The Semiotic Status of Movie Trailers

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Abstract

Jean Luc Godard once said that "movie trailers are perfect films because the never let you down". Movie trailers have a crucial role in the film industry. Despite their omnipresence there are just a few academic works willing to explain their semiotic status. There are many types of movie trailers and all of them have singular characteristics (eg: *theatrical trailers*, *teasers*, *clips*, *making of*, *creative trailers*…). In this paper, it is explained how they work depending on the semiotic relation between the *sign* and the *object*, in Peircean terms. Some of them might have a more metonymic structure and others might be understood as being more analogical. As a conclusion, it is argued why most of the movie trailers have almost the same sign configuration concerning their persuasive effectiveness.

Key words: movie trailers; semiotics; rhetoric; Pierce; metonymy; analogy

1. BACKGROUND

Despite being one of the most successful marketing tools used to get the public into the film theaters, there are just a few researchers that have noticed their importance and have studied them from an academic perspective. The first was Justin Wyatt (1994) when he published *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. He built up three rhetoric categories *(the look, the hook and the book*) by which trailer makers could market 'high concept' movies. Then, Anat Zanger (1998) distinguished four modes of representation a trailer could present: referentiality, exemplification, verbal description and expressive depiction. Lisa Kernan[1] (2004) went throughout the history of movie trailers applying the Aristotelian concept of enthymeme. She showed how movie trailers adapt their content to the viewer's expectations depending on the historical era they were used. One year before, Vinzenz Hediger (2003) published *Self-promoting story events, serial narrative, promotional discourse and the invention of the movie trailer* and participated in the documentary released by the *Andrew J. Kuehn foundation* (2005). He demonstrated to have a deep insight on the history of movie trailers and how they rhetorically work. Carmen Daniela Maier (2006) is the last researcher being thrilled by the semiotic singularities of movie trailers. Her theoretical background is the multimodal discourse analysis of Lavov's semiotics.

Needless to say, I am one of these few scholars that have been captivated by the singularities and the rhetoric power of these short films. In March 2009, I defended my PhD. Dissertation entitled «*Narrative thinking and rhetoric in movie trailers*»[2]. In the Dissertation, it is shown how the relations between narrative structures such as «introduction, confrontation and resolution» and the rhetoric appeal may arouse the interest of the public for a given movie. The theoretical background goes from Aristotle to Peirce, Umberto Eco and the cognitive semiotics of Lakoff, Fauconnier & Turner and Brandt. The Dissertation also is based on an empirical research by which the responses of the public to two handmade scientific-oriented trailers were measured.

This paper explains why movie trailers are interesting from a semiotic perspective and how they work depending on the type of trailer and its «sign relation» to the movie. As a conclusion, it is argued why most of the movie trailers have almost the same sign configuration concerning their persuasive effectiveness.

2. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Movie trailers nowadays are not the way they used to be when the first one was released in 1912. Movie trailers have evolved as cinema and advertising techniques have progressed. There are several points and periods in time the reader must bear in mind in order to construct a diachronic schema of movie trailer's history.

[1] In 2000 she defended her PhD Dissertation: A Cinema of (Coming) Attractions: American Movie Trailer Rhetoric.

