content-producing media corporations understand it. Henry Jenkins (2006) writes of the prospects for a Photoshop democracy to develop, when everyday citizens can cut, paste, and mash-up all manner of political speeches or material, then post them online for the world to see. In the wake of Joe Trippi's supposed revolutionizing of the American political system with the 2004 Howard Dean campaign, and with numerous journalists and academics alike pronouncing the arrival of Internet-driven politics, with the likes of moveon.org, Eminem's "Mosh" video, conservative bloggers questioning Dan Rather's document analysis skills, videos or photos from soldiers stationed in Iraq, and daily political parody on YouTube all entering the public's everyday talk of politics, much discussion of new video-sharing sites in particular has gravitated towards excited hopes for a pluralistic democratic venue, a true public sphere of, for, and by the people. Of course, some critics have proven less enthusiastic, noting YouTube's speed at removing clips that media corporations regard as violating copyright, pointing out the corporate ownership and uses of YouTube and MySpace (see Castells 2007), and rightfully observing that many Americans—much less citizens of the world at large—have no or little access to the Internet, or to digital editing software, meaning that the digital democracy is still a long way off (van Dijk 2005; O'Hara and Stevens 2006). Meanwhile, another key mode of discussing Web 2.0 has been to debate the legitimacy of cyber-communities, and to worry about e-predators and other

nefarious-yet-anonymous bad guys lurking in chatrooms for unsuspecting youth or posting “happy-slapping” videos.

Amidst these headline-garnering debates, though, some of the seemingly more mundane uses of video sharing sites have gone un(der)mentioned, such as the mass circulation of movie trailers. While home to Obama and Hillary Clinton parodies, clips from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and political discussion aplenty, YouTube and friends are also home to thousands of movie (and television and videogame) trailers, many with viewership in the millions. Especially well-suited to the small-screen, thirty-second-to-two-minute format that web video seemingly demands, trailers are populating the Net. They boast some of the largest numbers of views on YouTube and iFilm, they often attract thousands of MySpace members, they are part of the attraction of the hugely successful Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), and of course they spot the Internet globe in many official movie webpages, many of which exist only to screen a trailer. Meanwhile, trailers have proliferated in multiple other forms of new media: On Demand channels frequently offer multiple making-of, “first look” documentaries, or outright trailers, with cable providers Time Warner and Comcast both offering a dedicated (and free) On Demand channel for movie trailers; trailers seem to be taking up ever more space in television ad breaks; and movies now often offer previews and “sneak peaks” before even the official trailers. In this paper, I ask what the proliferation of trailers and previews means for film, for the nature and workings of the film text and film viewership, and for our understanding of video sharing sites’ “intervention” into cultural production and authorship.

Trailers have long played an important role in readying us for a text, and hence in constructing many of our initial interpretive frameworks, viewing strategies, and expectations, and while my ultimate interests lie in what the proliferation of trailers means or can tell us about film, film viewership, and new media, to address such interests, first we must examine exactly what trailers do and how they operate. Their power, I argue, is rising, but first we must detail the nature of this power to predetermine textual meaning, and to rob authorial power from directors and writers, instead transferring it to a marketing team. As such, this paper will delay discussion of the current moment in the history of trailers, but will ultimately argue that authorship as power is being dispersed in a Web 2.0 age. On one hand, YouTube and friends have at times become

beloved allies for media corporations, allowing them yet more power over their contracted artists, by shifting more authorial control from directors to marketers. However, lest we forget such sites' love of parody and user-created content, I will also examine the proliferation of fan trailers and of parodies, interrogating how these might create their own meanings and interpretive strategies, and hence shift authorial control to viewers.

