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Talking Trailers: Promotional Materials, and the Value of the Paratextual Turn

In the last decade, the term ‘paratext’ has become increasingly popular and dominant in studies of promotional materials, applied to study a range of different media forms. Genette’s term appears in *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Kernan 2004), before being developed in *Show Sold Separately* (Gray 2010) and a special issue of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (Brookey and Gray 2017). The latter issue states that ‘we know that paratexts walk amongst us’ and that paratextual analysis has advanced ‘a wide and impressive range of academic debates’ (ibid, 101), but there has been little discussion about the use value of such a term for the broader work that exists around the production and reception of promotional materials (see, for example, Hesford and Johnston 2015; Johnston 2019). What follows is a discussion between three scholars whose work spans different aspects of promotional materials, to think through the advantages and limitations of the paratextual turn and the future of this field.

Keith M. Johnston: The term ‘paratext’ has clearly gained academic purchase in the last decade - although it has little crossover into wider cultural debates - but what value do you think that term has in studies of trailers or promotional materials more generally?

Erin Pearson: On the one hand, I think it’s important to say that it’s one of the forefront theories

that privileges these media forms. Gray’s work certainly shifted my thinking away from trailers and posters being the ‘wrapping’ or the ‘cultural trash’ that surrounded film texts, towards thinking about the meaning-making processes that surround and converge with them. But then as I began my own work, I found it a little bit constraining just to think of these texts as paratexts. If you’re going to analyze the trailer specifically as your primary object and you’re trying to think through the history, the practices, the contexts – whether that’s advertising, marketing history, industry – paratextual theory doesn’t really encapsulate that and it certainly doesn’t lead to the best analysis. You have to go to other places for that.

Jesse Balzer: There’s something limiting about the term. It might make sense when you’re studying reception and want to think about how audiences engage with media, but you also lose quite a bit, particularly if you’re thinking beyond reception and textual hierarchy to, say, labor and industry. Gray’s book sees the paratext as one of many entry points to a larger nexus, but one of the things I keep trying to think about is all the times that you turn down a paratext, when you watch the trailer for the movie and then decide not to watch it. This is still a very meaningful encounter with that text – and one that I think stands on its own, where the concept of paratext doesn’t really open up quite as much in terms of understanding.

Keith: Watching the trailer – the act of viewing the trailer as a cultural object – is interesting in itself, without it needing to be a paratext for something else. I think the trailer for the film you never go and see, the trailer for the film that is no longer available to view in any archive, those are experiences that paratext analysis seems to overlook. I know that Jonathan [Gray] has revised this idea in later work, but despite that, I think the paratextual approach inevitably sets up a hierarchical relationship between promotional elements and the film, television show, video game, or whatever.

Erin: My question is: Is it entirely possible that a trailer, for instance, can be a paratext as well as being a primary object? It just depends on the lens that you're looking through. So, if you're interested in meaning making, or representation, and your focus is an original film object then perhaps paratext is the term for you. But it can also be something greater than that, not just an add on or doorway to another text.

Keith: And for researchers like ourselves who look to study things in different ways – we're not just interested in what does this trailer or this poster tell us about this film, we're interested in the creative labor behind it, the historical context, or the different ways in which you can view and understand what these materials do. What is interesting to me, I guess, is why this term gained purchase over, say, 'epiphenomena' (Heath 1976), or 'consumable identity' (Klinger 1989)?

Jesse: I think it's partially because the term fits in with a more traditional trajectory in film studies and comparative literature. It fits in very well with the kind of textual focus of that field in its most conservative or old-school traditions.

Erin: Completely. The cynic in me thinks that the literature background lends it a certain weight, whereas 'consumable identity' does point towards those aspects of the film industry that perhaps traditional film studies hasn't always engaged with so much – notably, ideas around selling. My second feeling is that it is a really handy term, an umbrella term to encapsulate all of those media forms that we haven't been able to otherwise quite fit within film studies, so it seems quite convenient in that aspect. And it's not actually until you start to work with it a bit and find its limitations that you realize it's perhaps not the best term.

Keith: Given the term has achieved this status, how do you adopt, use or challenge that term in your own work? I feel like I've been addressing it in different ways across different articles over the last few years – sometimes deliberately sidestepping it because it doesn't help me engage with the history (Johnston 2018; Johnston 2019), sometimes addressing it more directly and taking issue with its limitations (Hesford and Johnston 2015).

