

## Aspirational paratexts

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# Aspirational paratexts: the case of “quality openers” in TV promotion

By Enrica Picarelli

*If you take the title sequence away from the movie, it becomes a different movie.* <sup>1</sup>

The past fifteen years have seen a return of the opening title sequence as an object of scholarly interest, with the creative industry devoting consistent resources to its implementation. Openers have become an essential feature of media branding, proving a valuable output to launch creative studios and establish synergies between different sectors of the entertainment business. This essay looks at the functions of openers in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century American television and, more specifically, the role of “quality” “contemplative” title sequences in the promotion of series airing on premium cable channels. This focus helps to understand their promotional function, offering a preliminary exploration of the scholarly methodology applied in their analysis. To this end, the article closes with a study of the main titles of *Homeland* (Showtime 2011-present), whose negative reception invites further investigation into the evolution of this cinematographic form.

## The borderland of the audiovisual text

In the 1960s, the work of visual artists like Saul Bass and Maurice Binder brought the title sequences of Hollywood films to the attention of critics, turning into a significant vehicle of identification for movies and designers. Bass, especially, is often regarded as the father of title sequence aesthetics. Pat Kirkham underlines his contribution to a new formulation of the relationship between film and design, writing that Bass’s “images of intense clarity and subtle ambiguities transformed not only how titles were seen but also how they were conceptualized and regarded”. <sup>2</sup> Bass’s work on *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), and *North by Northwest* (1959) keeps company, in the hall of fame of ‘classic’ openers, to other acclaimed title sequences like those of *The Pink Panther* (by David H. DePatie and Friz Freleng, 1964) and *James Bond* (by Maurice Binder, 1962). Many have since taken inspiration from these works, turning credits into culturally relevant contents that enrich the viewer’s engagement with a film, a TV programme, and lately, with

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videogames and festivals.<sup>3</sup> Today, the growth of design studios specialising in their production attests to an on-going “design revival” of the visual arts.<sup>4</sup> These works elicit attention for their ability to stylise the essential features of audiovisual productions by means of aestheticised spectacles and cutting-edge animation. The positive interest that surrounds them inspires investigation of their composite nature.

An introductory definition of the title sequence, also called “opener” and “main titles,” is that of a brief audiovisual form (ranging from a few seconds to two minutes in length), which, placed at the beginning of a film and TV programme (either before its start or a few minutes into it), lists production, cast and crew credits and the distributor’s trademark logo. In spite of its growing prominence in popular culture, there exists little criticism on it.<sup>5</sup> The available articles and essays adopt two distinct, but interrelated analytic approaches that emphasise its “dysfunctional” nature, existing between “division and integration” with a media production.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand is the production emphasis on the opener as a standalone aesthetic element. The Creative Arts Primetime Emmys convention includes the category of “Outstanding Main Title Design” that selects the best openers in television programming, while the South by SouthWest film conference (SXSW) offers a screening session of “Film Titles Design” that includes TV titles. Credits are treated like “an experimental form of cinema”,<sup>7</sup> their level of self-containment and aesthetic coherence conferring on them a seemingly autonomous status. Judges regard them as works of art in their own right, with evaluations based on the formal and compositional properties of sound, editing, typography, computer animation. The work of Bass is the most representative of this discourse of artistic self-containment. Steven Spielberg’s statement that he was “one of the best film makers of this, or any other time” evidences the status of standalone works of art that producers confer to title sequences.<sup>8</sup>

However, this aesthetic bias often elides the analysis of their other uses and the relationship entertained with the work they introduce. Serving an array of diversified purposes (from art and fashion to certification of employment and entertainment), the opener is a “complex” cinematic form “in which an astounding number of operations are tightly interwoven”.<sup>9</sup> According to Georg Stanitzek, “[i]n its selection and strict coupling of singular elements, the title [...] references the film that follows and, reconsolidating allusions, makes self-reference to the form of the title sequence itself”.<sup>10</sup> In its status of “analytic synthesis” of medium and form, the opener never constitutes an alternative to a movie, functioning rather as a supplement that exists in a relation of co-dependence with it.<sup>11</sup>

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Deeply embedded in these dynamics, the title employs aesthetic sophistication to capture the tone, genre and narrative aspects of a production. Peter Frankfurt and Karin Fong, who created the openers of *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-present), *Rubicon* (AMC 2010) and *Mad Men* (AMC 2008-present), observe that credits exist to reference the series they introduce to the point that one cannot exist without the other. <sup>12</sup>



### Rubicon credits

Their highly stylised form arranges a hierarchy of meanings that conveys a compendium of larger narrative and thematic concerns, proving viewers with a “preferred arrangement of reading and commentary”. <sup>13</sup> Taking Joshua Alston’s comment that “if the story is the dream, the title sequence is the sedative,” it can be added that this sedative is primarily a textual one, which mediates the knowledge of an upcoming spectacle, dressing its industrial/legal function in an evocative, synoptical aesthetics. <sup>14</sup>

The work of Gérard Genette on paratexts is illustrative in this respect. <sup>15</sup> Writing about print media, Genette contends that the reception of a text is the result of a two-way relationship with the reader that is mediated by both the book proper and the materials existing on and outside of its borderland – covers, epigraphs, notes. Paratexts, as the subtitle of his book suggests, constitute the “thresholds of interpretation” where different worlds meet and possibly collide. This approach works also for audiovisual media. Drawing on Genette’s research, Jonathan Gray explores the uses of promotional materials to create the “hype” that draws audiences to the big and small screens. <sup>16</sup> Although he focuses on marketing strategies, the notion that these materials act as the “greeters, gatekeepers, and cheerleaders for and of the media” applies to openers as well. <sup>17</sup> Just like posters and trailers, the opener provides the “early frames through which we will [...] evaluate textual consumption”. <sup>18</sup> In an extremely compressed framework, it aggregates the salient features of a

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production, creating a synoptic storyboard that is allusive of narrative motifs and the extradiegetic.

