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# Interview with Frederick L. Greene

By Keith M. Johnston

**Frederick (Fred) L. Greene** is a trailer copywriter based in Los Angeles. After graduating with a PhD in English Literature, Fred began working freelance for the famous trailer maker Andy Kuehn while looking for a teaching job. Fred has been involved in various aspects of movie marketing for over fifteen years, from writing poster taglines for *City of Angels* (Silberling, 1998), to writing scripts for film and video games trailers.

This transcript is an edited version of a series of e-mail exchanges that took place on 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2012 (as part of a student-led Q&A session run at the University of East Anglia's School of Film, Television & Media Studies).

**KMJ [Keith M. Johnston]:** Fred, let's start with how you got started, how you broke into the business?

**FG [Fred Green]:** Of course, I did everything wrong—I would have been much better served by applying for a reception position at a trailer house when I finished grad school, rather than advertising myself as a copywriter, as if I knew what I was doing... In Hollywood, the “biz” is a guild system, so employers don't care about advanced degrees and fancy diplomas (I had both) but prefer you to start at the bottom (in the mail room, at reception, as an assistant) and work your way up. No one trusts anyone they haven't already worked with, or about whom they don't already have plenty of references / recommendations, so it's advisable to take any job at a trailer house, demonstrate competency and enthusiasm and curiosity to learn. You need to love movies/moving images and like creative workplaces, tight deadlines and long hours.

**KMJ:** Can you take me through the job of a trailer producer, and the role you play within that as a scriptwriter?

**FG:** The trailer producer, depending on the boutique or trailer house, may be an arms length creative, or he/she may be the

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writer/editor/account executive and voice over artist, all rolled into one, or any combination thereof. It depends, which is the default answer to all these questions. In the established houses, a producer is assigned to create the materials for the client, whether a studio or a feature film producer. The trailer producer will hire/assign copywriters to draft exploratory scripts and hire/assign an editor to begin uploading the digital assets (the film) and making selections (the select reel) from the incoming dailies/or finished film. Usually the client has a vision for what he/she/it wants the trailer to “do” as marketing material. Or, the trailer producer will be asked for his opinion/input. Usually, it’s collaborative. The client has a general notion and the trailer producer responds and advises, and often skews it in the direction s/he deems most likely to achieve the result—i.e. sell tickets to the film.

As a copywriter, I come back with scripts and concepts. A few are chosen and sent to the client for approval. Then, from that “direction,” or creative outline/blueprint, the editor will begin cutting a trailer. The producer will assign a graphic designer to assist in creating the graphic appearance of the trailer, as well as its titles, cast run, copy, etc. A voice-over artist may also be hired to read the copy dramatically.

Versions of the trailer are completed by the editor. Those are sent to the client, who approves or sends back. Then, those approved trailer(s) are sent to the market research company which tests them, often via mall intercepts, with hundreds/thousands of average movie goers. The response and feedback from the market research firm is fed back into the creative process and another version(s) of the trailer is/are cut, approved and returned for testing. Of course, the trailer can test brilliantly and be approved by the studio/client right away. Or it can go through generations of revision, approval, testing, etc. etc. The studio is typically looking for an objective “score” from the tests, which confirms that people definitely want to or probably will see it opening weekend.

The producer’s job is to organize the creative and also to translate the objectives of the client into a trailer that realizes what he/she also thinks is the most effective way to sell the movie, given its strengths/weaknesses. At the granular level, a producer will work closely with writer, editor, graphic designer, music librarian, and voice over artists to obtain the best possible “solution” to the creative challenges. Most Producers are also writers with editorial chops, so they see their role as collaborative as well as mediating.

The artistry and the creative challenge are motivating, because even a terrible movie can have a genius trailer; and a great movie is all the more stressful because you believe in it and want to create materials that rise to its level of excellence. People are in the movie business, believe it or

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not, because they love film and would rather think of themselves as creative artists, at the end of the day, than as paper shufflers or widget makers. So, “solving” the marketing problem and addressing the challenge of finding an audience within a competitive, saturated marketplace, is job #1.

**KMJ:** Can you take me through your process when you start work on a trailer? For example, what’s the first step, what materials have you got to work from?

**FG:** As a writer, I watch what I’m sent—sometimes an un-rendered draft of the feature. Sometimes, it’s complete. I’ll watch it once and if I can read the script, I’ll do that too. I take notes. I don’t need to know every detail of the plot—that’s too much information, but I do need to understand genre, story, emotion, appealing qualities and weaknesses to finesse/conceal.

If the project is eagerly awaited and there’s a concern over piracy, the client/studio may be extremely parsimonious about materials that the trailer producer gets to use, for fear of it getting “out” into the public arena. And, more commonly, a feature might not be complete or completely rendered at the time that its marketing efforts begin. In that case, you work with what you can get. Video Game projects add this wrinkle: given the game engine and the fact that this is a digitally created asset, it is possible to create special materials—not found in the game—for the marketing. Often, when I wrote vid game scripts, I was invited to describe things that weren’t in the materials I was shown on the understanding that the editor could most likely create /generate/fake them.

