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# RESEARCHING HISTORICAL PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS: TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY

Keith M. Johnston

*Promotional materials – such as posters, trailers, press/campaign books, lobby cards – have been part of the commercial film industry for almost as long as there have been films to advertise. The history of these materials, their creators, and the industries that produced them remains largely unexplored territory in film and media history, even while academic interest in such materials has increased over the last decade. This article argues that much of the existing scholarly work on promotional materials – including the recent ‘paratextual turn’ – lacks a strong methodology for approaching, selecting and analysing such materials. Through an exploration of academic theories and approaches currently used within historical promotional material scholarship, the article considers the limitations found in the current dominance of textual studies, and proposes new methodological steps to help refine and enhance the future of studies of historical promotional materials.*

Historical work at the intermedial borders can generate, in the best historiographical sense, new understandings of the past that produce progressive contexts by which to mobilise the future today.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that questions of method are also questions of tradition and legacy.<sup>2</sup>

This article has been a long time in gestation – the result of two decades worth of experience arguing for, and defending, the use of promotional materials as a unique and valuable resource for film and media history.<sup>3</sup> The lack of parallel histories that consider the growth and impact of promotional materials across different media and platforms – and in terms of their aesthetic, industrial, technological or social purpose – has always been a particular lacuna within media

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studies. The recent shift to concentrate on the relationship between promotional materials and the finished feature film or television programme – what might be called the paratextual turn – may have raised the profile of such materials. Yet it has rarely considered the historical development and placement of such industrially created advertisements.

The commercial film industries that developed in the early years of the twentieth century quickly saw the need to publicise, promote and differentiate their products. Initially driven by ‘a desire to duplicate modern selling techniques as closely as possible’, including successful trends in advertising such as posters, magazines, and merchandise tie-ins, and inspired by the work of consumer-focused ad agencies, film companies adapted these elements to fit their own industry-specific requirements.<sup>4</sup> As Janet Staiger has stressed, several significant shifts in the fledgling industry (towards individualised product content, a coherent distribution-exhibition structure, and creating films of a significant length) had to happen before a more regularised promotional system was developed.<sup>5</sup> From 1915 on, in parallel to the industrialisation and centralisation of the American film production industry in California, the New York headquarters of the major studios utilised film-specific promotional approaches to posters, press books, slides, and trailers. New York was also the site of National Screen Service Corporation (NSS): formed in 1919 to help the studios design and deliver effective promotional campaigns, NSS grew to include the production and distribution of trailers, posters, lobby cards, press books, and radio and television advertising for almost all the major studios. Since these earliest days through to digital marketing techniques of the twenty-first century, the production, distribution, and exhibition of promotional materials has run in parallel with the film industry; yet remains overlooked within film history. A key component in the economic success of the Hollywood film industry, the promotional activities of studio marketing departments, NSS, and other companies produced creative advertising work that sat alongside, and was crucially intertwined with, the Hollywood studio system. However, studies of the historical materials that were created and released, and the companies that produced them, can be as elusive and ephemeral as the materials themselves.

To focus attention on these historical ‘epiphenomena’ that surround the media text, and which contribute to the ‘consumable identity’ of that text, the article will adopt the umbrella term ‘promotional materials’.<sup>6</sup> Any such term has to deal with clear discursive overlaps within popular, industrial and academic work around advertising, marketing, and publicity, even while the three most historically dominant promotional materials (posters, trailers, and press or campaign books) exist interchangeably within, or across, such categories. The choice of ‘promotional’ materials is partly a statement of preference in regard to other, related, terms such as advertising, exploitation, or showmanship. As noted above, film and media promotion has borrowed liberally from the advertising and marketing industries since its beginning, but texts such as the film trailer are rarely industrially described as advertisements, and do not fall under the same classification framework.<sup>7</sup> While press/campaign books discuss exploitation strategies, they are only one aspect of the whole promotional campaign; with trade journal references to showmanship referring, on the whole, to exhibition-specific approaches taken by

cinema managers. Adopting ‘promotional materials’ as the key term therefore allows for the inclusion of a range of historical materials, and is a first step in understanding the methodological lessons that might be learned or developed from existing scholarship on promotional practices.

Historically, the poster, trailer and press/campaign book are the most dominant materials found in industrial, popular and academic contexts, although the recent rise of official and unofficial websites, online aggregators, and fan blogs has begun to challenge that. Given the lack of methodological reflection on how best to approach those three dominant promotional forms, the article will focus on industrially created materials produced before the 1980s. This concentration on a pre-digital age considers how best to approach the historical moment of production, distribution and exhibition, but will, of necessity, additionally engage with the apparent ubiquity and availability of promotional materials through contemporary digital resources such as Google Image or YouTube. Such online resources suggest access while eliding gaps, absences and issues of materiality. That focus on the industrial and the historical is not to ignore forms such as fan-produced versions of promotional material, or to suggest that fan-based work simply sprang up in the internet age.<sup>8</sup> There are potent examples of fans producing their own intermedial versions of promotional content, and this offers a parallel trend worthy of investigation.<sup>9</sup> Here, the use of industrially created promotional materials aims to create a better understanding of the historical precedents (structure, aesthetics, technology, industry) to which both industrial and fan work has responded in the form of rejection, parody, or creative extension.

