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Introductory remarks: How main titles work

A cab moves into the frame and stops by the curb. A man approaches it and opens the door. 'Jesus, what'd you do, come by way of the Panama Canal?' 'Alright, alright, I'm in a bad mood, okay?', answers a woman getting out of the cab. They move over to the ticket booth of a movie theatre as they continue to talk. A billboard reads: 'Ingmar Bergman's "Face to Face", Liv Ullmann'. 'H'm, has the picture started yet?', the man asks the ticket clerk, who replies, 'It started two minutes ago.' 'That's it! Forget it! I-I can't go in.' 'Two minutes, Alvy', the woman says. 'No, I'm sorry, I can't do it. We-we've blown it already. I-you know, uh, I-I can't go in in the middle.' 'In the middle? We'll only miss the titles. They're in Swedish.' Alvy's solution: 'You wanna get coffee for two hours or something?'

This amusing episode is easy to recognise as a popular scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977).[1] The humour of the sequence and the kind of tenderness we can feel towards the insane behaviour of Alvy consists in the 'natural' empathy with Annie's point of view: 'Two minutes, Alvy. [...] We'll only miss the titles.' Annie's quite justifiable protests clearly signal how title sequences can be considered as a remarkable example of 'marginality' in the context of the short format; literally placed at the fringes of films, title sequences have been long considered as peripheral and insignificant.

First, this impression of marginality can be experienced by the audience, at home or at the theatre. Since titles are *not yet* or *not exactly* the movie, spectators generally feel free to use the 'titles time' (or 'popcorn time') to make themselves comfortable, turn off the phone, get something to eat. Second, this marginality is to some extent corroborated by various players in the film industry. Suffice it to think of the ease with which producers have implemented different measures of normalisation or standardisation against, for instance, the disorienting absence of opening credits in Orson Welles' movies (as in the well-known case of *Touch of Evil* [1958]), or conversely the disorienting and eccentric form of credits in most of Jean-Luc Godard's films (which are almost always normalised in the Italian editions). Moreover, we can give an account of the importance that exhibitors give to titles recalling an anecdote from Saul Bass, the pioneer of contemporary opening credits. With respect to the credit sequence he created for *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Otto Preminger, 1955), Bass recalls:

> [w]hen Otto learned that his *The Man with the Golden Arm* was opening over closed drapes he made sure that there was a note attached to every print instructing the projectionist not to run the first reel until the curtains had been drawn back.[2]

Fig. 1-3: The Man with the Golden Arm, opening credits.

Film studies has long neglected the history, modes of production, stylistic features, and semantic/pragmatic role of opening credits. Aside from a few foundational contributions written between the 1970s and 1990s, which focus either on the theoretical implication of credits[3] or on Saul Bass' work,[4] the majority of any extensive studies of the topic were published in the last two decades and try to offer a historical and/or theoretical overview[5] as well as more focalised investigations.[6] Moving to the context of television production, it is apparent that titles played a fundamental role in forging the identities of many series in the past (let us think of some popular cases such as *Bewitched* [ABC, 1964-1972], *Mission: Impossible* [CBS, 1966-1973], *The Persuaders!* [ITV, 1971]) and continue

nowadays, in an increasingly crowded market, to 'brand' and 'package' television shows. Nevertheless, contributions in the field of television studies appear limited to thematic articles[7] or single references in thematic books,[8] with only one attempt to develop a broader investigation.[9]

Despite this inconsistent critical attention opening credits, insofar as thresholds or paratextual components,[10] accomplish the crucial task of managing a 'transition' (from the 'reality' of the viewing experience to the imaginary world depicted in the movie or television show) that in fact is simultaneously a 'transaction'. In addition to providing information about the production opening credits also offer clues about the fictional world, characters, genre, and thus orient the spectator and manage expectations. As Saul Bass has explained:

> [w]hat a title could do was to set mood and to prime the underlying core of the film's story; to express the story in some metaphorical way. I saw the title as a way of conditioning the audience, so that when the film actually began, viewers would already have an emotional resonance with it. I had a strong feeling that films really began on the first frame.[11]

The last sentence in this quotation clearly demonstrates Bass' understanding of the paratextual value of titles – even if they are not yet the movie 'proper' they play a key role in setting a communicative relationship with the audience. The 'paratext' has doubtlessly become a key concept in understanding and analysing opening title sequences, both in film and television studies; in this respect, suffice it to reference Jonathan Gray's recent definition of the opening credit sequence as an 'entryway paratext', or in other words a 'formidable introduction to the characters, tone, genre, and style of the show'.[12]

