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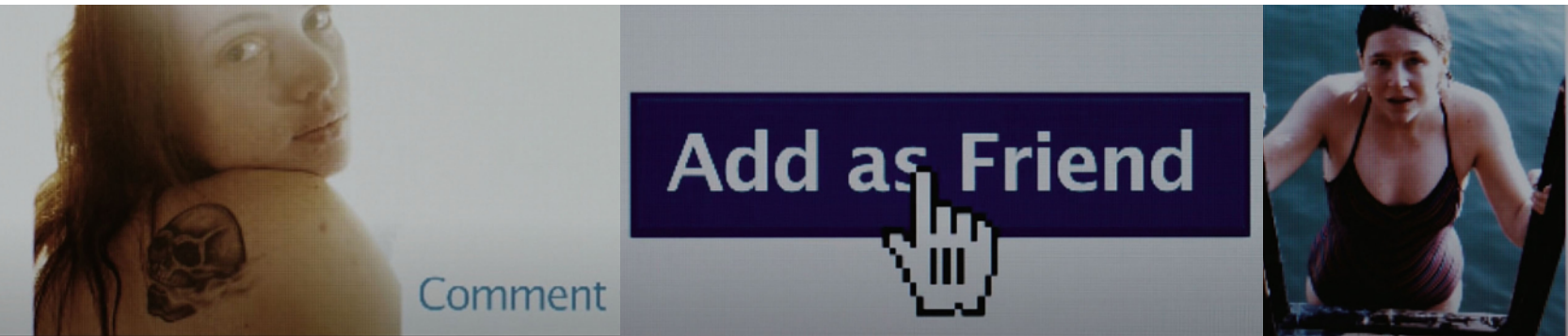
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THE TEASER

WRITTEN BY RALPH JONES

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TRAILERS ARE THE FILM INDUSTRY IN A MICROCOSM. THEY'RE EAGERLY ANTICIPATED, WATCHED MORE THAN MOST FILMS, AND CAN BE MASTERCLASSES IN EDITING, SUSPENSE AND HUMOUR. BUT DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S INVOLVED IN SELLING A FILM IN JUST A FEW MINUTES? TOTAL FILM SPEAKS TO SOME OF THE INDUSTRY'S KEY EDITORS TO FIND OUT.

More people will watch the trailer for a film than will ever see the film itself. While many trailers wash over you, fading away along with the title of the film, the very best burrow into your mind. If they've done their job well enough, they convince you to part with your hard-earned money. For this reason, trailers aren't just a crucial cog in the Hollywood machine, they're a lucrative art form. And, in the fight to win your eyeballs, they're more important than ever.

"It's a small industry and it's rather incestuous," says Lyle Goodale, an editor who will soon start working for Trailer Park, a huge trailer house in LA. As a teenager in Australia, Goodale started by making fan trailers for shows such as *The Sopranos* and *The X-Files*. He posted these polished pieces on forums for the channels in question. "HBO tracked me down and they were like, 'Who are you? Should we be hiring you or suing you?'" Fox also sent him

cease-and-desist letters. He was clearly doing something right. He has now edited trailers for films including *Drive* and *The King's Speech*, and TV shows such as *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Being a good trailer editor is like being a good dancer. You need to have a fantastic sense of rhythm. Eighty per cent of what an editor does, says Goodale, is to do with music. Again and again the trailer editors interviewed for this piece stress that sound is more important than anything else. "Nothing other than music has the ability to communicate a tone, a rhythm, a pace, in three or four seconds," says Ric Thomas, an editor at Buddha Jones, another major trailer house. Get the music right and a good deal of the battle is won.

In 2010, the trailer for *The Social Network* proved that theory right, kickstarting one particularly noticeable trend. The trailer for the David Fincher film begins with a distinctive cover of the Radiohead song 'Creep' – distinctive because it is sung in a floaty, choral style, making the song

more creepy than it was originally. This twisted the familiar, says Thomas, and for more than half a decade trailer editors reached for this technique because they knew it worked. Like every trend, audiences loved it for a while, but it is now considered passé.

HONKING SUCCESS

Another 2010 film used a sonic motif that would go on to become ubiquitous in the industry. Although Christopher Nolan's *Inception* wasn't necessarily the first to use the technique – previous examples include *Transformers* (2007) and *District 9* (2009) – after the trailer came out, its impact was staggering. The effect is known as 'braaams': a prolonged, bassy, foghorn-esque honk that conveys scale and impending doom. It immediately inspired copycats. "It was just insane," says Paul Cartlich, another Buddha Jones editor. "Everyone was trying to emulate that, and every music library was trying to push their 'braaam' albums on you."
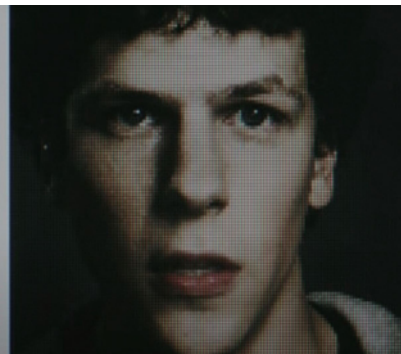
In the old days, explains Cartlich, trailer houses would simply use the score from other films in their trailers.

