

JOHANNES MAHLKNECHT

Writing on the Edge

Paratexts in Narrative Cinema

FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES 3



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	7
1 Introduction	9
2 The Studio Logo	17
2.1 History and Function of the Logo.....	18
2.2 The Majors and the Minors.....	25
2.3 Contemporary (Specialty Division) House Style	26
2.4 Individualized Logo Presentation	29
3 The Motto	35
3.1 Definition and Function	35
3.2 Paratextual and Textual Qualities of the Motto	40
3.2.1 The Explicit Motto	40
3.2.1.1 The Extradiegetic Motto.....	40
3.2.1.2 The Hybrid	41
3.2.1.3 The Diegetic Motto	44
3.2.2 The Implicit Motto.....	46
4 The Title	51
4.1 General Functions of Titles	51
4.1.1 Identifying a Film	52
4.1.2 Designating the Subject Matter.....	53
4.1.3 Playing Up a Film	55
4.2 Looks of Titles.....	57
4.3 The Title as a (Moving) Picture.....	59
5 Cast of Characters.....	67
5.1 Characters/Actors: Names and Faces	67
5.2 Credits and Self-Referentiality	73
5.3 In Medias Res: Introductory Intertitles.....	75
6 The End	79
6.1 “The End” Then and Now	79
6.2 Transitions and Overlaps	80
6.2.1 Fade to Black vs. Superimposition of End Credits	81
6.2.2 The ‘Diegetic’ Fade to Black	82
6.2.3 Sound and Music.....	84
6.2.4 The Post-End Credit Scene	85

7	Claims and (Legal) Disclaimers	89
7.1	Origins	91
7.2	Placement.....	92
7.3	Unofficial (Dis)Claimers	94
7.4	Claimer vs. Disclaimer	96
7.5	More to Disclaim: Names, Places etc.	100
8	The Movie Tagline	105
8.1	Collection of Data.....	106
8.2	Definition.....	107
8.3	Function	108
8.4	Presence/Absence of Taglines	110
8.5	Taglines Then and Now.....	111
8.6	Relationship between Tagline and Poster Image.....	115
8.7	Relationship between Tagline and Title	117
8.8	Praise for the Film	118
8.9	Syntax, Semantics, Rhetoric	120
8.9.1	List and Twist	121
9	The Movie Novelization.....	129
9.1	The Business of the Cover.....	132
9.2	Holes in the Plot.....	142
10	A Look Back: Early Film and Its Fan Magazine Fictionizations	151
10.1	The Early Fan Magazine.....	152
10.1.1	The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement.....	154
10.1.2	From the Submerged.....	156
10.2	Pictures from the Pictures.....	159
11	Conclusion	163
12	Bibliography	167
12.1	Primary Sources.....	167
12.2	Secondary Sources.....	171

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For Hilde, Michael, and Gabriel

1 Introduction

Unless we attend a sneak preview in our local multiplex, or stop spontaneously while zapping through TV channels, we rarely watch films without knowing anything about them beforehand. We may have seen the trailer on the Internet, the poster on the street, read an ad in a magazine or had a glance at the novelization's cover in a bookstore. A film, it seems, begins before its beginning, and often ends after it has ended. It is surrounded by a variety of elements that are more or less directly connected to it, and that are more or less directly part of it. They are the film's paratexts, and in circling around the film they generate, shape, and influence our attitudes towards it long before we actually start watching. And once we do, we still encounter texts on the screen that we may consider elements extraneous to the film proper, even though they are 'attached' to it. What, we may ask, do company logos, lists of cast and crewmembers, and the presentation of the film's title have to do with the story that unfolds directly afterwards? As it turns out – and as this book will show – a lot. These elements, too, are paratexts.

In the ever-increasing multitude of forms and media they appear in, paratexts can be seen to work as appetizers for the main course, namely the film proper. And once the meal is completed, one will more likely talk of the main course than the appetizer. This implies that paratexts inevitably occupy the hierarchically subordinate position of an accessory, designed to make the object they are attached to more desirable. Paratexts, in short, do to a film what make-up does to a face.

