Spoof trailers, hyperlinked spectators & the web

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Abstract
Spoof trailers are trailers for a non-existent film that typically has a parodic tone, changing the genre of the source film or films. They may combine materials from different films in the form of mash-ups or re-order scenes or shots of a single film, altering the original title cards and voiceover narration. They may also incorporate images and sound bites from popular media artefacts. Spoof trailers have also become one of the key manners through which Internet users inscribe their creativity on the Web, defy copyright laws and re-contextualize previously existing cultural material to challenge the distinction between producers and consumers. I seek to analyse what are the aesthetic characteristics of spoof trailers, the viewing environments in which they exist and the dominant logics at work within the Internet to account for this emerging, Web-specific, form of film culture.

Keywords
Brokeback, derivative attractions, hyperlink, Internet, poly-networked users, spoof trailer

Spoof trailers & participatory culture: A new form of film production and consumption
A ‘spoof trailer’ is a trailer for a non-existent film that has a parodic tone, changing the generic register of the source film or films. It may combine materials from different films in the form of mash-ups or re-order scenes or shots of a single film, altering the original title cards and voiceover narration. It may also incorporate images and sound bites from popular media artefacts.

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Spoof trailers re-define the role of movie fan as an editing pasticheur who cuts and pastes diverse clips together to create a final product that, while inherently derivative, it also opens up new signifying and stylistic paths. In addition, spoof trailers are not simply representational practices but also ‘communicative, dialogic events that can provide the basis for community formation’ (Strangelove, 2010: 185). They exist, consequently, as nodal points in a chain of co-existing media artefacts that Internet users access at various points, creating, in turn, their own relational networks to feed back to the mass media with new objects (Jenkins, 2006: 257).

The creation and viewing of spoof trailers has contributed to the re-articulation of the producer/consumer relationship. For, spoof trailer makers materially intervene in the original media artefact and effectively re-contextualize the cinematic into a series of online social networking practices. Within this scenario, Internet producers and consumers of spoof trailers participate in ephemeral Internet hypes, trending topics and buzzes. This ephemerality is directly related to the very functioning of the Internet in as much as content comes to the fore of online traffic and subsequently, after a certain time, ends up sitting in the backend of search engines, blogs and video portals.

Spoof trailers are thus the result of the capabilities of the legions of participatory culture to create their own contents and ‘multiply’ them in a variety of sites (McCracken, 2005). At the same time, Internet users themselves become part of the ‘viral marketing equation’ of media companies, contributing through their online practices to the dissemination of the advertised artefact ad infinitum.

On 27 November 2012, the spoof trailer ‘Brokeback to the Future’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uwulrv8jY) has been viewed 6,465,646 times on YouTube since it was posted on 1 February 2006; 4,186,256 people have watched Robert Ryang’s spoof of The Shining ‘Shining’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfout_rgPSA); the fake sequel of Titanic ‘Titanic: Two the Surface’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vD4OnHCRd_4) has been viewed a whopping 12,493,334 times. As Tom Gunning has argued, every shift in the history of the cinematic medium ‘implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way’ (1990: 61). The spoof phenomenon, through video distribution portals like YouTube or Vimeo and a variety of networking sites, has become one of the primary manners through which Internet users inscribe their own creativity on the Web, defy copyright laws and re-contextualize audiovisual content to challenge the distinction between those who produce and those who consume culture.

The hyperlinked functioning of the Internet has trained spectators in chains of relational audiovisual consumption. Understood in these terms, the success of spoof trailers in engaging the spectator in an aesthetic of appropriation works in partnership with their contiguity with similar contents that exist only a click away. Sites like YouTube or Vimeo present a set of choices to users once they have finished watching a particular clip, encouraging them to keep watching. Consequently, the media artefact is conceived within a chain of cultural objects that is potentially never-ending. This fact fundamentally alters the interface viewer/artefact in as much as it often fosters a chain of short viewing experiences that are inherently relational, pointing to a multifarious variety of aesthetic choices and ideological meanings.

In her pioneering analysis of TV, Ien Ang conceptualized television audiences as ‘active meaning producers’ (1996: 9). Now, many Internet users have turned into amateur
video makers who do only record their original materials and post them online, but also re-contextualize pre-existing images and sounds by combining them in unexpected ways. I focus on the modes in which Internet users have appropriated the film trailer format in the shape of spoof trailers to account for new forms of cinematic production and spectatorship in the digital age. I seek to analyse what are the aesthetic characteristics of spoof trailers, the viewing environments in which they exist and the dominant logics at work within the Internet cinematic field to account for this emerging, Web-specific, form of film culture.

