# The art and future of movie trailers in the age of AI and streaming



A few years ago, a Hollywood studio approached IBM with a unique proposition: leveraging the company’s artificial intelligence system, Watson, to create a movie trailer. The film in question was a 90-minute thriller centred on an artificial humanoid gone rogue. To prepare Watson for this task, the AI was trained on 100 horror trailers and then shown the entire film. With some human editorial assistance, the AI’s selected clips were compiled into what was billed as “the first movie trailer made by AI.” The outcome, however, was widely regarded as ineffective and awkward: scenes dragged with slow, unnatural pauses, Toby Jones’s characteristic eyebrow raise seemed disconnected from any clear narrative, and the trailer’s abrupt fades to black left viewers puzzled. The trailer concluded with a simple title card, “Morgan … September 2,” appearing apologetically.

Interestingly, the director of the film may have had a conflicted stance on this trailer; given the film’s subject matter warning against such AI technology, the poor quality of the trailer might have been somewhat intentional. Regardless, in an environment where AI-driven trailers are gaining traction—including Netflix recently receiving a patent for personalised algorithmic trailer technology—and viewer attendance at cinemas remains subdued post-pandemic, the “Morgan” trailer stands as a notable example of what happens when the delicate art of trailer creation is handed over to entirely automated processes. It simultaneously highlights the expertise of the uncredited professionals who craft enticing trailers that are capable of drawing audiences in just a few minutes of screen time.

Trailer creation is a distinct art form, very different from that of directing a full-length film. Highly skilled editors, often working anonymously, distil the essence of a movie into a compelling narrative of typically no more than two and a half minutes. Zoe Carey, a trailer editor at Create Advertising with credits that include acclaimed productions such as Nomadland, Paddington, and The White Lotus, explained, “My dad is always asking me, when will I see your name in lights? I’m like, never.” Carey recounted how, beginning from school days, she was captivated by the craft of editing and storytelling, compared to writing poetry—taking shapeless material and sculpting it into something powerful and resonant.

The process involves working with either nearly completed films or rough bundles of footage, identifying key moments that convey mood and essence, then weaving these with music (often sourced externally due to licensing restrictions) and dialogue into a narrative arc that appeals to potential viewers. This task requires extensive viewing, sometimes watching films on mute to check visuals alongside separate audio passes, and involves iterative collaboration with clients.

Historically, the making of trailers was fiercely competitive. Mike DiBenedetto, a prolific editor whose career began in the early 2000s and includes blockbuster trailers such as Enchanted and many Marvel movies, reminisced about the industry’s sports-like atmosphere, with multiple agencies competing to be chosen for a single film’s trailer. “Warner Bros might have 16 trailers commissioned for a movie, and only one of them is going to win,” he noted. This intense rivalry was accompanied by a workplace culture that could be challenging, particularly for newcomers. Zoe Carey recalled how, earlier in her career, her work would sometimes be presented by a boss as his own due to entrenched ideas of what an editor “should look like,” though she emphasised, “There’s no way that would happen now.”

The style and presentation of trailers have evolved significantly over time. DiBenedetto described a shift away from the once-dominant voiceover-led trailers to approaches that allow the film to speak for itself, enhancing viewer immersion rather than interrupting it with narration. The editing style shifted alongside generational change as editors brought new perspectives influenced by diverse media such as skateboard videos and Quentin Tarantino films.

Recognising the importance of trailer editing as a specialised craft, sisters Monica Brady and Evelyn Watters established the Golden Trailer Awards in 1999, after failing to find an existing awards show dedicated to this field. They attracted notable industry figures like Quentin Tarantino and Stephen Woolley to their first judging panel. Now in its 25th year, the event honours various categories including best feature, animated, action trailers, and more. The “Golden Fleece” award, humorously given to the best trailer for a bad film, highlights the editor’s skill in making even flawed movies appear appealing.

Zoe Carey’s own nomination for a Golden Fleece in 2019 for the trailer of Welcome to Marwen, despite the film’s poor reception, illustrates this craft. The trailer effectively conveyed emotional depth and narrative interest, eliciting responses of amusement and empathy, showcasing editors’ ability to find compelling angles within challenging source material.

Editors maintain a professional approach to even poorly received or disliked films, viewing their role as a “service industry.” John Piedot, known for a successful, award-winning Irish film trailer, noted that “finding something appealing in any project is the essence of the job.” Mike DiBenedetto framed his work as connecting a film to its potential audience, citing the example of “Baby Geniuses,” a critically panned film that nonetheless delighted his ex-father-in-law.

Despite the significant role they play, trailer editors often remain anonymous, their efforts unseen by the general public. Popular culture depictions, such as Cameron Diaz’s character Amanda in The Holiday (2006), sometimes conflate or misrepresent the roles involved; Amanda is a trailer producer, not an editor, as highlighted by Zoe Carey. Nonetheless, previews of the industry often perpetuate some myths or glamour around the profession.

The streaming era has introduced new dynamics. Marketing individual titles on platforms like Netflix often focuses less on traditional trailers and more on teasers or snippets aimed at drawing viewers to the platform itself. “Netflix realised there wasn’t a lot of return on investment on cutting a full-blown trailer when you can just pull a single snippet of the show out instead,” DiBenedetto observed. However, Carey noted that the rise of streaming has expanded opportunities overall, leading to more content and a corresponding increase in demand for trailers. She described creating the trailer for The White Lotus as a career highlight, noting the show’s significant cultural impact. The Golden Trailer Awards have also adapted, introducing categories for TV shows and digital trailers to reflect changing media landscapes.

With AI’s growing capabilities, concerns about the future of trailer editing naturally arise. However, many in the industry do not share these worries. Independent film editor Dan Noall explained that AI tends to generate an average approximation based on existing data, whereas clients seek something distinctive that truly resonates. “AI would produce something incredibly lazy,” he said. Similarly, the Golden Trailer Awards founders compare AI tools to off-the-rack clothing, contrasting them with the bespoke tailoring of a skilled editor.

Ultimately, what distinguishes the best trailers is their ability to evoke emotion and anticipation. John Piedot recalled the powerful impact of the Terminator 2 teaser trailer attached to VHS rentals of Total Recall in 1991, repeatedly watching the shot that revealed Arnold Schwarzenegger’s face. Mike DiBenedetto reflected that memorable trailers tend to age poorly as they embody the spirit and references of a particular moment in cinema history.

Brady and Watters remain personally invested in the craft of trailer-making and continue to work towards developing their initial film project, drawn by the anticipation and hope that trailers inspire in viewers about new stories yet to come. Brady shared a scene from the adaptation’s source material about a character reluctant to watch a drive-in film date but who admits, “I always have to watch the trailers… because they give me hope there’s something coming in the future.” This encapsulates the enduring power of a well-made trailer to generate curiosity and excitement for a film or show.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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