But they do more than that, of course. They make us aware of the existence of the film in the first place, and they provide information about its content and production history. Some paratexts, in fact – particularly those not directly linked to advertising, such as lists of cast and crewmembers and the legal disclaimer – may *per se* seem dull rather than attractive. Yet even they can be effectively used to persuade potential viewers of the merits of their main object. Lists of cast and crew are arranged strategically to highlight the most popular persons involved, even if their actual involvement is negligible. Similarly, a clever positioning and phrasing of a legal disclaimer stating that all events presented in the film are fictitious can arouse interest if the film treats a 'realistic' and potentially controversial topic. The analysis of these mechanisms

of persuasion contained within filmic paratexts, whether obvious or subtly hidden, as well as our reaction to them are central concerns of this book.

In dealing with a selection of major and minor paratexts, the most relevant questions are: How do paratexts affect viewer expectations and final judgment of the films they point to? In what periods of film history are the respective kinds of paratexts prominent, how do conventions of presenting them change over time, and what motivates these changes? Most importantly, the book examines the relationship between the paratexts and the text (i.e. the film) they frame. The main focus here lies in the interface between their extradiegetic nature and the diegesis of the films in question. This interface manifests itself, on the one hand, in the space between producers' endeavours to *advertise a product*, and on the other, in filmmakers' attempts to *tell a story*. The book discusses whether, or to what degree, the film meets the expectations created by the paratexts, and will thereby consider economic as well as aesthetic factors that determine design, size, organization and placement, or even deliberate omission, of paratexts.

The term 'paratext' is not new. Gérard Genette coined it in his seminal book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997),¹ in which he analyzes various peripheral texts of novels – such as the book cover, name of the author, preface, notes, and reviews. According to Genette,

more than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or [...] a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls the whole reading of the text.” (1997, 1f)

Genette subdivides paratexts into two categories: *peritexts* and *epitexts*. *Peritexts* are all elements that are not directly part of the novel's text itself but that are physically attached to it. Examples are the title, the name of the author, and the foreword. Applied to film, peritexts mainly consist of opening and closing credits, including elements such as the title, lists of cast and crewmembers, and the logo. *Epitexts* are paratexts that are semantically connected to a novel but that are not actually part of the printed volume. These consist of interviews, reviews, and all kinds of promotional material. In film, major epitextual elements are the theatrical trailer and the movie poster. As Genette says, “peritext and epitext completely and entirely share the spatial field of the paratext. In other words, [...] *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext*” (1997, 5).

Since Genette's terminology has been widely accepted in more recent studies, notably in Alexander Böhnke's book *Paratexte des Films* (2007), *Film*

¹ It was first published in 1987, under the original French title, *Seuils*.

Under Re-Construction (2009), edited by Andrzej Gwózdź, and Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately* (2010),² I will also use it in this book. Like them, I will not focus on paratexts in *novels* but will transfer the concept to narrative cinema, where in recent years the notion of liminality, 'frames,' and 'framings,' has attracted increasing interest.³

Unlike Gray's study *Show Sold Separately*, which expands the concept of paratexts to include sequels, spin-offs and viewer-created elements, my book will only discuss paratexts authorized (if not authored) by the producing/distributing company.⁴ In this, too, I will follow Genette's conception of paratexts: "By definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary" (ibid. 9). Although no less likely to influence or guide our reception of films-as-text, and certainly no less interesting, critics' reviews, cast and crew interviews (other than distinctly promotional ones) and viewer-created 'paratexts' are thus excluded from consideration. I am aware that in film the notion of authorship is considerably more contested than it is in literature. Genette's subdivision of paratextual authorship into "the author or one of his associates," which consequently leads to a differentiation of "*authorial* paratexts" and "*publisher's* paratext" (ibid. 9), suggests an agreement that may not necessarily exist.⁵ The diffuse authorship in film, given its collaborative nature as opposed to individual effort, makes pinpointing a single authorial source almost impossible. Aware of the fact that a director may hate what the trailer department did with his film, that trailer-makers may think the film's opening title sequence misses the point, and that the title designer may consider the official poster an abomination, I will nevertheless subsume under 'author,' the convenient if uncomfortable notion of the official authorizer, the collectivity

² For a comprehensive research report on filmic paratexts see Klecker 2015.