Saul Bass' training and experience in graphic design are also key to understanding his personal, innovative approach to such sequences; by transferring the main principles of graphic design from advertising and corporate communication to opening credits he literally initiated the 'branding' of films. From the second half of the 1950s onwards the work of Saul Bass radically changed the way credits were conceived. They became a playground for completely new stylistic features and acquired a strong metatextual value (titles begin to talk about the film through metaphor and synecdoche, in an intentionally allusive and potentially ambiguous way) and pragmatic function (credits became an essential component in building and negotiating the movie/viewer relationship). The work of Bass inspired

an entire generation of artists and designers (Maurice Binder, Richard Williams, Pablo Ferro, Jean Fouchet, Wayne Fitzgerald, Dan Perry, etc.) who, from the early 1960s, experimented with title sequences. Bass created his last sequence for *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995). He died a year later. However, 1995 is also the year in which graphic designer Kyle Cooper – one of the leading figures of a new generation of title designers – achieved notoriety thanks to the opening sequence designed for David Fincher's *Se7en*. Cooper's work inspired a new creative wave embodied by innovative post-production houses such as Imaginary Forces, Prologue, Digital Kitchen, Elastic, and many others, which impacted the development of digital graphic design significantly for films and television shows.
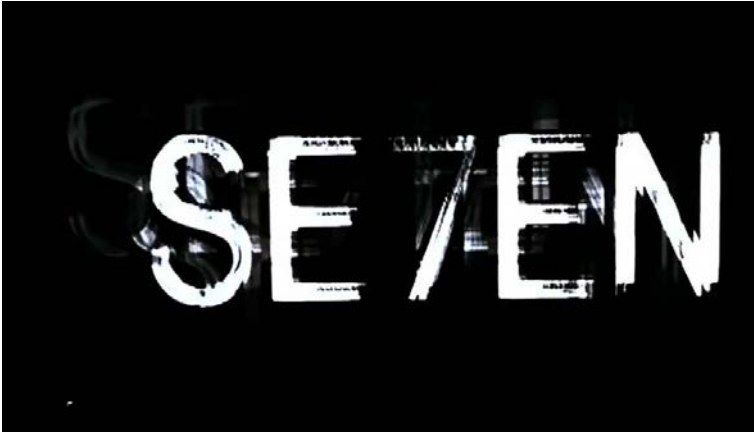
Figs 4-6: Se7en, opening credits.

Two years before *Casino* and *Se7en* something very different but equally important happened: After Effects software was launched in 1993. As Lev Manovich writes in *Software Takes Command*, the example of digital motion graphics is central to our understanding of the aesthetics of 'deep remixability' that characterises our contemporary 'software culture':

> [n]ormally a remix is a combination of content from a single medium [...], or from a few mediums [...]. Software production environment allows designers to remix not only the content of different media, but also their fundamental techniques, working methods, and ways of representation and expression.[13]

Having identified 'selected precedents' for contemporary digital motion graphics in the work of pioneers such as Bass and Ferro, Manovich then directly relates the 'exponential growth' of media design and its related aesthetics of 'deep remixability' (the new creative wave I have just mentioned) 'to adoption of software for moving image design – specifically, After Effects software released by Adobe in 1993'.[14] Let us consider one more point in Manovich's reflections:

> [t]he next major wave of computerization of culture has to do with different types of software – social networks, social media services, and apps for mobile platforms. The wave of social networks and social media started slowly, erupted in 2005-2006 (Flickr, YouTube) and continues to move forward and expand its reach. The 1990s' media revolution impacted *professional creatives*; the 2000s' media revolution affected *the rest of us*.[15]

In this article I do not adopt an aesthetic point of view, therefore I will not provide detailed analyses of how contemporary opening title sequences may express an aesthetics of 'deep remixability'. Rather, I am interested in analysing how motion graphics, particularly the opening titles of television series, played a fundamental role in this shift from the 1990s to the 2000s. As well as branding audiovisual content, thus expressing its identity and putting it in relation to an audience, main titles connect viewers – in other words they contribute to creating 'networked communities' or 'brand communities' based on a shared passion for media content. The main title sequence is a short text that identifies the content that spectators love and, at the same time (thanks also to its 'marginality'), can be easily appropriated, creatively transformed, and then shared by fans to exhibit their relationship with the content, to strengthen their relationships with other fans and moreover show their creative ability. In this perspective Manovich's 'software culture' intersects with Lawrence Lessig's 'R/W culture'[16] and Henry Jenkins' 'participatory culture'[17] and 'spreadable media'.[18]

