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## From Spoilers to Spinoffs

### *A Theory of Paratexts*

Paratexts surround texts, audiences, and industry, as organic and naturally occurring a part of our mediated environment as are movies and television themselves. If we imagine the triumvirate of Text, Audience, and Industry as the Big Three of media practice, then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three. Industry and audiences create vast amounts of paratexts. Audiences also consume vast amounts of paratexts. Thus, paratexts' relationship to industry and audience is most obvious. However, the secret to understanding paratexts lies in working out their relationship to textuality: What is the paratext in relationship to the text? How does it contribute to the process of making meaning? And how does it energize, contextualize, or otherwise modify textuality? This chapter attempts to answer these questions by presenting a theory of paratextuality. To do so, first we must examine the nature of this relationship. I will then offer a definition of textuality that accounts for the paratextual, examining multiple instances of paratexts at work in the interpretive trenches. In particular, I will distinguish between paratexts that grab the viewer before he or she reaches the text and try to control the viewer's entrance to the text ("entryway paratexts"), and paratexts that flow between the gaps of textual exhibition, or that come to us "during" or "after" viewing, working to police certain reading strategies in medias res ("in medias res paratexts").

#### *Watching on a Hope and a Prayer*

Let us begin by asking how one makes sense of a text. A simple question, this has nevertheless challenged artists, scholars, politicians, and everyday readers for centuries and has yet to yield anything close to a simple answer.

Throughout humankind's long history of debates over what and how texts mean, and hence what they "do" to us and what we can "do" to them, the most common method of analyzing a text has been close reading. The intuitive purchase behind such a method is obvious: if you want to understand a finely crafted machine, you look at it and take it apart; so it would seem that if you want to understand a book, a film, or a television program, you could similarly look at it and take it apart. However, especially if we care about social meanings and uses—what place a text has in society—close reading does not suffice. Whether of machines or texts, close reading fails to reveal vital aspects of the object under analysis. In particular, just as taking apart a machine would not necessarily explain why a given person chose that machine over another tool or machine, close reading may tell us little about how a viewer *arrived at* a text. Why view *this* program, or *this* film, as opposed to the many thousands of other options?

Sometimes our consumption choices are motivated by previous consumption: "I loved it the first time, so let's watch it again." Thus, in such cases, the issue of context may seem rather trivial. But a great deal of our textual consumption instead involves new texts. When faced with a multiplex full of unwatched movies, or an extended cable television package full of unwatched shows, one must engage in *speculative consumption*, creating an idea of what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, what "effect" it will have on us, and so forth. As such, with all the hype that surrounds us, announcing texts from subway cars, website margins, or highway roadsides, we can spend a surprisingly large portion of our everyday life speculatively consuming new texts. Especially with film, as Thomas Elsaesser notes, buying a movie ticket is an "act of faith," in which we pay for "not the product itself and not even for the commodified experience that it represents, but simply for the possibility that such a transubstantiation of experience into commodity might 'take place.'"<sup>1</sup> If we do not like the film, we cannot get our money back, since we paid for the *chance* of entertainment, not necessarily for actual entertainment. Even watching television, though sometimes less deliberative an experience than going out to the movies, still requires an investment of time, and amidst channel-surfing, many of our decisions to watch are still based on prior speculative consumption, and hence on the hope, the possibility, of transubstantiation. Or, as Roger Silverstone notes, "We are drawn to these otherwise mundane and trivial texts and performances by a transcendent hope, a hope and a desire that something will touch us."<sup>2</sup> Much of the business of media, in both economic and hermeneutic terms, then, is

conducted before watching, when hopes, expectations, worries, concerns, and desires coalesce to offer us images and scripts of what a text might be.

Synergy, paratexts, and intertexts are responsible for much of this faith in transubstantiation—the high priests of and for much of the textuality that allows speculative consumption. To choose to watch a movie, for instance, we may factor in any of the following: the actors, the production personnel, the quality of the previews, reviews, interviews, the poster, a marketing campaign, word of mouth, what cinema it is playing at (or what channel it is on), or the material on which it is based (whether prequel, sequel, or adaptation). All of these are texts in their own right, often meticulously constructed by their producers in order to offer certain meanings and interpretations. Thus, in effect, it is these texts that create and manage our faith, and we consume them on our way to consuming the “film itself.”

Gerard Genette entitled such texts “paratexts,” texts that prepare us for other texts. They form, he notes, the “threshold” between the inside and the outside of the text, and while paratexts can exist without a source—as when we read commentary on films or television shows that have been lost to time, for instance—a text cannot exist without paratexts.<sup>3</sup> Writing of books, Genette offered a long list of paratexts, including covers, title pages, typesetting, paper, name of author, dedications, prefaces, and introductions as examples of “peritexts”—paratexts within the book—and interviews, reviews, public responses, and magazine ads as “epitexts”—paratexts outside the book.<sup>4</sup> He also allowed for paratexts of fact, so that, for instance, knowing an author’s gender could serve its own paratextual function. Genette argued that we can only approach texts *through* paratexts, so that before we start reading a book, we have consumed many of its paratexts. Far from being tangentially related to the text, paratexts provide “an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much difficulty from one world to the other, a sometimes delicate operation, especially when the second world is a fictional one.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, paratexts condition our entrance to texts, telling us what to expect, and setting the terms of our “faith” in subsequent transubstantiation. Hence, for instance, an ad telling us of a film’s success at Cannes and Sundance would prepare us for a markedly different film than would, say, an ad that boasts endorsement from Britney Spears (even if both ads refer to the same film). Each paratext acts like an airlock to acclimatize us to a certain text, and it demands or suggests certain reading strategies. We rely upon such paratexts to help us choose how to spend our leisure time: they tell us which

movies and television programs to watch, which are priorities, which to avoid, which to watch alone and which to watch with friends, which to watch on a big screen, which to save for times when we need a pick-me-up, and so on. Thus, paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us “into” the text, and they provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption.

