Between narrative and rhetoric in movie trailers

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Resumen

The aim of this paper is to better understand the relationship between narrative thinking and rhetoric in movie trailers. For that purpose, an experiment on trailer comprehension and preference was conducted with 239 students. On one hand, variables concerning narrative comprehension of the story the trailers show were measured and, on the other hand, those regarding the appreciation of the trailers by the students were measured as well. Two different trailers of the same movie were edited in order to control the narrative structure of the trailers (the independent variable).

Palabras clave
Movie trailers, narrative thinking, rhetoric, semiotics, research.

1. INTRODUCTION

We may go back to Aristotle if we wondered when did the interest in narrative and rhetoric start from a philosophical perspective. In his *Poetica*, Aristotle reflected on the status of art and the mimesis, more precisely on how dramatic plays were constructed. He was the first to invent certain narrative concepts such as diegesis, characters, introduction, confrontation, resolution, climax, catharsis, anagnorisis, etc. Moreover, in his *Rhetorica,* he explained what it takes for a discourse to be persuading. The notion of enthymeme or rhetoric argument was one of his best achievements. Furthermore, other philosophers, semioticians, psychologists and film theorists have addressed the same issues such as Peirce (1903), Freud (1924), Tomachevski (1925), Propp (1928), Barthes (1957), Metz (1971), Genette, (1972), Grice (1975), Meyer (1975) Courtés (1976), Greimas (1976), Bal (1977), Van Dijk (1977), Petöfi (1978), Odin (1978), Jost (1978); Chatman (1978), Ricoeur (1984), Trabasso and Sperry (1985), Sperber & Willson (1986), Bordwell (1986), Gaudreault, (1989), Bruner (1990), T. K. Grodal (1997), Oakley (2002) and Bermejo (2005) among others. All of them share the same interest for ontology of narrative thinking and rhetoric but none of them have studied the problem of audiovisual narratives for advertising other audiovisual narratives.

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 by which she showed how movie trailers adapt their content to the viewer's expectations depending on the historic era they were used. Moreover, 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 a deep insight on the history of movie trailers and how they work rhetorically. 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.

The results of this study may complement the great achievements accomplished by the researchers mentioned above and might lead further investigations.

2. PREMISES AND HYPOTHESIS

This study has started from two main premises:

1. The activation of cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved in narrative thinking derived from watching film narratives is, somehow, pleasant for the viewer. The consumption of film narratives is, in fact, a ritual within the first world.
2. The 'grid editing' is the standard style of the prototypical movie trailer nowadays and is based on getting many different parts (dialogues and images) of the film altogether in a high pace dynamic montage. The purpose of this editing style is to arouse the interest of the audience in the movie by means of giving a schematic idea of the story, on one hand, and leaving many narrative gaps on the other (2).

This study has been set up from three hypotheses:

1. Movie trailers activate the same mechanisms involved in narrative thinking in the viewers as fiction movies do.
2. The activation of processes related to narrative thinking caused by movie trailers is one of the factors that generate the subjects' positive response towards the movie.
3. The more core narrative elements shown in a movie trailer, the more it is accepted by the individuals.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In order to validate or refute the hypothesis, the responses of 258 university students to two movie trailers with different narrative content of the same film were measured.

3.1. The individuals

The profile of the individuals was chosen from a research of HAVAS MEDIA (2007). The research points out that university students well educated in audiovisual languages are one of the main targets of movie industry. Thus, 258 students were randomly chosen, one half from *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*, and the other from *Universidad de Valladolid* and divided in two different groups.

3.2. The movie

Hard Candy (Vulcan Productions 2005), an independent movie from the newcomer director David Slade, was the film chosen. It is a psycho-thriller minimalistic drama. The main actors are Patric Wilson and Ellen Page. These are the reasons for choosing such a film:

1. The title for Spanish people does not mean much.
2. The movie is a mixture of different genres and the theme is complex.
3. There are no secondary plots.
4. The director and the actors are unknown for the Spanish public.
5. There are no 'high level' special effects.
6. It is an independent movie.

All these different variables matter in terms of not letting the individuals be aware of anything else but the main plot of the movie trailer and what happens to the characters. The individuals should not be distracted by another rhetoric strategies such us the esthetic or the extra-diegetic. The individuals must not have seen the movie or heard of it in order to participate in the experiment.