Moreover, in the last 20 years, because of the increasing access to cultural artefacts, films have turned increasingly towards the performative and self-conscious interplay with other films (Altman, 1999a: 189–190, 1999b) and, more extensively, with a variety of popular culture objects. I seek to analyse how Internet-based forms of production and consumption have reshaped and recontextualized the cinematic. I claim that the spoof trailer phenomenon is part of a broader popular culture trend structured through the relational character of popular media and its mutation into a variety of intertexts that function in direct contiguity with other artefacts from diverse origins. In different terms, in the digital environment, the cinematic is in direct contact with a variety of audiovisual materials – TV, music videos, homemade videos, video games, etc. – metamorphosing thus into a series of audiovisual texts that circulate in diverse environments through multifarious forms of social networking, which, in turn, play ‘a key role in helping users store and distribute [. . .] content’ (UNESCO, 2011). Consequently, film culture functions within a larger framework that subordinates the cinematic to digitally native forms of cultural action articulated through a variety of social networks. Within this scenario, spectators/users create relational chains of media consumption that are for the most part unique and unpredictable. They are thus the ultimate practitioners of a ‘contingent’ form of spectatorship and online navigation – that is, a series of actions that go through different web sites following multiple hyperlinks in a non-predetermined fashion – that structures the contemporary field of cultural production and consumption.

First, I discuss early forms of trailer consumption and production on the Internet and the growth of online trailer video making and viewing. I scrutinize the relationship between amateur production and corporate media and the ways in which this interaction is changing the digital landscape in terms of film culture. Second, I analyse the rise of spoof trailer making and viewing, delineating their aesthetic characteristics and primary modes of spectatorship through the case studies of ‘Shining’ and ‘Brokeback’. Third, I study a later stage of spoof trailer-making: the shooting of original materials as opposed to the appropriation of pre-existing audiovisual excerpts and its relationship with how social networking repositions the cinematic within a wider popular culture context. Finally, taking Tom Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’ (1990) as a point of departure, I propose the concepts of ‘cinema of derivative attractions’ and ‘poly-networked’ users to account for the contemporary practices of spoof trailer making and viewing.

Strategic ‘spoof’ alliances: The amateur/industry interface

_Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon_ (Ang Lee, 1999) was the highest grossing non-English language film of all time. The U.S. official _Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon_ site (http://www.sonymictures.com/cthv/crouchingtiger/feedback.htm) is a sophisticated audiovisual spectacle
that lives up to state-of-the-art production values that garnered the film global notoriety as a technological and artistic breakthrough in the martial arts genre. The site provides a variety of ‘behind the scenes’ footage and also offers an assortment of products ranging from wallpapers to e-cards. It is thus not simply an add-on to the film but a central part of the ‘event’ the distributors and producers aimed to create when the film was released in its successive market windows. For, from the early age of cinema, the industry attempted to sell not necessarily a product but rather ‘the experience of an entire show that had to be sold: a show that eventually would feature one special film that would run for only a certain period of time’ (Staiger, 1990: 6). In the digital age, cultural objects proliferate on the Web through a variety of audiovisual formats that Internet audiences watch and distribute on video portals, listservs, social networks, chat rooms and blogs. In terms of the trailer, the Crouching Tiger; Hidden Dragon site showcases both the international and the U.S. trailers, and earlier versions of both. It goes a step further: fans can create their own Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon trailer. If one follows the instructions, a simplified timeline appears.

To start, users can choose one of three clips, all of which include the movie title. Then, users can select from a range of 23 clips and stills. At any time, they can preview their work and shift the order of clips through a series of simple steps. When the image track is finished, the site prompts users to choose one out of three audio tracks. After the audio has been added, users can preview the trailer once again, or as a final step, add their name to it. Once this is done, a final screen with the name of the trailer maker and the title of the film appears, ‘A trailer edited by user’s name,’ on top of ‘An Ang Lee Film, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. www.crouchingtiger.com.’; Once users finish their trailer, they can e-mail it to their friends. In fact, users can preview their trailer at any step of the process. When doing so, two screens, invisible before to the user, appear: the first one features the standard rating screen ‘The following preview has been approved for all audiences by the motion picture association of America’; the second is the Columbia Pictures logo. The inclusion of these two title cards intensifies the illusion that users are generating an official trailer. At the same, it reminds users that even though they have created their own, personal, version of the Crouching Tiger; Hidden Dragon trailer, this process has occurred according to the rules established by a privately owned multinational corporation – Columbia – that holds the copyright of all the images and sound bites. It also brings to the fore the fact that the 23 clips users can choose from to make their trailers have been pre-selected by Columbia and that, given that users can e-mail their final work to other people, this selection of clips is ultimately aimed at promoting the consumption of the film in its existing formats – namely, DVD and Internet download.

The recipients of the trailer makers’ work will appreciate it due to the fact that they are aware of the generic conventions that characterize trailers. For, even though trailers are not necessarily a film genre but a format intended to advertise the whole they stand for, they invariably feed off historical archives of recognizable generic conventions (Kernan, 2004: 32). Moreover, the fact that, by 1999, Columbia offered the option of creating a trailer for users interested in checking out information about Crouching Tiger; Hidden Dragon not only implies that the studio expected a significant proportion of fans to have a great deal of interest in the film, given its global success and the growing
importance of viral marketing at this historical juncture, but also the fact that any movie fan was able to recognize trailer conventions (Rodríguez Ortega, 2007: 91–92).