As such, the study of paratexts is the study of how meaning is created, and of how texts begin. Moreover, precisely because paratexts help us decide which texts to consume, we often know many texts only at the paratextual level. Everyone consumes many more paratexts than films or programs. When we move onward to the film or program, those paratexts help frame our consumption; but when we do not move onward, all we are left with is the paratext. Hence, for instance, when at a multiplex we choose to watch one of the ten films on offer, we not only create an interpretive construction of the film that we saw; we have often also speculatively consumed many of the other nine. Paratexts, then, become the very stuff upon which much popular interpretation is based. As analysts of media, making sense of the film or program itself remains a vitally important step, but such a step will only tell us what it means to those who have watched it. From *Star Wars* to *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *American Idol* (2002–) to *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991–), many shows have meaning for an “audience” that extends well beyond those who actually watched the show. To understand what texts mean to popular culture as a whole, we must examine paratexts too. If media audiences have for too long been seen as unthinking, purely reactive monads, this is in large part because the analysis of media has consistently underplayed the importance of worries, hopes, and expectations in preparing us for texts. As full as the world is of films and television programs, it is more full of worries, hopes, and expectations concerning them. Ultimately, therefore, paratextual study not only promises to tell us how a text creates meaning for its consumers; it also promises to tell us how a text creates meaning in popular culture and society more generally.

#### *“Only Hype”: From Soda to Soderbergh*

In creating worries, hopes, and expectations, paratexts work in a remarkably similar manner to advertisements. Ads, of course, are the pariah of the media world, and thus just as paratexts are too often discounted

as “only hype,” so too do ads often provoke more scorn than study. It is beyond the scope of this book to heap yet more scorn on ads. However, if we look beyond a moral evaluation of ads to see how they function semiotically, we find the same skeletal form that lies behind most paratextuality.

An ad’s purpose appears simple—to sell and brand a product. As Celia Lury and Alan Warde note, ads exist in such numbers because of “a permanent source of insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety for any producer: for they cannot *force* people to buy their products and can never be sure that people who already do use them will continue to want to do so.”<sup>6</sup> Ads must continue the ministry of consumerism, making us want to buy their products, and giving us faith in the transubstantiation that they in turn promise. However, as many critics of advertising have noted, most ads have long since graduated from the form’s early days of merely listing what a product can do, and many have graduated from selling a specific product. Nike ads do not tell us that a particular line of Nike shoes pad our feet while playing sports, then let us decide whether to purchase them or not. They do not even *excitedly* tell us what their shoe is. Rather, as Sut Jhally observes, a key function of ads is often to *erase* much information of what a product is and where it came from, so that the entire history of how it came to be is a mystery: Nike’s labor practices in developing countries, for instance, are neatly left out of the picture, as is even a simple description of the product. Rather, ads aim to create new, metaphysical meanings for a product, so that “once the real meaning has been systematically *emptied* out of commodities [. . .] advertising then *refills* this void with its own symbols.”<sup>7</sup> Much advertising aims to sell products by creating brand identity and by promising value-added—product *and* metaphysics.

Nike, for instance, is famous for its ads featuring basketball stars, a hip urban drum beat in the background, and stark, edgy black backgrounds and high-quality cinematography that highlight the stars’ remarkable displays of athletic prowess. As Judith Williamson explains, everything in an ad works as a gestalt and condensation of the product,<sup>8</sup> so that here, by being hip, edgy, and urban cool, the ad hopes to create an image of Nike shoes as hip, edgy, and urban cool. By blacking out the background, the ads suggest that sports alone matter. By frequently featuring prominent African American athletes, the company hopes to suggest that it is “all about equality”; and since public mythology holds that many such athletes began playing in housing projects in inner cities, the ads subtly celebrate these athletes’ success and (Nike being the Greek goddess of victory) their

victorious navigation of the American Dream. The ads also rely on a racial stereotype of blacks as being more in touch with their bodies, perhaps offering the non-black consumer the opportunity to achieve parity. Thus, the ads aim to create a brand identity, a semiotic entity called Nike that represents victory, the American Dream, equality, urban hip, sporting excellence, raw masculinity, and looking cool while winning. In doing so, they imply that by buying Nike shoes, you are stating publicly your allegiance and dedication to this image. Meanwhile, of course, Nike aims to attach itself to the public images of the stars it uses, hoping that their aura and meaning will rub off on the shoes.

As Gillian Dyer observes in her close study of the semiotics of advertising, in ads, “the meaning of one *thing* is transferred to or made interchangeable with another *quality*, whose value attaches itself to the *product*.”<sup>9</sup> For instance, the black background (one thing) is made interchangeable with hipness and edginess (a quality), which attaches itself to the Nike shoes (the product). Effectively, then, ads create elaborate semiotic chains, which might seem to be logical in the moment of watching, but which offer no necessary correlation upon examination. To take another example, many ads for snack foods offer an image of a family in a beautiful, tidy home, yet with a hungry teenage son; usually the mother rescues the day by offering the supposedly ideal snack food, restoring perfection to the family. In such a script, the semiotic chain, “snack food brings happiness to son, which makes son happy with mother, and mother a good provider,” shortens itself to “snack food equals family bliss.” With such stunning sleight of hand, ads frequently add a rich layer of symbolism to any product, literally giving it meaning, rather than simply explaining the product. As such, ads are constitutive of a product’s meaning. Sometimes the proposed meaning and the product’s actual function are related, with the former growing organically from the latter, but this is never a necessity. When Che Guevara or Gandhi can be used to sell computers, advertisers prove themselves capable of creating a whole new slate of meanings for any product. These meanings not only work for those of us new to a product, but they also aim to continue providing meaning and value-added for longtime or return customers, so that one’s already-made purchases either maintain their added meanings or gain new ones. Not all consumers will follow all ads’ semiotic chains (hence the need for ever more ads), but in intent if not always in actuality, ads aim to create meaning. Or to rephrase, we could say that ads aim to make products into texts and into popular culture.

