

## The Adventure Continues...

### *Movie Release and Narrative Tensions in Film Trailers and Saga Recaps*

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#### 1 Seriality and tension strategies

Seriality has always been a crucial issue to cinema. From the study of genres to the analysis of specific narrative forms it has been pointed out that cinema experience and different forms of seriality are closely related.

Both genre theories and narrative studies on cinema clearly define the mutual relationship between serial forms, narrative patterns and figures, and dynamics of genre. Genres are defined as an ongoing process of text categorization based on the repetition of specific features and elements in the text<sup>1</sup> (Pescatore 2004). Genre itself is a serial form that, eventually, can be considered as a diffuse form of intertextuality (Dusi 2006; Casetti 1984) and is consequently related to broader cultural instances (e.g. imaginary, *encyclopedia* (Eco 1984), *frames*).

Lately, the importance of serial forms in cinema has considerably increased: filmic forms, both narrative and aesthetic, borrow and rearrange elements and features from other narrative forms and different media. The strong influence of the comics is an example of how other serial forms are reworked within the filmic framework thus redefining visuals and narratives of movies.

The specificity of contemporary products, however, goes beyond these resonances between serial forms in comics, television, other contexts and the cinema. Forms and products of serial narration now proliferate as a mainstream product and redefine cinema itself as a new complex framework<sup>2</sup>. The study of specific narrative devices related to this serial paradigm is therefore becoming more significant and is by now necessary to a more accurate understanding of contemporary cinema.

A study of narrative tensions precisely addresses these issues and stresses out the role of tension dynamics as one of the main features of seriality itself.

Rhythm and tension are indeed the core elements of serial narratives. As it is widely known, these narrative forms are based on the suspension of the narrative flow. Therefore, narrative strategies of suspension and resumption, twist and sustain of narrative patterns, run an economy of narration regulated by tensions and rhythms.

According to Greimas' definition, rhythm can be described as "an expectation, [...] the *temporalization*, according to the inchoative *aspectuality*, of the modality of *wanting to be* applied to the recurrent interval between asymmetrical groups of

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<sup>1</sup> Altman (1999) defines the "genrification" process: genre is defined by some redundant features within movies which are relevant to the audiences and, mainly, to the production. The repetition of specific elements imply a pattern, therefore it emphasizes the serial nature of the genre itself.

<sup>2</sup> As it has been pointed out in several contributions at the Udine Conference 2008 and Gradisca MAGIS Spring School (3-15 March 2008); in particular in the speeches of Malte Hagener and Philippe Dubois.

elements reproducing the same pattern.”<sup>1</sup> An interesting point can be emphasized within this definition: the relevance given by the author to the modality of *wanting to be* (vouloir-être) stresses out the relationship between the dynamics of rhythm and the actual *need of narrative* of the spectators. On the other hand, this economy of repetition clearly produces different types of tensive dynamics, intensive and *distensive*, both modulating the spectatorial experience between narrative pauses and repeated patterns.

In the end, the study of tension strategies and rhythmical patterns of audiovisual contents could highlight key features of contemporary cinema products by cross-considering such different aspects of cinema products as the redefining of the boundaries of the audiovisual text and the immersive nature of the spectatorial experience.

## 2 The cinema experience and serial film trailers

The progressive *serialization* of cinema is not an isolated phenomenon: the most important trend in contemporary mediascapes, including cinema, is the merging of different frameworks.

In contemporary media scenarios, narrative contents, audiences, as well as media markets, are all extremely fragmented (Pescatore 2006b). New technologies, distribution necessities and new emerging markets mould the audiovisual text into a specific diffuse forms. Multipolar models are adopted both for narrative elements (Sepulchre 2004) and authorship issues (Pescatore 2006a). Accordingly, the process of convergence is getting more relevant, eventually causing cinema itself to vanish in a multiplicity of contaminations and forms of reworking. The influence of narrative forms, consumption practices and technologies from other media such as the internet and the television are redefining the very nature of cinema which is no longer an isolated and self sufficient "system", but becomes a framework constantly (re-)shaping ordinary media and non-media experience.<sup>2</sup>

This conception of cinema embedded in a wide and multiple media framework constitutes one of the main issues in contemporary cinema studies and significantly matches the research trends in the field of semiotics where the importance of the study of practices has now a essential role.

