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First Impressions, Second Appraisals: Going Beyond the "Paratextual Contract" in The American Televisual Opening Title Sequence

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS, SECOND APPRAISALS: GOING BEYOND THE "PARATEXTUAL

CONTRACT" IN THE AMERICAN TELEVISUAL OPENING TITLE SEQUENCE

by

ERIK CLABAUGH

Under the Direction of Dr. Greg Smith

ABSTRACT

Much of the existing academic discourse surrounding opening title sequences suggests that they function primarily by providing viewers with information concerning a program's characters, settings, genre and themes. Such accounts seemingly fail to recognize more nuanced concurrent functions. Utilizing the concept of paratexts originally proposed by Gerard Genette in combination with a neoformalist approach to analysis, this project identifies patterns, narrative components, stylistic elements and various industrial and authorial characteristics within the field of American televisual opening title sequences in order to explore some of these underlying concomitant functions, and classify the segments that perform them accordingly.

INDEX WORDS: Paratexts, Title sequences, Neoformalism, Functions, Genette, Quality, Curiosity, Specific inquiry, Narrative, Television studies, Formalist, Paratextual devices

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DEDICATION

To Kristy and Poppy Seed. I can't wait.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

1   THE THRESHOLD

Ever since serious academic explorations of television began in the 1970s and 80s, scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds have offered a wide range of insights into the medium. Subjects from the ideological significance of television programming, to the economic and socio-political ramifications of media network ownership structures have been investigated in detail. Indeed, the scope of this work is seemingly exhaustive. Interestingly however, there is one area of study that has gone largely underexplored until quite recently. Here, I am speaking generally of paratexts, and more specifically of televisual opening title sequences (hereinafter referred to as TVOTS).

At one time, the study of paratexts was the exclusive realm of literary theorists, but this is no longer the case. Paratextual examinations of moving image texts have been gaining in popularity of late. Over the last ten years, academics including Lisa Kernan and Deborah Allison have worked to illuminate the role of paratexts in the cinema. Even more recently, scholars including Jonathan Gray, Amanda Lotz and Jason Mittell have examined televisual paratexts in an effort to explore how these devices influence and frame processes of viewer/textual engagement in the increasingly complex context of the convergence era. Yet, despite this nascent interest, relatively little attention has been paid to TVOTS.

The sheer scope of the paratextual arena offers a potential reason for this oversight. The field of televisual paratexts is both vast and rhizomatic in character. A single program may be accompanied by a legion of paratexts including: show promos, series based works of fiction and non-fiction, news stories, program reviews, magazine

articles, action figures, lunch boxes, "previously on" segments, program names themselves

(e.g. *How I Met Your Mother* [2005-Present], *Lost* [2004-2010]*, Two and a Half Men* [2003-

Present]), titles of specific episodes, spin-off programs, feature-length motion pictures,

opening and closing title sequences, websites, video games, blogs, wikis, discussion

boards, web based forums, webisodes, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, T-shirts... and the

list goes on.

Proof of the rhizomatic quality of paratextual expansion can be witnessed

whenever a program's paratexts lead to paratexts of their own. For example, the original

Star Trek (1966-1969) eventually gave rise to the spin-off *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

(1987-1994), which in turn spawned the spin-off *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (1993-1999).

Together, *Next Generation* and *Deep Space 9* spawned *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), and

all of these programs combined gave rise to *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005). Each of

these successive spin-offs is a paratext in its own right, and each has generated its own

field of paratexts including original novels, action figures, comic books and toys and

replicas.[1]

Thus, given the ever-expanding quantity of paratextual subject matter available for

consideration, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that the preponderance of writing on

televisual opening title sequences has been limited to brief article or chapter-length

examinations. Such studies often appear in multi-author anthologies dedicated to

exploring a single television program that has achieved a certain degree of critical acclaim

(*Deadwood* [2004-2006], *Rome* [2005-2007]), a relatively high level of popularity (*True*

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[1] These statements rely on Jonathan Gray's concept of paratextuality, which is more inclusive than the original concept set forth by Gerard Genette. Arguably, for Genette, some of these examples might constitute metatexts or hypertexts.

Blood [2008-Present], *Dexter* [2006-Present]), or both (*The Simpsons* [1989-Present]*, Six*

Feet Under [2001-2005]*, The Sopranos* [1999-2007]).

As a result, these analyses are frequently program-centric. That is, they only

consider title sequences to the extent that they inform or illuminate a specific program.

While this is undoubtedly useful, it is an inefficient means toward achieving an overall

picture of how such paratexts operate. Moreover, in concentrating on the show first, and

its opening title sequence second, these kinds of examinations have consistently come to

the same conclusions over and over again — that TVOTS function primarily by introducing

and reinforcing a show's characters, settings, genre and themes. And, while they certainly

work towards these ends, I suggest that some televisual title sequences simultaneously

function in more nuanced ways that have gone largely underexplored.

Instead of dealing exclusively with main titles for any one specific program, this

project focuses on televisual opening title sequences more generally. In recognizing and

isolating larger patterns, narrative components, stylistic elements and various industrial

and authorial characteristics, this work explores some of these underlying concomitant

functions, and classifies the segments that perform them accordingly.

1.1   Literature Review

1.1.1   Of "work" and "Text"

The concept of 'paratext' finds its origins in the work of the French literary theorist

Gerard Genette, who utilized the term to describe the range of elements that

simultaneously surround and augment a literary work. In his 1987 treatise on the subject,

Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, Genette offers a description that elucidates the

relationship between work and paratext while simultaneously suggesting a definition of both:

> A literary work consists... of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of statements that are... endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions... And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it, and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption... These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's paratext. (1)

Based on this excerpt, we may conclude that within a literary paradigm, the field of paratexts includes book covers, title pages, introductions, prefaces, dedications, tables of contents, epilogues and so on. Moreover, this passage lays bare the structuralist foundations that undergird much of Genette's theorizing. Not only do paratexts "surround" and "extend" the work, they simultaneously affect the work's "reception" and "consumption." This characteristic is critical in understanding the power of paratexts; and is rooted in a distinction between the "work" and the "Text," made previously by Roland Barthes.

For Barthes, the work is a *physical thing*, or in his words, "a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example)" (157). The Text, on the

other hand, is an *activity* of production. It is a process wherein the reader engages with the work and goes about the creation of meaning. Without the reader, the work is merely a book sitting on a shelf. However, once the reader picks up that book, and begins to consume it, his or her *consumption* paradoxically becomes an act of *production*.[2] The Text, as such, cannot come into existence without the reader.

When a reader confronts a work, he or she does so while under the influence of previous textual encounters. As Jonathan Gray observes, "all of us bring to bear an entire reading and life history to any act of textual consumption, so that each of us will find different resonances in the same text" (*Sold Separately* 30). The paratextual devices surrounding the work at hand may work to summon these prior experiences and affect the work's subsequent metamorphosis into Text.

1.1.2   The Paratextual Contract

A number of scholars propose that the opening title sequence operates as a kind of "contract" with the audience by providing them with an idea of "what to expect" from the program that follows (Allison, "Catch Me", "Iconography of Action" 107; Coulthard; Gray, *Sold Separately* 31; Karpovich 28-29). From the get-go, it is important to note that this is something of a problematic concept. The notion of the "contract" seems to imply that there is only one "correct" or "legal" way for viewers to receive and interpret a text. In this respect, it can be criticized for relying too heavily on the communication based "sender/medium/receiver" model of art in which "The main activity involved is assumed to be the passing of a message from sender to receiver…" and, "[the medium's]

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[2] For a more rigorous clarification see Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts* pages 30-35.

effectiveness is judged by how efficiently and clearly it conveys that message" (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 7). This model is only concerned with how clearly the receiver comprehends the sender's intended message. Notions of resistant or contested readings are at best unimportant, and, at worst, indicative of medium inefficiency.

Karpovich credits the idea of the contract to Geffner, who was principally writing for a production-oriented, industry audience comprised of filmmakers and designers. Clearly falling into the sender/medium/receiver camp, he suggests that, "[Opening title sequences] form a kind of contract, outlining the filmmaker's intentions and, for better or worse, setting up expectations that the audience, *almost subliminally*, will demand to be met (Geffner, emphasis added)." This line of reasoning is prevalent in production-oriented texts, which are (understandably) heavily invested in concepts of media authorship.

In some cases, these works appear to attribute media makers with virtually telekinetic communicative powers. Consider this passage concerning television title sequences from Dawkin and Wynd's *Video Production: Putting Theory Into Practice*: "All media texts are constructed: they are the result of *conscious* choices about what should and should not be in them. The person or persons constructing them have the power to create certain meanings... by including certain things and leaving others out"[3] (123, emphasis in the original). Such meanings must be created somewhere; and what this passage leaves unsaid — what it *assumes* — is that these meanings are being created in the mind of the viewer.[4] What's more, in both of the examples provided above, the making

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[3] In all fairness, Dawkin and Wynd do describe this as the "preferred" meaning, which does leave room for other interpretations. However, their wording here seems to contradict this notion by implying that the audience plays little or no role in the construction of meaning.

[4] For a brief yet thoroughgoing explanation of the dangers inherent in making assumptions see: *The Odd Couple*, Season 3, Episode 19," My Strife in Court." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfvTwv5o1Qs

of meaning is ostensibly portrayed as a cognitive process performed by the author. The audience constitutes little more than a collective *tabula rasa* awaiting the ("almost subliminal") inscription of the author's intended ("correct") meaning.

Of all the scholars that embrace the conception of the paratextual contract, Gray stands alone in recognizing and voicing his concerns regarding the problem of varying viewer interpretations. He takes French literary critic Michael Riffaterre to task for suggesting that authors can "guarantee" that their readers will come to a perfectly shared understanding of meaning simply by employing intertextuality. He points out, "Riffaterre's faith in intertextuality as conditioning and guaranteeing the "proper interpretation" is unrealistic, holding out for a world of *perfectly informed readers*" (Gray, *Sold Separately* 32, emphasis added). Gray effectively points out what we all know — that the process of interpretation is multivalent in nature, and there is never a "perfect" exchange of pure information.

Despite these problems, the notion of the paratextual contract still possesses much validity, particularly if we are willing to substitute this narrowly fixed understanding of "meaning," with the more flexible notion of "privileged" or "preferred" meaning. In doing so, we can acknowledge both authorial intent and the simple fact that there is no single interpretation that is seamlessly transferred from one the mind to another. With this caveat, we are free to delve more deeply into the notion.

As previously suggested, title sequences sometimes attempt to convey "privileged meanings" by invoking a viewer's previous textual interactions. Often, they accomplish this by employing iconography, music, typeface fonts, and/or program names associated with an existing genre. As Allison observes, "Title sequences thus help to shape audience

expectations by invoking intertextual… features. In order for this to occur, viewers must

have some familiarity with relevant films, prople or events that exist *outside* the diegetic

space" ("Iconography of Action" 108, emphasis added). These features attempt to cue the

audience and frame their reception of the text that follows.

Thus, the presence of six-guns, horses and cowboy regalia in the opening title

sequence for *The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.* (1993-1994) signals viewers that they are

about to engage with a western. Similarly, the eerie synth music, darkly lit Victorian

Manse, Rennie Mackintosh style typefont, and the very name of FX's *American Horror Story*

(2011-Present) all serve to inform the audience (albeit somewhat tautologically) that they

are, in fact, about to watch a horror story.

The scope of the "contract" with the viewer can extend beyond the invocation of

generic frames. It may also function as an introduction to the elements that comprise a

text's fictional universe. David Johansson likens the opening title sequence to the overture

in an opera. He notes that the word "overture" derives from the Latin *apertura*, which also

provides the root of the English word "aperture." He suggests that, "in order to see

through an aperture the viewer must actively participate, as if leaning forward to spy

through a peephole which, although small, provides a wide-angle view of a world outside

the familiar door…" (28).

Indeed, a glance through this "peephole," may reveal information about the show's

main characters (Karpovich 27; Gray, *Sold Separately* 73), its temporal and physical

settings (Karpovich 27), and provide important narrative points and disclosures

(Coulthard). Often, several of these elements are combined in a single program's opening

title sequence. For instance, the title sequence used in the first season of the USA

Network's *Monk* (2002-2009) begins with establishing shots of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Transamerica Pyramid Building (announcing the show's setting in contemporary San Francisco), moves on to introduce the show's titular character (Adrian Monk), and concludes with a montage of Monk engaged in litany of increasingly compulsive acts (his character's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder serves as a key narrative element throughout the series).

In a more abstract sense, the paratextual "contract" may also include information regarding a program's themes, tone and motifs (Coulthard; Gray, *Sold Separately* 73; Johansson 27). Again, these elements work at letting the viewer know "what to expect." For example, the lyrics for "Those Were the Days," cues viewers to one of *All in the Family's* (1968-1979) recurrent themes. When Archie and Edith sing lines like, "Didn't need no welfare state, everybody pulled his weight," it lets audiences know something about Archie's nostalgic (if anachronistic) conservatism, and sets the tone for much of the socio-political conflict that has come to distinguish the show. Similarly, David Johannson makes a case for how Tony Soprano's journey through the bleak, post-industrial landscape of New Jersey sets the tone for each of the successive episodes of the eponymous HBO drama. Straightaway, these images let the viewer know that the show that follows will not be a light-hearted comedy.[5] This is serious drama, dealing with serious issues. Or, as Johannson puts it: "this television comes heavy" (27).

Both Gray (*Sold Separately* 26-27) and Karpovich (27-29) suggest that opening credit sequences can work like advertisements. That is, they attempt to "hook" the viewer,

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[5] In my own mind, I cannot help but contrast Tony's hellish drive through Newark with the opening sequence of *Three's Company,* in which Jack Tripper comically falls off his bicycle while ogling the beautiful women walking along the sunny beaches of Southern California. Two different shows, two very different tones.

and get them to "buy" (watch) the primary text. In one sense, an advertisement is nothing more than the first phase of a contract. Importantly, a contract must contain, at a minimum, a promise to provide goods or services, and valuable consideration (payment).[6] As paratexts, TVOTS promise the viewer "the goods." Then, if the viewer *recognizes* and *is pleased by* these goods — namely the sequence's generic references, and the information it conveys about characters, setting, genre and themes — he or she may provide the good and valuable consideration of watching the program (thereby engaging in the process of consumption as production).[7]

This advertisement-like quality is one of the distinguishing features that serve to differentiate TVOTS from filmic opening title sequences. By the time a moviegoer checks local showtimes, decides which film to watch, drives to the multiplex, purchases a ticket, buys some popcorn, finds a seat, and sits through the previews, he or she has already essentially committed to watching the movie before its title sequence even begins. What's more, the moviegoer has already paid his consideration by purchasing a ticket. In the case of TVOTS, the contractual stakes are much higher. It must incessantly attempt to "hook" the viewer, because here the consideration is not paid in dollars and cents; it is paid through the *act of watching*.[8]

So, while there are problems inherent in an overly-simplistic approach to the paratextual contract, a more nuanced understanding can help to reveal the power of title sequences. As intertextual contractual devices, TVOTS make certain generic promises

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[6] For further legal clarification see: Justice v. Lang, 42 N. Y. 496, 1 Am. Rep. 576; Edwards v. Kearzey, 96 U. S. 599, 24 L. Ed. 793; Canterberry v. Miller, 76 111. 355.

[7] Here again, we touch of the notion of "privileged meaning." Pleasure on the part of the viewer may take many forms. For example, a viewer might recognize a sequence's generic references and choose to engage with the primary text solely for the purposes of deriving pleasure from a resistant reading. Thus, despite a willingness on the part of the viewer to watch the program, its "privileged meaning" may be contested.

[8] This is, of course, one of the reasons why Nielsen ratings are so important to the television industry.

about the shows they accompany. They can shed light on the program's characters, setting

(temporal and physical), and important narrative elements. And, finally, they can make

representations regarding a television program's overall themes and motifs. To this

extent, they act like advertisements, constantly striving for viewer engagement. Of course,

the degree to which these promises (promotional and otherwise) are received,

understood and accepted by the viewer will certainly vary.

1.1.3   Liminality

All TVOTS are paratextual devices,[9] and as such they occupy a distinctly liminal

space.[10] British cultural sociologist Victor Turner is widely credited for bringing the

theory of liminality to the academic forefront. Building on the work of ethnographer and

folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, Turner studied initiations as societal rites of passage,

eventually expanding on and popularizing Van Gennep's concept of liminality. For Turner,

individuals occupying the liminal stage of social transition are in a state of becoming. He

suggests they are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions

assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (98).

This passage, though clearly intended to describe the status of a group of people

within the context of a larger community, is particularly well suited to explaining

paratexts as a whole. They do not share the status of the primary text, nor are they

governed by the same conventions. What's more, they act as boundaries, or regions of

demarcation that allow for an adjustment that ultimately will affect the perception of the

---

[9] While some might challenge this statement based on the premise that many so called "fan made" title sequences have been created for media texts that do not exist; Genette asserts that paratexts can, and do, exist without texts. He cites discourse surrounding texts which have been "lost to history," some of which may or may not have ever existed at all.

[10] The term "liminal," comes from the Latin *Limen*, or threshold.

primary text. As we shall see, when we speak of paratexts we speak of them in a twofold

sense — as both borders and contradictions.

In his notes, Gerard Genette refers to this quote from the American literary critic J.

Hillis Miller in order to shed light on the liminal duality of paratexts. Here, Miller speaks of

the polysemic nature of the prefix "para:"

> 'Para' is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and
>
> distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority... something
>
> simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also
>
> beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive,
>
> as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para,' moreover, is not only
>
> simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and
>
> outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable
>
> membrane connecting inside and outside. (qtd. in Genette, *Paratexts* 1 n1).

From this, we may reasonably claim that the *para*-text is a clearly liminal device. It

serves as a threshold or gateway to the primary text, is at once "close" to the primary text,

yet removed from it, and forms a kind of "boundary line" while operating on both sides of

that boundary. Genette echoes this assertion when he notes that paratexts are located in

an "undefined zone between the inside and the outside" (*Paratexts* 2), and suggests that it

can exert its influence across the "boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the

text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)" (*Paratexts*

2).

Scholars have been quick to point out the liminal qualities of the opening credit

sequence. Georg Stanitzek suggests that the filmic opening title sequence is liminal in at

least two senses. First, it marks an intermediary zone of focus between entering the

theater and the beginning of the film. In his words, it "focuses the situation of

distractedness and divergent expectations, namely, by providing a focus that allows for a

transition into the movie" ("Reading" 44). Second, he posits that by operating as a kind of

"film within a film," the motion picture title sequence is a site of "divided focus" where the

fictive narrative of the film comes in contact with the decidedly non-fictive task of listing

the film's cast and crew ("Reading" 45). Angelina Karpovich asserts a similar point in her

examination of TVOTS. She suggests that they function as "reverse Brechtian devices"

wherein "the reality of the production process… is literally superimposed over the

fictional setting of the narrative" (29). Karpovich goes on to suggest that TVOTS are even

more liminal than filmic title sequences because they must also operate as signposts in the

context of what Raymond Williams famously described as the televisual "flow"[11] (29).

TVOTS signal the ending of one program (or advertisement) and the beginning of a new

one. It is at once a clearly recognizable signal marking a transition, yet barely identifiable

as an element in the overall current of televisual programming.

1.1.4 Entryway and In Medias Res Paratexts

Jonathan Gray divides paratexts into two distinct forms, "those that control and

determine our entrance to a text — *entryway paratexts* — and those that inflect or redirect

the text following initial interaction — *in medias res* paratexts" (*Sold Separately* 31). For

Gray, entryway paratexts function as "airlocks." They are spaces of decompression

wherein the reader/viewer can adjust after leaving one world, and prepare for entry into

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[11] While Karpovich does not specifically mention Williams, or "flow," her description makes it clear that she is dealing with his concept.

another. This notion clearly echoes Genette's proposition that paratexts operate as a "thresholds," or intermediate areas.[12] For Genette, this threshold "is an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside… a 'vestibule' that offers the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (*Paratexts* 2). Perhaps even more to the point, Phillippe LeJeune suggests that the entryway paratext or threshold is "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (qtd. in Genette, *Paratexts* 2).

Examples of entryway paratexts are numerous and easy to identify. They include devices like coming attractions, promos and advertisements, movie posters, pre-game shows, forewords, prefaces, book and DVD covers, and importantly, opening credit sequences.[13] In each of these instances, the entryway paratext engages the reader/viewer *prior* to the act of textual engagement and frames the subsequent production of meaning.