Toward this end, moreover, contemporary branding practices require much more than just ads. Just as the use of stars in ads proves especially helpful, because ads can thereby attach their product's brand identity to an already established unit of meaning, so too have advertisers long since realized the utility of attaching their brand identity to other established texts, whether individuals, events, or shows. Hence, for instance, for many years, du Maurier cigarettes sponsored the annual Montreal Jazz Festival in an attempt to "borrow" the festival's meanings. Sears prominently sponsors the "miracle work" of ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2004–), in an attempt to become synonymous with good deeds, family values, great and selfless service, and a strong presence in local communities. Or, as Victoria Johnson notes of Dodge's longtime sponsorship of *The Lawrence Welk Show* (1955–71), the goal was to associate the automaker with "simple," "Heartland" values of family, community, and conservatism; as Johnson playfully notes:

Welk's "citizen" stature as a man of tradition, community, and character was essentially defined by his denial of conspicuous personal gain in favor of a rigorous code of moral and behavioral standards. If Welk refused to play Las Vegas because it might offend some of his staunchly religious fans, must it not be the moral thing to do to drive a Dodge?<sup>10</sup>

In each case, the advertiser attempts to create meaning for a product or brand not at the site of the product or brand itself (i.e., not by simply making a funky cigarette, or a moral store or car, whatever they might look like), but at the site of the ad or promotional venue.

Much of the world of media hype and synergy is pure advertising and branding: posters on subways and at bus-stops and construction sites; roadside billboards; ads in newspapers or magazines; usually one ad spot out of every television commercial break; trailers and previews; "next week on . . ." snippets following television shows; appearances by stars on talk shows or entertainment news programs; interviews in industry or fan magazines; a toy promotion at a fast food chain; a new ride at an amusement park. Even revenue-generating synergy, such as a toy or clothing line, a CD or DVD, or a videogame, act as advertisements in their own right. The product in question, though, is a show, and hence a text, with or without the ad/synergy/hype. This allows advertisers to draw more deeply from the show when constructing an image of that text, as with trailers that lace together multiple scenes from a film or program, or interviews that draw on a star's already well-manicured public image. Film and television shows

therefore often weigh down their paratexts more heavily than in the *tabula rasa* world of product advertising (where Hummer ads insist that the car is at one with the natural environment that we all know it's killing). Nevertheless, the advertiser is still faced with the same fundamental need to create a desire, hope, and expectation for the show that will convince a consumer to "purchase"/watch it. As such, hype, synergy, and promos are just as much about *creating* textuality, and about promising value-added as are ads for Nike or snack foods. As with other ads, too, they create this meaning away from the "product"/show itself. And just as the images and qualities attached to the "text" of Nike shoes by the company's ads often remain attached, so too then do the images and qualities assigned and attached to shows by their paratexts stick to them, becoming an inseparable part of "the text itself." In this way, paratexts help to make texts.

#### *What Is a Text?*

If paratexts fashion and/or act as "airlocks" to texts, what does the text itself look like? The strange merging of synergistic text with "actual" text and the resulting confusion in vocabulary of textuality demand a reappraisal of what a text is and how it works. Roland Barthes famously insisted that the text is always on the move and hence impossible to grasp or to study as a set object. Barthes drew a distinction in this respect between the *text* and the *work*. The work, he explains, "can be held in the hand," whereas "the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse," and is "*experienced only in an activity of production.*"<sup>11</sup> One can hold a roll of film or a tape of a television program, but that is the work alone—the *text* is only experienced in the act of consumption. However, Barthes defines this act of consumption as one of production because no text can be experienced free of the individual reader. In effect, all of us bring to bear an entire reading and life history to any act of textual consumption, so that each one of us will find different resonances in the same text. To offer an exaggerated example, when watching a war film, a person with a family member at war will likely experience a different text than will a second viewer in the middle of a fraternity's action film marathon. Thus, while the work consists of letters on a page or images on a screen, the text comes alive in the interaction between these letters or images and the reader. The text, as Barthes notes, "decants" the work and "gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice," thereby asking of its reader "a practical collaboration."<sup>12</sup> The magic and majesty of art rely upon the individual



spark that occurs between work and reader as the reader participates in the birth of the text.

Texts make sense because of our past textual experiences, literacy, and knowledge. At a basic level, for instance, if we are new to a language, we can only decode small parts of anything that we read or hear. But fluency extends beyond mere vocabulary and grammar, to visual, imagistic, and artistic literacy and experience. As such, intertextuality—the inescapable links between texts—creates added meaning. Stories that begin with “Once Upon a Time” immediately signal their fairytale roots for those of us who have heard such stories before. Should we hear a character in a television show demand “a room of my own,” if we have read Virginia Woolf’s famous feminist treatise “A Room of Her Own,” the demand may have added resonance. Or, should we be watching a film in which a handheld camera is following a character by peering through foliage, a history of watching horror films will likely suggest that the character is being stalked, and that the camera’s “eyes” are those of the predator. Language, images, and texts never come to us in a vacuum; instead, as Valentin Volosinov notes, “*The utterance is a social phenomenon*,” for each shard of textuality or meaning comes to us in a given context. “Any utterance—the finished, written utterance not excepted—makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances. Each monument carries on the work of its predecessors, polemicizing with them, expecting active, responsive understanding, and anticipating such understanding in return.”<sup>13</sup> This means not only that texts talk back to and revise other texts, either implicitly or explicitly calling for us to connect their meanings to previous texts, but also that we will always make sense of texts partly through the frames offered by other texts.

Much intertextuality is random, entailing links that an artist could never have predicted. Indeed, much communication is chaotic: change channels from a news item about a rise in local crime to a channel that is advertising home security systems, and the former text may handily intensify the effect of the latter. Or turn from the cannibal-serial-killer film *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to a hamburger ad and one may be repulsed. But much intertextuality is intentional too. Michael Riffaterre in particular writes of intertextuality as a means by which writers “guarantee” that readers will come to the same meaning. He argues that all texts rely upon other texts for their meaning and value, so that “the most important component of a literary work of art, and indeed the key to the interpretation

of its significance, should be found outside that work, beyond its margins, in the intertext,” the recovery of which “is an imperative and inevitable process.”<sup>14</sup> Riffaterre’s faith in intertextuality as conditioning and guaranteeing the “proper interpretation”<sup>15</sup> is unrealistic, holding out for a world of perfectly informed readers. Similarly, his inability to recognize the disruptive force of invasive or corruptive intertextuality underplays the multiple roles that intertextuality plays in the reading process, as I will discuss shortly. Nevertheless, he is correct to point out the degree to which intertextuality can act both as a constraint upon reading and as a guide for interpretation. Character names, in particular, often offer intertextual “guides” on how to read a text, as do ways of filming, *mise-en-scène*, generic codes, and the like. Surfing through television channels, then, many of us need only a few seconds, if that, to determine a text’s genre, as many subtle and overt clues—film stock, mode of acting, use of color, rhythm of dialogue, and so on—immediately make sense to us based on our past viewing.