Given these premises, the analysis of the trailer becomes remarkably relevant as this audiovisual reformulation (Dusi 2004, 2006a, 2006b) of the film is one of the first elements of the *release* process of the movie. While the narrative configuration of the trailer is largely regulated by tensive elements used to catch spectators (eventually starting a tensive movement which would be resolved by actually watching the film) and its narrative structures are built upon these tension dynamics, by considering the trailer as a part of a broader tension strategy, involving release process, *buzz*<sup>3</sup>, suspended narratives, it is possible to emphasize the relationship between narrative and tension strategies within the text and the tension dynamics developed beyond the textual dimension.

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] une attente, c’est à dire comme la temporalisation, à l’aide de l’aspectualité inchoative, de la modalité du vouloir-être appliquée sur l’intervalle récurrent entre groupements d’éléments asymétriques, reproduisant la même formation. [...] Nous optons pour une définition du rythme qui le considère comme une forme signifiante, et donc de même nature que les autres phénomènes de prosodie. [...] une telle conception [...] offre la possibilité de reconnaître un rythme au niveau du contenu, par exemple.” Greimas, Courtés 1993.

<sup>2</sup> See note 2 page 1 and Casetti 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Unofficial/official news leaked to the audiences that generate expectations and contribute to an extended branding strategy.

Indeed, filmic forms and forms of trailer have to be considered as a sociosemiotic issue, a system of intercommunicating social discourses and have to be analyzed as a single instance (Dusi 2004).

Therefore, rather than focusing on a particular tensive device, this analysis will consider the strategies developed within and around the trailer to create tensions in the spectator.

The social discourse of the release and its tension dynamics, are indeed structured according to tensive strategies internal to films and trailers. Simultaneously, temporal markers of the release process can be found within the filmic text. These markers are often used as narrative pivot for the structures of the movie and the associated audiovisual forms (e.g. advertising).

Due to the nature of this study, however, the chosen corpus of trailer will be, once again, reduced. This brief analysis will consider exclusively the trailer of a peculiar type of film, the serial film which is part of a saga. While the definition of "serial film", as a film with suspended/continued/extendable narratives, given the arguments above, could sound too vague and general, saga films are a quite specific item. Saga films are serial narratives that come in groups of episodes; these narratives share the characteristic of *continuity*<sup>1</sup>. Without any further analysis of the different forms of seriality, we'll consider the serial film in the saga as a text that is significantly related to a specific group of movies/texts (generally prequels or sequels, or simply other episodes). However, the continuity remains crucial since it ensures the link between different fragments of the narration bridging over time lapses between these fragments. We'll analyze in depth the narrative and tension strategies associated to the trans-textual development of the saga, but in order to proceed with further considerations a case analysis will help to clarify and fully appreciate the complexity of the devices used within these trailers.

### 3 Tensions and narratives in Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull trailer

On February 14th, 2008, the new trailer of the fourth Indiana Jones movie was released. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, Usa) is due to appear in theaters on the 22th of May, with a worldwide release.

This fourth episode of the Indiana Jones saga comes almost nineteen years after *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, Usa, 1989), the last Indiana Jones adventure appeared on theaters, and twenty-seven years after the first apparition of Harrison Ford as the history teacher/lost treasure and civilization seeker.

As a relatively long time has passed since the last episode of this saga was released, content producers and distributions are forced to adopt specific narrative strategies within the trailer and the film in order to mark the new forthcoming movie as one of the episodes of the previously "concluded" saga. The awareness of the spectator of the ongoing narrative is indeed one of the core elements of serial narratives: as soon as the spectator is no longer sure whether the story will be continued in future episodes or it will be ended, he loses interest and, eventually, his loyalty vanishes.

I am using "loyalty" on purpose because this issue has to be considered as a matter of branding. Movies as Indiana Jones and, in general, the productions of LucasArts, are quite explicitly structured according to the standard of *high concept*

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<sup>1</sup> An overall narrative flow used as context for all other narrative threads and fragments. A coherent temporal framework structuring the narrative universe that integrates different events and single temporal developments; Barbieri 1992.

movies (Wyatt 1994), modularly created films sharing a peculiar narrative design. The contents of these movies have to be organized according to the principles of modularity: it has to be possible, mainly for advertising and communicational purposes (e.g. trailer), to sum up the content of the entire movie in a single *catch-phrase*. The title, brand, must be a semiotic condensation of spectatorial experiences, different styles and, most of all, of movie contents (including all textual levels: figures, isotopies, macro-patterns, etc...).

