2

Coming Soon!

Hype, Intros, and Textual Beginnings

Academic and popular accounts of film and television are frequently suffused with discussion of what happens *after* watching, following such questions as "What did you think of such-and-such a show?", "What effects might it have?", and "What does it mean?" The social science tradition of studying media has also produced considerable work examining what happens *before* watching, with, for instance, a strand of "uses and gratifications" research that studies the motivating factors behind one's choice to watch, and another strand of production studies and political economy that explores the creative and economic processes that go into creating media. But comparatively little work exists from within a humanistic tradition examining how meaning begins and where *texts* come from, suggesting by its absence that texts begin when the first scene of a film or program begins. A refreshing exception is Charles Acland's reading of multiplex geographies, construction, and contexts.[1] Exploring similar terrain for television (and for films on television), Barbara Klinger has also examined the geography of the home theater.[2] As important as such work is, and as much as it reminds us of the paratexts of geography and technology, in this chapter I argue that films and television programs often begin long before we actively seek them out, and that their textual histories are every bit as complex and requiring of study as are their audience, creative, or economic histories. This chapter is thus about the true beginnings of texts as coherent clusters of meaning, expectation, and engagement, and about the text's first initial outposts, in particular trailers, posters, previews, and hype.

As was discussed in the Introduction, Hollywood invests large amounts of money, time, and labor into hyping its products. Therefore, just as one would not expect Nike to construct its ads half-heartedly, there should in theory be nothing random or accidental about the meanings on offer in

Hollywood's trailers, posters, previews, and ad campaigns. Clint Culpepper, president of Sony Screen Gems, warns, "You can have the most terrific movie in the world, and if you can't convey that fact in fifteen- and thirty-second TV ads it's like having bad speakers on a great stereo."[3] As a result, DreamWorks' head of creative advertising David Sameth has said of trailers, "We'll spend five months to a year obsessing about them, every single cut and every single moment we use,"[4] showing how carefully manicured many texts' ads are. In a rare academic account of trailers, meanwhile, John Ellis writes of them as offering a "narrative image" in which everything can be assumed to be there for a reason, and "can be assumed to be calculated. Hence everything tends to be pulled into the process of meaning."[5] Rather than regard trailers, previews, and ads as textually removed from the shows they announce, therefore, Ellis suggests, albeit briefly, that they are *part of* the show's narrative, and that they are concentrates of the show's meaning. Precisely because trailers, previews, and ads introduce us to a text and its many proposed and supposed meanings, the promotional material that we consume sets up, begins, and *frames* many of the interactions that we have with texts. More than merely point us to the text at hand, these promos will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation. Promos often take the first steps in filling a text with meaning. The term "trailer" is a hold-over from when trailers followed films, but in today's media environment, movies and television shows are trailing the trailers and promos in months not minutes, slowly plodding forth while meanings, interpretations, evaluations, and all manner of audience and industry chatter are already on the scene. We may in time resist the meanings proposed by promotional materials, but they tell us what to expect, direct our excitement and/or apprehension, and begin to tell us what a text is all about, calling for our identification with and interpretation of that text before we have even seemingly arrived at it. This chapter will examine how texts begin, not in their opening scenes, but in their hype, promos, trailers, posters, previews, and opening credit sequences, and how these paratexts may continue to figure into the interpretive process even after the film or television show has started.

I will begin by discussing the role of promotional campaigns and trailers in initiating textuality, creating a genre, networking star intertexts, and introducing us to a new storyworld. This discussion leads into examinations of several movie posters and their initiation of their texts, and of a 2006 promotional campaign for ABC's *Six Degrees*. Looking at a New

York subway poster campaign and at the show's advance teaser website, I will argue that both set up a gender, a genre, a style, and an attitude for the show before it hit the air. This pre-text was not a wholly accurate reflection of the television program that followed, and so too is my next case study one in which the paratext and the show itself failed to work in concert with one another. Close-reading two trailers for Atom Egoyan's film *The Sweet Hereafter*, I examine how one film can "begin" in such starkly different ways depending upon the trailer that precedes it. Then, following this example, I ask what we are to make of the rise of trailers and hype, and of their increasing prominence on television and online in particular, especially given that, as I will argue, they play a constitutive role in establishing a "proper" interpretation for a text. This interest in "proper" interpretations finally leads to a discussion of television opening credit sequences as paratexts that can operate both as entryway and in medias res, telling us how to interpret a text, and then returning to remind us of this official, sanctioned interpretation, and serving a ritual purpose of transporting us once more into that storyworld. Throughout the chapter, my interests lie in where texts come from and how we return to them.

Hype, Promos, and Trailers: "A Cinema of (Coming) Attractions"

Trailers and previews have rarely warranted much attention from media studies critics, except as yet more advertising. But Hollywood takes them very seriously, and so it should. If we consider that most films make over a third of their box office in their opening week,[6] and since high opening-week box office figures have a compounding effect, giving rise to further hype to bring in audiences for the rest of a film's run, we cannot underestimate the importance of a good trailer to the film industry. If a film triumphs in its opening week, good promos will have played a significant role in this victory. Thus, on average, movie studios will budget $10 million per film for producing the marketing, even before adding triple that figure on ad buys.[7] Some even hire multiple agencies to compete with each other for the best trailer.[8] Meanwhile, the television industry similarly dedicates large amounts of money, time, and labor to hyping its shows. Especially in late summer, before the new television season begins, many cities are covered with various forms of advertising, as entire public transportation systems and roadways seem to be sponsored by the networks, newspapers garner full-page ads for new shows, and stars do the rounds of the talk show circuit. As with film, previews prove remarkably important for

a television show's tentative early weeks: many seasons have seen shows canceled after only two or three episodes, when Nielsen ratings are more effectively measuring how many viewers the promos attracted than how interesting the show is in and of itself.

The lone book-length study of film trailers, Lisa Kernan's *Coming Attractions*, opens on the note that trailers are "a unique form of narrative film exhibition, wherein promotional discourse and narrative pleasure are conjoined." Playing with Tom Gunning's famous discussion of a cinema of attractions,[9] Kernan notes that trailers are "a cinema of (coming) attractions."[10] As with all promos, they are ads, but they are also a taste test of films to come, offering some of a film's first pleasures, meanings, and ideas. Film fans have long enjoyed arriving early at the cinema in order to catch a glimpse of what movies to expect a month or season from now. Trailers have thus become an important part of the cinema-going experience and ritual, serving as the transitional, liminal device that navigates us from a loud theater with unruly teens, over-affectionate lovers, and people on their cell phones, to a world of celluloid dreams and spectatorial, narrative pleasures. Trailers announce and introduce the film that follows them by announcing the wonders of the medium in general, and they bring to a head the joys of anticipation, like the opening orchestral hum before a live performance. All the while, they help to reinforce cinema-going as a repetitive event,[11] promising that yet another voyage to the world of dreams awaits, and that though you are watching such-and-such a movie now, *next time* you can watch any one of these movies on offer. Television previews act similarly, encouraging us to keep watching or to return later in the week or month, and creating excitement and anticipation, whether for a new show, or for the next chapter in a continuing narrative.

Moreover, as Kernan argues, trailers circulate discourses of genre and of the star system, often even more so than do films themselves, promising the continued life of a beloved genre or star, extending the joys of cinema-going beyond the presentation at hand. She points out that trailers tend to concentrate their efforts (1) on delineating a film's genre, (2) on celebrating and featuring its star(s), and/or (3) on providing an environmental sampling (as exemplified in the trite opening common to many trailers: "In a world where . . ."). Genre can be established before viewing,[12] outside the realm of the text, and yet since genre is not just a classificatory tool, but also a set of rules for interpreting a text,[13] when trailers or other forms of promotion propose a genre, it may prove hard for an individual viewer to easily shrug off these rules. Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranth's

examination of would-be *Crash* viewers' responses to its negative hype, discussed in the previous chapter, gives us a window into how constitutive preliminary paratextual frames can prove for subsequent viewing and interpretation.[14] Genres can work as strong paratexts because they frequently enjoy communal definition and widespread use, and because they are cultural categories used by the industry, reviewers, audience members, politicians, and policy makers alike, often with a relatively shared or at least dominant definition at any given point in time.[15] Thus to say or to imply that a film is an action film, an eco-thriller, a sports biopic, or a romantic comedy is to summon entire systems of distribution, reviewer interest, and audience participation and reaction, ensuring interest, disinterest, and/or specific forms of attention from given studios, theaters, audience members, and would-be censors. Trailers and other advertising play vital roles in announcing a film's genre and in providing initial generic labels. Similarly, a star is his or her own generic signifier and intertext (think of the different filmic meanings and uses of, for instance, Clint Eastwood, Julia Roberts, Neil Patrick Harris, or Miley Cyrus), thus also offering interpretive strategies and expectations. Environmental sampling, too, seeks to outline for potential viewers the sorts of things that might occur "in a world where . . . " As particularly strong paratexts, then, trailers and previews may dictate how to read a text.

