

## **Watching the trailer: Researching the film trailer audience**

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### **Abstract:**

For over 100 years, the 'coming attraction' film trailer has been a key part of film promotion and viewing practices (both theatrical and domestic). Despite the prominent role of the trailer within the fabric of popular media, it has rarely been discussed in terms of audience behaviour, beyond limited claims that the viewer is either misled by inaccurate advertising or has become the source of increased prosumer activity. This article therefore offers the first rigorous exploration of the disparate range of audience perspectives on, and responses to, the trailer. We show that trailer viewing can be understood as a consumption practice that is separate from (and sometimes unrelated to) feature film viewing. Analysing data collected from an online survey, we reveal that while the trailer does have informational and prefigurative value to audiences, trailer viewing is also led by criteria that include emotional attachment, cultural value and social expectation. Our analysis disputes the notion of a linear, mono-directional model of trailer-to-film viewing practices, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the trailer audience is needed within studies of prefiguration materials and media consumption.

**Keywords:** film trailer; coming attractions; promotion; advertising; prefiguration; reception; cultural capital; audience discourse

Anyone wanting to extricate maximum enjoyment from a film must avert the eyes from all pre-release publicity – especially trailers. The modern trailer strikes with precision, annihilating the expectation of excitement, the bliss of ignorance. Where once a trailer was a sophisticated tease, it has now become a brutal compendium of potted highlights, filleting the movie it is meant to be promoting (Gibley 2006, 42)

The description of the film trailer offered by *New Statesman* film critic Ryan Gibley is one example of a recurring critical stance within academic and popular discourse on such ‘coming attractions’. Although its history dates back to the beginning of the Hollywood studio system, the film trailer has repeatedly been cited as a source of audience displeasure. In 1929 Mordaunt Hall described a cinema audience irritated by trailers that insult the intelligence with ‘ridiculous effusions’ recommending previews should become more ‘judicious... with a conservative wording and... less sensational selection of excerpts.’ (Hall 1929, p.5) A 1940s committee of cinema exhibitors recommended that the trailer should ‘minimise superlatives ... [and] not reveal too much of the plot or too many of the best gags’ in order to attract audiences (‘Trailers Improvements Urged’ 1948, 6). In the 1990s Andy Medhurst called trailers ‘pumped-up bullies, yelling out torrents of absolutes’ at their viewers (Medhurst 1992, 24), while the last five years have seen threats of court action against trailers for films such as *Drive* (2012) and *Jack Reacher* (2013) based on audience claims of deceit and misleading advertising (Child 2011, 2013). In almost all examples of this discourse, the trailer audience (sometimes the individual viewer) is conjured as the unwitting victim of an audio-visual assault, the recipient of misleading, inaccurate and vulgar advertising.

Against that critique we can consider the equally long and established parallel track within film industry and academic research that identifies trailers as a key promotional text. From qualitative research among college students that revealed trailers were ‘more important than... ads presented in radio, newspapers or magazines’ (Austin 1981, 46) to *The Hobbit* audience research project noting trailers were ‘the most widely consumed promotional materials’ (Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014, 73), there has been a persistent awareness that trailers fulfil a particular and valuable function for audiences. In the 100 years since its first appearance, the film trailer has remained at the forefront of movie promotion. With the rise of the internet and social media, the film trailer is arguably more prevalent than at any point in that history, with industry articles claiming that modern trailers ‘can generate as much buzz as the films themselves.’ (Faughnder 2015, C1) Meanwhile, trailers have moved beyond the cinema screen and are now avidly consumed across different media. Widely debated and regularly imitated, particularly online, the undeniable popularity of the trailer suggests that audiences engage with them in a manner different from other promotional materials. Shot-by-shot breakdowns of new trailers for blockbuster / franchise entries are now commonplace across a range of online media (in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, cult media websites like *Den of Geek*, and industry

focused publications such as *The Wrap*); old trailers are archived on a range of media sites or by individual viewers and fans; trailers are hailed as creative artefacts by individuals and by industry award shows such as the Clio Key Art Awards and the Golden Trailer Awards; trailers are repurposed as a source of cult entertainment on websites such as *Trailers from Hell*; while the production and sharing of recut, spoof and 'fake' trailers for non-existent movies via YouTube, Vimeo and other video-based social media platforms remains a popular phenomenon (Williams 2009, 2012) to which, more recently, has been added audience 'reaction' videos to trailers. (Liptak 2016)

Trailers are loud, over-revelatory, and misleading. They are also highly successful, commercially valuable, artistically acclaimed, and increasingly the locus of voluble audience, fan and prosumer activity, a part of the popular media fabric.

This essay is drawn from our *Watching the Trailer* project, which was designed to explore the dichotomy that has built up around this regularly viewed and, as evidenced above, highly contested media form, to offer a fuller investigation of audience response to the 'coming attraction' film trailer. Having already identified the scarcity of audience work in this area (Greene, Johnston and Vollans 2013) we designed the project as a first step in exploring and explaining this lacuna in the emergent field of film and media promotional materials. Yet we also intended the project to draw on, and contribute to, media consumption scholarship that demonstrates the validity and benefit of examining the social, cultural and financial influences that shape viewing and consumption habits.

We argue that the film trailer remains a crucial though largely overlooked component of historic and contemporary media circulation and consumption practice. While film scholarship has developed new understandings of the temporal and spatial sites of cinema-going, expanding notions of who cinema audiences are and what draws them to movie theatres, it has been slower to consider non-theatrical sites of film consumption (Aveyard and Moran 2011, 76-7) and slower still to consider the consumption of other parts of the film exhibition experience. We claim that film trailers constitute a unique object within the study of media consumption practices because of their ability to travel beyond the cinema, the traditional site of film viewing for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the flexibility offered by non-theatrical settings such as television, home video, and now the Internet, has had a direct influence on trailers' central position within media promotional practices. (Johnston 2009) Yet given the lack of attention given to promotional materials within broader studies of film and the film audience, this shift in the site of consumption has not been considered in relation to audience behaviour and attitude.

Granting the necessity of moving beyond the recurring and reductive binary of trailer audience as disgruntled consumer or active prosumer, the project analysed the disparate approaches and emphases of audience and trailer research, before adopting a suitable methodology to create a speculative map of audience discourse around the film trailer. Rather than repeat existing research that claimed 'movie audiences reported higher expectations ... after seeing a preview' (Eastman et al. 1985, 56), our approach aimed to push beyond simple measures of success to consider the wider discursive field that

surrounds audience reactions to, and discussions of, film trailers. As such, the evidence outlined in this article illustrates the disparate range of audience perspectives, complicates the popular belief that all audiences find trailers over-revelatory, and challenges the idea that the trailer-film relationship is linear, mono-directional, and pre-figurative. While this work reveals a range of complex and diverse audience attitudes toward the trailer, it is not attempting to isolate that response from other influences such as media commentary, industry activity, cultural understandings or received wisdom. However, the focus remains on the ways respondents remember, discuss and debate the experience of trailer viewing.

Accepting that audiences ‘encounter films in prior possession of a diverse set of discursive resources’ (Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014, 51) – or to use an earlier definition, a film ‘must exist ... [even] before we enter the cinema’ (Heath 1976, 34) – our findings expand and complicate the scope of such work. We argue that seeing a trailer as only one piece in a larger promotional campaign designed to ‘build awareness and stimulate desire among a viewing audience... and to encourage a positive or “preferred” reception’ (Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014, 51), ignores the cultural visibility, experiential qualities, and discursive reception of the film trailer as a media text. Equally, the level of consumption, production and often participatory activity that we outline in this article exceeds and challenges the informational model of trailer audience reception suggested in existing research. Our initial results reveal that watching a trailer constitutes an aesthetic and cultural mode of engagement that distinguishes the trailer from other promotional or pre-figurative materials. The trailer can be a source of information, it can fuel individual pleasures, be a site of emotional attachment, foster communal sharing and speculation, and represents an aesthetic format that audiences recognise and eagerly engage with. We claim here that trailer viewing can be discerned as a distinct practice separate from (and sometimes unrelated to) feature film viewing.

Although tracing the heightened expectations of an audience after viewing a trailer has become a dominant approach within recent pre-figurative audience research on films from the *Hobbit* or *Lord of the Rings* franchises (Biltreyst & Meers, 2006; Hedling, 2006; Luthar, 2008; Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014, see also Eastman, Bradbury and Nemes 1985 for an earlier example of such work), our research project develops from the premise that making any significant claims about the discursive relationship between trailer and audience cannot be achieved through a focus solely on one trailer or the trailer-film relationship.<sup>1</sup> While not denying the often derivative relationship between the film and the trailer, or the direct correlation often perceived by audiences, we emphasise that the relationship needs to be understood in the aggregate and general sense as much as the granular and specific instances in those studies. As noted above, existing discourse tends to talk about trailers as a coherent media form, a type of recognisable audio-visual production, a repeated intertextual activity that exists beyond one trailer and one film. To reduce any exploration of audience attitudes to, and uses of, the film trailer to paratextual activity, is inadequate, and runs the risk of impoverishing the complexity of actual audience engagement.

