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# How Parodic Tourism Explains the Rhetorical Force of *A Trailer for Every Academy Award-Winning Movie Ever Made*

Megan Myers

**Abstract:** As social media and content-sharing sites become an increasingly familiar part of daily life, the need to understand the effects of such mediums is also increasing. This essay explores the means by which *A Trailer for Every Academy Award-Winning Movie Ever Made* dissects its cultural landscape through use of parody and metatext. Following Ott and Bonnstetter's theory of parodic tourism, the author explains how the complex format of this YouTube video presents the audience with certain tools to construct or reconstruct their own cultural landscape. In addition, it will be demonstrated how these tools are being used increasingly in the YouTube culture, and explain the significance of this video to its parody genre, and subsequently, its viewers. This research contributes to the ongoing investigation in the field of visual parody and its impact on society.

On March 5, 2010 comedy duo Brian McElhaney and Nick Kocher, released a video on the popular social linking website, YouTube under their username BriTANick (pronounced to rhyme with Titanic). Kocher and McElhaney write, direct, produce, and act in their own productions, of which they have developed a repertoire and a following. The most recent and most successful of their short films, or comedy sketches, *A Trailer for Every Academy Award Winning Movie Ever Made*, is a particularly innovative film. A mere 3:29 minutes in length, the film initially garnered about 600,000 views on BriTANick's YouTube channel, BriTANickdotcom, before it was set to "private," making the video no longer available for public viewing. However, several versions remain on YouTube, courtesy of viewers who have reposted the video under a new title, *A Trailer for Every Oscar-Winning Movie Ever*, and others similar to this. The video is also currently hosted on several comedy websites. *Funny or Die*, *College Humor* and *Cracked* all have the video embedded on their sites, and the views from all these sources total at over 2 million views, with a viewership that is increasing by approximately 15,000 every week.

In making *A Trailer for Every Academy Award-Winning Movie Ever Made*, henceforth referred to as *Award-Winning Trailer*, BriTANick have created a satirical look at the elements commonly present in Award-winning movies. Another notable decision, aside from being a spoof, the characters do not have what would be considered "classic" dialogue. Instead of normal speech, the characters in the parody use a structure known as self-referential dialogue. This makes it appear as if the characters are reading the script cues, but with the body language and emotion that the directions would require.

As the trailer is hosted on YouTube, viewers are able and encouraged to comment on the video. Upon analysis, it was evident that the form of their comments take on the dialogue style of the trailer, and therefore, the commenters are leaving descriptions of what they would normally be saying instead of leaving actual comments. This phenomenon is not an isolated occurrence. Comments such as these can be found for videos such as The Onion's *Breaking News: Some Bullshit Happening Somewhere*, and vocal group DaVinci's Notebook's creation, *Title of the Song*. However the ratio of imitation comments to unaffected comments is considerably higher for *Award-Winning Trailer* considering the short time it has been available to the public.

### **Context of Artifact**

Interestingly enough, the BriTANicK duo are graduates of NYU Tisch School of the Arts. McElhaney majored in film and Kocher in acting. This makes the observation of the duo mocking their own field of study very interesting. When asked about the storyline they created Kocher replied, "We love the Oscars, but they do have a specific type of film they pick" (Suddath). Both McElhaney and Kocher see themselves as more comedic than dramatic and have striven to make an impact on their school and their teachers who, as they implied, suggested to them throughout their academic careers that drama is the backbone of a quality movie. However, the topics they address in their film and the means by which they are presented to the audience suggest a whole lot more about society than a mere disrespect of comedy. In this way, *Award-Winning Trailer* becomes a rhetorical object—a piece of text awaiting a translation into ordinary terms of understanding.

### **History of Rhetorical Criticism**

True rhetorical criticism began with the teachings of Herbert Wichelns. His essay, *The Literary Criticism of Oratory*, was published in 1925 and sparked a fire of critical analysis (Zarefsky 383). The essay compared the differences between the present literary criticism to a new idea; that of rhetorical criticism. Literary criticism of the 1920s can be loosely defined as the study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature, both modern and classic. This process involved forming a literary theory and providing a discussion of the text's methods and goals. Rhetorical Criticism, however, broadened the scope of discussion to that of spoken discourse, symbols, social movements and functions. The main point in this method is to analyze the artifact by studying its symbols, be they words, phrases, images, gestures or discourse in general, and in doing so provide an explanation of how and why they persuade their audience of an action or viewpoint (Foss 3). Rhetorical criticism, then, functions as a bridge between a person and the ideas presented in a situation. In short, rhetorical criticism seeks to understand how symbols affect people and, thus, provide insight into this method.

