

# Re-reading the history of the trailer: The production and consumption of “recut” trailers

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## Abstract

*Different audiences have viewed the film trailer in multiple contexts and spaces. This paper will address the recut film trailer, which edits footage from one or more filmic texts in order to create a new trailer for a feature that will not eventuate. Using Lisa Kernan’s study of American film trailers (2004), the recut trailer will be analysed through the history of the trailer and its relation to cinema, consumption and production. It will be questioned if the recut trailer can be read according to the conventions Kernan sets out for the rhetoric of the movie trailer, and the history of the space in which it is consumed. This paper offers an analysis of several recut trailers in combination with a discussion of Kernan’s key arguments with an emphasis on the anticipatory nature of the trailer; the ways in which the creator of the recut trailer engages with recognised conventions of the movie trailer; and the system of appealing to the desires of an audience outside of the cinematic space.*

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Despite the trailer being a recognisable and important icon in the history of cinema, there has been a distinct lack of critical attention directed toward the trailer. The most prolonged studies are books by Keith Johnston (2009) and Lisa Kernan (2004). While the recut trailer invokes discussions of the role of producer and consumer and work surrounding mash-ups, this paper focuses solely on the work of Kernan. This paper will analyse Kernan’s study of the trailer, and apply her arguments to trailers produced by users online. This paper will discuss the recut trailer, a type of fan-made trailer, which is disseminated through YouTube. The recut trailer is created by users by editing filmic material from one of more sources, often to displace the genre of the original source text. The “recutting” refers to the act of splicing together materials, which may alter the music for the original trailer, directly engage with the audience through new text or voiceover, or by choosing elements of the source texts to amplify or omit. The recut trailer intends to be humorous in its playfulness with the form and meaning of the trailer. Notably, the recut trailer also responds to the methods with which a commercial trailer seeks to appeal and sell to an audience, which is an integral part of Kernan’s study. The recut trailer’s purpose will be discussed in relation to the rhetoric of trailers that Kernan describes through a focus on the building of desire, and how the recut trailer relates to the culture of movie-going.

The history of the trailer is one that is heavily tied to space and, particularly, the space of the cinema. Originally the trailer was only shown within the walls of the cinema, meaning that it was not archived or re-released. Consequently, it can be seen as part of the event of cinema-going—there was nowhere else that it could be consumed. The use of space also restricted its purpose and directed its cultural intent; the trailer was watched in the very space it sought to draw the audience back to. The trailer was an

enticement to go and see another feature and to perpetually build an audience and a cinema culture. Importantly, it was also a communal activity that intended to build mass desire to see another feature, but also to collectively return to the cinema.

The trailer was then released into different spaces and through different delivery technologies. After the trailer began being released on DVD as a special feature and onto television—a history which is beyond the scope of this paper—it entered the domestic sphere. It then entered the online environment, where it could be uploaded by users on numerous sites and downloaded to hardware such as iPods or phones (Johnston, 2008). This demonstrates popularity for the trailer as form, as an audience was available who would now *choose* to see trailers, rather than merely be shown them in a pre-packaged group, based on the demographics of an audience.

Burgin argues that film promotion “spills its contents into the stream of everyday life”, resulting in an audience being familiar with a film prior to seeing it (2004, p. 12). The trailer is consequently an everyday object, one that exists in multiple spaces and manages to be a coherent and meaningful object outside of the realm that it was historically linked to. The trailer can be embedded on social networking sites or blogs in order to illustrate a point, frame discussion of a film, serve as a visual reminder of a past film, or be shared amongst friends for the sheer entertainment value of the trailer alone. As the trailer was moved online, it moved to a networked, linked space. It is consumed outside of the space of the cinema and is now not necessarily tied to advertising a feature. Space and technology impact upon the consumption of the trailer and, as a result, affect the meaning of the trailer. The recut trailer exemplifies what is a growing dislocation between the trailer, the feature film and cinema. While choosing to watching a trailer—potentially long after the theatrical release of the film it promotes—may suggest a growing “interactive relationship between film studio and audience” (Johnston, 2008, p.145), it also marks the beginning of an increasing interactivity between the trailer and the audience; a relationship which has altered the function and purpose of the trailer beyond the control of the studio.