A few years after the creation of the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* site, the recognizibility of trailer conventions along with the increasing literacy in the management and manipulation of audio and visual files through diverse software programs has catapulted the making and viewing of spoof trailers into becoming a widespread practice on the Internet. Certainly, the conventions of the trailer format are well known and, because of that, it is particularly fitting for the intervention of spoof creators since online audiences can easily identify both these formulae and the parodic operations at work within specific spoofs (Tryon, 2009: 257). Moreover, to a great extent, spoof trailers are the ideal genre for digital cinema since they are ‘short, pithy, reflecting the amateur filmmaker’s self-conscious relationship to commercial media’ (Jenkins, 2003: 295). In addition, one of the driving forces behind the current popularity of spoof trailers is the fact that they are also self-contained forms of entertainment that satisfy Internet viewers regardless of the users’ previous knowledge of the text or texts they spoof. In other words, detached from the original whole they once belonged to, they circulate as stand-alone artefacts, that, while initially derivative, may acquire full signification beyond the semantic and aesthetic characteristics of the text(s) they originated from by establishing a new set of relations with artefacts that co-exist with them online. Even though, as Jonathan Gray claims, fan-created paratexts, such as spoof trailers, function as ‘highlighters’ and ‘underliners’, weaving specific routes through a text and directing consumers in a variety of ways (Gray, 2010: 154), for many fans of spoof trailers, there may be no other, original, text, or this original may have little relevance. Instead, the spoof trailer itself is their object of interest as inserted within a relational framework that attaches it more directly to other spoof trailers based on a similar concept than to the original film or films it stems from. In such media contexts, paratexts, such as the spoof trailer, become the text itself (Gray, 2010: 79).

Spoof trailers have also become viral marketing tools through which film companies disseminate their products in various shapes and formats. Viral products propagate in a variety of Internet media contexts as users navigate from site to site, addressing consumers from multiple locations by taking advantage of the architectural logic of the hyperlink. Spoof trailers, like other short formats of promotional video, are ideally suited for online marketing strategies of economically driven corporations since they only require short attention spans from the potential consumers (and buyers) as these engage in navigation practices. In 2008, Lionsgate created mash-up contests for the martial-arts film *Forbidden Kingdom* and Oliver Stone’s *W* (Puente, 2010). This company continued to commit to this marketing strategy encouraging fans to produce mash-ups of their favorite *Saw* moments during the months prior to the release of *Saw V*. The promotional video for the fan-based films starts with Jigsaw addressing the audience. ‘You are watching me on YouTube. You thought the game was over but it’s only just begun.’ He then encourages users to visit the *Saw V* YouTube channel to find out more information about ‘the best movies’, clips of the new instalment of the franchise and fans’ mash-up films. The second part of the video concentrates on the upcoming release of the new *Saw* film. The video predictably utilizes the noisy CCTV footage that has come to epitomize Jigsaw’s imprint, respecting subsequently the basic generic motions of a horror movie trailer, and
the \textit{Saw} franchise more specifically, by offering a string of visual and aural thrills aimed at shocking the spectator. On the one hand, this video adheres to the aesthetic and narrative fabric of the trailer format, and, on the other, self-consciousness addresses the users/spectators capacity to both understand such stylistic features and mimic them. In other words, Lionsgate banks on the idea that users are also potentially producers of cultural artefacts or, in other terms, ‘marketing tools’ that able to disseminate \textit{Saw V} through multiple market windows.

The studios’ utilization of fan-made videos points to the fact that today Internet users are a key component of the marketing equation of media companies. Moreover, amateur production is not always a means to turn upside the existing hierarchies at work in the contemporary mediascape and democratize the cultural field. Even though some fans may appropriate the techniques, methods and aesthetics of a mainstream product to subvert it (Phillips, 2012), user-generated content often imitates or re-uses the representation templates set up by the entertainment industry and, consequently, is not necessarily progressive or groundbreaking but, often, quite the opposite. In other terms, the shift from the mass consumption of commercial media to the mass production of culture does not only guarantee the creation of a more diverse mediascape, but also the consolidation of a limited roster of representational models (Manovich, 2008: 46). And yet, although often movie fans and amateur video makers are ‘a crucial, but normative, part of the circuit of exchange between producing and consuming cultures’ (Klinger, 2006: 13), it is also necessary to emphasize that there is room for the subversive. In fact, participatory culture does not have to destroy hegemonic modes of representation or production to achieve its goals. Instead, it may just write over them, expanding and altering their impact by re-circulating and re-channelling them (Jenkins, 2006: 38). As a result of this, corporate strategies involving the direct input from Internet users sometimes yield less than ideal results for the very companies that launched them, catalyzing, instead, a series of unexpected user-generated interventions. In 2006, Chevrolet sponsored a contest to create TV ads for their Tahoe SUV. Although most users turned in ads that conformed to the campaign’s goals, some of them attacked Chevrolet on the basis of its links to the Iraq war and its problematic policies in relation to global warming and pollution. Negative ads piled up on the Chevy web site and spilled all over Internet. However, despite the negative publicity Chevrolet had unintentionally triggered, the Tahoe purchases ultimately peaked (Rose, 2011: 239). As this example demonstrates, corporate marketing departments have come to the realization that they must accept the risk of encouraging user-generated advertising campaigns. Since people do have the tools to create their own videos and globally deliver their own personal messages, negative publicity may often be an unavoidable part of the equation. Remarkably, most of these same companies are increasingly responsive to input from their consumers. In doing so, they facilitate the birth of networks of exchange beyond the own reach, ‘extending the influence that fans exert over the media they love, and fans as creating a context in which more people create an circulate media that more perfectly reflects their own world views’ (Jenkins, 2007: 362).

