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What's in a title (sequence)? Opening and Closing Sequences in Television

Form and Function in the Credit Sequence over Time

Opening and closing sequences in television might be productively viewed in many instances as aesthetic distillations of a show's organizing narrative premise and wider cultural themes. This is accomplished, I argue, through credit sequence producers enacting forms of aesthetic intensification, narrative condensation, and metaphoric extension. In this way the credit sequence is often a more direct, transparent, and efficient exposition of a show's socio-cultural imaginary. For successful shows that evolve over many seasons, opening and closing sequences may also be revised, or altogether redone, to better reflect changes in the diegesis and viewer expectations. Mapping these changes can be revealing of how a show inhabits public culture over time. However, for obvious reasons, the cases of opening and closing sequences evolving with a show differ greatly from narrative fiction TV to "reality" TV, and it is instructive to start to draw these lines of continuity and difference with some examples.

First, some examples within the category of "reality TV." The title sequences for mixed martial arts (MMA, i.e. "cage fighting") programming offer revealing case studies in how opening sequences develop relative to evolving public perception of content, and changing business models and market aspirations. Generally speaking MMA openings have evolved in accordance with the sport's overall historical movement from margins to mainstream. In the early years of the sport opening sequences highlighted greater sensational and taboo metaphorical and metonymic content, now shifting towards a more sanitized view (or relative "civilizing") as MMA (and the UFC as the sport's lead promotion) attempts to gain legitimacy as professional sport rather than spectacle. For example, the opening sequences of the WEC's program, *WrekCage*, focused on visual motifs that emphasized ancient, primal, or naturalizing imagery (i.e. nature metaphors such as images of animal predators and "tribal" thorn motifs, etc.). While the WEC is now defunct, the UFC recently nixed its longstanding opening sequence for major events, one that referenced ancient gladiators, for one emphasizing the athleticism of the sport's most iconic stars/personalities without historical references to ancient combat.

In addition to opening sequences changing to reflect expanding market aspirations, and a relative "sportization" of MMA, they have also evolved to enhance viewer identification with individual fighters following the turn towards a social media, personality-based promotional design. (For example, UFC fighters now receive Twitter bonuses, and are paid as much for their ability to attract viewers/promote fights as their ability to fight). In a reality show like *The Ultimate Fighter*, as with most shows featuring a seasonally changing cast of social actors, the openings must function to introduce the cast of characters. Yet MMA title sequences still (past and present), by and

large, work on the level of thematic intensification, heightened fantasy, and metaphor and metonym based in supposed viewer desires and expectations.

Looking at a long-running reality show like *Survivor* (or *The Amazing Race*) reveals much about the continuities and differences in credit sequences in relation to a show's format and gradual evolution (if any). In the case of *Survivor*, every new season's credit sequence is a revised version of a standard template, adjusted to accommodate a new cast of social actors and a different exotic location. What remains the same is the abrupt staging of the dramatic format, distilled themes (especially a romantic "human vs. nature" battle with the elements), and an intensification of the show's fundamental premise of exploiting actor's minimally clothed bodies while performing contrived "challenges" suggestive of primitive labor. While a sport like MMA –which has found much of its success through adopting reality TV conventions– wants to gain greater mass-market acceptability as "sport" by distancing itself from taboo and exoticism, *Survivor* is predicated on exploiting such categories, and thus has no need to substantially revise form season to season the socio-psychological imaginary projected in its credit sequences.

The credit sequence can be a work of art that stands on its own aesthetically (think *True Blood*, *Mad Men*, or *Dexter*), and even constitute one of the most stable parts of a show's historical legacy. But they can also evolve in ways that reflect a show's shifting cultural status, and the aspirations of producers. For reality TV the credit sequence often serves a narrative function in (re)introducing the cast of characters, format, and location. But the functional credit sequence is not limited to reality TV. Take for example *The Wire*, in which the credit sequence re-orient the viewer to the cultural and geographic specifics of Baltimore as narrative arc's change focus each season. While the style and tone of the credits are the same each season, including a different artists' recording of the same song creating audio continuity with past sequences, the imagery is different. In almost all cases, however, some form of narrative and thematic distillation is part of the organizing design of the credit sequence.