The archetypal examples here are trailers for action films, which may introduce us to key characters and/or plotlines, but tend to eschew complexity in favor of multiple fighting scenes, car chases, elaborate stunts, and awe-inspiring pyrotechnics, all accompanied by fast-paced, energetic music. A trailer for an action film that concentrates too heavily on its romantic elements will read as a romance, just as one that concentrates too heavily on a thoughtful plot may risk reading as a drama. That said, well-made trailers can often use scene selection to manicure genre more subtly too. Kernan provides the example of *Return of the Jedi*'s (1983) trailer, which George Lucas used to try to insist that the film was not simply sci-fi, but rather a family adventure film.[16] She also discusses *Men in Black*'s (1997) trailer, which hailed subcultural appeal by steeping itself in Will Smith's urban cool, often bouncing this off Tommy Lee Jones as white straight man. Smith, she notes, "as the *black* man in black, thus adds a cool factor to the film's characterological and star dynamics, and [. . .] serves as a comic aside to African-American audiences, assuming and asserting (through the rhetoric of stardom) that the film holds special appeal for them while also amusing whites."[17] Increasingly, films offer

multiple trailers for different presumed audiences, as, for instance, when *Bee Movie* (2007) pegged itself as a kids' film on Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, but as the return of Jerry Seinfeld and his brand of urban ironic comedy on prime-time network television. Andrew Wernick argues that "a promotional message is a complex of significations which at once represents (moves in place of), advocates (moves on behalf of), and anticipates (moves ahead of) the circulating entities to which it refers,"[18] and a significant part of that representation, advocacy, and anticipation is genred by nature.

Trailers and other forms of promotion serve a vital indexical purpose, too, since the mediascape is simply too large for any one of us to watch everything. Promos allow us to schedule our media consumption patterns, working as something akin to a menu for future consumption, and quickly helping us to consign texts to our personal Must Watch, Might Watch, or Do Not Watch lists. Many of us know and judge much of the media world through promos alone, with every one of us having seen thousands of trailers, posters, and previews for shows that we will never watch. Indeed, while promotional materials are constitutive in terms of hailing an audience for a text, they also create meanings for those who will not be in the audience. For every person who has watched any given film or television program, there are likely more who have watched a trailer, poster, or preview of it and yet not the thing itself. To popular culture, then, and hence to media studies' subsequent analyses of what role a text plays in popular culture, the promo and its editor's or producer's meaning-making may prove more important than the meaning-making going on in the show itself. Even in the many instances in which a trailer results in us resolving to never watch the film, clearly some form of interpretation, judgment, and understanding has occurred *without the show*. As the term "preview" encapsulates, we have a paradoxical situation in which we can apparently view a text before viewing it.

The Poster and Its Prey: Movie Posters and the Beginning of Meaning

To see advertising's intricate acts of meaning construction at work, we can turn first to movie posters. Though rarely as densely packed with meaning as are their video cousins, trailers, posters can still play a key role in outlining a show's genre, its star intertexts, and the type of world a would-be audience member is entering. Indeed, a browse through an

online archive of movie posters, *The Internet Movie Poster Awards* (www.impawards.com), quickly reveals a relatively limited and standardized set of poster styles. Action films regularly feature prominently the lone male (or occasionally female) hero looking steely-eyed and ready for action, with weapons on hand and/or muscles bulging (cf. *Rambo* [2008], *Mission: Impossible* [1996], *Walking Tall* [2004], *Gladiator* [2000], and most Bond films), while star-led comedies regularly offer a close-up of the smiling or goofy star(s) (cf. *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* [1994], *Bean* [1997], *Big* [1988], *Baby Mama* [2008]). Horror films often feature prominently either an icon of the murderer (cf. Jason's mask in posters for the *Halloween* franchise [1978–] or Freddie's claws in those for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise [1984–]), or a symbol of innocence that has been disturbed (cf. the baby's bottle with a creature in it for *The Kindred* [1987] or the bloodstained Christmas ornament for a teaser poster for *Black Christmas* [2006]). Sex-driven comedies are fond of framing the action with or between women's legs (cf. *Artie Lange's Beer League* [2006], *Bachelor Party* [1984], *Porky's* [1982], *Losin' It* [1983]) or of encouraging leering at half-naked women (cf. *10* [1979], *Hardbodies* [1984), *Spring Break* [1983]). Romances show either the lead couple staring lovingly at each other (cf. *When Harry Met Sally* [1989], *What Women Want* [2000], *Serendipity* [2001]) or simply a close-up of a content-looking woman (cf. *Amelie* [2001], *My Best Friend's Wedding* [1997], *Becoming Jane* [2007]). And many other genres have their set image or style too, so that one glance at the poster in a multiplex or at a bus shelter will immediately tell a viewer what genre to expect. Moreover, since many movie posters prominently feature their star or stars, they hail that star as an intertext of all their past roles and their public performance.

Movie posters can also offer considerably more complex and involved meanings, as is evident in some of the art form's more famous examples. Consider, for instance, the iconic poster for *Home Alone* (1990), in which a young Macaulay Culkin has his hands to his face in (mock?) shock/horror as two clearly ne'er-do-well bad guys (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern) look on through the window behind him. The top of the poster reads, "When Kevin's family left for vacation, they forgot one minor detail: Kevin" and the tag-line promises "A family comedy without the family," while type just below the center of the poster reassures, "But don't worry . . . He cooks. He cleans. He kicks some butt." Quite simple visually, the poster actually navigates delicate terrain. The set-up is given, namely that Kevin is all alone, having been abandoned by his family, and he's now clearly

under threat. This premise could easily be that of a horror film, or of a horrifying drama (as is played with in a parody of the poster available online that replaces Pesci and Stern with Michael Jackson). Yet the poster successfully manages to sell the film as a family comedy, not only because its tagline insists so, but also because Pesci's "evil face" is too comically overdone to be taken seriously, the initial set-up's sarcastic reference to forgetting Kevin as being "a minor detail" elicits humor, and Kevin's face is somewhat playful. The centered text also tries its best to assure us that Kevin is in charge. The poster alludes to a horrifying situation and one of seeming powerlessness, yet promises a flip in those power dynamics. Hence it also promises the child viewer a vicarious experience of power, complete with "I don't need you, mommy" sentiment, the naughtiness of "kicking butt," and the child literally and figuratively at the center of the action. A comic release of tension is hinted at, whereby parents and children can laugh off great fears and enjoy a magic-make-believe scenario in which an otherwise horrifying prospect is stripped of danger. All the while, too, this creates mystery and intrigue: since Kevin seems so obviously in peril, *how* will he reverse the situation and "kick some butt"? The poster speaks quite clearly to parental and kid tensions and concerns, but assuages them, while leaving a narrative hook to bring them to the movie theater.

Another famous poster for another beloved family film, *E.T: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), works in a similar way, not only offering genre, but also working through tensions and calming them. The poster depicts Earth from outer space, with a mock-up of the Sistine Chapel's depiction of God touching Adam in the top half of the poster, this time featuring an alien hand touching a child's. Large print at the top of the poster reads "His Adventure on Earth," while smaller print lower down the poster reads, "He is afraid. He is totally alone. He is 3,000,000 light years from home." Aliens often suggest horror films, or at least sci-fi thrillers, and the vast expanse of space seen in this poster has been used in other movie posters (cf. *Alien* [1979]) to suggest isolation and vulnerability, especially when the poster's vantage point—looking down on Earth—would seem to be that of the (invading?) alien. Hence, as with *Home Alone*, this poster could risk scaring off parents and children. However, the text refers to E.T. as a he, not an it, and makes "him" sound like a lost puppy, invoking SPCA ads more than H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, even while calming these anxieties with the notion of his "adventure." "His Adventure on Earth" reads like the subtitle of an issue of *Boy's Own Journal* or *Tintin*, albeit with a science

fiction twist, and thus the invocation of both a lost puppy and a young boy's adventure tale significantly domesticates and tames the film's image.