3.3. The trailers (3)

Two trailers were edited for the purpose of the experiment. First of all, the movie was rigorously analyzed by

means of detaching its narrative sequences using Bermejo's narrative theory (2005). Having detected the plot points, the theme and thesis of the story, the trailers were designed. These are their main characteristics:

a) No title.

b) No voice over.

c) No graphic art.

d) No extra-diegetic content

e) Grid editing.

Again, the aim of the experiment is to make the individuals only focus on the diegesis and properly active their narrative thinking.

The difference between the two trailers is their narrative content. Trailer 1 has the introduction-confrontation narrative structure and Trailer 2 the introduction-confrontation-resolution structure. Both of them are 2 minutes and a half long so T1 shows more information from the introduction and the confrontation sequences.

3.4. The screening

The screening took place in both, *Universidad Complutense de Madrid* and *Universidad de Valladolid*. When measuring the responses of Group 1, T1 was shown first and when measuring Group 2, T2 was screened first. Both groups were also divided in diverse subgroups for statistical purposes. The point was to let the individuals perfectly watch and hear the movie trailers.

3.5. The test

The test measured different variables: on one hand, the socio-demographic ones (sex, age, place of birth), and on the other those concerning the narrative comprehension and those regarding the attitude toward the movie and both trailers (rhetoric variables).

Members of G1 had their narrative comprehension ask asked after watching T1. G2 had the same questions requested after watching T2. The narrative questions were the following:

1. In your opinion, what is the story about? Make an abstract of the plot.
2. Enumerate the characters of the story.
3. In your opinion, who is the main character of the story and what she or he desires?
4. What would you highlight from the trailer?

The rhetoric questions were the following:

1. In your opinion, which is the worse trailer and why?
2. Score the trailers from 0 to 10.
3. Which movie trailer attracted you to watch the movie the most?
4. Why did you like or dislike the content of the trailer? Score the different items:

4.a. Because of the genre from 0 to 10.

4.b. Because of the actors from 0 to 10.

4.c. Because of the esthetics from 0 to 10.

4.d. Because of the plot from 0 to 10.

3.6. Interpretation of comprehension variables

One of the keys that explain the efficiency of this research has been the design of the indicators (patterns of responses) that determined three levels of comprehension in the individuals (4):

a) Number of words of the abstract (summary).

b) Coherence of the causal chain of the story (sequential order).

c) Abstract and conceptual references to the theme of the story (configurational order).

c) Correct identification of characters (sequential order)

d) Correct identification of the main character and the object of desire (secuential order).

f) Trailer's highlights.

3.7 Interpretation of rhetoric variables

This item intends to obtain a reasoned answer about which one of both trailers was the most interesting for the subjects. On this occasion, the questions did intend to make the subject reflect on their answers, since the main point was to obtain coherent arguments. With this idea in mind, two questions have been put forward before the most important one:

Which movie trailer attracted you to watch the movie the most?

The fourth question is meant to give data concerning the design of the trailers and the experimental procedures in general. Why did you like or dislike the content of the trailer?

3.8 Data Analysis

The data obtained were statistically analyzed. The results were given in terms of averages, ranges and percentage proportions. Chi2, two-tailed Fisher's tests and one-way ANOVAs were used. Quantitative variables were measured using the Students' T distribution. $P < 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant. SPSS 14.1.1 was the software used for the data analysis.
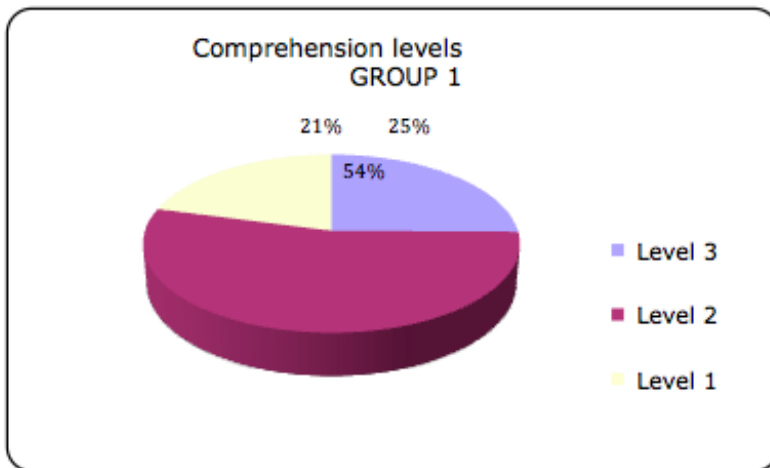
4. RESULTS

