

# Letters of Introduction: Film Credits and Cityscapes

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**ABSTRACT** This essay is about the textuality of film credit sequences and their relationship to the expressivity of urban life. It traces the development of credit sequences away from models based on the book and the theatrical stage, towards an engagement with the material objects and expressive forms of cities. Using a wide variety of examples, from the 1920s through the 1960s, the essay traces the shifting status of words, images and forms of public textuality in the credit sequence.

**KEYWORDS:** films, credits, cities, design, media

In the modern world, Walter Benjamin suggests, the written or printed word “is pitilessly dragged out into the street” (Benjamin 1996: 456). This article is concerned with film

credits, and with the ways in which the words or graphic forms of which they are composed have been interwoven with the expressive forms characteristic of urban life. From the late 1920s onwards, I suggest, the credits of entertainment fiction films became more and more frequently detached from old-fashioned precursors like the printed book cover, the emblematic slide or the theatrical proscenium. Almost from the beginning, the cinema had invoked these devices as effective means for announcing and inaugurating a fictional experience, mobilizing the familiar protocols of reading that each proposed. By the end of the 1920s, however, credits would begin to move into the space of the city, onto the sides of buildings or the surfaces of mobile urban forms like the automobile or the newspaper. The succession of credits would come to follow a metonymic passage that smoothed the distinction between credits and a film's diegetic world.

### Credits and "City Reading"

In a 1991 *Cahiers du cinéma* article, Luc Moullet wrote of the inscription of credits on mobile forms as a distinctive feature of the cinema of the 1960s. During that decade, he observed, "credits wrote themselves onto roadways, onto cars, onto the main character as he or she went from home to work, from one place of action to another" (Moullet 1991: 81; my translation). This movement of credits, out of the confines of the page or theatrical proscenium, had begun much earlier, of course. Two films from 1929 offer different versions of this passage. The credits for the British film *Piccadilly* (dir. Arnold Bennett, 1929) appear on the sides of buses as these move through a London cityscape already saturated in words and signs (Figure 1). *Piccadilly's* inscription of credits on moving vehicles, very common in later years, was unusual for 1929, as Valentina Re has noted (Re 2006: 38).

A more eccentric inscription of credits on public space may be found in the opening of the German film *Asphalt* (dir. Joe May, 1929), which shows the film's title being roughly burned and chiseled into a street pavement (the asphalt of the title) by workers using heavy machinery (Figure 2). *Asphalt* initiates a tendency that will remain minor in its time, then flower in later years: that of the degradation of credits, their descent from the elegance of theatrical signage or wonder of electric lighting to rough, crude forms of urban expressivity. Twenty years after *Asphalt*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1950) would write its titles in rough script on the sidewalk, to be walked over by the main characters (Figure 3).

One way of understanding the history of film credits, from the 1930s onwards, is in terms of a shift in the intermedial relationships between cinema and other cultural forms. With each successive decade, there is a decline in credit sequences whose key reference is the book or the theatrical play and a corresponding increase in credits organized around the forms and habits of what David



**Figure 1**

Still from the credit sequence of *Piccadilly* (dir. Arnold Bennett, 1929).



**Figure 2**

Still from the credit sequence of *Asphalt* (dir. Joe May, 1929).



**Figure 3**

Still from the credit sequence of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1950).

Henkin has called “city reading.” Even when their credits are fixed to conventional supports that mimic the printed page or the theatrical title card, films will seek more and more to offer bridges between the written words of credits and forms of public textuality. As credits unfold, the camera may move across a theatrical marquee, the headlines of a hand-held newspaper, or bits of urban signage, then follow these into the spaces of dramatic action. The smoothness of this passage has much to do with the upright placement of the film screen, which required practices of “vertical reading” (Henkin 1998: 63) that mimicked those of the city dweller confronted with billboards or newspapers held at eye level by riders of public transportation.