As Michael Iampolski spells out, to understand and to recognize “is to place what you see alongside what you know, alongside what has already been.”<sup>16</sup> Thus our reading of any text is illuminated by potentially thousands of texts that have “already been,” each intertext serving as a different energy source, and the shape and nature of the resulting text for any given individual will depend upon from where the energy comes. If, then, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations,”<sup>17</sup> Iampolski (echoing Barthes) notes, “only the viewer or reader can unite the text, using his [*sic*] cultural memory to make it one.”<sup>18</sup> The text is the consequence of the meeting of work and reader, but each work and each reader will bring multiple intertexts that energize and animate the text.

Such a process risks sounding wholly individual, as indeed all interpretation is open to personal nuances, quirks, and redirections. Within the field of textual studies, Stanley Fish is most notorious for espousing his belief in personalized texts, as his reader response theory allows for readers *in theory* to imprint any meaning upon a text that they desire. However, Fish argues that *in practice*, reading and interpretation are limited by context and by “interpretive communities.” “I want to argue for, not against, the normal, the ordinary, the literal, the straightforward [interpretation], and so on,” he notes, “but I want to argue for them as the products of contextual or interpretive circumstances and not as the property of an acontextual language,” so that “the category ‘in the text,’ like ‘the ordinary’ [interpretation], is always full [. . .], but what fills it is not

always the same.”<sup>19</sup> To Fish, context determines interpretation, so that, for instance, he recalls the radically different interpretations that two of his classes—one an early English religious poetry class, the other a literary theory class—made of the same string of names on the blackboard. Fish sees interpretation as constrained; the constraints, though, “do not inhere in language but in situations, and because they inhere in situations, the constraints we are always under are not always the same ones.”<sup>20</sup> In effect, he crowns context as king, and precisely because context of interpretation will often be shared by others, readings will tend not to be random and wholly individualistic. Rather, Fish proposes the “interpretive community” as the prime filter for reading, a group of similarly minded (or contextualized) individuals whose strategies for interpretation “exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.”<sup>21</sup> When a text seemingly has one meaning, to Fish this only means that one interpretive community is dominant, effectively controlling the context of reception, setting the terms by which any reader will approach the text.

Fish’s siren rhetoric is wonderfully seductive, but he is guilty of overstatement. In particular, one is left wondering how interpretive communities form, or how one moves from one to another, if not through language, and if not, therefore, through textuality. His reading schematic is also considerably more acceptable when contemplating a single text; when a singular interpretive community is met with a second text, producing a different meaning, the schematic proves unsuccessful in attributing all meaning to the act of reading alone. Surely texts contribute to their meaning in some way. Nevertheless, having slipped out of Fish’s trap, we could still take away a better appreciation of the utter importance of context, and of how interpretive communities with set reading strategies exert considerable pressure upon the reading process. For all the problems with Fish’s theorization of textuality, therefore, his work still insists that we regard readers as often ready for texts before they encounter them and, not only as individuals but as groups, as predisposed to find or create certain interpretations.

Moreover, if we reintegrate Fish’s interest in context and interpretive communities with a belief in texts as having something to say in and of themselves, we can examine the role that texts and paratexts play in constructing the contexts and interpretive communities that will be activated when interpreting other texts. As such, intertextuality can be directed. Here, Laurent Jenny offers that if, following Ferdinand de Saussure’s

linguistics, *langue* is the system and rules of a language and *parole* is the given utterance, through intertextuality other texts can create a “super-parole” as the meanings and context-setting apparatus of other texts encircle the text at hand.<sup>22</sup> Jenny writes of arguably the most obvious instance of such directed intertextuality: parody. As I have examined elsewhere, parody works as a form of “critical intertextuality” that aims precisely to bump a text or genre’s meaning-making process off its self-declared trajectory.<sup>23</sup> Works such as *The Simpsons* or *South Park* (1997–) thus gouge at all manner of traditional family sitcom rules, so that subsequent viewings of *Full House* (1987–95) or other similar happy-happy sitcoms renders them all the more obviously artificial and saccharine. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999–) and *The Colbert Report* (2005–) teach a form of news literacy that sets itself up on the perimeter of news discourse, so that subsequent exposure to the news may be recontextualized. In Jenny’s words, the author of such parody works in order “to encircle [the parodic target], to enclose [it] within another discourse, thus rendered more powerful. He [*sic*] speaks in order to obliterate, to cancel. Or else, patiently, he gainsays in order to go beyond.”<sup>24</sup> More than simply speaking to individual viewers, successful parody has also proven remarkably adept at networking and encouraging interpretive communities to build around it.<sup>25</sup>

Parody is certainly the most overt and flashy instance of directed intertextuality, yet it is a small subset of a much larger universe of texts and paratexts that refer to other texts and, in so doing, set up reading filters and create interpretive communities. For an example of a particularly successful para-/inter-textual network, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott offer the case of James Bond, a figure who exists across films, books, merchandise, and ads. Each of these sites of Bond, they note, work as “textual meteorites, highly condensed and materialised chunks of meaning.”<sup>26</sup> These meteorites orbit any interaction we might have with another Bond text, so that we approach the text with a sense of who and what Bond is; via the pre-existing para-/inter-textual network of Bond, we will always arrive at any new Bond text with a sense of what to expect, and with the interpretation process already well under way. Bennett and Woollacott see no need to reduce text to context, as does Fish, but they do argue that when texts such as any new Bond film are made sense of by first moving through the dense collection of intertexts and paratexts, we must therefore “rethink the concept of context such that, ultimately, neither text nor context are conceivable as entities separable from one another.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, as much as we may still use terms such as “text,” “intertext,” and

“paratext” for analytical purposes, in fact intertext and paratext are always constitutive parts of the text itself.