The perimeters and preferences outlined above remain essential for the article’s engagement with questions of historical method, particularly around selection and justification of sources, spatio-temporal concerns, materiality, and the process of self-reflection. It begins by reflecting on its own methodological approach, before exploring different themes that emerge within existing historical promotional scholarship. Moving on to demonstrate what current methodological gaps might reveal about the field’s understanding of different textual, archival or material issues, the article will consider whether that has undermined the place of those materials within academic debate. In so doing, it will contribute to a wider justification of these materials as unique historical resources that need to be treated and understood in their own right, not simply as adjuncts of the source text. Concluding with a series of recommendations for future work, the article aims to revitalise the discussion around historical studies of promotional materials in order to demonstrate what is lost for intermedial histories if such materials are overlooked.

## Current Methods

Most studies of promotional material (historical and contemporary) exist ‘on the cusp of a transition from generalist to specialist... a subject of study for some, but a dedicated calling for very few’.<sup>10</sup> The work considered here ranges across a disparate group of scholars who are interested in one or more elements within the creation, content, reception and use of a range of promotional materials. Much of

this scholarship emerges from film, media and cultural studies although there is a strong parallel tradition of work within advertising, computing, economics, and marketing communication that tends to focus on the industrial effectiveness of promotional materials over their broader cultural content or value.<sup>11</sup> There is little crossover between these approaches and those that have developed within film, media and cultural studies since the 1990s, and which remains the broad focus here. In terms of the historical materials that have featured in that latter scholarship, the focus has fallen almost exclusively on the film trailer, film posters, and campaign or press books.<sup>12</sup>

Across this work, many studies begin by justifying the existence of their object of promotional study: claims of the industrial or economic power of such materials (dollar or pound amounts that the film industry spends on promotional activities), discussions of stylistic or creative intent (reclaiming the trailer or poster as art), notes on ephemerality (historical deletion of materials, scarcity of archival sources), assertions of audience demand, dislike, or digital involvement (trailers breaking YouTube records, accounts of fan-produced parodic work), or discussions of the growing omnipresence of these media forms. While all are solid justifications for an object of analysis, such framings also function as statements about the precarious cultural (or scholarly) value of their central texts, likely due to recurring claims around their ephemeral status. Whilst the notion of studying popular culture may be mainstream across media and cultural studies, it seems clear that the continued insecurity about the place, popularity and presence of such promotional texts is driven by two issues: debates over the coherency of the field(s) that promotional materials fall within, and a lack of methodological certainty and rigour across the existing work that fits within that field.

An interest in popular media culture does not, of course, remove certain elite boundaries within those academic disciplines that engage with promotional materials; boundaries that can be theoretical and methodological as well as a concern over the suitability of specific materials or texts for analysis. For many years, promotional materials have laboured under theoretical terms that curtail their (academic) influence and content: ancillary, ephemeral, epiphenomena, films that 'sell', satellite text, and most recently, paratext. In each case, the theoretical insistence on the promotional material as a secondary or tertiary text stresses a belief such materials are only useful in light of what they reveal about a central media text (normally a feature film or television programme). The elision of promotional materials and their status as an ancillary text (or paratext) is not a new phenomenon: in one of the key texts on approaches to film history, the one paragraph on film advertising claims 'advertising discourse on the cinema did help to condition audience expectations and to establish the terms by which a film would be judged'.<sup>13</sup> The idea of establishing terms – or, to use a more potent phrase, to create a 'consumable identity' for a film – has been nuanced by later work, as will be considered below.<sup>14</sup> The recent paratextual turn can be read as reinforcing the hierarchical structure between promotional material and media text that currently dominates scholarly approaches.<sup>15</sup> All that being said, it is not the intention here to dismantle or replace the paratextual turn, but to use this overview of existing scholarship to advocate for the development of methodological principles that

allow future work on historical promotional materials to proceed on firmer footing, whatever their theoretical leaning.<sup>16</sup>

To tease out some of the methodological issues involved, and to develop a specific critique around selection criteria (or the lack thereof) in promotional scholarship, it is first important to consider the selection process of academic work covered in this section and through the article. An initial collation of data was conducted through searches in institutional library and popular databases using the following terms: promotional materials, trailers, posters, press books, campaign books, paratexts, satellite texts, ephemera, and advertising. The results of that search were triangulated with online bibliographies from two relevant scholarly projects and those from the leading monographs and PhD theses in the field.<sup>17</sup> Through this process, the project discovered 119 individual works on different promotional materials: books (22), book chapters (14) and articles (83): this spans early pieces on trailer production from industry practitioners John Huntley and Esther Harris, and the first academic accounts (from Stephen Heath and Barbara Klinger), with a clear dominance of scholarship from the twenty-first century expansion of interest (85 pieces in total).<sup>18</sup> That range additionally includes popular books such as *50 Years of Movie Posters: Hollywood's Golden Era*, *Those Great Movie Ads* and *The International Film Poster* which contain a range of posters and press book material.<sup>19</sup> From undertaking an overview across that range of scholarship, certain key approaches were identified: audiences, reception, and textual.<sup>20</sup>