Bracketing the film trailer from the associated feature film also represents a shift within existing studies of the film trailer. Much media and academic discourse has been concerned with the film trailers' paratextual relationship with the film advertised, its status as an industrially-constituted 'free sample' of the fuller audio-visual feature. This approach assumes that the trailer presents 'in 90 seconds the material that films will take 90 minutes to work over' (Haralovich & Klapat 1981/82, 65), with the stress that trailers are used by audiences 'precisely as they're meant to be used, as free samples to aid in moviegoing decision making' (Kernan 2004, 1). Jonathan Gray, citing John Ellis, states that trailers are not 'textually removed ... [but] *part of the show's narrative ... concentrates of the show's meaning*' (Gray 2010, 48, italics in original). Within such scholarship, the trailer is positioned mainly as the provider of narrative information that informs choice, a preview that underpins presumed consumption and investment, although it may also confirm the choice not to consume. While our project was not designed to directly challenge this reading of the trailer, we remain uncertain about the appropriation of Gerard Genette's term paratext by Kernan, Gray and others, given how it tends to calcify the trailer in an increasingly reductive relationship with the official 'text' (the feature, the television programme). Instead, we prefer to follow Gray's acknowledgement that audiences likely see 'thousands of trailers ... [for films] that we will never watch' (Gray 2010, 52), a suggestion that there may be additional pleasures to be gained from trailer viewing, and that the trailer-audience relationship is informed by more than simple informational exchange about feature content.

Our desire to offer depth to current assumptions around the film trailer audience is driven by the increasingly visible variety of trailer audience activity (analysis, parody, spoof, archiving) demonstrating a spectrum of interactions that exists beyond information source or a partial reflection (or refraction) of the fuller feature experience. As such, our project is inspired by audience scholars such as Ien Ang, who have argued that 'audiences consist of an infinite and ever expanding myriad of dispersed practices and experiences that can never be, and should not be, contained in any one total system of knowledge' (Ang 1991, 155). While Ang's work was a response to dominant tendencies within industry and academia to define the television audience in relation to limited and measurable behaviour (viewing figures and ratings), our own project is equally driven by the desire to see the trailer audience as more than one that is duped, convinced or put-off by trailer viewing. That is not to dismiss those recurring discursive and historical categories, but to acknowledge that there is a deeper and more complicated relationship between trailer and audience(s) than that allowed for in most current scholarship. In part, this is a response to what Davis and Michelle identify as 'the expansion of audience roles from the traditional reader, listener, viewer, spectator, and citizen to the much more varied roles of user, customer, player, producer, visitor, gifter, fan, friend, voyeur, learner, and participant' (Davis & Michelle 2011, 559-60). This article explores that expanded conception in relation to trailer audience roles and activities, a much needed first step for understanding the true complexity of those relationships.

## Methodology

To begin this exploration of the trailer audience, we adopted a standard data collection model using a quantitative and qualitative survey. The initial online survey of up to eighteen questions (not all respondents completed all fields) was launched via Survey Monkey. Our aim in using an online questionnaire was to gain a baseline survey of attitudes, habits, assumptions and discursive positioning of the broadest possible audience. The survey requested basic demographic information, asked respondents about specific trailer viewing habits and media use (where they viewed, what device or platform was used, whether they shared trailers with friends, what stood out in a given trailer), and about general attitudes towards trailer viewing, content and the film-trailer relationship. The survey was disseminated via social media sites Facebook and Twitter, media studies academic mailing lists, and promoted via a piece in the Huffington Post, but relied heavily on individual networks and snowballing to achieve a significant response. Running for three months (December 2013 to March 2014), the survey received 525 responses in total, a source of rich data that represented individuals from 30 countries, albeit with a dominance from the UK (n=317) and USA (n=80). The peak audience demographic was between 26 and 40 (n=296, 56%), with a dominance of female (n=308, 59%) to male (n=197, 37.5%) responses in terms of gender.<sup>2</sup>

A general online survey was chosen in place of a survey of existing fan forums or discussions on trailer-related articles partly as an attempt to offer a wider geographic and demographic range than that available to the project team, but primarily to try to engage those who were not dedicated trailer fans / enthusiasts. The decision to participate in the survey may indicate some pre-existing interest in trailers, but the online survey offered a strong route to achieving a more varied picture of the audience(s), and one that avoided particular fan or film-specific branding. The response rate to this survey places it in the low-to-mid-range of indicative audience studies that have used on- and off-line surveys as their core data sample. For the purposes of respondent numbers, we looked to indicative studies within the field, including those with 75-85 responses (Brooker 2012; Burke 2012), 500-1000 participants (Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014; Phillips 2015) or 1000 and above (Barker et al. 2008). What is clear from those studies, as with our own, is that no matter how rich and expansive the qualitative data it cannot, and should not, be read as speaking for all audiences. That said, the responses we received do complicate the existing assumptions about the film trailer audience(s) outlined above. They indicate that a more complex and fluid relationship exists between this promotional material and its viewers.

We coded the qualitative results based on the systematic analysis of respondents, rather than imposing existing or pre-set codes, to reduce the chance of predetermining or contaminating those responses based on our own perspectives. For example, coding responses to a question about the trailer-film relationship allowed us to identify an initial series of four recurring discursive clusters: 'Accuracy', 'Best Bits in the Trailer', 'Trailer better than Film', and 'Over-revelatory'. Within these, a further spectrum of opinions could be interrogated. While respondents identified 'Accuracy' as a key area, particularly in relation



to the trailer-film relationship (n=143), it became clear that two further levels of coding were required. First, the category needed to be considered in relation to general comments on accuracy (n=83) and comments on a specific film or trailer being 'accurate' (n=60). Second, those responses were considered in relation to other recurring terms such as genre, narrative/storyline, emotional response, and the language of 'selling'. This process allowed a wider range of audience reaction to be considered and revealed additional complexity around the repeated and different uses of words such as 'accuracy' or 'misleading'. In presenting our data here, therefore, we will be using individual examples as a way to concentrate on generalised and aggregated findings, rather than prioritising specific voices. While the qualitative analysis aims to illustrate broader trends, where relevant, responses are also analysed in relation to the survey's respective quantitative findings.

We are aware that the approach outlined above is not without its flaws, and that more work will need to be done to build on the results and expand the methodology of this project. As noted above, we can make no claims here for the representative nature of these results for all audiences, or for additional subsets of the audience who have alternative perspectives on the trailer. The selection of an online survey may additionally have skewed our results around the location(s) of trailer viewing practices towards respondents who are more internet active than *all* viewers of trailers: as such, the dominance of online viewing in our responses meant there was little or no space to consider those that chose to attend the cinema in time to watch trailers versus those who find the trailers an annoying distraction. Equally, the focus here on what respondents remembered about trailers may have elided those who couldn't remember or who display a lack of interest in the trailer in general: while we received a few 'can't remember' or 'don't know' responses, the survey approach may restrict our ability to explore disinterested audiences in this iteration of the project.<sup>3</sup> That said, the results we gained from our respondents do allow us to construct a better understanding of trends in trailer viewing than currently exists, and that usefully expands our knowledge of this specific audience practice.

## **Analysis**

Trailers are usually pretty good indicators as to the film itself. *Transformers 3* won't be sold to you as a Wiseman documentary. You usually know what you're getting. (#435)

This article is designed to offer an initial overview of the 525 survey responses through the three specific Sections below. It focuses on five of the eighteen questions asked through our survey. Three of those ('What was the last trailer you watched?', 'What medium did you use to watch this trailer?' and 'Did you seek out this trailer specifically?') contextualise and quantify audience activity. The latter two ('List 3 reasons why you remember this trailer?' and 'Thinking about trailers in relation to their feature films, has there been an occasion where you were disappointed with the film?') offer more qualitative representations of

trailers as sources of pleasure, and raise issues around positive and negative audience memories.

## **1: Trailer Viewing – Impetus and Selection**

342 out of every 1000 people attending the theatres surveyed were motivated primarily by the trailer to return for the next attraction... Almost 85 per cent could “play back” something they remembered from the trailer they had seen.’ (‘The Value of Trailers’ 1956, p5-8)

Over sixty years ago, this U.S. industry survey stressed repeat custom and memory recall as key components of the trailer’s value to cinema exhibitors. Given the limited number of television spots for feature films in the 1950s, this represents the classic view of the trailer experience: a cinema audience, gazing at the screen, being primed for a return visit by a series of hyperbolic coming attractions. The original and ephemeral nature of trailer viewing – where individual trailers would only be seen in cinemas, playing in a specific programme for three to seven days – has, due to the expansion of media technologies, now largely been relegated to film history. Indeed, the cinema has been usurped by individual online viewing in current trailer viewing habits. 60% of our respondents (n=315) stated they watched trailers via the internet (either a personal computer or mobile device), with only 27.7% (n=143) listing the cinema. That the film trailer has moved across new media screens with relative ease has been demonstrated elsewhere (Johnston 2008; Faughnber 2015), but the dominance of the internet as the leading source of trailer viewing demonstrates the increased importance of individual impetus.