In serial films, movie narratives are part of an ongoing narrative flow, therefore they are necessarily related to the contents of the previous episodes. Hence, within serial movies, especially in the *epitextual* forms (Dusi 2005) used to introduce and advertise the movie, previous narrative threads have to be clearly explicated and, additionally, it has to be evident where to place the episode within the narrative flow. This necessity is even stronger if several years elapsed between the two last episodes of the saga.

Using the notions of rhythm, tension and expectation it is possible to clarify how various spectatorial necessities are managed through a specific use of tensive resources within the trailer.

### 3.1 Awaiting Indiana: the release process and expectations in filmic macro-patterns.

As we have previously pointed out, most of the serial narratives rely on repetition of patterns. The essential effect of these repetitions is the creation of expectations and the process that repeatedly reconfirms them.

The first pattern of repetition is the reiteration of the macro-frame of the narrative universe of the saga. This macro-frame matches the brands (Indiana Jones, the title) summing up movie contents. The reiteration of this element in time, even if through different configurations, creates a rhythmic pattern that sets the base for further tensive and interpretative movements.

Within the nature of the serial narratives, the wait for the next episode is a powerful tensive device: as previously remarked, the awareness of a future development in the saga's narrative universe ensures by itself a fundamental degree of expectation within the spectator. This expectation is an interpretative movement which can easily be described as tensive: from the very end of the previous episode, whether the narrative developments conclude the threads or not, the spectator is eager to know what's next. This state of tension is precisely what is in-between the recurrences of different episodes. It is remarkable how this interpretative movement takes place without the release of any new narrative content. While the narrative flow is suspended at the end of an episode, the spectator is held in this tensive state until the next episode, where the dynamic reboots starting a new cycle.

Since this tensive dynamic takes place *in absentia* of the main narrative contents, the spectator has to bridge the two pieces of the narration. This usually happens in two ways: on one hand the previous contents are constantly reworked in different kinds of user-produced contents. In depth analysis of the narrative universe or creation of fan-fictions, for instance, are attempts to fill this narrative gap with *unofficial* contents. On the other hand the spectator is constantly expecting *official* contents to be *released*. The various *releases* of contents (ads, trailers, spoilers, photos, news), literally, *release* the tension of the spectator. While delivering a few contents to rework and interpret, these minor releases simultaneously foster the wait for the official main release that will reboot once again the tension cycle: the release of the movie itself.

This constant state of eagerness of the spectator is indeed the reason that pushes content producers to be extremely careful and precise about minor epitextual

deliveries: these releases are crucial steps in the fragile process of building expectation and resolving/sustaining tensions that leads spectators to the movie. Considering minor textual forms as ads and trailers as an integrated part of this release process helps us to understand, for instance, why the majors, and especially LucasArts, pay obsessive attention to copyrights and spoilers<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull*<sup>2</sup> the progressive release of parts of the forthcoming narrative development of the new film has a particular relevance. In fact, the Indiana Jones saga was already considered concluded and the long time elapsed between the last Indiana Jones and ID4 made the spectators "forget" their expectations and competences. Therefore, the trailer has an essential role as it has to *re-actualize* the expectations and the narrative macro-frame of Indiana Jones which has been partly lost.

The recovery of *virtualized* narratives has recently become a sort of a trend: *Indiana Jones, Batman, Rambo, Rocky, Superman, Star Wars*, etc... all share the same necessity to rehabilitate the spectator by prepping him for the renewed cinema experience.

The new ID4 trailer shows this necessity to *re-competentialize* the spectator and re-actualize the Indiana Jones brands and frames in an exemplary way.

In fact, more than half of the trailer, whose total length is 1:51 minutes<sup>3</sup> is a recapitulation of the previous episodes of the Indiana Jones saga. This recap, exploiting the modular structure of the previous movies, evokes each single adventure using a catch-phrase. A few significant frames from the old Indiana Jones movies are also shown, alternating with the titles appearing in-between and marking the passage from episode to episode.

The specific tension strategies of the narrative form of the recap will be analyzed afterward<sup>4</sup>. As of now, it is critical to recognize the objective of this recap in the general managing of tensions within the trailer and the broader release process.