Across hundreds of films, between 1930 and 1950, we see an almost Darwinian exploration of possible variations in the credit sequence. The texts of credits will seek new supports, often by attaching themselves to quotidian objects that possess their own mobility. Alexandre Tylski has pointed to the ways in which French films of the 1930s and 1940s employed a wide variety of scriptural or print media as surfaces for film credits: “a school notebook in *Zéro de conduite* (Jean Vigo, 1933), turning pages in *Le Rêve* (Jean de Baroncelli, 1938), the dance card in *Un Carnet de bal* (Julien Duvivier, 1937), the street sign in *Hôtel du nord* (Marcel Carné, 1938) or the books in *Les Visiteurs du soir* (Marcel Carné, 1942) and *Le Silence de la mer* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1947)” (Tylski 2008a: 32; my translation). In Hollywood films of the same period, we find credits scattered onto multiple forms of material culture. They are written on the sails of boats in a harbor (*The General Dies at Dawn*, dir. Lewis Milestone, 1936), on flowers floating in a pond (*Maytime*, dir. Robert Z. Leonard, 1937), on a married couple’s breakfast plates (*Breakfast for Two*, dir. Alfred Santell, 1937), on a series of crocheted wall hangings (*This is My Affair*, dir. William A. Seiter, 1937), on pieces of paper laid successively in an office in/out basket (*You Can’t Escape Forever*, dir. Jo Graham, 1942; Figure 4), on papers pulled from a filing cabinet (*Bureau of Missing Persons*, dir. Roy Del Ruth, 1933; Figure 5), on champagne bottles (*Joan of Paris*, dir. Robert Stevenson, 1942; Figure 6), on the front page of a newspaper (*The Payoff*, dir. Arthur Dreifuss, 1942; Figure 7), on naval flags hoisted in succession (*In the Navy*, dir. Arthur Lubin, 1941), and on the pages of a stylish fashion magazine (*Lady in the Dark*, dir. Mitchell Leisen, 1944). Not all of these material supports for words are urban in character, of course, but the vast majority are, as if words sit more comfortably on the surfaces of city things than on natural landscapes.

The 1941 film *The Lady is Willing* (dir. Mitchell Leisen), in which Marlene Dietrich plays a Broadway star, opens with a brief bit of live action over which the names of the film’s two stars (Dietrich and Fred MacMurray) are superimposed in conventional fashion. As the Marlene Dietrich character walks off screen, however, we glimpse the film’s title card as a billboard on the surface of a theater building, then follow the gazes of people on the street, standing in line, as they



**Figure 4**

Still from the credit sequence of *You Can't Escape Forever* (dir. Jo Graham, 1942).



**Figure 5**

Still from the credit sequence of *Bureau of Missing Persons* (dir. Roy Del Ruth, 1933).



**Figure 6**

Still from the credit sequence of *Joan of Paris* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1942).

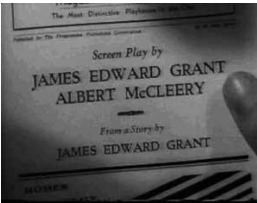


**Figure 7**

Still from the credit sequence of *The Payoff* (dir. Arthur Dreifuss, 1942).



(a)



(b)

**Figures 8a and 8b**

Two stills from the credit sequence of *The Lady is Willing* (dir. Mitchell Leisen, 1941).



**Figure 9**

Still from the credit sequence of *My Man Godfrey* (dir. Gregory La Cava, 1936).



**Figure 10**

Still from the credit sequence of *I Wake Up Screaming* (dir. H. Bruce Humberstone, 1941).

read the rest of the credits on theatrical programs held in their hands (Figures 8a and 8b). This inscription of credits on theatrical surfaces is both old-fashioned, in its invocation of an earlier cultural form, and forward-looking, in the way it sets credits amidst the multiple textualities of the urban street. The credits for *The Lady is Willing* are innovative in at least two additional ways. The billboard on which the title appears serves as the film's own, internalized advertising of itself, as if *The Lady is Willing* were just one more spectacle in a cityscape filled with spectacles. At the same time, we are shown characters who, as surrogates for ourselves, read the film's credits from within the film's own fictional space.