Furthermore, the Michelangelo mock-up is an arresting image, in part because the calm in the child's hand suggests a reaching to touch the alien, not a retraction from doing so, in part because the alien's bent wrist makes the touch seem less like an aggressive lunge, and perhaps most obviously because of the allusion. Michelangelo's image literally and figuratively connects God and Man, and so this poster suggests that the film will connect extra-terrestrial and human lives, fates, and existence. While Michelangelo depicted God touching an adult, just as *Home Alone* gives kids all the power, this next great step forward will be with child, not adult. Consequently, the poster alludes to Spielberg's Twainian idolicization of adolescence. Instead of threatening nightmares, a fear of the dark, and of the aliens out there, *E.T.*'s poster (as would *Home Alone*'s poster years later) promises a film that will make the child feel more adventurous, more comfortable with the world, and more sure of his or her place in it. An evocative, alluring text, in short, has been created for both child and parent. Once more, too, multiple narrative hooks are offered: *How* will they connect? What does this alien look like? Will "he" get home?

Taking a markedly different approach, the equally famous poster for Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) actively feeds fears and tensions. A young woman is depicted swimming in the ocean, oblivious to the huge great white shark rocketing toward her, its mouth open and as wide as her body is long, brandishing multiple sharp teeth (fig. 2.1). The text at the top of the poster, reading "The terrifying motion picture from the terrifying No. 1 best seller," hardly needs to repeat "terrifying," as the poster captures the utter helplessness of the woman. The poster may well have *created* a fear of the ocean for many a viewer (myself included!), but it similarly encapsulates this fear, selling little else but the fear. Unlike the posters for *Home Alone* or *E.T.*, the *Jaws* poster offers no plot, and no real characters, other than the shark as predator and the woman as undoubtedly one of many victims. The genre is clearly horror, but rather than simply announce itself as such, it moves toward starting the horror at the poster, thereby seemingly allowing the audience member to sample the emotive feeling of watching the film.

All three posters create their texts, giving vivid ideas of what to expect, and transporting viewers into their storyworlds—as young Kevin ready to kick some butt in his own house, as the lost E.T. in a strange land, as the swimmer waiting to be attacked. Each of the three, in other words, opens its respective film's storyworld before the film has reached the scene.

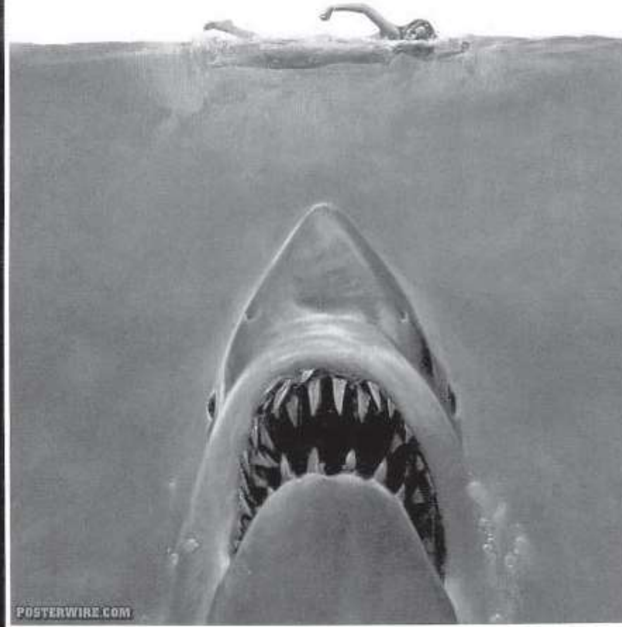

Fig. 2.1. The *Jaws* poster begins the horror with the image of Jaws' helpless, unaware prey.

Six Degrees of Promotion

Posters are often only one element of a concerted advertising campaign. A classic example here was provided by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Its poster art forebodingly sets up the ensuing horror, as well as the faux documentary style of the film, with a forest engulfed by darkness, a close-up of the scared looking Heather Donahue, and text that reads "In October of 1994 three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting this documentary . . . A year later their footage was found." But the combination of the film's advance website with "Heather's Journal," notes on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) for all three actors listing them as "missing, presumed dead," and a faux television documentary, *The Curse of the Blair Witch* (1999), worked to compound the sense of real-life horror.[19] Not surprisingly, then, *The Blair Witch Project* has arguably remained as famous (if not more so) for its creative and masterful promotion as for the film itself, since in many ways, the horror *began* online and in front of the television, not simply in the movie theater.

In the wake of *The Blair Witch Project*, Internet advertising has become par for the course with new media products, and innovative campaigns that tread into the spaces of everyday life are all the more common. Such was the case with ABC's *Six Degrees*, which in August of 2006, one month before its television premier, boasted an interesting website and a New York City subway blitz, both of which produced an attitude, a genre, and a gender for the forthcoming program. ABC had purchased all the ad space in numerous subway cars, plastering them with a series of provocative statements: "The man by the door will someday be your boss"; "The girl across the aisle is flirting with you"; "The guy next to you will someday be a good friend"; and "You and the woman in red have a shared secret" (fig. 2.2). Interspersed between these pronunciations were several panels announcing "Everyone is Connected," each of which included the URL www.u-r-connected.com. Clearly, these ads aimed to grab commuters' attention, but more specifically, they encouraged commuters to look around a subway car full of seemingly random faces. Declaring that "Everyone is Connected," they provoked any individual commuter to think about how s/he was connected to fellow commuters, and by extension to the city at large. Moreover, with two of the four statements positing the connection in a future "someday," and a third involving flirtation and hence a *hope* for future connection, they alluded to a notion of serendipity, fate, and destiny.

Fig. 2.2. Ads for *Six Degrees* in a New York subway car pique interest, while giving the show a definite style and character. Photograph by the author.

Meanwhile, the fourth statement posited a shared past, and thus, as did all of the panels, it suggested a common history and link between, if not all passengers in the train, at least a small select few. In doing so, the ads were quite playful, of course, eliciting the occasional shared smile or grimace as two real-life "women in red," for instance, laughed off their momentary allegiance. All of the statements were on the long ad panels above commuters' heads, making them easily visible, while an ad actually linking the slogan "Everyone is Connected" to *Six Degrees*—announcing the premier date, network, and producer J. J. Abrams's involvement—could be found lower down, by the doors. Further adding to the intrigue and mystery, this explanatory ad was therefore obscured from view during peak-hour commutes by commuters' heads for all but those closest to it.

If one followed the URL for clues, a black screen gave way to a series of photos of New York City street life, all time-exposed so that the people in the photos looked like blurs, and so that no faces were clearly visible. Overlaid on these photos, at first text announced, "There is a theory that anyone on the planet is connected to any other person through a chain

of six people . . . No one is a stranger for long," before more statements of the subway variety ("One day you'll work with someone you bumped into this morning") followed one by one. After a few seconds of this, the website implored one to "Tell us a little bit about yourself and discover a new connection," before giving way to questions such as "Who Are You? I am my work; I am the sum of my experience; I am my future; or I am my contribution". After six questions, the website would then show six characters, one of whose pictures would be enlarged, as the site announced that you shared a connection with this character. A "character video" would then load, showing character-specific clips from *Six Degrees*. The site also offered one the chance to "Find a New Connection" and start the questions again.

To begin to interpret this elaborate marketing scheme, we might first observe that both sites of advertising clearly evoked dating services. The subway ads were either written in soft purple or printed on a purple background, with phantom pictures of the program's attractive, yet not necessarily recognizable, cast in the lettering. New York subways are frequently home to ads for online dating services, and thus the stereotypically feminine color scheme, pictures of the handsome Jay Hernandez, Campbell Scott, and Dorian Missick (one Latino, one white, one African-American, and hence suitably multi-ethnic—another mainstay of dating ads in New York), and allusions to finding connection in the sea of faces that is New York immediately suggested an online dating service. Within such a framing, the photos of Hope Davis, Bridget Moynihan, and Erika Christensen appear to depict happy customers. Even the URL—u-r-connected.com—sounds like a dating site.

