Manufacturing Paranoia: Analysis of The Witch’s “Paranoia” Trailer

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Oscar Wilde was once quoted as saying, “This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.” Regardless of what Wilde was referring to, films in the genre of horror are characterized by a similar attitude. A horror movie is successful if it is filled with suspense, a tension and fear, that is sustained throughout majority of the film (Prohászková, 2012). When it comes to advertising a film in the horror genre, the trailer creators likely intend to arouse a similar feeling. If you are tense throughout an entire trailer, would you not expect the film to be the same?

A24’s The Witch was not only the distributor’s most successful horror film at the box office, but it was financially the most successful film the company released that entire year (IMDb, n.d.). The Witch is an independent horror film written and directed by Robert Eggers that follows a puritan family forced into exile from their original settlement. Isolated in the woods, the family is tormented by the presence of a mysterious witch. To advertise the film, A24 focused primarily on the release of three film trailers; “Peek-a-Boo,” “Paranoia,” and a full-length theatrical trailer. All three trailers were successful in advertising the film due to the emotional experience of tension and fear that the trailers created in the viewers- allowing them to anticipate a similar feeling from the film itself.

My analysis will focus on The Witch trailer titled “Paranoia,” which was prominently featured both online and through television. I have chosen to focus on this trailer specifically as it exceptionally illustrates the rich depth of information a trailer can portray in only a short one minute and twenty-three seconds. I will begin my analysis by discussing common constructs of the film trailer, before moving on to breaking down how The Witch “Paranoia” trailer utilizes various visual and rhetorical techniques to create feelings of tension and fear in the viewers,
focusing primarily on gestalt principles, audience-viewer interactions, symbolic objects, and intertextuality. I will close the essay with larger implications for further trailer research.

**Let the Show Begin: Trailer Conventions**

A film trailer can be described as a brief montage of scenes from a particular film, used to market that work to theatre goers. The odd name was coined in the early years of cinema when advertisements would appear at the end of a feature (Kerner, 2004). This trend didn’t last long, as cinema owners witnessed patrons leaving early on. However, the name has stuck (Kerner, 2004).

According to Charlotte Jensen in her work, “Reduced Narration, Intensified Emotion,” (2014) a film trailer has “the task of communicating a variety of formal information about the film,” and they must balance communicating that information, while at the same time holding it back (106). Jensen further suggests that trailers primarily focus on the emotional aspects of a film, as opposed to its plot or characters, and the emotions the trailer editors choose to focus on will depend on the genre of the film being advertised (Jensen, 2014).

*The Witch* “Paranoia” trailer fits well into typical trailer conventions. The trailer is made from editing together different scenes from the finished film in order to advertise it. Instead of focusing on a clear narrative structure, the trailer operates similar to how Jensen described, focusing primarily on an emotional experience. As discussed in the introduction, horror films primarily focus on fear and tension. If film trailers focus on providing an emotional experience dependent on the genre of the film it is advertising, trailers for horror films will likely also aim to create fear and tension. *The Witch* “Paranoia” trailer, as demonstrated by its box-office success, effectively produces the emotional experiences of fear and tension in the viewers, using the various rhetorical and visual techniques.
Reading Visual Cues: Gestalt Principles

One of the most common theories for explaining sensation of visual information is Gestalt theory. Gestalt theory discusses how the mind organizes the stimuli it sees, understanding the stimuli based on the patterns demonstrated by the whole of the image (“Gestalt Principles,” 2016). The theory consists of specific Gestalt principles of organization, which explain the specific patterns the mind uses to organize information (“Gestalt Principles,” 2016). The creators of The Witch “Paranoia” trailer specifically manipulate two principles from Gestalt theory, common fate and proximity, to create tension for the viewer.

The Gestalt principle of common fate explains that the direction of objects in an image will lead our eyes to a particular destination (Lester, 2011). The direction of the face or eyes of a subject of an image is a common way to lead the viewer to look in a certain direction. However, when an image leads the viewer in a direction for an unclear reason, that can create tension (Lester, 2011).

In The Witch “Paranoia” trailer, characters are constantly seen looking up. Early on, the young son looks up at the sky with an expression of fear and worry on his face. Later, the two young twins are also seen afraid, looking up at the sky. These brief scenes are only two of the strongest instances of this technique being used. As the characters look up in fear, they are telling the audience look up; that they should also be afraid of whatever is above their heads- but the audience is denied the ability to see whatever it is they should be afraid of. Not being able to see what they should be afraid of causes a tension in the viewer as they know to look up and feel afraid, but they are not allowed to do so.

The Gestalt principle of proximity explains that when objects in an image are seen in close proximity to one another, our brain associates them as being related (Lester, 2011). Editing
scenes together works similarly. We assume that if two shots are seen side-by-side, they must be somehow related (“Continuity editing,” n.d.). This idea is the main principle of continuity editing and is an important part of how moving visuals are understood.