The designing of credits to mimic theatrical marquees is a practice almost as old as the feature film. By the 1930s, it was common to set these marquees more obviously within the semiotic clutter of cities: at angles in relationship to buildings, for example, or amidst an array of blinking, electric signs. The credits for *My Man Godfrey* (dir. Gregory La Cava, 1936), which pan across a series of blinking electric signs attached to New York buildings, stand as one of the most spectacular examples of this *urbanization* of the credit sequence (Figure 9). Likewise, the credits for *Brief Moment* (dir. David Burton, 1933) and *Merrily, We Go to Hell* (dir. Dorothy Arzner, 1932) mimic the electric signage of theatrical display, and both set their brightly illuminated words against a night time backdrop of illuminated city buildings. We may see the theatrical marquee as a bridge between two periods in the history of the credit sequence, simultaneously looking backwards to theatre and forwards to the electrified, textualized city. The openings to *I Wake Up Screaming* (dir. H. Bruce Humberstone, 1941) and *Night and the City* (dir. Jules Dassin, 1950), made almost ten years apart, arrange their credits as bulbs on an electric theatrical sign (Figures 10 and 11). These films are only peripherally about the theater, however, and much more about the electrically illuminated city as the locus of *noirish* atmosphere. Electric signage here is a fragment of the text-filled city in which the words of the credit sequence will more and more seem to lose themselves. In both films, credits give way to more electric signs, and to more illuminated words, before we finally descend to street level and the shadowy spaces of the crime thriller.

**Approaches to the Credit Sequence**

The body of scholarship on film credits has grown noticeably over the last decade (see, for a useful bibliography, the *G n rique* website). Much of the recent work has been published in France and Italy, where, arguably, questions of form and style remain more central to film studies than is the case in the English-speaking world. Amidst the wide variety of writings on credits, we may distinguish three significant areas of emphasis. One of these is the economic and contractual function of credits. Historical research has traced the role of credits in acknowledging (or obscuring) certain kinds of labor and

in marking films as distinct commodities in the marketplace. Work by such scholars as Carman (2008), Clark (1995) and Chisholm (2000) has charted the role of credits in the development of national star systems and in signaling hierarchies of labor within Hollywood and other production systems. Credits, much of this work argues, function simultaneously as forms of professional currency within industry reward systems and as marketing devices through which the distinctiveness and value of films are enhanced for potential audiences.

A second strand of writing has worked to set film credits within a broader history of design, typically through the examination of key credit designers (such as Saul Bass or Maurice Binder) and their collaborations with design-sensitive film directors such as Otto Preminger or Alfred Hitchcock. Saul Bass's 1960 article in *Graphis* magazine, "Film Titles – a New Field for the Graphic Designer" (Bass 1960), is rightly seen as a milestone in the consecration of the movie credit sequence as a design object. Rightly or wrongly, Bass remains the most studied of film credit designers, in work that is often concerned with reconstructing his design strategies and their relationship to the stylistic coherence of the films in which his credits appeared (see, for examples of this and other designer-centered work, the articles in Tylski (2008b) and Innocenti and Re (2003). Bass, Binder and other consecrated designers of credit sequences are often studied for their role in transforming the credit sequence into what Stanitzek calls a "paradigmatic metaphor" of the film that will follow: a condensation of the film-text's graphic, narrative and thematic elements (Stanitzek 2009: 54). Since the 1990s, film credits have been the object of increased attention in studies of digital typography and design (e.g. Bellantoni and Woolman 1999).