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<sup>1</sup> Those who obstacle this process pay a price that is everything but fictional: when the plot of Indiana Jones 4 was partially revealed, the one dancer appearing in the film who leaked the spoiler has been banned from the studios never to return. LucasArts was also known for its hostile attitude towards too "creative" fans.

<sup>2</sup> From now on ID4.

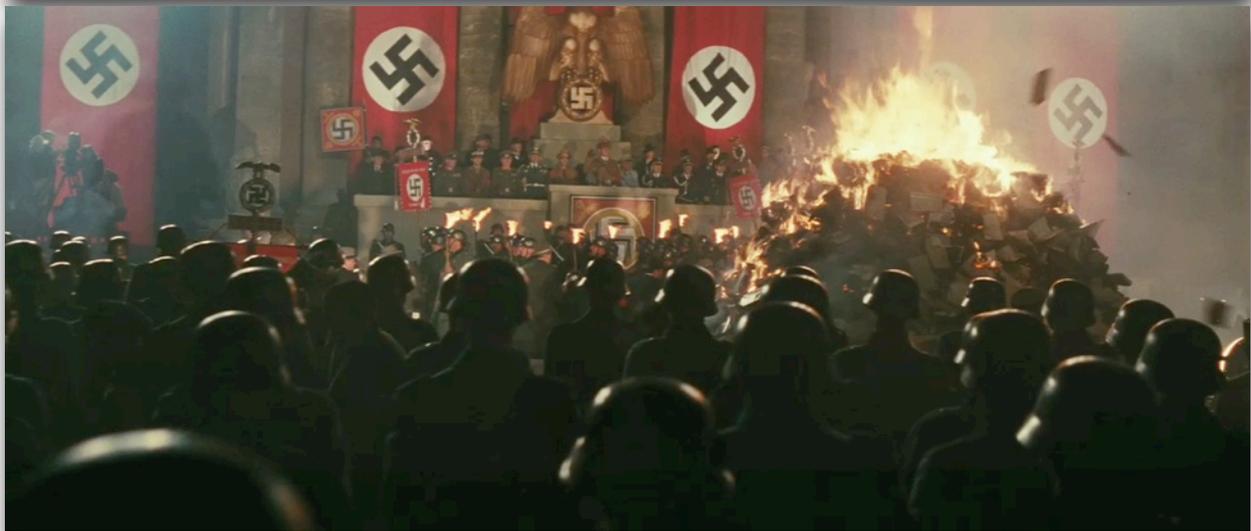
<sup>3</sup> I am using the HD trailer that has been released on [apple.com/trailers](http://apple.com/trailers).

<sup>4</sup> See par.4.



HE SAVED THE CRADLE  
OF CIVILIZATION





The objective of this first part of the trailer is to reactivate the narrative macro-frame "Indiana Jones" simultaneously calling to mind previous spectatorial experiences along with general genre competences, more specific competences and expectations. As the first part of the trailer, the recap itself, is about 50 seconds long, it seems reasonable to say that, in a 2 minutes trailer, the main goal of the trailer is to place the spectator once again in a position of *awareness* about the Indiana Jones universe.

As I have pointed out, the rhythmic pattern of constant releases of content between two film episodes articulates a tensive dynamic that becomes more intense in the last period before the release of the movie. This long intensive movement is associated with a growing interpretative activity that culminates with a peak by the actual movie release.

However, in this case, after a paratextual pause of almost seventeen years, it is particularly hard to fully immerse the spectators in the movie release process without any of the previous tensive steps. In fact, the previous releases of content are precisely managed to ensure the constant and progressive rise of interest about the movie release. News, scoops, pictures, ads, trailers, in the case of ID4, are condensed in a relatively short lapse of time.

Therefore a double tensive strategy is adopted. On one hand the delivery of the trailer itself to the public builds up expectation and resolve the tension by showing audiovisual contents from the new chapter of the saga.