Conversely, the paratext *in medias res* takes place and exerts its force as the text is "happening." Thus, it is not concerned with *establishing* frames and modes of reception, but instead it attempts to *reinforce* "specific actions, themes and issues" (Gray, *Sold Separately* 43). The paratext *in medias res* tends to act in a *ritual* capacity. It polices narrative interpretations by reminding audiences about where they are, what is at stake, and why it is of import. By way of illustration, Gray points to the "previously on" segments commonly found at the beginning of individual episodes in a serial television drama. These short segments cherry pick clips from previous episodes. They present only the information pertinent to the understanding of the plot points and developments that will take place in the episode to follow. They occur and wield their influence in the middle of

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[12] The original French title of Genette's work is *Seuils*, which translates literally to "thresholds."
[13] Even opening credit sequences that consist of nothing more than a title card operate in an entryway capacity. The name of the program, the choice of type font, and the accompanying music (or lack thereof) all influence the viewer's reception of the work that follows.

the unfurling diegesis. If the entryway paratext engages the reader/viewer prior to textual consumption, the paratext *in medias res* engages the individual in the *midst* of it, and influences the processes of decoding and recoding that continually take place as the text is being consumed.

While examples of paratexts *in medias res* are sometimes more difficult to identify than entryway paratexts, they are no less plentiful. For illustration, one needs look no further than the *Star Wars* "universe." The toys, action figures, video games, lunch boxes, variety shows, board games and Halloween costumes that surround the films are but a few examples. These paratexts have the potential to function as reminders or reaffirmations of the "privileged" modes of receiving and understanding their primary texts.

A key characteristic of TVOTS that distinguishes them from other paratexts is that they operate simultaneously in both entryway and *in medias res* capacities. Because of the serial nature of television programming, TVOTS are required to pull a kind of paratextual double duty. They must be constantly primed to hook first time viewers, provide them with an idea of "what to expect," and create frames which affect the viewer's subsequent engagement with the work and influence its transition into Text. At the same time, they must function in a ritual capacity, and prepare repeat viewers for "re-entry to television texts" (Gray, *Sold Separately* 42). Gray points out that they are obliged to ceremonially remind viewers about the "privileged" ways to receive the show by reinforcing its overarching themes, motifs and narrative elements. As a result, TVOTS are generally more ambiguous than their closest paratextual relative, the filmic opening title sequence, which often enjoys the luxury of referencing one relatively autonomous narrative.

1.1.5   Summary

TVOTS are, first and foremost, paratextual devices. As such, they surround and extend the works they accompany, and affect the ways in which readers/viewers engage with these works, and go about the process of generating meaning. By serving in the capacity of paratextual contracts, TVOTS offer audiences an idea of what to expect from the programs they accompany. They do so by intertextually calling upon the viewer's prior experiences, and offering glimpses into the show's characters, settings, genre and themes. The viewer can then either choose to engage with the program, or turn his or her attention elsewhere. When the viewer willingly engages with the work, they are fulfilling the paratextual contract by providing the valuable consideration of viewing the program, and going about the process of consumption as production.

All paratextual devices are liminal in nature, and TVOTS are particularly so. They occupy a kind of contradictory no-man's-land, "betwixt and between" the primary text and the world that surrounds it. They are neither part of the show "proper," nor are they entirely removed from it. In addition, they are liminal in the sense that they represent an area in which the fictive world of the narrative collides with the decidedly non-fictive world of the cast and crew responsible for the program's production. This quality of being neither wholly one thing nor another, allows TVOTS to operate as a "vestibules" or "airlocks" wherein the viewer may prepare for the transition from one world to another.

Finally, TVOTS are distinct from other paratextual devices because they are required to work in both entryway and *in medias res* capacities. The nature of television programming necessitates that they be prepared to accommodate both novice and repeat viewers alike. They function as entryways by hooking first-time viewers and providing

them with an idea of what to expect, while concurrently operating in an *in medias res*

capacity by ritualistically reinforcing the "privileged" modes of textual engagement.

1.2 Approach

1.2.1 Situating This Study

From the outset, it is important to acknowledge that this examination does not

constitute a foray into the realm of television studies — at least, not in the traditional

sense. As Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz seem to paradoxically observe, "someone can

study television and not be doing 'television studies'" (3). This distinction is based not on

subject matter, but on the theories and methods that are applied to its exploration. And,

while the approach that I have chosen has not been traditionally identified with television

studies, I believe it provides us with a particularly useful tool for the examination of

televisual opening title sequences.

The approach for this study is closely aligned with the neoformalist theories

notably propounded by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Noël Carroll. With roots in

the Russian Formalist tradition of literary theory and criticism, neoformalism emerged as

a response to the Marxist and psychoanalytic modes of thought that, when combined,

comprise the so-called "Grand Theory"[14] that has dominated the field of film studies from

the 1970s forward. Predictably, given its origins, this approach has traditionally been

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[14] It is important to acknowledge that "Grand Theory" is a contentious term. When Bordwell speaks of Grand Theory, or Carroll addresses the subject of "Theory," with a capital "T," they are doing so in a critical, if not pejorative manner. Unsurprisingly, many scholars invested in these traditions have taken umbrage. For an interesting rejoinder to the claims of Carroll and Bordwell, see Slavoj Žižek's *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* with a foreword by Colin MacCabe.

applied almost exclusively to the study of film.[15] In the course of this examination, I borrow this paradigm from film studies, and apply it to the study of television.

Neoformalism operates from the "bottom up." It begins with the realm of the artwork itself, *and then* moves "toward a general theory of mind and society" (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 9). In doing so, it is less ambitious than some of the more traditional approaches associated with television studies. It is not attempting to ascertain quantitative measures of media effects and influence. Nor, is it concerned primarily with industrial-economic forces, or investigating markers of identity and power. Instead, it is content in "seeking only to explain [the aesthetic] realm and its relation to the world" (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 9).

This does not mean that neoformalism seeks to discard the viewer. In fact, the world of the artwork (or text) and the realm of the viewer are inextricably linked. Neoformalism is, first and foremost, a cognitive approach that necessitates an active relationship between reader/watcher and text. Here, we are able to observe how the structuralist influences of Barthes and Genette inform the neoformalist sensibility. Thompson notes that, "The viewer actively seeks cues in the work and responds to them with viewing skills acquired through experience of other artworks…" (*Glass Armor* 10). From this statement, we can infer that a) the neoformalist approach acknowledges the importance of the process of reader/viewer textual engagement and its role in the subsequent production of meaning; and b) it accepts the basic tenets of intertextual relations that inform the theory of paratextuality in general, and the concept of the paratextual contract more specifically. Accordingly, I suggest that neoformalism presents

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[15] One very notable exception would be Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in Film and Television*, which constitutes the most extensive application of neoformalist theories to TV.

itself as a uniquely well-suited approach for the study of televisual paratexts, and opening title sequences in particular.

Nevertheless, over the past thirty to forty years, a distinct set of approaches has come to be closely associated with the field of television studies, and neoformalism is not one of them. In their aptly titled book *Television Studies*, Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz offer a brief genealogy of the field, and suggest that over time, it has been informed and characterized by social sciences, humanities and cultural studies-based approaches (6-16). Of these three, cultural studies based modes of thinking appear to have emerged as the dominant paradigm.

Since its origins in the Frankfurt School of the 1920s and 30s, the field of cultural studies has undergone substantial changes.[16] Notions of the value inherent in "high" and "low" cultural artifacts have been challenged, the range of acceptable methodologies has evolved and widened in scope, and issues of race, gender and sexual orientation have entered the conversation in very significant ways. However, at its core, cultural studies remains only marginally interested with the text itself. More precisely, it is concerned with the aesthetic realm mostly to the degree that it is can be perceived as a site of social (political) struggle. The artwork — be it punk music, romance novel, Barbie doll or title sequence — is important because it serves as a nexus for discussions of power.

So, while a cultural studies-based approach to the subject of American televisual opening title sequences would unquestionably yield substantive results worthy of significant interest, it is both beyond the scope of this project and, in a way, overly

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[16] While some would make the case that cultural studies did not truly become a recognized academic field until Richard Hoggart established the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1960s, I (and many others) would argue that cultural studies (as we have come to understand it today) began with the Frankfurt School and the works of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, *et al*.

ambitious. Before we can begin to understand the larger socio-cultural implications of title sequences, it is important to understand their fundamental aesthetic functions and construction. In art, as in life, we must walk before we can run. Hence, for the purposes of this examination, neoformalism's emphasis on the aesthetic world *first*, wins out.

In some ways, this approach does seem to mirror a more recent turn toward narrative and aesthetic examinations in television scholarship. For example, Jason Mittell's ongoing explorations into narrative complexity in American television are based in a "historical poetic approach" (30), which is itself closely tied to the Russian Formalist tradition. Similarly, in *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal*, Greg M. Smith tells us that when it comes to the study of television, "it is time to make room for readings grounded in aesthetic and narrative considerations" (5). And, as its title suggests, Jeremy Butler's 2010 book *Television Style* is devoted to understanding how aesthetic elements function in a televisual context.

Admittedly, these kinds of examinations do come with their own unique set of problems. In *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that the aesthetic turn in television scholarship can privilege hierarchical cultural valuations and reinforce industrial strategies in ways that are unproductive. Here, I work to avoid these dangers by situating my more detailed analyses in terms of larger historical and industrial contexts — a practice that neoformalists call "backgrounding" (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 21)

Nevertheless, it is evident that the recent works of Mittell, Smith and Butler are more heavily invested in the aesthetic realm than much previous television scholarship, and these are but a few examples. Speaking more generally of the field, Mittell himself

notes that, "media critics are turning attention to formal and aesthetic issues that have typically been downplayed in the development of television studies as a field" (30). When taken as a whole, this trend seems to suggest that Smith's call is being heeded — more room is being made at the television studies table, and aesthetic and narrative considerations are beginning to take a seat next to more established approaches.

1.2.2   Focus

In her book *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz argues for an understanding of television history that is based largely on specific eras of industrial, technological and regulatory change. Accordingly, she divides TV history into three distinct periods. For Lotz, the "network era" spans the time period "from approximately 1952 through the mid-1980s" (Introduction, ¶ 15). This period came to be characterized by the dominance of the "big three" networks, limited technology (and hence viewer control), restricted distribution outlets, and the generation of revenue via the sale of thirty-second advertising spots. The "multi-channel transition era" ushered in new technologies in the form of VCRs, analog cable and the proliferation of remote controls. At the same time, cable networks started to emerge as alternative distribution outlets and began to experiment with subscription-based revenue streams. This transitional phase lasted from "the mid 1980s through the mid-2000s" (Introduction ¶ 15).

Today, Lotz suggests that we find ourselves in the midst of the "post-network era," a time period that is perhaps best understood in terms of increased levels of viewer control. She notes that "network era" constraints "are not part of the post-network television experience in which viewers now increasingly select what, when and where to view from abundant options" (Introduction ¶ 34). Since roughly 2005, a host of

technologies including DVRs, digital cable, VOD, streaming services, mobile phones and

other portable viewing devices have changed the very conception of "TV." Furthermore,

the increasing popularity of these devices and distribution outlets has fundamentally

altered the nature and quantity of programming; and ushered in a new age of advertising

where multiple models exist side by side.

This thesis considers opening title sequences from each of these three eras. It

carves paths through this history, finding connective threads in their functions, while still

paying attention to historical contexts. In this sense, my examination is not meant to be

viewed as a comprehensive typology of TVOTS from the "network era" forward. Instead, it

represents an articulation of strong commonalities in the material, that, over time, have

allowed specific groups or classes of title sequences to do more than simply introduce

viewers to characters, settings, genre and themes.

1.3   Method

In the course of researching this project, I employed convenience sampling in

selecting TVOTS for examination, focusing almost entirely on fictive American primetime

programming. A variety of DVD boxed sets, streaming services and websites were utilized,

including Netflix, Hulu, Amazon.com, YouTube.com, ilovetvintros.com, tv-intros.com, tv-

timewarp.com, retrojunk.com and netnotables.com in order to cull a sample of

approximately 500 TVOTS ranging in time period from the 1950s to present.

Each title sequence was then subjected to a close analysis and evaluated in light of

factors including, but not limited to: time period, genre, formal elements, stylistic

characteristics, and, whenever possible, the segment's overall position *vis-à-vis* its primary

text.

It is important to note that televisual opening title sequences are frequently subjected to significant changes over time. In some instances, these alterations occur in the course of a show's initial run, in others, modifications may be made in order to make a program more suitable for syndication or presentation on another medium. Consequently, throughout this project, I take pains to identify these variations whenever they might have a material effect on my analyses.

1.4   Organization

This thesis follows a traditional five-part structure. This, the first chapter, serves as a general introduction and review of the relevant existing literature.

Chapter 2 deals with a class of opening title sequences that I have dubbed "open-ended narrative TVOTS." These segments are unique because on one level, they appear to offer a comprehensive Aristotelian three-part narrative all their own, while on another, they suspend their stories prior to the macro-scale completion of diegetic events. Consequently, they can be understood to exceed the inherent functions of the paratextual contract in two ways. First, they tell a story, detailing a set of causally related events. Second, this story allows for the sequence to function as a first act in the larger narrative structure of the series itself.

In chapter 3, I identify and examine how certain TVOTS go beyond the contract's purview by simultaneously providing and *withholding* information in a way that encourages viewers to engage in a form of exploratory behavior that psychologists call "specific inquiry." In a broad sense, these "constructs of curiosity" are fashioned in manner that rewards audience members for seeking out very particular kinds of information. More narrowly, they can focus the site of this specific exploratory behavior

in ways that favor the opening title sequence as an autonomous unit, or in a manner that binds the segment more strongly to its primary text.

Chapter 4 delves into the notion of "quality TVOTS." These sequences, like "quality TV" programs, can be easy to identify, yet hard to define. Nevertheless, I offer seven characteristics that help to differentiate these segments from their paratextual counterparts. Further, I explore how "quality TVOTS" function as legitimating devices that announce the cultural aspirations of the programs they accompany, whilst concomitantly defamiliarizing both reality and the conventions of the televisual medium more strongly than other sequences.

The fifth and final chapter serves as space for the articulation of a general summary and conclusions, as well as suggestions for future research.

2   MOM, GILLIGAN, ARISTOTLE AND EARL: OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVE TVOTS

I make it a point to call my mother once a week. We are separated by over 700 miles of coast; and these conversations allow us to bridge some of that geographical divide. Our topics of discussion vary wildly. One week, we might talk about who got eliminated from *Dancing With the Stars* (currently her favorite program), the next, we might be found debating the gastronomic merits of Ikea food (we both agree that their Swedish meatballs are spot on, particularly if you enjoy lingonberries).

Generally speaking, however, when I begin to prattle on about my studies, my mother shows little enthusiasm. I suspect that 40 plus years of marriage to my father — a college professor — has cured her of any desire to engage in the kind of academic debates that he and I still enjoy. Four decades of "shop talk" can do that to a person.

Consequently, I was surprised by her reaction when I informed her of the topic of this thesis. Immediately, enthusiastically, and without forethought, she began to sing: "Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip." My mother was, of course, singing the opening stanzas of "The Ballad of Gilligan's Island." Like millions of other Americans, she was very well acquainted with at least one version of the song, and knew every word by heart. What's more, she was able to recall the opening title sequence itself, including its images, quite vividly. [17]

All of this illustrates the fact that, although it was not the first of its kind, the opening title sequence for *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967), in either of its iterations, is

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[17] Two different versions of the theme song and opening credits were used over the course of the show's run. During the first season, the characters of the Professor (Russell Johnson) and Mary Ann (Dawn Wells) were referred to in the song as, "… and the rest." Their images did not appear in the credits. In the version used for the two subsequent seasons, all of the characters are mentioned by name; and Johnson and Wells share on-screen billing.

probably one of the best-known and most effective examples of a particular class of TVOTS

— the open-ended narrative. Although stylistic components may vary, open-ended

narrative TVOTS possess distinct structures; and serve formal functions that go well

beyond the introduction of characters, setting, genre and themes (although they routinely

establish these elements as well). In essence, they tell a story. But, in some ways, it is an

incomplete one. Furthermore, open-ended narrative TVOTS are closely linked to so-called

"high concept" episodic programming. As such, they seem to run the risk of extinction in a

post-network era that increasingly links seriality to notions of quality.

This chapter will begin by exploring the formal structure and functions of open-

ended narrative TVOTS, move on to an analysis of the opening title sequence utilized in

the first season of Greg Garcia's situation comedy *My Name is Earl* (2005-2009);[18] and will

conclude with a brief discussion of the role and place of this class of TVOTS in the context

of the contemporary television landscape.

2.1   Narrative Structure and Wholeness

Aristotle is commonly understood to be the father of all structural narrative

analysis. In *The Poetics*, he discusses Tragedy, and supplies his seminal account of the now

well-known three-act structure. He states, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is

complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude... A whole is that which has a beginning, a

middle, and an end" (Ch. VII, ¶ 2). While this statement seems self-evident, it is more

nuanced than it first appears. Of course, any artwork which is performed, or plays out

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[18] Here, I am referring specifically to the opening title sequence used in season 1, episodes 2 through 23. The sequence is not used in the pilot episode or season finale. This omission is most likely related to the fact that both episodes deal with the same events that are summarized in the course of the title sequence, and its inclusion would have proved to be redundant. After the first season, the sequence was essentially dropped. An updated and reworked version of the sequence is used in season 3 episode 1 in order to explain significant plot developments.

over a duration of time can be understood to have a beginning, middle, and end in the strictest temporal sense.[19] However, for Aristotle, as well as legions of theorists and practitioners that have followed, this three-part conception of wholeness is directly related to theories of causality. He explains the relationship thusly:

> A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin or end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. (Ch. VII, ¶ 2)

By analyzing this passage, we are able to draw a series of generalized epistemological conclusions regarding narrative wholeness and structure. First, the beginning is characterized by a set of *a priori* circumstances. That is, we are presented with characters and situations that have already achieved a certain state of being. Accordingly, we are free to guess at the events that may have led up to these circumstances, but are generally not supplied with any explication of the causes and associated effects that have brought us to this point. If the causal chain is understood as a kind of infinite progression, the beginning represents a clear-cut point of entry into the stream. Second, the middle and end may only be reached through action. For this reason, Aristotle asserts, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action and its end is a mode of action, not a quality" (Ch.VI, ¶ 5). Character

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[19] For example, a film like Andy Warhol's 485-minute "documentary" *Empire* (1964) seems to flirt with, and ultimately vindicate this notion.

then, is subordinate to action, which represents the primary unifying factor in the narrative assembly. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the end, understood in its most fundamental sense, represents both the logical outcome of the causal chain of action that began with our *a priori* circumstances; and the termination in an abrupt and clearly defined cut off of the infinitely progressing causal stream. Although it would logically follows that events should continue to unfurl, the end precludes us from witnessing these occurrences. Yet, this cut off is not (generally) wanting, unacceptable or jarring, due to its causal relationship to our *a priori* circumstances.

These epistemological conclusions are echoed throughout the professional writing on narrative construction. In his popular "how-to" guides to screenwriting, Syd Field encourages aspiring authors to adopt a three-act structure that mirrors Aristotle's model. Employing a Socratic question and answer technique (one suspects that Mr. Field should be paying royalties to some kind of Greek philosopher's guild), he posits: "What is a story? And what do all stories have in common? A beginning, middle and end... the beginning corresponds to Act I, the middle to Act II, the end to Act III" (44). He goes on to suggest that the unifying factor that brings these acts together is "dramatic (or comedic) action" (45).

For Field, Act I is devoted to "set-up." Here, the *a priori* circumstances and characters are introduced. A Plot Point brings on Act II. The Plot Point is, at its base, a unit of action. Field notes, "A Plot Point can be anything you want it to be *as long as it moves the action forward*" (51, emphasis added). Act II is made up of "Confrontation," wherein obstacles are presented and surmounted (53). Here, impediments and action are related to the circumstances established in Act I. Another Plot Point ends Act II and begins

Act III; which in turn offers a "Resolution," or causal outcome of the circumstances and actions that have preceded it (250).