That shift to personal searching, in parallel with the increased availability of trailers online, represents a paradigm shift in trailer viewing habits that resonates across our survey responses, even if few viewers reflect directly on that issue. Yet the access to a wide number of trailers is one reason given by respondents to account for specific trailer searches: ‘there are so many trailers out there these days that I prefer to search specifically for those I am interested in’ (#54). While prioritising the power of individual search, this response also returns to the issue of assessing general attitudes towards trailers. With so many available, from so many different sites, and with different levels of ‘official’ status, the modern trailer viewer faces an exponential expansion of choice when compared to the imagined 1950s cinema viewer discussed above. When asked if they had specifically searched for the last trailer they had viewed, 53.35% of respondents noted they had (n=223, out of 418 responses to this question). Considering, for now, the qualitative responses of those who displayed individual impetus in searching for a trailer, we identified four different reasons why respondents looked for a specific trailer title:

- a) To develop / deepen existing knowledge on the film
- b) To make a judgement on quality / aesthetics of film



- c) As a result of external recommendation (personal or social media)
- d) Because of a preference for a pre-existing element (star, actor, director, story)

Analysing these motivations in turn allows us to consider some of the general assumptions about trailer viewing that emerged during our examination of other audience activities.

### **a. To develop / deepen existing knowledge**

That desire to deepen knowledge has different strands, from the general 'I'm excited about the film and want to learn more' (#183) and 'to see how this mad sounding film looked' (#262) to the more specific 'I heard there was a talking racoon' (#100) or '[it] is about vampires and comes across like a gothic, horror noir, so it piqued my interest' (#86). This points to different levels of pre-figurative knowledge about films ahead of trailer viewing, but also identifies a variety of viewing habits that speak to the different individual needs of each viewer. This challenges earlier notions that the trailer simply creates a desire to buy a ticket (Haralovich and Klapat 1981/2, 66). Many of our respondents indicated they use trailers for confirmation of an existing plan to view the film, or to assess the suitability of the film for themselves or others to view, most often children or partners. A broad comment such as 'I wanted to see what the film was about because I want to watch it' (#416) complicates the popular notion that trailers are too revelatory, that they ruin what Gibley termed 'the expectation of excitement, the bliss of ignorance' (2006, 42). For many of our respondents ignorance was too much of a risk in the film selection process: a specific need for additional information often led directly to viewing a trailer.

### **b. To make a judgement on quality/aesthetics of film**

The desire for additional knowledge cannot be read simply as informational, however, and is linked to the second category of advance judgement on a film, particularly around issues of quality, aesthetics or tone. Many of these respondents stated they were 'intrigued about the feel of the film' (#70), they wanted 'to get a sense of the film's flavour' (#278), 'to have an idea of [what it] looked like', (#343), or 'to get in the mood' (#414). The repetition of phrases such as 'flavour' and 'feel' suggest the participant's hope that the trailer will convey a similar atmosphere to the finished product. This belief in the notion of the trailer as an accurate and reliable 'free sample' then forms the basis by which a judgement on 'quality' can be made. Yet this is diluted by 'get a sense' or 'to have an idea', a more equivocal framing that may suggest such respondents are aware that the trailer is industrially required to do more than simply offer that element. Perhaps the most intriguing response here is 'to get in the mood', which is suggestive of the trailer as a preparatory element, perhaps to excite or arouse a particular feeling in the viewer. Here, respondent #414 was preparing to re-watch *Robin Hood* (2010), and appears to have been viewing the trailer as a partial recreation, an *aide memoire* of the original anticipatory experience. This emotive and affective model of trailer viewing complicates existing linear assumptions about the trailer-

film relationship, and is underlined by respondents noting deliberate multiple viewings of the same trailer.

Knowledge and judgement combine when respondents talk about multiple viewings, either ahead of watching the film ('I'd seen it before and wanted to see it again', #392), or in some cases, after viewing the film ('Wanted to see it after seeing the film; also saw before', #512). This suggestion of a post-film trailer viewing fits with assumptions around how audiences now use the internet as a trailer archive / repository at different points in their relationship with a film, franchise, or individual trailer. In response to a separate question on the film-trailer relationship (which is discussed in Section 3 below), several respondents noted they re-watched trailers for films such as *Man of Steel* (2012) and *Prometheus* (2013) precisely because they believed the trailer was better than the film. Here, the ability to watch again reminded them of the preferred trailer experience, a parallel emotional connection similar to the *Robin Hood* example above.

This pursuit of additional knowledge, or to offer evidence for personal judgement, mirrors the pre-figuration research discussed earlier, but adds the additional stress that the audience does not just encounter the film 'in prior possession of a diverse set of discursive resources' (Davis et al. 2014, 1), but that the trailer audience encounters the trailer in similar circumstances. Here, the trailer is often used as confirmation or evidence to support existing knowledge or recommendation. One respondent identified this key function: 'I knew it [*The Amazing Spider-Man 2* trailer] was coming on the specific date (5 December 2013) because of other promotional materials such as single image highlighting the date of the trailer's release' (#516). This level of preparation for trailer viewing was echoed across several other survey respondents, revealing similar instances where trailer viewing was primed or pre-prepared, underlining the individual and specific appeal of trailers. An appeal to new (and existing) knowledge, narrative information, aesthetic and quality judgements, anticipation, and social participation.

### **c. External Recommendation**

Trailers have always played a critical role in creating 'word of mouth' around a new film release, with previous studies demonstrating the important role this has played in film selection and decision making (Austin 1981; Biltereyst, Mathijs and Meers 2008). While such external recommendations were initially based around cinema audiences recalling the trailer at a later date, and telling interested friends, the recent (and much hailed) rise of social media has created a more direct method of sharing the trailer. The relationship of new technology to audience motivation and satisfaction has been investigated in the uses and gratifications field and, while that was not the model adopted here, our survey responses do suggest that motivations for trailer use are similar to those claims: media as 'diversion ... social utility ... personal identity ... and surveillance.' (Ruggiero 2000, 26)

Personal and / or external recommendations remain a strong force in the individual impetus found through our respondents: 'my boyfriend recommended it to me' (#12) and 'A friend suggested it' (#229). Online links, comments and reviews were the most common

reasons cited for viewing a specific trailer, through social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, websites IMDb, BuzzFeed and Digital Spy, and other online reviews and news in unspecified publications. Around 24.6% (n=55) identified such external sources as the main reason they specifically searched for a trailer: such responses ranged from 'I saw a link to it on Facebook' (#112) and 'Internet chatter' (#310) to 'Saw Tweets about it' (#141) and 'There was a lot of discussion about it on social media' (#69). These relate more to audiences using trailers as a social utility than a simple informational conduit. The trailer is thus positioned more as a key text that respondents use within interpersonal interaction, or to continue or enhance conversations: 'I was talking about X-Men with and friend and he said he hadn't seen the trailer yet so I found it.' (#143) Expanding our notion of what purpose the trailer serves, and how that shifts across different viewers, the survey results suggest that trailer use has a personal and social function alongside the basic informational model.

#### **d. Pre-existing elements**

The final recurring impetus category was smaller overall (n=25), but no less salient concerning the existence of known pleasures. While it could be considered a sub-set of the 'deepen / develop knowledge' category, we argue that these responses need to be differentiated given the primary category made little or no mention of a specific element about which viewers were seeking more information. By contrast, respondents in this category were more specific, and often personal, identifying a particular area of the trailer that could offer them a specific pleasure. In that sense, these are respondents who may not need more information about the film, because they have an existing connection that could pre-sell them on the film being promoted, regardless of the other trailer content. Given the dominance of responses around director, star and original source material, this is the area where survey responses strayed most obviously into the arena of fan or adaptation studies, but it also suggests how emotional responses to trailer content may link to issues of personal identity within media use.

Directors (n=10) were the most commonly mentioned draw within this category, slightly ahead of actors (n=7), and source material (n=6). Those directors who were directly named were all largely independent / arthouse names: 'I love Wes Anderson's work' (#32), 'I'm really into Spike Jonze' (#63), 'I was looking for films by Michel Gondry' (#423), 'Being a Woody Allen's fan, I wanted to have an idea of how his latest movie looked like' (#397) and 'I'm a big fan of Christophe Gans' films' (#453). The idea of personal investment is clear from the language: 'love', 'really into' and 'big fan' demonstrate a particular (often long-held) connection with an *auteur* figure that respondents believed would be maintained by the trailer as much as by the new film (this despite the absence of most directors from trailer production). The language around stars and actors as a direct motivator for viewing was less emotional than that concerning directors, although it may be salient in relation to recall of the trailer, a subject we address below: comments include the 'actors who were in it' (#294) or the cooler 'I wanted to check out Simon Pegg's latest film' (#520); more passion was

evident in responses such as ‘Oh god, Robert Redford’ (#298) and ‘I am obsessed with Tom Hiddleston’ (#358).