[2] Dornaleteche. J. (2009): Pensamiento narrativo y retórica en los trailers cinematográficos, Universidad de Valladolid.
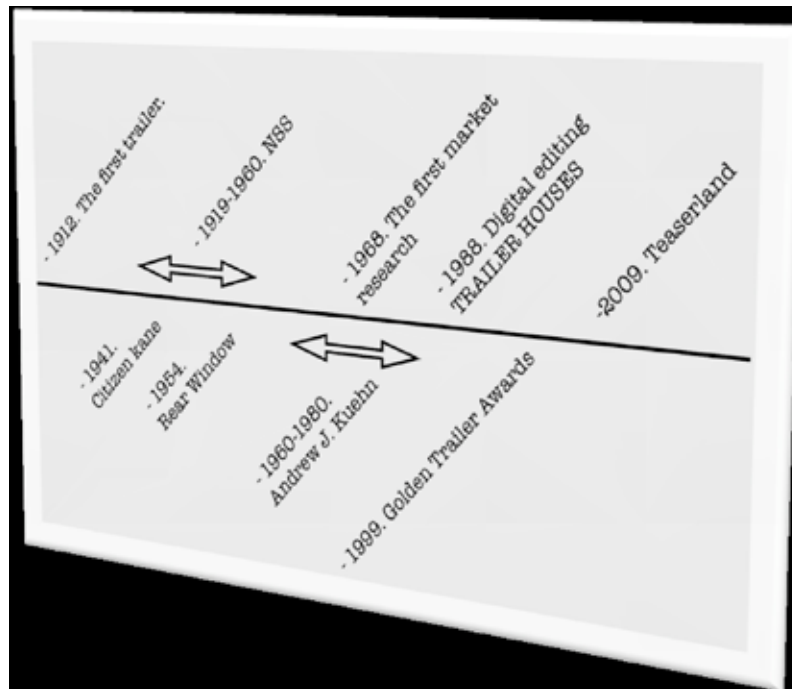
According to Lisa Kernan, the first trailer was shown in 1912 after the serial «The adventures of Kathlyn». The piece of advertising encouraged the public to see next week's thrilling chapter. But it was not until the beginning of the twenties that industry became aware of the importance of promoting feature films. From 1919 to the late fifties, the *National Screen Service* monopolized the production and distribution of movie trailers. All the trailers produced by the NSS virtually resembled the same esthetic pattern and formal characteristics. This period of time is known for hyperbolic and exaggerated appealing techniques. Nevertheless, there are some examples of famous directors cutting their own trailers such as Orson Welles, Alfred Hithcock and Cecil B. DeMille, but they were rare exceptions.

Andrew J. Kuehn, former employee of the NSS, changed the look of movie trailers due to his revolutionary vision of movie marketing. He invented the «grid editing» which gave movie trailers the dynamic appearance they have nowadays. In 1968, the first market research to test a trailer was carried out. The irruption of scientific techniques for validating the effectiveness of advertisements drastically changed the process of making movie trailers. Non-linear editing was also a crucial technological innovation. The digital techniques made the number of trailer houses[3] increase. The industry of trailer making grew larger for that reason.

In 1999, the *Golden Trailer Awards*[4] emerged as a response to the public's interest in movie trailers. This advertisement festival recognized the creative work of trailer makers and their artistic virtues. Furthermore, *Teaserland* (2009)[5] has invented a new category of trailers

[3] A trailer house is an advertising company specialized in movie trailers.
[4] Dornaleteche J. (2009): op. cit.
[5] Ibid.

of «movies that do not exist»; they give prizes to trailers of non-existing films. It may sound funny, but it is the consequence of the tremendous success of the trailer format. Those events reflect the growing attention towards movie trailers nowadays.

3. DEFINITION

So, what is a movie trailer? Following Andrew J. Kuehn's definition, «a movie trailer is a marketing tool that positions a certain film within the movie market and its purpose is to arouse the public's interest in watching it». A movie trailer is an audio-visual advertisement of an audiovisual product. This double audio-visual status make movie trailers interesting from a semiotic point of view.

Traditionally, movie trailers have been made using footage of the film they promote. That is their prototypical format. Nevertheless, in this paper it is shown that there are other advertising possibilities and other formats a movie trailer can adopt.

4. TYPES OF MOVIE TRAILERS

The paper *Definition and nature of movie trailers*[6] defines all existing types of movie trailers according to their formal characteristics, their content, the purpose they were made for, the place they were screened, etc. Thus, there are *creative trailers*, *clips*, *making of*, *theatrical trailers*, *teaser trailers*, *videogame trailers*, *TV trailers* and all the different subcategories such as *creative teasers*, *teaser clips* and so forth.