Yet, title sequences are a peculiar kind of promotional material, existing as “an individual form *within* the medium of a particular film”. <sup>19</sup> After all, if we are sitting in the theatre, it means that we are already persuaded to watch a movie or a show, with the opener being a part of the spectacle. This relationship, where division and integration coexist, blurs the boundaries of the two cinematic forms. Anna Zagala writes that there exists a “volatile” connection between film titles and the film, which develops according to “the poetic and absurd possibilities” of a “dynamic in-between space”. <sup>20</sup> Laying at the edges of the spectacle, the credits manage how we access an audiovisual narrative and what kind of knowledge we create about it. “Here the film is in the process of becoming, where distinctions between outside and inside dissolve, and the film undergoes the difficult, exhilarating passage towards suspended disbelief”. <sup>21</sup> The supposed seamlessness that makes a film appear to its audience as a coherent unit is actually the effect of a ‘wrapping up’ enacted by the credits, where various purposes come together in suggestive ways. <sup>22</sup>

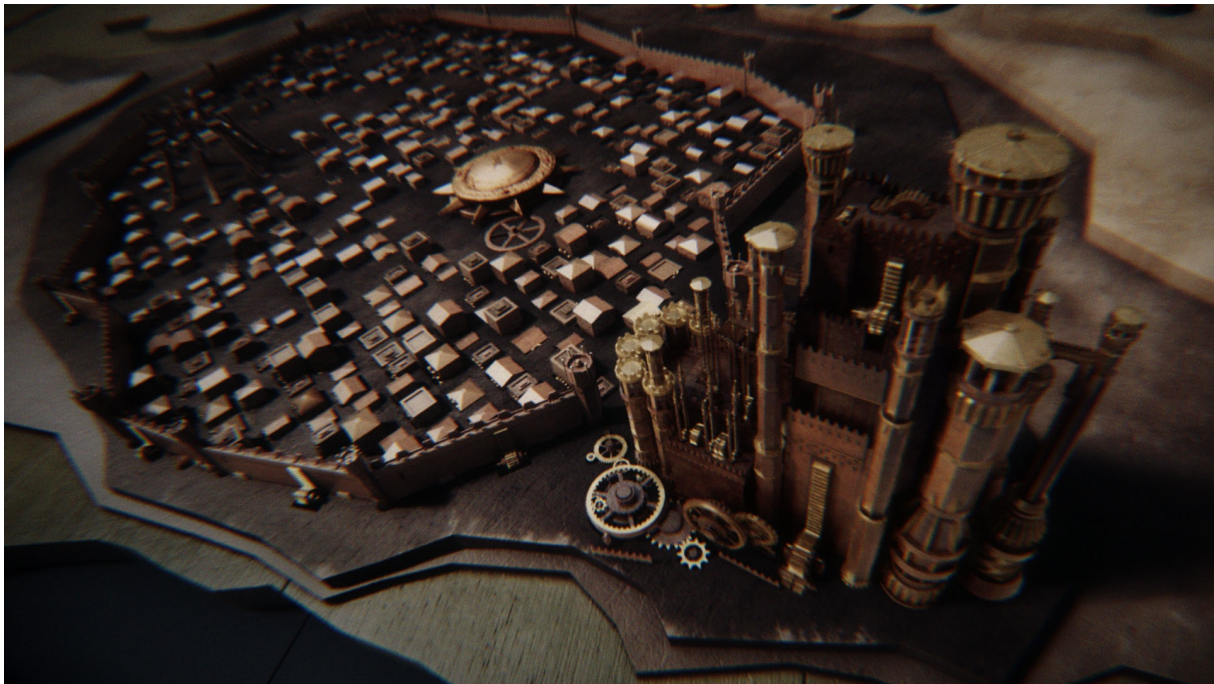
Indeed, as opposed to trailers and featurettes, which operate at a temporal and spatial distance from the work they advertise, the opener is already part of the entertainment experience. <sup>23</sup> Any exploration necessarily needs to straddle different analytic perspectives (regarding its production and reception) in order to understand the “combination of redundancy and variety” enacted by the multi-functional status of this audiovisual form. <sup>24</sup> The following arguments draw on the “quality” argument to investigate the production philosophy of TV openers.

## **TV openers and the quality argument**

Particularly in the context of contemporary television, the opener has become a central instrument of industrial re-definition. This is in marked contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when, with notable exceptions like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC 1990-96) and *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-91), the opener was treated like “a half-hearted afterthought” that attracted few resources and creativity. <sup>25</sup> Fear of losing viewers to an array of emerging competitors drove American networks to develop shorter sequences, and some executives to propose their elimination. The changes that have been taking place in the early 2000s and the mounting resources and interest devoted to these paratexts, however, attest to a significant transformation that has economic and cultural implications.