Audience studies has becoming increasingly interested in the relationship between 'pre-figurative' promotional materials and audience discourse and knowledge, with an early intervention arguing for 'more research on each of the fragments and stages of this entire process... [to] link the analysis of ancillary materials with a renewed emphasis on how actual, live viewers use them as part of their film-watching'.<sup>21</sup> The propositions for doing this work have been taken up in subsequent audience studies projects, the most notable being those that stress the pre-figurative relationship between promotional materials for media franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-03) or *The Hobbit* (2012-14) and the audience.<sup>22</sup> Given the emphasis on appropriate methods for studying the complexity of audiences, the original call for research on the ancillary materials themselves has not been as well developed in this work.<sup>23</sup> While noting the overwhelming task of collecting all examples of promotional materials (in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*), Barker, Mathijs and Trobia elide the precise search and selection criteria undertaken. Discussions of a 'sweeping search', of 'gathering and analysing' materials, and wanting to include 'promotion and publicity (evidence of straightforward publicity for the release of the films)' is, in the body of the article and the edited collection, sidelined in favour of more traditional reception studies sources: press and critical discourse.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps unavoidably, the audience and memory focus of such work reduces the historical specificity of the promotional material to a frame, and something audiences respond to. There is no particular interrogation of how best to analyse the content or production of the materials in their own right.

While still interested in broader conceptions of the audience, historically focused reception studies have offered a route to a discursive and aesthetic understanding of individual promotional materials.<sup>25</sup> Barbara Klinger's 1994 study of

promotional campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s, with its focus on the films of Douglas Sirk, offers a compelling example where textual evidence from posters, trailers and press/campaigns books is marshalled to explore a specific historical moment where censorship, social change, and culture helped construct the 'generic identity for *Written on the Wind* and other melodramas'.<sup>26</sup> While it has now become traditional to see promotional materials marshalled for claims about genre identity, this early attempt offers a strong link to reception studies' interests in both historical and critical contexts.<sup>27</sup> Yet the early appearance of promotional materials as historically distinct sources has not meant a larger adoption or exploration throughout this field.

Despite a clear awareness that 'the discourse of reception' starts well before reviews are published, the critique that reception studies privileges 'reviews over other kinds of ancillary materials' highlights how promotional materials are often absent from this field.<sup>28</sup> The place of such materials often mirrors that found within audience studies: referred to, and occasionally analysed, but with little focus on the specific content or form of the material, and how that might affect the analysis undertaken. That said, two different articles that 'examine how items other than reviews structured ... reception' offer a potent example of the advantages of promotional material analysis.<sup>29</sup> Mark Jancovich's analysis of the 'generic term[s] used ... in the marketing campaigns' of the 1939–46 series of Sherlock Holmes films and Richard Kraszewski's work on newspaper advertising for Blaxploitation films in the 1970s engage with different promotional materials but adopt similar approaches to consider how 'the film companies suggested ways in which the films could be sold to audiences'.<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on how promotional materials can construct historically situated discursive frameworks within which audiences understand films and genres reiterates the importance of Klinger's earlier work, and relies on specific examples of textual and discursive content of the materials.

The more textual approach to historical promotional materials considers them in terms of the evidence they offer to other theoretical interests around genre, stardom, adaptation, or industrial strategy.<sup>31</sup> Methodologically, such work tends to be less interested in exploring what might set the promotional material apart as a historical case study, preferring to see the materials as existing as part of mainstream film historical narratives. In this sense, the promotional material is an important historical artefact for scholars interested in understanding a range of broader practices within the different ideological and analytical perspectives brought to bear on the film industry. In the case of film authorship, for example, promotional materials such as the trailer can allow for a different angle on figures such as Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, either from an aesthetic or industrial standpoint.<sup>32</sup> More significantly for this study, however, are those studies that take a textual approach to tease out discrete moments within the history of film posters, film pressbooks, and film trailers from the silent era through the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Yet while such studies reveal how promotional materials contain different approaches and strategies, and are not simply mirrors of the feature film being advertised, they remain in the minority.

There are, of course, significant archival restraints on, and reasons for, the 'absence of any adequate historical discussion of ... film publicity and

advertising'.<sup>34</sup> The oft-claimed ephemeral nature of the poster, trailer, or press book (and the organisations that produced them) means a limited amount of primary documentation around production, distribution and exhibition has survived. Historical studies are then reliant on the collection of 'piecemeal evidence from divergent sources'.<sup>35</sup> An account of 'the literal typology of the pressbooks' may be rooted in wider historical approaches but more remains to be said about the methodological tools needed to explore the historical specificity of the pressbook itself, or what the available (albeit restricted) studio documentation might reveal about historical gaps in that existing typology.<sup>36</sup> The absence of historical documentation has not been a barrier for other areas of film and media history, and existing methods and materials from media history are equally applicable to historical promotional materials. What the field currently lacks, however, is more methodological reflection on the limitations and opportunities for studying both the history of promotional materials and the content of historical promotional materials.

