

The Ethos of Film Trailers Quantified

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Common arguments amongst moviegoers often reference not only the narratives of the films themselves, but also the creative forces behind their production. “I like Nolan’s Batman,” one might argue, “but Burton’s adaptation was a joke.” This often applies to decision-making in film consumption; if an individual is on the fence about seeing a film in theaters or waiting to rent it, they might consider the auteur behind its creation. If one friend invites another to watch *The Grand Budapest Hotel* in theaters, an argument in its favor may often be, “it’s from Wes Anderson; we need to see it.” Whether or not this argument is a solid one is not the question, but rather the pervasiveness of this sort of reasoning.

Whether the reason is because of arguments such as these, or simply to give credit where credit is due, there is hardly a film trailer today that does not proudly display the directorial and authorial individuals involved in the work. Furthermore, many trailers also let the audience know immediately that the work is “based on a true story,” or “based on the best-selling novel,” even if this is only very loosely the case. It might not occur to the average consumer to stop and think why this is done, but it does draw into question the use of this tactic, since production companies do not use it consistently across the board. For example, one film trailer might proudly show that Benedict Cumberbatch plays one of the lead roles, while another boasts that Steven Spielberg directed the film. This begs the question: What purpose does this serve? And how effective are the trailers in achieving that purpose?

In this paper, the effectiveness of this rhetorical tactic will be evaluated. First, previous research on ethos and visual rhetoric will be explored, including contemporary applications of these tools. Three research questions will then be posed, and ultimately explored through the use

of a Solomon Four-Group experimental design using attitudinal measures. Results will be analyzed using a Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test run through IBM SPSS Statistics Package 23.

Literature Review

Aristotle on invention

While there may be some debate over modern applications of Aristotle's work, there is very little contention over the significance of Aristotle's contributions to the study of rhetoric. Arguably, one of Aristotle's greatest contributions to the field was *The Rhetoric*, where he definitively outlines some of the rhetorical concepts still used to this day. "Rhetorical study," notes Aristotle, "in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion" (Aristotle, trans. 1954) That is, rhetorical study must consider the tools of persuasion, and furthermore, the effectiveness of these tools. For Aristotle, these tools consisted of invention, more commonly known as *ethos* (appeals to credibility), *pathos* (appeals to emotion), and *logos* (appeals to logic and reasoning) (Aristotle, trans. 1954).

Classically, Aristotle's work was concerned with oratory, and thus, verbal messages. While there would not appear to be any end to the need for the study of oratory and verbal communication in the near future, this understanding of Aristotle's work unnecessarily limits the body of knowledge on argumentation. Today, there is more of an effort to apply classical modes of study to more modern forms of persuasion, such as visual communication and media.

Visual rhetoric

Visual communication has long been an integral part of the human experience, but only in more recent years has there been a concentrated effort to study its communicative properties and value (Blair, 1996). Even longer still has it taken to begin to understand the possibilities of

visual argumentation in particular. Argumentation has traditionally been limited to strictly verbal study, but the abundant presence of visual persuasion in the day-to-day of individuals demands a greater understanding of this function of images (Blair, 1996). Birdsell and Groarke (1996; 2007) have made arguments for a movement toward a greater understanding of visual argumentation. Particularly, Scott (1994) has expressed a need for the study of visual rhetoric in advertising- a direction that proves relevant to the rhetorical value of film trailers.

While these scholars have begun to move towards the possibilities of visual argumentation, and thus visual invention, and while this movement could possibly open a great new level of understanding of visual communication, very little of these ideas have actually been applied in practice. Finnegan (2001) successfully studied images as an enthymematic form, concluding that there was, in fact, a possible real application for Aristotelian rhetoric in visual communication. Rossolatos (2014) specifically looked at commercials, and determined that as a whole, these are also capable of visual argumentation through the combination of these images. Visual arguments have also been determined to be heavily reliant on invention, as they cannot look to verbal textual cues to form associations or connections with the audience (Smith, 2007). In fact, a strong visual appeal to pathos can potentially stick longer with an audience than even well worded verbal appeals (Smith, 2007). However, Smith (2007) also notes that ethos is one of the most present forms of persuasion in film trailers, as they often depend on knowledge of the director and their body of work to convince the audience that the finished product is worth seeing.

