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PREFACE

"Not merely para": continuing steps in paratextual research

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The term "paratext" was coined by Gérard Genette in his 1987 book *Seuils*, translated into English in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Writing of literature, Genette used the term to describe all those things that surround the actual literary work that we may be inclined to consider not wholly a part of it, but that nevertheless append themselves to it, whether physically, as with book covers, prefaces, afterwords, and choices over paperstock and typeface, or conceptually, as with reviews, interviews, ads, and promotional materials. His point was that these matter, that they regularly change, edit, revise, or outright create meaning: since we regularly do "judge a book by its cover," Genette argued that textual analysis must account for the meanings that covers and their paratextual colleagues create. Several years after its publication, various media and communication studies scholars began applying the term to film, television, and other media, finding it a handy term to encompass the huge world of promos, hype, trailers, merchandise, licensed games, DVD bonus materials, ancillaries, transmedia extensions, fan texts, and more, and similarly calling for greater attention to their roles in creating media culture, meaning, and power.

Both of us contributed to a sort of "first round" of work flagging the paratext's existence, importance, and calling for more work on them (Rob especially through his and Robert Westerfelhaus' 2002 article, "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet," Jonathan through his 2010 book, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*). Now that we know that paratexts walk amongst us, though, and with the widespread and encouraging take-up of the term in media and communication studies, we thought a special issue was in order, taking stock of a burgeoning "second round" of work that moves beyond noting paratexts' presence, and instead "gets on with it" and uses paratextual analysis to advance a wide and impressive range of academic debates. This issue therefore sees paratexts and paratextual theory intervening in discussions of cultural memory (Hills and Garde-Hansen), activism (Scott, Johnson), identity politics and representation (Nishime, Draper, Scott), game culture (Consalvo), production studies (Grainge), global media travels (Bernabo), branding (Aronczyk), celebrity culture (Draper), constructions of the nation (Hills and Garde-Hansen, Aronczyk), social media "filter bubbles" (Johnson), translation (Bernabo), textual recoding and/or modding (Nishime, Consalvo, Scott), and more, including how universities do business (Grainge). Aronczyk and Consalvo each further finesse our understandings of exactly what paratexts are and how they work, moreover.

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To introduce the issue further, to offer some definitional clarity, and to survey the paratextual landscape, we decided to conduct an interview discussion.

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Brookey: Are paratexts merely para?

Gray: I'm glad you ask, since I'd like to straighten that out. When I wrote *Show Sold Separately*, I didn't want to create a neologism and offer a new phrase, so I used Genette's term. But the danger of doing so was that it hitched my wagon a little too closely to Genette's definition of paratext. However, there are differences between what each of us say that truly matter. First, Genette sees two things: the text and the paratext. Therefore to him, the paratext is always outside the text, and it is likely always secondary. He sees paratexts as *important*, of course, and that is why his work is groundbreaking, but they are nonetheless always in a position of subservience to the text. By contrast, I use Barthes (1977) to draw a distinction between the work and the text, where the text is the entity in society and culture, not "just" the aesthetic entity. Using that definition, we should see the paratext as outside *the work*, but when you put the work and paratexts together, you get the text. The "para" is deceptive because it might suggest it's outside the text when, in fact, I think paratexts are intrinsic parts of the text as social and cultural unit.

This also means that the hierarchies of value or importance are never predetermined: to different people and different communities, at different times, the hierarchy of value will be different. Indeed, sometimes a paratext that to me is central might be one that you are not even aware of. So, to me, that is one of the key differences between Genette's definition and use and my own. I tried to spell that out in *Show Sold Separately*, but clearly, I didn't spell it out well enough, because I still often see people use the language of paratext versus text, but in fact, it cannot be versus the text because it is part of the text.

Incidentally, I also didn't spell out the distinction between paratext and "brand" well enough, which is why I was delighted to get Melissa Aronczyk to do exactly that for this issue.