### “A Cinema of (Coming) Attractions”

As Lisa Kernan states, trailers are “a unique form of narrative film exhibition, wherein promotional discourse and narrative pleasure are conjoined” (2004: 1); playing with Tom Gunning’s (1989) famous discussion of a cinema of attractions, she notes that trailers are “a cinema of (coming) attractions” (2). They are ads, but also a taste test of films to come, offering some of a film’s first pleasures, meanings, and ideas. Film fans have long enjoyed arriving early at the cinema in order to catch a glimpse of what movies to expect a month or season from now. Trailers have thus become an important part of the cinema-going experience and ritual, serving as the transitional, liminal device that navigates us from a loud theater with unruly teens, over-affectionate lovers, and the like, to a world of celluloid dreams and spectatorial, narrative, and vicarious pleasures. Trailers announce and introduce the film that follows them by announcing the wonders of the medium in general, and they network the joys of anticipation, like the opening orchestral hum before a live performance. All the while, they help to reinforce cinema-going as a repetitive event (74), promising that yet another voyage to the world of dreams awaits, and that though you are watching such-and-such a movie now, *next time* you can watch any one of these movies on offer. Moreover, as Kernan argues, trailers circulate discourses of genre and of the star system, often even moreso than do films themselves, promising the continued life of a beloved genre or star, extending the joys of cinema-going beyond the presentation at hand. Important both ritually and for movie and television production culture, trailers are enjoyable in and of themselves, creating pleasures of anticipation, expectation, and intrigue, while also reimbuing a love of the medium. And trailers even play a key role in brokering a peace agreement between film and other media, at once conditioning Thursday nights as television’s big night – given movie producers’ preference for advertising on the very cusp of the weekend cinema-going spike – and directing us towards films on television, on DVD, or in their

videogame versions, thereby offering a continuation of the pleasures of the screen across media platforms.

Trailers serve a vital indexical purpose, too, since the mediasphere is simply too large for any one of us to even dream of watching every film. Thus, trailers allow us to schedule our media consumption patterns. The five or six trailers before a film work as something akin to a menu for future consumption, with the raspberries and critical laughs emitted by audience members acting as signs of which films have already been consigned to the Do Not Watch list. Distributors and exhibitors often try to match trailers to the film, so that genre, style, or even stars are similar—a primitive version of Amazon’s “If you liked this book, you might also like...” suggestions. Trailers have also long populated television ad breaks, often popping up during a star’s appearance on a television show or televised film, or during generically similar programs, in order to propose yet more sites for consumption of the star or genre. Thus many of us know and judge much of the cinematic world through trailers alone, with every one of us having seen thousands of thirty-second to two-minute trailers for films that we will never watch.

In textual, interpretive terms, then, trailers fundamentally challenge much received knowledge on textuality and the viewing or reading process. Most textual critics consider interpretation, judgment, and understanding as processes that occur either *while* watching, or *after* watching. For instance, if we follow Stuart Hall’s (1980) Encoding/Decoding model, or the Open University’s circuit of culture (see DuGay 1997), and their multiple manifestations in much ethnographic research in media and cultural studies (see, for instance, Buckingham 1987, Hermes 1995, Morley 1980, Radway 1987), meaning should follow consumption of the text. But if we take the hypothetical case of a trailer that results in us resolving to never watch the film, clearly some form of interpretation, judgment, and understanding has occurred *before* the text. Or, rather, as the term “preview” encapsulates, we have a paradoxically confusing situation in which one can apparently view a text before viewing it. For example, we may have seen only trailers of *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo*, yet *known* that we would not like it, and been able to give long, involved explanations and justifications of precisely why we felt this way. How, if we have not seen the film?

Here, I turn to Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: The Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). Genette draws on a long line of research on intertextuality (see, for instance, Bakhtin 1981, Barthes 1990, Kristeva 1980) and influence (see, for instance, Bloom 1973, Eliot 1991) that examines how texts learn from past texts, building their meaning on a tradition or history of work, characterization, and ideas, but he focuses his own attention on how "paratexts," not full texts such as films or novels, also create a text before and from outside the text. Genette defines a paratext as any dependent or semi-dependent textual item that surrounds a text, working with design or unintentionally as an interpretive guide for that text. Speaking of books, he writes of prefaces, for instance, or of covers, as creating a set of meanings and offering a set of interpretive strategies. These then work as "airlocks" (408), he notes, helping acclimatize us to the text, so that the process of meaning-making actually begins at a text's perimeter, before we read or watch it. Paratexts create their own meanings, attaching these meanings to the text itself, but we are therefore left with only these meanings before (or if we avoid) the "actual" act of consumption, and with these meanings added to the mix of textually-proposed meanings after this act.