Moreover, the interest in serendipity and fated connection in New York sets up direct links to romantic comedies that have drawn heavily on an ethos of Manhattanite serendipity. Prominent examples of such films include *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), which famously unites its two lovers atop the Empire State Building; *Serendipity*, which involves many scenes of the hero scouring New York for signs of his would-be lover; *Kate and Leopold* (2001), which sees a character transported through time to meet his lover in modern-day New York; and *When Harry Met Sally*, which sees New Yorkers Harry and Sally bump into each other over a number of years, and gradually come together as a couple. Even when one seeks out the URL, the "Tell us a little bit about yourself" and stylized answers ("I am my future") recall not only the profile forms that dating services would require one to fill out, but also the personality quizzes common to women's

magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. In many ways, the advertising campaign alludes heavily to women's genres of the romance and the magazine personality quiz, to direct its further allusion to dating sites toward women specifically, coding *Six Degrees* as a female-focused text that believes in the fairytale romance qualities of serendipity and fate.

The website's act of "computing" answers to six fairly mundane questions in order to suggest a connection to a specific character also announces a fairly clear pretension to be something akin to the next *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City* was a hugely popular program during its six-year run, gaining canonic status, particularly in New York City and for a female "post-feminist" audience. The show followed the lives and many loves of four close female friends as they interacted with the city around them, the female equivalents of Baudelaire's "flâneur." In the wake of *Sex and the City*'s popularity, pop culture became suffused with fan declarations that "I am Samantha," "I am Charlotte," "I am Miranda," or "I am Carrie," depending upon which lead character the speaker identified with the most. Such declarations are still common and widely available on t-shirts or mugs. *Six Degrees*' website, without much subtlety, mimics this identification game, by twinning a web-visitor with one of the six characters.[20] Not only does such a strategy declare that *Six Degrees* too will be a show endemic to the city and its ethos of interconnection, but it also suggests something of the sexual politics of the show, given that *Sex and the City* was most (in)famous for its frank discussion of sexuality, and it promises that this show too will offer characters who are "just like you," with whom the viewer can relate, and who represent the various facets of New York life. By referencing *Sex and the City*, too, this promise is once again directed at prospective female viewers in particular, given *Sex and the City*'s huge female fan following.

Such a message and such an intertextual network address a New Yorker with the promise of yet another "insider" show. The *New York Times* reviewer for *Six Degrees* picked up on this most poetically, when she wrote, prior to the network premier, that "the show's forte, for viewers like me who don't mind piety on television, is its ambience of faith, particularly in the ebullient Whitmanian idea of 'contact' in the city," further elaborating that, "there's an amorphous but powerful religion in New York, and just about every newcomer undergoes some kind of conversion to it. [. . .] The shared citywide creed might be called Manhattan paganism: a private, almost secretive belief in coincidence, chance, accident and serendipity."[21] Even by taking its advertising to the subway in such a quirky

campaign, the marketing for *Six Degrees* is keen to make it appear a "New York show." Indeed, early television ads played with J. J. Abrams's involvement by observing that Abrams—an executive producer of the castaway-gone-wrong series *Lost*—was turning his attention to "a new island," Manhattan. The island on *Lost* is a complex entity unto itself, and thus such ads similarly suggested Manhattan's own complexity, mystery, and intrigue. However, if all this advertising aimed to flatter New Yorkers and insist that the show "got" the entity that is Manhattan, such an advertising technique also stood to be equally as evocative for potential viewers who visited New York, were alerted to the advertising campaign by media reports, or watched ads and read reviews. The ads seemingly promised to transport viewers from elsewhere to the hard-paved yet magical streets of Manhattan. Just as *Sex and the City* sold a trip to Manhattan for those off the island, *Six Degrees*' advertising and early buzz offered a similar act of teleportation.

Ultimately, then, without watching *Six Degrees*, and based only on seeing its subway ads and its early website, one could already have a quite developed construction of the program: as intended primarily for women; as quintessentially New York, and modern, hip, liberal *Sex*-y New York at that; as romantic in genre and ethos; and as a show about characters "like you and me" and their feelings. If the website's questionnaire aimed to capture an image of its visitors ("I am my future"), it similarly suggested that on a weekly basis it would capture images and moments in the life of New York, reducing the seemingly anonymous, hostile, and gargantuan metropolis to the intimate circle of six people. Also, lest this seem some pretender to the throne, the mere presence of J. J. Abrams's name in marketing (despite later press that questioned the depth of his involvement with the show) gave a firm stamp of quality. Hot on the heels of the ratings giant *Lost*, and of the hip *Alias* (2001–6), Abrams had established himself as one of the medium's premium auteurs (see chapter 4), and through his early involvement with the urban love tale *Felicity* (1998–2002) he had proven his familiarity with New York. Abrams is particularly well-known and -loved for his character-driven writing, and for his ability to handle rich backgrounds and large casts. With *Lost* and *Alias*, too, he had garnered a name for the boldly original and out-of-the-ordinary, and so his name alone seemingly promised a high level of quality, and a text that would develop over time in intriguing and unique ways. Before *Six Degrees* hit the air, ABC's marketing team had therefore already offered many audiences the chance to decode its genre, style, tone, mood, quality,

prospects for development, and characterization. At the outskirts of the show, these paratexts had fashioned a text.

Interestingly, looking back on the advertising now, long since the show was first put on a lengthy "hiatus" and later canceled, and after having watched several episodes, I conclude that the paratexts were by no means purely indexical or metonymic. *Six Degrees* focused on relationships, and so in this slight respect may be coded more "feminine" than the overtly masculine run-and-gun worlds of shows such as *24* (2001–); but its world was more gritty and less magical-make-believe than either the romantic comedies to which its advertising alluded, or than its proposed "foremother," *Sex and the City*, and it seemed equally open to male viewers. With three interesting male leads in particular, it hardly hailed female viewers alone. For its marketing campaign to label it as an urban romance for women was not entirely inaccurate, but nor was it a label that truly fit. By December 2006, *Six Degrees*' future was in jeopardy, and one might wonder to what degree the advertising had contributed to alienating audiences who may have liked it, and/or to attracting audiences who were doomed not to like it. A show's ultimate failure to stay on air is a product of many things, ranging from the luck of the time slot, to network dedication to the series, to actual quality, and so it is impossible to attribute the program's cancelation to poor advertising alone, especially when the poster campaign described here ran only in New York and Los Angeles. But its ads hardly seemed wholly appropriate for the show, instead creating a different referent text for potential audiences and non-audiences alike. Given the disjuncture between the meanings of the promos and the meanings of the show once it began in earnest, we might speculate as to how many texts fail and get canceled in part because of a poor marketing campaign, and hence because of paratextual dismantling. Many a show's death may be predetermined at birth by its previews and trailers.

However, the television industry does not use previews just to communicate with would-be audiences; previews also play an important commercial role in selling the program, and the entire network, to would-be advertisers. As Amanda Lotz describes, one of the American television industry's more important yearly rituals and events is the Upfront presentations in mid-May, when each network announces a tentative schedule for its fall programming, with much pomp and pageantry in a lavish party in Manhattan.[22] Each network's returning programming is already a known quantity, its Nielsen ratings and audience demographics a matter of public record among advertisers and their designated ad time buyers.

But the Upfronts allow networks a chance to present previews for their newly commissioned shows and to create "buzz" about their schedule. As Lotz describes, the ad buyer's role at the Upfronts is to try to read the buzz, to gauge not only how successful individual shows will be, but how coherent a programming strategy the network has as a whole. A network that appears confident, with a strong slate of programs, can not only set higher ad rates for new programs, but can increase ad rates for all its shows, whereas "a network that reveals itself to be anxious, hesitant, or internally conflicted in its message or programming sends a clear message to advertisers to resist rate increases and buy elsewhere."[23] And since traditionally 75 to 90 percent of a network's advertising time has been sold immediately following the Upfront week,[24] little room exists to make a mistake. Confidence is sold in part by hoopla, with actors in attendance, glitz, and glamour, but good previews that evoke a favorable audience reaction can go a long way toward attracting advertiser money. Ultimately, then, preview production is arguably one of the most important steps in the creation of a new show, with good previews attracting both advertisers and audiences, and bad ones costing a network sorely. Both semiotically and economically, shows and their networks utterly rely upon the strength of their promos.