### *Getting into a Program: Entryway Paratexts*

James Bond presents an especially rich example of para-/inter-textuality, given his appearance in multiple movies, books, and ads over the last fifty years. However, every text has paratexts. As Bennett and Woollacott also show, the para-/inter-textual network surrounding Bond works in two key ways: (1) not only will our history of Bond serve as an airlock into the world of any new Bond text, but in turn, (2) Bond is always open for re-decoding, for any new text or paratext can re-inflect our notion of who and what Bond in general is. Therefore, as noted earlier, we can divide paratexts crudely, and for analytical purposes alone, into those that control and determine our *entrance* to a text—*entryway paratexts*—and those that inflect or redirect the text following initial interaction—*in medias res paratexts*. I will now turn to instances of the former, so that we might see paratexts in action; later in the chapter, I will return to instances of the latter, thereby developing a notion of textual phenomenology.

One of the more detailed accounts of paratextuality—though not using that term—can be found in Jason Mittell’s *Genre and Television*. Mittell seeks to illustrate how genre is created as much outside of generic texts as within them, arguing that “we need to look outside of texts to locate the range of sites in which genres operate, change, proliferate, and die out.”<sup>28</sup> Mittell therefore charts how advertising, policy, patterns of exhibition, public talk, and so forth all position a genre, as do “trade press coverage, popular press coverage, critical reviews, promotional material, other cultural representations and commodities (like merchandise, media tie-ins, and parodies), corporate and personal documents, production manuals, legal and government materials, audience remnants, and oral histories.”<sup>29</sup> For instance, he notes that cartoons began their televisual life as texts that appealed to adults too; however, over time, public discourse surrounding cartoons penned them into a kids-only category that, although challenged by texts such as *The Simpsons*, still inflects how many people react to and consume cartoons. Elsewhere in his book, he charts how audience talk about talk shows delimits their boundaries in popular culture, especially since much of this talk originates from those who do not watch talk shows, or who watch small amounts, and is therefore not simply reactive to “the show itself.” Genre serves an important duty in the interpretive

process, of course, because it acts much as I have said paratexts do, by providing an initial context and reading strategy for the text—so that, for instance, if we see cartoons as a children’s genre, we will be more startled by crude adult humor in a cartoon than in a Judd Apatow comedy. But Mittell shows that paratexts play a considerable role in establishing genre, and hence that they control our interactions with and interpretations of texts. If genres are, as Stephen Neale notes, “systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject,”<sup>30</sup> paratexts form much of this realm of the “between,” a realm through which we must travel in order to consume and make sense of a text.

Paratexts can also be seen to establish themselves around the interpretive perimeter of an entire medium. Highly illustrative here is Lynn Spigel’s examination of the role that women’s magazines played in establishing attitudes toward television in its early days. Spigel shows how ads and columns in magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *American Home*, and *House Beautiful* acted as arbiters of taste with regards to television’s place in the home.<sup>31</sup> Not only would they dictate where one should place one’s television, but what one should be careful of and how one should use it. Manufacturers proposed that the television was a new member of the family, and these magazine paratexts offered instruction on how we should treat this relative. Certainly such lessons and moral guidelines remain prevalent today, as all media are surrounded by cautionary tales, “Best of” lists, enthusiastic ads, published effects studies, and a whole host of other paratexts that aim to delineate how we should or should not use such media. Whether these take the form of ads for home entertainment systems that encourage us to create a home fortress based around our televisions,<sup>32</sup> or whether they take the form of conservative commentary on the liberal, immoral, anti-family values narratives that supposedly pervade film and television, paratexts draw many of the battle lines that surround media consumption. Beyond instruction on how to consume a given text or genre, they at least attempt to create entire interpretive communities and hermeneutic recipes for daily living in a media-saturated world.

As in the case of parody, some paratexts work as critical intertexts, actively trying either to deflect readers from certain texts or to infect their reading when it occurs. Reviews from journalists and/or religious or political figures are often obvious examples of critical paratexts. Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs, and Ramaswami Harindranth, for instance, chart

the effect that British moral panic regarding David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) had on viewers.<sup>33</sup> Cronenberg's film focuses on a group of individuals who become sexually aroused by car crashes, and when news of the film broke in England, several prominent politicians and newspaper columnists campaigned for it to be banned, thinking it perverse and dangerous. Interestingly, many of those who fought for a ban never watched the film; rather, they allowed the paratext of a small plot summary and/or descriptions of individual scenes to stand in for the text as a whole. But as Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath show through careful qualitative audience research, the media circus that surrounded the text worked as its own critical paratextuality, inflecting the reading of the text for those who did watch it. Many of the research participants found it hard to look beyond the critical paratextuality, or to find alternative frames for viewing, to the point that the media circus and paratextuality virtually took over the text for many viewers. Even those who refused to precode the film as depraved often wanted to watch the film just to see what all the fuss was about, and hence still with a firm, controlled interest in the violent, sexual content. As the authors write of such a viewing position, "to go to see *Crash* to check if it is 'violent' or 'sensationalist' is not like looking to see if there is water in the kettle. It importantly *prefigures* how [viewers] prepare to watch it."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, we might observe that following the controversy regarding *Passion of the Christ* in the United States, few viewers could watch it without particular attention drawn to whether it was anti-Semitic or not, or a devotional text or not, following the critical paratextuality that, respectively, the Anti-Defamation League and prominent church figures threw around the text. Or, as Janet Staiger observes, given reviews and commentary on D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), few viewers can approach it expecting anything other than racist propaganda;<sup>35</sup> due to critical paratextuality, its racism has almost subsumed the text before one can even watch it.

