# The art and challenge of film trailers in the age of AI



In recent years, the intersection of artificial intelligence and film promotion has come under scrutiny, especially following an experiment by IBM with its AI system, Watson. IBM was approached by a Hollywood studio to create a movie trailer generated by the AI for their science fiction film "Morgan," which tells the story of an artificial humanoid going rogue. The AI was fed 100 horror trailers and the 90-minute film itself, before selecting clips to compile the trailer with some assistance from a human editor. However, the resulting trailer was widely criticised for its disjointed pace and lack of emotional impact.

The trailer featured moments such as actor Toby Jones raising his eyebrow without clear reason, unnaturally long pauses, and abrupt black screens, culminating in a simple title card stating: "Morgan … September 2." The film’s director, whose narrative cautioning against the misuse of artificial intelligence perhaps informed the trailer's awkwardness, was implicitly linked to the experiment’s limitations. As interest in AI-generated trailers grows—exemplified by Netflix’s recent patent for personalised algorithmic trailer technology—the failure of Watson's trailer stands as a clear example of the challenges the technology faces in capturing cinematic essence.

While AI attempts to streamline and personalise trailer creation, the traditional discipline of trailer editing remains a highly skilled craft dedicated to condensing the emotional and narrative core of films into brief yet compelling previews. Contrary to popular belief that directors oversee trailer-making, this work is usually performed by specialist editors who remain largely anonymous. Zoe Carey, an editor at Create Advertising known for her trailers for films and series such as Nomadland, Paddington, and The White Lotus, emphasises the creativity involved. Carey describes editing a trailer as akin to "writing poetry," highlighting the process of distilling a film’s essence from often incomplete cuts and adding music and dialogue to create an enticing narrative. Carey comments on the anonymity of trailer editors: “My dad is always asking me, when will I see your name in lights? I’m like, never.”

Historically, trailers have been critical to film marketing, with significant resources devoted to their production. Mike DiBenedetto, a veteran editor with credits on numerous Marvel films and the movie Enchanted, recalls the competitive and high-pressure environment of early 2000s trailer production. He described a system where numerous agencies might compete with as many as 16 trailers produced for a single movie, with only one ultimately chosen. This "sports-like" rivalry underscored the stakes involved in creating trailers that stand out. DiBenedetto also reflects on industry changes over time, noting that voiceovers, once dominant, have declined in favour of trailers that let films speak for themselves, enhancing audience immersion.

Adding to the recognition of trailer editors' craft, the Golden Trailer Awards were founded in 1999 by Monica Brady and Evelyn Watters, sisters who sought to celebrate this overlooked art form after failing to find an existing awards ceremony. The awards, now in their 25th year, feature categories ranging from best feature and action trailers to the Golden Fleece award, which ironically honours the best trailer made for a poor-quality film. Brady recalls how the awards once even had a 'trashiest trailer' category, which was moved out of the main show due to the presence of their aunt, a nun, at the ceremony.

Zoe Carey herself was nominated for a Golden Fleece in 2019 for her trailer of "Welcome to Marwen," a biopic starring Steve Carell that was critically and commercially unsuccessful. She describes the trailer’s challenge: “The trailer … was hard to crack,” yet the resulting narrative and music managed to create an emotional response where the film did not. This dynamic underscores a recurring theme among trailer editors: regardless of the film’s reception, the trailer’s job is to capture something appealing for the audience. John Piedot, an editor working mostly with independent films, calls the field a “service industry” where finding appeal in every project is essential.

While the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix has transformed content distribution and marketing, leading to shorter timelines and sometimes smaller budgets for trailers, editors continue to find abundant work. Carey notes that streaming has increased demand due to the larger volume of content. She describes editing the trailer for "The White Lotus" as a career highlight: “It was such a big cultural moment, and I love the show so much.” The Golden Trailer Awards have adapted accordingly, now including categories for television and digital releases.

Regarding the advent of AI technology in trailer-making, experts in the industry express a measured stance. Dan Noall, who mainly serves independent film studios, argues that AI tends to produce “an average approximation” rather than something distinctive, stating: “Clients don’t want average, they want something that stands out. AI would produce something incredibly lazy.” Brady draws an analogy to fashion, saying, “It’s like clothes – you can buy a suit at Macy’s or wherever. But then there will always be the people who need Savile Row. You’ll always still need the person that cuts the suit to perfection.”

The core challenge for AI-generated trailers, as evidenced by the example of “Morgan,” is their lack of emotional resonance. The best trailers act as “ballets of condensed emotion,” reflecting the moods and moments audiences experience over two or three hours of cinema. John Piedot recalls being captivated by the iconic Terminator 2 teaser, filmed specially for its trailer, which he watched repeatedly. Mike DiBenedetto reflects on how trailers often become very much of their own time, anchored in the cultural touchstones and shared memories of audiences.

Monica Brady and Evelyn Watters remain hopeful about the art of trailer-making, continuing to pursue their original film project for which they first created the Golden Trailer Awards. Brady expresses the enduring magic of trailers, citing a scene in their prospective film where a character watching trailers at a drive-through cinema professes, “I always have to watch the trailers,” because they offer hope for the future. This sentiment echoes the significant cultural and artistic role trailers play in shaping audience anticipation and engagement.

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

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