Issue 3: Book Reviews

Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers

By Lisa Kernan

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. ISBN 0-292-70558-1/0-292-70600-6. 59 B&W photos, 316pp. £11.99 (pbk), £48.00 (hbk)

A Review by Deborah Allison, City University, UK

"Who do they think they're talking to?" (36) This is the question at the heart of Lisa Kernan's engaging survey of American film trailers. Studying trailers, she argues, can help us to understand the assumptions that film companies make about what audiences want. By examining the rhetorical devices they use it is possible to map the changing dialogue between their assumptions, the product itself, and the ways in which films are consumed by audiences.

Kernan argues that the rhetoric of trailers is centred on three textual features: genres, stories and stars. These priorities have existed throughout the period of her study, which spans from 1930 to 1999. Yet as she demonstrates, the ways in which they address audiences have changed significantly across this period. For example, she cites Vinzenz Hediger's argument that 'studio trailermakers started out in the classical era emphasising the withholding of story elements as much as possible (on the assumption that the story *is* the product)' but by the mid-1970s had moved to a formula that revealed approximately two thirds of the story arc (54). 'What is "the product" when it ceases to be the story?' she asks, going on to argue that 'in the contemporary era, the product becomes the movie event' (54).

This conclusion, like most of her others, is drawn from the series of twenty-seven case studies that occupies the greater part of the book. Taken individually, each case study provides an intelligent and rigorous examination of the workings of the trailer at hand. However, the extent to which this sample can speak for the genre at large is questionable at best. In describing her sampling methodology, Kernan reveals that she prioritised trailers which 'clearly and interestingly demonstrated the rhetorical inscription of assumptions about the film's audiences and its desires' and, secondarily, selected trailers 'representative of the larger group – whether of their era's trailers in general, or of specific aspects of trailer rhetoric' (33). By her own acknowledgement, a methodology which prioritises the texts that support the arguments she will make, above those that are deemed somehow typical (in a rather non-specific way), precludes an accurate history of trailer forms (34). Whilst her transparency of method is indeed admirable, it provokes a string of questions, such as: what proportion of the more than 700 trailers she viewed do the case studies typify? And what are the characteristics of the other, non-privileged types of trailer?

Kernan states, moreover, that in selecting the case study subjects, she has given precedence to well-known films (34). If films are well-known, it is normally because they have been widely seen. The sample is consequently dominated by successful films. Kernan accepts, as do her sources, that trailers can contribute significantly to the success of a film. This suggests an interesting syllogism. If the selected trailers are those which advertise successful films and they are also those that most clearly inscribe their assumptions about their potential audience, might we conclude that their particular rhetorical strategies are more successful than others? The relationship between trailer rhetoric and commercial success is touched on only rarely, when discussing *Caddyshack* (Harold Ramis, 1980), for instance (177), and is an issue that would undoubtedly benefit from further exploration.

Further issues are raised by the order in which the case studies are arranged and the ways they have been classified. Although Kernan claims that an accurate history is not the objective of her study, it is difficult to

avoid evaluating her conclusions according to such a benchmark. Two factors render this issue inescapable. The first is her decision to present her close analyses in a strictly chronological order. The second is the grouping of trailers into three distinct periods, which she refers to as the 'classical' (1930-1949), 'transitional' (1950-1974) and 'contemporary' (1975-1999) eras. In creating this taxonomy of trailers it is clear that she believes an evolution to have taken place that permits a strong association between certain rhetorical and stylistic features and their historical period.

Some features of this alleged development seem compelling. In particular, it is difficult to refute her account of shifts in the relative popularity of particular stylistic devices. These include the displacement of intertitles by an increasing reliance on voice-over, and a reduction in the use of wipes in favour of using sound effects to differentiate between segments of film. If the case studies are genuinely representative of their period (which is, of course, far from certain), then the evolutionary construct she posits would appear to meet with some success. Nevertheless, there are many instances when categorising certain features as intrinsic to one of the three time periods appears to require a degree of forcing. As Kernan herself acknowledges, some trailers of the transitional era, such as *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) and *Paper Moon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1973), evince significant commonality with, as well as difference from, the rhetorical features highlighted in her analysis of the classical period (123-27, 146-55). This suggests that the evolutionary linearity which the division into time periods implies may be a simplification of the true complexities of historical change.