Table 2.1- Syd Field's Three-Act Paradigm

Beginning Act I		Middle Act II		End Act III
	X		**X**	
pp.1-30 Set Up		pp.30-90 Confrontation		pp.90-120 Resolution
	plot point 1		plot point 2	

On the academic front, Kristin Thompson suggests that the basic three-act model is insufficient for understanding the narrative dynamic of films. Instead, in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Thompson proposes a four-act structure consisting of, "the set-up, the complicating action, the development and the climax"[20] (27). While the addition of a fourth act serves to divide Aristotle's "middle" into two distinct parts, it does not fundamentally alter the tripartite "beginning/middle/end" paradigm. Thompson herself admits that, "most authors refer at least in passing to Aristotle's observation that a play should have a beginning, middle and end... In a temporal art like cinema... the question is what those parts consist of and what their relative proportions should be" (New Hollywood, 21). Clearly, she does not take issue with the overall concept of Aristotelian narrative wholeness. It is instead merely a question of the size of the components that make up this whole.

As for Aristotle, causally necessitated action provides unity for Thompson's structure. She notes this "means most fundamentally that a cause should lead to an effect and that effect in turn should become a cause for another effect, in an unbroken chain

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[20] Thompson also makes room for a "short epilogue" that follows the climax.

across the film" (New Hollywood, 12). It is important to note that Thompson does not believe that cause and effect must *immediately* follow one another. In fact, she proposes that the "dangling cause" plays a major role in narrative impetus. She defines the dangling cause as, "information or action, which leads to no effect or resolution until later in the film" (New Hollywood, 14). In this case, although cause and effect do not occur one right after another, the relationship between the two both propels the plot, and supplies an overall sense of narrative wholeness.

This is not to say that Thompson is simply reiterating all of the assertions made in *The Poetics*. She and Aristotle do differ on some points. Most notably, Thompson places a much greater emphasis on the importance of characters and their role in narrative construction and propulsion.[21] Whereas Aristotle asserts that, "character comes in as a subsidiary to the actions" (Ch. VI, ¶ 7); Thompson maintains that, "Almost invariably, the protagonist's goals define the main lines of action" (New Hollywood, 14). This differentiation amounts to a kind of "chicken or the egg" scenario. For Aristotle, it is action that defines the character. For Thompson, it is the character (and their desires or "goals") that necessitates the action. However, in both cases, it is evident that it is action itself (brought about through some form of causal necessity), which is the essential ingredient required to unify a narrative, and provide it with a perspicuous momentum.

2.2   Identifying and Defining Open-Ended Narrative TVOTS

Thompson suggests that, "Aristotelian principles… have to be adjusted to the constraints of the medium to which they are applied" (*Film and Television*, 42). Such

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[21] These differences may stem, in part, from the simple fact that Aristotle and Thompson are writing about two different art forms. Whereas Aristotle is concentrating on Tragedy (with a capital T), Thompson is concerned with classical Hollywood films.

adjustments allow room for a degree of relativism that validates, or at least excuses,

differences in the structural make-up of narratives across media. In consequence, as

Thompson proposes, a two-hour classical Hollywood film might have four acts; while a

half-hour situation comedy may only have two.[22]

What matters then, is not necessarily the number of acts, but the fact that in order

to be whole, a narrative requires a causally connected beginning, middle and end. This

relativistic allowance provides that narrative constructs can be applied on both micro and

macro levels. For example, in her writing on television dramas, Madeline Dimaggio points

out that, "Each act in the hour episode is a separate unit with a crisis and climax all its

own" (44). Clearly, this suggests that measurements of narrative completeness may be

applied, in some degree, to portions or segments of larger texts, which are not intended to

operate as autonomous units. As I will illustrate, the adjustment of Aristotelian principles,

and their bi-level application, are essential elements in understanding the form and

function of open-ended narrative TVOTS.

2.2.1   Defining Characteristics

TVOTS come in all shapes and sizes; and vary greatly in terms of their formal and

stylistic elements. While a program like TNT's *The Closer* (2005- Present) employs

nothing but black and white title cards interspersed throughout the show's "cold opening;"

others such as HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-Present) utilize elaborate sequences that

combine dreamlike imagery, vivid color palettes and rousing musical scores. In between

these two extremes lies a vast array of sequences that present themselves and the

programs they accompany with varying degrees of complexity. For the purposes of this

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[22] Madeline Dimaggio makes precisely this assertion in her work entitled *How to Write for Television*.

examination, it is important to establish the qualities that differentiate open-ended narrative TVOTS from this wide and eclectic field.

Following Aristotelian principles, open-ended narrative TVOTS must have a beginning that consists of a clearly defined character or characters, as well as a set of causally unmotivated *a priori* circumstances. If we briefly return again to our *Gilligan's Island* example, we see that we have a well-established group of characters (the soon-to-be castaways), situated in the context of a situation with no apparent causal impetus. They are, of course, setting out from a tropic port on a three-hour tour; yet, there are no explanations as to how this has come to pass. How did such a socially diverse group end up on the Minnow that particular day? What brought them to this tropic locale? Why are there only five passengers? Moreover, did any of them watch the weather forecast before heading out to the dock? As viewers, we may guess at the answers to these questions, but causally necessitated answers are not supplied.

As I discussed in the first chapter, many TVOTS are understood to introduce viewers to characters and setting, and as a result, this requirement may appear to do little to winnow the field. However, when we begin to apply this rudimentary constraint, it becomes quickly evident how many title sequences are, in fact, excluded. Even if we limit ourselves to shows that have aired in the "post-network" era of 2005 to present, a host of examples come quickly to mind. Sequences for shows that rely primarily on title cards like *The Closer* (2005-Present), *Jericho* (2006-2008), *Heroes* (2006-2010), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-Present)*, The League* (2009-Present)*, Extras* (2005-2007)*, Glee* (2009-Present) and *Lost* (2004-2010) are quickly eliminated. Likewise, many sequences that take a more ambiguous, yet visually complex, approach to introducing their accompanying

programs like *True Blood* (2008-Present), *Breaking Bad* (2008-Present), *Fringe* (2008-Present), *Community* (2009-Present), *Mad Men* (2007-Present), *Game of Thrones* (2011-Present), *Lie to Me* (2009-2011)*, Numb3rs* (2005-2010)*,* and *Rubicon* (2010) all fail to make the cut. Not only do these TVOTS forego the establishment of a set of *a priori* circumstances, in almost every instance they eschew any character introduction whatsoever. Instead, they focus primarily on the showcasing of themes and motifs that are explored further in their primary texts.

In open-ended narrative TVOTS, once character(s) and circumstance have been established, a form of action will follow. Here, I will take a step away from Kristin Thompson's suggestion that narrative impetus is, more often than not, the product of character goals (at least in the context of classical Hollywood cinema). In open-ended narrative TVOTS this action often, but not always, arises from external forces, which are beyond the control of the characters. For example, in the case of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979-1981), it is a "freak mishap" that freezes the titular character's life-support systems and throws his spacecraft into a wider orbit, causing him to return to Earth some five centuries later. In *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978), a skydiving accident provides the narrative motivation for Jaime Sommer's mechanical augmentation and her transformation from tennis pro to secret agent. In *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982), it is an "accidental overdose of gamma radiation" that interacts with Dr. David Banner's "unique body chemistry," and causes him to morph into the green behemoth. And, in *Gilligan's Island*, it is a tropical storm that scuttles the S.S. Minnow.

Figure 2.1- The Scuttled Minnow

This event or action is an essential element in narrative construction, and equivalent concepts can be found throughout professional and academic discourse on the subject. While the names vary, the basic idea remains a constant. As I touched upon earlier, Syd Field categorizes this kind of action as a Plot Point, or "an incident, episode, or event that 'hooks' into the action…[and] moves the story forward (48).[23] In her rather informal guide to writing television scripts, Ellen Sandler refers to it as the "Oh" moment. It is when "Something happens that sets your story in motion… It's the event that catches your audience's attention and makes them want to stick around" (93). Thompson dubs this phenomenon "the complicating action" (New Hollywood, 28). And, I would suggest that Thompson's choice of words — specifically, her use of the word "action" — reinforces the Aristotelian emphasis on action as *the* unifying narrative force. This notion is further

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[23] At this point, I should acknowledge that applying Field (and others) to a radically foreshortened narrative form does a kind of violence to these concepts. For example, Field's "Plot Points" are to occur at very specific time intervals in the context of a *ninety-minute* film. Nevertheless, I suggest that these concepts provide us with insights into narrative structure that remain valuable, even in this drastically condensed format.

buttressed a few sentences later when she notes, "The complicating action… takes the action in a new direction" (New Hollywood, 29). Consequently, although Thompson departs from Aristotle in maintaining that characters and their desires provide narrative impetus and cohesion, it would appear that it is all but impossible to explain how this can be so without returning, again and again, to the notion of action.

The inclusion of this form of action as a prerequisite serves to further tighten up the definition of open-ended narrative TVOTS.   For example, while the opening credit sequence for *Caprica* (2009-2010) introduces viewers to a set of characters and presents them in the context of a set of *a priori* circumstances (i.e. the fictional world of the Twelve Colonies, in a time when human consciousness can be transferred to, or replicated in, automatons), it fails to function on the level of a narrative because it lacks the action or event required to propel and unify a plot. As a result, the segment fulfills the "paratextual contract" by acting as an introduction to the program's characters, settings, and genre; yet it cannot be understood as a narrative in the proper sense.

Finally, all open-ended narrative TVOTS conclude with a kind of pseudo-resolution that is predicated upon, and causally related to, the action and circumstances that precede it. In the case of *Gilligan's Island*, this pseudo-resolution is achieved when "The ship set ground on the shore of this uncharted desert isle." The castaways washing up on the island is, in some ways, the final outcome of the three-hour tour and the storm at sea. We can see a more recent example if we look at the opening title sequence for the first five seasons of the USA Network's *Burn Notice* (2007-Present).[24] Here we find the main character in a set of *a priori* circumstances (Michael Westen is a spy), an event or action

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[24] Interestingly, USA allowed viewers to cast votes via Facebook in order to choose a new title sequence for the sixth season of the show.

that propels the narrative (he has been disavowed or "burned" by his agency) and a pseudo-resolution (without resources, he is forced to stay in Miami). It is the combination of these three elements that allows these sequences to manifest a cohesive and easily understood narrative form.

The pseudo-resolution, like the other defining elements described above, is an integral component in the classification of open-ended narrative TVOTS, and serves to limit the field of opening sequences that aspire to this category. For instance, while the opening title sequence of *Dark Skies* (1996-1997) introduces its viewers to the show's main character (John Loengard) in a unique set of circumstances (he is recording his narration because he may not live through the night) and provides a form of action (aliens have arrived on Earth and are secretly coexisting with humans), the sequence fails to provide any kind of causally related resolution. In essence, the entire segment operates as more of a thematic precursor to the program. As viewers, we must assume that Loengard has survived this precarious evening in order for the series to progress. Yes, the sequence provides exposition, but it cannot be formally understood as a narrative because it lacks any kind of clear causally based resolution to the problems it introduces.

2.3   Micro and Macro-Levels of Formal Structure

I employ the term "pseudo-resolution" in describing the final formal component of open-ended narrative TVOTS because they are paratextual devices, and as such, can be understood in two distinct ways. If we look at them as stand-alone artworks — meaning that we have divorced them from the primary texts that they accompany — we may drop the word "pseudo" as a qualifier, and the "resolution" becomes just that. From this perspective, open-ended narrative TVOTS can be understood as adhering to Aristotle's

beginning/middle/end structure. The beginning provides the viewer with set-up, the middle is comprised of an event or action that propels the story in a new direction, and the end represents a causally related outcome. In this sense, the three-act narrative structure appears to be both whole and complete. However, as soon as we begin to look at TVOTS in conjunction with their primary texts, their structural composition is altered. They can no longer be regarded as completely self-contained narratives, because the "end" or resolution is followed in every instance by the primary text itself.   And, if we return to Aristotle, we are reminded that "An end… is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, *but has nothing following it*" (Ch. VII, ¶ 2, emphasis added). Accordingly, these kinds of TVOTS are "open-ended," because there is always *something* that follows the pseudo-resolution. And so, while in a micro sense they possess the tripartite Aristotelian qualities required for narrative completeness, on the macro level, they must be understood as part of a larger whole.

In some ways, the pseudo-resolution allows this class of TVOTS to function in a manner that is consistent with what Richard Neupert calls the "Open Story" film (75-110). In his book-length exploration of narration and closure — aptly titled *The End* — Neupert borrows Genette's distinction between narrative discourse (the "telling" aspect of the tale) and the story itself (the characters, events and actions). This division allows for varying degrees of closure in the cinema; and provides the basis for his suggestion that there are, "four possible categories of narrative film endings" (32). Of those four, Neupert posits that the "Open Story" film " typically suspends the story before all the diegetic events are finished, but it does reinforce narrational closure" (75). Because they are positioned as paratextual precursors, open-ended narrative TVOTS *must* suspend some portion of the

story before the diegesis is complete. Otherwise, there is no reason for the viewer to engage with the primary text. Simultaneously, because they surround the primary text (as opposed to being part of it), they must also reach a point of narrational closure. Traditionally, in the context of television, this is achieved through the cessation of a show's theme music and supertitles, a fade to black, and a cut to commercial. Thus, this class of TVOTS is definitively closed on the level of narrative discourse (which contributes to an overall feeling of closure on the micro level); yet, remains relatively open on the level of the story.

This "Open Story" quality allows the three acts that comprise open-ended narrative TVOTS function as the first act of an entire series. If we return to Field, we can see that, on a large scale, these kinds of TVOTS provide the set-up and Plot Point required in ACT I. And, because the pseudo-resolution they offer is open-ended, it allows the primary text itself to begin, again and again, in the midst of ACT II — which, of course, is characterized by the confrontation of obstacles.

For this reason, open-ended narrative TVOTS prove to be a remarkably effective tool for producers of episodic "high concept" programming. Although the exact definition of "high concept" is widely debated, it is generally understood that a "high concept" project is one that can easily be described — and thus marketed — to both industry executives and audiences alike, in just a few words or sentences. In his book-length treatise on the subject, Justin Wyatt explores the term's origins:

> According to the folklore of the entertainment industry, high concept as a
> term was first associated with Barry Diller, during his tenure in the early
> 1970s as a programming executive at ABC. Since Diller needed stories

which could be easily summarized for a thirty-second television spot, he

approved those projects which could be sold in a single sentence. This

sentence would then appear in the advertising spots and in TV Guide

synopses. (8)

Based on this passage, we can infer that the essential ingredient in any "high

concept" project is a relatively straightforward, and easily understood, narrative

foundation. Complicated subplots, false leads, snares, equivocation and jamming may all

play a role in the overall text as a whole; however, as veteran screenwriter Steve Kair

suggests, "In defining High Concept, we talk about the premise of your story, not what

happens in Acts 1, 2 and 3. The premise or logline is the core of High Concept" (High

Concept Defined Once and For All).

By functioning as a sort of three-act first act, open-ended narrative TVOTS provide

an opportunity for storytellers to present viewers with a compact yet seemingly complete

narrative backstory (generally in sixty seconds or less) that establishes the premise at the

heart of the program. In doing so, they operate in an "entryway" capacity, and allow first-

time viewers to begin watching the program at any point in its run. For repeat viewers,

open-ended narrative TVOTS serve in an *in medias res* fashion by ritually reminding them

of the "high concept" which defines and shapes the primary text. Moreover, they set the

stage for all of the forthcoming episodes to perform as a kind of perpetually unfurling

second act, wherein the main character or characters are repeatedly confronted with new

sets of obstacles that they must overcome in order to achieve their goals.

Interestingly, many of these "high concept" episodic series never make it to a

macro-level third act. Often, they are cancelled abruptly, and leave no opportunity for the

writers to offer a true resolution. Gilligan, for example, never made it off of the island, because CBS Board Chairman William Paley cancelled the show to make room for *Gunsmoke* in the 1967 fall schedule. Of course, at that time, the end of a series did not usually carry the same weight it does today.[25] Arguably, it was not until the concluding episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) that sitcom finales became cultural "events." Nevertheless, when the castaways finally did escape the island in the 1978 two-part television movie *Rescue From Gilligan's Island*, the first installment garnered a record-setting 52 share with a rating of 30.2 on the National Nielsens, which "remains one of the highest ratings of all time for a TV movie" (Schwartz Ch. 30 ¶ 68). These kind of ratings clearly suggest that, whether common practice or not, American television audiences have a desire for narrative closure. Even more importantly, when series are cancelled without this kind of resolution, the primary texts (i.e., the actual episodes) constitute nothing more than a second act, which has been stretched out indefinitely.[26]

2.4   Narrative Style and Genre

Appendix "A" to this chapter lists some of the TV programs that have utilized open-ended narrative TVOTS over the years. While this inventory is not intended to be exhaustive, it does reinforce the fact that these kinds of sequences have routinely accompanied both comedic and dramatic series. Furthermore, it seems to support the notion that open-ended narrative TVOTS are particularly well suited as delivery vehicles for the kind of exposition needed to quickly establish and "sell" so-called "high concept" programming. From *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) to *Person of Interest* (2011-

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[25] Finales for certain serialized shows like *The Fugitive* (1963-1967) provide the obvious exception.
[26] Of course, today, endlessly deferred narrative resolution is most closely associated with serial television.

Present), there is nary a series on the list whose premise could *not* be easily described in thirty seconds or less. Interestingly however, despite this overall similarity, the *ways* these sequences choose to convey this information does vary, and, when looked at from a generic perspective, certain tendencies appear to emerge.

The majority of the dramatic TVOTS on our list seem to favor some form of voiceover narration. In some instances, such as *Remington Steele* (1982-1987) and *Brimstone* (1998-1999), one of the show's main characters provides the narrative set-up. In others, like *The A-Team* (1983-1987) and *Renegade* (1992-1997), an anonymous, yet authoritarian, third party narrator lends a voice to the segments. At times, as in *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978), direct address narration is augmented with bits of character dialogue like the now famous line: "We can rebuild him." Nevertheless, in all of these cases, voiceover serves as the primary storytelling device.

Of course, there are a few examples of dramatic TVOTS that do not rely on any voiceover narration whatsoever. However, these kinds of segments appear to be the exception rather than the rule. The opening titles for *The White Shadow* (1978-1981) depend on purely visual storytelling in order to establish the premise of the show. A series of short clips show us, rather than tell us, about Ken Reeves' professional basketball career, his knee injury, and his subsequent decision to become a coach for a South Central Los Angeles high school team. Likewise, the opening sequence for *The Bionic Woman* uses a montage of still pictures, supertitles (in the form of computer generated readouts) and moving images to inform viewers about Jaime Sommers' parachuting accident and her physical and occupational transformation. Obviously, many other kinds of TVOTS depend almost exclusively on visuals; however, these two examples are noteworthy because they

manage to tell narratively complete stories, which incorporate a causally connected beginning, middle and end.

At the other end of the generic spectrum, comedic open-ended narrative TVOTS seem to enjoy a marginally greater range of narrative freedom. Not only do they make use of many of the same narrative devices as their dramatic counterparts, they also commonly incorporate the use of diegetic theme songs.[27] This is particularly true of many of the earlier series on our list. In addition to the examples already cited, shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), *F Troop* (1965-1967), *It's About Time* (1966-1967) and *Dusty's Trail* (1973-1974) all use descriptive lyrics and zippy tunes to tell what are essentially complete three-part narratives. Again, it is this tripartite quality that sets these TVOTS apart from other sequences that use theme songs in a similar fashion.   At first blush, the opening titles for *The Patty Duke Show* (1963-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) appear to be telling a story, but they are not. In both cases, they function as mere character introductions because they lack both a complicating action and causally related narrative closure.

2.5   Analyzing Earl

To this point, the majority of our examples have been culled from the "network era" of television, which, according to TV scholar Amanda Lotz, lasted from "approximately 1952 to the mid 1980s" (Introduction, ¶ 15). However, as our Appendix suggests, the sweeping changes that have altered so much of the television landscape in the "post-

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[27] With one notable exception, all of the dramas on our list eschew the use of diegetic theme songs. The sole exception here is *Branded* (1965-1966), an NBC Western drama, which employed a narrative theme song written by Dominic Frontiere and Alan Alch. The song plays over a scene that depicts the lead character's military dismissal for cowardice, and lets viewers know that these accusations are, in fact, unfounded.

network era" of 2005 onward have not completely done away with open-ended narrative

TVOTS. The opening credit sequence for the first season of Greg Garcia's *My Name is Earl*

provides us with an excellent, and relatively recent, case in point.