In “TV’s Golden Age of Opening Titles,” John Sellers celebrates the recent birth of the “quality opener”.<sup>26</sup> This label refers to the type of iconic main titles that in the last decade have been created to introduce ‘cult’ shows like *Six Feet Under* (HBO 1999- 2005), *Dexter* (Showtime 2006- present) and *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011- present). These sequences stand out for their ability to encapsulate thematic concerns in iconic ways, “serving as a threshold between the diegetic and non-diegetic world” that provide aestheticized ways to contextualise the production details of the series.<sup>27</sup>



Game of Thrones credits

Their commitment to detail, self-reflexive status, high-production values and use of advanced animation technology in fact conflate in a rich audiovisual experience and the object of mounting audience interest.<sup>28</sup> The creative boost injected in this production field is often seen as a consequence of the involvement of directors and designers previously associated with the big-screen industry. Sellers’s article mentions that a “film-to-TV-transition” is affecting the realisation of main title sequences, concurring to elevate television’s cultural standards.<sup>29</sup> Stacey Abbott similarly highlights the positive effects of this aesthetic hybridisation on the openers of TV series.<sup>30</sup>

Focusing on the horror genre, she examines the sequences of *American Horror Story* (FX 2011- present) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-present) realised by Prologue Films, the design company run by Kyle

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Cooper, creator of the acclaimed titles of *Se7en* (1995).



### American Horror Story credits

In the latter case, the titles employ visual motifs of urban decay and empty picture frames to evoke the narrative themes of the series. Their semiotic richness conveys *The Walking Dead*'s intent to explore the meaning of being human in inhuman situations, employing the oppressive atmosphere of "dark visuals, jittery, hand-held camera style, [and] jarring jump cut editing" typical of Cooper's "grunge aesthetics".<sup>31</sup> In the case of *American Horror Story*, Cooper's signature proved to be an important promotional vehicle. The titles were broadcast in advance of the premiere of the series which, created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, producers of the decidedly non-horror series *Glee* (Fox 2009- present), raised audience preoccupations concerning the generic identity of FX's show. By deploying Cooper's grunge mark, the anticipated airing of the credits "went a long way toward alleviating those concerns and generated much online discussion about the meaning of the credits and their implication for the show".<sup>32</sup>

A distinctive marker of contemporary television, the adoption of cinematic standards refers to the evolution of the medium's politics in its post-network phase.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, scholars contend that the enhanced look and style of recent TV series, linked to the participation of Hollywood talent and feature companies, constitutes "an even more important marker of the quality now expected by demographically desirable viewers".<sup>34</sup> However, the use of the term "quality" to describe ambitious title sequences is fraught with evaluative implications, as it connects the new economics behind their production with an effort to pursue the values of high culture. Formal concerns with an aestheticisation of televisual narratives seem to be concurring in the "renaissance" of TV design that extends the high-end presumptions of the series's 'proper' to their paratextual apparatus.<sup>35</sup>

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In her assessment of the inherent “goodness” of quality openers like those of *Game of Thrones*, Alice Rawsthorn pursues a similar line of analysis.<sup>36</sup> Commenting on the global success of this and other “intelligently made television shows”, she observes that their “ambitious” aesthetics evokes early 1960s precedents.<sup>37</sup> Notoriously, the post-war decade represents the “golden age” of television, a period “when serious people could take TV seriously,” largely thanks to the way tele-theatre mobilised the standards of modernist culture for a growing population of television users.<sup>38</sup> Today, advocates of TV’s “quality” turn similarly praise the commitment that many of the above mentioned shows devote not only to their realistic approach to socially relevant issues, but also their “stylistic integrity”.<sup>39</sup> Far from being just technical means to frame narrative concerns, production choices regarding editing, camera movement, soundtrack, and lighting concur to influence the audience’s experience of the spectacle, what Sarah Cardwell terms their “glossiness of style...open[ing] up the potential for rich, repeated viewing”.<sup>40</sup>

The status of openers as “essential viewing” exposes their iconic relevance as symbols of TV’s renewed artistic aspirations.<sup>41</sup> Although, the title sequence remains a largely underappreciated component of a TV programme, there is a growing demand by audiences which “now expect to feel something before the show starts—and not to be simply introduced to a cast”.<sup>42</sup> Looking at the analytics of online video aggregators, it emerges that openers are beginning to enjoy a rising popularity as their own genre of entertainment, eliciting user commentary and inspiring forms of bottom-up remixing that often reformulate the narrative priorities of the shows.<sup>43</sup> The next section discusses the industrial policies behind these ambitions of quality, showing that the production choices of openers function as a tool of branding and differentiation for premium cable channels.