Moreover, though, since paratexts are interchangeable, and are separable from the text itself, different paratexts may offer different reading strategies: change the cover or preface, and you change the meanings, expectations, and anticipation that precede a text. Different trailers for the same film can thereby elicit different responses. Depending upon which trailer is shown to any given viewer, s/he might be disinterested in one version of the text, yet intrigued by the other ... even though the text remains the same. Beyond interest and intrigue, though, our viewer's interpretive apparatus and toolbox will differ depending upon which trailer s/he sees, and his or her expectations could vary wildly. As Kernan points out, trailers tend either to concentrate their efforts on delineating a film's genre, on celebrating and featuring its star(s), and/or on providing an environmental sampling (as exemplified in the trite opening common to many trailers: "In a world where..."). Certainly, genre can be established before viewing (see Mittell 2004), outside the realm of the text, and yet since genre is not just a classificatory tool, but also a set of rules for interpreting a text (see Altman 1999, Neale 2000), when trailers propose a genre, it may prove hard for an individual viewer to easily shrug off these rules (see Barker and Brooks 1998, Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranth 2001). Similarly, a star is his or her own generic signifier (think of the different filmic meanings and uses of, for instance, Clint Eastwood, Julia Roberts,

David Spade, or Susan Sarandon), thus also offering interpretive strategies and expectations. And environmental sampling, too, seeks to outline for potential viewers the sorts of things that might occur “in a world where....” As particularly strong paratexts, then, trailers may dictate how to read a text. In time, the text may respond, proposing its own generic rules, but as we have said, many trailer viewers may not even watch beyond the trailer, meaning that to these viewers, their understanding, judgment, and interpretation of the text has been set by the trailer.

Hence, trailers not only question how textuality works, but also how the author works. If the author, director, or writer is assumed to be s/he who creates a text, scripting its characters, themes, genre, and so forth, trailers may rob this figure of some of his or her creative powers. Admittedly, we would be foolish to regard any cinematic creation as coming from one singular creative figure, and even when film fans talk of creator figures in reverential terms, they nearly always recognize film to be a communal act of creation. When we speak of authors, we often speak of what Michel Foucault dubs the “author function”—not a real figure but a projection, “in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice” (1980: 150). This author function may prove its own powerful paratext at times, variously demanding or suggesting that we interpret a film in set ways, perhaps even in contravention to those proposed by trailers. However, at the same time, the trailer’s power to create an initial interpretive framework for a film, sometimes as much as a year before the text is delivered to its audience, means that a considerable component of textual creation comes neither from the author figure nor the author function, but from the studio’s hired marketing staff and the editors who compose the trailer. These editors must work with footage filmed by the film’s creative personnel, so they do not have *carte blanche*, but as the following case of *The Sweet Hereafter* illustrates, editing allows one remarkable freedom of creation.

#### Trailers and Their Afterlives: *The Sweet Hereafter*

*The Sweet Hereafter* was released in 1997, directed by Canadian director Atom Egoyan. Egoyan was a well-known name in Canada due to his prior films, including *Exotica* (1994), *Calendar* (1993), and *The Adjuster* (1991), but had no popular caché or recognition whatsoever in

America. Based on Russell Banks's novel of the same title, it is a stunning and grueling film that examines a small mountain town's grief following a horrific school bus accident that kills all but one of the town's youth. Ian Holm stars as a lawyer come to town in the aftermath, trying to find someone to blame, while he struggles with his own feelings of guilt inspired by occasional calls from his drug-addicted daughter who he is powerless to help. At once a film about parenthood, protection, grief, loss, and childhood, it garnered widespread critical acclaim, including the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes, an Independent Spirit award, and Best Direction and Best Adapted Screenplay nominations at the 1998 Oscars. However, while bringing Egoyan one of his largest box office outings, with a little over \$3 M. grossed, it failed to register with the American public more widely. Inevitably, the question of why it failed produces many possible answers: it may have been too bleak, too slow, too dark (with an additional storyline following an incestuous relationship between the remaining youth and her father), "too Canadian," released on too few screens, not star-studded enough, or so forth. One possible answer that I want to advance, though, is that the American trailer sold a different film with a different genre, one that was formulaic and uninteresting. Especially when compared to the Canadian trailer, the American trailer hijacked and augmented the film, confusingly offering audiences a very different product than the one they would actually have received should they watch the film.