The traditional method of rhetorical criticism requires a methodical analysis of the artifact. As history progressed, different methods were developed and improved upon. The fact remains, however, that a person's own beliefs and values are embedded in his or her criticism of an

artifact. Because each person comes from a unique background and progresses through an entirely different set of experiences, one person's view will never be wholly identical to another's. Each has a lens through which he views himself, his culture and since his way of viewing this is unique, his interpretation of the meaning of the experience will be unique. This recognition led to a whole new idea of rhetorical criticism.

### **Generative Criticism: Letting the Artifact Define Itself**

Instead of using a cookie-cutter method to analyze one part of the artifact, generative criticism urges the critic to note the prominent and diverse themes in the artifact and develop a theory based upon the collective meanings. In this type of criticism, the explanations for the artifact are derived from the artifact itself, rather than by the use of a single method. "As useful as the formal methods of criticism are for discovering insights into rhetoric, they do not always allow what is most interesting and significant in an artifact to be captured and explained" (Foss 387). By engaging in generative criticism a much more complex and in-depth discussion of the artifact is created as one allows the elements of an artifact to lend themselves to explanation.

In this essay it is argued that *A Trailer for Every Academy Award-Winning Movie Ever Made* is more than just a funny YouTube video; it is a lesson meant to educate the public. That is, the video teaches viewers what the world views as unerringly important and how to react to such time-worn stereotypes. In examining *Award-Winning Trailer* the author will follow the format of Brian L. Ott and Beth Bonnstetter's idea of parodic tourism in order to explain the film's ability to induce its unique following. This template will be used to examine what the video says about the values of today's society, the lesson BriTANicK provides concerning how to address these values, and the audience's application of this lesson to their cultural landscape.

### **Film as a Rhetorical Force**

Films are undeniably rhetorical. In stating this, the author does not claim that all viewers have the same reaction to an experience. This would suggest that each person would have to have the exact same background and set of values. Since this is not possible, neither is the idea that everyone will interpret a film the same way. Instead, it is evident that the symbolic forms within a film offer audiences different equipment for confronting and resolving the unique challenges in their present social surroundings. It then becomes the job of the critic to "identify the modes of discourse enjoying currency in a society and to link that discourse to the real situations for which it is symbolic equipment" (Brummet 161). This is to say that, by describing and analyzing a film's distinctive rhetorical form, the rhetor provides audiences with a "guide book" detailing symbolic action in the real world. This type of criticism, rather than fitting an artifact into a category, teaches the audience to use media in a way that will help them understand their world.

*Award-Winning Movie* is a parody of all things considered stereotypical in the category of Oscar-winning movies. Its most obvious connections are to *Rain Man* (1988), *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), and *Forrest Gump* (1994) (from which the soundtrack, as well as some themes, is used). Each of these movies was either nominated for or

won an Academy Award, and BriTANicK incorporate several of their themes into *Award-Winning Trailer*. However, as mentioned before, the unique dialogue of this video means that the characters do not have names, but merely descriptive titles. However in the spirit of stereotypical award-winning movies, we have a lead male, friend of the lead male, disabled character, and lead female who make up the majority. The plot also references ideas generally found in Oscar movies, featuring, among other things, physical/mental disability, a fall from prosperity to difficulty, a rise to prosperity, and politically controversial topics (i.e. homosexuality, and minority rights). The film imitates very closely the classical style of Hollywood, following the outline of a linear narrative. However, the dialogue is not a classical form of speech but rather a form of metatext in which the object of the sentence and the content of the sentence are the same. Thus, the sentence refers to itself. "This is a sentence." is a fitting example of a self-referential meta-sentence. This dialogue structure presents the unique opportunity for the film to be split into two modes of experience which will be called *implied* and *explanatory*.

The implied approach is the classic approach to a film. There are characters whose journey is understood through their speech and actions and the meaning is conveyed through tone, expression, body language, etc. All of these elements are quite ambiguous and open to interpretation but also to misinterpretation. As seen from this approach, the plot unfolds as follows.