Paratexts can also inflect certain parts of a media text or certain characters. David Buckingham notes, for instance, how the knowledge of an *East Enders* (1985–) cast member's past criminal record hit the press in England. The actor played a villain on the show, but knowledge of his life behind bars contributed to the tabloid press naming him "Dirty Den" and to their construction of him as a folk devil. For any viewer aware of the press commentary, Den's villainy was potentially amplified and made to seem all the more realistic and authentic.<sup>36</sup> As C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby insist, the daytime press has long played an important role for

soap operas. Soap opera magazines and news frequently announce storylines before they occur, sometimes testing the waters for fan reactions, or allowing viewers to “catch up” on what they missed. Moreover, “by rendering the subculture [of soap fandom] visible and accessible both to itself and to outsiders, the daytime press contributes in important ways to defining the boundaries of the subculture and to managing those boundaries,”<sup>37</sup> hence playing a key role in the construction of interpretive communities for soap viewing. In such instances, paratexts can amplify and/or clarify many of a text’s meanings and uses, establishing the role that a text and its characters play outside the boundaries of the show, in the everyday realities of viewers’ and non-viewers’ lives.

Soap magazines may direct criticism toward texts, but they also provide an example of what we could call *supportive intertextuality*. As innovative and as semiotically active as parody and criticism may be, many paratexts reinforce a text’s meaning or otherwise set up a welcoming perimeter. Here we reach the realm proper of hype and synergy. To take the average animated Disney film, for instance, before release, the film has usually been preceded by an army of plush toys, coloring books, watches, bedspreads, and action figures. It will likely have been advertised during a hit Saturday-morning kids’ show, and McDonalds or some other fast food company will have released a specially themed “Happy Meal.” Thus, the movie suggests fun and good things to children—it is associated with cuddly toys, playtime, good television shows, and sugary food. Meanwhile, of course, the average Disney marketing campaign so heavily populates the kid universe with film-related merchandise that any given child could understandably feel as though “everyone” is watching the film. Ultimately, then, when it works, Disney paratextuality creates a well-fashioned image of all that the film represents, and it exhorts the child to watch the film. Writing of such instances, Robert Allen states that “a film is no longer reducible to the actual experience of seeing it”—as if it ever was!—as this paratextuality not only precedes the act of watching, but feeds into, conditions, and becomes part of that act. The toys, burgers, and so on are now *part of the text*. Allen even suggests that in such a paratextual/synergistic marketplace, films are often no longer the text in the first place, but rather “the inedible part of a Happy Meal” and the “movie on the lunchbox.”<sup>38</sup> When Disney might make several hundred dollars’ worth of product sales off a single young consumer, compared to the child’s paltry five dollars at the box office, we might be foolish to see the film as ipso facto the “primary text.” Allen is



hyperbolically fatalistic in declaring that cinema has died and that “it is now time to write the last chapter of the history of Hollywood cinema and its audience,”<sup>39</sup> but the Disney hype and synergy machine nevertheless illustrates the increasingly hazy boundaries between primary and secondary textuality, or between text and paratext, boundaries that we will return to in chapter 6.

Disney is quite exceptional in the degree to which its paratexts fill stores and lives, but many other companies have followed its lead, resulting in the heavy population of the world with paratexts. Quite simply, in a cluttered media environment, all texts need paratexts, if only to announce the text’s presence. Thus, media corporations are investing ever more time, energy, and capital into producing previews and spinoff merchandise, into public relations tours that get their cast and crew on anything from *Entertainment Tonight* (1981–) to *The Late Show with David Letterman* (1993–) to guest appearances on reality shows, into creative marketing campaigns (such as when *Lost* announced its forthcoming arrival on television by covering a beach with ads in bottles), into inviting the press to preview screenings, into plugging their texts for Oscars, Golden Globes, or Emmys, and into various other traditional and non-traditional forms of hype and synergy. Paratextuality is a vital part of the media business, precisely because paratexts play the key role in determining if a text will sink or swim. The public, the press, and the industry regularly evaluate movies based on opening weekend box office draw alone, for, as Tad Friend notes, “If a film doesn’t find its audience the first weekend, exhibitors pull it from their best theatres, and eventual television-licensing fees and DVD sales fall correspondingly.”<sup>40</sup> Many network heads, too, will cancel a new television show after only two episodes. As such, the industry desperately needs its paratexts to work, since both industry and audiences habitually count on paratexts’ relative success or failure as an index to the success or failure of the text as a whole. Moreover, while paratexts have surrounded all media throughout history, as Hollywood grows fonder of franchises and multi-platform brands or characters, yet more paratexts are being produced. Simultaneously, though, with all sorts of random paratextual or intertextual collisions threatening the encoded meanings of texts, and with devious and critical paratexts or intertexts working to hijack their meaning-making processes, the industry requires a strong frontline of paratexts. A continuing question for this book, therefore, will be the degree to which paratexts overtake and subsume their texts, and the conditions under which they do so.

*“We Interrupt This Broadcast”: Paratexts In Medias Res*

Paratexts do not merely control our entrance to texts, and thus as much as Genette’s metaphor of paratexts as airlocks is evocative of some of their functions, its utility is limited. After all, many paratexts are encountered after “entering” the text. For instance, using the term and metaphor of “overflow,” Will Brooker writes of how numerous contemporary television series are accompanied by clothing lines, websites, CDs, and fan discussion forums. Speaking of his own interaction with one such series, the short-lived BBC program *Attachments* (2000–2002), he writes:

After watching the episode where Soph is punished by her boss for her article “Hell is Other People Shagging,” I went to the seethru.co.uk website, which treats Soph and her colleagues as “real” people, with no mention of BBC2 or *Attachments*. On the front page I was able to read the full article, which could only be glimpsed in the actual episode. I then took part in a quiz compiled by Reece, the series’ womanizing programmer, and sent a semi-ironic mail to the character pointing out that he’d misspelled a *Star Wars* reference.<sup>41</sup>

He goes on to ask: “At what point, then, did the show ‘end’ for me? Technically, I stopped watching television at 9.45 pm, but I was engaging with the characters and narrative of the show for at least an hour afterwards, even to the point of sending a mail to a non-existent programmer.”<sup>42</sup> As such, Brooker proposes the notion of “overflow,” evoking an image of a text that is too full, too large for its own body, necessitating the spillover of textuality into paratexts. As much as synergy attempts to capture audiences’ attention and bring them to the show, much modern synergy is best understood as offering value-added, rather than simply announcing the show’s presence. Brooker points to the notable example of *Dawson’s Creek* (1998–2003), which while in active production had an elaborate official website via which viewers could navigate to the title character’s computer desktop (even reading his email) and that linked to a website for the show’s fictional university. American Eagle and J. Crew sold clothes worn by the cast. Each episode ended with information on how to buy the music played throughout the episode. And fan discussion forums ran 24/7, allowing critical, laudatory, or other talk by viewers.