Nevertheless, instead of showing brand new images of the new movie, half of the trailer recapitulates previous episodes. While being a crucial necessity to the managing of tension within the release process, this recap also hides a secondary tension strategy: during the entire first part of the trailer, even if the past adventures are evoked, there is no sign of explicit brands, names, images, as well as distinctive figures that can "summon" (*présentifier*) the hero himself. While the recaps clearly serves as a device to reaffirm Indiana Jones and his new adventure by recalling complex cinema experiences, the very same audiovisual segment hides Indiana Jones himself thus creating a secondary tension dynamic. The spectator has to solve a sort of narrative program of *recognition*<sup>1</sup> to "reveal" Indiana Jones. The tension is created by recalling the overall narrative frame with the recapitulation omitting the big piece, the protagonist, whose face never appears in the recap.

Therefore, the tension is developed between the awareness of the Indiana Jones frame and the absence of Indiana Jones himself. The trailer evokes a narrative frame and specific competences in order to stretch them out in its first part thus creating intense local expectations and tensions.

Eventually, an additional tensive segment could be highlighted at the very end of the recap segment: after that the previous episodes of the saga have been evoked, a last extra-diegetic title projects the spectator towards the new Indiana Jones adventure.

Immediately after the recap, the title "The adventure continues", supported with *high concept* music and sound effects getting to their higher tone when the phrase



appears, is supposed to be the very last element before the actual new adventure.

However, disregarding general spectatorial competences, a narrative gap follows this frame. The following fifteen seconds bear no narrative development and show just a few images from the movie (considering the standard very intense montage in trailers). Nothing appears but, after a long fade to black, a hat, the shadow of the one we already recognize as the protagonist, and finally his face. This segment renews the narrative program of recognition and creates a peculiar tensive dynamic by suspending and sustaining the tension at its higher point. When the adventure should continue and the tension is at its peak, the narration stops and the spectator is held in tension until the decisive apparition of Indiana Jones.

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<sup>1</sup> I use *recognition* as in Eco 1976: a rhetoric devices common in serial and popular narratives unveiling an already known identity.



Within this segment, music is a crucial component that clarifies, and sometimes grounds, tense dynamics. A specific analysis of this device will be led later.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In paragraph 3.4.

### 3.2 Time markers of the release and immersive effects.

An essential point to remark is the presence of temporal markers of the release process inscribed within the filmic text.

Beside the recap, which is by itself a clue of a serial narrative, several other elements mark the serial nature of the narration. In this trailer the *voice off*, meta-narrative device frequently employed in trailers, is replaced by the appearing titles. "The adventure continues" clearly identify the film as a sequel thus contextualizing the movie in its narrative flow.

Temporal markers are also present in the diegesis itself: the first line of Indiana Jones, surrounded by a group of hostile men, "Not as easy as it used to be...", explicitly marks the elapsed time between the different episodes. The following line "Damn! I thought it was closer!" marks again the different age of the hero, who, failing to get on a rolling jeep, is represented in a rusty, almost clumsy shape.

These temporal markers have an essential role in reasserting the *continuity* within Indiana Jones' narrative universe and between the different episodes. However, they do not simply refer to diegetic elements as the age of the character or the coherence of the narrative universe: these temporal markers simultaneously refer to both the diegetic universe and the non-fictional environment of the movie and trailer release process. By finding such explicit time markers within the audiovisual text the relevance of the release process is confirmed and tension strategies in the text enhance (and are enhanced by) the narrative device that merges diegetic and extra-diegetic times maximizing the immersive effect.

To briefly sum up, this first part of the trailer is, in the end, a recap which, bringing to mind the past cinema experiences about the Indiana Jones universe, sets the narrative macro-frame thus evoking the spectators' competences and expectations. This progressive process of re-actualization of narrative resources is shaped in a tensive dynamic that stretches thought the trailer only, instead of the entire long-lasting release process. Therefore, this tensive dynamic simultaneously fills the narrative gaps left by the long seventeen years pause and exploits the pause itself by doubling the tensive dynamic and over-stretching the wait for Indiana.<sup>1</sup>

Once the macro-frame is set and the associated tensions are resolved the adventure can finally continue.

### 3.3 The hat, the whip and the punch: trans-episode expectations and recognition of narrative figures.

After that most of the tensive resources related to the rhetoric device of the character recognition have been used, the trailer starts exploiting more specific elements to build up expectation and tension in the spectator.

Components from different textual levels are employed; however, they all are strictly related to the specific narrative universe of Indiana Jones saga. At this point, tension cannot be generated from general serial narrative devices but has to be rooted in the Indiana Jones frame that has been re-actualized.