Issues around adaptation as a driver for trailer viewing were tied to personal connection and fidelity. The former was expressed in responses such as ‘Favourite book’ (#57), ‘I’d read the books and loved them’ (#163), and ‘I am a fan of the TV show that this movie comes from’ (#231). That last statement, in relation to the *Veronica Mars* film, was the only reference to a non-book adaptation, but the use of similar language across all such participants demonstrates that personal investment, identity, and fandom are key drivers of interest in such trailers. Issues of fidelity were most commonly raised in relation to uncertainty around the adaptation of a new film version, a traditional discursive response. When respondents suggest they are ‘curious/excited to see a preview of the latest film adaptation’ (#156) or ‘wanted to see what sort of a film it would be’ (#289), there remains a note of caution and uncertainty about what form the adaptation would take. Here, the concerns around fidelity to narrative and character are regularly entwined with the former expressions of personal connection: ‘Because I read the novel and I heard they were making it into a film and wanted to see what sort of film it will be’ (#289, in reference to *Divergent*).

The link between existing knowledge and trailer audience pleasure is key to our responses, and offers a compelling challenge to current pre-figuration and trailer audience work. The knowledge that trailer viewers bring to bear is not restricted to book adaptations, and also connects with previous franchise entries such as sequels or prequels. Two responses, in relation to *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), demonstrate this impetus: ‘Love Tolkien. Superb handling of the books’ (#488) and ‘I’d read the books and loved them and liked the first movie’ (#163). Such responses position a model of trailer viewing that is based on known pleasures that arise from reading and / or film viewing. This partly turns on its head the notion that pre-figuration is mono-directional and works only from trailer to feature film. Here, the feature film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012) creates the framework within which a trailer is selected and enjoyed. This was not just restricted to larger franchises with connections to popular books: one respondent noted viewing a trailer for *Machete Kills* because they had ‘just watched the first *Machete* film’ (#99), while another offered the more general observation ‘I watched the first film and wanted to see what was in the second film.’ (#45)

This evidence about the role played by pre-existing elements in guiding trailer viewing choices suggests a more emotional, intellectual and intertextual connection than the ‘free sample’ of narrative or aesthetic found in the ‘deepen / develop knowledge’ cluster. The examples cited for *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* complicate the existing pre-figurative model of a linear relationship between trailer, promotional materials and feature film. In place of this, the trailer selection and viewing practices analysed in this Section demonstrate that audiences bring the same ‘disparate interests and priorities’ to their viewing of a trailer as they do to a feature, and that they equally “‘project forward” different visions’ of what the trailer viewing experience might provide (Davis, Michelle, Hardy & Hight, 2014, 55). Searching for specific titles,

viewing trailers multiple times before and after the feature film, responding to external recommendations, preparing for interpersonal discussions, reacting to existing knowledge: these are just some of the basic selection criteria applied by the modern, internet-enabled trailer viewer. While information gathering remains a key activity, the personal, emotional and affective uses of the trailer and the desires of the trailer viewer are clearly broader than what has been imagined in scholarship and industry research.

## **2: Total Recall – Remembering the Last Trailer Viewed**

This Section builds on the broader conceptualisation of the audience identified above by focusing on the specific elements of a trailer that our respondents recalled and identified as key to their memory of it. Ascertaining how viewers choose to access a trailer, and why they do so, has already revealed the complexities of audience behaviour in relation to trailer choice. This Section engages with questions of what specific textual details audiences remember and why. Our analysis identifies key memorable aspects and examines how these may be shared among the online and real life social networks discussed above.

Of the 525 responses to the survey as a whole, only 280 (53.3%) listed 3 reasons why they remembered the trailer they viewed. This modest level of response indicates that the request to provide three specific reasons put respondents off, suggests they were unable to recall that level of detail, or both. While we did not envisage this project as a study of trailer memories, analysis of our trailer survey data is an acknowledgement of Annette Kuhn's comment that memory work is about collecting 'material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities' (Kuhn 2010). While our analysis below offers a suggestive picture of what elements of a trailer stick in people's minds, it also acts as a reminder (and a methodological caution) that the act of remembering the trailer for this survey was itself a performance of memory (Monaco 2007). While some respondents noted that the reason they remembered the trailer was simply that it was the last one they viewed, this Section will focus specifically on the recurring trailer content areas that were identified and can be interrogated. Our analysis aims to construct a cohesive account from the interpretation of those 280 respondents, to create an indicative map of audience concerns, interests and attractions, which will deepen the analysis of the previous Section around audience memory and viewing impetus. A full table of responses is provided below.

What is immediately clear is that predictable categories dominate: star (or cast), narrative, visual imagery, and soundtrack recur across these responses, and appear to confirm academic research (Austin 1981; Biltereyst, Mathijs and Meers 2008) and broader film industry beliefs about the power of stars and storyline. The next two categories (comedy and spectacle) are arguably sub-sets of visual imagery and narrative, but respondents clearly felt that those terms were worthy of specific mention. When categories are selected by less than 10% of respondents, it is unclear how dominant such concerns are: certainly the remembrance of recognised elements such as franchise or character is based around a similar kind of previous knowledge as that discussed in relation to *The Hobbit* and

*The Hunger Games* above. Equally, references to a director correlate with impetus categories identified above, although the low profile of both awards recognition and specific writers point to the heightened perception of the film director over other creative personnel. Issues of trailer pace, genre, pre-existing hype and the length of a trailer remain low, although any hype experienced could be related to the pre-figurative claims made above, where existing knowledge informs and leads trailer selection. The top four elements will be considered in more detail below, exploring the complexity of individual qualitative responses and trailer recall more generally.

**Table 1: Key memorable elements of ‘the last trailer viewed’**

Trailer element referenced	Responses (out of 280)	
	Number	Percentage
Star / actor / cast (including specific reference to actor’s body)	90	32%
Story / narrative / plot (inc. references to adaptation, story location)	71	25%
Aesthetic / visual element	64	23%
Soundtrack: music / song / dialogue / voiceover	46	16%
Funny / comedy / quirky	38	14%
Action / visual effects / spectacle	36	13%
Remake / sequel / recognised franchise	24	8.5%
Characters	24	8.5%
Director	21	7.5%
Editing / pace	19	7%
Genre	17	6%
Remembered because didn’t like / enjoy	12	4%
Hype	7	2.5%
Length of trailer	6	2%
Violence	3	1%
Awards recognition	2	<1%
Writer	1	<1%

References to stars, cast or actors appear in almost a third of all responses, an indication that stars remain a memorable sales message within the film and trailer industry. Despite that status, references were often opaque: ‘famous actress’ (#34), ‘the cast’ (#55), ‘well-known actors spotted’ (#232) and ‘actors I love’ (#415) suggest that such elements are central, but respondents didn’t feel the need to identify them by name. More common was the reference to a specific actor, often just by name, e.g. ‘Channing Tatum’ (#219) and ‘Cate Blanchett’ (#385). References to a male actor were often linked to a specific visual element of that actor’s presence: ‘Kit [Harrington] had his kit off’ (#392) and ‘Ben Stiller’s hair’ (#212). The lack of any such commentary around female actors’ bodies may be explained by the dominance of female survey respondents, echoing earlier work on the *Lord of the Rings*:



*The Return of the King* that noted ‘female viewers ... responses concerning the male cast’s looks are common’. (Klinger 2008, 77) However, while that work went on to challenge that assertion by demonstrating the investment of such viewers in specific character traits as much as in objectification, the trailer would appear to offer less (temporal) opportunities for lengthy identification. It is unclear from these responses if this is an example of a female gaze being applied to the trailer. Indeed, the only expanded reference to a female actor (‘Kate Winslet being hammy’, #5) was less concerned with visual pleasure and more a critique of acting styles or performance issues. While the survey was not designed to explore attitudes to stardom in trailers, the evidence suggests that the visual pleasures of male stardom provide a strong memory aid to trailer audiences.