The protagonist, who will be referred to as "Lead Male" (Nick Kocher) is introduced as young and successful, and happy. The friend or "Beloved Actor" (Brian McElhaney) shows concern that Lead Male's life is not complete, but Lead Male is confident in his success. A third character is introduced as a young man (presumably Lead Male's brother) who is identified as a "character suffering from the most topical disability of the present year." Lead Male and Character must now learn to work through their differences. "Lead Female," the rebel of the bunch, enters the scene in a lighthearted dialogue expressing her interest in Lead Male. The two seem to be enjoying life, and things between Lead Male and Character are going well until Beloved Actor again insists that everything is not okay. From that point on a "string of heightened and seemingly unrelated plots" unfold. Differences arise between the characters, which leads to a question of Lead Male's sexual orientation. Also an unnamed trustworthy character is found to be untrustworthy, and Lead Male must help a Latin-American teenager improve his self-worth, defend the innocence of an older, black male, and support anti-military efforts. Somewhere in this process Character is injured and rushed to the hospital where he presents Lead Male with an inspiringly innocent statement that leads him on his road to change. Beloved Actor surfaces once again to point out Lead Male's character flaws and Lead Female pleads for a change. The transformation beings to emerge as Lead Male speaks to a sports team, and then the credits roll. As the film closes, the cast is seated around a table enjoying a card game, all disagreements and trials seemingly forgotten in a moment of comic relief to ensure the whole film is not a drama.

The second mode of experience suggested, the *explanatory* approach, is embedded in the dialogue. By looking closely at the text and locating the key terms—here defined as those which have been emphasized, occur frequently, or function as summary terms—the alternate version of the film emerges. This account is much less ambiguous and more succinct, clearly stating what is happening in the film from an almost omniscient viewpoint.

In beginning, there is an introduction of wealth and success which is correlated to physical attractiveness. Concern arises, but confidence blindly prevails. There is an unexpected introduction of suffering which causes frustration. Others have admiration for this journey. This sparks interest. A relationship blooms giving meaning and significance to life. Again there is concern, and again, it is valid. Differences create separation, accusations lead to suspicion, and trust is broken. The remedy is to help, prove, and fight to regain what was lost. Naivety provides inspiration, and more accusations provoke an overreaction and pleas of restoration. Inspiration and advice are offered by a third party, after which motivation is finally attained. The moral is then shared and the film ends in laughter and ease.

Though the two versions of the film are similar, the implications and stereotypical exhibits of the film are more accurately expressed in the self-referential, explanatory approach. Instead of allowing the audience to come to their own conclusion about the cause and effect elements of the themes, the metatext allows for a much more pointed description of what is happening. As will be illustrated in the next section, this dual interpretation allows the viewers to more accurately grasp the themes which are presented and help correlate the film to real-time experiences.

### **Parody and Parodic Tourism**

Contrary to modern media, the idea of a parody was not always popular. However, with the rise of postmodernist literature and theory, the idea has seen a revival, and is now traditionally understood as the imitation of a target object with mockery and/or irony (Rose 1, 17). It is possible, though, that ridicule may not be the sole purpose of a parody. Other theories suggest that a parody is not solely meant to mock, but could also honor and perpetuate that which it targets (Hutcheon 101). As time has progressed, it is also notable that more than one target text is sometimes included in a parody, and often it is the stereotype of an element or theme which is being satirized, as in the film *Spaceballs* (1987) and the song by DaVinci's Notebook, *Title of the Song* (2008). Although it is fairly recent, *Award-Winning Trailer* is a relatively unique parody in its treatment of this field, and its use of self-referential metatext dialogue.

Due to the means of presentation, and social prevalence of the themes presented, the underlying form of *Award-Winning Trailer* is that of *parodic tourism*. By using self-referential metatext, the film encourages the audience to recognize and actively participate in a cultural tour of the stereotypical elements of an award-winning movie. This participation serves as the basis for developing the audience's symbolic equipment.

“In a media-saturated culture, where cinematic codes and formulas are endlessly repeated...the extraordinary can quickly become the ordinary” (Ott 315). Through the repetition of themes and generic codes, objects begin to fall into stereotypical categories. When this

happens, people seek a form of tourism in which the ordinary can once again become extraordinary. This is precisely how *Award-Winning Trailer* functions. In both its presentation of the topic and its treatment of that topic it simultaneously mocks and pays homage to the ability of the sensational to become average and the average to become sensational. Thus *Award-Winning Trailer* is a museum of dichotomy which takes the visitor on a tour of Oscar-worthy texts and their underlying codes while providing a blueprint for addressing the cultural elements that are paralleled.

When visitors tour a museum, exhibits teach them about the objects they are encountering. Similarly the self-referential metatext directs the viewer beyond the exhibit itself, to what it is the display is referencing. Thus, as viewers watch *Award-Winning Trailer*, the metatext familiarizes them with the scenes being played out—the generic “codes” of award-winning movies.