The tensive strategy uses the competences of the spectators about the narrative universe to create expectations and tensions. The spectator has both diegetic competences about recurrent figures, patterns, isotopies, etc... within the narrative universe and meta-diegetic expectations about their forthcoming release. As the first part of the trailer clearly activates the specific narrative frame of Indiana Jones, the

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<sup>1</sup> By inserting a narrative gap of pure tension the trailer relies on the pure tensive dynamic and on the visual impact of Indiana Jones himself, again, after seventeen years.

spectator is aware that some typical elements are going to be shown in the audiovisual text.

The competent spectator is supposed to recognize narrative figures as typical parts, long awaited, of the Indiana Jones narratives. This rhetorical device of repetition of narrative patterns and figures between the different episodes is developed on different textual levels.

First of all, the trailer shows all the macro isotopies of genre<sup>1</sup> of the Indiana Jones universe: according to the aesthetic of high concept movies, these film combine different genres. Indeed, the first segment of the second part is marked by the isotopy of /action/: Indiana has to deal with hostile armies, guns and explosives.

A second segment highlights another essential element of ID4: the archeological mysteries and the ancient civilization. The passage between the two segments is once again marked by music. As a sort of conclusion, a third segment evokes a note of comedy (with a couple of stereotyped punches and jokes) reasserting the narrative patterns and isotopies typical of the saga.

On a different level but still related to the other levels, specific narrative figures are evoked as well. For instance, while the hat was the distinctive sign of Indiana Jones, the whip, smacking loud at the beginning of the first segment, is the symbol of Indiana Jones as a man of action.



<sup>1</sup> Notice that these frames are more specific than the genre itself. The pattern which is repeated is the peculiar "mix of frames and genres" that is reiterated in each saga episode.

Similarly, narrative patterns are reconfirmed with the introduction, once again, of an ancient primitive civilization, temples, dungeons and traps.

It could be said, generally, that the first part of the trailer, the recap part, is a preparation to the new cinema experience that will come. The second part is an anticipation/confirmation of the forthcoming narratives based on expectation and well-known patterns. Within the tensive dynamic, the first part is an introduction of the elements that will later support the tensions, a sort of pre-tension (which, as we have seen, is structured according to a double tensive movement thus developing a secondary tensive dynamic as well), while the second part is the *release* part following the *hold*. Eventually, second next-to-come trailer won't use the pre-tensive segment and will more likely employ the tensive strategies used in the second part.

### 3.4 Tensive music and branding.

One of the crucial devices used to implement tensive strategies is music. The rhythmical patterns of music are probably the component that reinforces more effectively the already well-developed rhythmical pattern of visual contents.

Musical patterns in the Indiana Jones trailer are generally associated to different visual instances. The tensions created through the montage and the editing, for instance, are reinforced by the rhythmical patterns of the music matching diverse key frames or particular cuts thus over-modulating the spectatorial experience.

Music is also used to reinforce preexisting tensive devices: the sequence of macro-genre isotopies, from the action sequence in the beginning, to the subsequent mystery part, is marked by a clear *modulation* of the theme that switches from the main Indiana Jones theme, to a different, more *evocative*<sup>1</sup> tune.

Consequently, we can notice how critical is the relationship between music and visual components to the managing of tension strategies. Both the component of expression and content of music participate in the tensive strategy: the rhythm, as mere repetition of patterns of expression, musical *matter*, supports other tensive strategies.

Furthermore, the content component of music is also used to match different visual segments, as in the case of the macro-genre isotopy.

As previously analyzed, the first part of the trailer is used as a prelude, an introductory segment that peaks at the end of the recap bearing a narrative gap, a pause that puts the spectator on *hold*. Music reinforces this strategy by almost deadening in the transitional gap between the end of the recap and the beginning of the new "adventure". This narrative pause is paired with an nascent musical theme. The absence of sound matches the absence of Indiana Jones, whose apparition will release the tension matured in the first part of the trailer and held in the pause. The nascent theme, however, already anticipates the future apparition of Indiana, thus keeping active an underlying intensive dynamic over-imposed to the tensive stillness of the narrative pause.