But besides the formal characteristics of movie trailers, it is also important to pay attention to their pragmatic sense. All of them contain different *rhetoric strategies*, which are mainly divided in three: the *diegetic strategy*, which highlights the content of the story, the characters and the genre of the movie. On the contrary, the *extra-diegetic strategy* focuses on «who» did the movie; the director, the actors, the production company, the critics and prizes in film festivals and also the implications they may have in the genre.

Finally, the *esthetic strategy* deals with the type of editing, the quality of the graphics and the genre concerning those. In this sense, the *genre* is a «meta» category because it can be inferred by means of the *diegetic*, the *extra-diegetic* and the *esthetic* content of the movie trailer.

The aim of this paper is to explain the semiotic relation between the format of the trailer and the product. For that purpose, it is applied the Peircean Semiotic Triad[7] of *sign*, *object* and *interpretant*.

[6] Dornaleteche (2007): Definición y naturaleza del trailer cinematográfico, Pensar la publicidad. Revista internacional de investigaciones publicitarias, 99-116.

[7] Sitio *web*: www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html [Peirce, C. S. (1905): *The Basis of Pragmaticism*, (MS 283)] visitado el 25-4-05.
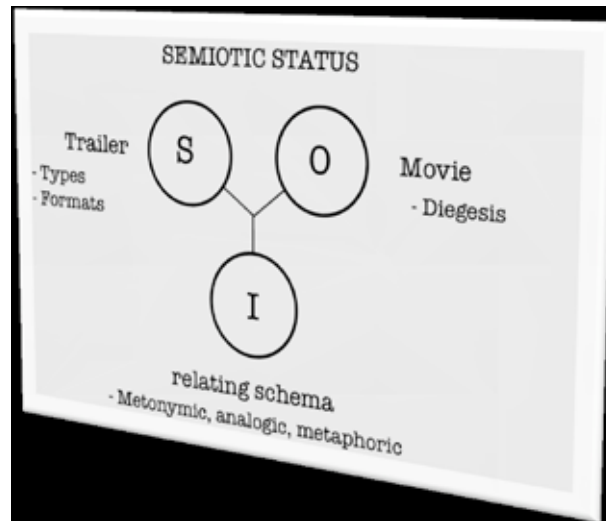
In this diagram, the movie trailer would be the *sign* and the *object* it refers to would be the movie. In this regard, the trailer refers to the movie. Then, what connects the sing and the object would be a relating schema. Depending on the type of trailer, this schema could be metonymic or analogic-metaphoric.

4.1. Creative trailer

The creative trailer is the one that does not use footage from the movie it promotes. Therefore, it is originally produced (autonomous). Previously, it was mentioned that there were some directors that produced their own pieces of advertising for their movies, such as Orson Welles and Hitchcock. These trailers belong to the category of «creative». Creative trailers are not frequently used because of their high cost. It is much cheaper to use footage from the movie. Nevertheless, nowadays there are examples such as the movie trailer for «The comedian» (2002), directed by Christian Charles. Creative movie trailers are often used in 3D animation movies like «Bee movie» (2007) or «Ice Age 3», (2009).
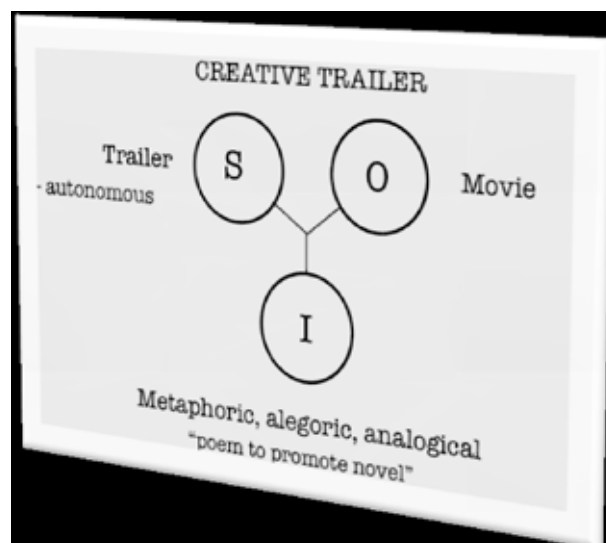
In this case, the relation between the sign and the object is metaphoric, allegoric or analogical because the trailer works as an *example*[8], in the Aristotelian sense, for the movie. It would be like writing a poem to promote a novel.