A science of film trailers

People are interested in analyzing film, from the smallest production details to the finished product; the existence of the title “movie critic” is testament enough to that fact. Despite

this interest, the commercial aspect of motion pictures, more specifically the trailer, often goes unnoticed. That being said, there have been a small handful of attempts to better understand trailers in their own right.

As early as 1947, Fiske and Handel studied audience responses to movie trailers, but not necessarily their effectiveness or structure. Perentesis (1948) specifically examined the effectiveness of motion picture trailers as political campaign propaganda. More recently, Maier (2009) considered how narrative analysis lends to the interpretation of film trailers by viewers. These studies provide great insight into many aspects of film trailers; however, they do not answer questions of what effect ethos in film trailers has on the consumption motivation of the viewing audience.

Rationale and Research Questions

Even with this new breaching into the world of visual rhetoric, and particularly a new interest in visual rhetoric and pictorial narrative, there has been no substantial attempt to quantify the effects of these supposedly credibility-building elements. These research questions have only been posited theoretically, drawing from what is currently known about visual rhetoric and its effects, but not in this particular case. The aim of this research proposal is to fill these gaps, and to begin to gain real insight into how these elements of visual invention contribute to viewer attitudes and towards projected film consumption. Since trailers aim to persuade audiences to consume films in a similar way that commercials attempt to sway viewers towards certain products or services, this information could offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between film trailers and actual film viewership.

In order to thoroughly investigate this influence of Aristotelian credibility in film trailers, a few research questions are posed in this proposal:

RQ1: How does the presence of directorial and authorial information affect viewers' attitudes toward film trailers?

RQ2: Do attitudes towards directors and other creators affect attitudes towards film trailers? And if so, to what extent?

RQ3: How does the presence or absence of any of these elements affect projected intent to consume the films advertised in the trailers?

Method

Solomon four-group experimental design

The aforementioned research questions will be best measured through an experimental study utilizing a Solomon four-group design. That is, two groups will receive the manipulation, while the other two are presented with control media. Additionally, two groups will receive pretest questionnaires (one control and one manipulation), while two will not undergo pretesting. Finally, all four groups will receive a posttest questionnaire measuring both attitudes toward the film trailers and motivation to consume the final filmic product.

The first group will serve as a control, and also receive a pretest measuring attitudes toward the ethos-based information in film trailers. This group will view three unedited, less advertised film trailers (*Crimson Peak*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, and *In the Heart of the Sea*; see Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C) to reduce the possibility of any a priori knowledge influencing the participants' attitudes, in addition to a posttest measuring intent to consume based on the trailers viewed.

The second group will receive the same pretest as the first; however, they will be shown the manipulated stimuli. While this group will be shown the same three trailers as the first group, the trailers will be manipulated so that any directorial and authorial credit will be removed. They will then receive the same posttest as the first group.

The third group will serve as the second control, and will be shown the unedited trailers. While they will still receive the same posttest measures as the first and second groups, they will not be presented a pretest.

Finally, the fourth group will receive the manipulation of the three film trailers, and like the third group, only receive a posttest questionnaire.

Measures

The measures used for this experiment have been adapted from Rubin's (2004) "Television Viewing Motivation's Scale." The pretest and posttest both contain additional questions regarding director and author credibility, as well as adaptation preference, and the posttest includes questions about intent to consume films, based on the three trailers shown. The pretest can be found in Appendix G, with the accompanying posttest under Appendix H, and the standalone posttest under Appendix I.

Dependent and independent variables

Two dependent and one independent variable have been identified in this study. First, the dependent variables being measured are attitudes toward film trailer ethos and second, viewer intent to consume.