Taking into account well-established research on the paratextual value of main titles, the main aim of this article is to discuss this renewed, double role of titles (branding content, branding communities) in the contemporary media landscape. In the first section, having distinguished the work done by film credits from that of linear television openings, I discuss in particular how title sequences can be re-evaluated in the age of video-on-demand services and binge-watching and related to the idea of 'spreadable media'. In the second section I investigate how opening titles (and their 'miniatures', title cards) can take advantage of repeated viewings in different ways and how spectators can further re-elaborate the dialectic between repetition and variation when they rework opening titles. I conclude by showing how a popular fan vid, *Channel Hopping*, provides a useful example of the multiple ways in which title sequences can work today and illustrates their role in a new 'engagement-based paradigm'[19] of television, to which binge-watching appears almost 'naturally' related.

Brands, rituals ... and 'spreadability': The case of *Mad Men*

With respect to the role of managing a transition (from the 'real' to the 'fictional' world) and a transaction (by providing suggestions and 'instructions' for the fictional world) there are several relevant differences

between the opening titles of films and television series. When a film spectator accesses the opening credits he/she has already decided to watch the movie, has already bought the ticket or downloaded/rented the movie, and he/she is already 'predisposed' to enter (for a few hours) a fictional world of which he/she already knows many details. In this respect titles encourage their entrance, confirm expectations, and provide new clues for the forthcoming narrative.

Now, let us think about traditional, linear television and its programming schedule. Within the flow of television images the act of recognising the name of an actor, a title, or a piece of music in the credits, or the discovery of particularly original and eye-catching visual features, can actually transform my state from 'potential spectator' to 'actual viewer'. The inattentive spectator can literally be captured and converted into a loyal follower. Or, if I am already familiar with the show or a regular viewer, the opening titles give me the time to turn off the light and prepare for my weekly, or maybe daily, ritual. In this way opening credits 'mark out' the single product in the television flow so that the viewer can take his/her time to 'enter' the show.[20] As Gray puts it,

> credit sequences are also powerful in medias res paratexts. […] Opening credits help to transport us from the previous textual universe to a new one, or out of 'real life' and into the life of the program.[21]

In both cases title sequences in television series appear more strongly related to the idea of 'seduction' than those of the film. The idea of seduction implies that of passing, moving into, entering; 'se-duce' etymologically means to draw apart and separate from the continuum of the world – in this case to allow the viewer to enter the textual world. The seductive component is a specific feature in an overall strategy that is developed through the liminal areas of a text, including both opening credits and beginnings.[22] As we have seen, this strategy is meant to produce a change of state in the viewer – the transition from a state of inertia and 'passivity' to the condition of an active predisposition to fiction, which requires an emotional and cognitive engagement.

My description of the seduction strategy developed by main titles is of course valid when we refer to the linear television model. Yet how does this strategy change in the age of streaming media, video-on-demand services, and binge-watching? Watching a television show on a video-on-demand platform implies a preliminary choice; in other words, when we start

watching we are already 'predisposed' to the fiction, and in this sense title sequences foster our predisposition only by suggesting characters, settings, or themes. More importantly, when we watch more episodes consecutively while binge-watching we might question the very need to pass through a liminal, marginal zone again and again since after the first episode we have already entered the fictional world. So why enter it again? More significantly, how can the traditional 'introductory function' of opening titles be reframed?

I would like to suggest that instead two other functions tend to prevail. In tune with Bass' ground-breaking approach to credits, the first is show-branding – that is, providing a show with a strong visual identity (of course, in the broader framework of online and offline branding strategies). In my view the 'branding value' of opening titles is nowadays increasingly important because it also inspires and interacts with transmedia promotional strategies and expansions and it encourages fandom. Thus, the branding value of main titles re-emerges in the high number of homages, parodies, and crossovers of opening sequences made by fans that are available on video sharing platforms like YouTube. In addition to alternative interpretations to the 'preferred readings' suggested by the original sequences[23] such videos signal the circulation of a visual identity and the building of a brand community across media. Let us briefly consider the case of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015).

> A shadowed figure enters his office, sets down his briefcase, and the room collapses around him. As he tumbles through a chasm of diamond rings, happy families, and women in pantyhose the glossy veneer of advertising gives way, revealing the rough humanity of a man lost. RJD2's jazzy 'A Beautiful Mine' conducts the viewer through the parallel worlds of the philandering, chain-smoking Madison Avenue boys' club and the idyllic nuclear family.