Brookey: Well, I agree that we can't oppose the paratext to the text, and I somehow think, in certain ways, that behind the idea of separating the two is a ghost of authorship. And when we begin to think about paratexts from the conditions of production, those divisions do not really make sense, nor do they capture the conditions of production because there are several texts that are motivated by paratexts. I often talk about how Disney has scheduled the Marvel Universe films into the year 2026, and that schedule is not driven by a bunch of great scripts sitting on their desks, it is driven by plans of how they can monetize different intellectual property from the Marvel Universe. Separating the two, in my mind, becomes very problematic, particularly when we look at it in those conditions of production.

Gray: Yeah, actually, that speaks to another key difference between my understanding of paratextuality and Genette's. To Genette, it does not count as a paratext if it is not by the key producers, which makes perhaps more sense when we are talking about a novel that in theory was written by one person. But even then, Genette was not a production studies scholar, and I think he is overestimating the degree to which when you publish a book with a press, you have full agency in deciding the paratexts. One of my books (*Battleground: The Media*) has a horrible cover, and I had no say in it. Genette's vision of

authorship—when he says that a paratext isn't a paratext unless it's by that production group—relies on notions of intent, and on an ideal of coherent authorship, but I think production studies scholars have proved to us that authorship and production are messier processes than that. Once you open the door to, you know, a showrunner working with a writing team coming up with an idea, and then someone in another city or country puts together a trailer based on the scant scenes he or she has been given, and once you realize that those people might have absolutely no communication with one another, yet we nevertheless allow that the ensuing trailer is a paratext, I think we have to allow all sorts of things to be paratexts: fan-made stuff, all sorts of things.

Brookey: I think that also brings up another good point. Even auteur theory was a conceit about agency in terms of the production of film, and we have always understood that agency in film production is much more complex than that. As you pointed out, there can be different directors, and this is almost always the case when you have a second production unit. In terms of the screenplay, there can be multiple screenwriters, and they may yank somebody in as a script doctor at some point in the middle of the production to begin punching up the dialogue. In fact, Carrie Fisher, who used to sardonically note her own existence as a Princess Leia paratext, was a rather active script doctor.

Gray: There's a fascinating *New Yorker* article about this guy who worked with Lionsgate, doing their posters and a lot of their promos, and he's nicknamed The Cobra (Friend, 2009). It talks about how, because Lionsgate is an indie outfit, they cannot afford to work on the same budget system as does Disney. Disney can have spectacular failures, Lionsgate cannot. So they will put two thirds of their budget into promos, and The Cobra will do what he wants to do. One of the examples they give is the biopic *W.*, and we're told how the director, Oliver Stone, hated the poster because it is having fun with Bush by putting him into Rodin's thinker pose, thereby suggesting the film is playful and satiric. We expect the film to be goofy, a brutal attack, or both. But in fact, it played it seriously. The Cobra's point was that he did not care because his job is to get you into the theater. Those moments fascinate me when you realize that different people in the production process are trying to do really, really different things with their work or paratexts, and somehow they all get stitched together—sometimes sloppily and incoherently, sometimes neatly—as a text. As an audience member, trying to make sense of *W.*, we have to make sense of all of those things at the same time.

Brookey: Absolutely, and while we have been discussing paratexts from the perspective of production, this might be a good time to turn the conversation to the perspective of consumption. If you experienced that poster, it is part of the experience of the film. I do not see how you can abstract it from the experience of seeing the film, particularly since the poster is supposed to motivate you to see the film and to invite you into that experience. And again, to make the separation between the two, text and paratext, perhaps ignores the conditions of perception too.

Expanding on the issue of consumption, digital technologies have certainly changed media consumptive practices, especially mobile technologies. How do you see these digital technologies influencing the importance, or the position, of paratext in the media landscape?

Gray: I think that influence is huge because interfaces are becoming so much more important. I cut the cord about two years ago. I have other devices and services now, but in the early-going, everything I saw on TV was now through the Apple TV. And I was struck by how all sorts of things that I usually interacted with, I was now interacting with differently because of the interface. I realized that we have not talked enough about interface. Interface is part and parcel with paratext. It is one of the gateways we enter through to get things. In the digital era, you have all sorts of modifications of these gateways that we go through, and they are often like organizing systems. One of the pieces I love in this issue is Derek Johnson's article about Facebook Trending, and the potentially huge role it can play in determining exactly *which* early messages and paratexts we receive before watching a film or television show, and thus in setting up paratextual echo chambers or filter bubbles. On one level, then, digital media often become organizational systems that arrange how we interact with texts.