The American trailer includes voiceover in typical Hollywood style, offered by one of its typical voice talents. As images from the film shoot by, with interspersed dialogue, the announcer reads:

In town where no one is a stranger, in a place where everyone feels like family, something has happened that will change their lives forever. Now, one man must find the truth. But who can you trust when everyone has a secret? Who can you blame when no one is innocent?

At no point do we see the bus veer off the road and crash, nor do we see the obvious aftermath; rather, we are left with oblique references to something awful that has happened, likely involving children, and the viewer's attention is pointed towards one man's quest for "the truth." Ian Holm's Mitchell appears to be one part lawyer, one part detective, and in the absence of the knowledge of exactly what sort of accident or incident took place, one is left to assume a murder

of some sort. The trailer poses a lone investigator stuck in a town in which everyone “has a secret,” yet “no one is innocent,” hence implying widespread complicity in whatever has happened. Numerous snippets of dialogue suggest a cover-up, with the trailer giving particular prominence, through muting all background sound when spoken, to Mitchell’s declaration that “As far as I’m concerned, there is no such thing as an accident.” This is *The Wicker Man* with snow, or, given the trailer’s book-ending with Sarah Polley’s Nicole reading the Pied Piper of Hamelin fairytale, we might assume a runaway *Children of the Corn* scenario. Certainly, when showing the trailer to a class of 250 undergraduates at University of California, Berkeley, none of whom had watched the film, the clear consensus amongst the students was that the town as a whole had committed a ritualistic murder. Or, taking their cue from the final interior shot of Nicole approaching a window at night, only for a blinding light to be emitted from outside, some students felt that supernatural, even alien causes might lie behind the “accident.”

The trailer slots Mitchell into a long tradition of American detectives trying to “cut through the crap,” vaguely referencing their forerunner of the Western hero, nobly taking on the bad guys and the environment all by himself. Noir with blanc, if you will, following in *Fargo*’s footsteps, but without the humor. The eeriness of the music and set-up suggest a thriller, complete with the foreboding threat to Mitchell, as made explicit by a scene in which Bruce Greenwood’s Billy threateningly demands that he stop asking questions. The film’s title suggests death has occurred, but also suggests a continuing threat of more death, with a promise from Nicole that she will not lie the lone help, and yet another nod to a seemingly formulaic thriller, in which the nice young girl helps the tired old detective. The trailer announces the various awards won by the film, but viewers are left to suppose that its artful camerawork—of which we see plenty in the trailer—was largely responsible, or Holm’s performance, or the gimmick of moving this old Hollywood formula into the snow, but very else about the film seems original or award-worthy. Without much apparent originality, and without star power or sex appeal, it promised to fall too easily into the no man’s land between art-house and multiplex viewing cultures.

As should be clear, though, the film that the American trailer offered hardly resembles the actual film. For a closer approximation, we must turn to the Canadian trailer, which while using many of the same shots and dialogue, is markedly different in tone, detail, and hence generic delivery.

