

***Coming Attractions: Reading
American Movie Trailers***
 by Lisa Kernan

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS, 2004

David Gibson

In a world where the line between promotional discourse and narrative form is increasingly blurred, movie trailers stand out as one of the purest distillations of both. Trailers exploit cinematic techniques to create a mini-narrative, which entertains the audience while promoting a film. Perhaps because of their entertainment value, movie trailers manage to skirt the criticism reserved for more blatant forms of advertising. In fact, the popularity of trailers has, in some ways, eclipsed that of the films they are paired with. Many believe that *Meet Joe Black*, released on November 15, 1998, by Universal Pictures, did better-than-expected business on its opening weekend because the film was released with the trailer for the upcoming *Star Wars* prequel, *The Phantom Menace*: a true testament to the power of the movie trailer in modern media culture. It is common knowledge of cinema and cultural studies that trailers are designed to speak directly to audience desire, although the true identity of this “audience,” or the film studios’ perception of the

“audience-as-consumer,” has remained somewhat enigmatic throughout cinema’s history. Lisa Kernan’s new book, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, sets out to unmask both the audience itself and the studios’ methods for enticing them to return to the theaters again and again.

In Kernan’s view, trailers are not merely advertisements for the films they promote but a cinematic genre in and of itself, with its own set of features and conventions. Though the author acknowledges trailers’ similarity to other forms of advertising, she points out that the main purpose of a movie trailer is to sell the desire for a unique cinematic experience rather than a specific physical object. The first chapter of the book includes an analysis of some of the generic features of movie trailers, such as montage, voice-over narration, and graphics, which work together to create a narrative that is at once separate from and tied to the film in question. Particular attention is paid to the fragmentary nature of trailers, which creates “a kind of pregnancy or underdeterminacy that allows audiences to create an imaginary (as-yet-unseen) film out of these fragments—[a] desire not [for] the real film but the film we want to see” (13). Kernan’s exploration of audience expectations, and the studio’s rhetorical appeals to these expectations, forms the basis of a compelling and convincing argument on the nature of American film advertising, and its evolution and transformation over the course of the last century.

Throughout the book, the author refers to the movie trailer genre as “a cinema of (coming) attractions” (2). Just as the concept of the “cinema of attractions” posits a view of a pre-narrative, spectacle-driven cinema in which an implicit awareness of the act of viewing exists within the audience, trailers resist narrative temporality in order to create audience desire. Kernan often alludes to trailers’ two distinct temporal modes, which operate by “withholding the fullness of the cinema event, even as they display a unique sense of heightened presence” (24), a feature she argues is unique to the film trailer genre. The notion of a pure cinematic form that is alluded to through promotional discourse, but never attained, may be of most interest to the archival community, as it closely parallels the desire to preserve a cine-

matic experience that may be unattainable now. Kernan shows how the construction of the cinematic “event” through trailer rhetoric succeeds in promoting the film itself and the anticipation of the film, thus creating a commodified narrative while speaking to audience desire.

The vaudeville and circus traditions, which exerted a great influence on the birth of cinema in the United States, had a strong impact on the early development of movie trailer conventions as well, particularly in regard to audience address. The author relates vaudeville’s “something for everyone” approach to movie trailers’ attempts to appeal to “as broad an audience as possible . . . by emphasizing the range of different aspects that might appeal to audiences within [a] specific genre” (19). Similarly, Kernan likens movie trailers to the rhetoric of the circus sideshow, an invitation to “‘step right up’ . . . [and] to participate in the film’s discourse in some way” (22). As much as these two modes of audience address relate to the idea of trailers as a cinema of coming attractions, they are also representative of the genre’s historical development, an evolution that lies at the heart of the book’s analysis. Literalizations of the vaudeville stage, of film actors addressing the audience firsthand before a curtained backdrop, were common during the beginning of what Kernan refers to as the classical era of movie trailers, but the practice soon faded like the vaudeville tradition itself. Even the last remnant of the circus mode, the announcement of a film “Coming Soon to a Theater Near You,” endures simply based on its status as an iconic phrase, much like the term “coming attractions.” In the modern era, when commerce through visual information has become such a large part of our daily lives, these modes have been eschewed in favor of quick cuts and reliance on flashy images rather than direct audience address.