### **The Tour Guide: Lead Male**

Many tours include a tour guide and *Award-Winning Trailer* is no exception. When taking a tour, the tour guide is typically the first person one meets. In imitating this experience it is Lead Male who we encounter first and who is thereby established as the tour guide. Lead Male facilitates the presentation and information of the tour, helping the audience from one exhibit to the next. In the first scene he introduces himself saying, “A toast—establishing me as the wealthy, successful protagonist—who is handsome.” With this introduction in place Lead Male initiates the tour as his friends/museum employees raise their glasses and begin to chatter, one employee in particular turns to Beloved Actor and whispers, “murmur of agreement.” This establishes Lead Male in his position of tour guide and the guests as his employees, and also signals the beginning of the tour.

Lead Male narrates the tour as it progresses, as would any tour guide. Often he points out the key elements of exhibits by exaggeration of a word or gesture. Towards the end of the film Lead Male gives an inspiring speech to a sports team as one would to a group of tired employees. Lead Male’s role as tour guide is established further as he is the only character to directly acknowledge the audience. In one series of scenes Lead Male looks directly into the camera and details the specific events which must follow, much as would a tour guide explaining the details of something the tourists are about to see. In this action Lead Male confirms himself as the initiator.

### **The Tourist: Lead Male**

Although a tour guide is important for a thorough tour, the most important element would have to be the tourist, for without the tourist, the existence of a tour is pointless. In *Award-Winning Trailer* the viewer’s fill this role. Viewers “go on the tour” by following the narrative dialogue and “learn about” the exhibits by watching the film. To the extent that the exhibits draw on the viewers’ ability to summon up their stores of cultural knowledge, the exhibits could also be described as somewhat interactive. However, due to its physical limits as a film, tourists cannot touch artifacts or ask questions as they would in a normal tourist environment. Because

of this, a replacement is needed—a type of surrogate tourist (Ott 317). In *Award-Winning Trailer*, Lead Male, in addition to his role as tour guide, is also the surrogate tourist.

This is most evident in the second exhibit of concern when Beloved Actor cautions Lead Male that “a string of heightened and seemingly unrelated plots may now arise.” In response to this, Lead Male breaks character from the self-referential text to exclaim, “Dude!?” In addition, toward the end of the film once everything has wound down, Lead Male takes on the role of “experienced tourist,” or one who has already explored a museum, again breaking from the strict self-referential metatext dialogue. In the final scene Lead Male gives a piece of advice to the audience, “It’s not going to be entirely a dramatic film, because we laughed there.” Lead Male’s remarks are more than just a break from dialogue, they are “reactionary comments and conclusions about what he is experiencing” (Ott 318). These are made much like a tourist would upon experiencing wonder and awe, or, as in the second example, lending advice to newcomers.

### **The Curator: Beloved Actor**

A tour guide and tourists are the two most likely people present at a tour, but there is a third possibility. Behind the scenes in every good museum there is a curator, the individual who oversees the exhibits, organizes the tour and helps maintain it. In *Award-Winning Trailer* it is Beloved Actor who takes this mantle. Beloved Actor is present in several scenes, but prominent in only a few. This reinforces the idea of the curator as being present, but not seen. There are only three instances in which Beloved Actor plays a vital role. The first two are the scenes in which he shows “friendly concern” in giving advice to the tour guide/Lead Male. The third is when the tour is “derailed” and Beloved Actor points out why it has been disrupted exclaiming, “specific outlining of your major character flaws!” From the moment he joins the tour, it is evident that Beloved Actor is in charge. Though the tour guide may have more knowledge of the exhibits and their meaning, Beloved Actor clearly demonstrates that he is the boss, and, through his foreshadowing concerns and his advice, directs the tour just as he quite literally directs the film. As curator/director one can fire employees and ban tourists. By casting himself as Beloved Actor, McElhaney highlights the fact that all cultural artifacts are produced by something or someone, and that their structure is meant to evoke particular responses. He also demonstrates that the director of a film cannot fully dictate the outcome or the meaning gleaned from the texts by Beloved Actor’s overall inability to keep the tour from derailing. What will happen cannot be prevented because Lead Male ultimately chooses to ignore the advice of Beloved Actor, and instead attempts to conduct the tour alone.

In the same way no creator can successfully dictate how their artifact is to be interpreted. In the beginning it was stated that *Award-Winning Trailer*, as parodic tourism, equips viewers to navigate the context of postmodern society, meaning that the ultimate significance is left to the viewer, however, the underlying codes of the artifact provide the audience with *tools*. In particular it is argued that, in parodic tourism, “viewers are taught that they, too, actively construct the social world of which they are a part” (Ott 317). *Award-Winning Trailer* has encouraged just that, and the results are evident.