While discussions of stars or actors were almost all positive, linking the individual response to a favoured or known personality, the dominant discourse around over-revelatory trailers might imply that narrative elements were discussed with a more negative tone. Yet a lower than expected number of responses related narrative specifically to disappointment or ‘spoilers’ (in this question, at least). Three main responses related to this element: ‘thought the trailer showed the entire film’ (#523), ‘probably too spoilery’ (#190) and ‘revealed way too much’ (#448), although the last respondent couldn’t actually remember the name of the trailer involved. While the over-revelatory nature of trailers was represented in audience responses, it was not a key aspect of trailer recall in the survey. When story is discussed as a reason to remember the trailer, it is largely positive: ‘interesting story’ (#471) and ‘amazing storyline’ (#12) were common responses, with more elaboration around ‘the plot is somewhat different from the average romantic film’ (#168), ‘the story seemed very clichéd and predictable’ (#31), and ‘disappointing presentation of the storyline’ (#510). Many responses in this Section return to the idea of a ‘free sample’, where audiences read an accurate representation of feature narrative into the trailer presentation. Indeed, it is clear that some viewers invest heavily in the depiction of narrative, with one response in relation to *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* noting the trailer ‘made me worry about the movie (too many bad guys again)’ (#283), a comment that draws together narrative, franchise knowledge and pre-figurative awareness of the previous appearance of this character into a source of personal anxiety and investment.

The apparent desire for, and retention of, narrative information, alongside the expectation that the trailer will reveal something of the film’s look, goes some way to explain the high placement of aesthetic and visual elements in this Section. As in previous categories, some respondents only noted broad terms such as ‘imagery’ (#159) or ‘aesthetically interesting’ (#33) as reasons to remember a trailer. More specific comments focused on elements of film artistry, with cinematography referred to by the majority of such respondents, being referenced either directly (‘cinematography looked great’, #498), or in relation to specific textual qualities found in the trailer (‘the beautiful light in it’, #5; ‘the colours are vivid’, #168; ‘hyperreal colour’, #212). The positive tone overlapped with more specific comments on the use of visual effects as an aesthetic element. Mainstream films regularly schedule particular special effects sequences early in production so they can

be used in trailers (Johnston 2011, 142), and the largely positive tone in survey responses suggests trailer audiences continue to respond to such cues: ‘vast CG visuals’ (#228); ‘effects look good’ (#217); ‘strong visual effects’ (#253); ‘spectacular effects’ (#335), and ‘big dragon!’ (#374) Indeed, the main negative note around aesthetics was more technological in nature, with two respondents commenting on the 48 frames-per-second technology used for *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. However, the difference between ‘I remembered the HD look’ (#368) and ‘The HD looked fake’ (#156) offers a timely reminder that audience reactions to aesthetic issues are not necessarily complementary or complimentary.

The final element, soundtrack, is one that trailer producers have regularly identified as foundational to the trailer narrative (Johnston 2014; Deaville and Malkinson 2014). Soundtrack is often related directly to visual and aesthetic issues, with claims that synchronisation points of aural and visual elements ‘tend to occur with significantly greater frequency in trailers.’ (Deaville and Malkinson 2014, 126) Certainly, survey respondents identified the aural elements of music and dialogue excerpts (or the lack thereof) as key to their memory of trailer viewing but, as with the other categories above, the qualitative responses do not offer a simple answer as to what such elements added to the trailer viewing experience. The simple identification of ‘music’ (#77; #82; #92; #99; #130; #135; #177; #277; #364; #366; #370; #379; #400; #456; #506; #512) confirms the important role music plays within trailer structure and recall. The expansion to terms such as ‘epic music’ (#34; #414), ‘dramatic music’ (#280), or ‘catchy music’ (#198) suggests some attempt to identify genres or effects of particular types of music. Yet neither offers an explanation of why respondents identified that element as a key part of trailer recall and pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Those responses that go into more depth suggest that quality judgements may be involved: the *Guardians of the Galaxy* trailer was described as featuring a ‘great song’ (#35); *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* trailer featured ‘overly sentimental music’ (#212); while the trailer for *Fantastic Man* featured a ‘great track’ (#65). In each, the participant remembers the trailer soundtrack because of a judgement they make about a specific song or section of the score. Other respondents were less judgemental about a single element, but identified the regular trailer practice of using music from existing soundtracks: ‘a particular music track recognisable from other films’ in the *X-Men: Days of Future Past* trailer, for example (#288). Here, memory and viewing (listening) pleasure overlap, perhaps confirming viewer enjoyment at spotting such repetition. In all these examples, a strong aural component aided trailer recall and retention of specific elements.

Of course, soundtrack features more than just music: ‘dialogue’ (#99), ‘funny dialogue’ (#287) and ‘good catchy sound bites’ (#275) were identified by respondents as a key part of trailer recall and enjoyment. Related to the discussion of narrative above, the use of such excerpts is the strongest aural example of the ‘free sample’ approach to trailers and is a standard and accepted part of trailer content. However, the dominance of comedy trailers in these recall responses has to be linked to a recurring theme addressed in the next Section, where comedy trailers are most likely to be charged with featuring all the ‘best bits’. Dialogue-heavy comedy clips are, therefore, both an attraction and a potential cause

of audience dissatisfaction. Several responses suggest the absence of excerpts could equally aid trailer recall: 'lack of dialogue' (#225), 'no dialogue' (#326) and 'minimal dialogue' (#357) were highlighted as strong trailer elements, while 'No dwarf singing!' (#374) and 'Will Ferrell just sat there not [doing] anything' (#412) demonstrate that the absence of specific dialogue or simple silence can also be pleasurable.

The move from a broader understanding of the trailer audience's motivations to a consideration of what viewers recall about a specific trailer has allowed us to sketch key characteristics and areas, suggest reasons why certain elements might dominate, and consider what that reveals about existing trailer structures. As in Section 1, it is clear that traditional visual and aural pleasures are key to trailer recall: star images, an increase in narrative information, strong visual cues, and identifiable or memorable sonic elements. These recur in trailer elements not discussed in depth above, such as recognition of character(s), an attraction to known pleasures (sequels, adaptations), or identification of genre. Taken together, these respondent-identified trailer elements are likely the repeated aspects that are shared by individuals when discussing and linking to trailers in different social and social media-related contexts, as discussed in Section 1. Yet beyond that, what all these elements point towards is a need for academic reconsideration of trailer viewing as an enjoyable act, a source of memorable entertainment that sits alongside the more traditional informational or promotional aspects of this media text. Given that process of reconsideration however, it must be tested against those recurring and dominant popular discursive assumptions and statements made about the trailer.

### **3: 'More exciting than the movie'? The Trailer-Feature Film Relationship and Discourses of Disappointment**

Having sketched out this more complex picture of the trailer audiences through a consideration of viewing habits, searching impetus, and viewing recall, this final Section returns to the dominant discourse of trailers as misleading and over-revelatory texts. This Section takes as its central data the final question from the online survey: 'Thinking about trailers in relation to their feature films, has there been an occasion where you were disappointed with the film?' Although designed to investigate the prevailing media discourse that often paints trailers as a site of audience disappointment, we remained highly conscious of the problem of directing audiences to consider only the negative aspect of their relationship with the trailer. Once again, our respondents provided a wide range of experience that complicated any easy binary between trailer viewing and feature film disappointment, while demonstrating that there remains a strong discursive concern around an apparently contentious trailer-film relationship.

While this question saw a high response rate (n=500), with 82.96% responding 'yes' (n=409), 18.46% 'no' (n=91), that sharp quantitative 80/20 split disguises a broader spectrum that can be identified through disclaimers offered by respondents who gave additional qualitative comments. 27.7% reiterated a general 'yes' (n=137), while 7.7%

repeated 'no' or 'not really' (n=38). Existing at either end of the spectrum, these responses do little to illuminate the debate. However, despite the overwhelming number who felt there had been occasional disappointment, less than 4% of additional qualitative statements stressed such disappointment as "Too many times" (2.6%, n=13) or 'Frequently' (1%, n=5). In fact, a middle point begins to emerge around disappointment being characterised as 'Often' (9.1%, n=45) and 'Occasionally' or 'Sometimes' (7.9%, n=39). This again points to the complexity of audience response to the trailer as a general concept rather than individual text, where 'trailers' are often tarred with the 'spoiler' or 'misleading' tag, but specific trailer viewing experiences do not feature those elements. As the first two Sections have demonstrated, trailer pleasure and dissatisfaction can be derived from an individual trailer without being scaled up to represent 'all' trailers.

Given that a spectrum of attitudes is clear from that combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the Section will illuminate that range by focusing on four specific clusters of qualitative response that were identified through the coding of the results, and which usefully expand on the above findings:

- a) Accuracy
- b) Best bits in the trailer
- c) Trailer better than the film
- d) 'Spoiler' / Trailers reveal too much

### **a. Accuracy**

This was the largest cluster identified when coding qualitative responses, with 143 participants mentioning accuracy, accurate representation, or a subjective claim of mismatch with the feature film. Given our discussion in Section 1 that many viewers place weight on the informational value of trailers, this category is key to assessing where such expectations fall down. The weight of anticipation that is placed on the trailer by many of our participants recalls what Vinzenz Hediger has described as the 'tense of desire, the tense of imaginary anticipation ... a remembrance of ... the film one has not yet seen as one would remember it if one had already seen it.' (Hediger, 2004, 156) As evidenced by various respondents quoted above, there exists a strong desire for a coherent trailer-film relationship, even while many respondents also acknowledge that this is not necessarily the job of promotional materials like trailers.