Trailers and Their Sweet Hereafters

If trailers and promos give birth to a text and promise an audience a mise-en-scène, a genre, and a set of meanings, then different trailers or promos might create wholly different texts. Comically illustrating this point was one of the hottest viral videos making the rounds in 2005, a trailer for *The Shining* (1980).[25] A series of staffers at video production and editing company PS260 had set themselves the task of changing a famous film's genre by weaving together existing footage to create a new trailer. In its new incarnation, *The Shining* became a feel-good father-son bonding film, simply called *Shining*. The newly minted voiceover began by introducing us to Jack Torrance, "a writer looking for inspiration," and Danny, "a kid looking for a dad," before explaining that while "Jack just can't finish his book," he's about to learn that "sometimes, what we need most is just around the corner." At this point, Peter Gabriel's upbeat song "Solsbury Hill" cues, as we are treated to a montage of the film's loving family shots and snippets of dialogue such as "I'm your new foster father" and "I'd do anything for you." While the pleasures and humor involved in watching

this trailer depend upon being aware of how inaccurately it advertises Stanley Kubrick's film about a father who goes crazy in an isolated and haunted mountain hotel, and while it was unlikely to have changed an audience member's understanding of *The Shining* as such, it once more illustrates a trailer's ability to play with and radically augment a film's genre. Similarly, another PS260 mock trailer turned the romantic musical and *Romeo and Juliet* retelling *West Side Story* (1961) into a *28 Days Later* (2002) style zombie horror flick, reframing dance sequences as zombie attacks.[26]

Such genre changes are by no means restricted to parody alone, however. Through reruns, the repurposing of television is a daily and pervasive practice, with hype and previews encouraging certain (generic) viewing strategies. Lynn Spigel, for instance, notes how Nick at Nite regularly advertises older sitcoms as camp[27]; parody can be created by viewers as much as by writers or directors,[28] and Nick at Nite encourages audiences to watch its shows as camp, where their original broadcast previews would have presented them as straight. If reruns can be turned into parody, though, as Derek Kompare notes, they can also be turned into classics, parts of our television heritage and national history.[29] Thus, while Nick at Nite is playfully ribbing older shows with its paratextual framing, TV Land in particular presents many of its reruns as the best of television past, steeped in nostalgia and added significance. To rerun a program in the first place is to send a subtle message regarding the show's worthiness of replay, especially for what has often been an ephemeral medium. Beyond simple statements of worth, though, as Kompare notes,[30] cable television in particular has found past television shows invaluable for laying claim to a generic and brand identity. Cable channels will regularly fill their schedule with reruns and films that match the channel's intended tone and identity, but in choosing these programs and films, and in labeling them as such, they further attach certain genres to the apparent surface of the text. For example, if Lifetime were to play *Charlie's Angels* (either the television show [1976–81] or the film [2000]), its advertising and brand identity alone would most likely encourage a "girl power," post-feminist reading, celebrating the three tough and resourceful women, whereas if Spike were to play *Charlie's Angels*, we would now likely be encouraged to see the film as an action romp with women in skimpy costumes.

In this manner, as Jason Mittell states, "Production is an ongoing process in the majority of television, revising notions of genre throughout the run of a series as producers respond to the ongoing cultural circulation

of programs,"[31] and each time a show or film is replayed, its surrounding paratextuality "produces" it and its genre anew. Mittell's interests lie in how genre is "a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts,"[32] and hence in how, over time, various agents and paratexts inflect dominant understandings and uses of a genre. These processes clearly apply to an individual text, too, so that textual meaning will shift across time as its paratexts direct our reading strategies. Of course, any given text will have limits to its uses, but promos and previews can still determine significant variation within a text's broad set of meanings. For instance, we could possibly imagine *Charlie's Angels* receiving play on BET as part of a series on films influenced by blaxploitation, but it is highly unlikely that any preview could convince viewers to see it as a film *about* the African American experience.

Various previews' abilities to inflect texts over time can make for dense and intricate textual histories, but texts can be further complicated within any given moment in time due to differences in promos and previews across space. Just as Mittell notes the varying understandings of cartoons as a genre over time, we should expect genres and texts to change meanings as they travel the planet, according to their different paratextual entourage. Such is the case for the American and Canadian trailers of Canadian director Atom Egoyan's film *The Sweet Hereafter*.[33] Egoyan was well-known in Canada due to his prior films, including *Exotica* (1994), *Calendar* (1993), and *The Adjuster* (1991), but had no popular cachet in America. A "quirky" director whose work rarely conforms to established genres, Egoyan poses a particular challenge to marketers trying to visually summarize his films in two minutes. *The Sweet Hereafter*'s American and Canadian trailers render this difficulty in vivid detail, as the former aimed to peg the film generically, while the latter could rely upon audiences' familiarity with Egoyan as his own genre. As a result, when the film opened in 1997, two starkly different movies were on sale in the two different nations' trailers.

Based on Russell Banks's novel of the same title, *The Sweet Hereafter* is a stunning if grueling film that examines a small mountain town's grief following a school bus accident that kills all but one of the town's youth. Ian Holm stars as a lawyer come to town in the aftermath, trying to find someone to blame, while he struggles with his own feelings of guilt inspired by occasional calls from his drug-addicted daughter whom he is powerless to help. A film about parenthood, protection, grief, loss, and

childhood, it garnered widespread critical acclaim, including the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes, an Independent Spirit award, and Best Direction and Best Adapted Screenplay nominations at the 1998 Oscars. However, while bringing Egoyan one of his largest box office outings, with a little over $3 million grossed, it failed to register with the American public more widely. Inevitably, the question of why it failed to attract a larger audience produces many possible answers: audiences may have considered it too bleak, too slow, too dark, "too Canadian," not star-studded enough; it may have been released on too few screens; or any number of other reasons. Another possible answer that I want to advance, though, is that the American trailer sold a different film with a different genre, one that was formulaic and uninteresting. Especially when compared to the Canadian trailer, the American trailer hijacked and augmented the film, confusingly offering audiences a different product than the one they would actually have received should they watch the film.

The American trailer includes a voiceover in typical Hollywood style, offered by one of its typical voice talents. As images from the film shoot by, with interspersed dialogue, the announcer reads:

> In a town where no one is a stranger, in a place where everyone feels like family, something has happened that will change their lives forever. Now, one man must find the truth. But who can you trust when everyone has a secret? Who can you blame when no one is innocent?

At no point do we see the bus veer off the road and crash, nor do we see the obvious aftermath; rather, we are left with oblique references to something awful that has happened, likely involving children, and the viewer's attention is pointed toward one man's quest for "the truth." Ian Holm's Mitchell appears to be one part lawyer, one part detective, and in the absence of the knowledge of exactly what sort of accident or incident took place, one is left to assume a murder of some sort. The trailer poses a lone investigator stuck in a town in which "everyone has a secret," yet "no one is innocent," implying widespread complicity in whatever has happened. Numerous snippets of dialogue suggest a cover-up, with the trailer giving particular prominence, through muting all background sound when spoken, to Mitchell's declaration, "As far as I'm concerned, there is no such thing as an accident." This is *The Wicker Man* (1973) with snow, or, given that the trailer ends with Sarah Polley's Nicole reading the "Pied Piper of Hamlin" fairytale, possibly a *Children of the Corn* (1984) scenario. When

I showed the trailer to a class of 250 undergraduates at University of California, Berkeley, none of whom had watched the film, the clear consensus among the students was that the town as a whole had committed a ritualistic murder. Or, taking their cue from the final interior shot of Nicole approaching a window at night, only for a blinding light to be emitted from outside, some students felt that supernatural, even alien causes might lie behind the "accident."