It is possible to accept that promotional materials are 'complex cultural artefacts with a range of unstable and variable meanings dependent on context, audience and the historical moment at which they appear' without necessarily adopting a reception or audience-focus.<sup>37</sup> The literature surveyed here revealed an absence of rigour and reflection in relation to both corpus generation, despite the potential strength of the theoretical framework or analytical technique being adopted. As noted above, there is an ongoing debate within reception studies about the centrality of press-based critical writing, and how to select (and reflect upon) sources that challenge claims of homogeneity, account for political bias, regional coverage, or include synchronic and/or diachronic studies. Using historical promotional materials requires a similar reflection on how the analysis of such materials needs a different method than that used to analyse the discursive strategies of film critics, or the textual qualities of feature films or television programmes. There remains little discussion or reflection around how to analyse press book content as distinct from a film poster or a lobby card: they all offer a historical window into the industrial positioning of a film, potentially in relation to genre, stars, adaptation, director and other qualities. But what is the historically contingent nature of such materials, and how should we approach them in terms of content and context?

## **Towards A New Methodology for Promotional Studies**

Given the scholarship context outlined above, more reflection is needed on how methods are chosen, developed and applied to studies utilising promotional materials, and how these can illuminate the form, content and history of the chosen materials. Adapting the call for 'more research on each of the fragments and stages of this entire process', this section will begin to think through how and why these specific promotional 'fragments' are chosen for study, with the intention of building a firmer methodological understanding of how to approach, collate and analyse such materials.<sup>38</sup> This will, of necessity, consider how to address any methodological gaps, and how to find and adapt the tools needed to undertake it. To do this, the following sections will tease out issues relating to selection, with a



consideration of the often-overlooked spatial, temporal and material nature of the items under study.

Methods ‘are ways of organising the production and consumption of all material and aesthetic goods. Without a method, any method, there is literally no way to produce or consume [a promotional material]’.<sup>39</sup> Echoing an earlier point, there are a small group of scholars, who work on promotional materials on a regular basis, and who are clearly attempting to expand its visibility and range; equally, there are a wider number of scholars who use promotional materials in one article, or as a passing example in a larger piece. Understanding and refining methodologies suitable for the study of promotional materials – and being critical of existing theoretical legacies from media, film or literature studies that may not account for the specificity of promotional texts – is a crucial step for both sets of scholars. Given the criticism of qualitative research (within which most promotional studies sit) as having a ‘low degree of specification and documentation of analytical procedures; data analysis remains the Achilles heel of qualitative media studies’, this article will now focus on one area of qualitative methodology: data collection and analysis, understood here as the selection and justification of sources.<sup>40</sup> Given the exploration of historical promotional material, the article will go on to explore spatial, temporal and material issues as they relate to such materials, and argue for methodological refinements that may allow future research to account for those qualities.

## Selection and Justification

What’s really hard... is to answer the question of how we ascertain which flow audiences experience. Which paratexts are loud and which paratexts are quiet? Which are the ones we cannot avoid and which are the ones we are more likely to avoid?<sup>41</sup>

Jonathan Gray’s pertinent questions regarding paratextual work overlook a crucial methodological step: how do ‘we’ begin to research, select and justify a suitable range of materials? Given the dominance of textual readings within studies of promotional materials, this speaks to a compelling methodological absence: source selection, or how the researcher generated the corpus of texts that is to be analysed. This is not simply an exercise in boundary setting: the selection of materials represents the first moment at which methodological rigour can be demonstrated. In trailer studies this oversight has been criticised as a lack of ‘a transparent, unbiased process... [where] these studies become potentially influenced by one person’s, or one archive’s, understanding of a trailer’.<sup>42</sup> This section pursues this idea by considering how the issue of process and selection echoes across promotional studies; specifically, how *a priori* assumptions appear to lead selection decisions, and lack any reflection of how collection and analysis could reveal potential bias or selectivity on the part of the researcher.

Corpus selection in many of the articles sourced for this study is clearly led by a specific research focus: the generic identity of the 1940s Sherlock Holmes series, 1970s Blaxploitation films, the marketing campaign for *Cloverfield* (2008), or the

film trailers of Jean-Luc Godard.<sup>43</sup> In book-length studies of promotional materials, selection criteria or processes may be more opaque. Gray's *Show Sold Separately* uses the Internet Movie Poster Awards website ([www.impawards.com](http://www.impawards.com)) to make a case about the standardisation of posters within genre categories, but there is little on how the chosen posters were selected, why the focus falls on the specific examples or genres selected, or why a 30-year period of time is specified.<sup>44</sup> My monograph *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* offers a justification of its 'unified analysis' method of historically informed close reading, notes that research questions arose from a viewing of 1000 trailers, but the actual rigour of its source selection varies across the topic of each chapter (and is largely reliant on archival availability of either trailers or trailer scripts).<sup>45</sup> Kernan's *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* is stronger in this regard, partially detailing the viewing and winnowing process from 700 trailers down to 27 case studies that 'had the special features of audience address ... [and] adequate evidence of the range of typical characteristics of trailers'.<sup>46</sup> Kernan does note 'there are so many gray areas in some of these [analytical] categories ... selection was more intuitive than systematic', additionally noting all 700 trailers were from the one archival source, a potential limitation.<sup>47</sup>