Digital media are active in shifting the ground beneath paratextual feet in other ways, too. On another level, for instance, digital media allow for the proliferation of paratextuality because we can click, click, click, and get through way more than we can get through in physical space. They allow for a heightened ubiquity and everydayness of all sorts of texts. And when we have such access to countless paratexts, there's bound to be more and more instances in which even the logic of what is "the work itself" and what is the paratext flip, something that Mia Consalvo's article in this issue examines thoughtfully, as she looks at gaming paratexts that have become the thing itself. Flip or no flip, though, all this extra access can of course also do a lot to open texts up for fan involvement. Fanfic existed long before the Internet, but in an era in which one had to wait for someone to send you a 'zine to get a hold of a piece of fic, we didn't have the same kind of access that we now do digitally.

Brookey: It is really interesting that you used the example of old 'zines and fan fiction, because those harken back to an early digital era, with the personal computers and desktop publishing. Those earlier digital technologies made the production of those 'zines relatively easy, and that introduces a whole different discussion of how those earlier, amateur publishing efforts helped usher in blogging and social media. But let's not have the discussion. Instead, let's talk about networked digital media, because when you talked about interface, I immediately thought about the most current version of Netflix. Netflix has always organized things in different kinds of generic relationships, and also in a relationship to your interests as a viewer. But now, when you scroll through the different film and television options, they automatically begin playing scenes from those options. It is a very interesting experience to scroll through that stuff and have a scene begin immediately playing, and then scroll to the next and another scene plays. Particularly when those scenes are often in a row of films that are supposed to reflect particular interests or a particular genre, because they are kind of speaking as a diffuse, yet unified text.

Gray: Yeah, what's fascinating is how that can be personalized. We're all getting potentially really different experiences of texts and of the textual world based on what the various algorithms around us think they know about us. On my Apple TV, for instance, when I log into Netflix, there is no category or menu of Netflix Originals. I know you can get such a menu on other interfaces, but I'm still interested in how Netflix doesn't seem to

want any one of us to know about everything they are making. They just want Rob Brookey to know about the kinds of things they think Rob Brookey is going to like, and they want Jonathan Gray to know about the kinds of things they think Jonathan Gray is going to like. That is why Netflix never told me about its Adam Sandler movie.

Brookey: One of the things that is very interesting too is the idea of flow and how these online portals for the delivery of content have refigured the sense of flow. When you scroll through these options, and these scenes play, it really does reflect the old sense of television flow, or the idea of similar content keeping the audiences engaged, but of course it is manifest in a very different way.

Gray: The easy (if still often fascinating) thing in studying paratextuality is to grab a paratext by its throat and work out what is doing, what relationship it has to the larger text. "All" you've done at that point, though, is to have worked out potential meanings. So, for instance, thinking about your great article on how the *Fight Club* DVD bonus materials are trying to frame our interpretation of the film (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002), all of that means nothing to someone who has not seen or listened to the DVD bonus materials. Similarly, in *Show Sold Separately*, I wrote about the *Lord of the Rings*' DVD bonus materials and their meanings at length, but I am aware of the fact that probably not too many people spent 100 or more hours getting through all those bonus materials. Meanwhile, the flow that Netflix gives me is not the flow that Netflix gives you or someone else. What's really hard, and what I am trying to wrap my head around as I think about moving forward, is to answer the question of how we ascertain which flow audiences experience. Which paratexts are loud and which paratexts are quiet? Which are the ones we cannot avoid and which are the ones we are more likely to avoid? And how do different paratexts create different we's there too?

Brookey: It would seem that those questions also present challenges for practitioners of media criticism, because the default has usually been the discrete text. Generally, it has always been easier to choose a discrete text, because it was often easier defending your choice; a diffuse text often required more explanation and defense. We still often let a discrete text function as the object in a good deal of media criticism, but is looking at just the movie, capturing the movie?