³ The idea of the 'frame' as a mental concept that we continuously employ in order to arrange and understand thoughts, actions and situations, has been around for more than thirty years (foundations having been laid by Erving Goffman's 1974 book *Frame Analysis*). It has become widely used in discourse analysis, cognition theory, psychology, and other areas of science. In literary studies, frame theory has been increasingly discovered as a field of interest only within the last two decades (notably in Gale MachLachlan's and Ian Reid's 1994 study *Framing and Interpretation*). In these years, several approaches towards the idea of 'frame' developed, one often considerably diverging from the other. What these varying approaches all have in common, however, is the assumption that frames, of whatever kind they may be, are seen as tools that are used to help and enable recipients to interpret texts (see Wolf 2006, 3).

⁴ This is also more true to Genette's understanding of the concept of paratexts. According to him, magazine reviews or word-of-mouth recommendations are not really a paratext, for the paratext "is characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility" (1997, 3).

⁵ On the problem of paratext and authorship see also Stanitzek 2005, 34, as well as Böhnke 2007, 14 ff.

of the studio. I will take as model the (paratextual) studio disclaimer commonly found on DVDs and Blu-rays with bonus features: “Any views or opinions expressed in interviews or commentary are those of the individuals speaking and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Universal Pictures International, its parent, or any of its affiliates or employees” (*Back to the Future*). In authorizing the presence of such views and opinions the studio *makes* such interviews and comments paratextual – since viewers appear to welcome them, unflattering comments about a film placed within DVD bonus features can increase sales, too. In essence, however, and for the purposes here, it is the stamp of permission and of proprietorship that ultimately decides what is admissible as paratext and what is not.

This book is divided into two main parts, the first dealing with the peritext, the second with the epitext of films. Each part typologically analyzes major as well as some supposedly minor elements that belong to the respective kind of paratext. I am aware that a clear distinction of paratextual elements in epi- and peritexts is not always easy, as some paratexts can be part of both peritext *and* epitext, depending on how they are used. The title of a film, for instance, occurs not only peritextually as part of the opening credits, but is present in virtually all epitexts. Similarly, lists of cast and crewmembers appear peritextually in opening and closing credits, and epitextually as the so-called ‘billing block’ commonly found on film posters and in trailers (see Biederman et al. 2006, 183). This book treats titles, logos, and cast lists as peritexts, not because they are *per se* exclusively peritextual, but because the respective chapter focuses on their predominantly peritextual, rather than epitextual, *use*.

The specific *peritexts* (or peritextual uses of essentially peri- *and* epitextual paratexts) I will explore in the first six chapters are: *logo*, *motto*, *title*, *cast of characters*, *end credits*, and *legal disclaimer*. Each chapter analyzes the respective element and the various ways in which filmmakers, by assimilating it to elements pertinent to the film’s diegesis, attempt to blur boundaries between the paratext and the film proper so that one mingles with and (ideally) becomes an ‘organic’ part of the other. The main focus thereby lies in observing how the different methods of presenting the peritext influence the viewing experience and the viewer’s attitude towards the film as a whole. The first part investigates both the paratexts’ functions and the way they are presented on the screen, and analyzes how the presentation is used in order to facilitate the transition from nondiegetic to diegetic realms. In the discussion on the motto in chapter 2, for instance, a gradation of the diegetic qualities of the peritext shows how words, in

combination with their visual presentation, can shape viewers' expectations as well as their attitude towards the film proper.

The final three chapters of the book discuss *epitexts* and particularly their promotional aspect. Considering that studios nowadays routinely invest a third of a film's total cost for marketing purposes (see Drake 2008, 63), we cannot ignore the impact promotional material can have on viewer response to films as a whole. The analyses thus focus on the way promotion guides (or attempts to guide) audience expectation in a specific direction, and on the rhetoric the epitext employs in order to arouse viewer interest. The three epitexts selected are the *movie tagline*, the *novelization* and the latter's historic predecessor, the early *magazine fictionization*. The tagline, as a snappy catchphrase that works as the film's advertising slogan, is essentially a paratextual sub-element of another epitext – the movie poster – but employs rhetoric devices that, we can argue, elevate it to an aesthetic genre of its own. Written retellings of films in the form of novelizations (the novel format) and fictionizations (the short story format), on the other hand, are technically autonomous narratives with fully textual (rather than paratextual) status. Yet the promotional function pushed by the marketing machinery of Hollywood, I argue, invariably reduces them to accessories to the film. In this sense the tagline and written prose versions of films lie at the opposite end of a spectrum: peritext-as-text vs. text-as-peritext. The second part therefore discusses the multiple roles of filmic epitexts and explores the increasingly hazy boundaries between what constitutes a text and what an epitext.