The third and most theoretically elaborate treatment of film credits has followed the formalist path laid out by French literary theorist Gérard Genette in his book *Seuils* (translated into English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*). Genette is concerned here with "paratexts," those elements of a literary work long considered secondary or parasitical (prefaces, appendices, title pages) and with the challenges such elements pose to ideas of textual coherence. In their use of words and drawings, expressive materials one might see as radically distinct from the audio-visual basis of the live action film, film credits would seem more alien in relation to their "host" film than the literary title page to the text that follows. The degree of alterity of the credit sequence within mainstream entertainment cinema has been the focus of ongoing controversy. Cognitivist theorists have argued that credits may be seen as functional in the ways they propose protocols of spectatorship (through their signaling of a film's genre and its hierarchy of performers, for example, or through their aforementioned condensation of a film's key elements). As liminal zones within the filmic text, credit sequences are often seen as performing a necessary mediatory function, organizing the



**Figure 11**

Still from the credit sequence of *Night and the City* (dir. Jules Dassin, 1950).

spectator's passage from an extratextual to a textual world (see, for strong versions of all of these positions, the articles in Innocenti and Re (2003) and Re (2006).

None of these three strands of research has direct relevance to a study of credit sequences and their relationship to urban textuality. While credits perform legal and institutional functions, in the ways they acknowledge and valorize a film's personnel, the fanciful play with words and shapes that marks the examples discussed so far in this article is in excess of these functions. Likewise, the traffic of graphic forms between credit sequences and fictional cityscapes cannot help but dilute the creativity of recognized designers within a more generalized expressivity which is that of the cinema as a modern cultural institution. The emphasis, in other scholarly work, on canonical credit sequences like those of Saul Bass or, more recently, Kyle Cooper, has come at the expense of studies that would examine large numbers of "ordinary" (and, as it were, uncredited) title sequences and trace broad tendencies over time. (An exception here is Alexandre Tylski, who viewed over 2,000 credit sequences for the writing of his 2008 book *Le générique de cinéma*.)

The rich vein of work inspired by Genette's theorization of the paratext has been concerned, for the most part, with relations between a film's credits and the film that follows, rather than with the place of film credits within a broader intertextual field that would include the expressive forms characteristic of urban life. In his comprehensive, recently translated analysis of film credits, Stanitzek speaks convincingly of the credit sequence as a "complex intermediary zone," marked both by an exuberant indulgence in multiple means of expression (songs, typesetting, graphics) and by the controlled conventionality with which these means of expression are often deployed (Stanitzek 2009: 44, 50). The migration of words and shapes between credit sequences and the textual surfaces of urban fictional worlds is a particularly striking form of this semiotic exuberance. We may see it as mimicking the broader traffic in expressive forms that is one characteristic of city life.

### **Post-Second World War Film Credits and the Crisis of the Ceremonial**

The development of film credits in the years following the Second World War is best studied as what Stephanos Stephanides, writing of literary form, calls a "system of variations" (Stephanides 2004: 101). Between 1945 and 1965, and across several national cinemas, one strain in credit sequences will incline towards the repression of writing and graphic forms while another will tend towards their extravagant display. At both extremes, and in the rich variety of credit sequences falling between them, the relationship of credits to cityscapes and urban textualities will be revised. The example of *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, briefly discussed earlier in this essay, offers us one way into this "system of variations." This 1950 film

begins with the casual whistling of the film's theme song, as a man, seen only below the waist, walks along a sidewalk on which the film's credits are scrawled. After the names of the principal actors have passed, we see the remaining credits in a more conventional fashion, superimposed over a city street, but the ambient urban sounds here are muted. The relative quiet of the scene, and absence of the punctuating, ceremonial music typical of the beginnings of films from this period, suggest something of its innovative quality.

The brief opening of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* condenses a set of impulses which, by the early 1950s, would come to mark the gritty, avowedly realistic city film. It is during this period that we may witness something like a crisis of ceremonialization in the credit sequence. Credits with elegant typefaces, or accompanied by fanfarish, exclamatory music, will come to seem less and less compatible with the naturalistic aesthetics of the various postwar neorealisms, and for two reasons. In the first place, credit sequences of a highly ceremonial sort cannot help but reiterate the links between film and theater, links that the neorealist project of so many postwar film movements was anxious to deny. At the same time, the ornamental character of the traditional credit sequence will come to seem a frivolous indulgence incompatible with the reformist politics of the postwar neorealist film.