Eschewing the standard Hollywood “In a world where...” voiceover style, the Canadian trailer uses voiceover only at the end to announce the film’s director and title, and instead uses title cards, reading, “Sometimes the past can’t be forgotten. Sometimes justice can’t be found. And sometimes the truth is just the beginning.” Importantly, since Egoyan was a known quantity to Canadians, and known for dark, peculiar characters and plots (*Exotica*, for instance, followed a taxman’s obsession with a stripper who once babysat for his child, who was abducted and killed), the trailer had the luxury of not needing to place this ungeneric, original director’s work into a generic box, as did its American counterpart: instead, then, this is advertised as “an Atom Egoyan film,” a quantity that would have meaning to its Canadian audience. Moreover, the Canadian trailer uses considerably more shots of the school bus, at first full of children, and later hauntingly empty and destroyed. The trailer also adds the sound of children screaming in the background to one shot, and it adds shots of the bus cracking through the ice, and of it driving off the roadside, followed by a fade to white. Thus, whereas American audiences were being encouraged to imagine an eerie detective thriller, Canadian audiences were offered the shock of the actual accident from early on. I distinctly remember audience members gasping in horror during many of the trailers’ showings in 1997 in Vancouver. Billy’s reaction shot, as the father of two children who was riding behind the bus when it crashes, though used in the American trailer, now gives the audience an immediate point of identification, and a set of (parents’) eyes through which they can watch the incident. With this shot added, with the intertextual knowledge of Egoyan’s past work alluded to, and with the title cards focusing on the absence of meaning and announcing that “sometimes the truth is just the beginning” instead of promising the truth, audiences could now immediately understand Mitchell’s mission as futile, Billy’s act of threatening Mitchell as giving voice to desperate anger and grief, and the entire film as being about dealing with loss, not discovery. Meanwhile, too, the title now gains a grim quality—this is anything but “sweet”—and the Pied Piper tale becomes quite clearly about loss, childhood, and parenthood, not about cultish killings or alien abductions. The trailer speaks to us in a markedly different tone, therefore, capturing the spirit and genre(lessness) of the film with considerably more accuracy.

Here, then, we have a stark example of how two different trailers can offer two different films. Interestingly, too, though, if one watches *both* trailers, the genre-refusing nature of the film

becomes all the more impressive, precisely because the American trailer shows the genres and formulas that Egoyan's film frustrates: this is clearly *not* a noir detective film where the detective will get his man, and it is clearly *not* a puzzle movie with an answer at the end. The American trailer, as such, shows the backdrop to the film, while the Canadian one shows the development and foreground. Such a reading, though, is left mostly for the Egoyan or *Sweet Hereafter* enthusiast watching both trailers on the DVD; at the time of release, with YouTube and IFilm several years away from hitting the Internet, and barring a jet-setting lifestyle, North American viewers would have been left with only one of the two trailers. Initially, viewers would have made a decision to see the film or not based on their reactions to the trailer they saw, and perhaps based on discussions with others who had seen the trailer. Without Egoyan's past films serving as active intertexts screaming out that the director's films aren't usually so simple, American viewers would likely make this judgment of whether to see or not with faulty "advice." If a trailer is a window into a movie, windows point in different directions, giving us different angles of vision, some refracting or otherwise distorting. And lest my above account suggest that the Canadian trailer encapsulated the film perfectly, we could certainly envision another trailer that would accurately encapsulate elements of the film, yet focus on different themes; for instance, the incestuous relationship between Nicole and her father might feature more prominently, likewise pointing to a film about parenthood, childhood, damage, and loss, but now highlighting the threatening, tenuous nature of the parent-child relationship. While I hesitate to write in hypotheticals, were viewers to watch this imaginary third trailer, they might watch the film with such themes more firmly in mind, yet again shifting their expectations and changing the nature of the text that they experience. Therefore, while Egoyan directed the film, the subtle or stark differences in trailer editing give the studio significant powers of authorship that in some cases supercede his own, and in all cases prove constitutive of the frames with which viewers will watch the film.

#### Ten Years Later: Trailers in 2007

Trailers have rarely warranted much attention from film studies critics, except as yet more advertising. But Hollywood takes them very seriously, and as the above example shows, so they should. Janet Wasko quotes DreamWorks's head of creative advertising David Sameth as saying

of trailers that “We’ll spend five months to a year obsessing about them, every single cut and every single moment we use” (2003: 198). His comments here echo a rare account of trailers, from John Ellis, who writes of trailers as offering a “narrative image,” one in which everything can be assumed to be there for a reason, and “can be assumed to be calculated. Hence everything tends to be pulled into the process of meaning” (1993: 54). If we consider that most films make approximately a third of their box office in their opening week (Acland 2003), and since high opening week box office figures then play a decisive role in bringing in audiences for the rest of a film’s run, we cannot underestimate the importance of a good trailer to the film industry. If a film triumphs in its opening week, a good trailer has probably played a significant role in this victory. Thus, as Kernan notes, studios commonly spend large sums of money making the trailer, even hiring multiple agencies to compete with each other for the best trailer (2004: 53), and then even larger sums of money are spent buying advertising space to play such trailers. In the early 2000s, studios spent \$28 M. on average per film on marketing, with blockbusters warranting considerably more, and with much of this money going to ad space (Wasko 2003: 164).