As should by now be evident, it is not – nor can it be – the aim of this book to provide a detailed typology and discussion of *all* filmic paratexts in existence. As anybody who has worked with the concept will confirm, for each paratext one discusses, two more will come to mind. DVD or Blu-ray releases alone, for instance, are surrounded by a whole array of paratexts (as well as sub- and, if we want, even sub-sub-paratexts), including package design, booklets, disk imprints, menu design, and special features, all of which deserve closer scrutiny.⁶ Likewise, the novelization discussed in chapter 8 is only one example of a whole range of tie-in products⁷ that accompany the release of mainstream Hollywood films. *Toy Story* Happy Meals at McDonald's, *Transformers* T-Shirts, *Lord of the Rings* jewelry, *Shrek* plush toys, and *Avatar* videogames⁸ all qualify as paratexts.⁹ The perhaps most conspicuous absence in this book is the movie trailer, which is discussed at length in three different publications: Vinzenz

⁶ For an examination of DVD paratexts, see Volker Helbig's essay "Schriftliche Paratexte der DVD" (2009).

⁷ Robert Marich defines tie-in products as "joint marketing efforts in which a film distributor partners with a consumer-goods company to promote movies" (2009, 309).

⁸ And there are many, many more. For a comprehensive – and very long – list of (almost) all kinds of merchandise products, see Marich 2009, 125ff.

⁹ Some of these tie-in products are discussed in Gray 2010, 175ff.

Hediger's *Verführung zum Film* (2001), Lisa Kernan's *Coming Attractions* (2004) and in Keith M. Johnston's *Coming Soon: A Technological History of the Film Trailer* (2009). As the perhaps quintessential promotional epitext that justly warrants its own book, readers interested in the detailed workings of trailers are referred to these works. I will only mention them cursorily, when appropriate within the discussion of other paratexts.

Despite the necessarily selective nature of this book, however, the range of elements it covers is one of the chief aspects that distinguish it from previously published works on filmic paratexts. Böhnke (2007) and Allison (2007) focus exclusively on aspects of the *peritext* and Johnston (2009) on only one major aspect of the *epitext* (the trailer). While, in parts, clearly indebted to and building on their efforts, *Writing on the Edge* tries to encompass a wider field, and includes elements (in particular the motto and the tagline) that have hitherto altogether escaped the attention of scholars.

Also important is the historical angle on paratexts this book takes. In a largely diachronic approach, it analyzes paratexts of (mostly) American films ranging from the silent period to the present. It investigates the conventions filmmakers have established to negotiate between realms that may seem to be mutually exclusive and points out how these conventions have changed over time. The book attempts to keep, at least roughly, a balance between early and contemporary examples in order to allow for comparisons between methods and customs prevalent during different periods. Among other things, this diachronic approach shows that in many cases techniques which one might consider new and original have often been employed already fifty or even ninety years before.¹⁰ Today, it seems, we are confronted with an ever-increasing supersaturation of film-related paratexts (some of which function as texts in their own right). Gray also suggests an ongoing trend towards "confluence and convergence" (Gray 2010, 41) between texts and paratexts that may soon overthrow the (already shaky and relative) boundaries between texts and their 'secondary' accompaniments. In view of this development, a diachronic study that traces the emergence, change, and consolidation of paratexts throughout history becomes highly relevant. It will help illuminate pertinent aspects of paratexts' diverse roles: from a legal viewpoint, as markers of a variably diffuse author- and proprietorship; from a marketing viewpoint, as persuaders; and from an audience-centered (as well as from a structuralist-narratological) viewpoint, as agents that help construct textual meaning.

¹⁰ This, in itself, is not a new insight. As David Bordwell states (echoing comments by Martin Scorsese, an expert of innovative film techniques), virtually every technique used nowadays has been tried out in the first decades of cinema history (see Bordwell 2002, 16). And yet, to discover and re-discover the sophistication that in part existed even in early filmmaking never ceases to surprise.