The recut trailer signals that the trailer can be watched separately from the feature film and that audiences *enjoy* the form of the trailer. It appears as the excess of an advertisement: an advertisement that advertises nothing. As the trailer can now be viewed in multiple spaces, the imperative of being drawn back to the cinema has become decentralised. The recut trailer draws the space of the cinema open, and questions the linearity of filmic consumption previously dictated by film studios, aided by online channels of dissemination and the blurring of the lines between producer and consumer (a wider debate that is beyond the scope of this thesis). The popularity of the recut trailer is reliant upon these conditions. It takes an object emblematic of the cinema and places it outside of the need to go to the cinema at all, and yet, paradoxically, imbues a high level of cinematic literacy. By releasing the advertising imperative of the trailer, the fan-made trailer questions our understanding of the role of the trailer as advertisement.

While a recut trailer demonstrates technical ability and close reading of a source text — perhaps, but not necessarily, intimate knowledge—the recut trailer functions at the site of the parody and displacement of genre. The recut trailer has a complex relationship to the promotional value of the trailer. These trailers appear not to promote anything, in contradiction to the perceived function of the trailer; instead the advertisement

primarily advertises itself and its creators offer their work into a wider body of recut trailers that are judged by their peers.

Kernan delineates the small field of “trailer studies”, providing a comprehensive overview and foundation for the theoretical consideration of trailers. Kernan situates her analysis of the trailer in historical discourse, providing discussion of trailers since their inception and focussing on their use of movie stars, genre, and narrative. She seeks to place the trailer as selling to an audience and creating a catalogue for future film-going. Her positioning of the trailer as a “brief film text” (2004, p. 1) guides her discussion of the trailer in relation to cinematic technique and the amplification of directorial decisions. For Kernan, the trailer is perpetually tied to the communal aspect of cinema—a notion which the recut trailer, created by a viewer and watched individually, appears to defy. Kernan sees the trailer as entertainment rather than just an advertisement. However, the discourse of “being told and sold to watch a film” informs her positioning of the trailer even through to the online era (2004, p. 208). Her engagement with the trailer is tied to ideas of nostalgia, and continually played against the notion of the “classical era” trailer (the period of early sound cinema, and the selling of cinema that took place through filmic advertisements), as though to legitimise the trailer through historical comparisons.

The temporality of the trailer as a “coming attraction” is paradoxical, and only amplified by the space of the Internet, where the trailer can be viewed at any time. Kernan argues that trailers function:

As nostalgic texts that paradoxically appeal to audiences’ idealized memories of films they haven’t seen yet, they attract audiences not only to themselves (as attractions), nor even only to the attractions within the individual films they promote, but to an ever renewed and renewable desire for cinematic attraction per se. Like magnets, they attract (or occasionally, repel) in an attempt to draw bodies to a center, assembling their assumed audiences in a suspended state of present-tense readiness for a future that is always deferred. (2004, p. 208)

The recut trailer plays with the notion of a “deferred” future—as one that will not come to fruition. Instead, the recut trailer is a playful treatment of an understanding of the suspended temporality of the trailer (is the feature film the future?), recut trailers question the idea of an “attraction” as figured in the form of the trailer. Kernan’s argument of being drawn toward a “center” can be tested against the self-referential parodying of the use of celebrity, genre and appeal in the recut trailer, which is provided for audiences who arguably view these trailers in a different space than the cinema.

Kernan addresses the effect of the growth of the Internet on the way trailers are viewed, namely, that it led to “heralding major new elements in the ‘dialogue’ between Hollywood and its audiences” (2004, p. 166), although the trailer in the age of the Internet shows a “continuation” of the production of trailers from the sound era onward. Admittedly, her study is not concerned with audience reception; her comments can be applied to the recut trailer as the recut trailer is conditioned by both modes of consumption and production. Indeed, the traditional trailer editor also produces the trailer after viewing the feature film. However, the recut trailer seeks to parody this process and, essentially, make this process appear transparent and well known to its audience. The claim that viewing trailers online demonstrates dialogue between studios and the fans of films is troubled as the role of film marketing is to reach as many potential consumers as possible. The ability to re-watch, share and publicise on third party websites only increases the saturation for potential market for the feature film.