## **Contemplative openers**

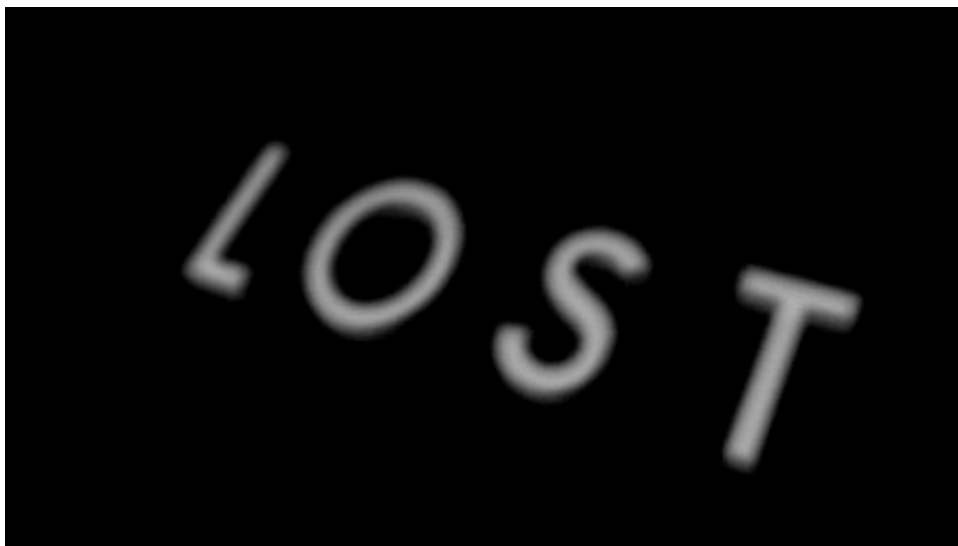
The proliferation of ambitious openers should not be taken as proof of a radical transformation of the TV’s policies. While, ideally, openers are regarded as if they were “abstract cinema”,<sup>44</sup> those which benefit from the care and resources devoted to “quality” productions remain rare. They are, rather, a disputed object of concern – as they are not a direct source of revenue, observes Danny Yount from Digital Kitchen studio, “there’s not always a lot of enthusiasm about [them]”.<sup>45</sup>

Although this statement apparently contradicts the argument of the previous section, it exposes the complexities of the American TV landscape, where the absence of state-sponsored platforms ties quality



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standards to the different economic arrangements of channels. In the present industrial context, “interstitials” like openers acquire great importance as “little instruction manuals on how to read TV”. <sup>46</sup> Since, as John Ellis writes, “[t]hey show how television regards itself”, these contents that cannot be classified as ‘programme proper’ provide a privileged means to understand the changes undergone by the medium in its present phase. <sup>47</sup> Catherine Johnson’s study of the “communicative ethos” of US television makes reference to the precarious status of credits, focusing on their disappearance from national networks. <sup>48</sup> Arguably, media planning in the USA is “particularly concerned with the bottom line and with ensuring that the non-advertising texts within the interstitials are generating revenue”. <sup>49</sup> In an effort to discourage viewers from switching channels between programmes, the networks are either doing entirely away with openers, switching to title cards (as in the case of *Lost* [ABC 2004-10] and *Grey’s Anatomy* [ABC 2005-present]), or postponing them in what are known as “cold starts”, where the sequence airs a few minutes into the beginning of the actual programme.



Lost credits



Grey's Anatomy credits

Commenting on this disappearance, Ellis compares quality openers to the “hardback binding on a book, denoting quality, seriousness of intent and the buyer’s willingness to pay more”. <sup>50</sup> His reading highlights that credits sit at the heart of a reconfiguration of entertainment standards, where “quality” and “sophistication” work to alleviate the effects of a new economy of scarcity while simultaneously setting up cultural hierarchies. The effect of these changes is that the kind of imaginative openers praised by critics is quickly becoming an exclusive staple of premium channels. While economic needs and the pressures of advertisers are forcing the national networks to maximise on revenue and cut on interstitials, platforms like Showtime, FX and HBO are unencumbered by such preoccupations. Since their revenues are generated by viewer subscriptions, their mission is to offer audiences something ‘more’ and ‘better’ than regular TV. For this reason, openers and other interstitials work as a branding vehicle and a means of differentiation for competing channels. Their stylish and engaging spectacle becomes a deluxe addendum that provides supposedly memorable entertainment to those willing to pay extra for their chosen pastime.

In this respect, high-production values and artistic standards concur to mark the cultural currency of a series, with the audiovisual excellence of its opener functioning as an effective tool of programme branding. Productions apply the standards of advertising and cinema to title design to perform quality, setting, in Ellis’s definition, a “contemplative pace” into the action that brands them as purveyors of “elegance and perfection”. <sup>51</sup> The posture entices viewers and sets mood, turning

description into iconicity and eliciting instant recognition of a series. The time spent watching a contemplative opener serves to “pace” the pleasures of entertainment, a luxury afforded by the subscriptions that allow premium channels to eschew commercial interruptions.<sup>52</sup> Here, narrative and thematic concerns are extrapolated and re-contextualised in sequences that establish levels of correct reading via the inclusion of extratextual elements drawn from literature, cinema and painting.<sup>53</sup>

Showtime exemplifies how premium platforms employ contemplative openers to define the channel’s distance from regular TV. The success of its original productions like *Dexter* and *Californication* (2008- present) made the channel an undisputed source of cutting-edge entertainment. In some cases, the openers of these series have elicited as much positive attention as their referring programmes. *Dexter* and *The Borgias* (2011-present) are illustrative of this phenomenon. The former’s credits chronicle the morning routine of serial killer Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) in extreme close-ups, with a jump-cut editing and accompanied by Daniel Litch’s “dorky” “Blood Theme”.<sup>54</sup> They have become synonymous with the superb aesthetics of quality openers, with critics naming them “a mini-masterpiece”, still “the best on TV” after six seasons.<sup>55</sup>