This principle can easily be taken advantage of in many forms of media. In the trailer, there is a particularly shocking scene when the teenage daughter exclaims “Why have you turned against me?” The next shot is the person the audience may assume to be the girl’s father, pointing a gun. Because these two shots are shown side-by-side and there is not any noticeable change in background, viewers can assume that these two scenes are related; the father must be pointing the gun at his daughter. This shocking event can cause surprise in the audience that a father would do such a thing and a tension by not knowing what the outcome will be. Will the father shoot his daughter? When the viewer goes to watch the film, they will find that these are actually two completely different scenes that occur at completely different times.

**Face-to-Face: Subject-Audience Interactions**

_The Witch’s “Paranoia” trailer_ takes advantage of shot length to create both feelings of empathy and tension within the viewer. In _Reading Images_, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen make the case that interactions between viewers and represented participants-characters in an image- approximate real-life social interactions. For example, a medium close-up of a person creates feelings of intimacy and a perceived emotional relationship between the subject and the viewer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

A large majority of the scenes in _The Witch_ trailer show characters at a medium close-up, also called a medium social distance, showing about mid-chest to the top of their heads. When the characters are featured at a medium social distance, their facial expressions represent a clear state of fear, such as the previously discussed little brother looking up in the forest or the father
shown shaking with fear later on. Scenes where characters are shown angry or happy are displayed at a further social distance, such as the twins laughing and the mother (Kate Dickie) yelling in anger. Because closer shots feature characters looking afraid or worried, viewers may be inclined to relate to those feelings, especially when in comparison to the distant instances of other emotions.

There are a few scenes in the trailer that go beyond the medium close-up to what is known as an extreme close-up. Extreme close-ups feature anything less of an individual than a regular close-up would, commonly focusing on a part of a person’s face (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In most cases, it could be concluded that an extreme close-up would create an even greater intimacy with its close social distance and allow viewers to further emphasize with a character’s emotion. But what about when an extreme close-up of a human face is missing crucial information?

Only seconds into the trailer, the audience is shown a close-up of a goat’s face. Within two seconds, a lower half of a seemingly young human face comes into the frame. The extreme close-up of the character’s face does not include the character’s eyes. Without the eyes, the viewer is unable to relate to this character with its’ voice repeating, “Black Phillip.” In the beginning of the trailer, the viewers are not sure if the lower half of the face they are seeing is even human at all. Without being able to connect with this face, the audience feels a sense of tension. Without eyes, they are not exactly sure who or what they are looking at- whether this creature is a friend or foe.

The distance between subjects and the audience, mediated through the camera, tells the viewers how they should relate to the characters and how they should feel about what is being shown. When shown only fear and worry in close-proximity of characters and being unable to
emphasize with the closest of social distances, the audience reads quickly that they are meant to continually experience fear and feel tension from the unknown.

A Demonic Animal: Symbolism

Another way that a trailer quickly presents information to their audience is through the careful use of symbols. Symbols operate as a “mental representation in the mind’s eye,” using one image to demonstrate a much larger concept or idea (Hills & Helmers, 2014, p. 16). Trailers will often take advantage of symbols to communicate their messages about a film in as few shots as possible. Remember from Jensen’s previous article (2014), a trailer must balance communicating a film while simultaneously holding it back. Symbols are an ideal way to do just that, giving off a specific set of messages through quick, visual information.

The Witch “Paranoia” trailer’s most prominent symbol comes in the form of a large black goat named “Black Phillip.” He is prominently featured in the trailer, something that at first glance may seem odd as the goat’s presence doesn’t seem to relate to the prominent story of a family being terrorized by an unseen witch. However, the creators of the trailer and the audience likely meet a mutual understanding of what the presence of the goat adds to the overall mood of the trailer, adding even more tension and fear due to its presence.

According to Douglas Ezzy (2015), goats have a long history of been associated with the devil and Satanism. This connection is largely seen through the common occult symbol of the Pagan god, Baphomet, a figure with a man's body and goat's face. The connection with Baphomet and the goat believes to be a connection with the previous Greek God, Pan. Pan was also a half goat, half man, popular for playing dangerous pranks and having affairs with human women. When the Christians attempted to convert pagans, who had long adopted Pan’s appearance to the god Baphomet, the goat like horns started to appear on images of the Christian
Satan. Ever since, Satan and his worshipers have been heavily associated with the image of the goat (Ezzy, 2015). In the European middle ages, many paintings appeared showing witches riding goats, as witches were often considered worshippers of the devil in Christian lore (Russell, 1984).

When viewers see the images of Black Phillip, they can automatically associate it with Satanism. The viewers can likely perceive that the devil and his influence will be a significant part of *The Witch*’s narrative. The goat’s presence will likely add an additional tension and fear to those familiar with the religious connotations associated with goats.