The trailer slots Mitchell into a long tradition of American detectives trying to "cut through the crap," vaguely referencing their forerunner in the Western hero nobly taking on the bad guys and the environment all by himself. Noir with the blanc of pervasive snow, following in *Fargo*'s (1996) footsteps, but without the humor. The eeriness of the music and the set-up suggest a thriller, complete with the foreboding threat to Mitchell, as made explicit by a scene in which Bruce Greenwood's Billy demands that he stop asking questions. The film's title suggests death has occurred, but also suggests a continuing threat of more death, with a promise from Nicole that she will not lie offering the hero his only shred of help, and yet another nod to a seemingly formulaic thriller, in which the nice young girl helps the tired old detective. The trailer announces the various awards won by the film, but viewers are left to suppose that this was due to its artful camerawork—of which we see plenty in the trailer—or Holm's performance, or the gimmick of moving this old Hollywood formula into the snow, since little else about the film seems original or award-worthy. Without much apparent originality, and without star power or sex appeal, it promised to fall too easily into the no-man's-land between art-house and multiplex viewing cultures.

As should be clear, though, the movie that the American trailer offered hardly resembles the actual film. For a closer approximation, we must turn to the Canadian trailer, which while using many of the same shots and dialogue, is markedly different in tone, detail, and hence generic delivery. Eschewing the standard Hollywood "In a world where . . . " voiceover style, the Canadian trailer uses voiceover only at the end to announce the film's director and title, and instead uses title cards, reading, "Sometimes the past can't be forgotten. Sometimes justice can't be found. And sometimes the truth is just the beginning." Importantly, since Egoyan was a known quantity to Canadians, and known for dark, peculiar characters and plots (*Exotica*, for instance, follows a taxman's obsession with a stripper who once babysat for his child, who was abducted and killed), the trailer had the luxury of not needing to place this ungeneric, original

Fig. 2.3. *The Sweet Hereafter*'s Billy watches in horror as his children's school bus sinks into ice. Decontextualized in the American trailer, the reason for his horror is considerably clearer in the Canadian trailer.

director's work into a generic box, as did its American counterpart. Instead, then, this is advertised as "an Atom Egoyan film," a quantity that would have more meaning for its Canadian audience. Moreover, the Canadian trailer uses considerably more shots of the school bus, at first full of children, and later hauntingly empty and destroyed. The trailer also adds the sound of children screaming in the background to one shot, and it adds shots of the bus cracking through the ice, and of it driving off the roadside, followed by a fade to white. Thus, whereas American audiences were being encouraged to imagine an eerie detective thriller, Canadian audiences were offered the shock of the actual accident from early on.

I distinctly remember audience members gasping in horror during many of the trailers' showings in 1997 in Vancouver. Billy's reaction shot, as the father of two children who is riding behind the bus when it crashes (fig. 2.3), though used in the American trailer, now gives the audience an immediate point of identification, and a set of parents' eyes through which they can watch the incident. With this shot added, with the intertextual knowledge of Egoyan's past work alluded to, and with the title cards focusing on the *absence* of meaning and announcing that "sometimes the truth is just the beginning" instead of promising the truth, audiences could now immediately understand Mitchell's mission as futile. Similarly, Billy's act

of threatening Mitchell is recontextualized as giving voice to desperate anger and grief, and the entire film is framed as being about dealing with loss, not discovery. Meanwhile, the title now gains a grim quality—this is anything but "sweet"—and the Pied Piper tale becomes quite clearly about loss, childhood, and parenthood, not about cultish killings or alien abductions. The trailer speaks to us in a markedly different tone, capturing the spirit and genre(lessness) of the film with considerably more accuracy.

Here, then, we have a stark example of how two different trailers can offer two different films. Interestingly, though, if one watches *both* trailers, the genre-refusing nature of the film becomes all the more impressive, precisely because the American trailer shows the genres and formulas that Egoyan's film frustrates: this is clearly *not* a film where the detective will get his man, and it is clearly *not* a puzzle movie with an answer at the end. The American trailer, as such, shows the backdrop to the film, while the Canadian one shows the development and foreground. Such a reading, though, is left mostly for the Egoyan or *Sweet Hereafter* enthusiast watching both trailers on the DVD. At the time of release, with YouTube several years away, and barring a jet-setting lifestyle, North American viewers would have been left with only one of the two trailers. Initially, viewers would have made a decision to see the film or not based on their reactions to the trailer they saw, and perhaps based on discussions with others who had seen the trailer. Without Egoyan's past films serving as active intertexts screaming out that the director's films aren't usually so simple, American viewers would likely make this judgment with faulty "advice." If a trailer is a window into a movie, windows point in different directions, giving us different angles of vision, some refracting or otherwise distorting. And in case my above account suggests that the Canadian trailer encapsulated the film perfectly, we could certainly envision another trailer that would accurately encapsulate elements of the film, yet focus on different themes; for instance, the incestuous relationship between Nicole and her father might feature more prominently, as might Mitchell's relationship with his daughter, likewise pointing to a film about parenthood, childhood, damage, and loss, but now highlighting the threatening, tenuous nature of the parent–child relationship. While I hesitate to write in hypotheticals, were viewers to watch this imaginary third trailer, they might watch the film with such themes more firmly in mind, yet again shifting their expectations and changing the nature of the text that they experience. Therefore, while Egoyan directed the film, the stark differences in trailer editing gave the studio significant powers of authorship

that in part superceded his own, and would likely have proven constitutive of the frames with which viewers would watch the film.

Hence, trailers and promos not only question how textuality works, but also how the author works. If the author, director, or writer is assumed to be s/he who creates a text, scripting its characters, themes, genre, and so forth, trailers and promos may rob this figure of some of his or her creative powers. Admittedly, we would be foolish to regard any cinematic or televisual creation as coming from a single creative figure, and even when fans talk of creator figures in reverential terms, they nearly always recognize film and television to require communal acts of creation. When we speak of authors, as will be discussed further in chapter 3, we often speak of what Michel Foucault dubs the "author function"—not a real figure but a projection, "in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice."[34] This author function may prove its own powerful paratext at times, as chapter 3 will examine. However, at the same time, the trailer's or promo's power to create an initial interpretive framework for a text—sometimes as much as a year before the show is delivered to its audience—or to propose a new framework later in the text's life, means that a considerable component of textual creation comes from neither the author figure nor the author function, but from the studio's hired marketing staff and the editors who compose the trailer or promo. These editors must work with footage filmed by the film or program's creative personnel, so they do not have carte blanche, but as the case of *The Sweet Hereafter* illustrates, editing allows one remarkable freedom of creation and re-creation.

The power of the trailer editor is often most evident with generically complex films and programs, such as *The Sweet Hereafter*. Similarly, for instance, M. Night Shyamalan's movies have also posed a challenge to their editors. Shyamalan's films (*The Sixth Sense* [1999], *Unbreakable* [2000], *Signs* [2002], *The Village* [2004], *Lady in the Water* [2006], and *The Happening* [2008]) are renowned for their plot twists, but they all mix genres too. Trailers for *The Village* tried to peg the film as horror, focusing on creatures in the woods, and including several standard horror film scenes, such as the creature's apparent stalking of the young female lead, and the listing of rules for avoiding the creature. Granted, *The Village* draws from the horror genre, as Shyamalan uses horror as decoy for the movie's twist, but ultimately it is not horror, and audiences who went to

the film expecting that genre—primed as they may well have been by the trailers—would have been sorely disappointed. By contrast, Shyamalan's next films, *Lady in the Water* and *The Happening*, had suitably vague and generically open trailers that more accurately pegged the films as odd mixes of, respectively, drama, character study, fairy tale, and horror, and horror, sci-fi, and bio-disaster.

Ultimately, a film need not mix genres for a trailer to play with or augment its framing. Trailers for dramedies notoriously tend to include all the film's funniest lines, thereby suggesting an out-and-out comedy; trailers for thrillers can suggest an action film by focusing only on the more high-paced moments; character-rich films might be pitched as plot- or action-based; trailers for sequels might fail to acknowledge a change in tone; films designed for a niche audience might deliberately be pitched as for the whole family; in the wake of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy's success, many films in the fantasy genre are pitched as action films even when they are not; and so forth. A great deal of movie-going in particular is about expectation, and since trailers play a key role in setting expectations, they become a key contributor to a text's meaning and can be central to an audience's reaction to that text.