The industry, of course, cares primarily about bums in seats, but for our own purposes as analysts, we should also underscore the importance of trailers for telling us about the bums *not* in seats. Popular culture is based not solely on careful close readings of texts, but of whatever sort of readings occur, of whatever level of closeness. If a film has a reputation for being salacious, or charming, or banal, whether it is or is not becomes somewhat immaterial if popular culture dictates this to be the reading that matters. In the field of textual studies and critical theory, much has been written of “misinterpretations,” “overinterpretations,” or simply poor reading (see Eco 1992; Sontag 2001), and of how to avoid these, but popular culture is full of misreadings, and as analysts we must attend to these. The meanings that trailers create play a constitutive role in how popular culture regards the texts that trailers advertise, precisely because for every person who has watched any given text, there are likely as many if not many more who have watched a trailer or preview of it and yet not the thing itself. To popular culture, then, and hence to film studies’ subsequent analyses of what role a text plays in popular culture, the trailer and its editor’s or producer’s meaning-making may prove more important than the meaning-making going on in the film itself.

If trailers have such powers over their texts, though, what are we to make of the recent rise of the trailer? On March 25, 2007, my cable package's Movie Trailers On Demand channel boasted 22 trailers for coming attractions, seven for movies currently in theatres, and multiple extras.

Turning to the Internet, MySpace's homepage featured an ad for Mike Binder's *Reign Over Me*, with a prominently featured link to Binder's page, where one could watch trailers for this and other Binder films. As of 8 p.m., his films had enjoyed 173,196 plays, with 43,315 plays on that day (showing the success of the MySpace homepage ad) and 21,928 plays of the *Reign Over Me* trailer. But MySpace is often small potatoes when compared to YouTube or iFilm. Amassing viewer play numbers is a sloppy science, since most clips get posted multiple times, since they do not tell us how many actual people have watched the clips, and since—as my students who have interned at media companies tell me—most corporations artificially inflate these numbers by requiring interns and others to keep “watching” them. Nevertheless, by March 25, on YouTube, the *Spider-Man 3* trailer had received approximately 4 M. views, *300* had garnered similar numbers, *Rocky Balboa* had amassed 2.5 M. views, *Transformers* 1.6 M. views, artsy *Babel* 285,000 views, and even pre-Internet classics such as *The Godfather* or *The Sound of Music* had cleared 150,000 and 50,000 views respectively.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, some of the more famous viral videos had similar numbers to the popular trailers, with “Little Superstar” boasting approximately 5 M. views, and the “Numa Numa” video attracting 4 M. views. And though YouTube seems to enjoy all the press, iFilm's *Spider-Man 3* trailer had attracted a massive 20.6 M. views, and many of its trailers enjoyed viewership in the millions. Neither IMDB nor the *New York Times* release viewer figures, but both also prove easy locations to access trailers.

Trailers and previews, as such, are often key and popular offerings in video sharing sites, regularly topping Most Popular lists, moved to the front or to flashy margins by corporate interests or advertising, and voraciously consumed by viewers. Where trailers were once limited to the space before movies (whether in a cinema or on a VHS tape), in television ad breaks, or very occasionally as television making-of specials, trailers can now be found in various other locations, as Hollywood has used new media to circulate ads for its shows far and wide. In such

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<sup>1</sup> Television shows too had grabbed their fair share of views, as *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*'s various pre-season previews had been watched over 400,000 times, *24*'s Season 6 previews claimed 304,000 views, and even video game previews had brought in the viewers, as Rockstar's *Bully*'s various previews had attracted approximately three million views. Thus, while I write here of movie trailers, previews for all sorts of media are on the rise.