The Internet is thus a changing ecosystem, where new actors with the capacity to produce media objects are both making alliances and colliding with media companies that have incorporated such contents within the online ‘narratives’ they design to advertise
their products. It is, consequently, a space where a set of dynamic relations between market and non-market, social and economic and cultural activity constantly occurs (Burgess and Green, 2009: 90).

Spoofs raid the web: From ‘Shining’ to the ‘Brokeback’ movies

In October 2005, a homemade trailer became an online worldwide event. Robert Ryang entered a contest for assistant editors sponsored by the New York chapter of the Association of Independent Creative Editors. The challenge was to take any film and cut a new trailer but in an entirely different genre, modifying only the audio tracks. Ryang transformed Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), into a romantic comedy titled ‘Shining.’ A friend of Ryang’s posted a link of the spoof’s location on his blog. The site was immediately flooded with requests. Internet users then posted Ryang’s video on a variety of video portals and social networks. Soon after, *The New York Times* published an article on Ryang’s instantaneous rise to fame. All of a sudden, online word-of-mouth had catapulted Ryang to global recognition; industry talent hunters knocked at his door.

Sending emails with links to Ryang’s spoof and posting his video on blogs and social sites, Internet users created a network of exchange centered on ‘Shining’ that did not comply with hierarchical structures of media distribution. Instead, they capitalized on the hyperlinkable nature of Internet content to build a community of fans. In many ways, even though it was not the first spoof trailer, ‘Shining’ opened the door for the rise of the spoof phenomenon as a form of media consumption and amateur production that has grown steadily since its making. It also called attention to the capacity of trailers to ‘play with and radically augment a film’s genre’ (Gray, 2010: 64).

The celebration of Ryang’s artistic feat did not stem from the way in which he re-cut the original trailer for *The Shining* since very few people are likely to be familiar with the film’s trailer. Some viewers instead appreciated Ryang’s capacity to refurbish a classic horror tale into a comedy. Moreover, what truly mattered is that Ryang was able to turn upside down and mock the formulaic conventions of a well-known cinematic format — that of the trailer. In other words, Ryang banked on the audiences’ awareness of the modus operandi of the trailer format and the disjuncture between the generic register of Kubrick’s film and the spoof. Nonetheless, some Internet users who did not have a thorough knowledge *The Shining* and became first acquainted with the film through Ryang’s trailer had a diverse set of experiences upon watching it. User ‘biohalo87freak’ posted, on 23 October 2010, the following comments: ‘Wow, this looks nothing like a horror movie. I think I’ll watch it. After the movie OH MY GOD! I’M GONNA KILL THIS SON OF A BITCH.’ A couple of months later, user ‘Metroidfreak123’ posted ‘me and my kid thought this was a great scene’ misidentifying the spoof for an actual scene from the film. User ‘TheQfe’, on his behalf, added: ‘are you freakin kidding me dude? the guy tries to kill everybody. THAT’S NOT A FAMILY MOVIE!’ Other users, fully aware of the fact that ‘Shining’ is a spoof do comment upon the great editing or the shrewd generic shift Ryang has performed. Significantly, a fair amount of users do not necessarily react to ‘Shining’ having linked it to Kubrick’s film, but, conversely, they understand it as a stand-alone piece, interpreting its generic and aesthetic codes from the immediacy of
their online viewing experience – one that is not necessarily related to cinephilia but is instead a direct consequence of social networking.

Spoof trailers thus often circulate as objects detached from the film or films they recut. Online audiences may interpret them as legitimate advertisements for the original film and watch the later conditioned by the content and generic register of the spoof. Or, they may simply never watch the original and comment upon the spoof as though it were an artefact that exists on its own. The online circulation of spoof trailers is, on the one hand, altering the very experience of watching films, and, on the other, creating communities of users that navigate video portals and experience the cinematic through short-length artefacts that do not function within the realm of cinephilia.