Trailers' contribution to meaning may even be growing, given their increasing presence in all forms of media. Many cable providers now offer a free Movie Trailers On Demand channel, while many a commercial break contains at least one ad for a film or television program. YouTube, Hulu, Facebook, and MySpace, meanwhile, all circulate trailers and previews, as does IMDb. Movie trailers regularly attract more views on video-sharing sites than do even some of the most popular viral videos,[35] and television promos can easily top a million views. Thus, where trailers were once limited to the space before movies (whether in a theater or on a VHS tape) or to television ad breaks, they can now be found in various other locations, as Hollywood has used new media to circulate ads for its shows far and wide. In such an environment, producers and marketers may well be gaining considerably more control over the meanings of a text. When trailers were limited to a few minutes before movies, or a few television ads, their effect may have been more muted, but today's proliferation of trailers means that most of us watch each one multiple times, often unable to escape them even if we wanted to do so. Today's culture of trailers sets the stage for parodic items such as The Onion News Network's on the *Iron Man* trailer discussed in the Introduction, or Stephen Colbert's occasional segment on *The Colbert Report* called "Trailers That

Are Ruining America." Their constructions of meaning, suggested modes of viewing, and tailored calls to specific viewing audiences are repeated incessantly, and are constantly available for repetitive viewing. With each viewing, the director's text potentially dissolves yet a little more, with the marketing team's text replacing it. Final cut is relative, as the high trade in trailers and promos over YouTube and similar sites puts ever more power into studios' hands to pre-purpose and repurpose films and television shows.

The Twenty-Second Text: Opening Credit Sequences and "Proper" Interpretations

So far in this chapter, many of the examples have been of promos or trailers as entryway paratexts, either setting up the initial framework(s) for viewing or establishing a new framework years later for a different audience. Many trailers and promos on television in particular, however, work in medias res. Ads for rerun television shows and replayed films may just as likely address themselves to repeat viewers. Even beyond reruns, after a new show is up on its feet, its network hardly stops advertising it, nor do networks direct their continuing ads for a show only at non-viewers, attempting to convert them into viewers or fans. Rather, many ads preach to the converted, welcoming longtime viewers back, and serving both as continual reminders of a show's time and place in the weekly schedule and as narrative lures. When addressing new audience members, promos can set frameworks for expectation, can give a text a definite character, and can generate a text prior to viewing. When addressing returning audience members, promos can on one hand begin to construct the text of the individual episode, while on the other hand, at the level of the show in general, they offer producers the chance to reiterate their version of a text, and rerun broadcasters the chance to recontextualize the text. In the wake of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model and its reliance on a notion of a text's "preferred reading,"[36] Justin Lewis answered David Morley's question regarding where the preferred reading originates—with the text, audience, or analyst[37]—by stating, "The answer must inevitably be: *the audience*."[38] Instead, I would pose that paratexts often tell us how producers or distributors would prefer for us to interpret a text, which audience demographics they feel they are addressing, and how they want us to make sense of their characters and plots. In short, promos offer "proper" and "preferred" interpretations.

Working in a similar fashion, moreover, are opening credit sequences and recaps. Like promos, opening credit sequences and recaps serve an entryway function for new audiences, introducing them to the characters, genre, themes, relationships, and general subject matter. Take, for instance, the opening credits for *The Simpsons*. The camera pans down from the clouds to Springfield Elementary, and into a classroom window, where we see Bart writing lines on the blackboard before he leaps on his skateboard and heads home. Next, we find Homer working at the nuclear power plant, so excited to get off work that he doesn't notice the glowing uranium ingot attached to his clothing till he is halfway home, an ingot that he simply tosses out the window. Mother Marge is shown buying the family groceries and losing sight of Baby Maggie, who gets scanned for a price, before they too head home in the family station wagon. Meanwhile, Lisa is shown playing saxophone in the school band, and is banished by the band teacher for interjecting a virtuoso solo performance into an otherwise typically cacophonic school band song. Unfazed, she leaves the room and cycles home. Then all the family members converge on their living room to watch television, allowing the animators a quick moment of play, as each week the "couch gag" involves doing something silly to the family, such as when they "beam" onto the couch, *Star Trek* (1966–69) style. All the while, Danny Elfman's theme song, a rather frenetic orchestral piece, plays in the background, until finally, as the song crescendos, we cut to the family's television, to creator credits, and then the sequence is over.

Though only seventy-five seconds long, the sequence serves as a formidable introduction to the characters, tone, genre, and style of the show. Famously, each episode begins with Bart writing a different set of lines, giving a sense of him as a serial mischief-maker, as does his reckless skateboard trip home. Marge's momentary loss of Maggie codes her as a busy mother, while Lisa's introduction codes her as gifted, soulful, and, per force, solitary. Homer's introduction visually references the opening sequence to *The Flintstones* (1960–66), thus establishing him as a similarly dumb but well-meaning comic hero. The upbeat tone of the background music, the 2.5 kids, the numerous comic moments in the intro, and the final destination of the family living room all clearly announce the text as a family sitcom, though some of the quirks, such as Maggie being scanned for a price or Homer discarding a uranium ingot, allude to the show's intent to play with the rules and tone both of family sitcoms and of realistic depiction. While Homer is presented as somewhat stupid from the

outset, and Marge as simply flustered, Lisa's sax solo and the suggestions of Bart's intelligence from some of his lines written on the blackboard (such as "I do not have power of attorney over first graders" or "I am not the new Dalai Lama") immediately tell us that these kids are not normal sitcom kids. Occasional blackboard lines also announce the show's meta approach, as, for instance, when Bart writes "I will never win an Emmy" or "I should not be 21 by now." And with the final shot being of the television, the credit sequence subtly suggests the degree to which the show will be about television as much as it is about family life. Thus, by the end of the seventy-five seconds, viewers know the central characters and genre, have been adequately warned of its offbeat, subversive nature, and know to expect the unreal.

The Simpsons' opening credit sequence is a particularly effective one, but all opening credit sequences work in similar ways to create genre, character, and tone. Many involve remarkably fast editing, with more frames per second employed than anywhere else on television, as characters and character relationships are introduced. Colors, background music choice, and relative use of naturalistic or computer-doctored images can tell prospective viewers a lot. Watch *CSI: Miami*'s (2002–) opening credits and one knows to expect a style-conscious, sexed-up procedural, just as *ER*'s (1994–) pulse-like music and somber tones announce a more realistic, gritty drama, *Desperate Housewives*' (2004–) opening credits announce a playful, tongue-in-cheek tone, *The Wire*'s (2002–8) discordant theme song penned by Tom Waits prepares one for a dark and uncompromising look at Baltimore's drug trade and at urban poverty in general,[39] and *Dexter*'s (2006–) eerie tight close-ups of the titular character cutting his bacon and eggs, flossing his teeth, shaving, and squeezing a blood orange (fig. 2.4) put one on edge and ready for a show about a serial killer. So central are opening credit sequences in offering "proper interpretations" of genre and character that some of the recent class of genre-mixing serial dramas such as *Lost* and *Heroes* have eschewed using them, relying instead on a simple title-card and a "previously on . . . " segment, thereby refusing to pin down a broader sense of genre, character, or theme.

However, credit sequences are also powerful in medias res paratexts. Raymond Williams's account of televisual flow is famous, his argument being that broadcasting's "defining characteristic" was the "planned flow" between program and program, program and ad, ad and channel identification, and so on, so that "these sequences together compose the real flow, the real 'broadcasting.'"[40] He contrasts this to meetings, concerts, or games

Fig. 2.4. A close-up image of a blood orange being squeezed from *Dexter*'s opening credits looks distinctly fleshy, hence contributing to an unnerving and disturbing sequence.

that we might attend elsewhere, all of which set up their own internal conditions and responses so that one's "most general modes of comprehension and judgment are then closely linked to these kinds of specific and isolated, temporary, forms of attention."[41] But opening credit sequences frequently serve an important function of setting the tone for programs as they begin, and thus of redirecting the nature of the flow and setting up their own "specific and isolated, temporary, forms of attention." Opening credit sequences, in short, serve an important ritual function. Earlier I wrote of the trailer's role in transitioning us from a noisy theater to the world of celluloid, and most performative events require similarly obvious, repetitive rituals to signal their beginning. In live theater, it is the dimming of the lights and raising of the curtain. In classical music performances, it is the orchestra's tuning of their instruments. In a sports game, it is the playing of the national anthem. And in television, it is the opening credit sequence. Opening credits help to transport us from the previous textual universe to a new one, or out of "real life" and into the life of the program (even if a growing number of shows are opting for cold starts to throw the viewer right into the action). Hence the importance of tonal shifts in opening credit sequences, and hence the utility of story-style opening credits (as in *The Simpsons*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* [1990–96], or *The*

Brady Bunch [1969–74]). If trailers frequently announce "In a world where . . . ," imploring us to move with them to that "world," an opening credit sequence is similarly entrusted to take us to its text's world.