4.2. Clip trailer

The clip trailer is just a complete part of the movie. The Clip trailer is the one that is made by «cutting» an entire part of a movie without touching it. There is not *a posteriori* editing in it. So the relation between the *sign* and the *object* is completely *metonymic*. It is «the part representing the whole». A fraction of the movie refers to the full movie. Clip trailers work as an *index* or as a semiotic proof, in Peircean terms. They function as a proof that the movie exists and therefore reflects credibility.
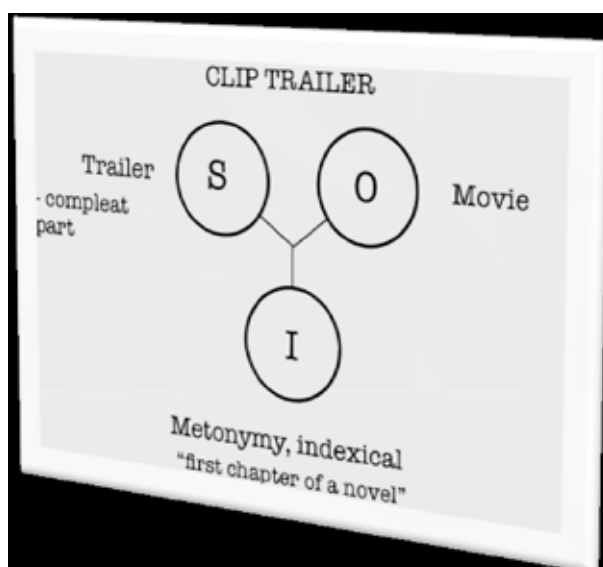

4.3. Standard movie trailer

Standard movie trailers are those that the public has been watching from the late seventies to these days. Standard trailers are divided in two: theatrical trailers and teasers. The difference between them is primarily temporal. The first lasts around two minutes a half and the second about one minute and twenty seconds long. Due to its length, the theatrical trailer has more time to introduce the different characters and better explains the basic content of the plot, whereas teasers focus on present the story briefly and leave more questions unanswered. Both of them rely on the *voice over*, the *graphic art* and the *grid editing*. The last one is the main characteristic of standard movie trailers. Grid editing[9] is based on getting many different parts of the film together in a fast-pace dynamic montage. The purpose of this editing style is to arouse

[8] Aristóteles, (1998): *Retórica*, Alianza Editorial.
[9] Kernan, L. (2004): op. cit.

the interest of the audience in the movie by means of giving a schematic idea of the story, on the one hand, and leaving many narrative gaps on the other. The semiotic relation between the *sign* and the *object* in standard trailers is essentially *metonymic*. Nevertheless, compared to clip trailers, the metonymy is far more «creative» in the sense that it is put together in a more imaginative and innovative manner. In those types of movie trailers different kinds of *transtextuality*[10] are found such as: *hypertextuality* due to the co-presence of the content of both the trailer and the movie, and *paratextuality* because of the synthetic nature of the trailer concerning the plot of the film. It would be like mixing up several paragraphs of a novel to explain it and promote it.
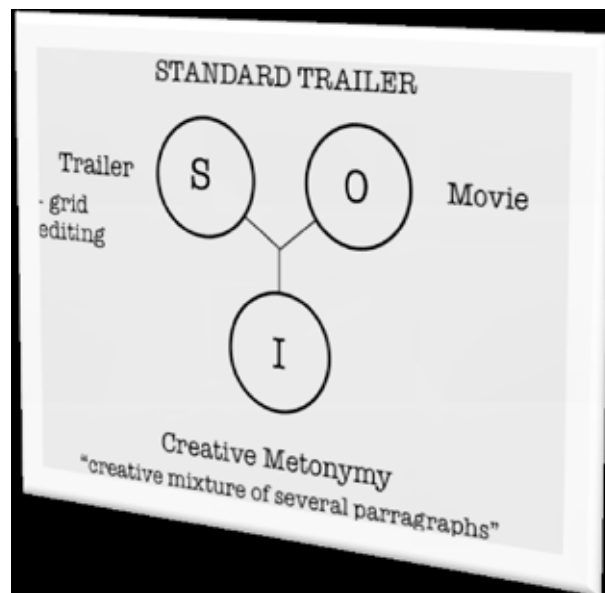
4.4. Making of