Since the making of ‘Shining,’ spoof trailers have flourished on the Web in various ways. The most predominant ‘subgenre’ has become the trailer remix, or mash-up, in which two or more films are brought together through the mobilization of a ‘catch concept’ that seals the aesthetic and ideological gap that previously separated them. *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) has generated dozens of trailer parodies and over 43 million Google page references. However, ‘Brokeback’ spoof trailer makers do not necessarily tap on the recognized status of a well-established masterpiece within the film canon, such as in Ryang’s re-imagining of *The Shining*. The great critical success of *Brokeback Mountain*, its eight Academy Awards nominations and its remarkable box-office performance have little to do with the internal logic that structures most of the spoof trailers of the film. *Brokeback Mountain*, despite director Ang Lee’s repeated insistence that the film was a ‘universal love story’, became known, at the time of its release, as the ‘gay western’ in mainstream media and Internet networking sites and blogs (Bradshaw, 2006; Lamb, 2005). In fact, viewers and spoof trailer makers do not need to see Lee’s film to appreciate the operations at work in the different spoof trailers of the film. As Chuck Tryon observes, the Brokeback spoofs subvert the hetero-normative orientation of most Hollywood films but they, for the most part, parody *Brokeback Mountain*’s widely seen trailer ‘with its unambiguous heartfelt pleas for tolerance that did as much as anything to foment Ang Lee’s romance as the “gay cowboy” movie’ (Tryon, 2009: 163). Thus, the spoofs do not typically perform a parodic re-reading of Lee’s feature film but, instead, re-invent its trailer. In addition, their ‘gay’ re-articulations of other films do not offer critical insights on the dominant heterosexual modes of representation in mainstream cinema. Instead, they utilize an immediately comprehensible catch concept, ‘a gay western’ to draw audiences. Once the coined adjective ‘Brokeback’ has been attached to any film, it is understood that homosexuality has been assigned to a previously ‘straight’ text.

Aesthetically, the ‘Brokeback’ spoofs are visually and aurally heterogeneous. Trailer makers utilize footage from the original films, stills from the actors’ film careers, materials in diverse aspect ratios and resolutions, and original and homemade title cards. They deploy songs that are native to the original films but also others that have little to do with them. In other words, they are collages of a multiplicity of media artefacts of various origins that signal the fact that digital contents are always potentially in touch with other digitizable materials. Moreover, most spoof trailers typically function through an aesthetic of reiteration since they capitalize on the ‘catch concept’ that they illustrate time after time. These processes effectively redefine the film object not only as malleable
but also as raw material that may be isolated in excerpts or sections and re-used in a variety of contexts.

On 30 August 2007, a Google search for ‘Brokeback spoofs’ rendered 97,500 results. Two months later, on 1 October, the same search returned 200,000. A more recent search made on 12 April 2012 yielded 12,000 results. The Brokeback phenomenon is passé but it still generates a significant amount of online production and consumption. One of the first Brokeback spoofs, ‘Star Wars: The Empire Brokeback’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omB18oRsBYg), for example, utilizes the main musical theme from Ang Lee’s film and mimics the structural logic of the original theatrical trailer – namely, a series of title cards alternating with images. Most significantly, two of the key statements of the original trailer ‘It was a friendship that became a secret’ and Gyllenhaal’s confession to Ledger: ‘I wish I knew how to quit you’ are prominently figured to play out a gay romance between Luke Skywalker and Han Solo. These two statements are the structural axis of most Brokeback spoof trailers. A Brokeback parody of Fight Club (http://YouTube.com/watch?v=phcbqQu5Exk) similarly utilizes these two phrases along with the soundtrack from Lee’s film while mixing in the aesthetic fabric of Fincher’s film by inserting subliminal frames of Tyler Durden’s on two occasions. ‘Point Brokeback’ (http://YouTube.com/watch?v=BCRITsdDvhw) thrives on the already latent homoeroticism of Kathleen Bigelow’s Point Break (1991) and brings this underlying motif to the fore with the inclusion of Lee’s film soundtrack.