*Dawson’s Creek* led the way at the time but has since been eclipsed by shows such as *Lost* with alternate reality games, podcasts, spinoff novels

written by characters from the show, and “mobisode” mini-episodes filmed for mobile phone or Internet distribution, for instance, by *Heroes* (2006–), with a supplementary online comic book and other transmedia initiatives (see chapter 6), and by countless other shows’ variously innovative or derivative “overflow” techniques. And while Brooker’s metaphor of “overflow” might suggest a movement *away from* “the show itself,” Henry Jenkins refers to such multi-platformed media texts as “convergence,” suggesting a grand *confluence* of media texts and platforms under the broad heading of the single text. Jenkins’s recent book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, charts the proliferation of many such franchised, convergent texts. For instance, he examines how *The Matrix* (1999) gave birth not only to two sequels, but to anime spinoffs (collected in the DVD *The Animatrix* [2003]), comic books, and a videogame that were authored either in part by or in coordination with the Wachowskis, so that the *Matrix* narrative weaved through various platforms. Meanwhile, fans create their own paratexts, writing fan fiction, making fan songs and films, and, as Jenkins notes, even staging fully costumed re-enactments of scenes from *The Matrix* and other media texts in certain Japanese parks.<sup>43</sup>

Rather than choose between metaphors of “overflow” or “convergence,” I find the ebb and flow suggested by employing both terms indicative of the multiple ways in which many media texts are now both moving outward yet incorporating other texts inward, being authored across media. Between the outward overflow and inward convergence of paratextuality, we see the beating heart of the text.

What, though, are we to make of such paratexts presented in medias res, and what control do they have over the text? To answer this, we must move away from questions of textual ontology—what *is* the text?—to questions of textual phenomenology—how does the text *happen*? In particular, we can turn to the textual theory of Wolfgang Iser and to Stanley Fish’s “Affective Stylistics” period that preceded his above-mentioned theoretical excesses. Both writers insisted on the importance of studying a text as it happens, from sentence to sentence, page to page. Fish argued that we as analysts too often interpret the text as a whole, hence forgetting how it developed and took form in the act of reading.<sup>44</sup> He wrote of literature as “kinetic,” in that it moves, and “does not lend itself to a static interpretation because it refuses to stay still and doesn’t let you stay still either.” He further reasoned that readers respond not only to a finished utterance, but rather to the “temporal flow” of a text: “That is, in

an utterance of any length, there is a point at which the reader has taken in only the first word, and then the second, and then the third, and so on, and the report of what happens to the reader is always a report of what has happened *to that point*" (emphasis added).<sup>45</sup> Iser too was interested in how sequent sentences act upon one another, and in how texts leave "gaps" between sentences and ideas that readers must fill in, producing an ebb and flow (a beating heart?) of anticipation, retrospection, and accumulation, an "experience [that] comes about through a process of continual modification."<sup>46</sup> "Every moment of reading," he notes, "is a dialectic of protension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake." Meaning arises, he argues, out of the process of "actualization,"<sup>47</sup> in the act of reading, and both he and Fish point to the active nature of texts—they are experiences, not just monuments, and so our interpretation of a text must occur as itself an experience, not in a lightning-strike moment of sense-making.

For television series in particular, the ramifications of a phenomenological approach to interpretation are profound.<sup>48</sup> Many shows take years to play out from supposed start to finish, and thus the televisual equivalent of the moment between pages in a book may be a week between episodes, or a summer hiatus. However, it would be ludicrous to think that we simply tuck away our interpretive efforts into small corners of our brains, waiting until after the series finale to make sense of a text. Rather, we constantly interpret as we go along. Furthermore, television shows give us significant time between episodes to interpret them, and so we will often make sense of them away from the work itself, in the moments between exhibition. As we have seen, though, these moments, or what Iser would call "gaps," are often filled with paratexts: as Brooker's narrative above illustrates, we might go online and read others' opinions of a show, we might consume tie-in merchandise, or we might consume any number of other paratexts.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, just as paratexts can inflect our interpretations of texts as we enter them, so too can they inflect our *re-entry* to television texts. For texts that destabilize any one media platform as central, each platform serves as a paratext for the others. Since our process of textual "actualization" remains open with most television series, paratexts are free to invade the meaning-making process. Especially, too, since many serial programs leave us wondering what will

happen next, frustrating the narrative delivery system by dragging it out over multiple years, many viewers will actively look for clues in producers' paratexts regarding what will happen next. Of course, a similar process occurs in serial films, so that, for instance, Brooker charts the debates and discussions among *Star Wars* fans about the films' many paratexts (games, novels, comics, etc.) as to what entails the "canon," or the accepted *Star Wars* universe.<sup>50</sup>

With an increasing number of television and film serial texts opening up what Matt Hills dubs "endlessly deferred hyperdiegesis"<sup>51</sup>—huge, seemingly never-ending plotlines—and set in elaborate textual universes, we might expect both the frustrations of wanting to know what will happen, and the experience of a text as comprising much more than just the show, to increase markedly. Such cult texts invite their viewers in and give their imaginations acres of space in which to roam, and it is this openness that often proves most attractive to many viewers. Thus, these texts seemingly welcome in all manner of other texts and paratexts to delineate small portions of the universe, plotline, thematics, and characterization.