an environment, it stands to reason that producers and marketers are gaining considerably more control over the very meanings of a text. Of course, studios have long held multiple powers over a film's creation, from veto power on hiring, to final cut privileges, control over the budget, and so forth (see Wasko 2003, for instance), and thus trailers by no means give studios a new power per se. Nevertheless, they do allow another front for the practice of this power, and a wonderfully situated front at that, since trailers occupy the space between film and audience. As was illustrated above with *The Sweet Hereafter*, a trailer's editor *creates* a film for many potential viewers, dictating its genre, style, and tone, and producing the only part of the text that many "viewers" will ever see. When trailers were limited to a few minutes before movies, or a few television ads, their effect may have been more muted, but today's proliferation of trailers means that most of us watch each trailer multiple times, often unable to escape them even if we wanted to. Hence, their constructions of meaning, suggested modes of viewing, and tailored calls to specific viewing audiences are repeated incessantly, and are constantly available for repetitive viewing. With each viewing, the director's text potentially dissolves yet a little more, though – the marketing team's text replacing it.

#### Mash-ups, Parodies, and Fan Trailers

If the directors' authorial powers to create the very entrance to their films are challenged by their distributors' marketing teams, so too do Web 2.0 sites allow fans and everyday viewers to create their own trailers and hence entrypoints. In the Fall of 2005, one of the hottest viral videos making the Internet rounds was a trailer for *The Shining*.<sup>2</sup> The trailer had been produced in a competition by a staffer at video production and editing company PS260, where the goal was to use existing footage from a famous film to create a trailer that augmented that film's genre. As such, *The Shining* became a "feel-good" father-son bonding film, simply called *Shining*. The newly minted voiceover began by introducing us to Jack Torrence, "a writer looking for inspiration," and Danny, "a kid looking for a dad," before explaining that while "Jack just can't finish his book," he's about to learn that "sometimes, what we need most is just around the corner." At this point, Paul Gabriel's upbeat "Salsbury Hill" cues, as we're treated to a montage of seemingly all the loving family shots from the film, and snippets of dialogue such as "I'm

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfout\\_rgPSA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfout_rgPSA)

your new foster father” and “I’d do anything for you.” While the pleasures and humor involved in watching this trailer depend upon being aware of how inaccurately it advertises Sydney Lumet’s film, and while it was likely to have changed an audience member’s understanding of the film as such, it once more illustrates the remarkable speed and distance with which trailers can travel online (I received links to the clip in the same day from Sydney, Australia and Vancouver, Canada), the potential pleasures that can be gained from watching a trailer alone, and a trailer’s ability to play with and radically augment a film’s genre. But it also showed how editing is now an open sport, not the sole provenance of Fox, Paramount, Universal, and friends. The trailer were released long after their respective films, so here their director lost little authorial power, but it signifies how easily parodies, mash-ups, and fan trailers may assert authorial powers at an earlier stage.

On the same day that I was counting views of trailers online, I was fascinated to see close to 600,000 views counted for a fan-made trailer for the third installment of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. However, such trailers are increasingly common, having rocketed to popularity following the release of several fan-made trailers for the *Star Wars* prequels. One of the latter, for instance, culled scenes from the stars’ previous work, of a sinister looking shrouded figure in *Elizabeth*, of warriors charging down a hill in *Braveheart* (with lightsabers added digitally), and scenes from the original trilogy.<sup>3</sup> Fan-made trailers for ongoing franchises prove important battlegrounds wherein fans can make clear exactly which meanings in a series matter to them, and where they can crystallize their expectations for the next outing in visual form. Certainly, the army of lightsaber carrying warriors in the fan-made *Star Wars* prequel trailers garnered considerable appreciative comments amongst the fan community, thereby sending a loud and clear message to anyone in Lucasfilm who might have been charting online chatter that a Jedi army was expected and desired. Increasingly, television producers are admitting to lurking on fan discussion forums to gauge ideas, characters, and plot developments by fan reactions, with the likes of Joss Whedon, Carleton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, Aaron Sorkin, Rob Thomas, and multiple others all frequent lurkers; fan-made trailers and posted reactions offer a similar R&D site for film directors, whereby they can see what fans are expecting from the next chapter of a favorite story, and what sort of visuals have grabbed them to date. And while acting as research

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN-5n6rBcHM>

for directors, these fan-made trailers can occasionally act as proclamations and lists of expectations for fans, further conditioning expectations of their viewers too, and thus they are visually expressive ways of contributing one's own voice to the creative process.