As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine observe, "During the early 2000s, the

situation comedy, with its reliable comedic tropes, its conventions of storytelling and style

enduring since television's early years, underwent a significant transformation" (Ch. 4, ¶

1). As a primary text, *My Name is Earl* possesses many of the characteristics that have

come to epitomize this transformation, and is representative of the new breed of situation

comedy that has developed in the context of the post-network era. The series forgoes a

laugh track, utilizes a single-camera shooting technique, eschews a live studio audience,

employs a variety of cinematically inspired visual effects and camera angles, and relies

heavily on absurd flashbacks in order to achieve its comic effect.[28] And so, it is interesting

to note that despite the fact that the show openly embraces this decidedly *au courant*

combination of stylistic elements, it nonetheless relies upon the well-established tradition

of the open-ended narrative title sequence to augment and introduce its primary text.[29]

This constitutes an important point regarding the position of open-ended narrative TVOTS

in the context of the post-network television era, and we shall touch upon it again later in

the conclusion to this chapter.

The opening credit sequence for the first season of *My Name is Earl* runs exactly 30

seconds. Images, shots, camera angles and POVs all change in quick succession, with no

one shot lasting longer than five seconds. Yet, despite its brevity and rapid-fire editing, the

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[28] *Earl's* reliance on bizarre flashbacks can likely be traced back to Garcia's experiences as a writer on *The Family Guy* (1999-Present) — a program that has effectively bridged the gap between the transitional and post-network eras.

[29] At least in the context of the first season.

sequence imparts a remarkable amount of diegetic information, and, on the micro level, manages to construct a clearly identifiable three-act open-ended narrative structure.

2.5.1   Micro-Act I: Establishing Character, Circumstance and More

Although it is barely two seconds in length, the very first shot of the sequence provides viewers with some clues concerning Earl's character and circumstances. In it, Earl (Jason Lee) is shown smoking a cigarette and looking furtively out from behind the corner of a convenience store. Clearly, it is reasonable to suspect that he is up to something, and these suspicions are quickly confirmed by the next three shots, which depict Earl breaking into a parked car, stealing a stack of CDs and making his getaway on foot. Right away, the audience understands Earl's *a priori* status as a thief; yet we know nothing of the causes that have led Earl to this life of petty crime. However, the voice over that accompanies these shots *seems* to provide us with some vague ideas. As the shots unfurl, Jason Lee supplies a narration that hails the audience by querying us. He asks, "You know the kind of guy who does nothing but bad things and wonders why his life sucks?" In asking this question, he suggests a reason — albeit a specious one — for the theft: Earl is just the "kind of guy who does nothing but bad things." So, while this query appears to provide a vague answer as to why Earl has turned to a life of crime, it actually serves only to reinforce our *a priori* understanding of his character and circumstances. Furthermore, it unequivocally establishes another foregone conclusion — that Earl's life "sucks." Why does it suck? Who knows? It just does.

Figure 2.2- Our First Glimpse of Earl

The next shot depicts Earl having his mug shot taken. Concurrently, the narrator confirms his identity: "Well, that was me." This lets us know that the narrator and the hapless criminal depicted onscreen are one and the same. Interestingly, although nothing in the voice over links Earl's theft of the CDs to the mug shot scene, the order of the shots leads the viewer to fill in the missing causally necessitated occurrences. That is, we assume that he was arrested while making his getaway, and taken to the police station. This Bordwellian-style filling of gaps leads viewers to another conclusion concerning the character of Earl: Not only is he a thief, he is a bad one.

The first micro-act ends with the introduction of a Plot Point in the form of an event that drives the narrative forward. Earl is shown scratching off a winning lottery ticket worth $100,000. Syd Field tells aspiring screenwriters that, "Plot Point I is the true beginning of your story" (51). This assertion is particularly accurate in the case of Earl's scratch off win. Whereas Earl's theft of the CDs clearly establishes his character, it is his lottery win that effectively sets the plot in motion. And, as we shall see, instead of offering

itself as a remedy to his circumstances, Earl's sudden windfall introduces a new set of

problems that he must overcome in both the second micro-act and on the macro-level of

the series itself.

Beyond setting up Earl's character and circumstances, the first micro-act of the

opening title sequence also introduces several themes that reappear throughout the series

proper. For instance, the shot of Earl approaching the parked car is presented from the

POV of the store's surveillance camera. This shot announces a theme concerning the

ubiquity and intrusiveness of video cameras that is heavily played upon in later episodes

such as "Number One," "Our Other Cops is On (Parts I & II)," "Inside Probe (Parts I & II)"

and "Dodge's Dad (Parts I & II)." Similarly, when Earl has his mug shot taken, his eyes are

closed. This gag is also repeated throughout the series. Every time we see his picture,

from Driver's License to family photos, Earl has his eyes firmly shut. While it is not

uncommon for TVOTS to evoke a show's broader themes, the introduction of these

elements in the context of a relatively self-contained narrative like this one lend it the feel

of a miniature episode — which, to some extent, it is. Essentially, *Earl's* opening title

sequence is a radically foreshortened version of the series' pilot episode. For the sake of

brevity, certain complicating actions, like Earl's loss and eventual recovery of his winning

lottery ticket, are glossed over, yet, the overall storyline remains largely intact and

provides the exposition needed to establish the show's premise. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

this title sequence was not introduced until the series' second episode, and was left out of

the final episode of the first season, which elaborated on the events of the pilot in greater

detail. In these cases, its inclusion would have been redundant; however, when paired

with the remaining first season episodes, the segment serves to provide the causal

foundation for each of Earl's line-item quests.

Figure 2.3- Surveillance Camera POV in *Earl's* Title Sequence

On a more abstract level, some of the elements in the first micro-act give viewers an

idea of what to expect stylistically from the rest of the series. For example, the long shot of

Earl escaping on foot is filmed from an unusually low angle, and as such, is the first of

several shots in the sequence that cue viewers to the primary text's cinematic aspirations.

Likewise, when Earl throws up his arms in victory after scratching off his winning lottery

ticket, the shot is filmed from an extreme overhead angle that is seen more often in

feature-length films than in traditional three-camera comedies. The introduction of these

kinds of shots is clearly intentional, and is based on the notion that a "cinema like" quality

is a desirable thing. Creator Greg Garcia notes that, "We try to give it a look that feels more

like an independent feature film. To the extent that we're successful doing that, it feels

like a movie rather than a TV show" (qtd. in Newman and Levin, Ch. 4, ¶ 20). What's more,

Garcia admits in his nbc.com blog that the Coen brothers' film *Raising Arizona* (1987)

provided much of the inspiration for *Earl's* visual style and characters. He explains: "We felt it was a great look for the show and the writers of the show are big fans of the movie" (Garcia).

2.5.2   *Micro-Act II: Confronting Obstacles*

As we watch Earl scratch off his winning lottery ticket, he tells us, "Every time something good happened to me, something bad was always waiting around the corner." This bit of insight serves to usher in the second micro-act. Appearing to be both dazed and jubilant, Earl stumbles into the street and is immediately struck by a car. As viewers, we are treated to a shot from the driver's POV. We see Earl splayed across the windshield, his face comically scrunched up by the force of the impact. Suddenly, the POV changes. Now, it is as if we are watching the events unfold from the store where Earl presumably purchased his ticket. And, as inertia pitches him forward and he rolls into the street, Earl names the primary obstacle that he must confront. It is the same bad thing that is "always waiting around the corner": "Karma."

Because all of the events progress so quickly, it is noteworthy that, at a length of approximately five seconds, the subsequent shot of Earl in a hospital bed is the longest in the entire sequence. Beginning as a close up of Earl in a neck brace, the camera pulls out to reveal more damage. He is in traction, and busily scribbling on a sheet of yellow legal paper. Simultaneously, via voice over, Earl states, "That's when I knew I had to change." The duration of this shot accomplishes several things. First, it emphasizes the importance of the challenges he is facing. Not only has a car struck Earl, but as the pull back reveals, he has sustained some serious looking injuries. Second, it reinforces the importance of what is being said in the voice over narration. In order to overcome Karma, Earl must

change. Lastly, the temporal length of the shot seems to imply how difficult this change

may be. Just how is Earl to win out against this invisible force?

This question is answered in the next shot, which reveals a close-up of the paper

that Earl has been working on. It constitutes a litany of offenses that he has committed

over his lifetime, including items like, "Faked death to break up with a girl," and "Stole

beer from a golfer." And, while we don't learn exactly how many bad deeds are

represented on the list, the close-up reveals that the numbers run at least as high as the

sixties. As the camera pans down the list, Earl explains, "So I made a list of everything bad

I've ever done, and, one by one, I'm going to try to make up for all my mistakes."

Earl's assertion and his construction of the list constitute the second Plot Point on

the micro-narrative level. Again, returning to Field, he suggest, "The Plot Point at the end

of Act II 'spins the story around into Act III" (53). Based on Earl's proclamation, it is

evident that there has been a causally related change in narrative direction. Not only is he

no longer interested in pursuing a life of crime; he is actively attempting to be accountable

for his previous actions.

The introduction of Earl's list is, thematically speaking, the most important aspect

of the opening title sequence. Furthermore, on the macro-narrative level it can be

understood as the first Plot Point of the series itself. Over the course of the first two

seasons, nearly every episode is predicated on Earl trying to rectify one of the items on the

list.[30] It is, in essence, the key to the "high concept" that the series is based upon.

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[30] This continues through the end of the second season, when the series takes an abrupt turn and Earl pleads guilty to a crime he did not commit in order to exonerate his ex wife. As a result, Earl is sentenced to two years in prison, and is forced to abandon his list. Accordingly, the first episode of the third season begins with a reworked title sequence that explains how Earl ended up behind bars, but makes no mention whatsoever of Karma or the list.

2.5.3   Micro-Act III: The Pseudo-Resolution

The third micro-act is brief from a narrative perspective, yet still clearly identifiable.   As Earl folds up his list and begins to place it in the pocket of his hospital gown, there is an abrupt cut to a close-up of Earl completing this action. Now however, both the setting and Earl himself are noticeably changed.   As the camera pulls out and up, we see that he is in back in his street clothes and out of the hospital. He has clearly overcome the obstacles presented by his physical injuries. Moreover, the expression on Earl's face has changed from one of pained thoughtfulness that he wore while compiling his list in the hospital to a look of obvious contentment. Concurrently he explains, "I'm just trying to be a better person." Given the apparent improvement in his health and circumstances it would seem that Earl's efforts have been somewhat successful. Here then, we have our pseudo-resolution.

Because more events will inevitably follow the opening credit sequence, it is important that the pseudo-resolution impart some sense of closure while leaving the narrative line itself open-ended. So, despite the fact that Earl has clearly managed to resolve some of his problems, the narration itself leaves the door open to future developments. His assertion that he is "… *trying* to be a better person," is indicative of the fact that this is an ongoing process. Furthermore, without specifically citing it, Earl is invoking the list. Obviously we are meant to understand that in order to be a better person and change his luck permanently to the good, Earl needs to rectify each of the misdeeds on the list. As a result, it logically follows that more obstacles must be overcome before a true macro-level resolution can be reached.

The opening credit sequence comes to a close with a long shot of Earl. The program's title and the words "Created by Greg Garcia," are displayed in the upper right-hand portion of the frame.[31] Concurrently, Jason Lee concludes his narration saying simply, "My name is Earl." This straightforward statement has a twofold effect: First, it formally introduces Earl as the central character.   Although we have been through a lot with Earl over the past 29 seconds, we did not know his name. Now, there is no more room for ambiguity. His character is clearly and definitively established. Second, the statement (in combination with the superimposed titles) signals the close of the segment's narrative discourse. Briefly returning to Neupert, we see that *Earl's* title sequence has now fulfilled the definition of the "Open Story" film. While the pseudo-resolution has left the story open to continuation, the segment itself has concluded in a "secure and systematic way" (110).

Finally, it is important to note that the last shot of the title sequence allows for the introduction of a key setting — Earl's motel. In the context of the first two seasons, the motel serves as Earl's home and base of operations. Many of the individual episodes begin here, and nearly every one ends with Earl and his brother Randy going to sleep, side by side, in one of the motel's comically undersized double beds. Additionally, the decrepit state of the motel serves to reinforce Earl's white trash status. The pool is surrounded by an asphalt parking lot instead of grass. Paint is visibly peeling off of the exterior walls. An overflowing trash bin sits in the corner of the frame. This is clearly not the Ritz-Carlton. What's more, Earl's car is plainly visible in the background. And, appropriately enough, it

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[31] It is noteworthy, that as a showrunner/*auteur*, Garcia seems to be partial to narrative style title sequences. The full-length opening sequence for his show *Raising Hope* (2010-Present) proceeds in a manner similar to *Earl's*. Ultimately however, the segment falls short of meeting our definition of open-ended narrative TVOTS because it lacks a causally based conclusion.

is a battered 1973 El Camino. Thus, the *mise-en-scéne* of the final shot effectively

introduces a key setting, while cementing Earl's socio-economic and cultural credentials.

Figure 2.4- The Final Shot of *Earl's* Title Sequence

2.6   Conclusions

As I have illustrated, open-ended narrative TVOTS function in two distinct

manners. On one level, they function as mini-narratives; with an identifiable three-act

structure that appears to adhere to the fundamental Aristotelian criteria for narrative

wholeness. On a larger level, they serve as the first act to an entire series. They supply the

set-up and inciting incident that allows for each subsequent episode to function as a

continuation of an enormous second act that is often ultimately left without any form of

third act resolution.

It is hard to overestimate the power of open-ended narrative TVOTS as a macro-

level tool in the context of episodic programming. They provide creators and

showrunners with the ability to quickly and efficiently present their viewers with

expository information in an entertaining way that can be easily understood. Often, this

can have a direct influence on the success of a series. In the case of *Gilligan's Island*, Sherwood Schwartz and his team created three different versions of the pilot, and the CBS brass rejected each. Then-CBS president James Aubrey described the problem succinctly, "I like the Skipper, I like Gilligan, and I like the little boat. The problem is the exposition. How the hell is the audience going to know what they're doing on that same damn island every week?" (Qtd. in Schwartz, Ch. 6, ¶ 75) In the end, with the help of friends, and without the authorization of studio executives, Schwartz cobbled together a fourth version that included the now-famous diegetic theme song and opening title sequence. Audiences loved it, and as a result, the program was picked up and enjoyed a successful three-year run.

Much about television has changed within the context of the post-network era, and one of those changes has to do with kinds of programs that are being offered. Increasingly, serial programming has enjoyed both an uptick in popularity and a close association with notions of so-called "quality." Roberta Pearson explains that, "Since *Hill Street Blues*, *Thirtysomething* and other shows of the early 1980s demonstrated the appeal of dense serial storytelling to viewers with the desirable demographics, narrative complexity has become a hallmark of the quality television of the post-network period" (245).

As I have already demonstrated, open-ended narrative TVOTS work remarkably well in the context of "high concept" episodic television programs because they supply much needed exposition. Yet, it is this same level of exposition that seems to make this class of TVOTS a bad fit for more serially oriented programming. All at once, they seem to tell too much, and yet not enough. As a result, fictive serial programs often rely on more

ambiguous title sequences, in combination with "previously on" segments that serve to bring the viewer up-to-date with the latest plot developments.

Interestingly, even the subject of our case study seems to have succumbed to this tendency. After the first episode of the second season, *My Name is Earl* relied almost exclusively on a radically foreshortened version of the original title sequence that consisted of nothing more than the final shot of the segment accompanied by Jason Lee's voiceover announcing the name of both his character and the show. Presumably, at that point, many audience members were already well acquainted with the premise of the program. However, it is also noteworthy that this change occurred just as the series itself began to increasingly incorporate serial storylines in the overall narrative. So then, the question becomes, do open-ended narrative TVOTS still have a place in a post-network era that appears to value serial programming more highly than episodic series? I would suggest they do.

Seriality is a relative concept, and can be measured in a matter of degrees. Some shows are clearly more serially oriented than others. For example, although HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-Present) contains an ongoing story line regarding Larry's divorce, it is clearly more episodic than a series like ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012). In essence, seriality has become something akin to an ingredient in a recipe. If a show lacks flavor, its producers can throw in a pinch of it to spice things up. As a result, there are numerous shows that have aired in the post-network era that possess a degree of this serial quality, yet are episodic enough that they utilize open-ended narrative title sequences. Unsurprisingly, many of them might be considered to be "high concept" programs. Shows like *Nikita* (2010-Present), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*

(2008-2009), *The Glades* (2010-Present), and *Person of Interest* (2011-Present) provide but a few examples.

If there is anything surprising about the role of open-ended narrative TVOTS in the context of the post-network era, it is that they now seem to accompany dramas more often than comedies. Newman and Levine offer a reason why this might be so: "Without exception, the critically admired and culturally validated comedies of the convergence era have rejected some of the once-defining traits of the genre" (Ch. 4 ¶ 1). If we take this as fact, it makes sense that modern sitcoms might pass on a class of opening title sequence that introduced viewers to shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Dusty's Trail*. Nevertheless, while their generic allegiances may be shifting, it is evident that open-ended narrative TVOTS continue to present themselves as efficient and viable devices for the introduction of "high concept" programming.

3   CONSTRUCTS OF CURIOSITY: ENCOURAGING SPECIFIC INQUIRY

The Zenith Radio Corporation introduced the first multi-function television remote control in 1950.[32] Dubbed the "Lazy Bones," the device allowed viewers to power their sets on and off and change channels from the comfort of their armchairs. Unfortunately, it was also tethered to the set by a rather ungainly cord, which quickly presented itself as a safety hazard for some of the earliest of "early adopters." As a result, more than one irreverent observer has suggested that a better moniker might have been the "Broken Bones"[33] (Twitchell 98; Van Lingen; Van Brimmer).

Pratfalls notwithstanding, the introduction of the TV remote can be viewed as one of the first steps in a technological evolution that has resulted in viewers enjoying increased control over the moving image texts they choose to engage with. Today, audiences are more in command of how, what, when and where they watch than ever before. And, while there are certainly many aspects of TV content that still remain beyond the viewer's purview, this heightened level of empowerment has become one of the distinguishing characteristics of television in the post-network convergence era, and represents a significant shift in the ways in which audiences interact with television programs and their opening title sequences. To put it simply, viewers no longer have to watch TVOTS if they don't want to.

As a result, a bifurcated class of opening title sequences has come into vogue. These TVOTS function by engaging viewers on the level of curiosity. They are constructed

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[32] In 1949, RCA had released a single-function remote control designed to fight "tuning drift." The device was essentially, "a separate tuning knob that viewers could manipulate from the couch" (Engber).
[33] Ugh.

in a way that encourages audiences to watch them again and again, in order to satisfy a desire to obtain specific pieces of information. As I will illustrate, this desire can either focus more strongly on the opening title sequence (as a stand-alone text), or privilege an investigation of the interplay between the opening sequence and its primary text. These divided sites of inquiry provide the basis for our bifurcation.

What I am proposing here —the idea that certain TVOTS can function as "constructs of curiosity" — seems to run counter to much of the existing discourse, academic or otherwise, concerning opening title sequences. As I outlined in the first chapter, the regnant theory surrounding TVOTS suggests that they operate as a kind of a paratextual contract. That is, they *inform* viewers about "what to expect" from the program to follow by introducing characters, settings, genre, and themes. The presumption is, that when title sequences offer these kinds of promises, audiences have a greater desire to engage with the show itself. At its base, this concept relies on the idea that all TVOTS function by *providing* information; and to some extent, they do. Even the style of font used on a title card has the potential to convey something about the program it accompanies. Yet, this notion seems to overlook an equally important part of the overall equation, which is, that by providing viewers with *some* pieces of information, and withholding others, these segments encourage us to find out more. In essence, they reward curiosity.

In his article entitled, "Curiosity and Exploration," psychologist D.E. Berlyne defines curiosity as, "the condition of discomfort, due to an inadequacy of information, that motivates specific exploration" (26). He goes onto explain that, "exploratory responses can be of two distinct classes" (26). *Specific* exploratory responses "supply or

intensify stimulation from particular sources… that can supply the *precise* information the [viewer] misses" (26, emphasis added). *Diversive* exploratory responses occur when viewers seek out "stimulation regardless of source… that offers something like an optimum amount of *novelty*… or *variety*" (26, emphasis added). This distinction provides us with a means for understanding how TVOTS function generally, and, at the same time, helps to define a particular class of sequences.