Gray: Yeah, exactly. LeiLani Nishime's article in this issue underlines that point extremely well, since she looks at how operative specific paratexts have been to framings and reframings of Bruce Lee. Representational analysis is a key part of media studies, yet her article shows how limited an examination of representations of Asian masculinity through Lee would be if it looked just at his films; instead, she shows how productive representational analysis can be when it considers what work paratexts do, long after the films are over, to comment upon in this case Asian masculinity.

Brookey: I am flattered by the way you characterize the *Fight Club* paper. A little embarrassed too because honestly, we kind of arrived at it ass-backwards. Robert Westerfelhaus and I were looking at doing another project together, and we had both seen the film and were interested in the way it deals with gender, sexuality, and consumption. We both agreed that while those were interesting issues, that kind of criticism probably wouldn't make the cut in a communication journal; and, of course, we were both untenured at

the time. I remember the *Fight Club* DVD was getting a lot of attention when it came out, because of all the special features, and so Robert and I decided to look at how those features mediated those issues. But, how did you become interested in paratext? Were you first interested as a consumer and then a scholar, or vice versa?

Gray: My first book, which is based on my Ph.D. dissertation, is about intertextuality, and I was looking at parody, using *The Simpsons* as a case study. I recorded about 13 seasons of *The Simpsons*, then I watched them all, and I took notes on what they were saying. It was pretty exhaustive textual analysis. And I was writing about what *The Simpsons* was doing and what *The Simpsons* was saying. I became more and more uncomfortable as I was doing that, though, particularly because at a grander level I was talking about where texts were and how texts worked, yet I realized that I was missing so much of it by focusing only on the show. It is naïve to think you can talk about *The Simpsons* just by looking at the TV show. For instance, a classic dilemma here is with regards what *The Simpsons* says about consumerism and commercialism. I think it is entirely defensible to say that there is no mainstream text in American TV history that has been more reliably critical of consumerism and commercialism *at the level of the television show*. Every episode has some dig in it.

Brookey: You'll get no argument from me.

Gray: But *at the level of the text*, there are also no shows in the history of American TV that appear on as many key chains, T-shirts, notebooks, bedding, toys, all sorts of things. So here I was writing a chapter on how *The Simpsons* are really critical about advertising and advertising culture, but I was troubled by the fact that I was only consulting the TV show, not the wider cultural unit that is *The Simpsons*, which has a much more conflicted and ambivalent relationship to consumerism and commercialism. I knew this was too much for the Ph.D. thesis, but I needed to come back to it. So I stuck a pin in it, vowing to come back later to think in more detail about what all those other things—the paratexts—do to contribute to the text at large. That is how I got into studying paratexts.

By the way, one of the things I really like about your *Fight Club* piece is that it points to one of the more exciting applications of paratext theory that I have seen, which is to realize that sometimes paratexts will play an especially important role in dog-whistling, and producers can use them to try and move audiences towards or away from particular readings. Draper (2012) has a cool article in *Popular Communication* that follows on from this, about *American Idol*, and what he called "the lens of detection" that surrounding press and paratexts applied to discussing Adam Lambert's sexuality when he was a contestant. In that case, FOX and *American Idol* resolutely avoided making any declarative statements on Lambert's sexuality, but this has been common throughout media history, as LGBTQ content often isn't declared openly and thus has to be "detected." As Draper shows with *American Idol*, as your article on *Fight Club* shows, and as countless other instances show (witness Charlton Heston and Gore Vidal's battles, at the paratextual stage of interviews, over whether Ben-Hur is gay), paratexts have been central to inviting and endorsing a queer reading in some cases, or to trying to shut it down in other cases.

That said, I don't want to suggest that the confluence of paratextual studies and LGBTQ studies is limited to an era of forced closeting and detection; indeed Draper's contribution to this issue artfully examines how paratexts maintain importance in a different cultural context for diva worship, given how they circulate information on which divas have

supported LGBTQ rights and turn context into paratext in order variously to grow or shrink given divas' gay fan bases.