Kernan's explanations for the variations she observes over time are interesting but piecemeal. Her analysis posits a general shift in assumptions about the kinds of films that audiences wish to see, and in the features deemed most likely to attract them to a particular film. Trailers' shifting modes of address are shown to arise from a complex interrelation between stylistic devices, verbal rhetoric, the film excerpts included and the way that they are edited together. Industrial determinants, such as the breakdown of the studio system, are credited with influencing rhetorical change. The extent to which technological and aesthetic influences may have helped to shape the history of film trailers receives little attention however. Kernan notes, for instance, that wipes were widely used from 1935, but the reason for this delay, when the technique was common in American feature films by 1932, remains a mystery. Similarly, whilst intertextual relationships between trailers are occasionally referred to, with *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and *Twister* (John de Bont, 1996) both cited as influential (167, 190), a broader mapping of how trailers have influenced one another is substantially underdeveloped.

Kernan's categorisation of trailer features according to their era of production is not the only area in which her classification system shows signs of strain. Within each of the three time periods, she identifies each case study as being dominated and defined by the salesmanship of one of three features: star, story or genre, so that her typology of trailers effectively places them in a nine-cell matrix. Her own analyses demonstrate the significant extent to which trailers resist such pigeonholing as she shows that most of them appeal to an audience's assumed desire to make viewing choices on the basis of familiar stars, stories *and* genres. This point is made explicit in her account of how the trailer for *Men in Black* (Barry, Sonnenfeld, 1997) 'typifies the contemporary era's seamless integration of the three rhetorical appeals'. (190) One can only wonder, therefore, what the purpose of this classification system is. Purely descriptive, it is not used to quantify or measure, and instead suggests only a desire to impose an order where one does not demonstrably exist.

Discussion of the various ways in which trailers evince rhetorical appeals to audiences' assumed desires draws attention to another feature of this study that is not adequately developed. The question at the heart of the analysis – 'who do they think they're talking to?' – begs a further question, which is 'who are "they"?' In a prehistory of the group of texts on which the study focuses, Kernan tells us:

> Attempts were made to advertise films with trailers as early as 1912, and beginning in 1919, a company called National Screen Service (NSS) made crude 35 mm film ads from transferred films stills (without the studios' permission) and sold them to exhibitors… The studios soon realized the potential of trailers and began supplying NSS with film footage (25).

Between 1928 and 1960, several major studios stopped outsourcing trailer production and assumed this task themselves. (27) More recently, the industry has turned at least some of its trailer production over to a range of advertising agencies (53). A number of different organisations have therefore been involved in producing trailers. Sometime they are also the maker of the film, and sometimes not.

Kernan does not offer any information about who was responsible for creating the trailers examined in the case studies. This absence presumably owes much to the difficulties inherent in obtaining such data. Nevertheless, the question of authorship is relevant for several reasons. For one thing, the prominence of her argument that trailer rhetoric embodies the assumptions producers make about the audiences they address would be more meaningful if greater clarity were offered about who these producers are. This issue is especially relevant in the light of her observations that in some cases, such as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), there seems to be a distinct mismatch between the projected selling points of a film and its actual appeal to audiences (145). Moreover, the industrial sectors in which these companies operate (specialised trailer service, film production, or advertising agency) may help to set the individual agendas for trailer style and rhetoric. For instance, Kernan identifies a growing competitiveness between ad agencies as a factor impacting on the style of recent trailers (53). Providing information about the producer of each trailer might offer a useful indication of whether any systematic differences exist in terms of film style and/or mode of address. Although she claims that 'the look and structure of NSS trailers and the in-house trailers are very compatible during the classical era' (27), it is unclear whether such a similarity exists in later years.

As a study of specific phenomena, *Coming Attractions* is fascinating and informative. The range of trailers Kernan discusses, and her close observations of them, provides a valuable insight into a filmmaking practice that has been widely viewed but rarely studied in detail. In the extent to which trailers mediate between film texts, producers and audiences the topic has enormous potential to illuminate wider issues in the fields of film history and theory. Had her methodology involved an unbiased sample, the implications of her findings for a broader history of American cinema would have been substantial. As it is, her case studies remain an absorbing footnote with only a limited capacity to throw light on wider phenomena. This limitation notwithstanding, Kernan's book amply demonstrates that trailers provide rich pickings for further study, which it must be hoped her work will inspire. Just as she characterises film trailers as a cinema of coming attractions, so we might think of this book as providing a taster of things to come, even while it intrigues and entertains us in its own right.