With chapter 2 of the book, entitled “Trailer Rhetoric,” Kernan outlines the various forms of rhetoric that trailer producers use to entice the assumed audience of a motion picture. The three central rhetorical appeals she focuses on, genre rhetoric, story rhetoric, and star rhetoric, each play on a different aspect of audience desire in order to achieve the same end, namely, to persuade the audience to return

to the theater to see the next attraction. With emphasis on persuasion, Kernan justifies her use of Aristotelian rhetorical theory, principally the theory of the enthymeme, which she describes as “an implicit assumption within the logic of the remaining terms” of an abbreviated syllogism (40). Essentially, Kernan posits an image-based enthymeme in which the applied assumption on the part of the trailer producers in regard to the assumed audience may be “You’re going to want to see these films!” (43). This is complicated territory, but Kernan succeeds in creating a clear and concise picture of the ways such rhetorical logic can be applied to the genre of trailers by stressing the audience’s importance in the formation of such a persuasive text. The sole function of the trailer, to create in the audience the desire to see, hear, and “feel” a specific cinematic text, is moot without the participation of the audience itself.

Kernan concludes the first half of the book with an analysis of each of the three rhetorical appeals. Much has been written in history of film scholarship regarding cinematic genres, stories, and stars; however, this book treads new ground by exploring each facet in relation to movie trailers. By isolating the methods employed within each appeal toward the creation of audience desire, the author is able to reposition these familiar concepts in light of rhetorical analysis, while laying the foundation for the analyses that form the core of her study. Although, as the author herself admits, no one rhetorical appeal can be seen as mutually exclusive to any one trailer, Kernan succeeds in demonstrating how “in each era a dominant rhetorical appeal is discernable in most trailers” (42).

The bulk of the book is devoted to an in-depth rhetorical analysis of twenty-seven theatrical movie trailers, nine from each of the three defined historical periods. The examples are just a small sampling of the hundreds of trailers Kernan viewed for the project, a chronological list of which is included in the back of the book. Although the author does not spend much time expounding on the process by which she chose these particular trailers, it is implicit in the text that the examples included fell most closely within the bounds of the three rhetorical appeals. The majority of the trailers viewed,

as the author points out, came from the collection of the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Kernan, herself an arts librarian at UCLA, is no stranger to the value of primary research, though she steps out on a limb at several points in her argument against modern historiography's tendency to favor the archival document about the text over the text itself. The author's formalist approach is certainly appropriate in this case, as the persuasive rhetoric that forms the basis of movie advertising exists as an unspoken enthymeme, hidden among the editorial decisions and self-conscious promotion of most movie trailers. At times, however, Kernan's formalist approach threatens to cloud the larger issues of rhetorical persuasion, particularly in regard to the shot-by-shot analyses of trailers from the modern era, where quick edits and visual overload are the order of the day. In these cases, words alone cannot do justice to the editorial rhythms and near subliminal imagery that form such a large part of the visual language of movie trailers. The illustrations, when included, do some work in resolving the disconnect between the text-based description of the trailer and the trailer itself. Perhaps the most successful aspect of this section of the book is the way the author shows how each of the rhetorical appeals evolves over time to correspond to the studios' changing ideas about their imagined "audience."

The three historical eras explored in the book Kernan identifies as the Classical Era, the Transitional Era and the Contemporary Era, and she argues that the three main rhetorical appeals conform to the studios' assumptions about the audience during each era. The Classical Era of movie trailers, which spans the 1930s and 1940s, is characterized in Kernan's investigation by a desire on the part of the studios to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, an extension of the aforementioned vaudeville and circus traditions. The Transitional Era, spanning the 1950s through the early 1970s, witnessed Hollywood's struggle to maintain and, at times, regain an audience that had begun to wane with the emergence of television after World War II. It was a time of experimentation and, as evidenced by the trailers made during this era, studios were unsure of the identity and desires of their potential audience.

Unlike earlier eras, the Contemporary Era finds the role of the movie trailer taking a subordinate position. With the proliferation of film advertising on television, the Internet, and the various home video formats that have come and gone, the theatrical venue has become just another platform through which the studios have been able to advertise their product. Nevertheless, the author shows how the language of promotional rhetoric is alive and well in today's cinematic global economy in the formation of a sense of desire and nostalgia for films yet to be seen by general audiences.