As the ‘Brokeback’ spoof evolved to become a growing Internet spoof trend, the explicit references to Brokeback Mountain or its trailer started to fade away. ‘The Brokeback Samurai’ (http://YouTube.com/watch?v=J6mzw6MD0so) sets up a tale of homoerotic desire between Ken Watanabe and Tom Cruise by inserting two stills that link it to Brokeback Mountain (a frame from the film and a photo of Gyllenhaal and Ledger receiving an award). Other than that, the author, ‘Makeitstop’, uses footage from The Last Samurai (Edward Zwick, 2003) in combination with an eclectic soundtrack that includes several 1970’s soul themes, a cover of ‘Fever’ and Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘The Sound of Silence’, to tell a love story between Watanabe and Cruise through the re-cutting of different scenes. The author establishes a series of visual rhymes between Cruise and Watanabe through the use of cross-fades, juxtapositions and eye-line matches that play out the sexual tension between them. A series of intertitles and text captions add a humorous commentary to the featured scenes. The spoof has a three-act narrative structure: Cruise and Watanabe meet and sexual attraction between them grows; they have sex and deal with the forbidden character of their relationship; their love lasts until Watanabe tragically dies in the battlefield. The music track unambiguously punctuates the key narrative turns of the story, creating a comedic effect. More than a trailer, ‘Brokeback Samurai’ is thus a short film where the presence of Brokeback Mountain is a mere alibi to place it within ‘Brokeback’ Internet genre. It seems as though, at the time immediately following the theatrical release of Lee’s film, the hyper-dominant status of Brokeback Mountain in relation to the representation of homoerotic desire within the spoof trailer field would have vacuumed the history of cinema of such precedents and made all previous, non-explicit, male-to-male desire, to become only visible if seen in relation to Lee’s film. It is worth noting that one of the first Brokeback trailers, ‘Brokeback to the Future’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uwuLxrv8jY ), created
by the comedy troupe ‘Chocolate Cake City’ (www.chocolatecakecity.com), did explicitly bank on the homosexuality & western combo that defines Lee’s film by re-contextualizing a series of physical and verbal exchanges between Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd from the Back to the Future franchise. In other words, throughout the course of the Brokeback Internet hype, we have witnessed its progressive detachment from the key referential text, Ang Lee’s film, and the full-throttle re-articulation of the signifier ‘Brokeback’ as a synonym for a homosexually-inflected parodic discourse within the specific rules and conventions of the spoof trailer format. Under the spell of the Brokeback phenomenon, these spoof trailers have little to do with the capacity to re-invent the contours of the trailer format. They are not either a form of critical thinking such as a great amount of fan vids, which often articulate alternative, political or subversive perspectives (Coppa, 2008; Phillips, 2012). Instead, they are, for the most part, predictable renderings of an already firmly established and easily identifiable ‘catch concept’: the parodic re-invention of a non-sexual male-to-male relationship as explicit, erotically charged homosexuality. They are thus tools to propagate the ‘Brokeback’ catch concept trend through online social forums, blogs and communities. As such, they are not fan products necessarily related to the original film per se. For,

The ideology of fandom involves both a commitment to some degree of conformity to the original program materials as well as a perceived right to evaluate the legitimacy of any use of those materials, either by textual producers or by textual consumers [. . .] Such a relationship obligates fans to preserve a certain degree of fidelity to program materials, even as they seem to rework them towards their own ends. (Jenkins, 2000: 486)

The trailer makers of most of the second wave of ‘Brokeback’ spoofs, such as ‘The Brokeback Samurai’, seem to have little knowledge or interest in re-inventing the aesthetic or ideological fabric of Brokeback Mountain. They simply ride the ‘Brokeback’ wave and play the gimmick. In other words, they are not fans from Brokeback Mountain but fans of the ‘Brokeback’ spoof trend; consequently, they are not necessarily cinephiles but technologically-savvy online social networkers who utilize the film as their alibi and raw material to deliver their imprint.

A new type of spoof trailers: From ‘The Brocial Network’ to ‘Drink’

Upon the release of the first teasers and trailers of The Social Network (David Fincher, 2010), fake trailers inundated the web overnight. In most cases, users appropriated the scene-by-scene structure and soundtrack of the original artefacts to create their own trailers about other social networks or Internet services such as Twitter, YouTube or Ebay. Inherently derivative, these spoofs banked on the audience’s knowledge of The Social Network promotional materials and the structuring principles, common practices and highlights of the spoofed web sites, such as, for example, the ‘most watched’ YouTube videos, the banality of many Tweets or the obsessive character of online shopping. These fan-made ‘trailers were concerned with demonstrating literacy in film and intimate knowledge of the official trailer, as well as knowledge of online culture and the history
of popular Web sites, and the ability to create humor’ (Williams, 2012). In addition, they built upon the growing literacy of online audiences in regard to the parodic trailer format, the very visibility of the spoofed social networks and their makers’ capacity to disseminate audiovisual artifacts in a variety of digital contexts and environments. Furthermore, some of these video makers did not re-utilize previously existing materials but shoot their own videos, imitating the original teasers and trailers of *The Social Network*.

This recent stage of the development of spoof trailer trends seems to go a step further: it is no longer necessary to take as a point of departure a concept or gimmick from a source text, such as homerothicism from *Brokeback Mountain*, and retool it into myriad contexts and textual mash-ups. Instead, video makers utilize a ‘temporarily hyped cinematic artifact’ (a film with remarkable visibility within the cultural sphere at a given time) to produce a string of parodic artefacts structured around the same conceptual axis. On 1 February 2011, the collective ‘Atomic Productions’ uploaded ‘The Brocial Network’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTgccp7I_l8g), which, in their own words is ‘a mock trailer created parodying *The Social Network* and the elite world of bros, drinking, and all-out fratastic-ness.’ The spoof imitates shot by shot the original trailer of *The Social Network*, changing the photos that appear on the prominently featured Facebook interface. They now display instances of excessive drinking and frat-boy behaviour. Likewise, the original Radiohead song, ‘Creep’, has been rewritten for the spoof by the band ‘Scala’; its lyrics similarly describe the consequences of excessive drinking. In addition, Atomic Productions re-shot the scenes featured in the original trailer of *The Social Network* with a new cast of actors. Like in the spoof trailers of other social networks made after the release of David Fincher’s film trailer, the framing, length and camera angles are almost identical to the original material. In fact, Atomic Productions also created a parodic web site, http://www.500millionbros.com/, to advertise their video that also imitates one of Columbia Pictures’ marketing artefacts, http://www.500millionfriends.com.