Broadly speaking, when an opening segment utilizes iconography associated with a certain genre, announces the role of a familiar actor or actress, or introduces a general location or setting, it encourages diversive exploration. That is, it invites viewers to investigate the show — in a very *general* way — to ascertain what is "new" or "novel" about it. Accordingly, in these circumstances, we might feel compelled to ask ourselves questions like: How is this Western different than the others? Or, how will Lisa Kudrow's character behave in *this* series? The answers to these questions are broad, multi-faceted and depend heavily upon intertextual relationships with other artworks.

Yet certain sequences go beyond encouraging this generalized form of exploration. These TVOTS function by providing and withholding very particular forms of information.[34] Thus, when confronted with one of these segments, we might ask ourselves more focused questions like: How much does Maggie ring out for when she is scanned at the supermarket in the opening titles for *The Simpsons* (1989-Present)?[35] Or, which outfit will Sabrina change into this week during the credits for *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-

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[34] "Withholding" is a complicated term, and I use it here in two distinctly different ways. In one sense, it implies that information is being *intentionally* withheld. And, while this is the case with many TVOTS, it is not *always* the case. At other times, information is simply not revealed for any number of reasons, which are not necessarily related to a desire for secrecy or subterfuge.

[35] The answer? It depends. In early episodes, Maggie rang out for $847.63. In more recent times she rings out at $486.52.

2003)?[36] The answers to these questions are quite precise, and do not depend on

intertextual relationships in the same way. This chapter focuses on this particular variety

of TVOTS — those that encourage specific inquiry.

To begin this chapter, I will begin by discussing some of the technological

advancements and related conditions that have allowed these kinds of TVOTS to flourish.

From there, I will move on to examine how this class of sequences can be understood as

divided in the sense that some of them encourage viewer inquiry on the level of the stand-

alone sequence; while others promote examination on the level of sequence as it relates to

its primary text. Along the way, I will provide a variety of examples, along with more

detailed analyses of programs that have been produced during the post-network

convergence era.

3.1   Time-Shifting and Defragmentation

Like the introduction of the remote control, the widespread adoption of the VCR in

the 1970s and '80s marked a noteworthy technological step toward increased viewer

empowerment. Thanks to the ability to "time-shift," audiences found that they suddenly

had a greater margin of control over their own television viewing schedules.

The concept of time-shifting finds its origins with Sony founder Akio Morita; who,

in his autobiography, describes the practice in emancipatory (if not suspiciously altruistic)

terms:[37]

> In the late fifties and sixties, popular programs in the United States and later
>
> in Japan caused people to change their schedules. People would hate to miss

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[36] In seasons 1-3 Sabrina changes into one of four different outfits.
[37] One cannot help but think that Mr. Morita might be glossing over some underlying financial motivations.

their favorite shows. I noticed how the TV networks had total control over people's lives, and I felt that people should have the option of seeing a program when they chose. (208-209)

Later advancements helped to solidify this shift in power. As Chuck Tryon observes, "concepts of interactivity, consumer choice, and time-freedom have only expanded in the age of DVRs and TiVo, in which viewers can more easily construct their own TV schedules" (26).

While both of these passages make salient observations concerning audiences' abilities to create unique viewing schedules, they also overlook another important point regarding the ways these technologies — along with DVD boxed sets of TV series and streaming services — have allowed viewers to fundamentally alter the temporal experience of watching television. Not only can consumers control *when* they watch television programs, they can control *how* they watch them.

In his essay "Videophilia: What Happens When You Wait for It on Video," Charles Tashiro posits that the release of movies in laserdisc format resulted in a fragmentation of film texts.[38] And, while the laserdisc has gone the way of the dodo, much of what Tashiro has to say still applies to films on DVD.

He notes that, "Videodisc chapters are not cinematic composition. They are videodisc imposition. They aren't chosen at the point of production, but after the fact, a voice from outside the text" (11). So, whereas film viewing in the context of the theater is a kind of seamless experience, on laserdisc (or DVD) the text becomes artificially fragmented in a way that can alter the viewing experience. As a result, he argues that,

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[38] Tashiro wrote the article in 1991, when laserdiscs were arguably the highest end of home entertainment.

"Scenes or segments of the film end up getting treated like pop songs on a record or CD…
they become isolated and discrete units" (11).   Moreover, Tashiro maintains that this kind
of division encourages viewers to engage with film texts as a series of individual (or
fragmented) scenes. He notes, "Fans of a film no longer have to sit through parts they
don't like; they can jump to their favorite scenes, in whatever order they choose" (11).

I bring up Tashiro's concept of fragmentation here because I want to suggest that
DVD editions of television series, the streaming of TV programs on sites like Hulu,
Amazon, Netflix and iTunes, and the ability to record entire seasons of shows on DVRs
have the potential to create precisely the *opposite* effect. Instead of fragmenting a
previously unified narrative text, these formats allow for fundamentally divided texts to be
"defragmented," or viewed as a seamless whole.

The most obvious example of this artificial unity is manifested when commercial
television programs are reformatted for either streaming or DVD release and presented
without their advertisements. In one sense, commercials can be construed as narrative
interruptions or divisions. Kristin Thompson suggests that, "They are often welcome
breaks, precisely because viewers know that the narrative is suspended briefly and that
they will miss nothing by dashing away… [for a] few minutes" ("*Film and Television*," 17).
In removing these "welcome breaks," the text is effectively "defragmented" to the extent
that its original narrative pauses have been eliminated.

An even better example of this potential for defragmentation can be found in the
form of the "Play All Episodes" option that is now offered on many series' DVD menus. In
these instances, three or four individual episodes are often combined on a single disc, in
one contiguous narrative. Importantly, choosing this option usually eliminates the

opening credit sequences (as well as any "previously on" segments) on all but the first

episode. Thus, not only are the "natural" temporal breaks between episodes done away

with, so are the accompanying paratexts. Moreover, even when "play all" is not an option,

DVDs, streaming, and DVRs make watching entire series at once, and manually skipping

through title sequences, remarkably easy. Again, in these contexts, television series are

essentially defragmented. Instead of appearing as weekly installments, or, on an even

larger scale, as seasons, all the "individual" episodes of a given series can be experienced

in a way that more closely resembles watching one long feature film.[39]

All of this creates a problem for TVOTS that focus primarily on promoting diversive

forms of inquiry. As entryway paratexts, they only need to be viewed once in order for

most audience members to glean the information required to set out on a generalized

exploration of a show's characters, setting and genre. Thus, when given the option, many

veteran audience members choose to forego these kinds of titles. Furthermore, their ritual

value as *in medias res* paratexts is essentially negated when audiences employ the practice

of back-to-back-to-back viewing strategies. Viewers do not need to be reminded of the

"privileged" method of engaging with a text when they have never left it. Interestingly

however, as I suggested earlier, the divided classifications of TVOTS that function by

encouraging specific inquiry appear uniquely well suited for dealing with these

challenging circumstances.

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[39] Of course, there are obvious differences. Feature films do not generally run for more than two or three hours. And, even when TV programs are watched in this back–to-back context, a viewer can often sense the narrative pauses where the commercials once resided. Nevertheless, I maintain that this streamlined mode of viewing is more cinematic than televisual in character.

3.2   Stand-Alone TVOTS of Specific Inquiry

One of the most obvious ways to stimulate specific inquiry is to insert signature devices, motifs, or "gags" in an opening title sequence, which change every time a program airs. The series *Police Squad!* (1982), provides one of the earlier examples of this practice. Although it lasted for only a quarter of a season, each of the show's six title sequences announced a famous "guest star," only to have to them die before the episode actually began. Every sequence would then conclude with the title of the individual episode superimposed over the image of a police station while a narrator read the title. The problem was, they never matched. For example, although the title of the first episode read, "A Substantial Gift," the narrator intoned, "Tonight's episode: The Broken Promise."

Police Squad! was created by the writing team of Jim Abrahams and brothers David and Jerry Zucker, who had scored a hit two years earlier with their send-up of the disaster genre, *Airplane!* (1980). The playful nature of the gags included in the opening titles of *Police Squad!* announced that the show would have the same kind of comic sensibilities that audiences enjoyed with *Airplane!.* In doing so, the sequence encouraged diverse exploration to the extent that it invited potential viewers to investigate how these comedic stylings might be applied to another popular genre. However, at the same time, these gags also gave audiences very *specific* elements to look for each week in the context of the title sequence itself. In this capacity, they rewarded a level of attentive viewing that is more traditionally reserved for a program's main episodes.

This practice has not been limited to comedies. NBC's detective drama *The Rockford Files* (1974-1980) utilized an opening title sequence that began with a different message being left on the protagonist's answering machine each week. In some ways,

Rockford represented a departure from the traditional television detective series. The

show's eponymous lead character, Jim Rockford (James Garner), was an (unjustly accused)

ex-convict, and barely made enough money as a private detective to support his solitary

existence in a ramshackle mobile home (although, his trailer *was* parked next to a beach in

Malibu). Accordingly, the messages that began the title sequences were often from irate

clients, or centered on Rockford's general inability or unwillingness to meet one of his

many financial obligations. Thus, they helped to establish one of the series' overarching

themes, and worked to set the tone for the show (thereby encouraging diverse

exploration of the series as a whole), while simultaneously encouraging viewers to engage

in the weekly specific exploration of the title sequence itself.

The BBC series *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) began each episode in a similar

manner, with a title sequence that depicted the hotel's sign and reader board with the

establishment's name reworked into a comic anagram. Thus, over the course of the

show's twelve episode run, Fawlty Towers became, "Farty Towels," "Fatty Owls," "Watery

Fowls," and so on. These presumed acts of vandalism played perfectly into the premise of

the show, which focused on the misadventures of a haughty hotelier, Basil Fawlty (John

Cleese), who was constantly being undermined in his efforts to cultivate an air of

sophistication and refinement about his resort establishment.

Importantly, in each of these instances, these devices provided insight into the

primary text's characters and genres, yet they were usually not related in any specific way

to the episodes they preceded. For instance, Jim Rockford's perpetual financial difficulties

were a significant theme of the overall series, yet the messages left on his home answering

machine at the beginning of an episode were rarely, if ever, explicated in the course of the

subsequent program. Similarly, even if the sign in front of Basil Fawlty's hotel read "Flay

Otters," the accompanying episode would have nothing to do with semi-aquatic mammals

(despite the fact that Otters are, in fact, really funny). So, while these opening title

sequences might have provided viewers with a gist of the show about to come, they

primarily functioned in a kind of "stand-alone" capacity.

3.2.1   Analyzing The Simpsons

According to a recent *L.A. Times* article, *The Simpsons* (1989-Present) is "the

longest-running cartoon, the longest-running situation comedy and the longest-running

scripted prime-time series in the history of American television" (Lloyd). And, ever since

its second episode, the show has been accompanied by a version of its now famous, highly

stylized opening title sequence.[40]

Originally quite long, at approximately one minute and twenty-five seconds, series

creator Matt Groening developed the show's title sequence in order to cut back on the

amount of animation required for each individual episode (Groening). Over the series'

run, segments within the title sequence have been routinely removed or expanded upon as

needed, in order to make an individual episode fit within the constraints of the show's

commercial time slot.

On a larger scale, the basic sequence has been overhauled three times, with the

most recent makeover occurring in 2009.[41] Although many of the elements from the

original have carried over to subsequent iterations, the most recent version (in its

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[40] Season 1, Episode 1 "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire," began with a simple title card. The credits for
the cast and crew were then superimposed over the opening scenes.
[41] The most recent iteration was designed to accompany the show's premiere in HD format. For a thorough
account of all of the changes made to the sequence (including time edited versions) over the years see:
http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Opening_Sequence

complete, non-edited form) offers itself as a particularly good example of an opening title sequence that introduces characters, settings, themes and motifs, but also contains four stand-alone gags, which invite viewers to investigate particular segments of the sequence every time it appears.

The sequence begins with clouds parting to reveal the series' title superimposed over a crystal blue sky. This serves as a kind of entryway into the text. Groening himself explains that, "as we go through the clouds we enter this cartoon universe of *The Simpsons*" (qtd. in Getlen). But, before viewers can enter this fictional world, they are met with the first of several ever-changing gags. Just before the camera makes its descent into Springfield, something flies across the screen. In each case, this clearly identifiable (thanks in large part to the sequence's high definition format) flying object is different. In the first airing of the HD title sequence, it was a three-eyed crow — a reference to a running gag in the series itself concerning the mutative effects of the town's nuclear power plant.

Subsequently, we are presented with a whirlwind tour of the town itself, which provides viewers with a sense of setting. We see the nuclear power plant, the perennially burning tire fire, the "Hollywood" style Springfield sign, the town square, and, as we make our way down the street, we encounter the sequence's next gag — a billboard with ever-changing ad copy. The billboard that appears in the episode entitled "Chief of Hearts" depicts the notoriously wealthy and long-lived character of Montgomery Burns with copy that reads, "Death and Taxes, Two Things I Avoid." Thus, not only does this mock advertisement give curious viewers something specific to look out for, it provides an opportunity for the show's writers to play on any number of the series' motifs.

Almost immediately, the sequence segues into one if its oldest and best-known devices — the "chalkboard gag." Here, we see Bart, who has presumably been kept after school, writing lines as punishment. Over the years, this gag has often provided viewers with insight into Bart's mischievousness nature and intelligence with lines like, "I will not hide behind the Fifth Amendment," and "I will not put hot sauce in the CPR dummy." And, as Jonathan Grey notes, "Occasional blackboard lines also announce the show's meta approach, as, for instance, when Bart writes 'I will never win an Emmy' or 'I should not be 21 by now'" (Ch. 2 ¶ 44).

The chalkboard gag is one of two holdovers from the original sequence, and at times has appeared to generate more discussion and debate than the actual episodes themselves. For example, in 1992, when former Vice President Dan Quayle famously misspelled the word "potato" during a visit to an elementary school, the chalkboard gag made national headlines with Bart repeatedly scribbling, "It's potato, not potatoe." More recently, national news outlets including the *L.A. Times* and the *Huffington Post* ran stories about the segment after Matt Groening used it to refute an article in *Smithsonian Magazine* that suggested that the fictional town of Springfield was located in Oregon.[42]

As the whirlwind tour progresses, we are quickly introduced to the rest of the main characters. We see Homer at work in the nuclear power plant, Marge and Maggie shopping for groceries, and, in the fourth oft-changed gag of the sequence, Lisa playing a saxophone solo during band practice. According to the fan-based website snpp.com, as of the 21st season of the show, there were 37 different versions of Lisa's solo (Garvey). What's more, the music is not the only element of the gag that routinely changes. Groening

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[42] So, just where is Springfield? According to the chalkboard gag in Season 23, Episode 18, "Beware My Cheating Bart," "The true location of Springfield is any state but yours."

notes that Lisa doesn't just play a sax, "but a baritone sax. But she doesn't always play a baritone sax because the animators don't know what it looks like, so it changes shape and color from show to show" (qtd. in Barron). Lisa's solo, like Bart's chalkboard gag, provides viewers with insight into her character. So deft is her playing, that she is thrown out of the rehearsal. Clearly, this little girl is an overachiever.

From there, the sequence amounts to a montage of scenes that depicts each of the main characters racing to the Simpson's home at 742 Evergreen Terrace. Along the way, they encounter a host of the show's minor characters, with each displaying some of the attributes and characteristics that have come to define them over the course of the series. The ever-nefarious Sideshow Bob is shown wielding a knife and trying to kill Bart; Kwik-E-Mart proprietor Dr. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon (he holds a Ph.D. from Calcutta Tech in computer science) can be seen tending to his brood of octuplets; Colonel "Tex" O'Hara, the town's second foremost leading Republican (behind Montgomery Burns, of course) is depicted enthusiastically exercising his Second Amendment rights by firing his six-guns in the air, and so on.

These glimpses of the series' secondary characters are so brief that it is almost impossible to believe that they have any introductory value for first-time viewers. One shot, which clocks in at just under a second in length, depicts no fewer than fifty-four characters.[43] Accordingly, I suggest that these transitory encounters are tendered to pique the curiosity of repeat audiences. Veteran viewers can freeze the image on their DVRs or DVD players and join in a "Where's Waldo?" style game of search and find, or, if they feel

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[43] It actually contains fifty-six if you are willing to count the three eyed fish and Sideshow Mel's monkey as characters.

like a challenge, they can watch in real time and see if they can spot their favorite

character.

To some extent, these shots function in a manner that is similar to that of "Easter

eggs" in video games. In their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Katie Salen

and Eric Zimmerman explain, "Easter eggs are secrets hidden in a game that players can

discover;" and that "Hidden messages, *images*, and spaces are now a standard feature of

digital gaming" (219, emphasis added). Admittedly, the character glimpses afforded by

The Simpsons' opening title sequence are not quite "hidden" in the same way as many of

the Easter eggs found in video games, however, the brevity of their duration certainly

works to conceal their presence to some degree. Moreover, Salen and Zimmerman go on

to suggest that "Part of the pleasure of finding an Easter egg is a sense of transgressive

discovery: by bending the rules of the game in just the right way, the player gets to see

something… that more lawful players would not" (219). Here again, the nature of the

discovery is not exactly the same, but is still similar. While it is difficult to say that they

are truly "transgressive" in spirit, the pleasures associated with the discovery of a favorite

character in the context of *The Simpsons'* opening title sequence are assuredly linked to

the reward of a form of specific inquiry that is enabled by control technologies and so-

called "alternative viewing practices."

Figure 3.1- Characters We Glimpse in *The Simpson's* Title Sequence

The sequence culminates in an ongoing visual joke known as the "couch gag." Another holdover from the original sequence, the couch gag is difficult to explain succinctly because of its hundreds of variations. The online site Wikipedia attempts to describe it thusly:[44]

> The couch gag changes from episode to episode, and usually features the Simpson family's living room couch. A typical gag features the Simpson family running into the living room, only to find some abnormality with the couch, be it a bizarre and unexpected occupant, an odd placement of the couch, such as on the ceiling, or any number of other situations. ("The Simpsons Opening")

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[44] While I acknowledge the fact that citing Wikipedia is the academic equivalent of urinating on oneself at a dinner party, I do so here because a) it provides a useful definition, and b) the very existence of this entry on a collaborative non-profit Internet based resource proves a point — that the couch gag generates curiosity on the part of viewers.

While this is a reasonable description, it still does not do justice to the full range of topics, concepts and ideologies the couch gag has explored. Although it began as a kind of slapstick bit of physical comedy —in the first season, the couch gag usually amounted to little more than one of the main characters being squashed and/or falling off the sofa — it quickly morphed into something more. From the fourth season on, the couch gag has routinely offered itself as a kind of pop culture looking glass through which viewers are able to observe influences and discourses they might otherwise let slip past them without consideration. From a neoformalist perspective, it functions as a stand-alone artistically motivated distanciation device.[45] Or, to put it more simply, the segment has the effect of making familiar cultural artifacts and discussions unfamiliar by placing them in the context of the Simpson's living room. For example, in the couch gag for the episode entitled "Kamp Krusty," the Simpsons arrive home only to find the Flintstone family already occupying their sofa. Many media critics have compared Homer Simpson to Fred Flintstone. Writing about the title sequence more generally, Jonathan Gray suggests, "Homer's introduction visually references the opening sequence to *The Flintstones* (1960-66), thus establishing him as a similarly dumb but well meaning hero" (Ch. 2, ¶ 44). And, while it's one thing to read such comparisons, it is another thing altogether to actually *see* Fred and Homer in the same room.

Like the chalkboard gag, the couch gag has generated considerable media and viewer interest in and of itself. In October of 2010, the segment gained international attention when *Simpsons*' executive producer Al Jean enlisted the pseudonymous British artist and political activist Banksy to design the couch gag for the episode "MoneyBart"

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[45] Here, I briefly considered using the term "Brechtian device;" however this descriptor is loaded with political ramifications that are not always applicable to this particular segment.

(Itzkoff). In it, the image of the Simpsons seated on the couch is revealed to be a painting

hanging on the wall of a South Korean sweatshop where young children labor under

oppressive conditions to create the animation cells for the series, and unicorns, pandas,

kittens and severed dolphin heads (yes, really…) are routinely exploited in the

manufacture and distribution of *Simpsons* merchandise.[46]

Figure 3.2- Severed Dolphin Heads Prove Useful in the Banksy Couch Gag

Here again, the segment achieves a kind of distancing effect. This time, the effect is

realized by placing the fictional conditions for the production of the series and its

promotional goods within the context of the opening sequence itself.[47] More importantly

however, by inviting a "celebrity artist" like Banksy to create a controversial segment, the

opening sequence becomes a stand-alone object of curiosity. This assertion is borne out

by the fact that the Banksy title is widely available for viewing on the Internet *without* its

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[46] In this instance, the "Brechtian" descriptor is clearly more appropriate.