One of the key themes here is the breath of relationship that respondents assume exists between the trailer and the feature film: from 'I don't expect trailers to be a representation of what the film actually is' (#343) to 'the film is over-long and indulgent, not particularly indicated in the trailer' (#232). In the latter instance, the trailer is felt to be disappointing because it didn't warn the viewer about a specific aspect of the film (duration), so it wasn't an accurate enough sample. The first comment is more open, although does go on to note 'if there's a thematically audacious trailer that plays with form and then the film is conventional... I get a bit disappointed' (#343). The divide between rigid

accuracy and a more playful or creative form can be found across multiple responses in these four clusters: audiences want information (be that narrative or aesthetic) but not too much; they want an accurate representation of the film, but not too accurate otherwise it may also be accused of revealing too much or showing too many of the ‘best bits’.

The issue of accuracy is also related to the expectations raised by trailer viewing, notably around the recurring themes of star and narrative (already key to responses around trailer choice, selection and memory), but also genre, which has not appeared as regularly in other Sections or responses. Despite Section 2 detailing stars / actors as the highest recall for trailer content, the presence of stars was also disputed in relation to trailer accuracy: ‘trailers suggest actors are in a film for more time than they are’ (#69) and ‘*Kick Ass 2...* advertised Jim Carrey in a key role but he was barely in the film.’ (#73) Here, there is a disjuncture between what audiences remember and respond to in promotional messages (the recall of star imagery) and an issue about duration of appearance. The trailer is, after all, not required to accurately represent the running time of a film, or suggest the length of a star appearance: indeed, if audiences respond to star images (as suggested above), the trailer producer would be advised (perhaps be contractually obliged) to feature such stars in the trailer. While the responses cited above can be read as part of Hediger’s sense of ‘imaginary anticipation’, where the imagined feature film has a longer appearance by the star, there is an added complication around audience expectations of such stars: ‘*Philomena* [trailer] suggested the film may contains laughs from Steve Coogan – it [the film] did not’ (#256). In relation to stars, then, the desire for trailer accuracy is concerned specifically with accuracy over durational appearance and existing star values.

Responses to accuracy around narrative and genre tended to overlap, with many respondents again describing a gap between expectation and actual feature film viewing: ‘the [trailer] storyline is exciting or mysterious which is then not substantiated in the film’ (#241); ‘trailer made it seem like there would be character exploration, but it was mostly repetitive action scenes’ (#367), or ‘[the trailer] made it look like an intelligent action movie with ‘serious’ questions to ask about the meaning of life... it really wasn’t’ (#374). What is clear from many of these responses is that respondents offer subjective value-based judgements on the trailer and/or feature as evidence of misrepresentation or perceived lack of accuracy. While it is not new to note the subjective nature or breadth of audience responses, a closer look at responses to one particular genre (horror) allows us to identify repeated characteristics of criticism. Here, trailer reception is largely positive while the film experience is negative: ‘The trailers look scary, but the films usually aren’t’ (#282), ‘horror films ... [are] more conventional than the trailer suggests’ (#290), ‘I was disappointed with the movie because it was more of a “high brow” horror film than the trailer had promised’ (#56), and ‘the [*Twilight*] trailer made it look cool, like vampires vs. vampires not [a] weird teen love story’ (#90). In all these cases, the trailer’s accuracy at representing narrative or genre information is rarely challenged – at least three of the four respondents knew it was a trailer for a horror film – but it was the expectations raised by that representation that could not be fulfilled by the subsequent feature viewing. As such, while accusations around

accuracy remain high, they are traditionally fuelled by personal value judgements and appear biased towards the feature film not delivering on the trailer's promise.

### **b) *Best bits in the trailer***

The purpose of a trailer is to make a bad picture look good and a good one better. (Harris 1953, 98)

The belief that 'all the interesting parts of a 120 minute film were in the 2 minute trailer' (#322) dominated these 92 responses. Whether identifying best 'bits', 'moments', 'parts' or 'scenes' such responses directly related that experience to feeling let down by the feature film viewing experience. While narrative and genre were briefly mentioned as context – references to comedies, blockbusters and action films were most common – the participants tended to make more personal and emotive connections. The use of strong excerpted scenes 'reduces the enjoyment' (#71), meant the film was 'not very entertaining' (#52), or that there was 'nothing else to be enjoyed in the whole film' (#120). The link to expectation-setting, or Hediger's 'imaginary anticipation' is clear again here, but in these instances the blame is more regularly placed on the trailer's shoulders as opposed to the features, as it was in the discussion of accuracy above. Only one of the 92 responses directly noted that disappointment in the feature may be 'because the film is lacking in content / plot / characterisation, rather than a major flaw in the trailer' (#137).

The accusatory tone levelled at trailers for editing all the 'best bits' of a feature appears to ignore what trailer producers such as Esther Harris note above, which is that the job of a trailer is to make a film look good, which will necessitate using strong material from the feature. One respondent noted 'you feel that the "best bits" are put together on a trailer to lure you into coming to see the film' before parenthetically adding 'which I suppose is true' (#399), the closest any of the 92 responses came to acknowledging the commercial nature of the trailer. In the full bank of 500 responses, only 13 made a direct reference to the broader industrial purpose of a trailer, but even these were often derisory: films were 'mis-marketed ... just to get "bums on seats"' (#225), identifying 'a massive gap between what is marketed and what is actually delivered' (#184) or claiming 'trailers distort the product to make it saleable to a wider audience' (#524). While there was one positive opinion ('I don't blame the trailer for my disappointment. The trailer producers are just doing their job', #237), the general cynicism about the trailer-film relationship in this category is perhaps best summed up by this respondent: 'a trailer just has to make a promise. And it doesn't care if the movie breaks that promise as long as you pay to see the movie' (#331). While there is an implicit truth to that statement – most trailers have a partly derivative relationship with the feature advertised and are designed to fuel audience interest – it represents a far darker perspective on the trailer, and issues of trailer enjoyment, than seen in the survey responses so far.



### **c) Trailer better than the film**

A more positive strain of response appears through a claim made by 10% of respondents that the trailer was actually better than the feature film. However, while this positivity challenges aspects of the previous two areas, it has to be tempered with the fact that the positive outlook on the trailer is (once again) largely fuelled by rejection of the feature: 'Pearl Harbour: trailer contained all the best bits and better ambience; film boring' (#336) or 'the trailer for *Grand Budapest Hotel* was much more entertaining than the film itself' (#26). As noted in Section 1b above, a cluster of opinions around the quality of the *Man of Steel* and *Prometheus* trailers began to emerge, with differing levels of rejection of the finished film. The *Alien* prequel trailer 'made it look better than it actually was' (#80), was 'far better than the feature film' (#514), and 'was a wonderful text in its own right, and did an absolutely brilliant job of showcasing something that promised to be thoughtful, spectacular and exciting' (#457). The trailer for *Man of Steel* was 'fantastic... [with] a better story, better pacing, better use of music, and stronger emotions than the film did' (#143), 'a great trailer but... a horrible film' (#206) and 'Excellent, frission [sic] inducing trailer. The movie was only so-so in my opinion' (#331). These instances still contain different levels of rejection of the film but their identification of stylistic and emotional connections with the trailer returns again to the different pleasures and enjoyments that audiences clearly take from trailer viewing.

Indeed, the identification of trailer style or aesthetics is where some respondents were able to see value in the trailer as an artistic form as well as a commercial or informational one: 'sometimes the rhythmical edited trailers are more exciting than the actual narrative of the full movie' (#185) or 'sometimes the trailers indicate a better execution of the story than what actually happens' (#193). Here, specific aesthetic techniques and trailer narrative are identified as important sites of enjoyment, reducing the need to dismiss or ridicule the feature.

A parallel site of trailer enjoyment and disappointment is the use of scenes that do not make it into the final cut of the feature film. Because teaser and main trailers are cut ahead of the feature film being 'locked' (in its final edited form), the trailer producer often has access to sequences and images that are then never seen in the final release. While the trailer has previously been hailed as a site of unique historic information specifically for featuring footage from lost films or new angles on known classics (McElwee 1988), our respondents were largely negative about this practice: 'trailers ... have no relevance [if] they are made up of the delete scenes' (#140), 'when trailers ... show footage that isn't in the movie at all, that disappoints me' (#404), or 'it featured a scene that did not make the final cut ... which was disappointing' (#438). Given the recent New Zealand court decision to uphold a complaint about a *Jack Reacher* television trailer that used a shot that didn't feature in the film (Child 2013), the prominence of this element of trailer content may become more contentious. It is clear from these results that some viewers feel this is an instance where the trailer-film relationship may be broken, and where, once again, the narrative or visual 'free sample' has no direct correlation to the feature film experience.