Dexter credits

Those of *The Borgias* make virtue of their audience’s knowledge of Renaissance painting to establish the high-brow presumptions of the production.<sup>56</sup> The sequence uses as its main motifs paint and paintings (like Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* and *Exposure of Luxury* by Agnolo Bronzino) to encapsulate the themes of the narrative that, focusing on the

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Borgia family, deals with corruption, lust, bribery and murder. <sup>57</sup>



The Borgias credits

The work of “aestheticisation” of these titles generates a “sense of beauty” and allusion: their functionalism turns into a form of persuasive entertainment that magnifies that of the associated series. <sup>58</sup> Like the logos and brand signatures of Hollywood’s heyday that resonated with “particular kinds of production values”, Showtime’s titles are a “means of confirming specific kinds of industrial authority and viewing pleasure”. <sup>59</sup> Their cutting-edge style and artistic virtuosity aspire to position the channel as a competitive brand of entertainment that congratulates viewers for their supposedly superior taste in entertainment. This strategy shows that credits create interpretive frameworks for individual productions, while concurrently working within the broadcasting context to attribute an organic, distinct identity to a platform and its audience.

### ***Homeland’s “worse opening credits ever”***

Openers distil different concerns, with legal matters, reception, marketing strategies converging in the creation of a “functional space” that, “open[ing] up room for aesthetic variation”, performs a channel’s aspiration to cultural relevance. <sup>60</sup> “In their search for beauty”, notes Ellis, they “present a vision of television as it could be ... if only it were even more costly than it already is”. <sup>61</sup> But what happens when audiences do not receive credits favourably? This section looks at the disputed

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credits of *Homeland* to further analyse the impact that an opener has on a channel's marketing strategies.

Acclaimed as “stylish and challenging”, <sup>62</sup> *Homeland* has been Showtime's flagship programme since its premiere in 2011, receiving consecutive awards in the competitive category of “Best TV Drama”. <sup>63</sup> An espionage drama based on an Israeli original, it tells the story of the involvement of Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), a Marine Sergeant back in the US after missing in action for eight years in Iraq, with CIA officer Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), with whom he starts an affair, and with the jihadist cause. Brody's hidden agenda and Mathison's love for him and obsession with security question the meaning of pervasive surveillance, vulnerability and patriotism in a time of ideological redefinition, as the first decade of America's “war on terror” comes to an end.

Like other shows airing in the last decade (most notably *Battlestar Galactica* [SyFy 2003-2009] and *Lost*), *Homeland* is an investigation of confinement, both in the sense of physical imprisonment and containment, when a character is unwillingly forced to comply to a pre-established set of rules and expectations. Its opening credits show a particular instance of confinement, chronicling Carrie's obsessive identification with CIA's counterterrorism agenda. <sup>64</sup> In approximately 100 seconds, they use a collection of jumbled fragments spanning her childhood, adolescent and adult years and the visual motif of the garden maze to map her involvement with the cause of homeland security.



Homeland credits



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The most evident feature of the sequence is its discontinuity and lack of consistent narrative unfolding. Not only is it difficult to assign coherence to it, when they attain narrative continuity (because of an internal recurrence of subject and motif), some shots literally jump before the eye, while others fade in a blur of aberrant chromaticism, or are superimposed to other ones. <sup>65</sup> This editing choice draws attention to the precarious status that, in the series, images and sounds have as objects of knowledge: the spectatorial mastery of the object of vision is bracketed by an overabundance of sensorial stimuli, like the insistent superimposition of diegetic sounds (sirens, fragments of presidential addresses on terrorism, helicopters and voices speaking in muffled Arabic) on a piercing jazz soundtrack. <sup>66</sup>



Homeland credits



### Homeland credits

With its dense, eccentric style of execution, the sequence is a challenging piece of spectacle that performs *Homeland's* aspirations of cultural relevance, particularly with respect to its soundtrack, a jazz composition by Sean Callery. The tune, which was nominated for "Outstanding Main Title Theme Music" at the 2012 Emmys, provides a hint into the narrative as well as its reception. Jazz is Carries' preferred means to calm down at moments of crisis, while its "wailing" trumpet melody functions as an acoustic commentary to the scenes of chaos passing on screen.<sup>67</sup> The choice of jazz for the sequence operates as cultural code. On TV, this genre is often employed to add sophistication to a scene, its improvisational qualities inviting the audience to acknowledge its baroque execution. Scores of famous New Orleans musicians (*Homeland* notoriously features Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser") intermingle with themes created by Callery, demanding from viewers a degree of knowledge and appreciation of the complex mechanics of composition and affective involvement mobilised by sophisticated television. Indeed, it is both the ambitious aesthetics and its opening theme that, in the mind of the producers, would single out *Homeland's* titles as quality entertainment.