Jesse: Most of the time I end up side-stepping it because most of my research is about the labor and the history and archival work, so I kind of dance around it very gently. I find that a lot of the stuff that needs to be done around histories of trailers or histories of promotion needs to be done in terms of understanding the people who are working on it and the history of it. Doing 'readings' of the trailers can be relatively simple compared to that – because there's not a lot done around the history of trailers, or a history of that labor. That can be supplemented with paratextual analysis, but that's not the focus for me.

Erin: It was my window into this work, but when I started working with those materials a bit more I realized I was just going to end up saying the same thing over and over again – I'm just going to end up doing textual analysis of these forms and not really thinking through them in any great depth. Because my own work analyzes space and spatial theory in terms of film culture, I found I have less use for a paratextual approach. I don't actually tend to engage as much with primary film objects at all, so I'm not particularly interested in the way that these frame specific films. It just became unworkable.

Keith: Obviously, my early work combined textual analysis of trailers with historical and archival work (Johnston 2009). I never felt that I wanted to talk about the fact that some scenes are in the trailer, but not in the film, or to make that hierarchical connection so concrete. Even given its use in Lisa's book (Kernan 2004) – which is ultimately more interested in rhetoric than paratexts – and then Jonathan's work (Gray 2010), I never felt we needed that term to make sense of the trailer, or other materials. However, the term's popularity clearly proved me wrong!

What's also interesting to me is that, although it isn't the term that would be used, most media commentary on trailers has fallen into that paratextual model of 'this trailer reveals something about this forthcoming film / television show / video

game'. So my uncertainty about the academic value of paratextual analysis has to be balanced against that being a dominant cultural discourse.

Erin: It goes back to the point that if your analysis is around the audience reception of particular films or trailers then it's a salient point to bring up paratextuality. If that's the way that people are talking about these texts, and the way that they are using them, then it would be very difficult for the reception studies researcher to avoid using that framework. But, if you're more interested in the way that a text persuades and how its particular persuasive dynamics have developed over time, then you're going to need a much deeper and interdisciplinary analysis of those forms.

Keith: So do we need a better – or at least different – term for this sub-discipline of film or media studies?

Erin: I feel really strongly that forming links with industry would help us develop those theories: what terms are they using? What is the rationale behind those? I worked with an AdTech company that was cutting six-second trailers and I was interested in why they had developed that form, how they had developed it and what they called it. They didn't call them six-second trailers, they called them bumper ads (Campbell and Pearson 2018). And they were equally fascinated by the textual perspective that researchers could bring – the ability to read images for meaning, to interpret images for meaning, are qualitative skills that these firms don't necessarily have. So developing those stronger links might help flesh out something that could be called trailer studies or promotional studies broadly, that has a number of branches under it.

Jesse: That's true in my work as well. When I go to the Clio Entertainment Awards or the Golden Trailers and you look for the industry terms that they're using, at the Clio Entertainments, they don't always have an award just for trailers. They have categories like 'Theatrical AV', and awards for Social Media Partnerships and Influencer Kits and Packaging. The focus is much broader than that. In that same way, for us researchers I think something broader like 'promotional media studies' or 'promotional studies', as opposed to 'trailers studies' would capture all of that other stuff that's being produced, often by the same people.

Keith: I like those names – and there is a need to pull these threads together. I've long been an advocate of a trailer studies approach, the more I think about where the trailer sits within industry and academia, I think ignoring the very potent intertextual relationship that trailers have with posters and press kits and six second ads – we are missing a trick in not connecting that work up more. And paratexts has not necessarily offered us a way to do that work, either.

Erin: That's a much bigger project. There absolutely needs to be trailer studies to think through all of the dynamics and everything that makes up a trailer historically and now. But then we could also be looking at online video ads, we could be looking at six second trailers, GIFs, memes, posters, cinemagraphs, we could be looking at all of those things at the same time. We could also reach out more and involve people who research advertising and marketing perspective – a huge number of academics work in those fields that we don't currently align ourselves with.

Keith: Is there an issue of academic silo-ing here, then? Obviously there is a small cohort of people who study trailers and promotional materials within the arts and humanities, but this field still struggles to be part of the mainstream of research and teaching.

Jesse: There is a funny kind of taste culture in academia in terms of what objects you study, and what has prestige. I sometimes tell people what I study, and they will say 'Is there really enough to write a dissertation on that? Trailers are only two minutes long'. And a minute or two later, if I'm any good at describing my research, they'll be fascinated by the idea of studying it, and will actually have a lot to say about it. So, at least on the surface of things, it's maybe some kind of institutional taste cultures that are there to say what's worth studying and what's not. And our job is to convince people that that's not true!