#### **d) 'Spoiler' / Trailers reveal too much**

Debates around the alleged spoiling nature of trailers, and other media texts and audience interaction, have expanded rapidly over the last few years in both academic and popular forums. In late 2015 alone, the directors of three summer blockbusters (*Jurassic World*, *Terminator: Genysis*, and *Ant Man*) all expressed frustration at the decision of studio marketing departments to reveal key narrative information or visual imagery. (see Johnston 2015) As the above discussion around both accuracy and 'best bits' has demonstrated, audiences frequently perceive a strong connection between the trailer and the film, often betray an ambivalence about the trailer's commercial nature, and regularly offer personal emotional and value-laden connections to judge the success or failure of a specific trailer-film relationship. In so doing, our respondents challenge easy linear paratextual or pre-figurative accounts of that trailer-film interaction. In its place, we find a spectrum of responses where the trailer and film are blamed for not delivering the anticipated pleasure.

The responses analysed in this final area shift the focus a little, in that they deal exclusively with narrative revelations. As such, they bring the discussion around disappointment and trailer expectations full circle, returning us to debates on accuracy and misrepresentation, but with a new slant: that the trailer is too accurate. In these responses, the trailer is criticised for expressing too scrupulously narrative or visual events, for not obfuscating or misleading, but presenting a precise (often too precise) account of the feature. In contrast to accusations that the trailer was not a true representation, here knowledge is the key problem: 'too much was shown in the trailer' (#92), 'there's no point in watching anything if every plot point ... has been revealed beforehand' (#146), 'You can see the whole movie in this trailer' (#77). Unlike parallel discussions around the use of spoilers in fan communities, where fans 'accrue discursive fan power ... this practice is linked to knowledge, and to enforcing fan discussions and ways of reading the text' (Williams 2004, 3), it is possible to read our respondents' answers as expressing feelings of powerlessness, having knowledge foisted upon them rather than being respected as a participant in knowledge production. Yet it is worth contrasting such responses with the discussion of trailer usage in Section 1, where respondents regularly identified the trailer as part of a communal act of sharing, an act that included the display of knowledge, fan-based discussion and the creation of specific readings of the trailer text.

As with many spoiler debates, the issue is where narrative information tips over into narrative revelation, particularly around 'the twist' or elements of the feature's 'third act'. One respondent highlighted a *Terminator Salvation* trailer that 'completely ruined the "Twist" ... I'll always wonder if I might have enjoyed the film more had I not known about it already' (#49). This offers a different emphasis to Hediger's notion of 'the tense of imaginary anticipation' (2004, 156) where the respondent considers the 'imaginary enjoyment' of an unspoiled viewing experience. Another response notes that 'modern trailers seem to reveal too much about conclusions of the film' (#345). While there is again a temporal issue here – a trailer can only be proven to have revealed too much in hindsight and review – this response was echoed in others, demonstrating that many media and trailer-savvy viewers

insist that they can 'read' the feature film based on the range of material offered in the trailer. Again, unlike the case of 'imaginary anticipation', this is 'imaginary rejection' based on narrative and structural speculation.

This repeated claim sets up an apparent division between the acts of avid fan sharing and discussion, regular shot-by-shot breakdowns of new trailers on popular websites (where particular readings are enforced), and our respondents' claim that trailers are now too spoiler-heavy. Yet other responses suggest possible reasons for this discursive pattern, placing the trailer back in the larger pre-figurative model of pre-release promotional materials. The over-revelatory trailer is linked, by several respondents, to 'wider media "hype" that ruins the film because it builds it up too much' (#379), claims that 'the best bits ... are ruined as we've seen them hundreds of times before going to see the film' (#345) and 'the current trend to analyse trailers in detail' (#208). Here, the larger media saturation around particular films, and the creation of shot-by-shot breakdowns by internet sites, may provide context for discursive claims about the spoiler trailer. Returning to the start of this article, these respondents see the wider access and searchable nature of the current online-dominated trailer experience, and the broader internet embrace and use of the trailer, as key determinants of why they feel trailers reveal too much.

## Conclusion

[M]ovie audiences reported higher expectations ... after seeing a preview (Eastman, Bradbury, & Nemes 1985, 56)

Trailers are not a fail-safe method of knowing what the film will be like. (#87)

Our Watching the Trailer research project began as an attempt to understand how audiences interact with the trailer and to try to interrogate and complicate the binary that has grown up around trailers as annoying cinematic bullies and as active audience texts. We were also concerned with moving beyond simple exchange models where audiences were more or less likely to view the film, or where audience reactions were explored only in relation to one specific feature film. As the data presented has demonstrated, the relationship between trailer and viewer is as contested as the one that viewers have constructed between trailer and feature film. However, it has become clear through the analysis of our survey results that emotion, cultural value and expectation are key to understanding the trailer audience response. Certainly, the trailer has informational value, but trailer viewing is led as much by pre-existing knowledge and sources of pleasure, particularly around stars, franchises, adaptation and genre, than by a simple linear paratextual model. While our respondents found fault with trailers, particularly around their revelation of film knowledge, they also described them as exciting, amusing, engaging, mysterious, intelligent, and compelling: an emotional and affective response that depends

on the specific and personal relationship as much as a broader functional notion of what the trailer should be and do.

While this research has opened up new avenues to understanding the trailer audience, and indeed the response of audiences to media promotional texts in general, it raised as many questions as it answered. The general absence of knowledge around trailer production, and particularly the lack of acceptance around the commercial function of the trailer, was a surprise to us. The dominance of a model of the trailer unproblematically offering an accurate ‘free sample’ of the future film (including where it was tipped over from accurate into over-revelatory) was expected, but the ferocity with which our respondents clung to this idea, and berated both trailer and film for straying from that relationship, was not. Not only does this suggest there is more to be done to understand why that model dominates (particularly when respondents also able to criticise trailer structure in other regards), it may point to the need for more focus group-led research on top of quantitative-qualitative surveys.

What our research reveals is the spectrum of trailer-viewer interaction, not necessarily in the range of things our respondents do with trailers – none admitted to making spoof trailers, producing shot-by-shot breakdowns, or creating their own archives – but in the way that trailers function within their media-heavy lives: they are used as evidence in arguments with partners and friends; viewed as research for Christmas present buying; shared on social media to satisfy a communal fan interest; watched to recreate a nostalgic viewing experience; found as part of a research for a university essay; embraced as a better version of much-loved narrative; and enjoyed because of the sight of a naked Kit Harrington. Screened, revisited, discovered and occasionally avoided – the emotional and personal connections, the joy and the rage they cause – to us these are the strongest results of this research, these are the recurring responses that remind us that the trailer is not just a ‘coming attraction’, but a central part of the media viewing world we inhabit.

### **Biographical notes:**

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## **Appendix A: Film / trailer titles identified in response to Q1: What was the last trailer you watched?**

The results are listed in order of number of responses, highest to lowest. Titles are listed using our respondents own words where possible, therefore a film's full or sub-title are not always present (e.g. *Anchorman 2* and *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues*).