These words summarise the opening sequence of *Mad Men* (Imaginary Forces, 2007), at the beginning of a discussion with producer Cara McKenney and creative directors Steve Fuller and Mark Gardner that is published on the website *Art of the Title*.[24] On a superficial level the sequence suggests the general theme of the show: the life of advertisers working on Madison Avenue in New York City in the 1960s. The theme is evoked through both the images included (skyscrapers made out of graph paper, the recreation of period ads that appear genuine) and their visual style. In this respect Steve Fuller defines the sequence as a 'kind of an update of Saul Bass'. On a deeper level the sequence alludes to the profound

ambiguity that marks the television series. Through the shadowy figure that enters his office and then falls down, surrounded by conflicting and tempting images (alcohol and cigarettes, women, and the bourgeois family), the sequence anticipates the main character of the series Don Draper.

Figs 7-8: Mad Men, main title.

The profound and challenging ambiguity of Don Draper's identity as well as the narrative polyphony of the entire show – which portray American culture in such a way that tensions and contradictions are free to emerge rather than being theorised or resolved – emerge more powerfully at the end of the sequence. The long fall does not end, rather the sequence concludes mysteriously with the man seen from behind sitting comfortably in an armchair and smoking a cigarette. On his right the title *Mad*

Men appears in Helvetica. The question then becomes: 'Is this a dream? Which part of it is actually real? Is the pose at the end real, or is the helpless fall real?'[25]

So far I have examined the traditional work of the opening title sequence as an entryway paratext. However, evidence of its ability to brand the show and transmit its powerful visual identity can be found in the homage paid by the popular series *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-; I am of course assuming that to be parodied by *The Simpsons* implies an act of homage and the recognition of an 'authority'). The parody appears in the episode *Treehouse of Horror XIX* (season 20, episode 4), which is part of the 'series within the series' of Halloween specials. The sophisticated visual style of the *Mad Men* main title is accurately reproduced and ironically applied to *The Simpsons* world. Don Draper's office is replaced by Homer's living room, a box of donuts replaces the briefcase, and images of *The Simpsons* characters, places, and objects (including the Duff Beer) replace 1960s ads. Finally, in the title card which closes the sequence Don Draper's cigarette is replaced with Homer's lollipop.

YouTube hosts a huge number of fan-made parodies which clearly demonstrate the 'spreadability'[26] of the sequence (and thus of the show's identity) in the contemporary media landscape. Title sequences constitute spreadable content because they are portable, widely available, and easily reusable. As we have just seen with regard to *Mad Men* they can also 'yield hidden levels upon active interpretation and appropriation'.[27] In the case of Mad Men fan-made parodies mock the motif of the fall in varied ways; in one the shadow figure crashes on a road; elsewhere it falls into the glass of whisky and gets out drunk; it is also literally kicked onto the title card of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013); finally, it is saved by Superman. In a further example the fall is removed entirely; when the office collapses the black silhouette exclaims, shocked and bothered, 'Are you kidding me?'
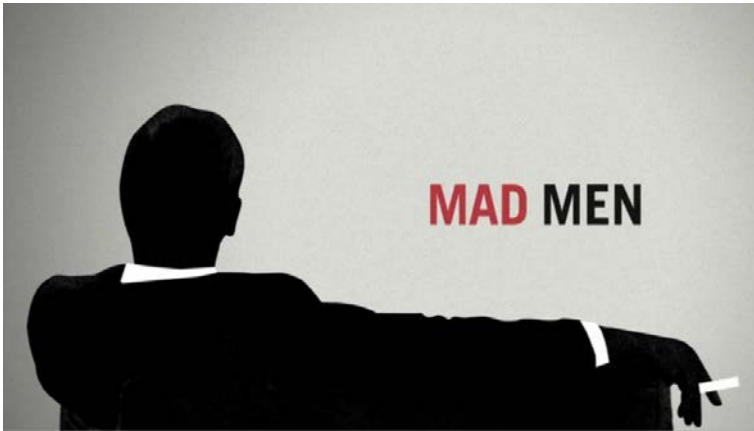
Figs 9-10: Mad Men main title and The Simpsons parody.