The theme is indeed the notorious Indiana Jones theme that will be fully developed releasing all tensions. The same tensive dynamic of recognition played on the narrative level is reproduced and enhanced by the musical component. As soon as the hero has been recognized, the musical theme develops and further confirms the spectator's expectation. As the theme is extremely well known, it is used as a brand: with its relatively scarce semantic component, music can evoke a vast *nebula* of

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<sup>1</sup> *Modulation* and *evocative* are here used in the musical meaning. Modulation is, basically, a change of tone within the same melody that provokes a change of mood, a different emotional meaning in music.

contents associated to the Indiana Jones universe without recalling any specific element.

The use of music in the trailer's finale is particularly interesting. The tensive scheme of the entire trailer has a first recap part culminating with the narrative pause that holds and sustains the tension. The following release starts a distensive dynamic and the confirmation of narrative expectations. The music always matches and marks the different phases both with its rhythm and its semantic component. When these two main segments are closed, the trailer, according to usual compositional patterns of this narrative form, could end. On the contrary, immediately after the joke that closes the trailer's narrative development, a third segment starts. This conclusive part is separated from the previous segments: the Indiana Jones theme plays again and structures this ending part whose only purpose is to reaffirm again the brands of the movie. In fact, this time, music matches the Indiana Jones logo, appearing with a smack of whip. This restarting of the tensive dynamic, however, sounds almost awkward: the only point of the segment is to renew the same strategy by reaffirming the brand paired with music and sound, both associated as a theme in an advertising.

In the end, music has a crucial role within tensive strategies: it reaffirms with its rhythm the passages between different segments, it matches the semantic component of visual contents and it over-modulates tensive dynamics.

In serial products, the use of themes and music always has an essential role: a repeated or returning theme is often used to enhance branding strategies<sup>1</sup>. Because of the efficacy of music in supporting branding and tensive strategies, patterns and narrative forms can, eventually, be redefined according to the musical component. This LucasArts trailer shows how this process takes place.

#### 4 Tension and narrative arcs: saga recap in Star Wars Episode III trailer.

The analysis of the *Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull* trailer has pointed out the relevance of an integrated approach to release strategies of movies and trailers and their serial narrative structures. By framing the progressive release and delivery of contents and regulating textual dynamics, tensions, an essential device in seriality, have been flagged as one of the core elements of the spectatorial experience.

Nevertheless, while focusing on the release process, the Indiana Jones example fails to adequately emphasize another important tensive device used in trailers: *narrative arcs*. Notwithstanding the *continuity*, trans-episodic coherence of a unique narrative universe, the serial narrative of Indiana Jones can basically be described as *episodic*. Although this trailer could still be used to further analyze this device, a second more adequate example will be introduced briefly to focus on tensions and narrative arcs in sagas.

The *Star Wars - Episode III - Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, USA, 2005) *teaser trailer* is quite similar to the ID4 trailer. With its very rapid montage and editing this trailer's<sup>2</sup> structure reproduces some tensive dynamics of the previous case: the first part is indeed a prelude, a recap that sets the base for future narrative developments; a pause follows this recap defining the macro-topic and the overall narrative frame of the film. The second part is a *de-tension* movement; all the isotopies of the Star Wars universe are shown: starship battles, alien races, jedi confrontations. Even the finale matches the structure of the ID4 trailer: the branding-

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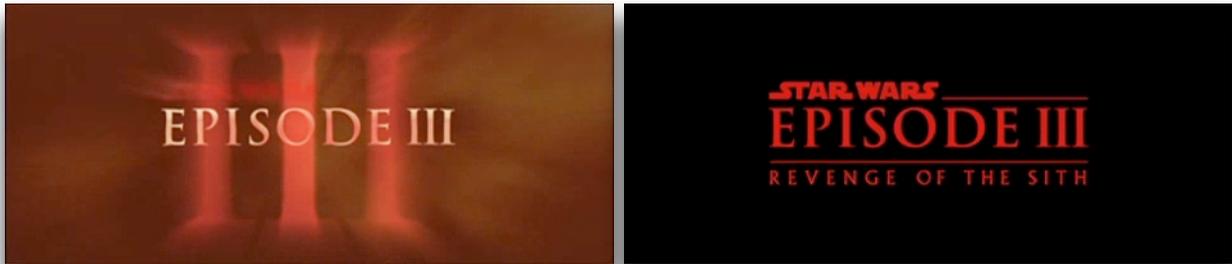
<sup>1</sup> More about music in branding strategies in serial products in Jost 2004, Morineau 2004 and Wyatt 1994.