The independent variable is the display of the name and works of the director and writer. This variable will be manipulated in the experiment.

Participants

The subject pool was taken from a convenience sample, comprised of SUU students. Ages of the subjects ranged from 18-33 (mean = 22.6 years old). There were a total of 32 male participants, 28 female participants, and one participant identifying as “other”. Participants were either randomly approached in the Gerald E. Sheratt Library on Southern Utah University and asked to participate in the study, or they were recruited through a class visit to their Comm 1010 course. These participants were incentivized with an opportunity to earn extra credit in their Comm 1010 course.

The necessary materials for this experiment include the three control trailers (Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C), the manipulated trailers (manipulated form the trailers in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C), a recruitment script for participants (Appendix D), flyers for recruitment (Appendix E), a script for the experiment (Appendix F), and the pretest and posttest questionnaires (Appendix G, Appendix H and Appendix I). The experiment requires audiovisual equipment and an isolated, quiet room, for which a library study room with a television was used. Finally, IBM SPSS Statistics 23 will be used to analyze test results.

Results

In order to answer the research questions, the researchers gathered a convenience sample totaling 61 participants from the campus of Southern Utah University. Ages ranged from 18 years to 33 years, with a mean age of 22 years. Of the participants, 32 self-identified as male, 28 as female, and one participant as other. The average number of films watched per week by this group was 2.21 films.

Over the course of several days, participants were recruited in groups of two or three individuals and assigned to one of four experimental; groups- posttest-only control (Group 1;

n=16), pretest-posttest control (Group 2; n=14), posttest-only manipulation (Group 3; n=16), and pretest-posttest manipulation (Group 4; n=15).

After the data were gathered, researchers utilized a Kruskal-Wallis Test. The Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) by ranks is a non-parametric method for testing whether samples originate from the same distribution. It is used for comparing two or more samples that are independent, and that may have different sample sizes, and extends the Mann-Whitney U test to more than two groups. The parametric equivalent of the Kruskal-Wallis test is the one-way analysis of variance (Corder & Foreman, 2009).

Upon completion of the study and analysis of the data, the results were anticipated to demonstrate a significant relationship between presentation of directorial and authorial credit and intention to consume, in order to be consistent with the current trends in filmic advertising.

The first significant result this study produced referred to the trailer for the movie, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Both of the control groups showed a much higher desire to watch the film because of the trailer than the manipulation groups. This result was significant on the .05 level ($H = 7.866, p < .05$).

Experimental Group		n	Mean Rank
Based on the trailer, I would watch The Man from UNCLE.	Posttest-only control	16	34.22
	Pretest-posttest control	14	39.14
	Posttest-only manipulation	16	23.63
	Pretest-posttest manipulation	15	27.83
	Total	61	

Test Statistics	
Chi-Square	7.866
<i>df</i>	3
<i>Asymp. Sig</i>	.049

Likewise, the trailer for the movie, *In the Heart of the Sea*, displayed statistical significance. Both of the control groups showed a much higher desire to watch the film because of the trailer than the manipulation groups. This result was significant on the .01 level ($H = 10.672, p < .01$).

Experimental Group		n	Mean Rank
Based on the trailer, I would watch <i>In the Heart of the Sea</i> .	Posttest-only control	16	36.75
	Pretest-posttest control	14	38.29
	Posttest-only manipulation	16	21.25
	Pretest-posttest manipulation	15	28.47
	Total	61	

Test Statistics	
Chi-Square	10.672
<i>df</i>	3
<i>Asymp. Sig</i>	.014

The trailer for the film, *Crimson Peak*, did not show statistical significance at the .05 level ($H = .901, p > .05$).

Discussion

The current trend in filmic advertising is to include information about the production process in the trailer. That information may be the name of the director, screenwriter, producer,

actor, previous films in their rosters, or any accolades these individuals have received for previous works, or even praise for the film being advertised. The results of this study show that this trend is not just egocentric boasting- it serves a definitive persuasive purpose which furthers the success of the feature-length film.