The hypotheses have been used to guide the research and design the experiment. The results have confirmed the main hypotheses, whose link narrative thinking to rhetoric. They have also have brought up some issues that had not been taken into account previously. This new data has enriched our knowledge on the rhetorical phenomenon of movie trailers, which can be used as a future starting point for further research.
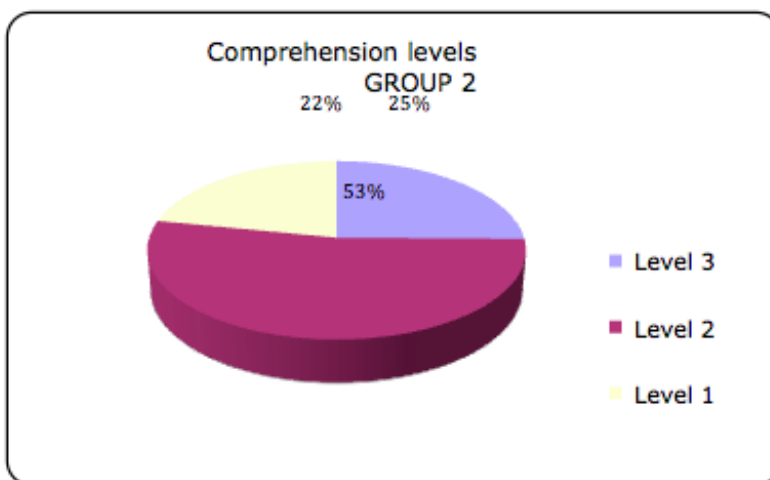
4.1. Hypothesis 1

«Movie trailers activate the same mechanisms involved in narrative thinking in the viewers as fiction movies do».

We confirm the first of the hypothesis since individuals have activated the schemes of narrative thinking by means of inferential processes and the search for textual coherence [Chatman (1978), Grice (1975), Sperber & Willson (1986), Bordwell (1986), etc] in order to give meaning to the content of both movie trailers. Data shows that all the subjects have identified the characters in the story – regardless of whether they have done it correctly or not –, their object of desire, their motivations, the causal relation between the successive events and the aspects related to the configuration order (the theme, the thesis). Besides their different narrative structure and content, both trailers are equally understood.

Figure1

Comprehension levels
GROUP 1

21%　25%

54%

- Level 3
- Level 2
- Level 1

(35 – 75 – 29) n=139

Comprehension levels
GROUP 2

22%　25%

53%

- Level 3
- Level 2
- Level 1

(30 – 63 – 23) n=119

4.2. Hypothesis 2

«The activation of processes related to narrative thinking caused by movie trailers is one of the factors that generate the subjects' positive response towards the movie»

We can confirm the second hypothesis since the data shown in both tests proves that there is a correlation between the activation of processes related to narrative thinking while watching a movie trailer and the final attitude towards the movie. There is a significant correlation between the individuals' level of comprehension and their appreciation of the information increase shown in the movie trailer (i.e., the more the individuals understood the content of the movie trailer, the more they appreciated a greater deal of information, fig. 2). Individuals that show a higher comprehension level positively perceive a movie trailer with more core narrative elements of the story, meanwhile subjects showing a lower level of comprehension do not perceive it positively.

Comprehension level vs perception of information					
G1 (n=139)			**G2** (n=119)		
More info. positive (n= 88/139)			**More info. positive** (n= 65/119)		
N1	17 (29)	58'62%	13 (26)	50%	
N2	48 (75)	64%	33 (63)	52'38%	
N3	23 (35)	65'71%	19 (30)	63'33%	

* P= 0,0001 (for G1 with Fisher's)   **P=0,0001 (for G2 with Fisher's).

Regarding the interest created by both movie trailers, both tests show that there is a significant correlation between the individuals' comprehension level and their preference of one movie trailer over the other (fig. 3). The subjects that comprehend the story the most prefer the movie trailer showing more core narrative elements (introduction-confrontation-resolution) and the subjects that comprehend the story the least chose the trailer with fewer core narrative elements (introduction-confrontation).