[47] Al Jean goes to great lengths to explain that although the series in animated primarily in South Korea, the working conditions in no way mirror those shown in the Banksy couch gag. For more on this see Dave Itzkoff's *NY Times* piece, "The Simpsons Explains Its Button-Pushing Banksy Opening."

accompanying episode. In fact, very few of the related newspaper articles, blogs or

magazine stories concerning the sequence make any reference to the episode itself.

While this brief analysis of the opening credit sequence for *The Simpsons* has

illustrated how TVOTS have the potential to create a stand-alone sense of curiosity and

interest on the part of the viewer, it also presents a kind of dichotomy *vis-á-vis* the

defragmentation of television texts. On one hand, these kinds of TVOTS clearly discourage

viewers from taking advantage of some of the alternative viewing practices afforded by

DVRs, DVD boxed sets, and streaming sites. After all, if audiences are curious enough

about the elements or devices contained in a particular sequence, they are unlikely to

"play all episodes" or fast forward through the titles. From this perspective, these kinds of

TVOTS encourage the viewing of the entire text in a manner that is closer to its original

form.

On the other hand, as our Banksy example demonstrates, if a sequence proves too

efficacious in breeding this self-contained curiosity, it can become *so* divorced from its

primary text that the entire work takes on an *overly* fragmented quality. Websites like

YouTube and Vimeo, as well as millions of individual blogs and thousands of Internet

"news" portals, allow for these kinds of TVOTS to be presented as stand-alone texts to

millions of viewers.[48] In these instances, the "threshold" quality of these paratexts is

negated to some degree. They no longer possess the same measure of immediacy in

relation to their primary texts; and as a result, come to have more of an intertextual

relationship with the series they accompany. For Genette, intertextuality is characterized

by, "a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts" (*The*

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[48] As of the time of this writing, the Simpson's Banksy opening has reached over ten million views.

Architext 1-2). Thus, as these forms of stand-alone paratexts take on the autonomous

qualities of primary texts themselves, their influence becomes less introductory and more

covalent. Instead of "framing" the reception of their primary texts, they become

something more akin to another instantiation of the series itself.

At this point, it should be acknowledged that the opening title sequence for *The*

Simpsons is a something of outlier. The overall success of the show, and the longevity of its

run, clearly allows for a degree of artistic license that other less well-established programs

are unlikely to enjoy. Furthermore, the show has made a name for itself over the years by

featuring an irreverent brand of comedy, which functions in part by both challenging and

grossly exaggerating existing television tropes and conventions. With all this in mind, it

should come as no surprise that *The Simpsons'* opening title sequence stands out because

of the degree to which it showcases elements that encourage an autonomous kind of

specific inquiry. It is an extreme example. Nevertheless, in its extremity, the segment

provides a very clear picture of how some segments utilize devices like oft-changing gags,

and particular shots and segments that encourage an almost ludic approach to viewership

in order to achieve this effect.

3.3   Textually Bound TVOTS of Specific Inquiry

Each opening title sequence for the first two seasons of the American Western

television series *Have Gun, Will Travel* (1957-1963) is unique.[49] The piece begins with a

close-up of a white chess knight against a black background. As the camera pulls back, it

reveals that the knight is emblazoned on a leather holster, which hangs from the hips of a

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[49] The sequence was altered after the second season. Although one of the subsequent versions continued to change with every episode, this practice was eventually discontinued.

gunman clad entirely in black. Slowly, he draws his six-gun from the holster, levels it at the camera, and speaks. He never says the same thing twice.

The gunman is Paladin (Richard Boone), the series' protagonist; and in every sequence his dialogue consists of lines from the following episode. Interestingly however, this dialogue is typically delivered in a markedly different fashion than it appears in the primary text. Further, the lines are often confrontational, giving viewers a taste of a dramatic face off yet to come. In order to witness the showdown, audiences must stay tuned. For example, in the opening sequence for the first season episode entitled "The Singer," Paladin states, "Hospitality towards strangers is a Western virtue. If you gentlemen don't see fit to practice it, I'll have to use this gun." However, in the context of the episode itself, Paladin has already employed his six-gun to disarm the two aggressors and the line becomes, "Hospitality towards strangers is a Western virtue. I hope you gentlemen will see fit to practice it from now on."

The opening for *Have Gun, Will Travel* provides another outstanding example of an opening title sequence that functions primarily on the level of specific inquiry. Like our previous cases, the sequence attempts to "hook" viewers by offering them something different with every episode; yet, there is one noteworthy difference. Whereas openings for shows like *The Simpsons* and *Police Squad!* function by creating a sense of curiosity within the confines of their title sequences; the interest generated by the opening titles of *Have Gun, Will Travel* is bound to its primary text. Paradoxically, by supplying viewers with a *limited* quantity of data — in this case, a few lines of inflammatory dialogue — the sequence creates an *inadequacy* of information, which, in turn, produces something akin to

Berlyne's "condition of discomfort" (26).[50] This condition can only be cured through the

spectator's specific exploration of, and engagement with, the episode itself.

Berlyne tells us that this kind of investigation is "generally known in Western

countries as 'exploratory behavior'" (25), and the 'condition' that encourages this behavior

is known as "subjective uncertainty" (30). Accordingly, we can say that while both these

kinds of textually bound and stand-alone TVOTS operate by creating subjective

uncertainty, the distinguishing factor between the two is manifested in the site of

exploratory behavior or inquiry.

These kinds of textually bound TVOTS function across a wide assortment of genres.

As we have already observed, *Have Gun, Will Travel* illustrates how this kind of sequence

fits seamlessly with the Western genre. More recently, the sci-fi series reboot of *Battlestar

Galactica* (2004-2009), the FX series *American Horror Story* (2011-Present), and the HBO

fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011-Present) all provide examples of how this kind of

sequence is deployed across a range of artistic storytelling categories.

The opening title sequence of *Battlestar Galactica* is similar to that of *Have Gun, Will

Travel*, in that it encourages behavioral inquiry by revealing a limited quantity of

information about the episode to follow. While each sequence begins with a series of

stock visuals, the latter half offers a montage of images derived from the subsequent

episode. More often than not, these images depict key scenes that figure considerably in

the series' overall story arc, or portray events and behavior that is atypical for the show's

characters. Plainly, this is done in order to generate interest in the primary text before it

even begins. In these instances, the spectator is provided with just enough information to

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[50] To some extent, these lines function like newspaper or magazine headlines that tempt us to: "find out more inside!"

begin to form an idea of what is about to occur, yet not enough to maintain this idea with any degree of certainty.

The usefulness of this kind of approach is supported by Berlyne's scientific research into curiosity and behavioral inquiry. In one study, blurred pictures were used to "introduce uncertainty" in test groups (30). Results indicated, "The replacement of a blurred picture by a clear version of the same picture seems… to be a more effective reward or reinforcer… than the replacement of a blurred picture by an unrelated clear picture" (30). What's more, Berlyne suggests that:

> We have some hint that a clear picture is most rewarding when it replaces a picture with an intermediate degree of blurredness… a degree at which some differentiation is beginning to emerge but no objects or detail can be recognized, so that there is maximum scope for competing hypotheses. (30)

In effect, sequences like those for *Battlestar Galactica* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* function like indeterminately blurry images where "some differentiation" is initially apparent. In turn, the subsequent episode then replaces these images with a "clear version of the same picture," by presenting the identical information in a causally explicated (or clearer) context.

The opening title sequence for the first season of FX Network's *American Horror Story* functions in a slightly different manner.[51] The overall storyline details the life of the Harmon family as they move from Boston to Los Angeles, and take up residence in new home with an incontrovertibly gruesome past. The segment itself unfolds as a kind of exploration of the basement of Harmon's new home, and features a montage of frightening

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[51] The show unfolds in an anthology format with each season offering an autonomous storyline. Accordingly, it is reasonable to believe that the credits will be completely revamped for each subsequent season.

— if seemingly unconnected — visuals. Yet, both the basement and the images it reveals

are related. As series co-creator Ryan Murphy explains:

> The title sequence is almost like a mystery… By the time you see the ninth
>
> episode of this season, every image in that title sequence will be explained.
>
> So for example, what are the jars in the basement? What is the mystery of
>
> the floating white Christening dress? Why is somebody holding hedge
>
> clippers that are bloody? Each time you watch it and you watch the week's
>
> episode you'll be able to say, 'Oh that's why that's in there!' (qtd. in Stack)

So, while the sequence itself remains unchanged from episode to episode, its

images gain meaning as the season unfurls. Accordingly, as viewers begin to recognize the

relationship between the images contained in the opening sequence and the narrative

storyline of the primary text, the yet-unexplained images become a locus of subjective

uncertainty that can only be satisfied via specific exploratory inquiry into the season as a

whole.

Furthermore, the segment has the effect of adding to the pleasures associated with

the primary text's narrative complexity. It rewards viewers that take a more attentive

approach to viewing. Those that pay attention to *Horror Story's* opening credits are

offered the experience of what Jason Mittell calls the "operational aesthetic" (35).

Borrowing from Neil Harris, Mittell posits that part of the joy associated with intricately

plotted programs has to do with, "unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics" (35).

Or, in simpler terms, marveling at the intricate relationships created by the program's

authors. In these instances, the pleasure comes not so much from the actual component

pieces of the overall narrative storyline, but by the way these pieces are put together and

interact with one another. Mittell likens the experience to observing the intricacies of a

Rube Goldberg machine, where the pleasure is derived not only from the spectacle, but

also from the gratification associated with understanding its underlying complexity.

Importantly, in the case of *Horror Story*, this complexity is not only woven throughout the

episodes themselves, but extends into the opening title sequence in a way that binds it

more closely to its primary text.

3.3.1   Mapping Game of Thrones

As is common in the fantasy genre, all of the books in George R.R. Martin's series *A

Song of Ice and Fire* are prefaced with a paratext in the form of a map depicting the

fictional lands that provide the setting for the novels. Fittingly, the opening title sequence

for HBO's *Ice and Fire*-based series *Game of Thrones* precedes every episode with a similar

map (thereby linking the series to its literary origins), which is animated in a kind of

clockwork detail that reflects both the intrinsic characteristics of each location as well as

the complex machinations of the overall storyline.

The segment begins with the image of a sun surrounded by whirling astrolabe-like

armatures that tell the show's backstory in heraldic relief. In Martin's books, as well as the

series itself, much is made of the signs or 'sigils' of the highborn families that play key

roles in the narrative, each of which is symbolically represented by an animal or creature

— either real or imagined. Accordingly, the astrolabe portrays these creatures interacting

in a kind of pictographic narrative that, when fully understood, supplies a lead-in to the

events that unfold in the course of the series itself. The segment's lead creator Angus Wall

explains: "We cut to those three times in the title sequence, so you actually see a history of

Westeros and Essos. The third time we see all the animals [representing] the different

houses bowing down to the Baratheon stag, which brings us to the present, where there's a Baratheon king" (qtd. in Appelo). Interestingly, each of these segments is quite brief in terms of the overall sequence's approximate one minute and forty second running time. The longest of the three takes featuring the relief is just over three seconds in length.

As with the fleeting glimpses of the minor characters in the opening title sequence for *The Simpsons*, it is difficult to imagine that this device would have significant introductory value for viewers unfamiliar with Martin's fictional universe. Indeed, it seems that these sequences represent a new tendency toward the privileging of the invested viewer over the novice. As newcomers, audience members would have no basis in understanding that each of the creatures depicted in the relief corresponds symbolically to a key noble family, nor would they be able to comprehend the meaning behind the creatures' interactions. In addition, these segments are so brief that the images themselves are difficult to discern, which brings up another point: The tableaux depict a backstory that is never fully explained by the show in one expository sitting. Instead, viewers are left to piece together hints and references to previous events that are supplied as the series unfurls. For instance, while we learn early on that the Starks and Baratheons played decisive parts in the overthrow of a mad Targaryen king, the roles of the other noble families in this uprising are not revealed until later. As a result, the transitory appearance of these pictographic images functions as a kind of puzzle, which seems to promise a key to understanding the narrative events that precede and inform the series' narrative. They are perplexing due to both their brevity and the symbolic nature of their representation; however, with repeated viewing, a DVD set, a DVR, and an understanding

of the families' sigils, these images have the potential to reward very specific forms of audience inquiry with a tidy summary of important diegetic information.

The main body of the sequence takes the viewer inside the sphere and on an aerial tour of a fantasy map detailing the regions that play an integral role in the show's narrative. Importantly, these locations change over the course of the series. Again, Wall explains, "It's a map that's constantly evolving. We have four different versions. Episode two has a different title sequence, and there are later episodes where we go to two new locations" (qtd. in Appelo). Thus, viewers are compelled to engage with each sequence as a site of specific inquiry that holds the possibly of change from episode to episode. Furthermore, on each occasion, this inquiry comes with a potential reward. As new locations are introduced, spectators gain a kind of extra-episodic spatial understanding of Martin's world.

Given the breadth of territory covered in the series, its creators wanted to present viewers with a geographical overview of the Seven Kingdoms. Initially, Wall and his production company, Elastic, were called in to create a series of map segments for the pilot that would provide "something that shows us exactly where we are when we go from place to place" (Perkins). These segments would not only explain the geographic relationships between these settings, they would offer viewers a spatio-temporal mode for understanding the time required for the show's characters to traverse these regions. However, Wall explains that "We created five… map shots that were cut in every time the show went from one place to the next. It worked really well in terms of telling you where you were, but it interrupted the narrative flow of the show" (qtd. in Perkins).

As a result, the idea of the map was shifted back to the title sequence, effectively imbuing it with a narrative significance that is bound to the show itself. Viewers who choose to skip the opening sequence are deprived of its added insights into how settings relate to one another in the context of the program's fictional world, and importantly, new settings can be introduced at any time. Similarly, audiences that only engage with the show's opening sequence are denied the satisfaction afforded by the primary text's detailed depictions of these regions.

Figure 3.3- Scenes from *Game of Thrones'* Opening Title Sequence

Each site on the fantasy map is capped with a sigil, which serves to identify the area's controlling family, and becomes the "main cog" that initiates a kind of clockwork animation. As the camera approaches, pop-up book style models of the regions emerge from the map, seemingly driven by a network of interlocking gears. These animations are painstakingly rendered in a manner that makes them appear to be quite realistic. Wall notes, "In the shadowed areas beneath the surface of the map, there are cogs in there. If

you look carefully, you'll see they're all working with the cogs that are exposed above the surface of the map" (qtd. in Appelo). Richard Fell, the sequence's art director, purposely designed the animations to reference machines designed by da Vinci in the 15th century (Perkins). Accordingly, the models possess an organic quality, yet they also manage to exhibit a complexity that mirrors the Machiavellian power struggles that propel the series' narrative. Here again, we are reminded of Mittell's "operational aesthetic." In order to appreciate the Goldbergian intricacies of the models, they must be observed repeatedly; and, in order to understand the specific themes they introduce, they must be investigated alongside the primary text of the series itself.

Because they contain elements that are bound to the primary text, these kinds of TVOTS seem to discourage defragmentation. Viewers that recognize these relationships are unlikely to avail themselves of the option of skipping opening sequences when they offer puzzle pieces that can contribute to a more specific understanding of the primary text. Concurrently, they discourage over-fragmentation, because, unlike stand-alone TVOTS, their devices are not self-contained. As a result, they do not stand up (in the same way) to viewing as discrete units.

3.4   Conclusions

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, the idea that some TVOTS operate by stimulating viewer curiosity is seemingly at odds with much of the prevailing theory and discourse on the subject. Scholars including Deborah Allison, David Johannson, Lisa Coulthard, and Angelina Karpovich all suggest, in their own ways, that opening title sequences are fundamentally informative — that they principally function by telling audiences "what to expect" from the series they accompany. Yet, as I have illustrated,

notions of TVOTS as informative paratextual devices also depend on concepts of curiosity.

Common sense dictates that if an opening title sequence tells audiences everything they

need to know about a series, they have no reason to watch it. Clearly, then, there is

something left unsaid in the regnant theory. Yes, TVOTS inform; but in doing so, they also

encourage viewer inquiry. Accordingly, we can say that the more important distinction

lies not only with the amount of information TVOTS offer, but also with the kind of inquiry

they encourage.

All title sequences have the potential to encourage forms of diversive inquiry. That

is, by disclosing, or even alluding to, information about a series' cast, setting, genre and

themes, a segment can promote general exploration into how these elements will all fit

together more generally in ways that are related to "novelty" or "variety." Yet, as our

evidence here suggests, certain title sequences go a step further by simultaneously

encouraging forms of specific inquiry. In these instances, viewers are prompted to seek

out very precise forms of information. These forms of exploration are not mutually

exclusive. In fact, it seems safe to say that an opening title sequence can never entirely

encourage one form of inquiry over the other. In this sense, it may be better to think of

these distinctions as points on a sliding scale, rather than consider them as wholly discrete

classifications.

Nevertheless, it seems apparent that TVOTS that favor the specific inquiry side of

this scale may be divided into two sets, and this division provides the central distinction

for this chapter's thesis. They may function in either stand-alone, or textually bound

capacities.[52] In both cases, these sequences privilege specific exploratory behavior, but the focus of this exploration lies with different sources.

Stand-alone iterations use devices like running gags and ludic elements to center viewer inquiry more strongly on the sequences themselves. In these instances, the precise information that audiences seek often cannot be found in a show's main episodes. Accordingly, they seem to discourage the defragmentation of television texts, until they reach a kind of tipping point where they begin to take on an intertextual kind of quality.

Textually bound TVOTS that function by encouraging specific inquiry often present materials from accompanying episodes in an obfuscated manner, or offer ambiguous bits of information that only become clear through the exploration of their primary texts. As a result, they seem to discourage defragmentation *and* avoid the intertextual characteristics associated with increased levels of textual autonomy.

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[52] Although this dividing line is not an entirely neat one either, given narrative's propensity to incorporate the elements which surround it.

4   SOMETHING'S HAPPENING HERE: "QUALITY TVOTS"

If there is any one thing that all scholars and media critics seem to agree upon regarding the notion of "quality TV," it's that it is a deceptively simple description of a phenomena that is unusually hard to define. Robert Thompson, one of the concept's progenitors, admits that, " The precise definition of 'quality TV' was elusive right from the start, though we knew it when we saw it" (*Quality TV* xix). Likewise, NPR TV critic David Bianculli asserts that, "when asked to define quality TV as it applies to the United States, I find myself echoing the sentiments of one of our US Supreme Court Justices, Potter Stewart, who admitted in a 1964 ruling that perhaps he couldn't properly define hard-core pornography, 'but I know it when I see it'" (35).[53] This same sense of vague awareness eventually led Janet McCabe and Kim Akass to organize an academic conference at Trinity College in 2004 in order to explore the phenomena in greater detail. In their book *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, they explain that, "Something had been happening in American TV, and we wanted to understand this new wave of critically acclaimed drama hitting our screens" (1).

Similarly, 'something is happening' right now in the field of televisual opening title sequences; and it is directly related to notions of "quality" and legitimation. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growing interest in both film and television opening title sequences. Once the realm of graphic designers, directors and producers, the field of title design is now commonly monitored and critiqued by academics, independent bloggers

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[53] For the record, Potter's stance on pornography has always struck me as uncomfortably similar to Viennese mayor Karl Lueger's notoriously anti-Semitic assertion: "Wer Jude ist, bestimme ich" (I decide who is a Jew).

and the mainstream media. In each instance, these arbiters of taste seem to agree that we are in the midst of a renaissance in title design.

In a recent Salon.com article, John Sellers proclaims that "eye-popping intros can now be found on virtually any channel not named C-Span," and "some of the best work being done on television today occupies the space once reserved for cheesy cast montages and explanatory ditties written by Alan Thicke" ("Golden Age of Opening Credits"). Correspondingly, in his blog for the *Huffington Post*, writer and academic Mark Lashley tells us, "At least since *The Sopranos*, the title sequence on television has re-emerged as an art form unto itself" and "Sometimes… the opening sequence outshines the main product" ("Some Great Opening Title Sequences").