Arguably the most clear-cut example of an *in medias res* paratext at work is the "last week on . . ." or "previously on . . ." segments that precede many television serials. Such segments usually consist of a carefully edited fifteen- to thirty-second sequence of images and plot-points from previous episodes, designed to give audiences necessary backstory. For new viewers, these segments clearly serve as entryway paratexts, but they also act as reminders for returning viewers, designed to focus attention on specific actions, themes, or issues. Thus, for instance, if two characters are best friends, and yet five weeks ago we learned that one has betrayed the other, the "previously on . . ." segment will likely replay the moment of revelation only if this information is seen as pertinent to the current episode. Should the betrayed friend return the betrayal in this episode, the absence of a "previously on . . ." tip-off may result in us judging him negatively, whereas with the tip-off, we are more likely to understand or even forgive his actions. Beyond "previously on . . ." segments, though, *all in medias res* paratexts work in a similar way, offering frames through which we can interpret the text at hand, and subtly or radically inflecting our reading accordingly. In effect, they build themselves into the text, becoming inseparable from it, buoys floating in the overflow of a serial text that direct our passage through that text.

Serial television programs and films are not unique in being vulnerable to paratextual influence. Rather, all films and television programs can be

jostled by paratexts, whether we have “finished” reading them or not. As is especially evident in the case of serial television texts, each of us carries with us thousands of open texts that can be re-decoded and re-inflected at any point in their progression, whether this be one episode into a three-hundred-episode run or fifty years following the watching of a film. Of the latter instance, Annette Kuhn’s work with “enduring fans” of 1930s films is illustrative. Kuhn interviewed numerous women in their seventies who still enjoyed watching and talking about the films and stars of their twenties, and who still found new meanings in them. She argues, “For the enduring fan, the cinema-going past is no foreign country but something continuously reproduced as a vital aspect of daily life in the present.” As these women grew older, watched different films, and gained new experiences, they were able to return to their beloved texts with new interpretive strategies or nuances, hence keeping the texts alive and active for decades. “As the text is appropriated and used by enduring fans, further layers of inter-textual and extra-textual memory-meaning continuously accrue.”<sup>52</sup>

Since intertextuality works by placing the text at hand into a conversation with previously viewed texts, not only will earlier-viewed texts be able to talk to a current text—the current text will also be able to talk *back* to earlier texts. We may well find, then, that many years, months, days, or minutes after we thought we had finished with a text, it is once more active, and we are once more consuming, decoding, and making sense of it. Such is the case with, for instance, many texts that we watched as children rather naively, only to learn of deeper nuances later in life, and such is potentially the case with any text that we find reason to think about, rewatch, or reference “after” consumption. As Mikhail Bakhtin ended his last-known article, in words poetically befitting the close of the great intertextual theorist’s career:

There is neither a first word nor a last word. The contents of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and into the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never finally be grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue’s later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival.<sup>53</sup> The intertextual dialogue and life of texts remains perpetually open.

If the notion of a paratext changing our understanding of a text “after the fact” sounds odd, we might think again of the analogy of product branding. Throughout their lifespan, many prominent brands have engaged in rebranding attempts, so that, for instance, McDonalds’ move from their “You Deserve a Break Today” campaign to their current “I’m Lovin’ It” campaign toggles the brand’s semiotics without any discernible change in the product whatsoever: the paratext of the campaign has aimed to change the text of McDonalds. Or, for another analogy, we might think of the construction and telling of history, wherein despite the seeming immutability of a past event, each retelling of the story can ascribe different symbolic value to it. Even the day after an event, one will often find stark differences in how that event is reported and framed from, say, CNN to Fox News to *Daily Kos* to a non-American source. “Anniversary journalism” will later, in all likelihood, assign new meaning to the event,<sup>54</sup> and with the benefit of hindsight, history books in years to come may reframe the event yet again: “every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival.” In other words, each invocation of a moment in history can paratextually rewrite the text of the event, since, at the moment of the telling, the “text” is only accessible through the “paratext.” *The Onion* humorously illustrates this process of the infinite reassigning of value in a parodic article about the sinking of the Titanic, entitled “World’s Largest Metaphor Sinks,”<sup>55</sup> tipping its hat to the endless narrativizations of exactly what the ship and its sinking (the “text”) represented that have proliferated since the fateful event.

With texts alive interminably, forever open to toggling, paratexts may always work in medias res. Especially thoughtful reviews may cause us to reflect once more upon an already-seen film or television program; academic articles and close readings may open up whole new realms of texts for us; toys or games might place a text in a whole new setting, bit by bit shifting our understanding of it; and so forth. In other words, there is never a point in time at which a text frees itself from the contextualizing powers of paratextuality.

### *Wear the T-Shirt, Skip the Film: Paratextual Superiority*

Nevertheless, paratexts sometimes take over their texts. A child can, for instance, eat the Disney movie Happy Meal, buy the toys and the coloring books, and play the game with his or her friends without actually watching

the film. Similarly, some fans recount the experience of falling more heavily for a text's fan discussion site than for the text itself. If today's television and film paratextuality extends the horizons of the narrative universe well beyond what "the text itself" offers, surely some audience members will find that the universe is more interesting at its horizons. In such cases, these audience members may still consider themselves fans or at least viewers of the text, but here rather than simply modify or inflect the text, the paratexts may in time *become* the text, as the audience members take their cues regarding what a text means from the paratext's images, signs, symbols, and words, rather than from the film or program's. As analysts, we might be tempted to think of the paratexts here as mere residue, or a long shadow, of the show, but individual audience members may not care to make the distinction between paratext and show. Precisely because the language of "paratextuality" is absent from everyday talk of film and television, and because the desire to delineate exactly what is and is not "the text" is often an analyst's alone, not an average audience member's, frequently we may find that audience talk of and reaction to a text may have originated with the paratext, yet been integrated into the individual audience member's conception of "the text itself."

Shunning the text in favor of the paratext may appear a somewhat anomalous practice, but as we have said, any given individual speculatively consumes thousands of texts over the course of his or her life. We cannot watch every show in order to choose what we would prefer to watch, and thus, by force of necessity, we all regularly allow paratexts to stand in for texts. As I have written elsewhere, non-fan and anti-fan texts in particular are often only partially consumed, therefore shifting the burden of textuality to the paratext.<sup>56</sup> *If* all paratexts were accurate depictions of their related texts, and *if* no paratexts introduced any meaning other than those meanings which are in the related shows, paratexts would be unremarkable. However, since paratexts have, as I have argued and as the remaining chapters will show, considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning, much of the textuality that exists in the world is paratext-driven.