**Among the Greats: Intertextuality**

Intertextuality can be explained as the way a work (a text, film, image, etc.) relates to other works or events in the environment (Hills & Helmers, 2004). This technique is another way that film trailer creators can deliver a vast amount of information in a short period of time. They take advantage of film goers past experiences with other films to create certain associations. When a trailer references another popular film, the viewer may conclude that the advertised film will be similar to the film it alludes to. *The Witch* “Paranoia” trailer strongly utilizes this technique, making references to three famous stories—*The Amityville Horror*, *The Crucible*, and *The Exorcist*.

The first horror film reference in the trailer is to *The Amityville Horror*, a well-received horror classic from 1979, directed by Stuart Rosenberg. The film follows a young family that moves into a new home to start their life over. However, the home has a sinister past that starts to take a toll on the family and causes the father to seep into insanity (Rosenberg, 1979).

The allusion to *The Amityville Horror* is in the first character introduction of the short trailer. The image portrays the father figure of the film chopping wood with an axe, surrounded
by stacks and stacks of previously cut logs. This calls to various scenes in *The Amityville Horror* where the father figure does the exact same thing. In the film, the father’s constant wood cutting that increases as the character is further affected by supernatural elements in the house could demonstrate his gradual descent into insanity (Rosenberg, 1979). By seeing this comparison in the trailer, especially so early on, the viewers of *The Witch* trailer can interpret that the father figure in *The Witch* may go through the same delusional rage.

As the viewers of the trailer take in the scenery and establish a setting for the trailer, comparisons to *The Crucible* are likely to form in the audience’s mind. *The Crucible* is a famous play written in 1953 by famed playwright Arthur Miller (Miller, 1953). The play follows a fictionalized account of the Salem Witch trials that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1963 where many young women were put to death for the crime of witchcraft (Miller, 1953).

The comparisons between *The Witch* trailer and *The Crucible* play (or it’s 1957 or 1996 film adaptations) are unavoidable. Both of the works take place in a similar time period, with similar set pieces, costumes, and feature subject matter related to witchcraft. Because of these similarities between the two pieces, viewers of the trailer may expect that the film, and especially the film’s female characters, may experience a similar fate as the women in *The Crucible*.

Finally, near the end of the trailer, there is a strong reference to the often-rated scariest movie of all time, *The Exorcist* (“The Exorcist (1976)”, n.d.). Directed by William Friedkin, *The Exorcist* tells the story of a young girl who is possessed by a terrorizing demon. In the film’s pinnacle moments, two priests perform an exorcism on the young girl, while the demon inside her brutally protests (Friedkin, 1976).

The pinnacle scenes from *The Exorcist* are alluded to during one of the scenes in the “Paranoia” trailer. Near the end there is a longer scene involving the young boy writhing in pain,
moving his body in ways that mimic the climatic scenes from *The Exorcist*. While not directly mentioning anything about a demonic possession, the section of the trailer that mimics the body language of the iconic *Exorcist* exorcism scene will place the idea in the viewer’s head to expect something similar.

Regardless of whether or not a viewer has seen the films alluded to, the cultural popularity of the three stories discussed make recognition of the allusions, conscious or not, nearly unavoidable. The trailer editors hope to cash in on these near immediate associations to communicate not only that similar events may occur in the film, whether they actually do or not, but to place the film in a similar category with the films it alludes to. *The Amityville Horror* and *The Exorcist*, in particular, are often remarked as horror classics. By placing references to the films in their trailer, the editors may hope to place the association in the viewers minds that this film, *The Witch*, may become just as iconic.

**That’s All Folks**

The creators of *The Witch* trailer, “Paranoia”, whether knowingly or not, manufactured feelings of tension and fear in their audiences through the use of visual and rhetorical techniques. Each shot was selected based on its ability to create the desired emotional experience, and in this creation, a new narrative was born. Where the film, *The Witch*, could easily be considered a psychological horror film, focusing on how fear, suspicion, and religious paranoia can tear a family apart. The trailer tells a different story. The “Paranoia” trailer seemingly tells the story of a supernatural horror, focusing on a family turning on their eldest daughter, who may or may not be a wicked creature, and suggesting there may be something supernatural and even more sinister lurking in the woods. Despite the trailer’s purpose of advertising the film, the different narrative suggests another movie entirely.
The different narrative structures, largely built to sustain the emotional experience of the trailer, could be considered dishonest on the trailer makers behalf. People who see the “Paranoia” trailer could become disappointed when they buy a ticket expecting one film, and they end up viewing a completely different one. By revealing the techniques that trailer editors use to create an intense emotional experience, audience members can be more cognizant of how they are often manipulated into buying a product that may be different from what they thought they were purchasing through the trailer’s presentation.

This essay also urges for further research in the subject of film trailers. Film trailers are often regarded as advertisement and little else- thus research into the effects of film trailers on viewers and society as a whole is limited. Due to the different narrative structures of the trailers and the intense emotional experiences that film trailers can create, I urge that research on trailers in the future should focus on what other possible effects a trailer could have on an audience. What can trailers tell us not only about how trailer creators see the film-going audience, but how the viewing of trailers can change audience’s world views?
References


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