## Conclusion

Trailers are the advance guard of a film, marching ahead of it into the territory of popular culture. Frequently, then, by the time the actual film arrives on the scene, audiences are already interacting with the film's meaning and aesthetics, power and "effects," identifying with or against characters, intrigued or bored by plotlines and themes, and so forth. Trailers do not create the film in its entirety for all viewers, but they do create it in entirety for many would-be viewers, and they establish interpretive frames that might limit and focus many audience members' subsequent consumption of "the film itself." Given these powers, now that trailers are multiplying, yet more of the mediasphere is being fashioned by trailers, hence forcing us to reevaluate concepts such as creation, ownership, and authorship. On one hand, through fan-made trailers, fans can put their own imprint on the production process, creating their own frameworks for interpretation and evaluation of the subsequent film. If one criticism of the "active audience" approach to media consumption was that such a viewing position came after the fact as a purely reactive "tactic" of what Michel de Certeau (1984) dubbed "making do,"<sup>4</sup> fan-made trailers allow for "poaching" (see Jenkins 1992) *before* the film arrives. On the other hand, though, the mediasphere is significantly more populated with official trailers than it is with fan-made alternatives, and as I have shown, trailers raise a studio's marketing team up to the level of virtual co-creator, if not of "the film itself," at least of its entry and initial presence into popular culture. Thus, over-enthusiastic proclamations of "You" being the powerful entity of the day, and of the death of corporate agency in the field of cultural production fail to recognize how the high trade in trailers over MySpace, YouTube, iFilm, and friends is putting ever more power into studios' hands to repurpose, or, rather, *pre-purpose*, a film prior to release. Final cut is *au fait*, as marketing allows producers plenty of (p)re-creative abilities.

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<sup>4</sup> For a particularly prominent attack on "active audience" theory, see Seaman 1992.

Meanwhile, though, trailers are not alone in preceding films; indeed, in a convergent media culture in which synergy and promotional vortexes can surround even the smallest of films, films may now be preceded by video games, toy lines, Happy Meals and other food products, and promotional campaigns that stretch through television, cinema lobbies, bus stops, subway cars and buses, roadside billboards, newspapers and magazines, and any unexpected location of guerrilla marketing. Hence, in actuality trailers will work alongside (in the case of coordinated campaigns) and/or in combat with (in the case of contested releases) other paratexts, hype, and synergy. As they do, the powers of creation continue to disperse, and authorial control is left open for strategic or tactical raids by various forces from the studio to the fan. The very term “trailer” is of course an odd hold-over from when trailers followed films, but in today’s media environment, movies are trailing the trailers in months not minutes, slowly plodding forth while meanings, interpretations, evaluations, and all manner of audience and industry chatter are already on the scene and underway.

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This depends entirely on who is releasing the movie. For example, I personally have been involved closely with a studio in the creation of all marketing materials for a movie of mine, and indeed most directors' contracts will specify a certain lev...Â For example, I personally have been involved closely with a studio in the creation of all marketing materials for a movie of mine, and indeed most directors' contracts will specify a certain level of creative consultation in these kind of things. But other studios or distributors might push the filmmakers to one side and leave them totally in the dark. Certainly I know of this happening to other directors.Â In most cases, at least for studio films, that means the studio producing and/or distributing the film. The Creation of Meaning (Italian: La creazione di significato) is a 2014 experimental film directed by Simone Rapisarda Casanova. An elderly shepherd, Pacifico Pieruccioni, is forced by the economic crisis to give up his house and land in the Italian mountains, where his parents had fought in the Resistance against the German Army during World War II. Oddly enough, the prospective buyer is a young German. The two of them start a conversation about history and present-day Italy. Create Free Account. You are currently offline. Some features of the site may not work correctly. Corpus ID: 11916665. Movie Trailers and the Creation of Meaning. @inproceedings{Gray2007MovieTA, title={Movie Trailers and the Creation of Meaning}, author={Jonathan Gray}, year={2007} }. Jonathan Gray. Published 2007. Culminating with Time's announcement that 2006's " Person of the Year " was " You, " much of the hoopla surrounding Web 2.0's multiple sharing sites, such as YouTube, iFilm, and MySpace, has focused on how they challenge corporate culture and logic