Thus, David Johansson notes that the opening credit sequence to *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) is "a 'road movie' in miniature,"[42] taking us as viewers alongside Tony Soprano in his ride through the urban, sterile environment of New Jersey. He notes that the "Drive Safely" sign on the turnpike "grows in absurdity every time the viewer sees it since this is a world where no one is ever 'safe.'" He also writes of the toll booth as representing "impersonal bureaucracy and a faceless government—the system. Tony must enter it like anyone else who wishes to drive down the highway of the American Dream."[43] And he states of the trip with Tony:

> He's a bad guy certainly—but we're with him, inside the frame with his face, his hairy hands, his brute strength, his air of danger, but within the intimate bounds of the car we get a sense of strength in repose, the alpha male at rest, his guard down, vulnerable. And this deepens the viewer's sympathy for the "hero" because, even though he *is* a bad guy, we're *right there* with him, in tight proximity, where the sense of Tony's physical presence—his aura—feels private, as though we are being trusted. He may be a tough guy but for now he's alone, as naked as the rest of us.[44]

I am less interested here in the universality or "correctness" of Johansson's rather close reading than in how it illustrates the degree to which opening credit sequences inspire close readings from all viewers, thereby becoming spaces for the projection of personal interpretations. Or to change metaphors from projection to uploading, we might think of the opening credit sequence as providing time for our memories and preferred reading strategies to be uploaded, preparing us for the episode at hand. This role also pertains to theme songs, which over time similarly come to represent the entire program, and the joys and memories of that program.

Through repetition, opening credit sequences may also reaffirm what a show is about, how its characters are interrelated, and how we "should" make sense of them. Precisely because it and its theme song can represent the show, standing in for it metonymically, its constituent parts declare what a show is about. This is most obvious when performing what Barthes calls the "commutation test" of replacing one or more elements to see how the meaning of a text changes,[45] and many stark and clear examples are offered by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s (1997–2003) opening credit sequence. To begin

with, this sequence is one of the most densely packed in television history, using more than one shot per second to introduce the show's large cast and novel concept at lightning speed. As the show aged, though, it frequently remixed the intro, so that new characters, character details, and character relationships could be reflected. Indeed, it is worth speculating on the degree to which *Buffy* was aided in picking up many fans later in its lifespan—as was required, given that its original ostensible genre of high school soap meets gothic horror was not an immediate and easy fit with the "quality television" label for which it would soon come to be known—by its remarkably comprehensive "cheat sheet" opening credit sequence. By contrast, opening credit sequence–shunning serial dramas such as *Lost* and *Heroes* can prove deeply confusing for newcomers (leading to the former's need to play reruns with pop-up style background notes). *Buffy*'s opening credits adequately introduced, for instance, the complexities of Angel, the vampire with a soul, showing both his kinder, somewhat stock tall, dark, brooding romantic lead character, and the killer Angelus. In time, too, the sequence would adapt to suggest the depths of Spike, another vampire seeking a soul. *Buffy* would also play with its opening credits occasionally, as in "Superstar," an episode in which local nerd Jonathan casts a spell to make himself revered by all, thereby producing a remixed intro in which Jonathan replaces Buffy in many shots. Or, when the show added a sister for *Buffy*, the opening credit sequence added her seamlessly, as though she had always been present.

Similarly, Victoria Johnson is able to rest much of her analysis of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s (1970–77) construction of a proudly urbane American Midwest "Heartland" on its developing opening credits. Over several pages of rich close reading of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s first five seasons' credit sequences—wherein, for instance, the first season's lyric, "You might just make it after all," in the second season becomes the more famous, "You're gonna make it after all," while images of Mary encountering the city are replaced in later seasons by images of her integrating within the city and as a single head-of-household—Johnson shows how these intro sequences

> "evolved" to offer a "balanced" view, portraying Minneapolis as a site of public liberation and private self-actualization. In this sense, the program promoted an idealized vision that suggested 1970s downtowns might be "reclaimed" (particularly for young, white, female professionals) as liberating, joyful spaces of tourism, labor, and consumption in an era post-1960s upheavals and political traumas.[46]

As did *Buffy* years later, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* communicated *and framed* its title character's and its setting's "evolution" as well as the "evolution" of its theme, argument, and hence "proper" interpretation through its evolving opening credit sequence, such that Johnson can chart these varying evolutions largely through the sequence alone.

Arguably the greater commutation test, though, can be witnessed by watching multiple fan-made opening credit sequences. After all, if production personnel can "prefer" certain meanings through official opening credit sequences, fan edits can prefer their own readings, while at the same time illustrating the many different introductory frames and filters that can be provided for any one show. One *Buffy* fan-made intro sequence, for instance, removes the Nerf Herder rocked-out theme song, replacing it with *Buffy* spinoff *Angel*'s (1999–2004) more somber strings and rock theme, thereby setting the show up as darker and less frenetically peppy. Various other songs replace the original theme song in other fan-made trailers, too, each giving the show a decidedly different spin. Similarly, the fan-made trailers string together different frames from the series, in the process offering different interpretations of the characters and their interrelationships: some downplay Buffy; others show her to be a more tortured figure; some show her to be an angry, vengeful character; and yet others suggest a romantic bond between Buffy and Spike, Buffy and Willow, or Angel and Spike. In this way, as will be explored in considerably more detail in chapter 5, viewer-end paratexts can repurpose the "proper" interpretation, posing their own frames for viewers, and shrugging off the official frames that (in this case) Mutant Enemy Productions put forward. But to repurpose the proper interpretation requires that it has already been stated, and the television industry's opening credit sequences often make this interpretation clear, underlining and repeating it on a weekly basis.

Conclusion: More Show than the Show Itself?

Whether in their fan-made or more official varieties, opening credit sequences, trailers, posters, and ad campaigns often build the text at its outskirts. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that films and television programs will prove unable to overcome or to challenge these meanings in due course, for undoubtedly a viewer who eventually watched *E.T.*, *Six Degrees*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would find quantitatively more textuality on offer, and a more coherent, realized narrative,

than their respective poster, ad campaign, trailer, or opening credit sequence offer. The point, therefore, is not that paratexts necessarily kill or become their texts. Rather, in preparing us for the text and offering us our first encounters with it, entryway paratexts hold considerable power to direct our initial interpretations, telling us what to expect and establishing genre, gender, style, attitude, and characterization. Working in medias res, paratexts also attempt to police proper interpretations, insisting on how they would like us to read the text. At the same time, though, while paratexts do not necessarily become their texts, especially for eventual viewers, it would be a trap—and a trap into which media studies analysis often falls—to concentrate only on what texts mean to their eventual close viewers and fans. In the case of casual viewers, paratextual frames are likely to rise in importance, precisely because there is less countervailing textuality on offer from the film or television program itself to challenge the paratextual frames. And in the case of non-viewers, of the millions who saw the *E.T.* poster, *Six Degrees* ads, *Sweet Hereafter* trailers, or *Buffy* opening credits, then decided to take their media consumption elsewhere, now there is no countervailing textuality to challenge the paratext, meaning that the paratext may well be, for such (non)viewers, the entirety of the text. Regardless, then, of whether they address eventual fans, eventual casual viewers, or non-viewers, and regardless of whether their meanings dovetail with or diverge from those of the film or television program, introductory paratexts are a vital part of the interpretive and consumption process, the first outposts and the beginning of textuality.

This page intentionally left blank