When he was at a company called Empire Design, he remembers the trailer for the 2004 film *House Of Flying Daggers* being cut to the music from *Gladiator*. "Now that kind of idea is insane," he says. The industry cottoned onto this opening and music libraries began making music specifically designed for the beats of a trailer. Goodale says that there are now more people composing music for trailers than there are people editing trailers.

A trailer house usually has around two weeks to complete the job – though deadlines are shrinking all the time, according to editors. The company will often be competing with a few other trailer houses for the 'finish' – the only version of the trailer that the public will ever see. (As Thomas points out, "Ninety-five per cent of the work that we do doesn't get made [*for release*].") Studios with the money to audition like this will do so because it guarantees them the best possible product. The process varies, but they will usually be sending the trailer house the dailies from the film – and perhaps a script –

but nothing more cohesive. As Cartlich puts it, "Sometimes we're working on a trailer before the film exists." Receiving the footage, an assistant editor is often assembling the trailer at the same time as the editor for the actual film.

In the rush to release a trailer, the VFX often look dodgy because they are not the VFX that will be used in the finished film; scenes are often included which are later cut from the film. Directors have varying degrees of influence. Keenan Kelly, a trailer editor at GrandSon, says Christopher Nolan has an almost unparalleled level of control: "He bends the rules to his will." Nolan will provide much less footage to use, and will say, for example, that his shots cannot be reversed. Michael Ferman, another

'HBO TRACKED ME DOWN AND THEY WERE LIKE, "WHO ARE YOU? SHOULD WE BE HIRING YOU OR SUING YOU?"'
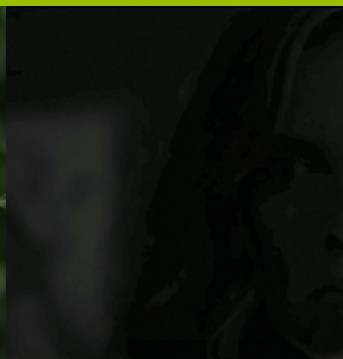**LYLE GOODALE**

Buddha Jones editor, says that the steep rise in competition has caused studios and streamers to want to keep their filmmakers happy for fear that they might take their business elsewhere.

Once a trailer has been made, audience testing can shape its trajectory. Here, audiences are asked to comment on the trailer and its salient moments. Editors have mixed feelings about the value of testing. "I think it can be flawed sometimes," says Phil Daccord, who edited the trailer for *The Matrix* and is creative director at Ignition. "I always feel it's a slippery slope if you're just giving people what they want." Thomas says that the result of testing will tend to be that more story, more information, is included. (And then people complain the trailer was so exhaustive that they don't need to see the film – a gripe that is more likely if the film "may not do too well", says Cartlich.)

Editors agree it is a lot easier to turn a good film into a good trailer. When Daccord and his team saw *The Matrix*, they cleared their schedule to cut ⟫➔

WARNER BROS, COLUMBIA

TRAILER BREAKDOWN

Tommy Malatesta dives into his work on horror classic *Hereditary*.

1. OPENING SHOT

The thinking behind that is wanting to grab the attention of the audience as fast as possible. You can't look away; the camera's forcing your eye to the man walking in. And it helps to further the narrative of the grief that the family's dealing with.

2. MUSIC

The main cue gets going right when Toni Collette starts speaking. It's really just a pulse. The turn is the cutting-off of the bird's head: boom, the needle moves more dark. We break into a little sound design and quiet section. You want to change gears; we need to get to complete dread.

3. CUTTING

It starts slower and then gets faster, basically. I match cut Toni Collette's face quite a bit: her face will be on the centre of the screen and in the next cut her face is also there but she's in a different location. It's a little style that can keep you interested.

4. MONEY SHOT

In the scene where the boy smashes his nose, there's a shot where a classmate looks at him and he's terrified. That guy tells you what you're supposed to be feeling, and he is completely shaken up. Without the shot there was no dread.

5. CLOSING SHOT

Toni Collette looking at camera is, I think, pretty gripping. It's just very arresting. Whenever I have a chance to do something like that, I try to. It includes the viewer in an unsettling way. This is intimate; in my opinion it's more confident. **RALPH JONES**

the trailer. "With a movie like that, all you can do is mess it up," he says. Daccord knew that trying to explain the concept of the Matrix was going to get too complicated. "We wanted to keep a strong sense of mystery," he says – hence the line, taken from the film, "You can't be told what the Matrix is; you have to see it for yourself."

CUT TO THE CHASE

Having great visuals is 50 per cent of the battle, says Tommy Malatesta, an editor at AV Squad. For the film studio A24, Malatesta has carved out a niche making memorable trailers for memorable films: *The Witch*; *Hereditary*; *Midsommar*. A24 follows testing results less strictly than the big studios, Malatesta says. They value "style and vibe" over positive audience scores. All the same, for the *Midsommar* trailer Malatesta knew that including gore would test badly and put off the vast majority of the audience. "The imagination is way better than anything you can see on screen," he says.