## **Social Implications: Parody the Parody**

Film, as social constructions, invite shared experiences. As before mentioned, everyone has a different lens through which they view and interpret experiences, therefore the author does not claim that all viewers have identical responses to a particular film. As such, rhetorical critics rarely take into account “citizen’s reactions,” however, in this case the reactions are fully representative of *Award-Winning Trailer’s* rhetorical force, and perpetuate its message.

*Award-Winning Trailer* is hosted primarily on YouTube, the popular video-sharing site. On YouTube one is able to view a video, comment on the video, become a member and contribute videos, subscribe to members “channels”, to “like” meaning “to vote for” a video or comment, and to “dislike” videos or comments.

Upon analysis of the comments left for *Award-Winning Trailer* it has been observed that the format of the comments generally reflect the style of the video’s dialogue. For the most part they are created on the basis of self-referential metatext, and often reference these very terms. As stated before, this occurrence is not the only example of this type of imitation. However, the ratio of imitation comments to unaffected comments is considerably higher for *Award-Winning Trailer* considering the short time it has been available to the public. The truly interesting discovery was the parallelism found in the way BriTANicK satirizes the stereotypical elements found in an award-winning movie, and the way in which the commenters “parody the parody”.

In a study of common comments left on YouTube videos, it was found that there are, what could be considered, five separate categories. The first group contains *spam comments*. These include corporate plugs or bits of completely unrelated information. The second group is made up of *personal gain comments*, usually an attempt at a clever or witty comment, posted to gain “likes” and increase the commenter’s recognition. The third group of comments is that of *affirmative comments*. Here the commenters praise the work, the creators, the idea behind the video, etc. The fourth group is left to the *derogative comments* which themselves are broken into two categories; malicious intent directed at the video, or directed at those who have “disliked” the video. In the fifth category, then, fall the comments which are composed of any combination of these.

It is these types of comments which are found for *Award-Winning Trailer*, except that many are modeled after the format of the dialogue. Instead of quoting their favorite part of the video, commenters instead write, “Quote from the video we just watched,” or “misspeeld quoaot of movei” instead of posting a misspelled quote from the video. They also bring in other culturally generic themes, such as the above mentioned misspelled comments, socially trending musical artists or movies, subjects people love to hate, or trending political issues, such as the comment, “aggressive political comment somehow bringing in America’s involvement in the Middle East.”

*Award-Winning Trailer* parodies the typical Oscar-winning movie through its satirical approach and humorously self-referential dialogue. However, in creating this video and doing this in a way that is comical and therefore agreeable, they are perpetuating and paying tribute to the very ideas they mock. It is in this way that BriTANicK play with their reality and construct

their culture by taking the well-known elements of an Oscar-winning movie and mocking it in a unique way, by utilizing those tools provided in *Award-Winning Trailer*, the commenter's on YouTube do the same, playfully imitating *Award-Winning Trailer* by taking the stereotypical elements of the YouTube culture and applying Britannic's blueprint. Just as every film is not a parody nor does it use a self-referential metatext dialogue, not every comment left for *Award-Winning Trailer* imitates that style. The fact remains, however, that many do. This confirms the assumption that not everyone interprets an artifact in the same way. It also confirms that *Award-Winning Trailer* is indeed a rhetorical force whose influence is evident in the YouTube culture, and perhaps in the personal culture of those who have viewed it. From this it can be drawn that the parodic tourism of *Award-Winning Trailer* not only teaches its viewers to interact with and take part in creating their reality, but provides its viewers the equipment necessary to do this by giving them a format for addressing the issues of a culture.

This essay has argued that BriTANicK's video *A Trailer for Every Academy Award-Winning Movie Ever Made* demonstrates an innovative form of storytelling best described as parodic tourism. By addressing the rhetorical features of this form—the self-referential metatext, tour guide, surrogate tourist and curator—the author attempts to explain how parodic tourism equips its audience to negotiate their individual cultural landscape of postmodernity. Specifically, the way in which the video addresses the accepted standards of a media stereotype, the effect of the video within its social arena, the transfer of its format to the social community's stereotypes, and its subsequent treatment of those have been examined. In this process of viewing the video, the audience finds the symbolic resources to address their own cultural standards, and manage changes. *Award-Winning Trailer* is not the first of its kind, but its ongoing success suggests that it will neither be the last. It will instead continue to be a crucial piece in the puzzle of examining the role of film—and of parodic tourism—in providing an audience with the tools to understand their surroundings and create their own social landscape.

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