For all its aspirations, however, the surrealism of the titles has been the object of unnerved criticism by viewers and commentators. For example, Todd VanDerWerff of the online magazine *AV Club* finds them "goofy".<sup>68</sup> In a list of "The Best and Worst Credit Sequences of 2011" published in the influential *TV.Com*, Tim Surette gives them an "F" for looking "like your college roommate's bad poetry, visualized",<sup>69</sup> while Nestor Watach

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points to their “poor execution”, judging them “the worst opening credits in TV history”. <sup>70</sup> In a post for the blog *The Warm Glove*, Watach notes that “the quality of the show itself is the antithesis of the nature of the opening credits”, an “enthraling drama” that the titles’ “contrived travesty” does nothing to delineate. <sup>71</sup> The criticism is so widespread that in an interview for the *Hollywood Reporter* Alex Gansa, *Homeland*’s executive producer, felt compelled to justify his choice: “some people love [the sequence]; some people hate it. [...] What I like about it is it clearly shows how the last 25 years of bad news, in terms of the war on terror, might have influenced a girl growing up with bipolar illness”. <sup>72</sup> Contending that the titles are symbolic of contemporary anxieties, with Carrie embodying the neurosis of a burned-out populace, Gansa moves the argument away from the bottom-up criticism of the aesthetic shortcomings of the sequence, and repositions it on the paratextual level of its sociocultural implications.

Within unanimous recognition of the cultural import of *Homeland*’s thematic concerns, the criticism of the titles sticks out as the proverbial *bête noir* that threatens to compromise the reception of the show, with Gansa’s defensive statement hinting at some deep-seated anxieties as he tries to counter the audience’s reactions. Openers do indeed serve the purpose of protracted “content branding”, <sup>73</sup> setting up the mood and tone” of the shows. <sup>74</sup> Furthermore, they need to be resilient: “ensur[ing] that they won’t seem tedious on the umpteenth viewing”. <sup>75</sup> Negative reception of the titles might thus operate in an aporetic fashion, countering the principle by which they must create screen attachment and “resonate” with the viewer. <sup>76</sup>

The compromising status of *Homeland*’s credits within the economy of the series and its broadcasting channel points to the fact the marketing force of a series’s paratextual apparatus operates as long as it triggers a productive relationship with the audience, inspiring positive feedback. This latter aspect often takes the form of audience appropriation of the paratexts. TV’s cultural economy is in fact increasingly dependent on the autonomous, bottom-up circulation of its contents and the repurposing activities that they initiate. If opening credit sequences are paratexts that influence the audience’s understanding and engagement with a media production, their negative reception should not be overlooked. Not only because it might determine a loss of viewers, but because it engenders a different relationship with the televisual text, <sup>77</sup> one that compromises the function of openers to ‘hook’ viewers to a channel in an instant fashion. An opener’s ability to generate hype and attract viewers is indeed linked to its ability to “produce value [...] through the expression, attention and co-creation of subjectivity”. <sup>78</sup> The dispute over *Homeland*’s titles shows the extent to which Showtime’s promotion needs not only to harness and inspire, but also to inflect this subjective creation with positive market

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value.

## **The evolution of TV openers**

The strategies associated with the production of contemplative, quality openers extend beyond the broadcasting moment, to foresee and modulate their circulation as autonomous entertainment forms. What seems to motivate the current industrial interest in openers is their ability to initiate an encounter that “linger[s] longer than the television series itself”.<sup>79</sup> If channels need promos with a lasting effect, they might have found in openers the right balance of artistic and promotional integrity that “lodges itself in the mind and won’t be dislodged”.<sup>80</sup> This performative character of openers shows how a sophisticated aesthetics and its ability to comment on a developing storyline enhance forms of moment-intensive consumption. At the same time, openers become vehicles of a form of ‘instant’ entertainment that might further push TV’s dive into an economy of the “commons”, whereby promotional materials aggregate interest and attention because of their social resonance, but also defuse and disperse this attention away from the series.

The marketing of openers is part of the marketing of attention taking place throughout the system of communication, where television overlaps with other media in an attempt to regiment the transductive dimension of media’s perceptual mobilisation. The industry thus finds itself in the position of both implementing and containing the power of media forms to engender prolonged textual engagement.<sup>81</sup> There is an element of moment-intensive capitalisation that criticism of openers has so far eschewed and that instead needs to be further analysed. Efforts to seize attention at the moment of broadcasting merge with TV’s need to sustain viewer support and curiosity through time. Openers stand at the point where these assemblages overlap, their properties of brevity, attraction and flexibility instigating new strategies of promotion based in the top-down modulation of practice of textual repurposing and experimentation.

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published articles and essays on *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mad Men* and *Lost* and blogs at <http://spaceofattraction.wordpress.com>.

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## **Filmography**

*American Horror Story* (FX 2011- present).

*Battlestar Galactica* (SyFy 2003-2009).

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*Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-present).

*Californication* (2008- present).

*Dexter* (Showtime 2006- present).

*Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011- present).

*Grey's Anatomy* (ABC 2005-present).

*Homeland* (Showtime 2011-present).

*James Bond* (1962, Lewis Gilbert).

*Lost* (ABC 2004-10).

*Mad Men* (AMC 2008-present),

*North by Northwest* (1959, Alfred Hitchcock).

*Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock).

*Rubicon* (AMC 2010).

*Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2003, Andrew Douglas).

*Se7en* (1995 David Fincher).

*Six Feet Under* (HBO 1999- 2005).

*The Borgias* (2011-present).

*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC 1990-96).

*The Pink Panther* (1964, Black Edwards).

*The Seven Year Itch* (1955, Billy Wilder).

*The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010- present).

*Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-91).