The most important note here is the broad lack of reflection on data collection found across the assembled literature. That is not to demand that each decision be fully delineated and quantified, but to acknowledge that more can be done to define the borders of such scholarship, particularly in a precarious and emergent field. In part, this would allow studies of historical promotional materials to confront its own choices around a secure and repeatable process of 'corpus composition and engagement'.<sup>48</sup> Data collection can potentially feel overwhelming given the historical scope of the materials in question. For example, the scholar who wishes to research film posters is faced with over 100 years of examples and although certain standardised practices emerged between 1910 and 1930, that doesn't remove the need to narrow the focus.<sup>49</sup> There are clearly different routes into this dilemma: one is to select *a priori* research focus (the posters of Alfred Hitchcock), the other is to more broadly follow Gray, Kernan or my lead and view a large selection of posters, using the mass of data to help guide the research questions that follow (with adequate self-reflection on how that formation progresses). Yet within those two approaches, further paths need to be chosen: following a director, or a genre, still leads to issues of selection. How many posters to collect together? What kind of posters to select?

In an example discussed earlier, self-reflection on the selection process demonstrated how the identification of a genre or cycle of films was a first step, followed by the selection of a particular mode of poster presentation (newspaper advertisements), then the exploration of relevant newspaper titles to locate recurring film advertisements.<sup>50</sup> Each stage is clear, and offers an approach that could be adopted by another researcher with a different foci. It also reveals the importance of historical contextualisation tools within selection and data analysis. Understanding release and re-release patterns for films, identifying appropriate studio logos, censorship certificates, design aesthetic, or poster rhetoric can help locate likely time periods or (trans)national contexts for different poster designs. This is illustrated through

the Hitchcock poster suggestion above: a Google Images search for *Rear Window* (1954) reveals over 200 posters that cover different time periods, countries, home video releases, restorations and fan artwork. Here, it is important to sift the larger data collated for additional historical clues: a rhetorical claim such as ‘See It! If your nerves can stand it after *Psycho!*’ clearly helps position that poster after 1960 rather than during the original release. As such, historical information can aid in the decision for a synchronic or diachronic analysis of that specific Hitchcock film.<sup>51</sup> A similar search for *Dial M for Murder* (1954) reveals a poster featuring the Warner Communications logo, which dates that poster to a 1970s re-release. Ensuring that such contextualisation occurs during selection, and that there is space to reflect on those criteria, offers a far stronger methodological justification for the research project.

Part of that contextualisation process may also involve looking beyond the individual promotional material – the film poster, in this example – to other materials, such as the film trailer, pressbook, or press articles; or to the reproduction of posters in other media. These additional reference points can function as a point of triangulation early in the research process. The campaign or press book is a strong option here, if it is available. Such books tend to demonstrate the range of options available for promotional purposes, while also offering coverage of different poster designs. Yet the triangulation with a press/campaign book can also complicate source selection: what to make of the claim in the press book for *Mr and Mrs Smith* (Hitchcock, 1941) that three separate trailers are available, when only one appears to be available in archives?

The use of a broader selection of materials for triangulation is also not to state that promotional studies requires the complete corpus of available texts across a promotional campaign. Even presuming the feasibility of such an endeavour, historical studies would inevitably suffer given the regular scarcity of relevant materials. As is discussed below, the apparent availability of resources in the digital era elides the broader absence of many promotional materials from both physical and digital archives, and the call here for a more rigorous selection process includes a period of self-reflection on what could be accessed, what could be analysed, and why. The desire for more rigour in selection is not to demand that a wider corpus is a necessity for analysis, but to demonstrate the advantages of allowing the promotional materials to help guide both the creation of research questions and the methodology applied to those materials during analysis. This has the additional advantage of understanding promotional materials as texts in their own right, with specific conventions and approaches, before making any decision to link those qualities to the film they relate to, or the viewer/audience that views them.

## Space, Place and Materiality

For a start, actual situated individuals only ever encounter a sample of such materials. And among the ones they encounter, different materials will have variable salience for them - the poster passed in the street whilst driving is probably going to signify less than the preview in the magazine specially bought.<sup>52</sup>

This passing comment on the spatial, temporal and material nature of the materials at the heart of promotional studies raises a complex set of issues that are rarely acknowledged within such studies, but which strongly relate to the discussion of data collection and analysis above. Considering a similar idea, Gray notes that 'one glance at the poster in a multiplex or at a bus shelter will immediately tell a viewer what genre to expect'.<sup>53</sup> What both comments pass over, however, is whether the analysis of one promotional material can be reconciled with an exploration of the spatial, temporal and material qualities inherent within all promotional materials. There are clear methodological questions brought raised: what might the material, spatial and time-limited nature of that viewer–poster interaction in the multiplex or at a bus stop tell us about their relationship to the physical promotional material? Is there a methodological solution that would allow scholars to analyse such materials within an experiential framework, particularly in a time when digital image searches are more common than access to physical materials?