This “sold to” model is only bypassed if the trailer can be accepted as being of cultural import outside of being an advertisement, which the constant circulation of the trailer in a network—and as a result, the recut trailer—signal.

The recut trailer appropriates the history of the trailer through its use of parody, in its performance of a high level of cinematic literacy, and continuation of the common techniques of studio trailers. In her three demarcated eras of trailer production, Kernan proposes that the contemporary trailer no longer needs to deal with the confusion of the new medium of film that the classical era trailer did. Consequently, rather than having the “problem of promoting cinematic innovations that weren’t yet understood”, the contemporary trailer is able to play with “stylish repetitiveness” and “experimentation” (2004, p.204). This historical corpus of trailers and the ways in which cinema itself is sold is drawn upon in numerous recut trailers. For example, the recut trailer for blockbuster disaster movie *2012: It’s a disaster!* includes methods of direct address and the “experience” of witnessing event cinema. This recut trailer does not follow the form of typical recut trailers; the source material is edited in much the same way that the trailers for *2012* depicted the disasters. It is through the displaced 1970s nostalgic soundtrack, the use of graphics and direct address, and the self-referential selling of the film, that the creator of the recut trailer alters the intention of the original *2012* trailer.

Kernan argues:

In the process of *advertising* stories, trailers *tell* stories about what trailer producers think audiences want. These stories, the domain of ideology, selectively display and withhold elements or aspects of film narratives, textually demonstrating some indication of Hollywood’s image of its audiences’ desires to knowledge and experience the social world. (2004, p.205)

*2012: It’s a disaster!* directly references the notion that trailer producers know what audiences want, by playing with the idea that the film was created with audiences’ desires in mind: “Run away from plot! Run away from character! You just want some . . . DISASTER!!!” is imposed over images of a monk being obliterated by a wave the size of the Himalayas. As Kernan identifies, the role of selectively showing parts of a film and withholding others is something that audiences are aware of—a common critique of a film is that a trailer was misleading (Kernan, 2004, p. 1). *2012: It’s a disaster!* presents action scenes in succession (with accompanying text: “Plane disaster! Train disaster! Whole city disaster! Can you handle all this destruction?”), and then demands “but wait, there’s more!” acknowledging the technique of trailers attempting to appeal generically to audiences by offering “something for everyone”, (Kernan, 2004, p. 19) and also by playing with the notion that the best parts of the film are shown in the trailer. *2012: It’s a disaster!* tests the plausibility of the film, and the willingness of the audience to overlook this because the film it is what they “want”. The trailer addresses the audience with “Anything’s possible! It could happen!”, parodying the original *2012* trailer which positioned the film as a call to arms for an impending disaster. In a final address to the audience, the trailer implores the audience to see the film as there is “so much destruction . . . All future catastrophes will be compared to this film!!!” In effect, in order to read future events, this film must be watched: a claim implied in the original trailer’s appeal for certainty of the alleged forthcoming apocalypse.

Kernan argues that the trailer’s rhetoric focuses on three distinct modes of appeal: stars, genre and stories (2004, p. 19). She argues that the star is “increasingly integrated with

those of story and genre in high-tech contemporary trailers” (2004, p. 205). Kernan states:

More often than not, contemporary trailers that operate primarily within the rhetoric of stardom ensure that their stars are recognized by audiences (segmented and mass ones alike) as multiplicitous entities—whether by way of a multiplicity within their primary identities as stars, multivalent relationships with other star/characters within the trailer, or the increasingly multivalent intertextual echoes of their presence in other films and their positioning of celebrities within the contemporary media marketplace. (2004, p. 205)

The recut trailer plays with the identification and use of stars to appeal to audiences. In *Ten Things I Hate About Commandments*, which recuts *The Ten Commandments* to be a teen film (rather than a biblical one), the trailer identifies both musicians and fictional characters as actors in the film for comic effect and to highlight and expand upon the use of intertextuality noted by Kernan. A bald male character is noted as being played by “Sinead O’Connor”, and Samuel L. Jackson appears as “Principal Firebush”, a burning bush which delivers lines from *Pulp Fiction* about witnessing a miracle. This humour is directed at both the use of star appeal in trailers and also addresses the “multivalent intertextual echoes” Kernan identifies, by creating a world between trailers that these celebrities and fictional characters float between, appearing in new texts and drawing their past body of work into this networked text.