Notes:

1. David Cronenberg cited in Janet Abrams, "Beginnings, Endings, and the Stuff in Between", *Sight and Sound* 12 4 (1994): 23. [↵](#)
2. Pat Kirkham, "[Reassessing the Saul Bass and Alfred Hitchcock Collaboration](#)", *Design Observer*, January 11, 2012, accessed 28, May 28 2012. [↵](#)
3. See, for example, the openers of the F5 Festival realised by Buck Studio and of 2010 OFFF in Paris available at Vimeo. "[F5 Titles](#)", accessed April 16, 2013, and Vimeo, "[OFFF Paris 2010 Titles](#)", accessed April 16, 2013. [↵](#)
4. Alice Rawsthorn, "[Opening Titles That Grab Viewers' Attention](#)", *New York Times*, November 18, 2012, accessed 5, April 2013. [↵](#)
5. Abrams, "Beginnings, Endings, and the Stuff in Between"; Stacey Abbott, "'I want to do bad things to you': The Cult of the TV Horror Credit Sequence" (paper presented at the symposium Popular Media Cultures: Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines, London, May 19, 2012); Pamela Haskin, "Saul, Can You Make Me a Title? Interview with Saul Bass", *Film Quarterly*, 50 1 (1996): 10-17; Georg Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence (*Vorspann, Générique*)", *Cinema Journal* 4 48 (2009): 45; Veronica Innocenti and Valentina Re (eds.), *Limina. Le Soglie del Film/Film's Thresholds* (Udine: Forum, 2004). [↵](#)
6. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 49, 45. [↵](#)
7. Ibid. 53. [↵](#)
8. Spielberg quoted in Kirkham, "Reassessing the Saul Bass and Alfred Hitchcock Collaboration". [↵](#)
9. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 46. [↵](#)
10. Ibid. 47. [↵](#)
11. Ibid. 47. [↵](#)
12. "[The Art of Film & TV Title Design](#)", *YouTube*, accessed January 22, 2013. [↵](#)
13. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 53. [↵](#)
14. Joshua Alston, "[TV's Amuse-Bouche](#)", *VanityFair*, April 12, 2012, accessed February 1, 2013. [↵](#)
15. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of*