Brookey: We got a lot of flack on the *Fight Club* piece, informed by this old cultural studies notion of reception, and people said we were arguing that audiences are cultural dopes. In fact, we were arguing that producers had become more strategic. Those ideas about audience resistance and cultural dopes come from media conditions that no longer exist. We also have to recognize that some of the students we have been teaching that cultural studies theory to, have now become part of the industry. Perhaps in some ways, what we are seeing is that our students have paid attention after all, and they have learned to speak to audiences in very strategic and specific ways. What we were saying about the *Fight Club* DVD, is that the different agents of the production were trying to speak to an audience that perhaps did not want to recognize the film's homoerotism. When we were working on the project, I would mention it in passing to a class. Invariably a guy would come up after class and say, "Oh, man. I'd really like to read that paper. That is my favorite film, man. It is really great." I would always think to myself, "I bet you really don't want to read our paper."

Gray: I don't think a belief in the power of paratexts needs to get in the way of cultural studies' belief in the power of audiences. I do recognize a potential challenge, to be clear, since it adds a negotiating figure standing in the middle of the supposed Manichean battle between producer and audience. One of the examples I sometimes give when discussing the relationship between paratexts and "active audiences," is Liebes and Katz's reading of *Dallas* audiences worldwide in their book *The Export of Meaning* (1994). They show clearly that cultural context matters, and of course I think cultural context matters. But I've always wondered how *Dallas* was *advertised* around the world. If the Saudi audiences Liebes and Katz talked to were making fun of it and seeing it as a sign of American decadence, is it entirely because they are opposing the text, or might they also have been dutifully consuming the preferred meanings as offered by paratexts that surrounded *Dallas* in Saudi Arabia? Thus, I certainly see the potential challenge, as a theory of paratextuality definitely shakes up notions of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings by adding a refractive element in the middle of this process.

But at the same time, I like Michel de Certeau's metaphor of "walking in the city" (1984). He likens textual structure to urban structure and design, but notes that we can still walk through a city in many different ways. Urban planners, traffic flow experts, and owners of private property have their preferred notions of how they want you to get from one place to another, and they cut down all sorts of options or try to make other options more enticing. But in the end we have agency, and we do not have to follow their paths entirely. This is what paratext creators are doing—they are some of the key would-be urban planners and land developers of the textual world. They too are trying to direct us one way or another, to get us through a text in a particular way. We may ignore them, but it is their job to try to tell us, "Hey, go over there!"

Brookey: You touched upon a point that I think relates to the *Glee* article in this issue by Laurena Bernabo that is really important too, because the article shows how *Glee* becomes reframed by its paratexts for a situated, foreign audience.

Gray: That piece is kind of like the follow-up to Liebes and Katz's *Export of Meaning* that I always wanted to read. Before we ask how Italians interpret *Glee*, let's ask how *Glee* was advertised in Italy.

If I could say a little more about paratexts and preferred meanings, though, it's worth considering how often they backfire. Indeed, to use the paratext's reviled cousin's name—hype—everyone (supposedly) hates hype, and so it's human nature to resist it. There is always a danger of the paratext that protests too much. When everything is telling you that you *must* go watch this movie, it's easy to decide not to watch the movie on principle. Or if DVD bonus materials are trying ever so hard to tell me that *Fight Club* is not homoerotic, they're backfiring and giving me every reason to read the film as a queer narrative. Paratexts can backfire easily, and we regularly read against or in spite of them.

Brookey: I think there is a related issue when people say there is too much hype in media. When we are talking about Hollywood (both film and television production), we really are talking about an industry that inherited the soul of vaudeville. I do love pop culture, and I'm unapologetic about that, and I also understand that hype is part of the mix, and I find myself enjoying the paratexts that are products of the hype machine. I always worry when people say there is too much hype, they are speaking from an assumption that all of this popular culture should try to be a higher form of art, or should aspire to be a higher form of art. I like watching television, and I like going to museums. Sometimes I like finding television in museums, and sometimes I like seeing museums on television. I never want to see one totally collapsed into the other.