This research sought first to answer the question of how directors, screenwriters and other individuals involved in the production process affect viewers' attitudes towards film trailers. This result showed no statistical significance in all groups, and thus it can be concluded that the viewing audience does not necessarily believe this information will affect how they feel about this trailer. This might be because certain directors and screenwriters may not *always* produce work the individual enjoys. For example, Steven Spielberg consistently produces massively popular films that quickly become household classics. However, Spielberg is also responsible for directing *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skulls*, widely considered to be a filmic flop. With this information in mind, viewer's might be weary of *Jurassic World* (currently being directed by Spielberg) despite the success of the original *Jurassic Park* film. The results likely reflect this sort of attitude- this director tends to produce quality content, but it's not the *only* criteria for determining whether or not a trailer or a film might be quality entertainment.

The final question this study questioned whether or not this information would affect predicted consumption behaviors, regardless of attitude. This result did show statistical significance for the groups that viewed *In the Heart of the Sea* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* at the .01 and .05 levels respectively. Both control groups (pretest-posttest and posttest-only) rated themselves more likely to view these films based on the trailers than either manipulation group (pretest-posttest and posttest-only).

Effectively, the control groups- which viewed directorial information and previous works organically, as they would in a television or YouTube commercial, for example- rated themselves as more likely to view these films than the manipulation groups, who viewed these trailers with that information edited out. This information somewhat contradicts the earlier findings, but does provide evidence for the argument that the *ethos* of production staff exerts some influence over the consumption behaviors of the viewers, regardless of attitudes.

These results pose some interesting implications for the future use and study of visual rhetoric.

Limitations

The research used a convenient sample. Because the convenient sample was done at SUU in Cedar City, Utah, the majority of the participants consisted of predominantly LDS young adults (mean age of 22). The research showed that the only movie that did not have significance was rated R. This could be because of the LDS participants. A portion of the participants were recruited from the SUU library. The participants were offered no monetary compensation. Because of that, the participants might not feel compelled to answer completely and accurately. Another limitation of the research was that two of the three movie trailers were from the same genre. Future research should consist of a movie trailer from different genres.

Future research

This research has been able to make first steps in finding the correlation of ethos in movie trailers and viewers intent to consume the film. The study overall showed the important connection of having visual rhetoric with the combination of credibility-building elements. After this research, it is more apparent how audiences are persuaded to view a movie; credibility in the movie trailer.

In conclusion the findings show that the participants were indeed influenced by the ethos of the directors and creators. The research was able to show that the ethos in a movie trailer increases the viewer's intent to see the movie, based on the results of the post-test in the controlled groups. Three movie trailers were used; two of the three movie trailers, *In the Heart of the Sea*, and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* are both rated PG-13 and are both considered action/adventure/drama. The third movie trailer, *Crimson Peak* is rated R and is considered a horror film. *Crimson Peak* was the only movie trailer that did not show significant results. Future research should look at whether having the research done in a primarily religious community may have affected the results of whether or not they would watch *Crimson Peak* based on the fact it was Rated R. Also, it is not clear on whether or not the genre, horror, had an impact on whether or not the participants would watch *Crimson Peak*. It might be suggested that any future research use a random selection of participants as well as a wider demographic, specifically age groups. Another element to look at is whether or not the genre and age have any connection, and if that overrides the ethos in the movie trailer.

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Appendix A

Crimson Peak Official Teaser Trailer #1 [Electronic source.] Del Toro, G. (Director). (2015). Los Angeles: Universal Studios. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zBlG8Lv01k>

Appendix B

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. Official Trailer #1 [Electronic source.] Ritchie, G. (Director). (2015).

Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K4Iv_N9Nno

Appendix C

In the Heart of the Sea. Official Trailer #1 [Electronic source.] Howard, R. (Director). (2015). Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs-JfPjgiA4>

Appendix D

Crimson Peak Trailer- Edited for Science [Electronic source.] Del Toro, G. (Director). (2015).

LosAngeles: Universal Studios. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz89NRHAKqs>

Appendix E

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. Trailer- Edited for Science [Electronic source.] Ritchie, G. (Director). (2015).

Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures. Retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbdM2BqSwwM>

Appendix F

In the Heart of the Sea Trailer- Edited for Science [Electronic source.] Howard, R. (Director). (2015). Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs-JfPjgiA4>

Appendix G

**Do You Like Watching Movies?
Do You Want to Earn Extra Credit?
Be Part of Exciting Research!**

Date & Time
Room
For more info text:
Hayden
(503)779-8457
haydencoombs@suuemail.net

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Appendix H

Recruitment Script

We are here today to recruit participants for a research study into attitudes towards new film trailers and motivations to view new movies. This study should take no longer than 20 minutes of your time. Your participation would involve viewing newly released film trailers and filling out (a) short questionnaire(s) based on what you have been shown.

There are no monetary incentives offered for participation in this research study, however, your instructor may offer extra credit for your time. You should discuss with your instructor whether or not this is an option.

If you wish to participate, we have flyers with our information on them. You can also reach me by e-mail at michelle.e.carr@hotmail.com, or text/call me at (310) 293-7890 if you have any questions regarding this experiment or if you would like to sign up for a time slot to participate.

Appendix G

Movie Trailers

Comm 6030, Spring 2015

This study involves viewing movie trailers and answer questions about your preferences in movies. The pre-test questionnaire seeks information that we will use for statistical purposes only. It is anonymous and confidential. No effort will be made to identify you from your answers. Participation is voluntary; you may skip any question or discontinue at any time without penalty. Participation in this study constitutes informed consent.

We will begin by asking for demographic information. These eight questions inquire about your age, gender, ethnicity, religion, student status, and marital status. They also inquire about the frequency with which you consume movies and your preferred genre. You may skip any question you do not want to answer. This information is gathered for statistical purposes only, and no attempt will be made to identify you.

ID No.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your gender? Male (1) Female (2)
3. Which of the following categories best describes your ethnicity?

<input type="checkbox"/> Asian (1)	<input type="checkbox"/> Black (2)	<input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian (3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic (4)
<input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander (5)	<input type="checkbox"/> Native American (6)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (7)	(Please specify) _____
4. What is your religion?

<input type="checkbox"/> Agnostic (1)	<input type="checkbox"/> Athiest (2)	<input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist (3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Catholic (4)
<input type="checkbox"/> Hindu (5)	<input type="checkbox"/> LDS (6)	<input type="checkbox"/> Muslim (7)	<input type="checkbox"/> Protestant (8)
<input type="checkbox"/> None (9)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (10) (Please specify) _____		
5. What is your student status?

<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time undergraduate (1)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part-time undergraduate (2)
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate (3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Not currently enrolled (4)
6. What is your relationship status?

<input type="checkbox"/> Single (1)	<input type="checkbox"/> Married (2)	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced (3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Widowed (4)
<input type="checkbox"/> In a relationship (5)			
7. How many movies do you watch each week? _____
8. Which film genre do you prefer *most*?

<input type="checkbox"/> Action/Adventure (1)	<input type="checkbox"/> Biographical/Documentary (2)
<input type="checkbox"/> Comedy (3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Crime (4)
<input type="checkbox"/> Drama (5)	<input type="checkbox"/> Family (6)
<input type="checkbox"/> Horror (7)	<input type="checkbox"/> Mystery (8)
<input type="checkbox"/> Romance (9)	<input type="checkbox"/> SciFi (10)
<input type="checkbox"/> Thriller (11)	<input type="checkbox"/> Western (12)
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (13) (Please specify) _____	

Appendix I

Movie Trailers

Comm 6030, Spring 2015

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