Materiality is, of course, closely linked with the availability and archiving of a suitable range of sources. Analysing an exhibition site for promotional materials (bus stop, cinema, or billboard) on any given day is an attempt to capture a fleeting temporal and spatial moment, with little allowance for a focus on a specific franchise, film cycle, or cultural event. Looking back at an historical example means most of the physical contexts within which promotional materials would have been received are not available, but a wider range of examples might be. As noted above, newspaper advertising offers a partial sense of the positioning of posters within one specific medium, but the place of a film's trailer in the 'trailer park' compilation played before a feature is almost certainly lost to history. Klinger and Jancovich's work reveals how some elements of exhibition campaigns are available via pressbooks, and specific showmanship ideas might be captured in trade press such as *Kinematograph Weekly* or in local newspapers; yet those remain partial and might reveal little of the material nature of the promotional activity being undertaken. The availability of those posters, pressbooks and trailers that have survived also tend to dominate those that haven't: billboards or larger outdoor poster formats, bus-side posters, radio and television spots.

If most studies cannot begin to grapple with the full range of promotional materials that are produced, what is lost when no attempt is made to engage with whatever physical materials might still exist? First, the promotional material is never understood within its original physical context. The shift to digital archiving of images and audio-visual material is an understandable one, but seeing a film poster (or range of posters) on a computer screen versus in the original publication, billboard or cinema site removes that spatial and temporal context. Second, seeing and holding an original pressbook rather than one that has been scanned for microfiche or digital viewing contains obvious material issues: the quality of the paper, the presence of colour (rather than black and white microfiche scans), or unusual creative elements (one *We Joined the Navy* (1962) pressbook, for example, featured a cardboard sleeve from which thinner sheets of cardboard could be removed). Third, while many trailers have migrated from cinema screens to (multiple) online and mobile ones, YouTube viewings of older trailers remain adrift from the physicality of their (singular) historical theatrical screening context. In all cases, the

temporal relationship with the promotional material is altered if, through digital or practical means, that material can be viewed and reviewed multiple times: something a pre-1980 audience would rarely have been able to do.

This underlines the doubly ephemeral nature of historical promotional material: understood as disposable ephemera, the exhibition context(s) are also spatially and temporally ephemeral, rarely captured or documented. Although there are holdings of such materials in many archives and museums, there is no effective archive of film (and media) promotion, and such holdings are rarely fully catalogued or explored. In a mirror of the paratextual debate, such archive sites often view the feature film as the key text, and therefore a priority for attention, preservation, and funding. That hierarchy of value has led to the situation where ‘copies of the most frequently seen films in our cinemas: the trailers and pre-feature advertisements ... are not an archival priority, running the risk of being unavailable to future historians’.<sup>54</sup> While some film trailer archiving has been achieved, most notably in the Packard Humanities Institute Collection at the Academy Film Archive and the British Film Institute’s National Film & Television Archive, holdings remain partial.<sup>55</sup> And, of course, that focus, while admirable, also runs the risk of prioritising the trailer over other, equally valid, aspects of the promotional campaign.

As the textual content of the poster, trailer, or press book is often emphasised over the exhibition or viewing context, the physical and temporal contexts discussed here could aid textual analysis, or help support broader claims made about audience interaction with, and response to, promotional materials. There is a long history of audiences and fans who want to interact with the physical poster, lobby card, press book or trailer.<sup>56</sup> Equally, recent work has noted that the ‘spatiotemporality of paratexts ... needs interrogation if we are to understand the role they play in cultural memory’.<sup>57</sup> While the link between spatiotemporality, paratexts, and cultural memory moves beyond the historical and methodological scope of this article, the materiality of the poster within fan acquisition may help underline the importance of reflecting on materiality (and the availability of material and digital objects) within data collection and selection processes when planning a study of historical promotional materials.

## Conclusion and Propositions

because advertising and promotional forms do not reconstruct the text, but fragment and extend it for the purposes of consumption, their analysis does not necessarily lead to a coherent reconstruction of the text.<sup>58</sup>

Methodological complexity within studies of promotional materials is something that should be celebrated, supported, and furthered, and the aim of this article has been to start the debate about how existing or new methods could fuel the development of such studies. My focus on methodology here is not to curtail the possible approaches that the field might take, or the theoretical perspectives that can be underpinned by more focus on the methods chosen, but to demonstrate key ways that rigour could be added to collection, selection and analysis within the

field. Given the recurrent debate on the status of the promotional material as a primary or secondary text, and related restrictions around how the function of those materials is understood, the article closes with some propositions for this emerging field that build on existing work while suggesting more could be done to explore crucial areas.

***Proposition One: Treat the Promotional Material(s) as Text***

This is not to suggest that the industrial role of the promotional material (to sell a film to audiences) is completely ignored, but that scholarly work should consider analysing the material as its own unique text. This will help reduce the insistence on such texts having value only in terms of what they reveal about the relationship with a feature film. Studies of films are not purely concerned with whether they were successful in entertaining an audience, so why can the same not be true of promotional materials? The historically specific textual content of these materials remains under-researched, and there is clear space to develop a finer grained understanding of the formal and aesthetic properties of these materials, and how those have shifted across time.

