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

Creating Brand Loyalty With Opening Credits

As a former sound professional I have had the opportunity to talk with colleagues who design opening titles for film and television. I take the position that opening credit sequences are carefully designed and monitored to attract and keep the demographic targeted, and to create brand loyalty. The visual and audio design, as well as the editing and timing of the images, are debated and tweaked for identification purposes. Opening credits are intended to initially grab the attention of the viewer and create a sense of belonging.

The television shows of the 1960s and 1970s used theme songs, many with lyrics, that are instantly identifiable to viewers. Just a few notes of *The Munsters* or *All in the Family* and we recall the show, the characters, and our favorite episodes. It is a fun game of trivia to “name that tune” of television shows. Today, visuals play a major role in setting the tone and style of the television show. As a side bar, it is fascinating how few remember the first theme song for *I Dream of Jeanie*. It was replaced after one season. The tune we remember is the second one. It is easier to hum, more playful, and has the required “hook” in the opening bars of the tune.

Typically, television symbol makers are concerned with producing an artful product that will expand the viewer base and please the marketing and financial experts, while still retaining enough imagination to satisfy aesthetic requirements. The design of opening credits is a specialty, much as the production of trailers is, and is both paratextual and textual in its intention and result. The titles act as part of the show, as well as becoming recognizable objects within themselves. There is pressure for the title design to emulate the style and substance of the show while appearing unique so the audience feels “special” being a part of this experience. The opening titles must act as a hook to get the initial viewing and retain loyalty. Borrowing from film, the titles must entertain, and be aesthetically interesting so the viewer's gaze is fixed.

Those who design opening and closing credits design for film, television, games, and commercials. Predictably, there is a resultant hybridization. The main difference with television closing credits as opposed to the closing feature film crawl is the time used for displaying them on the screen. The regulations for television exhibition allow closing credits to run more quickly for flow. The cold open assists in this endeavor.

Two illustrations of my point the *Law and Order* franchise and *Mad Men*. Both shows have identifiable styles that are included in the textuality. *Law and Order's* opening titles show images of crime, courtrooms, and our leading characters walking together toward the camera. The theme song, written by the prolific Mike Post, can be sung by most, and we know just where the famous “doink, doink” will hit as the stinger. The opening titles, although shortened from the first season back in the Michael Moriarty days, still retain the same elements, simply

abbreviated. The opening of the show is always a cold open, the opening titles follow, then the remaining credits for the episode are within the opening minutes of the drama. The intertextuality of these titles make the franchise unique: the orchestration of the theme and the energy behind the performance changes from the original series, to *Special Victims Unit*, and also to *Criminal Intent*. When *Criminal Intent* left network and went onto cable, the theme song was reorchestrated to be harder hitting and aggressive. The demographics on USA were different than on NBC. Thus, the cold opening and credits have been altered to appeal to the “Characters Welcome” branding of USA.

Mad Men's opening sequence takes us back to a day of male dominance in the workplace, with an artfulness that mimics advertising in the 1960s. The female sexuality is overt, yet playful in the animated opening. The show is clearly adult and contains a certain wit. The opening credits are spicy, yet retro. The titles are intended to impart a sense of sophistication: both for the content, and the viewers. *Mad Men* fans are identified as more educated and nuanced in their media consumption. *Mad Men* contains only bold lettering, first names in red, last names in black, with the name of the director included in the stock opening credits that appear after the “previously on *Mad Men*” segment.

Both shows reveal the ancillary credits within the opening scenes following the identifiable branding opening titles. The action is the focus, with the guest credits revealed within the first ten minutes. As is the convention with the majority of feature films, many television shows have adapted this practice. The message is clear: this show is special and you are special as a viewer and fan.