	Film title	No. of responses
1	<i>The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug</i> (2013)	29
2	Don't remember	27
3	<i>The Amazing Spider Man 2</i> (2014)	22
4	<i>The Secret Life of Walter Mitty</i> (2013)	20
5	<i>Anchorman 2</i> (2013)	16
6=	<i>Gravity</i> (2013)	15
	<i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i> (2013)	15
8	<i>Godzilla</i> (2014)	14
9=	<i>Frozen</i> (2013)	10
	<i>Saving Mr Banks</i> (2013)	10
	<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (2013)	10
12=	<i>The LEGO Movie</i> (2014)	9
	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> (2014)	9
14=	<i>American Hustle</i> (2013)	8
	<i>Her</i> (2013)	8
16=	<i>The Hunger Games : Catching Fire</i> (2013)	7
	<i>Dallas Buyer's Club</i> (2013)	7
18=	<i>Thor: The Dark World / Thor 2</i> (2013)	6
	<i>Muppets 2 / Muppets Most Wanted</i> (2014)	6
	<i>Nymphomaniac</i> (2013)	6
	<i>Robocop</i> (2014)	6
	<i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (2014)	6
23	<i>Monuments Men</i> (2014)	5
<b>4 responses per film title</b>		
24=	<i>Blue is the Warmest Colour</i> (2013); <i>Kill Your Darlings</i> (2013); <i>Transcendance</i> (2014); <i>Nebraska</i> (2013); <i>Pompeii</i> (2014); <i>Inside Llewellyn Davis</i> (2013); <i>Jupiter Ascending</i> (2014); <i>Maleficent</i> (2014); <i>21 Jump Street 2 / 22 Jump Street</i> (2014)	
<b>3 responses per film title</b>		
33=	<i>Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom</i> (2013); <i>Divergent</i> (2014); <i>Machete Kills</i> (2013); <i>Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit</i> (2014); <i>The Butler</i> (2013); <i>X-Men: Days of Future Past</i> (2014); <i>Blue Jasmine</i> (2013); <i>The Counsellor</i> (2013); <i>Only Lovers Left Alive</i> (2013); <i>Edge of Tomorrow</i> (2014); <i>Noah</i> (2014); <i>Winter's Tale</i> (2014); <i>Veronica Mars Movie</i> (2014); <i>Cuban Fury</i> (2014); <i>The Book Thief</i> (2013); <i>Non-Stop</i> (2014)	
<b>2 responses per film title</b>		
49=	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (2014); <i>Rust and Bone</i> (2012); <i>Dhoom 3</i> (2013); <i>Mr Peabody and Sherman</i> (2014); <i>The World's End</i> (2013); <i>Carrie</i> (2013); <i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> (2014); <i>Don Jon</i> (2013); <i>Cinema Paradiso</i> (2013 re-release); <i>Interstellar</i> (2014); <i>47 Ronin</i> (2013); <i>How to Train Your Dragon 2</i> (2014); <i>The Railway Man</i> (2013); <i>Ride Along</i> (2014); <i>August: Osage County</i> (2013); <i>The Raid 2</i> (2014); <i>Star Trek: Into Darkness</i> (2013); <i>300: Rise of an Empire</i> (2014)	
<b>1 response per film title</b>		
67=	<i>Captain Phillips</i> (2013); <i>The Punk Singer</i> (2013); <i>Out of the Furnace</i> (2013); <i>Les Garçons</i>	

	<p><i>et Guillaume</i> (2013); <i>In Secret</i> (2013); <i>Patrik 1.5</i> (2008); <i>Red 2</i> (2013); <i>Labour Day</i> (2013); <i>Frances Ha</i> (2012); <i>Rush</i> (2013); <i>The Interpreter</i> (2005); <i>Our Idiot Brother</i> (2011); <i>The Life of Emile Zola</i> (1937); <i>The Last of Us</i> (2013); <i>Beloved</i> (1998 [?]); <i>Wise Blood</i> (1979); <i>Alter Egos</i> (2012); <i>Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?</i> (2013); <i>Robin Hood</i> (2010); <i>The Box Trolls</i> (2014); <i>Reasonable Doubt</i> (2014); <i>Gimme Shelter</i> (2013); <i>Blackfish</i> (2013); <i>Robot &amp; Frank</i> (2012); <i>The Congress</i> (2013); <i>Visitors</i> (2013); <i>Brass Teapot</i> (2012); <i>The Stranger</i> (2011); <i>Philomena</i> (2013); <i>Broken Circle Breakdown</i> (2012); <i>I, Frankenstein</i> (2014); <i>The Heat</i> (2013); <i>The Thing</i> (2011); <i>2 Guns</i> (2013); <i>Mega Shark vs Mecha Shark</i> (2014); <i>Pow[d]er Room</i> (2013); <i>Twice Born</i> (2012); <i>Moshi Monsters Movie</i> (2013); <i>Chalet Girl</i> (2011); <i>Atonement</i> (2007); <i>Oldboy</i> (2013); <i>Akeelah and the Bee</i> (2006); <i>XXY</i> (2007); <i>After Earth</i> (2013); <i>The Innocents</i> (1961); <i>Leviathan</i> (2012 documentary); <i>The Darkest Hour</i> (2011); <i>One Day</i> (2011); <i>The Double</i> (2013); <i>The Marked One</i> (1963); <i>Kill Bill 2</i> (2004); <i>Russian Ark</i> (2002); <i>Kusursuzlar</i> (2013); <i>Sonrie</i> (2012); <i>Presentimientos</i> (2013); <i>Kite</i> (2014); <i>What a Girl Wants</i> (2003); <i>Babies</i> (2010); <i>Devil's Due</i> (2014); <i>Cloud Atlas</i> (2012); <i>Rio 2</i> (2014); <i>Son of God</i> (2014); <i>Enders Game</i> (2013); <i>The Last Stand</i> (2013); <i>Happiness for Sale</i> (2013); <i>Rushmore</i> (1998); <i>She</i> (1965); <i>Calvary</i> (2014); <i>The Skin I'm In</i> (2012); <i>Fantastic Man: A Film About William Onyeabor</i> (2015 short); <i>Punch Drunk Love</i> (2002); <i>Fast and Furious 7</i> (2015); <i>The Other Woman</i> (2014); <i>Tim's Vermeer</i> (2013); <i>Wolf Creek 2</i> (2013); <i>The Room</i> (2003); <i>Captain Harlock</i> (2010); <i>Sabotage</i> (2014); <i>Stop the Pounding Heart</i> (2013); <i>Run</i> (2013); <i>Lord of Rings</i> (2001-03); <i>Boys of Abu Ghraib</i> (2014); <i>Playing for Keeps</i> (2012); <i>American Mary</i> (2012); <i>Smetto quando voglio</i> (2014); <i>Island of Lemurs</i> (2014 short); <i>The Invisible Woman</i> (2014); <i>Una donna per amica</i> (2014); <i>Short Term 12</i> (2013)</p>	
156	'series for upcoming cinema release'	1
157	Genre but no title (i.e. 'rom com')	2
159	No answer	1
	<b>Television show title</b>	<b>No. of responses</b>
1	<i>Sherlock</i> (BBC 2010-)	8
2=	<i>Doctor Who</i> (BBC 1963-)	3
	<i>Game of Thrones</i> season 4 (HBO 2014)	3
4	'BBC original drama'	2
	'a TV show'; 'TV series trailer'	2
	<b>1 response per television programme title</b>	
6=	<p><i>The Good Wife</i> (CBS 2009-16); <i>Tatort</i> (German TV series; 1971-); <i>Constantinople</i> (BBC 2013); <i>Supernatural</i> 'Season 9' (Warner Bros. 2005-); <i>The Happenings</i> (UK TV Watch 2013); <i>Teen Wolf</i> 'Season 3b' (MGM 2011-); Channel 4 Psychopaths Night (2014); <i>Community</i> 'Season 5' (NBC 2009-15); <i>TURBO Fast</i> (Netflix 2013-); <i>House of Cards</i> 'Season 2' (Netflix 2013-); <i>Girls</i> 'Season 3' (HBO 2012-); <i>Sherlock Interactive</i>; <i>Vampire Academy</i> (fan series 2015); <i>Flowers in the Attic</i> (Lifetime TV movie 2014); <i>Game of Thrones</i> '3<sup>rd</sup> season DVD release'; <i>The Musketeers</i> (BBC 2014-16); <i>Silk</i> (BBC 2001-); <i>Heroes Reborn</i> (NBC 2015-16); <i>Shetland</i> (ITV 2013-); '1WW debate' (BBC 2014)</p>	
	<b>Videogame title</b>	<b>No. of responses</b>
1=	<p><i>Injustice: Gods Among Us</i> (2013); <i>Thief</i> (2013); <i>Assassin's Creed: Black Flag</i> (2013)</p>	1

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Out of 525 responses to the question ‘what was the last trailer you viewed?’ we received 155 individual film titles, 26 television programme titles, and three video game titles (see Appendix A for the full list). Some of the bigger trailer releases during the survey period scored highly: for example, *The Hobbit: The Desolation Smaug* (2013) with 29 responses, or *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) with 22 responses. 68 film titles were mentioned more than once, with 89 titles only mentioned by one respondent. The latter list was particularly eclectic, covering films such as *Captain Harlock* (2013), *Wolf Creek 2* (2013), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and *Atonement* (2007). The clustering of responses around some of the larger blockbuster trailers could speak to the success of such marketing campaigns; however, the second highest response to that question was ‘I don’t remember’, which doesn’t speak as highly of viewer retention.

<sup>2</sup> Full demographic breakdown: 14-21 years (n=27, 5%); 22-25 years (n=59, 11%); 26-30 years (n=151, 29%); 31-40 (n=145, 28%); 41-50 (n=75, 14%); 51-60 (n=42, 8%); 61+ (n=15, 3%); no answer (n=11, 2%). 4 participants indicated they were transgender, while 5 declined to state this information.

<sup>3</sup> Our thanks to Barbara Klinger for pointing out the potential for exploring this issue in future trailer audience work, and the links it may offer with, for example, the work on non-fans by Jonathan Gray (2003).

<sup>4</sup> A Canadian research project, Trailaurality ([www.trailaurality.com](http://www.trailaurality.com)), has focused on the relationship between trailers and music, including its own online survey. However, its findings (and survey) do not appear to have had any effect on the responses found in our data.