Comprehension level vs best trailer								
G1 (n=139)				**G2** (n=119)				
Trailer 1 (n= 85/139)		**Trailer 2** (n= 45/139)		**Trailer 1** (n=56/119)		**Trailer 2** (n= 60/119)		
N1	14	48,27%	15	51,72%	10	38,46%	16	61,53%
N2	46	64,78%	23	32,39%	30	47,61%	32	50,79%
N3	25	71,42%	7	20%	16	53,33%	12	40%

* P= 0,0001 (for G1 with Fisher's)   **P=0,0001 (for G2 with Fisher's).

Both tests show that there is also a significant correlation between the comprehension level, the appreciation of more information and the preference of one movie trailer over the other (fig. 4). The subjects that show a higher comprehension level and appreciate a greater amount of information in the movie trailer prefer the movie trailer that contains more core narrative elements, meanwhile the subjects that show a lower comprehension level do not appreciate a greater amount of information in the movie trailer and prefer the movie trailer that contains fewer core narrative elements.

Comprehension level vs best trailer vs perception of information							
	G1 (n=139)				G2 (n=119)		
	More info. positive (n= 88/139)				More info. positive (n= 65/119)		
	Trailer 1		Trailer 2		Trailer 1		Trailer 2	
N1	8 (14)	57'14%	9 (15)	60%	8 (10)	80%	16 (5)	31,25%
N2	28(46)	60'86%	15(23)	65'21%	30 (26)	86,6%	6 (32)	18,75%
N3	16 (25)	64%	4 (7)	57'14%	16 (16)	100%	3 (12)	25%

The analysis was significant with the Reapeted Measurement ANOVA test. P=0,044 in G1 and P=0,0001 in G2.

4.3. Hypothesis 3

«The more core narrative elements shown in a movie trailer, the more it is accepted by the subjects»

The third of our hypothesis has not been confirmed. However, the experiment has been able to clarify the factors that intervene in the relation between comprehension and appreciation of the movie trailers. The results point out that both movie trailers have been appreciated and/or comprehended in a similar way in both tests (*cfr*. figure 1). Our interpretation of this data is that both movie trailers contain enough core narrative elements to activate the necessary inferential processes to follow the plot. This implies that even though movie T1 includes one more core narrative element (resolution), it is not enough to create significant interpretative differences. In order to be able to validate this third hypothesis, we should have obtained significant differences in the election of one trailer over the other. When the experiment was designed and the movie trailers were edited, we thought that the individuals would choose the movie trailer that includes one more core narrative element. The first results made us think that we had planned the research incorrectly, since the editing variable had been neutralized: apparently, we had edited two very similar movie trailers, and the subjects could not discriminate between them properly. Nevertheless, when linking the individuals' comprehension level with their choice of one of the movie trailers, an unexpected significant correlation was revealed.

What apparently seemed to be a lack of differences between both experimental movie trailers turned out to be a platform that allowed us to have a deeper insight into the issue. Actually, the fact that both trailers are so similar has allowed us to perceive the correlation between the comprehension variable (activation of inferential processes) and the rhetorical variable (the pick of one movie trailer over the other).

The individuals that showed a higher comprehension level picked the movie trailer containing introduction, confrontation and resolution, meanwhile the subjects that showed a lower comprehension level picked the movie trailer containing only introduction and body (*cfr*. Figure 2). The subjects that showed a higher comprehension level demand more information in movie trailers, whereas the ones that showed a lower comprehension level demand less information in movie trailers (*cfr*. Figure 1). The reasoning underlying this interpretation is: 'the more I understand, the more I want'.

4.4 The reliability of the test

The results obtained (figure 5) show that our research has correctly followed the patterns marked when discriminating the use of rhetorical strategies used in standard movie trailers. Among all of them, the study has focused on the one that highlights the particularities and the originality of the plot through grid editing. The commercial strategies that seek a quick identification of the movie with quality standards through the use of genre conventions and the star-system appeal have been set aside. Although an independent movie has been chosen, we have avoided rhetorical strategies belonging to this genre, such as references to the director, prizes in international festivals, etc.

This planning, based on the purge of variables, has allowed us to neutralize all those variables intervening in the persuasive process, except the one that links narrative thinking and rhetoric. The individuals' appreciation of the movie has been remarkable.