The final chapters in particular (on novelization and fictionization, respectively) highlight the historical dimension of this book. In contrasting contemporary prose versions based on popular films with earlier ones (specifically, of the 1910s), chapters 8 and 9 will point out the drastic shift in function and meaning of a specific epitext through its historical development. Furthermore, the comparison will challenge the notion and limits of paratextuality itself. When do paratexts cease to be paratexts and become texts in their own right? And conversely, when and how can texts lose their status and become other texts' paratexts? While fictionizations and novelizations can be enjoyed independently from the film, both – the former in their function as advertisements, the latter as narrative clarifiers – also serve as paratexts since they can provide a particularly pronounced “initial context and reading strategy for the text” (Gray 2010, 36).

Finally, a key point is the book's stronger focus on *written* paratexts (or written *aspects* of paratexts) rather than visual ones. Writing forms the common denominator for what is an otherwise highly diverse set of paratexts whose properties the following chapters investigate. Writing, it seems, has always been considered a tolerated but unloved presence in narrative cinema. In its attempt to establish itself as an autonomous art form in the early twentieth century, film limited all emphasis on its visual qualities as opposed to the written ones of its major rival, literature. The term ‘motion pictures,’ however, denies the fact that writing remained and remains an important element of the new medium. Used for the intertitles of silent films, for presenting cast and crewmembers in the opening and closing credits, this paratextual, extradiegetic writing has often been considered problematic. As it is both in contact with yet at the same time detached from the diegetic universe, it conflicts – apparently irreconcilably – with the illusion of reality that filmmakers attempt to create on the screen. Although a popular film aims to present its story so as to have audiences suspend disbelief, to forget that they are watching a fictional product, paratextual writing makes them aware that the events within the diegesis are, in fact, fiction. As the book *Schriftfilme* (2009, edited by Scheffer and Stenzer), which explores avant-garde films consisting (almost) entirely of writing in motion, proves, the two media are not necessarily as opposed to one another as one might believe.¹¹ In the various manifestations of Hollywood's peri- and epitexts, the written word and the moving image may interact in numerous ways: they may resist one another, support one another, merge with one another, and sometimes all three at the same time. The examination of this multitude of intermedial relationships between paratextual writing and film, and its historic development, then, is at the heart of each of the following chapters. Whichever forms paratexts have taken in

¹¹ Another interesting book is Jeff Bellantoni and Matt Woolman's richly illustrated *Type in Motion* (2000), which highlights and discusses motion graphics design and type in both classical narrative films as well as in documentaries and television commercials.

the course of history, and whatever their degree of proximity (spatially as well as medially) to the films they frame, they always have, and probably always will, co-determine the way we feel and think about cinema.

2 The Studio Logo

When we look at written openings of films and at their development and change throughout cinema history, we will soon see certain *tendencies* at various periods, but general *rules* concerning the order of the appearance of epitexts (such as title or lists of cast and crew) do not exist. One film only mentions producer, title, and director of the respective picture, while another adds a list of dozens of other crewmembers and actors. *When* the credits begin to appear may also vary – consider the so-called James Bond opening (see Flinn 1999, 30), which presents a scene of the film *before* the opening titles start.¹² We also have no assurance of how long they will last once they do appear. Some last only a few seconds, while others, such as those of *The Fugitive* (1993, Andrew Davis), take several minutes.¹³ Today, in fact, it has become customary to omit opening credits altogether. In order to find out about even the most important persons involved in the making of a film, we are increasingly forced to wait until the end. In his review of *The Pink Panther 2* (2009, Harald Zwart), film critic Roger Ebert (indirectly) laments this frequent lack of opening credits:

I was smiling all the way through the opening credits. [...] They made me miss the golden age of credits, when you actually found out who the actors were going to be, and maybe saw a little cartoon in the bargain: This time, one about the misadventures of the Pink Panther, of course. And 10 of the actors in the movie's cast! (Ebert 2009)

Not even a presentation of the title of the film at the beginning is any longer compulsory – it appears, for instance, at the beginning of neither *Hostel* (2005, Eli Roth) nor *Van Helsing* (2004, Stephen Sommers), to name only two examples.¹⁴ If there is *one* paratextual element on whose appearance at the

¹² While characteristic of the superspy franchise, the “James Bond opening,” features, of course, in numerous other films as well.

¹³ One of the longest title sequences, however, is that of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969, Sergio Leone), whose credits run for nine minutes.

¹⁴ Films without any titles existed before that. According to Deborah Allison, the first commercial American feature film since the late 1920s without title and opening credits is *Head* (Bob Rafelson, 1968; see Allison 2001, 109).