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Preface

On the Intimacy of Para/texts

At some point over the past several years, I began using "(para)textual" rather than "textual and paratextual analysis" as a sort of shorthand to describe my own analytical approach to how fan and industry relations play out across and between a wide array of media texts, social media platforms, news stories, promotional materials, and fan texts and discourse. This was less an attempt to avoid clunky prose than to visualize and convey what I perceive to be a growing intimacy between text and paratext in our contemporary media landscape. In retrospect, though, perhaps para/text is more appropriate. Not only does the slash visually evoke the tradition of tagging the central relationship explored within a given fanfiction story (e.g. Kirk/Spock), it also suggests the centrality of audiences and their individualized interpretive practices to any broader understanding about how paratexts function. Much as the slash in fanfiction is utilized to convey the act of bringing two characters into contact, audiences are the ones that ultimately put paratexts and texts into meaningful cognitive conversation. If the parenthetical seems to imply a hierarchical relationship between text and paratext, then the slash conveys a distinct dynamic, an evolving relationship, or a unit that demands further exploration.

A decade after the publication of Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, which was central in updating and porting paratextual theory from its roots in literary analysis into a contemporary media landscape, the term "paratext" still carries some of the contextual trappings of its initial use in Gèrard Genette's 1987 book *Seuils* (translated into English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* in 1997). This is an issue that Gray himself recently took up in a conversation with Robert Brookey when prefacing their 2017 special issue on paratexts for *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. As Gray notes, "The 'para' is deceptive because it might suggest it's outside the text when, in fact, I think paratexts are intrinsic parts of the text as social and cultural unit" (102). This special issue of *Cinephile* powerfully affirms this view, reflecting on the myriad and multifaceted ways that paratexts mediate relationships between authors, texts, and audiences, particularly within a digital ecosystem primed to para/textual cross-pollination. In doing so, the articles that follow productively engage and expand on foundational concerns within paratextual studies, including work addressing how authorial and promotional paratexts function as a form of reputation management or performance of taste, articles that contemplate the distinct functionality of entryway paratexts (ranging from movie trailers to opening credits sequences), and others that take up longstanding concerns around fan-produced paratexts as both a form of digital labor and a site of textual negotiation.

It is precisely because of the synergistic slippage between para/texts and their growing centrality to the social and cultural experience of media objects that it is vital we more actively theorize the contextual and experiential dimensions of paratexts for audiences. This special issue's emphasis on the relationships between audiences and paratexts is an essential step in this process, but there is still an abundance of work to be done, particularly considering the lack of comparative analyses of paratexts within the same general category. For example, how does the aura surrounding an

authorial paratext shift if we examine a long-running creator podcast, a DVD director's commentary, a magazine interview, or a Twitter feed? How do the aural, textual, or multimodal dimensions of these transmissions impact our experience of this authorial address, or the sense of intimacy or interpretive influence that they are designed to produce? How are they temporally situated? Do they suggest a presumed or optimal window of consumption connected to the text, or how might their repeated consumption week in and out increase their impact? While a wide array of work continues to be done on how authorial paratexts strive to shore up a creator's reputation or interpretive power, we know considerably less about why audiences seek them out or how and when they choose to (dis) engage them. There has also been limited study of how paratexts (and authorial paratexts in particular) are wielded by audiences within broader intra-fannish debates and disputes.

Alternately, we might consider if there is a palpable difference between experiencing an anticipated movie trailer at a panel at Comic-Con before it is widely released, or seeing the same trailer in a movie theater before a film or on your phone walking down the street. While the narrative or promotional work this paratext is seeking to perform might be similar in many cases, the experiential dimension of the paratextual encounter is radically different. It is likewise problematic to flatten "fan-produced paratexts" as a conceptual category. Any given piece of fan art (even if we imagine two examples that are identical in content and design) might serve a radically different paratextual function depending on if it is circulating within an insular fan community as part of an annual fandom challenge, or if it is being spread via a media corporation's social media channels as a part of a fan contest and related marketing campaign that is bound by particular creative strictures.

In other words, now that we have thankfully moved past the need to justify analyzing paratexts as producers of meanings, textual mediators, and as objects of study in their own right, we would be remiss to not embark on more audience-centered research that explores the deeply contextual and experiential dimensions of paratexts. If para/text implies a symbiotic relationship between text and paratext, it also might suggest a conceptual intimacy for consumers, who routinely use their knowledge of one to inform their consumption of and navigate their affective relationship with the other. Audience-centered paratextual studies would afford an unprecedented opportunity to better map and theorize personalized media flows, but with this call for more ethnographic work, it is important to acknowledge that it is precisely because paratextual networks are highly individualized, and media consumers' experience of paratexts is often ephemeral, that these studies pose unique challenges. Still, they will be essential to better understanding not just how intrinsic paratexts are to the social and cultural dimensions of media texts, but also the ways in which that / between para and text might become a politically charged space. Much as media fans have historically used that slash, in part, to indicate queer couplings that simultaneously exist outside of the representational desires or norms of mainstream media production and nonetheless are perceived to be subtextually present, para/texts represent a site of perpetual negotiation between industry, text, and audience in which audiences ultimately determine which elements to take in, and the relative weight they are given. If the slash is an indicator of intimacy, it is also a sign of the power of that intimacy, and conflicting desires on the part of media industries, creators, and audiences to control it.

Works Cited

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