For the majority of trailer editors, the 'theatrical' trailer – the two-and-a-half-minute cut designed to be shown in cinemas – remains the holy grail. But there are now numerous other platforms and types of trailer, some of them less popular in the industry. "Fucking TikTok," says Goodale. "I'm not interested in it, period." Making

trailers for social media is a different game with slightly different rules. Your audience isn't sitting in a cinema, so how do you stop them scrolling past your trailer?

Our attention spans aren't necessarily changing in the way we might think, says Ferman. At Buddha Jones, they are constantly looking at studies about how people's attention works. It is true that the first couple of seconds are essential; these are the moments in which you should present something the audience will find interesting. In the old days, says Ferman, they may have begun with a beautiful landscape shot. This might work in a cinema, but not online. "We don't do that any more – because people don't pay attention to it. They've seen everything." For an online trailer they might start with a bumper – five seconds of the biggest shots – but once the trailer begins, it is faces and, perhaps surprisingly, extended sequences ('hook-and-holds') that people want to see. The audience want to "live and breathe in a scene".

For an industry predicated almost entirely on sound, the digital native poses a dilemma: they may not be watching the trailer with sound on. Dialogue has to be converted to subtitles, and the visuals become all the more important; if your film
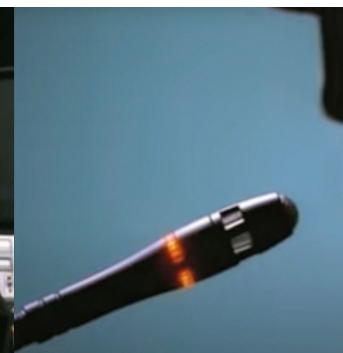
features The Rock, he should appear immediately. "The thing that I always prefer about theatrical is you have the luxury of subtlety," says Daccord. "Whereas the digital, it really just has to hit you over the head with a wet noodle as quickly as possible." Juggling these multiple sensibilities is why Kelly compares trailer editors to the one-man-band street performer: singing, playing a harmonica, tapping a drum, and strumming a guitar at the same time. "Your music has to work with your story and your tone; your visuals need to be paying off your dialogue; but your visuals also need to be strong enough on their own so that if someone's watching it they can digest easily what's happening."

On younger-skewing platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat – 32.5 per cent of TikTok's users are between 10 and 19; on Snapchat, 37 per cent are between 18 and 24 – people don't particularly like to be advertised to. "They would much prefer something irreverent or inclusive," says Thomas. This, he thinks, means that trailers are likely

'THE THING THAT I ALWAYS PREFER ABOUT THEATRICAL IS YOU HAVE THE LUXURY OF SUBTLETY'
PHIL DACCORD

only to become more self-referential – a technique that is arguably relatively old-fashioned, with trailers such as Jerry Seinfeld's *Comedian* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* drawing attention to themselves as advertising products.

Some self-conscious techniques have come and gone – the 'rug-pull' technique that would lead an audience to think they were watching a trailer for *Batman* when in fact they were watching a trailer for *Scooby-Doo*; the deep narrative voice of Don LaFontaine ('Thunder Throat'). Up until perhaps the early 2000s, audiences seemed to like seeing trailers that explained the film to them. No longer. "I think people felt like they were being sold to," says Ferman. "You don't even see it in TV shows any more." And, significantly, the biggest films in the cinema became ones such as *Harry Potter* and *Iron Man*, in which audiences already understood who the characters were and what they wanted.

Today, trailers are an industry in and of themselves – dissected, analysed for clues, watched over and over. Goodale calls them "the only genre of advertising that people actually seek out". In an increasingly crowded marketplace, a good trailer editor is more valuable than ever before. For blockbusters, this is especially true. Millions of dollars can be spent preparing VFX for a trailer; a 30-second

trailer at the Super Bowl can cost $6.5m. "You've got a quarter-of-a-billion-dollar product," says Ferman. "You're not exactly sure how to sell it, and you only get one shot. It's extremely high-pressure."

Daccord says, however, that the premium on editors' skills is not necessarily reflected in their pay. "It's not some financial walk in the park where we're all rolling in it," he says. "It has become big business, but what people don't realise is this is also one of the few businesses where we're getting paid less and less every year to do more and more." Though Goodale talks about the job being lucrative, he also says that a trailer house can lose money working on a trailer because the budget doesn't cover the several editors required. But the company can then make significantly more money once they are on the campaign, doing lots of work over a longer period of time. "It's always competitive, but I'm like, 'Well, better men fought world wars.'"

Now is the time of the trailer editor. As Thomas says, "In a way, the world is switching to short-form video content, but we've been doing short-form video content for years." In a world that is drowning in content, there will be one group of people dictating your calendar, altering the course of your year, turning these shows and films into irresistible packages. It will be trailer editors.

comedian