The making of is the trailer in which the public finds footage «behind the scenes»: interviews with the actors and the director about the experience of filming the movie, about the special effects, and other issues involved. Nonetheless, it is also shown the same type of grid editing of the standard movie trailers. In the making of, the relation between the *sign* and the *object* is *meta-metonymic* because it refers to «the process of making» the movie. Whereas in the rest of movie trailers the question answered is «what is this movie about», the making of trailer responds to «how is this movie done» and «why» besides «what is the story». The aim of the making of is gaining credibility by means of exploiting the *extra-diegetic* aspects of the film. It would be like interviewing the writer of a novel or, furthermore, like watching the writer writing the novel to promote it.

[10] Genette, G. (1997): Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretación, Cambridge University Press, 334-347.
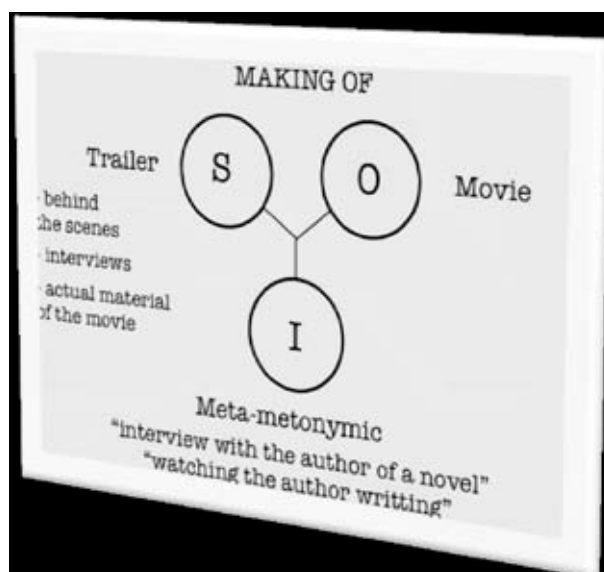
5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, it is revealed that there are different semiotic relations «*sign-object*» depending on the format of the trailer. First, it shows the *metaphoric-analogical* schemes that relate creative trailers to the movie they promote. The metaphoric-analogical relation makes the distance between the *sign* and the *object* larger than the *metonymic-indexical* relation that clip and standard trailers show. This «distance» is both semantic and iconic. Creative trailers are more artistic but this arty status lacks the credibility of the indexical signs of «the standards» that work as *traces* of the original movie. Nevertheless, the creativity in standard trailers comes from the artistic and persuading possibilities of the *grid editing*. Creative trailers are far more expensive that the standards. Besides, the public might be afraid of what they are «hiding» or «not showing». The semiotic distance between the *sign* and the *object* can be interpreted as an artistic symptom but it can also generate distrust in the public. The public is used to trailers that may guarantee certain standards of quality. Standard trailers allow the viewers to have an idea of where are they going to spend their money. Apart from the financial issues of producing autonomous creative trailers, that «semiotic distance» might be another reason for the success of standard trailers nowadays.

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