Generally, the client/studio/film producer will make available as much materials as they have, in order to give the trailer maker everything possible to make the best preview... anything and everything including materials from b-roll and dailies. You can reverse shots and assign Visual FX artists to “sweeten” or enhance images. No one remembers the trailer when watching the film (well, almost no one) so you are licensed to do whatever with whatever materials you happen to possess. Outright lying/misrepresentation is discouraged—(it doesn’t work so well; audiences resent it) but mixing up elements, plot order, causality, separating dialogue from scene, suggesting complications that aren’t in the film, diverting attention from unpopular issues (like cancer!)—all of that is perfectly acceptable and appropriate in service of your marketing objectives, which, I must remind you are different from the artistic objectives of the film.

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**KMJ:** Is there a particular type of film trailer you specialize in, or do you do work across the board?

**FG:** Independent producers who bring us their films and studios who are handling the marketing for the films' they've financed and will be distributing. At my former company, we also created trailers for films that had yet to be shot—we called them sizzles, which is the term of art in the industry for creating a visual identity for a “concept” or pitch. Basically, you “fake” what the finished film and its marketing will look like using odds and ends of other films, occasionally supplementing these odds and ends with specially shot materials. We also made promos, which are trailers for films that haven't yet found a distributor. They are made to take to the film market –say Cannes, Toronto, etc. and they are typically longer, more informative and less gimmicky, since the end user (the film buyer) wants to see how well the film is made and how the acting/directing/production has been accomplished.

**KMJ:** Is there a general rule of thumb for how long a trailer production should take? How many people do you expect to work with during that time?

**FG:** As short as a weekend; as long as half a year. It depends, of course, on budget, time constraints, complication, research and testing, decision making hierarchies, etc. However, a month is very typical. It can also depend on the size of the company: at a small trailer shop (house/boutique), the creative director/producer may also be the owner and copywriter. Sometimes he/she is a recovering editor. But in terms of discrete jobs there are: account executive (handling client communications, budget negotiations, time frame); producer (project manager) creative director (creative supervision), copywriter, editor, graphic designer, music librarian, voice over artist, and assistants (coffee, food, comic relief).

**KMJ:** What do you see as the main change that has taken place in your time in the industry?

**FG:** In 1915, the year of the first recognizable trailer, we sold story, spectacle, stars and genre. In movie posters and glass slides from before the era of trailers, we sold story, spectacle, genre, and stars, as that cultural category of the film world came into existence. I think that while

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human nature is not static or essential or trans-historical, an abiding interest in characters, plots, and archetypes and visual wonders can be discerned in the historical sweep of movie marketing. Trailer rhetoric used to be more bombastic and hyperbolic; then it became subtler and less aggressive. But there are cycles in advertising, just as in history, and some of these earlier practices can be utilized effectively in a different era, in which different communicational norms obtain. We're in a post-modern era of movie marketing where all styles, approaches, conventions can be exploited and re-invigorated, at least in theory. Today, voice-over is less common than graphic cards (words on text). But voice-over will probably stage a comeback soon, as audiences grow tired of the contemporary hegemony of a particular approach.

Things have gotten faster. It's faster and cheaper to make trailers these days (and easier to enter into the business, proper), and over the last 15-20 years, much greater attention is paid to what we do. Box office figures and trailer websites are part of a sea-change in the movie marketing industry. Now, a film has to open well, or it gets little chance to succeed. Therefore, the stress on the trailers, TV spots, teasers, posters, etc. is greater than ever and yet so is the competition from other films and the materials produced by other trailer makers.

Plus, there are more competitors in the business, and other centers beyond Hollywood and New York and London. It's cheaper to open a shop - Final Cut Pro is a fraction of the cost of Avid based systems, so it no longer takes hundreds of thousands of dollars to open a boutique. Rather, two writer/editors can work from a garage or spare room, for 10 or 20K. There's more content than ever before and anything/everything goes. It's a totally post-modern era of creativity, where you can try something that worked in the 30's or whenever, or you can try to "reinvent" movie marketing all over again.

**KMJ:** One trailer producer I talked to described a sense of autonomy in trailer production, do you still find that, or are you more constrained in how you approach a trailer script these days?

**FG:** On the latter point, yes, sometimes... The distributor of a film (a studio, for example) has enormous experience/expertise with marketing movies, so they will have detailed input that you ignore at your peril. Some films come in, though, without an especially knowledgeable or confident producer/distributor. They come to you (a given trailer house with a reputation) because they want your expertise and advice. Sometimes, the creative director/trailer producer will write the creative brief, if one hasn't been done by the client/studio. These are almost

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always general, vague and ambitious. But, clients do expect to see that you have taken their wishes into consideration. Lastly, remember that every film, no matter how formulaic, is different and enters a different marketplace (however subtly) than its predecessors. This is what makes trailer-making artisanal rather than the result of a factory, assembly process.