The rethoric perception G1 & G2
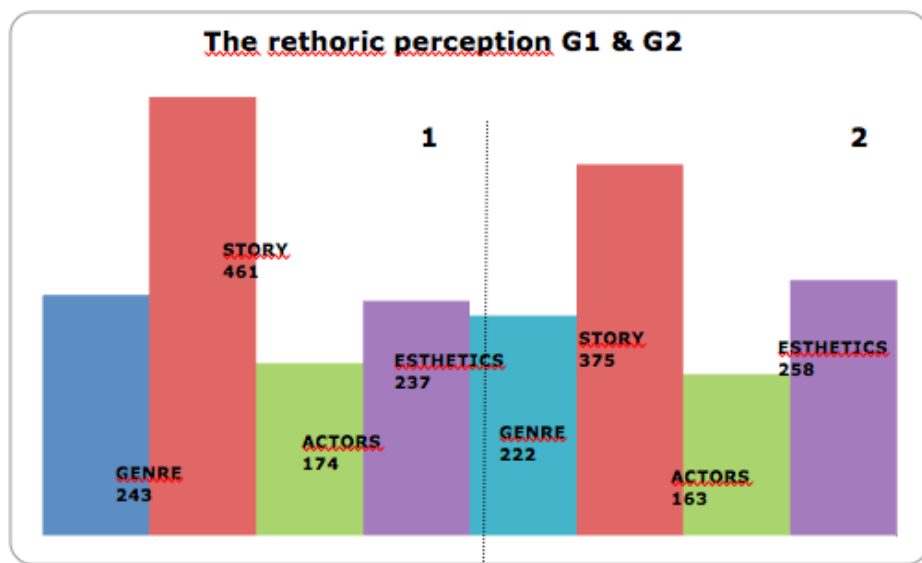
P=NS. Students' T distribution sugest the the aro no signiticant differences between both groups.

5. DISCUSSION

The starting point of our hypothesis lay in the testimonies of the movie advertising professionals (5), which state that the tendency in the current movie market is that movie trailers say more and more about the film they refer to. The main objective of this research was to shed some light onto the understanding of this phenomenon, apparently paradoxical and questioned by many of these professionals. How is it possible that the most efficient advertising strategy was showing more parts of the product offered? How is it possible that in order to draw the public into the theaters the movie must be spoiled? How is it possible that the industry has to show a product for free so that the public will pay for it afterwards? How is it possible that someone can be interested in watching a movie when they know or can sense how it is going to end?

These were the questions raised after listening to the different opinions expressed by several representatives of the movie making industry. After analyzing the results of our research, we feel more capable of answering them. The more inferential processes linked to the narrative thinking a movie trailer activates and the more the subject comprehends the whole textual structure of the story, the more the subjects desire to complete the whole process of interpretation.

A greater comprehension implies that the subject is able to guess the content of the plot that he/she has rebuilt with the pieces of the film that he/she has initially. The more sure the subject is about the text he has reconstructed, the greater his/her capacity is to get involved in a reinterpretation process that will lead him/her to understand the configuration order of the story. In other words, by reconstructing the sequential order in which the plot lies, the subject will be also able to reconstruct the configuration order of the story (6). This is why the subjects that can more easily carry out this interpretative leap prefer the movie trailer that they believe allows them to perform this operation.

The more one knows, the more one wants to know. This is the principle of expectation. As the release date gets closer, the information showed increases progressively until the last week, when the movie occupies the media almost constantly. Not only more advertising slots (TV trailers) are bought, but the amount of their narrative content also increases (behind the scenes trailers). Designing a campaign that takes into account timing and frequency in such a way that both the presence of the movie in the media and the narrative content of the movie trailers increase constantly generates expectation.

In order to make this persuasive process efficient, the public must infer that there will be more to watch and enjoy. As logic tells us that the more we watch of a movie, the less we have left to watch, the rhetoric of the 'grid editing' succeeds in reverting the reasoning. Movie trailers show enough hooking elements to structure the plot (the 'what'), but at the same time they create gaps (the 'how'), which provokes intrigue and disconcert.

Even though a movie trailer shows the best moments of the movie, the 'grid editing' makes the public infer that the content that is not shown to them will also provide them with enjoyable moments. Therefore, the rational argument 'the more good moments the movie trailer shows, the less good moments will be left to watch' (the more, the less), the grid editing makes the public infer that 'the more good moments the movie trailer shows, the more good moments will be enjoyed in the movie' (the more, the more). Andrew J. Kuehn was the precursor of this sort of editing in the mid-seventies. Nowadays, it remains a standard practice in both the independent and the mainstream film productions.