Often, this praise accompanies "best of" lists; and these lists seem to be popping up everywhere. In the past year alone, sources as diverse as Newark based NJ.com (Hyman), *USA Today* (Matheson), and the online magazine Pajiba (Rowles), have all gotten in on the action. What is interesting about these lists — particularly if you go back several years — is that the same title sequences appear over and over again. Openings for shows like *Mad Men* (2007-Present), *Weeds* (2005-Present), *True Blood* (2008-Present), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Dexter* (2006-Present), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-Present), *Rome* (2005-2007), *Carnivàle* (2003-2005), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) and *Homeland* (2011-Present) all make the list with a startling degree of regularity.

Furthermore, many of these sequences — unlike the majority of their televisual brethren — have been the subject of academic inquiry. Lisa Coulthard has examined the opening sequences of *Deadwood* and *True Blood* ("Familiarity"), Angelina Karpovich has

plumbed the depths of *Dexter's* titles (27-42), Holly Haynes has investigated the intricacies

of *Rome's* opening sequence (49-60), and Sarah Cardwell has explored the titles of both

Nip/Tuck and *Six Feet Under* (19-37).

The widespread presence of these particular TVOTS on "best of" and "top ten" lists,

as well as their evident appeal as sites of academic exploration, suggests that they possess

certain "qualities" that set them apart from the larger field. As with "quality TV"

programming, these attributes amalgamate into a recognizable gestalt that allows viewers

to "know it when they see it," and yet, these characteristics, in and of themselves, can be

difficult to identify. Nevertheless, I think we can still add a measure of discernment.

4.1   The Defining Characteristics of "Quality TVOTS"

In the course of this chapter, I propose to particularize these qualities. By detailing

their stylistic, formal, industrial and authorial characteristics, I identify key elements that

make these sequences significantly different from anything else found on television.

Furthermore, I maintain that as a class, "quality TVOTS" function in a way that goes

beyond the mere introduction of characters, settings, and genre. In fact, as we shall see,

many of these elements are eschewed completely in this context. They do so by

simultaneously acting as "legitimating" paratextual devices, and as signifiers that are

meant to alert audiences to the "quality" sensibilities of the accompanying programs.

4.1.1   "Quality TVOTS" are More Strongly Defamiliarizing

From a neoformalist perspective, all artwork is defamiliarizing without regard to

its provenance. In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, Kristin Thompson explains this effect in fine

detail:

Artworks achieve their renewing effects on our mental processes through an aesthetic play the Russian Formalists termed *defamiliarization*. Our nonpractical perception allows us to see everything in the artwork differently from the way we would see it in reality, because it seems strange in its new context… Art defamiliarizes our habitual perceptions of the everyday world, of ideology… of other artworks, and so on by taking material from these sources and transforming them. The transformation takes place through their placement in a new context and their participation in unaccustomed formal patterns… Defamiliarization then, is the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in our lives. (10-11, emphasis in the original)

What Thompson is suggesting here is that in the course of everyday perception, the perceiver becomes inured to the things that surround him or her. That is, perceivers cease to actually *see* the elements that comprise their world. As Victor Shklovsky famously declared, "Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war" (5). Familiarity then, rather than breeding contempt, breeds a kind of unconsidered acceptance. For the Formalists (and the neoformalists accordingly), the contemplation of an artwork is a non-practical activity that allows for a different *kind* of perception, one that renders everyday elements *unfamiliar*, and allows them to be *re-cognized* in the most fundamental sense of word. In this way, the deleterious effects of repetition and automatization are effectively circumvented.

Importantly, Thompson goes on to note that, "Defamiliarization must be present for an object to function as art; yet it can be present to vastly varying degrees" (11). So, while all artworks are defamiliarizing, some are more so than others. Based on this premise, she observes that, "The works that we single out as most original and that are taken to be the most valuable tend to be those that either defamiliarize reality more strongly or defamiliarize the conventions established by a previous artwork…" (11). Accordingly, I suggest that this "more strongly defamiliarizing" characteristic is what causes "quality TVOTS" to be consistently recognized (re-cognized) by journalists, academics, industry professionals and invested viewers alike, as exceptional.

Broadly speaking, this effect is achieved in three ways: the foregrounding of cinematic techniques and sensibilities in the context of televisual title sequences, the introduction of weighty themes and subject matter, and a willingness to explore these themes at the expense of diegetic clarity. As I will illustrate, each of these means towards defamiliarization are related to, or manifested in, the six characteristics that follow. Consequently, these identifiers should not be considered as discrete units, but rather as qualities that are free to combine in a form of symbiosis, and work in conjunction with one another in order to achieve the overall impression of "quality."

4.1.2   Quality Pedigree

The "quality opening title sequence," like "quality TV," "usually has a quality pedigree" (R. Thompson 14). More often than not, these sequences are designed by a small group of award winning visual production boutiques with extensive experience across an array of media including feature films. Before designing the TVOTS for shows like *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*, the California-based design firm Imaginary Forces

created the title sequences for a host of movies including *Minority Report* (2002), *Spider-*

Man (2002), *Donnie Brasco* (1997) and *Se7en* (1995). In addition to crafting the openings

for *Dexter*, *Nip/Tuck, Six Feet Under* and *True Blood*, self-proclaimed "digital agency and

production company" Digital Kitchen authored the main titles for films like *The 6th Day*

(2000), *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), *Secondhand Lions* (2004) and *The Stepford Wives* (2004).

And, TCG Group, the company behind the sequences for *Weeds* and *Homeland*, also created

the titles for *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) and

Appaloosa (2008).

A recent Salon.com article attributes this crossover trend to the success of original

programming on pay cable networks:

> A film-to-TV transition… would have been hard to fathom even just a dozen
>
> years ago, when networks were still the primary source of entertainment on
>
> the small screen. But then came *The Sopranos*. Fueled by unprecedented
>
> success, HBO and other premium outlets, which aren't as concerned about
>
> advertisers or the FCC, began rolling out the welcome mats — and
>
> wheelbarrows of cash — for creative types. A trickle-down effect soon
>
> extended to basic cable, broadcast television and beyond… (Sellers).

To some extent, this line of reasoning comes off as historically uninformed. After

all, the studios were an enormously important source of TV content as early as the 1950s.

However, it does hint at two important points. First, it intimates that the relatively

"unregulated" status of pay cable channels allows for a degree of artistic freedom that

commercial networks do not enjoy; and that this kind of independence is appealing to

design professionals. Second, it suggests that premium cable outlets recognize the

elevated cultural standing enjoyed by the cinema; and are willing to pay more in order to attract film industry veterans in hopes that some of this cachet will transfer to the small screen with them.

In addition to their feature film experience, many of these firms also possess extensive backgrounds in advertising. Digital Kitchen has fashioned campaigns for Levi's, Budweiser, BMW, Audi and the Atlantic Lottery. Imaginary Forces has generated spots for Herman Miller, Microsoft and Nike; and a52, the company behind the opening titles for *Rome* and *Carnivàle*, has created television advertisements for companies like Volkswagen, the Texas Lottery, Gatorade and Toyota. Much of this work has garnered awards, industry attention and media coverage. In 2008, the *New York Times* ran a feature article on Digital Kitchen's "Levi's Unbuttoned" campaign, which showcased gay men and lesbians "talking frankly about trying to live life 'unbuttoned'" (Elliot). Design firm a52 has been honored with multiple CLIO awards (the advertising community's version of the Oscars) for their work with Toyota; and their efforts for Nike have garnered awards from *AdWeek*, *AdAge*, *Shoot Magazine*, The Advertising Club of New York, and taken top honors at the London International Advertising Awards ("Roman Coppola"). Clearly, there are similarities between a good television advertisement and a "quality" opening title sequence. They both must be brief, attention getting, exhibit high production values, and, perhaps most importantly, introduce audiences to the products they are advertising, and attempt to frame their perception of that product moving forward.

Dual proficiencies in film and advertising make these boutique firms particularly appealing resources for showrunners and networks that aspire to cultivate a sense of legitimacy about their works and target a niche audience. In the post-network era, the

television landscape has become increasingly fragmented. The proliferation of available

channels, programming and control technologies has divided audiences (and, accordingly,

market share) in ways that seemed inconceivable during the reign of the "big three"

networks. As a result, rather than trying to appeal to everyone, broadcast and cable

networks alike have begun to engage in the practice of "narrowcasting," or the targeting of

programming at niche audiences.

As it turns out, one particularly important target group for both factions consists of

what Jane Feuer has called the "quality audience" — a collection of young, urban,

sophisticated, upscale viewers ("MTM" 27-28). Broadcast networks hope to reach this

audience because, "advertisers [are] willing to pay premium prices for the attention spans

of these liberally educated and conspicuously consuming viewers" (R. Thompson, *Golden

Age* 38). Cable channels, on the other hand, are interested in attracting this market

segment since "they happen to be the very upscale demographic willing to pay extra for

more specialized and more highbrow fare" (Feuer, "HBO" 147).

Because TVOTS function in part like advertisements meant to "hook" viewers and

get them interested in their primary texts, it makes sense that the industry more widely

would be interested in hiring firms to create these sequences that have experience in

advertising products aimed at smaller demographics with considerable buying power.[54]

Clearly, Digital Kitchen's Levi's campaign aimed at the gay and lesbian communities

qualifies as a kind of niche marketing targeted at just such a group.[55] Similarly, a52's

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[54] Admittedly, in the single-sponsor days, advertising agencies often "made" TV shows. However, there was certainly a time when programming was not aimed at niche markets in the same way — NBC's practice of "least objectionable programming" comes to mind.

[55] According to the strategic marketing firm Witeck-Combs Communications and the market research group Packaged Facts, "The total buying power of the U.S. lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adult population in 2010 is projected to be $743 billion" ("America's Gay 2010 Buying Power").

award-winning work for the Lexus division of the Toyota Motor Company establishes the

fact that they are proficient at targeting a smaller, upscale, segment of consumers.

Their feature film pedigrees also suggest that firms such as these are able to bring a

cinematic sensibility to the sequences they design. In terms of comparative cultural

discourse, feature films have traditionally enjoyed greater respect than television

programming. Accordingly, Newman and Levine assert that, "Quality TV [programs] gain

legitimacy by comparison with movies" (Ch. 4 ¶ 6). If TVOTS are paratextual devices that

function in part by "framing" the viewer's engagement with the primary text, then this

cinematic sensibility is clearly a desirable characteristic for creatives and executives that

hope to appeal to a "quality" audience that looks down on traditional TV programming as

"inartistic and thus as having lesser cultural value because of its putatively televisual

character" (Newman & Levine Ch.4 ¶ 6). From this perspective, "quality TVOTS" can be

understood as legitimating paratextual devices because they have the potential to signal

audiences to the "more legitimate" cultural aspirations of the programs they accompany.

Comparative cultural evaluations aside, the introduction of cinematic sensibilities

into the realm of televisual opening title sequences have a defamiliarizing effect.

Specifically, by taking stylistic elements traditionally associated with one medium and

strongly foregrounding them in another, they appear to be strangely out of context in a

way that invites a kind of reassessment on the part of the viewer.

4.1.3   *Visual Sophistication and Density*

"Quality TVOTS" often display a level of visual sophistication that is more closely

associated with (relatively) recent trends in feature films than with television. Rapid fire

editing, the combined (or simulated) use of both film and digital formats, an increased

emphasis on close framing, roving camera work, and the liberal mixing of animation, digital effects and live action have all come to be defining characteristics of "quality TVOTS." It is noteworthy that David Bordwell cites three of these five qualities as visual markers that indicate a general move toward an emerging style of "intensified continuity" in "American mass-audience films today" (16). He suggests that while quick edits, extremes of lens lengths, close framing and a roaming camera have been recognizable cinematic techniques for many years, the *combination* of these tactics represents a stylistic departure from classical orthodoxy.[56] In the realm of feature films, he argues that the amalgamation of these practices amounts to "an intensification of established techniques" (16).

To some extent, this line of reasoning is also applicable to TVOTS. In the context of opening title sequences, this combination of elements does not necessarily contribute to narrative "continuity" in the Bordwellian sense; however, it does represent an amplification of traditional methods. Montages, quick edits and the blending of effects and live action are nothing new. However, all of these practices are accentuated in the context of "quality" title sequences. Moreover, by incorporating mobile camera work and 'macro' style close-ups, "quality TVOTS" have distinguished themselves from the larger televisual field by showcasing techniques more traditionally observed in the cinema.

Take for example, the opening title sequence of HBO's *True Blood*. At approximately a minute and a half in length, the segment presents its viewers with a salvo of edits, with many images appearing for just tenths of a second. Often, even when a shot

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[56] Of these four tactics, "bipolar extremes of lens lengths" is the only one not consistently found in "quality TVOTS;" although, it can be seen, to some degree, in opening sequences for *The Wire*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland*.

does appear to linger (comparatively speaking) in its duration, it has been cut and augmented with effects in a manner that creates a kind of "rumbling edit" ("DK's True Blood"). Digital Kitchen's Creative Director Matt Mulder explains the process:

> Shawn would cut the footage of humans, animals and insects into tiny
> slivers, dropping out frames so their movements felt jittery, jarring and
> beyond their conscious control... By colliding quick jerking movements with
> smoother slower ones, he would create a beautiful kind of lunging staccato
> effect. On top of this he would spatter nearly subliminal frames of blood
> drops throughout the edit as a visceral reminder of the show's foundation.
> ("DK's True Blood").

All the while, the camera appears to be constantly in motion. Whether travelling through a fecund swamp, a hurricane-ravaged town, or up the shores of mighty Mississippi itself, the camera rarely ceases its relentless movement. Moreover, when it does pause to rest, the views it offers are often quite close.

Throughout the segment, images are captured with an assortment of cameras on a variety of recording formats. The sequence's creators tell us that they utilized "everything from home consumer DV cam, to old time Super 8, to 16, to 35 and some HD" ("*Making of*"). Further adding to this complexity, the sequence features newly minted black and white footage that is made to resemble early television and film coverage of the violence perpetrated against civil rights protestors in the American South during the 1960s. When combined, this intricately edited array of film stocks and historically evocative images construct the effect of an almost overwhelming *bricolage*, and seem to mirror a

hyperkinetic and visually rich style that has been increasingly favored by a somewhat recent crop of *auteur* filmmakers.

Figure 4.1- Close Framing in *True Blood's* Title Sequence

Indeed, one might readily identify this description as pertaining to *True Blood's* opening title sequence:

> the [piece] forcefully calls attention to itself as a fabrication through [the] use of various film stocks and media (super 8mm, 16mm, black and white, color, video), and by emphasizing montage over narrative, with [a] barrage of imagery edited in an almost subliminal fashion…" (Sharrett)

Likewise, this description seems apt.

> changes in film and video stock occur every few seconds, including… insert edits of fragments from film and television history, [and] bizarre superimpositions… it is riddled with jarring discontinuities and violent outbursts of action and images that are taken from elsewhere. (Beller 267-269)

Interestingly however, both of these passages refer to Oliver Stone's 1994 film, *Natural Born Killers*. The ease with which these descriptions might be applied to either *True Blood* or *Natural Born Killers* is notable, because it suggests that the opening title sequence for Ball's series employs emergent cinematic techniques within the context of the televisual medium.

The main title sequence for HBO's *Six Feet Under* is decidedly less frenetic. With an opening shot approximately ten seconds in length, the segment initially comes across as almost morbidly slow — which, of course, is the point. However, as it progresses the timing of the edits begin to ebb and flow, with many shots coming in at less than a second each. Here again, the camera seems to be in almost constant motion throughout the sequence. A gurney-up view of a corpse's feet gives way to a shot of the sky that seems to rotate on an invisible axis. We are offered a scene that might be from the cadaver's point of view as it is wheeled down the halls of a hospital morgue toward a blindingly white light. Indeed, the only times that the camera seems to linger in the latter part of the sequence is when the names of the creator, cast and crew are superimposed over signifiers of human mortality.

All of this gives the segment a decidedly cinematic feel, while further contributing to the effect of defamiliarization on two distinct levels. First, the implied corpse-eye point of view makes the segment and its environs particularly jarring. We have traded the familiar perspective of the living for the decidedly unfamiliar view of the deceased. Second, on a broader level, the choice to focus on the show's larger theme of mortality — rather than merely introducing specific characters and settings — asks the audience to reconsider the function of the title sequence as an artistic device. In this instance, it

operates as more of a prologue than an introduction; instead of providing specific information that is directly related to the central narrative, the segment details a set of events that are only tangentially related to the main storyline but work to establish the overall theme, mood and atmosphere of the entire work.

The main titles for the joint HBO and BBC production *Rome* provide a particularly good example of visual complexity that stems from the layering of images and effects. The segment begins with a relatively straightforward animation of a skull, which is clearly intended to evoke the now famous "*Memento Mori*" mosaic unearthed at Pompeii and currently housed in the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli* ("*Sito Officiale*"). However, as the camera takes us into the eye of the pate, the viewer is transported to the streets of the ancient empire. Here, denizens roam the alleyways and corridors while brightly colored animated graffiti illustrations depicting Roman myths, festivals, and historical events unspool on the walls behind them.

At times, these animations appear to encroach upon and overlap the stationary graffiti as well as the computer-generated grain of the walls themselves. All the while, the names of the cast and crew are superimposed. By layering these elements one atop the other, the segment takes on an "onion-like" quality. Latin words and phrases, pictographic animations, live action and supertitles all coalesce into an almost opaque visual tableaux that no viewer could hope to investigate fully in one sitting. In order to appreciate the intricacies of the sequence, its layers must be peeled away. As each layer is peeled back, more are revealed.

As these examples have collectively illustrated, "quality TVOTS" are characterized by a high level of visual sophistication. When combined, elements such as brisk editing, a

roving camera, close framing and the liberal mixing (or layering) of effects lends these

kinds of TVOTS a kind of stylistic density or richness that is not customarily observable in

more traditional title sequences. Consequently, this aesthetic complexity serves to bolster

the defamiliarizing impact of the segments as a group.

4.1.4   Extended Duration

Typically, "quality TVOTS" are longer in duration than their counterparts. The

opening sequences for *Dexter*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Rome*,

Carnivàle and *The Wire* are all roughly a minute and a half in length.[57] By way of contrast,

the latest iterations of the main title sequences for *CSI* (2000-Present), *CSI: NY* (2004-

Present) and *CSI*: *Miami* (2002-Present) all clock in at less than a minute; the opening for

TNT's reboot of *Dallas* (2012) runs just forty-seven seconds; and the now infamous credits

for ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010) lasts just a scant thirteen seconds.[58]

It is important to note, however, that there are exceptions to this rule. Not all

"quality TVOTS" make it beyond the one minute mark. For example, the opening credit

sequence for AMC's *Mad Men* runs approximately thirty-six seconds; and the main titles

for the FX Network's *Nip/Tuck* come in at a relatively brief forty-five.

There is, of course, a reason for this — and that reason is money. Shorter title

sequences leave more time for commercials. A recent *Vanity Fair* article observes that,

"Major networks will always opt for brief title-card reveals wherever possible, rather than

sucking up valuable advertising time indulging a designer's vision—no matter how

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[57] The Wire presents a special case because it utilized a different opening title sequence for each season. Nonetheless, all in all four instances, the segments are at least a minute and a half long. In fact, the main titles for the final season run one minute and forty seconds.

[58] With the mention of *Lost* (an obvious example of a "quality" series), I should clarify the fact that — while related — "quality TVOTS" and "quality TV" are *not* the same thing. The sequences that I have dubbed "quality TVOTS" are only one of many potential indicators of "quality television."

talented the designer or singular the vision" (Alston). Similarly, TV critic John Sellers

notes that the perfunctory TVOTS for shows like *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), *Seinfeld*

(1990-1998) and *Frasier* (1993-2004) "resulted in slight upticks in viewer retention and

ad revenue, and helps explain why shorter titles and cold opens are so prevalent on

broadcast television in 2012" ("TV's Golden Age"). Given this consideration, it is

noteworthy that the segments for *Mad Men* and *Nip/Tuck* go on as long as they do.

Premium cable channels, on the other hand, are not reliant on advertising dollars to

keep the lights on. Instead, they "are in the business of selling subscriptions" (Thomas).