The second function that main titles preserve even in the age of marathon-viewing is that of 'framing' the ritual, or in other words of conserving the pleasure and the rhythm of a serial narrative. In this respect watching several episodes consecutively is not exactly the same as watching a very long movie. Every episode has its inner structure and mood and provides its personal contribution to the storyworld, even in the most remarkable examples of 'complex TV'[28] where long-term narrative arcs are developed in the most sophisticated way. This could nevertheless appear as a controversial issue. The popular video-on-demand platform Netflix commissions famous production studios to create the sumptuous opening title sequences which characterise and brand its original productions such

as *Marco Polo* (Mill+, 2014), *Narcos* (Digital Kitchen, 2015), or *Daredevil* (Elastic 2015). We should also consider the direct experience of binge-watching on Netflix; when we start watching one episode after another the streaming service offers us the possibility to skip the opening credits. Netflix seems to be competing with prestigious networks (like HBO or Showtime) by releasing increasingly spectacular opening title sequences; also, when it comes to the tension between haste to begin the viewing experience and the pleasure of waiting for it, Netflix seems to privilege the former. That said, doubtless there are spectators who still appreciate the pleasure of waiting – in other words, those who love to be seduced once, twice, and ideally ad infinitum. This idea brings us to the next section.

Never the same: The opposing cases of *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones*

The traditional pleasure connected to serial narratives – namely the tension and dialectic between identity and difference, between repetition and variation – has of course been investigated at length. Yet what has not been stressed enough is that however many times we watch them television opening credits are never the same. In this respect we can identify two main practices. In the first case the opening sequence does not tangibly change throughout the season (*The Wire*, HBO 2002-2008) or even the entire series (*Mad Men*) but the viewer's knowledge about the fictional world continues to change, and so inevitably does his/her experience and interpretation of the opening sequence. In the second case the title sequence changes (to varying extents) from one season to another or even from one episode to the subsequent (*Game of Thrones*, HBO 2011-present), explicitly challenging the viewer to modify his/her interpretation and expectations.

    The Wire title sequences are created by assembling existing footage from the related season. Starting from the second season and through the fifth the title sequence also incorporates shots from the previous ones. Thus a unique, coherent strategy is able to produce varied results. First, it provides the entire show with clear consistency and an effective visual identity rooted in a background of familiar images in which something new appears. Second, thanks to use of footage from that specific season different opening title sequences are able to anticipate the individual themes that will be developed in each season – from the illegal drug trade to the conditions of

the urban working class, the difficulties of social and institutional reform, the public school system and the media.[29] Let us consider the opening title sequence of season one. The editing style suggests two clear, alternating motifs: cops and surveillance equipment; drug and dealers in dark and dirty streets. At the same time the coherent use of many interrelated strategies – parallelism, symmetry, graphic matches – suggests that the borders between the two opposed fronts are blurred and permeable and neither of the two groups can really prevail; more importantly they are both 'subject to similar kind of institutional pressures and tensions' and 'ensnared in and driven by larger social forces'.[30]

Figs 11-12: The Wire, main title (season one).

Furthermore, the combination of 'already known' fragments and new fragments related to the storyline of the specific season tells us something very important: *The Wire* is far more than the sum of five stories connected by their common setting, the city of Baltimore. The opening title sequences of *The Wire* tell us that every storyline is deeply intertwined with the others, and every storyline is part of something bigger:

> *The Wire* is not about Jimmy McNulty. Or Avon Barksdale. Or crime. Or punishment. Or drugs. Or violence. Or even race. It is about The City. It is about how we live as Americans at the millennium, an urban people compacted together, sharing a common love, awe, and fear of what we have rendered in Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles. [...]   It is, in its larger themes, a television show about politics and sociology and, at the risk of boring viewers with the very notion, macroeconomics.[31]

As well as indicating what *The Wire* is, its opening titles moreover suggest what *The Wire* is not. As David Simon claims, *The Wire* is not a cop show, nor a crime show.[32]The fact that the show we are about to see does not perfectly correlate to a codified genre is implicit already in the title sequence – we see no fire fights, no action, no emphases on the selected images. The impression that lingers is that if we really want to enter the

world of *The Wire* we will need to be patient. Indeed, Simon has frequently referred to the show as a 'visual novel' with no reward for casual viewers.

For the purposes of my analysis what is more important is that the title sequences in *The Wire* foster the pleasure of the fragment and repetition both *a priori* and *a posteriori*.[33] At the beginning we are not able to contextualise the shots; we have no idea of the characters and the story in which they are involved. However, the fragments and the relationships among the fragments have a great evocative power. As we gradually enter the world of *The Wire* we can begin to recognise and contextualise the fragments, we establish new links among them and they acquire further more specific meanings and a greater emotional value. So even if the opening title sequence does not literally change our experience and interpretation make it different every time we watch it.