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- Interpretation* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [↵](#)
16. Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010). [↵](#)
17. Ibid. 17. [↵](#)
18. Ibid. 26. [↵](#)
19. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 45 (italics mine). [↵](#)
20. Anna Zagala, "[The Edges of Film](#)", *Senses of Cinema* 20 (2002), accessed February 12, 2012. [↵](#)
21. Ibid. [↵](#)
22. The wrapping up is enacted as much by opening as by closing titles. See on this aspect: Abrams, "Beginnings, Endings and the Stuff in Between". [↵](#)
23. According to Stanitzek, the title sequence belongs to the category of "peritexts". These "are found close to the text to which they refer, are affixed to it to some degree and enter into view with it." Conversely, the trailer is an "epitext," as it is located at a greater distance from the text to which [it] refer[s], so that [it] can - in a temporal dimension as well - provide commentary in the forefront or as follow-up". Stanitzek "Reading the Title Sequence", 52. [↵](#)
24. Ibid., 50. [↵](#)
25. Alston, "TV's Amuse-Bouche". [↵](#)
26. John Sellers, "[TV's Golden Age of Opening Credits](#)", *Salon*, February 18, 2012, accessed January 24, 2013. [↵](#)
27. Abbott, "'I want to do bad things to you'". [↵](#)
28. Fans often create alternative versions, like Daniel Kanemoto's unofficial titles for *The Walking Dead*. See "[The Walking Dead \(unofficial\) 2010](#)", *Art of the Title*, October 29, 2010, accessed April 13, 2013. [↵](#)
29. Sellers, "TV's Golden Age of Opening Credits". [↵](#)
30. Abbott, "'I want to do bad things to you'". [↵](#)
31. Abbott, "'I want to do bad things to you'". [↵](#)
32. Ibid. [↵](#)
33. For a discussion of post-network television see Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). [↵](#)
34. Roberta Pearson, "Lost in Transition", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 241. [↵](#)
35. Rawsthorn, "Opening Titles That Grab Viewers' Attention". [↵](#)
36. Ibid. [↵](#)
37. Ibid. [↵](#)
38. Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 11. [↵](#)
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39. Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality TV Any Good?," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 30. [↵](#)
  40. Ibid., 26, 31. [↵](#)
  41. Sellers, "TV's Golden Age of Opening Credits". [↵](#)
  42. Alston, "TV's Amuse-Bouche". [↵](#)
  43. "Feature programmes, advertisements, idents, bumpers and so on are disassemble, recycled, remixed with materials of other provenance and recast as new texts – some funny, some absurd, some biting in their commentary. In many cases, the ephemeral has come all the way around to emerge centre stage." William Uricchio, "The Recurrent, The Recombinatory and the Ephemeral", in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (London, BFI: 2011), 32. [↵](#)
  44. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 45. [↵](#)
  45. Yount cited in Alston, "TV's Amuse-Bouche". [↵](#)
  46. John Ellis, "Interstitials: How the 'Bits in Between' Define the Programmes" in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (London, BFI: 2011), 60. [↵](#)
  47. Ibid. [↵](#)
  48. Catherine Johnson, *Branding Hollywood* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 133. [↵](#)
  49. Ibid., 135. [↵](#)
  50. Ellis, "Interstitials," 61. [↵](#)
  51. Ibid., 65. [↵](#)
  52. Ibid., 65. [↵](#)
  53. For example, the opener of *True Blood* (HBO 2008- present), a supernatural series about vampires in the American South, enriches its overview of narrative motifs like the haunted house, with extradiegetic references to southern gothic literature (especially the novels of Harry Crews), David Lynch's films, and the documentary on Christianity and country music *Searching for the Wrong Eyed Jesus* (2003). See "[True Blood](#)", *Watch the Titles*, date of publication unknown, accessed April 13, 2013. [↵](#)
  54. Emily Nussbaum, "[It's Never too Soon to Suck them In](#)", *New York TV*, May 16, 2010, accessed January 24, 2013. [↵](#)
  55. Ibid. [↵](#)
  56. Realised by Momentist studio. See: Momentist, "[Title sequence for The Borgias. Showtime](#)", accessed April 16, 2013. [↵](#)
  57. Other significant examples are the main titles of *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Nurse Jackie* (2009-present). [↵](#)
  58. Ellis, "Interstitials", 64-65. [↵](#)
  59. Paul Grainge, "Branding Hollywood: Studio Logos and the
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- Aesthetics of Memory and Hype", *Screen* 45 4 (2004): 349, 346. [↵](#)
60. Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence", 49. [↵](#)
61. Ellis, "Interstitials", 65. [↵](#)
62. Jonathan Storm, "[One Crazy Good Spy](#)", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2011, accessed January 24, 2013. [↵](#)
63. The series has won multiple awards at the Emmys and Golden Globes, among which are best performance by an actress and an actor in a television drama received by Claire Danes and Damien Lewis consecutively in 2012 and 2013. [↵](#)
64. The credits can be viewed at: Vimeo, "[Homeland Opening Credit Sequence](#)", accessed April 12, 2013. [↵](#)
65. This affective intrusion also materialises as hypersaturation and chromatic aberration. Occasionally, a grain effect is added, as the some close-ups of Carrie's facial features. [↵](#)
66. Chris Billig, executive producer at TGC (the studio responsible for the sequence), states that the goal was to provide a surreal spectacle that shows how Carrie is at the same time the pursuer and the victim of a "cat-and-mouse" game where good and bad sides switch place. The opener discloses that she and Brody will cross many thresholds, reviewing their goals and questioning what they used to take for granted. The images and sounds of TV news, echoes of past conversations, the Arabic language and reports from the warfront, mark the limit of a perceptual threshold tying the officer's predicament to that of her country's fight against terrorism. [↵](#)
67. "[Homeland: Creating the Opening Titles Music](#)", *YouTube*, accessed January 20, 2013. [↵](#)
68. Todd VanDerWerff, "'[Blind Spot](#)': *Homeland*", *AVClub*, October 30, 2011, accessed January 20, 2013. [↵](#)
69. Tim Surette, "[The Best and Worst Credit Sequences of the 2011 TV Season: Sunday Shows](#)", *TV.com*, November, 21, 2011, accessed January 24, 2013. [↵](#)
70. Nestor Watach, "[Does Homeland Have the Worst Opening Credits in TV History?](#)", *The Warm Glove*, November 28, 2012, accessed Jan 24, 2013. [↵](#)
71. Ibid. [↵](#)
72. Jethro Nededog, "[Homeland EP Alex Gansa Talks Nick Brody Twist, Defends Opening Titles Sequence](#)", *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 20, 2011, accessed January 21, 2013. [↵](#)
73. Alston, "TV's Amuse-Bouche". [↵](#)
74. This is especially true of the credits for serials, whose life is genetically programmed to stretch for months and often many years. In this case, titles must be generic enough to encompass the potential of a diegetic universe to change, a universe that, at the moment of the openers' realisation, exists just in blueprint form, since the decision to keep a show on the air, or renew it, is
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taken several weeks (if not months) into the airing of the season.

[↵](#)

75. Rowsthorn, "Opening Titles That Grab Viewers' Attention". [↵](#)
76. See the interviews with Jim Helton and Ben Conrad in "The Art of Film & TV Title Design". [↵](#)
77. On anti-fans and non-fans see Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.1 (2003): 64-81. [↵](#)
78. Jon Dovey "Time Slice: Web Drama and the Attention Economy", in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (London, BFI: 2011), 143. [↵](#)
79. Alston, "TV's Amuse-Bouche." [↵](#)
80. Michael Szpakowski, "One Minute Volumes 1-4", *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 1 (2012): 133. [↵](#)
81. Victoria Jaye from BBC talks about the industry's goal to create "moment-intensive content" as a way to repurpose TV programmes for Internet use on the BBC iPlayer platform: "We create those moments [...] But now those moments are no longer just gone. While we're maxing out on their momentariness, we will also ensure that they will never have to be forgotten, so you're giving them a permanent place or record of the passing of that moment, but it's still a moment. You definitely still want to create hit moments of jeopardy and hilarity [...] We are driving moments, but those moments have a lasting value and we can support that lasting value through these endeavours". Elizabeth J. Evans, "The Evolving Media Ecosystem: An Interview with Victoria Jaye, BBC", in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (London, BFI: 2011), 119. [↵](#)