Erin: I think the hiring culture of universities has a lot to do with it. If you think about the ways that we pitch and get funding for certain PhD projects – in that there has to be a certain interest from particular researchers, or a department etc. – and the ways that we achieve full time tenured positions, it makes sense that our departments can become very secular. I think it's a deeply embedded problem that expresses itself within film studies through precisely these kinds of discussions.

Keith: You're right that there's a taste issue here, which suggests the trailer might still be a 'bad object' of study – is that still intrinsically linked to its dual nature as a creative object that has a specific business objective?

Jesse: There is definitely that connotation of being a bad research object. I think the trailer in particular is still treated as subsidiary, in service of something else in that hierarchy of objects we study. Interestingly, that often mirrors the industry situation as well: many speeches at the Clio Entertainments, for example, will underline how much they are indebted to the studio for giving them something great to work with, but they will also talk about their work as somewhat independent and possessing artistic merit of its own. Likewise, in academia, I think it's still an object that people look down on, it's lesser-than, it's shorter, it points to something else. I think that's a lot of it.

Keith: I think the lack of a central author plays into that – which bring us back to dominant theories and trends within film studies. We know that trailers tend to be put together by multiple teams. So, we can't say that 'x person made that trailer' – as if identifying a director would give it cultural validity. I think that feeds into the sense that promotional materials are 'bad' objects – or at least uncertain objects – because we can't assign authorship to it. It has a largely unknown creative and collaborative industrial background and it has a business perspective.

Erin: It's the same with posters and the analysis of posters as well. It is just a poster, and it could be wrapping paper, unless it's a Saul Bass poster and then suddenly it's amazing.

Jesse: People are often surprised to learn that there's an award show like the Golden Trailers. They're surprised that there are people who get up there and give speeches. So, there might be an assumption or an easy way of thinking that a trailer just kind of tumbles out of the movie at some point. And you have to tell them that no, there are people doing the editing, the sound design, that they're writing it to some degree. There's creative work going on, it's just that the public generally can't see it surface in the way they expect for directors, screenwriters, producers. One of the few times where you'll actually see or hear from those involved in trailers or promotion is when there's a clear-cut authorial figure: Saul Bass, Don LaFontaine, and so on. I think that's one of the problems that we

have in terms of using this as a research object is that it doesn't speak to those disciplines, especially film studies, the way that they're used to. Trailers don't quite work the same way as a research object.

Keith: So, as PhD students who are working on different perspectives of this field or discipline – as opposed to me, who has been around for years – what do you see as the future of promotional studies, or promotional media studies? What should it be exploring?

Erin: I would like to see a lot more interdisciplinary work. I would like to see more of that synthesis happening, maybe through symposiums or edited collections. I'm really interested in looking back at the methods that work for my project and the specific media forms that I'm looking at, and ask: what have I done there? What have I used? And how could that be picked up and reused if someone else is looking at similar things in the way that I was?

Jesse: I'd like to see more interaction and interface with archival spaces. It's hard because trailers and other promotional materials have been treated very much as ephemeral and subsidiary, so unfortunately this material is often gone and/or not documented well. But I know that material is out there and archivists are working hard to preserve and prepare it, so I'd like to see more work in terms of building a material history of trailers and promotion.

Keith: I feel like I've spent the last six or seven years looking at different ways to approach this idea of where trailer or promotional studies could go. I did a piece on radio trailers (Johnston 2014), the trailer audience research project with Ed Vollans and Fred Greene (Johnston, Greene and Vollans, 2016), a historical industry piece on the British National Screen Service trailer company (Johnston 2017), and a recent piece on the methodology for researching historical promotional materials (Johnston 2019). It's also very exciting that Vinzenz, who wrote the first book on trailer history (which has only been available in German until now: Hediger 2001), will be publishing the English language translation soon. But I also agree with you both that more work on the history of the trailer and the trailer industry would be great, as well as getting more researchers working with / alongside current industry to understand what is happening there – possibly in a similar way to Paul Grainge and

Cathy Johnson's project a few years ago (Grainge and Johnson 2016).

Jesse: I think it would be beneficial to speak more with those people who are working in trailers and promotion to help with that history, but also as a kind of solution to what we were just talking about: trying to increase the visibility and viability of our research object within film and media studies. It might actually help to surface more of the people working in these industries and talk to them directly.

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Erin Pearson is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia. She has a keen interest in the ways that promotional materials work to build film cultures. Her research spans trailers, posters, film festivals, review journalism, and fashion media coverage. Erin has also worked with video AdTech firm Unruly Media to analyse a range of online video phenomena, such as sound-off video (Campbell and Pearson 2018) and 6-second advertising.