While the title sequence of *The Wire* is constant throughout each season *Game of Thrones* provides an opposite example, in that it potentially changes from one episode to the next. In order to orient the spectator through multiple storylines that involve a huge number of characters and many different settings, while also remaining in tune with the tradition of literary fantasy to provide maps of the narrated fiction world at the beginning of books, the opening title sequence represents an animated map which evokes a vaguely medieval world. Through a bird's eye perspective we snake over the map, gradually discovering its main centres. This concept allows for introducing variations on a recurring scheme, and based on the specific locations appearing in each episode the visualisation of the map (and therefore the title sequence) can vary slightly.
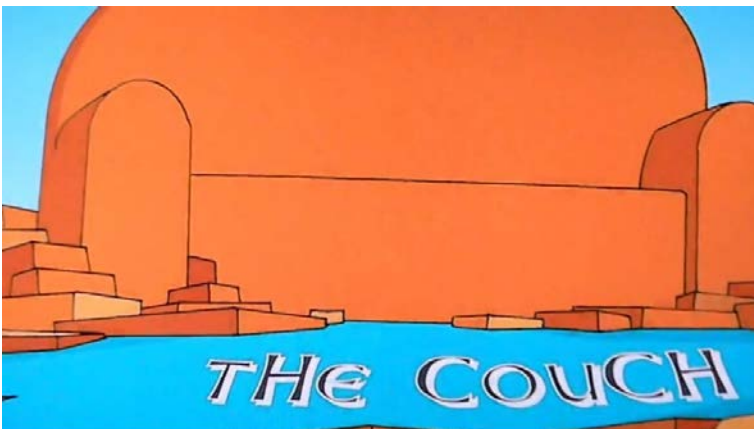
Figs 13-14: Game of Thrones, main title.

This variability combined with the visual power of the sequence brings us back to the question how main titles circulate and are reworked in the contemporary mediascape. The *Game of Thrones* wiki very accurately documents all the 'known variations so far',[34] and in addition to providing a detailed description of the sequence as well as a 'Locations gallery' with images of all the places as represented in the map it scrupulously reports the producer Greg Spence's explanation of the 'several rules about which locations appear in each episode's opening sequence'. Moreover, as in the case of *Mad Men*, the sequence has given rise to a huge number of fan-made variations: the opening sequence entirely re-made in Lego;[35] a re-interpretation in 'Buffy style';[36] a 'Game of Thrones shot-for-shot parody in the style of Super Mario World';[37] and an alternative title sequence in 'Saul Bass style'.[38] Earlier we observed how the opening title sequence conceived as a brand can foster and interact with fandom thanks to its spreadability. At this stage we might assert that all forms of fan re-appropriation and creative transformation can be considered as another way to express the pleasure of repetition and to play with the dialectic between identity and difference, persistence and variation, by unceasingly transforming a shared, loved pattern in a personal way. It is worth noting that another element links *Mad Men* to *Game of Thrones*: *The Simpsons* parody/homage of their opening title sequences. In the episode *Exit Through the Kwik-E-Mart* (season 23, episode 15) the traditional opening sequence is replaced by a 'remake' of the *Game of Thrones* credits, where *The Simpsons* characters are dressed in stylised costumes and the

different locations of the fictional continent of Westeros are substituted with places in Springfield such as 'Springfield Gorge' and 'Burns Landing'. At the end the Simpson family couch takes the place of 'The Wall'.


Figs 15-16: Game of Thrones, main title, and The Simpsons parody.

Contemporary television series offer interesting examples of what we may consider a 'miniature of a miniature': the title card, a shorter (about 10-15 seconds long) version of the opening credits which maximises the idea of the opening title sequence as a brand as well as the communicative value of a very short fragment. Although the most popular example of this strategy can probably be found in the show *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010)[39] another very remarkable case is that of *Supernatural* (The WB/The CW, 2005-), which tells the story of two brothers (Sam and Dean Winchester) who have

devoted their entire lives to hunting demons, monsters, and other supernatural creatures. Supernatural uses different title cards (placed after the teaser) in each season[40] and, more interestingly, either uses specific title cards or 'expands' the standard one to mark special episodes.