A few months earlier, in August 2010, Atomic Productions made ‘Inebration’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsZ1SagUPb4), a spoof of *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) structured around the same premise as ‘The Brocial Network’: the direct imitation of the structure and aesthetics of the film’s original trailer, re-contextualizing its meaning under the rubric of excessive alcohol consumption and related frat-boy behaviours. Continuing this modus operandi, Atomic Productions released a spoof of *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011) titled ‘Drink’ on January 2012 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smFn5HFMYeo) following the same formula they have deployed in their previous works. ‘Drink’, ‘The Brocial Scene’ and ‘Inebration’ perhaps represent a latter stage within the evolution of the spoof trailer phenomenon. These artefacts take as a point of departure a widespread social practice, frat-boy drinking, and re-imagine it, mobilizing a series of popular cultural artefacts, such as *Drive, The Social Network* and *Inception*, in order to appeal to audiences from a different ‘position of speech’ – one that directly capitalizes on the imbrications between the cinematic and the social. Following an in-your-face logic that announces its imitative character, these spoofs are materially original (since they are completely re-shot and do not utilize shots from the original films) and aesthetically derivative products that aim, above all, to gain visibility within already hyped-up existing networks of cultural production and consumption. They are
thus instrumentally related to the original film they imitate. In other words, the central concept around which these networks are constructed and evolve is not a particular film, or the creation of a cinematic experience per se, but the production of diverse manifestations of modes of social interaction (such as drinking) that are, in turn, codified in a variety of ways, taking as an aesthetic referent the film they spoof. Consequently, these spoofs do not attempt to re-articulate the meanings of the original artefacts in cinematic terms or subvert, in any way, their ideological fabric but simply reinvent them in their own terms for online communities that are deeply aware of the conventions of the spoof trailer.

Towards a cinema of derivative attractions? From the ‘Kleenex’ aesthetic of the recycling comedy to the spoof trailer

One of the most successful film franchises of the past 10 years, *Scary Movie*, thrives on the non-stop accumulation of cinematic and popular culture references, foregrounding, consequently, its derivative character. *Scary Movie 4* (2006), for example, blatantly rides on the cusp of the Brokeback phenomenon. The two African-American male characters of the film, Kevin Hart and Anthony Anderson, are featured in a dream sequence playing the role of two gay cowboys. This scene was an add-on, shot in the late stages of the production, which attempted to capitalize on the great notoriety ‘Brokeback’ had garnered. In fact, producer Robert Weiss affirmed that director Jerry Zucker and his team were committed to an extremely fast turnaround between the release of the spoofed films and their incorporation into the ‘story’ of *Scary Movie 4*. According to Weiss, the film spoofs ‘movies that our audience really should have just seen’ (*Scary Movie*, 2006).

The *Scary Movies* are fundamentally a non-stop compilation of gags glued together through a parodic register that subordinates storytelling coherence to the creation of a chain of quick laughs. The series is thus organized under the rubric of a quote-and-throw away ‘Kleenex’ aesthetic calculated to generate a chain of rapid detections on the spectator’s part. Consequently, *Scary Movie* not only recycles film excerpts from other films but also their audiences. Working within the long-lasting ‘skit’ logic of films such as *Airplane!*, *Top Secret*, *Kentucky Fried Movie* or the *Naked Gun* franchise, and TV shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, this type of comedic text operates within the field of popular culture through the constant recycling of established cultural items, subordinating narrative coherence to the production of a string of stimuli audiences can easily identify.

The spoof trailer makers of the ‘Brokeback’ series and Atomic Productions perform an analogous operation: ride the wave of the current online hype and foment a type of spectatorship based on the fast recognition and digestion of a series of well-known formulae. The transformation of ‘Brokeback’ into a code word for homosexuality and the almost complete disregard for its contextual signification within Ang Lee’s film facilitated its readability and its flexible appropriation to generate a widespread online phenomenon. In this sense, the ‘Brokeback’ trailers have effectively reduced the nuances of the original artefact from which they originate to the ‘gay gimmick’ they have come to signify. Aside from their different approaches to the cinematic, the
remarkable popular success of online spoof trailers and the *Scary Movie* series (along with other variants of the same formula such as *Epic Movie* or *Vampires Suck*) signals a shift in the dominant mode through which cinematic products engage consumers in the Internet-mediated contemporary age. In other words, rather than carefully weaving a narrative to foster the use of the spectators’ interpretation skills, this kind of films banks on a kinetic engagement with viewers to provoke a string of thrills, appealing to their connoisseurship of canonical films or contemporary media objects. This ‘cinema of derivative attractions’ that digital culture champions is not new; conversely, it continues a tradition of spectacular entertainment that ‘runs throughout the twentieth century (from vaudeville and “trick” films at the turn of the century, through theme park rides, music videos, CGI, IMAX, motion simulators, etc)’ (Lister and Dovey, 2003: 150). Similar to the cinematic attractions of the early silent era, spoof trailers often display their visibility, announcing their self-reflexive character through their salient visual and aural heterogeneity and obviously derivative aesthetic. Like the early Georges Méliès’ films, spoof trailers often ‘display’ a series of editing ‘tricks’ that bring together previously disparate texts, shifting the power of filmmaking into the computer skills of amateur editors that have access to the entire history of cinema through digitization.

