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Chapter ?

Title Sequences for Contemporary Television Serials¹

Annette Davison

People want, when they're in the next room, then they hear that song, they know the show is on.

HBO's advice to David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*²

All you need is the opening chords, or the image of the tree and it's so evocative, people immediately know where you are or what you're talking about.

Alan Poul, executive producer, *Six Feet Under*³

In May 2010, a lead story in *New York* magazine focused on television: "Televisonaries: An Extraordinary TV Season, and the Rules that Shaped It."⁴ Title sequences ranked among the topics it covered, and the sequence for Showtime's *Dexter* was presented as the exemplar. A brief commentary summarized how the sequence was produced, and the article presented a series of frame stills from the sequence alongside extracts of Rolfe Kent's music score in reduction (somewhat unusually for mainstream print media). The Blogosphere too has been in a state of excitement over television title sequences in recent years. Many sites list favorite examples of the genre and engage in detailed discussions of the music, the visuals, and their audiovisual interactions.⁵ Let me lay my cards on the table now: I agree with these critics. In recent years the main title sequences for high-production-value television serials, particularly those developed for broadcast on premium cable channels, have become fascinating

progenitors of new audiovisual aesthetics. Such sequences have undoubtedly been influenced by developments in music video and commercials. The title sequence is today a vital tool in generating and conveying brand identity.⁶

In this chapter I focus on the main title sequences for two recent serials commissioned by the influential North American premium cable channel, Home Box Office, aka HBO: *The Sopranos* (1997–2007) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–05). My interest lies in the relationship between the institutional context of these serials and the aesthetic character of their main title sequences. The two shows' title sequences are utterly different from each other in terms of their genesis and aesthetic character, but they are complementary in other ways, not least in the sense that like the signature music for any series, both must satisfy the prospective viewer while also remaining interesting to the returning viewer and fan. Both sequences ran unchanged for five or more seasons.⁷

Defining functions and characteristics

An opening title and/or credits sequence accomplishes several tasks simultaneously. Perhaps most tangible among these is to convey serial- and episode-specific information through text, most often including the show's title, the names of key cast members and creative personnel, and in some cases an episode title. Full credits are usually reserved for the end of a show—where interesting developments are also occurring of late. Both *The Sopranos* and, more recently, *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–) use a different music track for their end credits each week, for example. Do such changes increase the interpretive space for viewers?

Title sequences pitch, or make desirable, the show that follows. As a result, signifiers that suggest the show's genre are often incorporated.⁸ Functioning as a trailer for the coming attraction, they seek to convert the distracted potential viewer into a repeat viewer/consumer, and use arresting images and notable music to achieve this.⁹ Simon Frith suggests that in

order to be televisual, “music must not only be visualised but given a sense of occasion. Television address — as a matter of both voice and setting — means inviting audiences to be part of something out there (while staying in their living rooms).”¹⁰

The music itself in title sequences acts to draw in distracted viewers, indicating that a particular show is starting. It functions as an auditory cue, a boundary in the “flow” of television’s continuous programming, particularly for potential viewers who are not physically in sight of the screen.¹¹ Indeed, as commentators such as John Ellis, Rick Altman, and Kevin Donnelly suggest, we “listen to television sometimes more than we watch it. [...] [It] tends to have sound cues that we can follow when our attention is drawn elsewhere. [...] [We] can glance away from the television only to be brought back by sounds that appear to signal action, excitement or interest.”¹² In this sense, title music acts as “curtain music,” signaling the start of a show, and the end of the commercials or other program trailers.

Title sequences also enable viewers to ready themselves for the move to a period of focus and engagement with a show. Given that many serials are originally broadcast in a weekly pattern (same day/time each week), such preparations may also become ritualized, born of anticipation and excitement for a planned period of escapism and/or engagement. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that for many viewers a title sequence is part of this ritualized experience. It signifies the return of the familiar along with the novel, favorite characters in new situations and developing story arcs. Title music may thus encourage the regular returning viewer to undertake certain behaviors: complete chores, prepare refreshments, end conversations, and/or sit and watch.

Viewers may well remain distracted today, but with the advent of digitization they are offered a variety of options for content delivery; in other words, they can determine where, when, and how they view that content. Thus, while a proportion of television’s audiences may still receive content via the set that plays continuously in the corner of the room, others

watch differently. There has been a growth in services offered “on demand” by certain channels and by cable/satellite distributors, for example, offering opportunities for the selection and downloading of content, viewable via a range of devices: television sets, computers, and hand-held devices such as tablets and mobile phones.