As a result, networks like HBO and Showtime do not need to scale back on opening title

sequences in order to make room for commercials, and, as we have seen, the length of

many of their segments bears this out. These premium outlets offer a comparatively small

number of original programs, but depend on them to garner high levels of media and

public attention. Writing on the industry, journalist June Thomas speculates:

> Popular "buzz," a uselessly fuzzy concept for channels that make money
>
> from ad sales, is important to HBO and Showtime because it generates
>
> subscriptions—the more a show like *Game of Thrones* dominates the
>
> cultural conversation, the more people will sign up for HBO to watch it.
>
> Ideally, every show will receive a) critical praise, b) a huge audience, and c)
>
> a shelf full of statuettes. But in a pinch, just one of those things will suffice.
>
> ("How Much Gold")

While lengthy elaborate title sequences do not necessarily equate to a large viewership,

they do seem to result in shelves overflowing with awards and accolades (a phenomenon

that we will explore shortly).

Furthermore, by employing longer TVOTS, these networks are able to differentiate their original programming from "regular TV" by mimicking an overall trend in the development of feature films. Citing earlier work by Deborah Allison, Matthew Soar explains, "the average length of [cinematic] title sequences has gradually increased from around sixty seconds in the 1930s to around three minutes by the end of the 1990s" (2). Thus, because they are generally longer than their televisual counterparts, "quality TVOTS" invite comparisons with cinematic title sequences, which, as we have already observed, enjoy an elevated position of cultural status. Here again, this "cinema like" characteristic allows "quality TVOTS" to function as legitimating paratextual devices.

4.1.5   Awards

Much like their "quality TV" counterparts, "quality TVOTS" "are usually enthusiastically showered with awards and critical acclaim" (R. Thompson, *Golden Age* 15). Since *Six Feet Under* took home the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Main Title Design in 2002, the category has been dominated by "quality TVOTS." Of the twelve programs that I identified at the outset of this chapter, nine have been nominated in this class, and four — *Mad Men*, *Dexter*, *Carnivàle* and *Six Feet Under* — have won the top prize ("Primetime Emmy").[59]

While the Emmys are arguably the most prestigious awards a television show can hope to earn, the list of honors associated with "quality TVOTS" does not end there. In 2005, Digital Kitchen won the Telly Award in Main Title Design for their work on *Nip/Tuck* ("26th Annual"); and one year later, designer Angus Wall was nominated for the British

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[59] One can argue that there is a "chicken and egg" problem in saying that awards are one indicator of "quality TVOTS," and quality TVOTS win awards. Nevertheless, I would argue that the causal factors underlying this characteristic do nothing to lessen its usefulness as an identifier.

Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for Best Titles for *Rome* ("Awards for

Angus Wall"). Additionally, in recent years, "quality" televisual opening title sequences

from visual production companies like Imaginary Forces, Prologue Films and Elastic have

been nominated as finalists competing directly against feature-length motion picture title

sequences for SXSW's Excellence in Title Design Awards ("SXSW Design"). The very idea

that TV credit sequences could even compare with — let alone, compete against — film

titles, is both a remarkable notion and a testament to their recent advances in overall

stylistic complexity.

The fact that these kinds of TVOTS seem to compare favorably with film credits

while taking in awards and nominations has a kind of legitimating effect on their primary

texts. This fact is not lost on the networks that air them. A page on the AMC website

proudly proclaims, "*Rubicon* Nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Main Title Design"

(Dayton). Another page offers an interview with *Mad Men's* title designers Mark Gardner

and Steve Fuller, and compares their work to the filmic *oeuvre* of Saul Bass (Oei).

Similarly, HBO's website offers its viewers several "behind the scenes" style videos and

slideshows that detail the creative processes involved in the crafting of the opening title

sequences for shows like *Six Feet Under*, *Treme*, *Bored to Death* and *Game of Thrones*. In

every instance, references are made to the "cinematic" or "film-like" feel of these

segments.

While these kinds of short "making of" documentaries are fairly common in relation

to primary moving image texts as a whole, it is noteworthy that these segments focus only

the creation of the opening credits. They are, in essence, paratexts of paratexts. It is

evident from these examples that both AMC and HBO feel that there is something to be

gained by promoting discourses that focus on the award-winning pedigree of these

segments, as well as reinforcing their cinematic parallels. Clearly, they are hoping that

viewers will forget the old admonition, and "judge these works by their covers."

4.1.6   "Quality TVOTS" Usually Accompany One-Hour "Quality Dramas"

If we look at our initial examples of "quality TVOTS" in terms of genre, it quickly

becomes apparent that one-hour dramas dominate the list. In fact, of the twelve,

Showtime's *Weeds* presents itself as the only exception.[60] And, while I do not suggest that

these dozen examples constitute an exhaustive inventory of the class, I do propose that the

prevalence of this particular genre in our relatively small sample tells us something worth

noting about "quality TVOTS" and the kinds of programs they usually accompany.

Obviously, given the fact that "quality TVOTS" are longer in duration than their

counterparts, it makes sense that they would be a natural choice to accompany

commercial-free premium cable network programming regardless of genre, although

comedy might seem to offer special incentives over drama. After all, who could blame

creators and producers of half-hour premium cable comedies for wanting to alleviate

some of the pressures associated with providing a steady stream of humorous new

content by utilizing a lengthy visually complex opening title segment from an award-

winning visual production firm in every episode?

Interestingly, however, such programs seem to favor relatively brief, simplistic

sequences. The main titles for HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-Present), *Girls* (2012),

Extras (2005-2007) and *Eastbound and Down* (2009-Present) all consist of little more than

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[60] Even here, it is difficult to say how much of an exception *Weeds* actually is. Although each episode is only thirty minutes in length, the show itself represents a generic hybridization of comedy and drama. Robert Thompson cites this kind of genre mixing as one of his twelve defining characteristics of "quality TV" (*Golden Age* 15).

title cards which appear for less than ten seconds in each instance. Surprisingly, broadcast network comedies often have slightly longer title sequences than their premium counterparts. Nonetheless, broadcast network titles are still shorter than many of the sequences we have examined, and are lacking in the kind of visual complexity that characterizes "quality TVOTS." For example, the season nine intro for the popular CBS sitcom *Two and Half Men* (2003-Present) runs twenty-two seconds in length, but is limited in its stylistic scope to a single shot of the show's main characters singing its theme song. Likewise, the opening title sequence that accompanies ABC's *Modern Family* (2009-Present) is approximately thirteen seconds long, but offers nothing more than series of quick establishing shots that depict the show's characters and settings.

In some respects, the brevity and simplicity of these examples reflects their light hearted and relatively uncomplicated premises, storylines and approach to overall themes and subject matter — a characteristic of TV comedies throughout their history. For example, even though it has had to deal with the narrative implications of Charlie Sheen's abrupt departure, *Two and a Half Men* deviates little from the standard situation-comedy formula from week to week. Similarly, although *Modern Family* (admittedly, a more narratively complex show) is willing to address some of the problems that concern gay and lesbian couples, it does so in a decidedly jocose manner.

This same line of reasoning, then, offers a possible explanation as to why "quality TVOTS" usually accompany "quality dramas." Their complex visual style and generous durations serve as paratextual harbingers, which announce their primary texts' aesthetic aspirations, increased reliance on intricately deferred narratives, and emphasis on abstract, yet weighty, subject matter.

4.1.7 Diegetic Ambiguity and Focus on Larger Themes

Angelina Karpovich begins her examination of the opening title sequence for Showtime's *Dexter* by pondering the functions of the title sequence more generally. She concludes that, "It sets the mood of the piece, conveys essential information about the genre, setting, and characters, and it 'hooks' the viewers in by building up anticipation for what is to follow" (27). And yet, while this may be true of many TVOTS, these assertions seem to miss the mark when we look at "quality TVOTS" — *Dexter* included.

For instance, what "essential information" does Digital Kitchen's title sequence *really* convey about the show's setting? Save for the last shot, the entire segment consists of close-ups that reveal next to nothing about Dexter's apartment and no other locations are shown. In fact, there is nothing that even suggests that the show is set in Miami, or Florida for that matter. Likewise, what information does the sequence actually impart about the show's characters? Key players like Dexter's sister Debra, his father Harry, and his wife Rita make no appearances. Nor do any of Dexter's coworkers, many of whom play pivotal roles in the program's overall narrative. Dexter himself is the only character that appears in the sequence, and what do we *really* learn about him, besides the details surrounding his morning ablutions? We are given no hints as to his occupation, sexual orientation or marital status. While his murderous proclivities are certainly hinted at, they are not explicitly disclosed. What does the segment tell viewers about the show's generic classification? Its slightly discordant yet whimsical theme music could introduce a dark comedy as easily as a drama. Furthermore, the sequence's repeated emphasis on precision, blood and cutting would not be out of place in the introduction to a primetime medical soap opera *à la Grey's Anatomy*.

Figure 4.2- Scenes from *Dexter's* Opening Title Sequence

When we look closely at the opening title sequence for *Dexter*, it becomes apparent that it *does not*, in fact, convey the kind of "essential information" that Karpovich alludes to. Nor do many of our other examples. The main titles for *True Blood* do not introduce any of the show's main characters or precise settings. Vampires — arguably, the show's main focus — are only briefly referenced once. Similarly, the opening sequences for *Nip/Tuck*, *Rome*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood*, *Carnivàle* and *Weeds* all eschew the introduction of any characters whatsoever. If settings are established in these segments, they are usually quite general. For example, Atlantic City is clearly introduced in the sequence for *Boardwalk Empire*, but more specific locations, like Nucky's office in the Ritz-Carlton, are left unrepresented. Moreover, these segments often establish a sense of space through extreme close-ups. These shots stand in stark contrast to the longer establishing shots that have traditionally been used to orient viewers spatially. As a result, they create a very intimate impression of a show's settings (more akin to how the characters

populating these fictional worlds might see them), while maintaining a level of indeterminateness.

It is evident that these sequences share in a kind of fundamental diegetic ambiguity. They seem to withhold as much (or more) than they reveal. Specific details about these fictional worlds are simply not provided. Instead, "quality TVOTS" generally focus on one or more of their primary text's overall themes or metaphors. Because many of these texts are "quality dramas," these themes often "tend toward the controversial" (R. Thompson, *Golden Age* 15). *True Blood's* opening title sequence plays on the cultural storm surrounding groups like the Westboro Baptist Church and their vocal criticisms of homosexuality with a roadside sign that reads "God Hates Fangs." *Homeland's* introduction directly addresses the events of September 11th, 2001, as well as our nation's resultant fears, insecurities and international acts of aggression.

Even when these segments choose not to deal directly with such obviously controversial issues, the themes they grapple with are often quite profound. The unconsidered violence inherent in Dexter's morning ritual says something about mankind's animalistic nature. As the silhouette of the falling man descends from his disintegrating office in the opening titles of *Mad Men*, he passes an advertisement that reads, "Enjoy everything America has to offer." Every episode of *Weeds* begins with a meditation on cultural conformity, reminding us that we are all "made out of ticky tacky, and… all look just the same."

All of this amounts to defamiliarization *par excellence*; and suggests that in many ways, "quality TV" is defamiliarizing TV. Generations used to images of Dick Van Dyke sidestepping the ottoman, or Andy and Opie strolling down to the fishing hole, are less

accustomed to seeing the American dream figuratively dissolve in the course of a thirty-six second title sequence. Whether or not shows like *Weeds* or *True Blood* are highbrow or lowbrow, or "good" or "bad"," their title sequences are more "original" and hence "valuable" in the sense that they defamiliarize both reality and the conventions of the televisual medium "more strongly than other artworks" (K. Thompson, *Glass Armor* 11).

4.2   Conclusions

It should be noted that over time, many of the examples cited here will lose much of their defamiliarizing impact. As these defining characteristics become increasingly assimilated into the larger field of opening title sequences, they will appear to become progressively more mundane. Just as old episodes of Th*e Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1979) now seem tame in comparison to programs like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), these TVOTS will be forever evaluated and reevaluated according to the context of the viewer. As Jane Feuer observes, "The judgment of quality is always situated" (145).

Nevertheless, as I stated at the outset of this chapter, something is happening in the field of televisual opening title sequences today. A new class of TVOTS have emerged that are characterized by seven fundamental qualities: They are more strongly defamiliarizing than their counterparts, are being created by award-winning design firms, are visually sophisticated, have extended durations, garner awards and acclaim, typically accompany dramas, and are diegetically ambiguous while concurrently focusing on broader themes and metaphors. Though every "quality" opening title sequence may not possess all these attributes at once, all of them will possess *some* combination of these elements. This is how, as with Justice Potter Stewart, we know them when we see them.

5   CONCLUSION

5.1   Summary/Recap

The examples that we have looked at here clearly illustrate the fact that opening title sequences function in ways that exceed the scope of the "paratextual contract." Indeed, it is evident that the introduction of characters, settings, genre and themes amount to little more than the tip of the paratextual iceberg. While this is an admittedly tired cliché, it is nonetheless appropriate. Because these functions are so readily apparent, it is easy to overlook (or simply ignore) the legion of more enigmatic operations that lurk beneath the surface. In the course of this examination, I have identified a few of these more obfuscated functions, and offered classifications for the segments that perform them.

 Open-ended narrative TVOTS exceed the scope of the paratextual contract because they seem to tell a thoroughgoing narrative in and of themselves. Rather than serving as simple introductions, these segments unite the basic elements of character, setting, genre and theme with action and events in a way that creates a causally coherent Aristotelian mini-narrative. They don't just present these constituent elements; they put them in play. And yet, because they suspend the story they tell prior to the completion of diegetic events, they make room for their primary texts to begin (over and over again) *in medias res.* Accordingly, these TVOTS have proven to particularly efficient devices for the introduction of so-called "high concept" programming across multiple eras in television history.

Other title sequences function on the level of curiosity. They are constructed in a way that privileges a form of exploratory behavior that psychologists have dubbed "specific inquiry." By both providing and withholding particular pieces of information,

these TVOTS have the potential to create a "condition of discomfort" on the part of the viewer, that can only be quelled through further investigation. As a class, these TVOTS can be divided based on the site of this investigation. In some cases, they employ elements like self-contained gags and ludic "Easter eggs" to privilege the segments themselves as autonomous exploratory sites. In others, they present viewers with cryptic images and information that can only be explicated through an inspection of their primary texts. When taken together, these TVOTS are uniquely well suited for use in a post-network era where control technologies have resulted in increased levels of viewer empowerment, and, consequently, have threatened the paratextual status and impact of title sequences on the whole.

"Quality TVOTS" take us beyond the paratexutal contract by acting as legitimating devices. By incorporating combinations of seven fundamental characteristics, they frame the shows they accompany in ways that suggest that they possess more "cultural value" than their television counterparts. Often, this effect is achieved by encouraging cinematic comparisons on the level of style, duration and pedigree. At other times, this legitimization is accomplished by reflecting characteristics of their primary texts that might be intertextually understood as markers of quality — traits such as narrative complexity, or a focus on socially relevant or abstruse themes and subject matter. These TVOTS emerged in the context of the multi-channel transitional era, and have continued to thrive in post-network contexts where narrowcasting practices seem to demand that programs adorn themselves with such markers in order to reach a small group of affluent well-educated viewers.

These are but three examples that I have carved out from an enormous field. Because these devices and the elements that comprise them work in varying combinations as part of a larger system, the scope of their functions multiplies exponentially each time a new element is introduced. Consequently, as the definition of "TV" continues to change and expand, and as new kinds of programming materialize, the potential range and variety of functions that TVOTS can perform continues to increase.

5.2   Potential for Further Research

As I suggested in the first chapter, neoformalism is relatively modest in its aspirations. It seeks to understand the aesthetic world first, and then utilize this understanding to explore linkages to the everyday "real" world. As a result, I have no doubt that the application of more ambitious theories and methods to the study of televisual opening title sequences would yield substantive and valuable results.

For example, because these segments work in both introductory and ritualistic capacities, an ideologically based analysis of TVOTS — especially one that is historically backgrounded — might say much about the assumptions and implications contained in these works. By examining both what is said, and what is left unsaid, we might gain a better understanding of how they engage in processes of interpellation, frame their accompanying texts, and reinforce "particular ranges of values, beliefs and ideas" (White 169). Moreover, because the artisans that craft TVOTS often have little or no involvement in the creation of the series they accompany, comparisons of text versus paratext from this ideological perspective might reveal interesting dichotomies.

Industry centered case studies focusing on some of the boutique visual production firms responsible for the recent wave of "quality TVOTS" might also prove fruitful. Such

examinations could examine whether or not particular companies have developed "house styles" that have come to define their works, or if individuals within these organizations have risen to *auteur* status within this microcosm of the industry. They might also consider some of the relationships between these firms and specific showrunners. For example, Alan Ball, the creator behind shows like *Six Feet Under* and *True Blood* has depended almost entirely on Digital Kitchen to supply the opening sequences for his television projects. What is it about this particular firm that helps him realize his artistic visions? By using this kind of "outside in" approach, we might discover insights that more "text first" considerations would be unlikely to discover.

Along these same lines, a reception-based approach to the study of televisual opening title sequences seems like a logical and potentially rewarding avenue of intellectual investigation. If, as I have previously asserted, TVOTS are paratexts that operate in ways that frame and influence the process of viewer textual engagement, it makes sense to study the ways in which *actual audiences* confront and negotiate with these devices. The results might be surprising. In any "text first" mode of analysis it is all too easy to lapse into the belief that a particular artwork imparts one constant or uniform meaning. Not only would such a study remind us of the fact that texts are incapable of these kinds of telekinetic efficiencies, it might also reveal a host of unforeseen and unpredictable interpretations and viewpoints. In examining these paratexts from the other end of the viewer/text equation, we might discover new parameters and paradigms surrounding their functions. Simply put, we might be surprised at how they *actually work*.

Finally, even if we limit ourselves to the neoformalist approach applied here, there are a multitude of elements within opening title sequences that invite further inquiry. For

instance, a detailed evaluation of the typography utilized in these segments might shed light on how distinctive fonts are used to different ends within the context of a broader intertextual system. Likewise, a more in-depth examination of how music functions in these sequences has the potential to reveal important information about the primary text's transtextual and artistic motivations. Similarly, a study focusing on the location of different TVOTS in the overall temporal flow of the programs they accompany might tell us more about larger issues including narrative complexity, generic classifications and industrial-economic influences.

Truth be told, the potential directions for future research are so plentiful they are difficult to enumerate. While I have provided a few suggestions that are of particular interest to me, a comprehensive account is nigh on impossible. Because these possibilities are limited only by the actual number of title sequences in existence, and the variety of methods and approaches that can be applied to them, they present themselves as particularly rich and intriguing subjects of study.

APPENDIX

A Survey of Some Open-Ended Narrative TVOTS Over Time

Program	Genre	Primary Narrative Device
The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-1971)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
Gilligan's Island (1964-1967)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
The Brady Bunch (1969-1974)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
Branded (1965-1966)	Drama	Diegetic Theme Song
F Troop (1965-1967)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
It's About Time (1966-1967)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
Run for Your Life (1965-1968)	Drama	Voice Over/Dialogue
Alias Smith and Jones (1971-1973)	Drama	Voice Over/Dialogue
The Six Million Dollar Man (1974-1978)	Drama	Voice Over/Dialogue
Rhoda (1974-1978)	Comedy	Voice Over
Dusty's Trail (1973-1974)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song

Isis (1975-1976)	Drama	Voice Over
The Bionic Woman (1976-1978)	Drama	Visuals/Text
Tabitha (1976-1978)	Comedy	Voice Over
Charlie's Angels (1976-1981)	Drama	Voice Over
The Incredible Hulk (1977-1982)	Drama	Voice Over
The White Shadow (1978-1981)	Drama	Visuals
Buck Rogers in the 25th Century (1979-1981)	Drama	Voice Over
Private Benjamin (1981-1983)	Comedy	Voice Over (1st Season)- Then Theme Song
Filthy Rich (1982-1983)	Comedy	Voice Over
Remington Steele (1982-1987)	Drama	Voice Over
The A-Team (1983-1987)	Drama	Voice Over
Stir Crazy (1985-1986)	Comedy	Voice Over
My Two Dads (1987-1990)	Comedy	Voice Over
Dear John (1988-1992)	Comedy	Visuals
The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990-1996)	Comedy	Diegetic Theme Song
Renegade (1992-1997)	Drama	Voice Over
Hercules: The Legendary Journeys (1995-1999)	Drama	Voice Over
Xena: Warrior Princess		

Nikita (2010-Present)	Drama	Voice Over
The Glades (2010-Present)	Drama	Voice Over
Person of Interest (2011-Present)	Drama	Voice Over

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