Gray: A thing I find frustrating is the implication, in some criticisms of hype and paratexts, that although some texts have paratexts, some don't. Everything has paratexts, and while for some texts that means roadside billboards, ads on public transit, and a blanketing of public space, it'll just take other forms with other media. Think about the role, for instance, that the *New York Times* plays in determining and predicting the life or death of a foreign film because of its reviews. Sure, we don't see those reviews as we walk down the street, nor do they appear as ads on Facebook, but the *New York Times*' reviews of foreign films are probably way more powerful than most trailers or posters to the specific community to whom they're talking. Everything has its paratexts. Heck, as Paul Grainge's article in this issue shows, our universities are getting into the business of creating paratexts, as it's by no means just the entertainment industry engaged in flooding the world with them. The question is just which paratexts are on the scene and what they're doing.

Brookey: So few of these films, even independent films, come to us without going through the machinery of marketing. Once they get picked up for distribution at Slamdance by some studio like Lionsgate, they are going to go through the mechanics of marketing. Back when the film *Dead Man Walking* was out in theaters, it was held up as film with such a high purpose. But I remember seeing an interview with Susan Sarandon talking about how she had become such good friends with the nun she was portraying in the film. That statement is a standard, back-story talking point, where actors try to relate themselves to the person they are portraying in the film. In spite of how high-minded this film may be, Susan Sarandon is still using the same talking points that Tom Cruise used for *War of the Worlds*, he said, "Now, I'm a single father too. That is how I can

relate to my character in the film." It is the same thing, and it just seems kind of precious to say that there is too much hype.

Gray: Look, at some level, of course we should complain about excess. When *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* produces BB-8 oranges, that's just silly. But for me, that's why the language of paratextuality can help us make sense of hype, because it encourages us to ask "what is it contributing?" The *Jaws* poster scared me more as a kid than the movie did. The movie wants us to experience a sense of terror, and the poster did a great job at doing exactly that, scaring me away from enjoying an ocean swim for life! *Jaws* as entertainment property is already happening, being done, "playing," and "screening" through that poster. By contrast, what are those oranges actually contributing to *Star Wars* as a text with which anyone might want to engage? I've been criticized for supposedly caring about whether paratexts make a text financially more successful, which isn't at all my point here—I don't care about that. What I do care about is asking whether and how a paratext contributes to audiences' meaning-making, enjoyment, and/or to the storification of a text. And I realize this will change from person to person. Some out there might find the idea of BB-8 oranges meaningful in some way, but I don't.

And it's not "just academic" to ask these questions: as Suzanne Scott's article for this issue notes, fans and activists have realized the curatorial powers that paratexts have over their associated texts, and that the right sort of hype, paratexts, and merchandise can matter. Scott examines how the #wheresrey campaign objecting to the conspicuous absence of Rey from *Force Awakens* merchandise was based both on concern that the merchandise was paratextually holding back the film's otherwise seeming feminist intervention in the franchise, and on hope that better paratexts/merchandise could instead assist that intervention. Matt Hills and Joanne Garde-Hansen's contribution to this issue also shows how central paratexts are to cultural memory and to precisely what stories we tell ourselves about the roles that different texts played in creating culture, and thus they invite us to consider which paratexts are engaged in nation-building projects, for instance, and how.

Brookey: It is so funny that you used that example of the *Jaws* poster because I remember that the paperback book used a very similar image when the film came out. They will often reissue the paperback book with the film's one-sheet as the cover because they always get the one-sheet established well in advance of the film's release. I remember being a kid, being at the pool, and some woman had laid a book open on her lounge chair or something. Seeing that cover and being very fascinated perhaps by the same kind of threat that it seemed to signify. Clearly it was an early paratext that did its work, if our youthful reactions were any indication.

Gray: Another analogy might come from teaching. There are very different types of students who talk a lot in class discussions. There are the ones who speak a lot and give pure gold, contributing and moving discussion forward in great ways. I'm happy to have those students. And then occasionally you get the ones who go on lengthy asides, who think out loud in a weird stream of consciousness, and/or who mansplain everything. It is the same with hype and paratexts. Hype and paratexts in and of themselves are not a problem. It's the hype that is harmful, whether to the text and/or society, that we need to worry about. Or the hype that does not do or say anything relevant or important: the hype equivalent of

Ralph Wiggum. If, however, the hype is the equivalent of the smart student who is getting me to think about the text and who is engaging the text in interesting ways, I'm happy it's there.

Brookey: So, what we need is the hype equivalent of Lisa Simpson.

Gray: Exactly!

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