Kernan reiterates Elsaesser’s notion that, when choosing to watch a film, there is a contract of sorts between the audience and their expectations based on advertising:

Trailers exaggerate this ineffable act of faith that constitutes the cinematic experience as a whole, the utopian consciousness that stirs in the hearts of moviegoers every time the lights go down and the show begins, for it is at this hopeful moment in the beginning that trailers are experienced. (2004, pp. 209-10)

*Must Love Jaws* is a typical recut trailer that defies this “act of faith”—the contract between the audience and what the trailer promises of the feature film. The trailer presents recut footage from *Jaws* to create a romantic comedy between “two men and a shark”, which is the “family adventure of a lifetime”. The trailer parodies the clichés used in direct address to create the universal appeal that Kernan describes, and plays into recognisable storylines of overcoming adversity: “in a world that doesn’t understand . . . in a place where all hope is lost . . . Love comes to the surface” serves to absurdly reframe the story of *Jaws*, a shark terrorising a beach, to familiar narratives and mythologies of love, hope, and overcoming society’s expectations. The recut trailer that displaces the original genre of a film in such a way draws attention to the “act of faith” that audiences make by going to the movies. It challenges all that is known about the original source text, and forces it into a new narrative, by using the very techniques utilised to draw an audience into the cinema to see this film in the first instance.

Kernan argues that trailers “assume we want to go to known yet new cinematic spaces; while there experiencing narratives that offer at once secure, familiar story types and endless open possibilities”, and that these:

. . . appeals designed to keep a range of audiences wanting more and continually coming back to the theater, enable trailers to perpetually hover in the consciousness of the viewer as incomplete, unformed “ideas” of movies rather than as a sample of particular movies or as merely ads for movies. (2004, p. 210)

The recut trailer exemplifies the trailer as an “idea”; it too is quotational and “unformed”, and is a realisation of the idea of re-reading a source text. The recut trailer

also requires imagination on the behalf of the viewer which enacts the same mode of viewership as the original trailer: being able to recognise possibilities for the end product of the feature film. However, in the case of the recut trailer, the feature film will not eventuate, instead signalling that there is a desire in an audience to experience the “unformed” idea—and the process of accepting the possibility for the new potential, but non-existent, film is demonstrative of the “anticipatory consciousness experience” of the trailer (Kernan, 2004, p. 11). Kernan argues that the “anticipatory, utopian dimension of trailers” exists in the “spaces between the images of the trailer montage” (2004, p. 216). The recut trailer, then, exists as the space in between images of the original trailer—becoming then, the “utopian and anticipatory dimension” of the trailer. Just as most of the recut trailers utilise the generic terms used in trailers to give a timeline for the release of the feature film (“coming this fall”, “this year”, “coming soon”), the perpetually deferred future of the feature film ensures these quotational “ideas” remain consistently anticipatory, greeted with the same excitement and hype that a trailer can bring to a collective audience. Kernan states that:

... a trailer’s truth “claim” different kinds of “truth” about the films they promote than other ads do, thus potentially creating a range of responses in audiences that may vary from their responses to ordinary advertising rhetoric. (2004, p. 11)

Following this logic, the trailer, to an extent, advocates a misreading. The end product is manipulated and framed in such a way that, while it is there to create audience expectation, it also cannot provide all the information for the film, leaving potential for audience interpretation. Normally, this potential for interpretation provides a need to see the feature film but, in the case of the recut trailer, in the act of watching the recut the act of interpretation is left to the audiences’ imagination with no such future.

The recut trailer circulates in a network with the traditional trailer, sharing knowledge and capital about the techniques used in trailers, and demonstrating audience reception to the form of the trailer. By also allowing the audience to relive a feature film in a new way, the recut trailer contributes to the culture of Hollywood and the cinema, even if the space and temporal location it is viewed in are skewed and expanded. By desiring to create and contribute to the creation of filmic texts without creating a feature film, the recut trailer demonstrates that the trailer is considered part of cinematic culture and serves as its own type of cinema—one that challenges pre-conceived notions that film exists within the four walls of a cinema in which the trailer is forced upon its viewers.

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