In episode 8 of season 3 the title card is adorned with Christmas decorations; the combination of the show's and the episode's titles read *A Very Supernatural Christmas*. In episode 18 of season 4, *The Monster at the End of this Book*, the single title card is replaced by multiple details from several book cover illustrations. The illustrations come from an embedded tale – a literary saga titled 'Supernatural' which narrates the Winchesters' lives over the past four years and which has a great online fan following; thus, as a radical case of mise-en-abyme the embedded tale (the novels) coincides exactly with the embedding tale (the series) and explicitly addresses the show's real fandom. Episode 5 of the fourth season, *Monster Movie*, replaces the title card with an opening credit sequence that mimics those of classic horror movies, like Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932), or George Waggner's *The Wolf Man* (1941). This entire episode is shot in black and white and we eventually do see monsters like Dracula, mummies, and werewolves. Of course we are always in the *Supernatural* world, and therefore at the end we learn that we are dealing with a cinéphile shapeshifter who interprets famous monsters from classical Hollywood cinema.
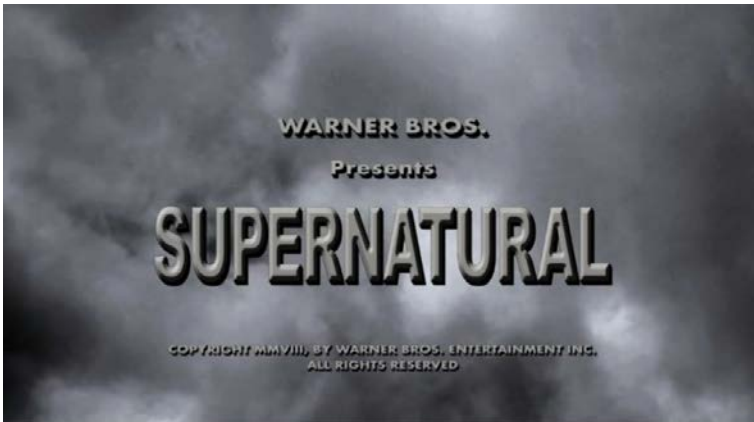
Figs 17-19: Supernatural, title cards and special opening credits.

Channel Hopping: **Branding content, branding communities**

To conclude, let us recall the eighth episode of the fifth season of *Supernatural*. The instalment, titled *Changing Channels*, mysteriously starts with an explicitly artificial setting that can easily be linked to the sitcom style. After the opening title sequence which replaces the traditional title card and mimics the main titles of sitcoms from the 1980s we return to the ordinary world of *Supernatural*. A new investigation starts, but the brothers quickly realise that they are dealing with a trickster and find themselves

literally trapped in a series of different television shows: a hospital show called *'Dr. Sexy, M.D.'*,[41] of which Dean is a huge fan; a Japanese game show; the sitcom again; a procedural cop show that clearly mimics *CSI: Miami* (CBS, 2002-2012); and the popular show *Knight Rider* (NBC, 1982-1986).

Figs 20-21: Supernatural, episode 8 season 5, Changing Channels.

One of the most interesting aspects underlying *Changing Channels* is that a similar 'experiment' had been proposed by fans more than one year before the episode's broadcast.[42] In May 2008 vidder Sarah House, known in the community as Ash48, posted the vid *Channel Hopping* on YouTube,[43] which begins with the very familiar image of Dean sitting on the couch drinking beer and watching television. When Dean changes

channels brief clips inspired by the opening credits of well-known shows (such as *Starsky & Hutch*, *ER*, *Knight Rider*, *Twilight Zone*, *Buffy*, *Mission Impossible*, *Friends*, et al.) appear one by one, separated by the 'reverse shot' of Sam and Dean in the roles of spectators. The clips are clearly recognisable thanks to their structure, editing style, graphic treatment, and original theme songs, yet the images themselves are composed of short sequences or shots taken from *Supernatural*. As a result Sam and Dean are comically relocated into many different fictional worlds which are immediately and strongly 'made present' by the simple reworking of their opening title sequences.

Figs 22-24: Channel Hopping.

The fan vid *Channel Hopping* provides a particularly appropriate example for concluding. As we have seen, in the contemporary media landscape the opening title sequence continues to provide its traditional, paratextual function by connecting audiences to media content and introducing a storyworld. More importantly, it consolidates other functions while nevertheless assuming new ones. It is able to brand content powerfully, providing it with a strong visual identity which makes it clearly recognisable in an increasingly crowded mediascape. Also, it potentially connects viewers with each other and contributes to the building of networked communities, thus reinforcing the idea of content as 'a medium for interaction between people'.[44] In this sense the multiple ways in which main titles work can play a key role in the 'shift from an appointment-based model of television viewing toward an engagement-based paradigm'.[45] Rather than 'consumers of preconstructed messages',[46]' engagement-based models see the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value'[47] – or, in other words, 'as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined'.[48] In this renewed framework main titles become a very interesting platform for 'meaningful participation'[49] and provide useful insights about 'the roles that networked communities play in shaping how media circulates'.[50]

Author

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Notes

[1]   The first paragraph of this essay quotes the film's script, available at: http://www.screenplaydb.com/film/scripts/anniehall1977/ (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[2]   Kirkham 1994, p. 16.