Tom Gunning states that the cinema of attractions did not disappear with the emergence of narrative filmmaking as a normative form but ‘went mostly underground both in experimental and narrative film’ (1990: 58). Other scholars, such Linda Williams (2001), have questioned the classical Hollywood cinema model defined by Bordwell et al., convincingly claiming that these ‘excessive attractions’ have not only continued to exist within narrative cinema (in action films, the musical or the melodrama) but are, in fact, a central component of their aesthetic fabric. In my view, spoof trailers are a new mutation within this long-lasting tradition of cinematic attractions that is native to the architectural logic of the digital media environment. Individual shots function in combination with other shots from various origins creating new signifying paths, appealing to spectators as self-contained cultural objects within the dynamic of online navigation and consumption. In addition, spoof trailers operate within a technological framework, the Internet, which decentres the cinematic and positions it side by side with other forms of aural, visual or textual interaction. They are thus one of myriad manifestations through which the cinematic object propagates on the Web following new forms of transmedia cultural production, enabling online communities to proliferate and expand.

Today, the vast majority of film-to-spectator interactions happen via one of the different media formats – from pirated VCD discs to downloaded files – the digital can inhabit. Furthermore, as I hope to have demonstrated above, the hyperlinked acts of consumption that online audiences typically carry out while navigating Web portals have altered the manners through which audiovisual products address consumers. Media contents display a propensity towards the intertextual citation of other texts and the re-combination of selected sounds and images in a variety of media contexts, evolving thus toward ‘an aesthetic based on appropriation, parody, and the dialogic’ (Jenkins, 2003: 309).

Contemporary commentators are the privileged witnesses of a radical transformation of audiovisual production since nearly 70% of online content is created by individuals who do not work for, or are affiliated to, profit-driven media enterprises (Strangelove,
The interface artefact/spectator is thus evolving through the increasing computer literacy of users/digital media makers. Now users have the capacity to break down and alter a variety of audiovisual products using software applications – e.g. iMovie, Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, etc. – that handle a wide variety of image, video and audio files such as tiff, jpeg, mp3, png, mov or wav. In this sense, any piece of audiovisual information is recode-able in one of these formats, and, therefore, alterable. This alterability of audiovisual media has championed its re-placement in a combinatory universe where bits and pieces of aural and visual information are more in contact with others than in precedent eras.

Internet users are unpredictable. They may visit a dozen web sites in a few minutes or linger on one of them for hours, watching all the showcased ‘Brokeback’ spoofs. They might be patient enough to watch all of them in their entirety or just quickly browse and fast-forward through them in search for a funny catch phrase. Moreover, they may just do that or they may be simultaneously writing emails or updating their Facebook or Twitter profiles. In other words, unlike movie house spectators who are clearly mappable in terms of their volition to enter a dark room in order to watch a film for a pre-determined period of time, Internet users can potentially inhabit many different entertainment spaces at any given time and extend their acts of consumption at will. Internet users are thus a new breed of film spectator, one that marketing departments of multi-million dollar corporations can fully chart in terms of their Internet history, but never completely define in terms of their modes of interaction within the myriad possibilities of the digital medium. Internet users are often ‘prisoners’ of the frenetic consumption they constantly contribute to perpetuate, activating the power of the hyperlink to disseminate media contents through a multiplicity of venues. They are poly-networked subjects who produce and watch videos, post links, photos or videos on Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter and send instant messages with Whatsapp or Skype; their online persona creates, processes and distributes information through ‘a heterogeneous experience of discontinuity’ (Sobchack, 2004: 156). It is thus a nonlinear, often repetitive, and discontinuous engagement with an array of quasi-simultaneous stimuli that pop in and out of navigation tabs and windows as they click on them. Even if completely focused on a single cultural artefact, these poly-networked subjects know well there are too many other stimuli waiting to be activated, discarded or simply forgotten. The access to them is, after all, a click away. Most of us keep clicking, sooner or later.

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Notes
2. Here, I am not only referring to an aesthetic of contiguity and/or juxtaposition, but also a
liter combination of sounds and images via their transformability in universally readable codes.

References


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