<sup>2</sup> From now on SWIII.

music restarts a tensive dynamic that suddenly ends with a brusque cut thus reaffirming the brands and focusing on the evil component that will pervade the 3rd episode of the trilogy.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Notice that LucasArts realized the two movies and trailers. This could partially account for the similarities in style.



Music is used, as for the ID4 trailer, with a strong match between rhythm of montage and rhythmical patterns. Powerful branding tool, the famous Star Wars theme over-modulates the entire narrative.

In general, this trailer's tense structure is very similar to the ID4 trailer. Therefore I'll use this example to focus on narrative arcs without any further consideration of its overall structure.

While the visual and compositional structure of the two trailers is similar, the SWIII trailer is part of a different serial narrative: *Star Wars - Episode III* is indeed the last sequel of a prequel trilogy. This quite uncommon situation in serial narratives enlightens the very nature of the recapitulation device and its influence on tense configurations.

It is already clear that narrative strategies based on expectations in serial products go well beyond the single filmic text extending through groups of episodes often released in different periods. For this reason, as we have seen in the ID4 case, a recap is needed to remind the spectator of suspended narrative threads, to *competentialize* the spectator in order to exploit the subsequent expectations that the narrative awareness creates.

In the rapid overview of the trailer I proposed, notice how the trailer is structured: a first recap part, culminating with a volcano eruption, then a second segment where different aspects and features of Star Wars are evoked; then, finally, the brand.

Now, the interesting part is precisely the recap. This segment recombines and re-edits parts of all five previous saga episodes, from the *Episode IV* (1977) to *Episode II* (2002). But the recap also includes parts of the forthcoming *Episode III*, thus building up expectations with a sort of flash-forward device. This recap has a capital importance to the overall economy of the saga narratives. Being the very centre and the final act of the entire saga, SWIII has to recall a multiplicity of narrative arcs. The most important narrative arc, core of SWIII narratives, is the "Darth Vader" segment. The origin of this evil character is the final act of *Episode III* and the beginning of the old trilogy that follows; *Episode I* and *II* were designed to bring the narrative development to this very point.

Such uncommon development of narrative arcs supports a particular tense dynamic.

Usually, the most relevant device supporting the tensions within narrative arcs, especially in serial narratives, is the suspended narrative, eventually the cliffhanger. The resolution of narrative threads releases the narrative tensions and concludes the tense dynamic. This device, however, cannot sustain any tension in SWIII. *Episode III*, within the particular serial context of its saga, is a prequel and, therefore, the spectator already knows the end of the story.

As we have seen in the ID4 case, the rhetorical device of recognition is also used to create, sustain and resolve tensions. The trailer of SWIII thematizes the entire movie and points at the "first" appearance of Darth Vader, character whose story and

destiny is already known by the spectator. Therefore, similarly to ID4, the main tensive strategy is the recognition of the (anti-)hero.

Within the tensive economy of the trailer, the recap has a crucial role: it places *Episode III* at the center of all narrative arcs, past and future ones. On one hand it evokes the "Darth Vader" narrative arc in a *salient* position: SWIII will be the final act of the previous *Episode I* and *Episode II* and will exploit the tensive burden of these film's narrative arcs. On the other hand, the recap implements a strategy of recognition of a character, Darth Vader, that, from a narrative point of view, isn't appeared yet. By combining fragments of the five episodes and re-thematizing the entire saga on the narrative arc of Darth Vader, the trailer creates a tension based on the recognition of the character and the expectancies that he recalls. The "re-finding" of the anti-hero bears a much more intense emotional charge (compared to the tension based on suspended narrative whose conclusion is already known by the public) thus ensuring the efficiency of the tensive device.

SWIII, despite its particular position within the Star Wars saga that could have caused a failure of the tensive structure of the movie's narratives, takes advantage of this narrative position, sequel of a prequel, to develop tensive strategies exploiting competences and expectations beyond the single text. Therefore, narrative tensions are based on multiple narrative arcs extending to the other saga episodes, backward and forward.

The recap, a device already used in ID4, has once more an essential role: by re-editing previous textual materials the recap composes a new audiovisual segment according to new narrative strategies and tensive necessities that the trailer has to manage within the release process.

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