[3]   Gardies 1976, 1981, 1997; Kuntzel 1972, 1975; Odin 1980; Caprettini & Eugeni 1988.

[4]   Blanchard 1978; De Gances 1977; Haskin 1996; Kirkham 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997; Supanick 1997; Rondolino 1963.

[5]   Carlini 2009; Moinereau 2009; Re 2006; Solana & Boneu 2007; Tylski 2008; Veronesi 2005.

[6]   Bass & Kirkham 2011; Codrington 2003.

[7]   See for instance the many interviews with producers and creative directors published by the website Art of the Title: http://www.artofthetitle.com (accessed on 13 February 2016). See also the sites Forget the Film, Watch the Title: http://www.watchthetitles.com(accessed on 13 February 2016); and Générique: http://www.generique-cinema.net (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[8]   See for instance Johansson 2006 and Klein 2006.

[9]   Vérat 2012.

[10] Genette 1997; Gray 2010.

[11] Haskin 1996, pp. 12-13.

[12] Gray 2010, p. 73. See also Re 2006 and Ellis 2011.

[13] Manovich 2013, p. 46.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., pp. 46-47.

[16] Lessig 2008.

[17] Jenkins 2006.

[18] Jenkins & Ford & Green 2013.

[19] Ibid.

[20] One might object that the same is true of the main title sequence of a film when it is broadcasted. However important the pay or free television window may be in the commercial life of a film, I would nevertheless underline that opening credits in movies are not primarily conceived for a television release. Conversely, main titles in television shows are specifically conceived in relation to this kind of viewing experience.

[21] Gray 2010, pp. 74-75.

[22] In this article I do not discuss the relationship between opening credits and the teaser, or cold open. In this respect it would be interesting to analyse in greater detail how the main title sequence can combine and interact in different ways with the 'previously on…'/recap sequence and the pre-credits sequence.

[23] On this topic see in particular Gray 2010.

[24] http://www.artofthetitle.com/title/mad-men/ (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[25] Mark Gardner in http://www.artofthetitle.com/title/mad-men/ (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[26] Jenkins & Ford & Green 2013.

[27]   Ibid., p. 201.

[28]   Mittell 2013.

[29]   With regard to audio we notice that the same theme song opens each season – Tom Waits' Way Down in the Hole. However, in each season the song is interpreted by different artists from different genres. As Andrew Dignan recalls: 'In an interview from 2003, the writer-producer [David Simon]   is quoted as saying, "This is the same show [song], but this year the tale itself [singer, tonality]   will be different."' Dignan 2006.

[30]   Rose 2008, p. 85.

[31]   Simon 2004.

[32]   Ibid.

[33]   Hudelet 2009.

[34]   http://gameofthrones.wikia.com/wiki/Title_sequence (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[35]   https://youtu.be/Mb9fybxt8B4 (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[36]   https://youtu.be/8FB2MaR3HAA (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[37]   https://youtu.be/jRIfDI5_PyQ (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[38]   https://youtu.be/cMTq4S3O8cM (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[39]   See http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Title_sequence#cite_note-0 (accessed   on   13   February 2016).

[40]   Repetition and continuity are assured by the logo-title, which preserves the same font across all seasons. The backdrop changes from season to season, accordingly distorting the title which, though always centralised within the frame, varies in colour and graphic treatment of the font.

[41]   A parody of Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005-).

[42]   The episode aired on 5 November 2009.

[43]   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzQPbleK-GM (accessed on 13 February 2016).

[44]   Jenkins & Ford & Green 2013, p. 199. The quotation is from Douglas Rushkoff.

[45]   Ibid., p. 116.

[46]   Ibid., p. 2.

[47]   Ibid., p. 116.

[48]   Ibid., p. 2.

[49]   With respect to 'meaningful participation', let me remind that this is not limited to 'actual creation'. Like Jenkins & Ford & Green I would like to argue that 'even those who are "just" reading, listening, or watching do so differently in a world where they recognize their potential to contribute to broader conversations about that content […]. From this perspective, a "lurker" provides value to people sharing commentary or producing multimedia content by expanding the audience and potentially motivating their work.' Ibid., pp. 154-155 and 157.

[50]   Ibid., p. 2.