**KMJ:** Given the competitive market you describe, do you produce multiple versions of a trailer, or trailer scripts, for different audiences?

**FG:** Often there will be versions produced that the client gets to review. And of course, even if the client (studio/producer) loves your trailer, the great unwashed public whose opinions are solicited by the market research professionals, will be consulted about which trailer they like best. There's a saying that the editor (and by extension, the trailer house) only gets Version #1. By that, it's meant that an array of other marketing opinions and judgments and "decisions" are going to be integrated into the final trailer. A trailer is often "done," only when time has run out before its release... Often, a trailer will be given to multiple vendors in order to see who comes up with the best preview. And often, one boutique does a great opening; another has a great ending; and a third, may be hired to stitch the two parts of other company's trailers together. (This is called the Frankenstein and while it's not popular, it is common practice.)

It is your job to imagine and understand what the audience wants, desires, needs, fears, loves, worries over, and so forth. Every film does not appeal to every audience and marketing materials (the trailer, for example) must endeavor to conceive who it is addressing and to whom it is appealing. Some films have many audiences—of all ages, sexes, classes, education levels, etc. We call them 4 quadrant films (based on rather old, traditional and woefully imprecise demography), and they theoretically can be enjoyed by everyone. For these, often big budget, wide-release films, you create as many versions of the trailer and TV spots as you think are needed to reach all the different audiences. Other films have much less universal appeal and often smaller budgets: In that case, you pitch your film to the largest/most likely audience and commit your limited resources where they will do the most good.

[With] different territories and genres, they imply different expectations and approaches. Foreign marketing is often best done by a boutique in that nation. But because of budget constraints, an American or UK based boutique will often do a "card" trailer (using text on screen, rather than voice-over) which allows the trailer to be translated into other languages

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and tailored for the cultural differences that inhere across nations and languages, without having to be opened up and re-edited. Different genres imply different formulas (or styles of approach) but they still have to be adapted (or, as often, rejected) for the particular film in question.

**KMJ:** In your opinion, is a trailer just another marketing tool, or is it part of a larger trans-media, narrative world?

**FG:** Why can't it be both? It is certainly, and ultimately a tool to position a film within a crowded, competitive marketplace, a bid for attention in a saturated environment. But, one of the ways that advertising achieves its ends is, (and I quote Ogilvy on Advertising here) by delivering information, by sharing "news." Tell the audience what kind of movie it is; who's in it; what the conflicts are and the likely resolutions. Let them see some of what they will get, but also give them a chance to use their imaginations to complete the "story". Some trailers need to "explain" the film or provide a narrative "précis;" others, for a series like Harry Potter, for example, are so well known that they must address different "desires" among the audience rather than for "what is going to happen and to whom." You engage the audience in a variety of ways—sometimes with information; sometimes with mystery; sometimes with spectacle; sometimes by withholding spectacle. It depends, of course, on the film, its source materials, its stars, its budget, its FX/spectacle, its buzz, etc. etc.

**KMJ:** To finish off, then, what do you think makes a trailer work, what differentiates a 'good' trailer from a 'bad' one?

**FG:** It depends. If there are major stars, sell them. If the FX and spectacle are jaw-dropping, you sell that. If the story is fascinating / compelling, you sell that. Typically, you sell a variety and a combination of the fundamental appeals (story, genre, spectacle, stars as well as the lesser qualities of provenance, popular reaction, critical reception). Some filmgoers love genre—predictable pleasures; some love independent and surprising, generically indeterminate film. It depends on the project and its context.

But I do have a [simple] answer... Editing. That is the ultimate, fundamental, critical essential, determining skill/ art form in trailer making. (And I'd say that editing occupies the same role in feature film...)

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Editors are magicians.

Bad films routinely have great trailers...because even the worst piece of dreck, at 90+ minutes, will have a few good moments—a joke, a dramatic scene, a visual payoff, that you can tart-up into something misleadingly appealing. When you've got a bad film, you've got no choice but to disassemble, deceive, distract or mislead. It's actually rather fun, and presents an irresistible creative challenge. Editors can do wonders. Copywriters find it as easy (often easier) to write strong trailer scripts for a bad film.

A good film is often harder—typically because it is good precisely because it's not formulaic, predictable, obvious or already familiar. Often, the complexities of a good trailer are extremely challenging to capture and convey in a 2 minute trailers. A good film also exudes a kind of integrity that you feel protective of and want to faithfully re-present, which can complicate the sleight of hand that often accompanies good trailer making.

But, ultimately, what makes a trailer successful? A strong concept for how to sell the movie and good editing to realize that vision.

**KMJ:** Fred, thank you very much.

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