***Proposition Two: Deepen the Historical Understanding of Promotional Materials and Supporting Industries***

While clearly related to the first proposition, in that aesthetic histories of most promotional materials are scarce, this calls for more historical work that understands the specific contexts (industrial, social, technological) under which the promotional industries operated. There remains, for example, no complete history of the trailer company National Screen Service, despite its central role in creating and distributing the bulk of US and UK studio publicity, including almost all trailers, posters, lobby cards, and pressbooks.<sup>59</sup> A deeper understanding of the creative, structural, and financial approaches of that industry and its personnel could underpin both the textual approaches that currently dominate, as well as the audience and reception work that crosses over into this territory.

***Proposition Three: Create and Justify Stronger Corpus Selection Methods***

Allowing research questions to emerge from the process of data selection will not be suitable for all projects where *a priori* questions and issues exist. One current research project includes an example where a rigorous approach to corpus composition and data collection has allowed the identification of specific research questions. One element of the extensive database created for 'Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955-85' project considers the popular marketing strategies of Eastman Colour in Britain. Looking initially at the period 1960–69, the project ran a trial to ascertain patterns across film poster advertising of colour films. From

a list of 214 titles, 185 titles were then identified and selected digitally via a series of online searches of Google Images, other web sources, and physical archive holdings.<sup>60</sup>

The creation of this corpus revealed new questions about the role of film promotion in selling and differentiating between technologies. Those 185 posters raised questions about the different industrial position of separate colour technologies and laboratories including Deluxe, Eastmancolor, Metrocolor, Technicolor, and Trucolor, as well as the more generic 'Colour'. They show patterns that shift across the decade: instances where Eastmancolor (or 'Eastman Colour') is identified as the production stock, but Technicolor prepared release prints; clear cases where Eastman Colour is promoted in the UK but US promotion focused almost exclusively on the brand name of Technicolor. The ability to collect and analyse a larger amount of data in this manner has, therefore, allowed the research to consider new questions that may not have been revealed in a more scattershot selection of sources. While not all studies have the resources to support such an endeavour, it offers a good example where a strong data collection process can fuel new research ideas and directions.

***Proposition Four: Consider Spatial, Temporal and Material Questions***

This is the most speculative of the propositions, in that it is the area where most methodological and theoretical development is needed. Accounting for the spatial and temporal situation of promotional materials, particularly in the digital age which gives the appearance that new 'born digital' materials will be archived and available forever, is not a debate that promotional scholarship has yet engaged with. Some studies of film trailers have begun to consider the temporal address found in trailers, but more work here and across the other materials would be a valuable addition to the broader field.<sup>61</sup> While many projects will be able to gain archival access to examples of physical press books and posters, offering a fuller methodological self-reflection on what such materiality offers, and how it relates to spatio-temporal issues, remains work to be done.<sup>62</sup>

***Proposition Five: Be Self-Reflective***

Developing a deeper self-reflection on methodological choices is a clear and immediate option that scholars of promotional materials can begin now. There are brief examples of this in some of the literature surveyed above, but often discussions of method are cursory, with no consideration given to what choices made might have revealed about bias, wider corpus generation, or underlying theoretical assumptions. This article generated its corpus of literature selection through a triangulation of institutional library catalogues, bibliographies found in monographs and articles, and two online sources. While this led to a range of compelling and relevant scholarship, those choices revealed a clear bias in the literature towards film promotional materials over work in television or other media. While that is clearly

changing, the questions of methodological rigour raised above need to be regularly tested against other media sources.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, given the broader desire for self-reflection, it is worth noting that the analysis of literature undertaken here raises the question of whether it is possible to draw together the often disparate fields that contribute to studies of promotional materials. The parallel interests around such materials found in scholars who study advertising, marketing, critical reception, audiences, genres, authors, or media history may only be clear when there is time to step back and consider the literature as evidence of an emerging academic field. While the article makes no claim to represent or define a discipline of 'promotional studies', it does finally posit that a broader interdisciplinary discussion of how different scholars approach these inter-medial texts would allow the fuller exploration of the formal, aesthetic, and discursive content of these historical promotional materials that is promoted herein.

## Notes

1. Mark Williams, 'Rewiring Media History: Intermedial Borders', in *Convergence Media History*, eds. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 55.
2. Tim Anderson, 'For the Record: Interdisciplinarity, Cultural Studies, and the Search for Method in Popular Music Studies,' in *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies*, eds. James Schwoch and Mimi White (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 287.
3. Thanks to my students who, in modules on promotional materials, debated methodological issues with me such as how to locate the 'authentic' poster or trailer in the digital age, and whether online archives were reliable repositories.
4. Janet Staiger, 'Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideas: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising', *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3 (1990): 3.
5. Staiger 'Announcing Wares': 4-6.
6. Stephen Heath, 'Screen Images, Film Memory', *Edinburgh Magazine* 1: 33-42; Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 4: 9.
7. Film trailers are rated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), not the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). However, modern day television trailers or 'spots' are subject to different legal requirements, such as the ASA (UK and New Zealand) or New Zealand's Commercial Approvals Bureau. Historically, the Code Authority of the National Association of Broadcasters has also issued recommendations to U.S. television stations on suitable television trailers: Val Adams, 'Commercials are Challenged', *The New York Times* (January 15 1965): 87.
8. See, for example, John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (London: Routledge, 1995).
9. Kathleen A. Williams, 'Fake and fan film trailers as incarnations of audience anticipation and desire', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 9 (2012):