The notion of a trailer's ability to create a feeling of nostalgia for an unseen film raises interesting questions for the moving image archival community. The latest DVD collection to be released by the National Film Preservation Foundation, *More Treasures from American Film Archives*, includes a collection of early trailers for films that are believed to have been lost. Undoubtedly, this is just a small sampling of similar cases that reside in archives throughout the world. Without access to the films they were made to promote, such trailers take on even greater cultural and historical value, providing a glimpse, and thus creating an imaginary construct, of a film that can neither be confirmed nor denied. These trailers that outlive and transcend the films that they advertise confirm Kernan's view that trailers are a unique cinematic form. To view a trailer simply as a paratext of a given film does not allow for a full understanding of what the trailer can tell us about the film through closer textual and rhetorical analysis. Kernan's argument to consider trailers as both para- and metatexts is supported by the concept of the archival trailer as the missing link to lost films. This book may be a key to uncovering information about these films simply by placing emphasis on the ways that they were sold to an audience. If nothing else, the book will increase the historical research value of the countless trailers currently stored in the world's moving image archives.

Movie trailers have worked their way into almost all of the popular forms of moving image media, from television to the Internet and DVD. Kernan, however, is quick to establish her definition of a trailer in the context of the book as "a brief film text that usually displays images

from a specific feature film while asserting its excellence, and that is created for the purpose of projecting in theaters to promote a film's theatrical release" (1). Although Kernan leaves the modern modes of film promotion out of her historical analysis (rightfully so, as theatrical trailers provide more than enough fodder for a book-length study), it is hoped that *Coming Attractions* may inspire further examination of the ways film promotion has evolved beyond traditional theatrical exhibition. Trailers on the Internet have become a particularly fascinating subject for study, as many trailers are "premiered" on-line and entire Web-based communities exist to scrutinize trailers on a shot-by-shot level in some effort to decode the mystery of films yet to be released. Although the book does not necessarily suffer from its omission of modern media trailers, it does open several avenues to be explored.

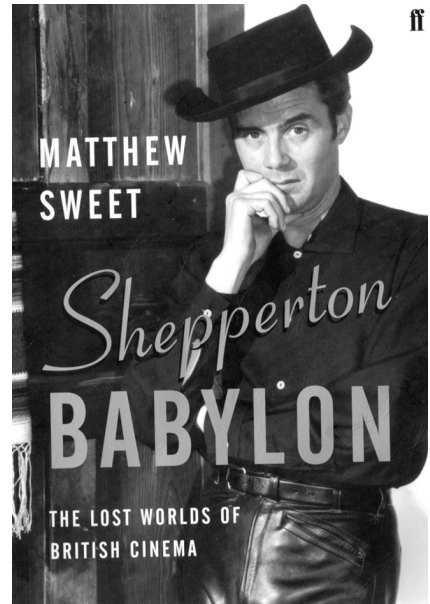
Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers takes a fresh look at an aspect of moving image visual culture that is almost as old as the cinema itself. Through close textual analysis of a small sampling of movie trailers, Kernan uncovers the ever-evolving ways the studio system uses the form to enhance audience desire for the films themselves, and the ideals represented by the films. The book raises important questions about what trailers can tell us about ourselves as filmgoers and what clues they can provide to fill gaps in film history. With the release of this book, archivists, scholars, and audiences may never again view trailers in quite the same way.

***Shepperton Babylon:
The Lost Worlds of British
Cinema* by Matthew Sweet**

FABER AND FABER, 2005.

Aubry Anne D'Arminio

In the Q and A available at the Web site for the BBC Four documentary based on *Shepperton Babylon: The Lost Worlds of British Cinema*, Matthew Sweet explains how his idea for the book originated during an interview with the then-eighty-nine-year-old American expatriate Constance Cummings:



I wondered if there were other veterans who could talk about the experiences they had in the 1930s, perhaps even further back. Many of the silent actors didn't have careers into the sound period, and I wondered if any of them could still be alive. Could they be in a nursing home somewhere, telling a teenage care assistant that they used to be in pictures? Would it be possible to track them down and get them to tell me their stories?

Shepperton Babylon, Sweet affirms in the book's introduction, is the culmination of thousands of such conversations—"an attempt to pursue the story of our native cinema to the limits of living memory" (8). Yet the final product is not the oral history of the UK film industry that Sweet claims. Few of his "witnesses" actually speak for themselves. Their memories (culled from memoirs, biographies, fan magazines, trade papers, and archived collections, as well as Sweet's interviews and personal correspondence) are, for the most part, filtered through Sweet's own agenda and gift for storytelling. He exploits their personalities to create characters, and he recklessly fetishizes their behavior for effect. One can almost hear Sweet rejoice as he finds arthritic Joan Morgan sipping milky tea from a safety cup,