The research data reveals that movie trailers activate inferential processes in the subjects at a sequential and a configurational level (hypothesis 1). The 'grid editing' plays at showing core narrative elements of the plot (sequential order), but it also provides the subjects with clues that allow them to infer how the movie can enrich their lives (configuration order). Watching movie- trailers provokes narrative pleasure in the subjects. The evidence for this phenomenon is that there are festivals that pay tribute to these small commercial jewels. Movie trailers are evaluated according to their commercial success, but there is also a critic mass of people that enjoys their artistic and aesthetic dimension. According to Jean Luc Godard, 'movie trailers are perfect movies because they never let you down'. This is because the viewer cannot complete the inferences at a configuration order. The discontinuous montage denies the catharsis of enjoying a whole movie and, at the same time, leads to it.

Part of the key to understanding this phenomenon lies in the 'halo effect', which is an inductive cognitive prejudice that attributes general characteristics to certain particular attributes: 'If I liked the moments watched in the movie trailer, I will certainly enjoy the movie too (sequential order)', 'if I liked the gags included in the movie trailer, I will certainly enjoy the movie too (sequential order)' –in the case of a comedy–, 'if I liked the values showed in the movie trailer, I will certainly enjoy the movie too (configuration order)', 'if I liked the main character, I will certainly enjoy the movie', 'If I was intrigued by the movie trailer, the movie will certainly do so', etc.

In short, the results have confirmed our main hypothesis which links narrative thinking and rhetoric and have brought up some issues –not expected beforehand– that have enriched our knowledge on the rhetorical phenomenon of movie trailers, mainly with regard to narrative comprehension. Our research allows us to better explain the results of market studies questioned by many professionals of the movie industry. During the analyses and result discussing process, new hypotheses emerged. These can be tested in further experiments using different socio-demographic variables, different kinds of movies, and other audiovisual entertainment formats.

The fact that movie trailers are a part of our life cannot be denied. Movie trailers are made for a reason. They are meant to raise our desire for fiction. They promise us non-lived experiences, build up our hopes, give us aspirations, introduce themselves in our lives and mobilize our most primitive instincts.

Movie trailers are everywhere. More and more audiovisual shows are starting to use their montage techniques. It is not rare to find a 'commercial' of a sport event in which a voice over, similar to the great Don La Fontaine introducing the show as an epic battle; thus appealing to archetypical narrative structures already shaped in the collective unconscious. 'Grid editing' is one of the most effective ways to sell any audiovisual product susceptible of being interpreted in narrative terms.

Movie trailers have already become a reference to world culture. We could bet that there are far more movie trailers than movies. This tendency is increasing. Nowadays, we are close to a point where there are five trailers produced per movie –not to mention TV Trailers–. In other ambits, the Videogame industry, which overcame the movie industry in terms of commercial benefits in 2007, produces at least 5 trailers per product released. This sector has inherited the advertising tradition of the movie industry.

Lisa Kernan said that movie trailers do not show us the movie that we are going to watch, but the one we would like to watch, thus agreeing with Jean Luc Godard in the sense that they never let us down. There are also many

testimonies from people that have been close to death, in which they state that they had seen their lives passing by in shots. All of them refer to that moment as a prolonged period of pleasure. Most of them state to have seen images from their childhood –when the ontogenesis of narrative thinking and identity are conceived– and all of them seem to agree on having seen the best moments of their lives – some of them previously forgotten–. It seems that our brain has been genetically prepared to carry out a last operative task: to edit a trailer that make us happy before dying, make us feel that our life made some sense. Who knows, we might even see a shot from our favorite movie… Perhaps, the key to understanding the success of trailers is to recognize that they are rooted in the very core of our nature. The study of them can shed some light on issues that go far beyond the next movie premiere.

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

(2) Kernan (2004: 10, 13, 40, 148, 264).

(3) Any reader of this paper interested in watching the 'scientific movie trailers' can contact me in jon@hmca.uva.es and I will send her/him the trailers via e-mail or megaupload.

(4) For more explanations Dornaleteche, J. (2009): Pensamiento narrativo y retórica en los trailers cinematográficos, Universidad de Valladolid.

(5) The testimonies are founded in Andrew J. K Foundation (2005) and in the interview I made to Monica Brady, CEO of the Golden Trailer Awards, New York, 2006.

(6) These concepts are developed in Bermejo (2005).