- 1–21; Vicente Rodriguez Ortega, ‘Spoof Trailers, Hyperlinked Spectators & the Web’, *New Media & Society* 16, no. 1: 149–164.
10. Anderson, ‘For the Record’, 287.
  11. A full literature review of social science and humanities approaches to audience studies and promotional materials can be found in Frederick Greene, Keith M. Johnston, and Ed Vollans, “‘Would I Lie to You?’ Researching audience attitudes to, and uses of, the promotional trailer format”, *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 10, no. 1 (2014), pp. 109–116. Examples of this approach include: M. Burzynski and D. Bayer, ‘The effect of positive and negative prior information on motion picture appreciation’, *Journal of Social Psychology* 101, no. 2 (1977): 215–218; C.B. Stapleton and C.E. Hughes, ‘Mixed Reality and Experiential Movie Trailers: Combining Emotions and Immersion to Innovate Entertainment Marketing’, *Proc. 2005 Int’l Conf. Human–Computer Interface Advances in Modeling and Simulation* (Soc. for Modeling and Simulation Int’l, 2005): 40–48; Thomas K. Hixson, ‘Mission Possible: Targeting Trailers to Movie Audiences’, *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing* 14, nos. 3–4 (2006): 210–224; Sophie Moore, ‘Film Talk: An investigation into the use of viral videos in film marketing, and the impact on electric word of mouth during pre-release and opening week’, *Journal of Promotional Communications* 3, no. 3 (2015): 380–404.
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  13. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 90.
  14. Klinger, ‘Digressions at the Cinema’; Staiger, ‘Announcing Wares’.
  15. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The paratextual model was popularised in film and media studies. See, for example, Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions*; Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010); and Matt Hills, *The Unfolding Event: Marketing, Merchandising and Mediatizing a Brand Anniversary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
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  17. Those website bibliographies can be found at <http://www.watchingthetrailer.com/bibliography.html> (accessed May 25, 2017) and <https://www.trailaurality.com/resources/> (accessed May 25, 2017).
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- British Kinematography* 23, no. 4 (1953): 98–103; Heath, ‘Screen Images, Film Memory’; Klinger, ‘Digressions’.
19. John Kobal (ed.), *50 Years of Movie Posters: Hollywood’s Golden Era* (London: Hamlyn, 1973); Joe Morella, Edward Z. Epstein and Eleanor Clark, *Those Great Movie Ads* (New York: Galahad Books, 1972); Gregory Edwards, *The International Film Poster: The Role of the Poster in Cinema Art, Advertising and History* (London: Columbus Books, 1985).
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  24. Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs, and Alberto Trobia, ‘Our Methodological Challenges and Solutions’, in *Watching The Lord of the Rings*: 213–17, 236.
  25. Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Barbara Klinger, ‘Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies’, *Screen* 38, no. 2 (1997): 107–28; Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Janet Staiger *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
  26. Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 56.
  27. See, for example, Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Kernan, *Coming Attractions*; Carmen D. Maier, ‘The Promotional Genre of Film Trailers: Persuasive Structures in Multimodal Form’ (PhD diss., Aarhus University, 2006); Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg Publishers): 117–156.
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35. Keith M. Johnston, "A friend to every exhibitor": National Screen Service and the British trailer industry', *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, eds. I.Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter & Justin Smith (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 182.
36. Miller, 'Helping exhibitors', 195.
37. French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 26–27.
38. Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues'.
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44. Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 52–56; 65–72.
45. Johnston, *Coming Soon*.
46. Kernan, *Coming Attractions*, 33.
47. *Ibid*, 243.
48. Vollans, ‘So, just what is a trailer, anyway?’, 114.
49. Staiger, ‘Announcing Wares’; Rhodes ‘The origin and development of the American motion picture poster’.
50. Krazsewski, ‘Recontextualising the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation’, 60.
51. Mathijs, ‘Bad reputations’ offers a poster-based reception study that considers the desirability of synchronic and diachronic approaches.
52. Barker, ‘News, Reviews, Clues’.
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55. Cassie Blake, ‘Ahead of Its Showtime: The Packard Humanities Institute Collection at the Academy Film Archive’, in *Film That Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising*, eds. Bo Florin, Nico de Klerk and Patrick Vonderau (London: BFI Palgrave, 2016): 251–256; Dylan Cave, ‘The Hidden Film-Maker ...’ in *Films That Sell*: 232–238.
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58. Klinger, ‘Digressions’, 8.
59. Johnston, ‘A friend to every exhibitor’.
60. Keith M. Johnston, ‘Selling Eastman Colour in the 1960s’ (paper presented at 1960s British Cinema: Histories and Legacies, London, United Kingdom, September 6, 2017)

61. Johnston, 2009.
62. Erin Pearson's emerging work on indie film trailers seems well placed to consider some of those aspects.
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