Increasingly, films of the postwar period manifest that aesthetic doctrine which the British art critic Lawrence Alloway usefully described as the equation of social reform with stylistic impoverishment (Alloway 1971: 9). Postwar films that sought to portray the impoverished worlds of the New York waterfront or the poor Italian village would offer credit sequences that themselves looked grim and incommunicative. A useful example of these tendencies is a self-consciously realist and reformist film like *12 Angry Men* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1957). The credits to this film are snuck in, several minutes into the story, with no musical flourishes to announce them. (The musical accompaniment to the credit sequence is subdued and melancholy.) The lettering of the credits is in a lower case, *sans serif* typeface, set in the lower right of the frame – a space diametrically opposed to those points from which Western reading habits conventionally begin (Figure 12). Throughout the 1950s, in gritty urban dramas, credits avoid serif typefaces, flirt with lower case lettering and generally seek typographical styles that avoid the obviously ornamental. Indeed, a general suspicion of lettering, as something extraneous and therefore distracting or corruptive, manifests itself throughout these films: in the absence of clear indications as to a scene's location, for example, and in the delaying of credits until the main narrative is well underway. Credits will enter quietly into films behind sequences of action in ways that are designed to be unobtrusive, almost as if they were embarrassments to be quickly disposed of.

One way of understanding this tendency is in terms of John Welchman's discussion of the changing status of the title and



**Figure 12**  
Still from the credit  
sequence of *12 Angry Men*  
(dir. Sidney Lumet, 1957).

signature in painting. The visual arts of the post-Second World War period, Welchman suggests, were marked by the puritanical injunction to fall silent, by the impulse towards verbal and textual restraint. In painting, one of the ways in which this manifests itself is through the elimination of the artist's signature and of evocative titles from the work of art. More and more, Welchman suggests, one witnesses the move to give works incommunicative, undescriptive titles, such as "Untitled," or "Exercise No. 1" (Welchman 1997: 7). These impulses will express themselves, albeit in restricted ways, in the silent or muted credit sequences of so many films of the two decades after the Second World War. While even the most artistically ambitious postwar Hollywood films sat at considerable cultural distance from the practices or doctrines of a painterly avant-garde, they overlapped in their embrace of restraint and penchant for quiet, incommunicative rituals of naming.

The opening to *Two for the Seesaw* (dir. Robert Wise, 1961) condenses several features of the restrained postwar urban credit sequence, though it stands as a late example of all of these. Robert Mitchum walks on the Brooklyn Bridge, then through Manhattan, obviously alone and lonely, while the credits appear, in a small, *sans serif* typeface, with no exclamatory music behind them. Mitchum's movement through the city here is offered in the cinematic equivalent of the imperfect tense, conveying the typicality of a repeated action rather than the singularity of a punctual event bearing narrative significance. Strikingly, for a sequence offering a collage of New York City locations, this one is devoid (with very minor exceptions) of signs or visible words, the constituent features of public textuality. Ted McCord's stark black-and-white cinematography emphasizes the cold incommunicability of architectural structures throughout the credits. The muted expressivity that marked *Where the Sidewalk Ends* or *12 Angry Men* is evident here, and we confront the distinctly modern eeriness of a credit sequence that is all but silent.

At the same time, this credit sequence manifests the pictorialism that will become a prominent feature of credit sequences after the Second World War. In film after film, from the late 1940s through the present, films will begin with a panoramic shot of a landscape – a harbor, Western mountains, a city skyline – that is often held for a few seconds before the procession of credits gets underway. The opening cityscapes of *Race Street* (dir. Edwin L. Marin, 1948), *Outside the Wall* (dir. Crane Wilbur, 1950) or *Woman on the Run* (dir. Norman Foster, 1951), the city harbor in *The Raging Tide* (1951), the mountainous landscape of *The Secret of Convict Lake* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1951) and the Western vistas of *Streets of Laredo* and *Whispering Smith* (both directed by Leslie Fenton, 1948) or *Gun Fury* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1953) are all part of a shift wherein the pictorial quickly asserts itself prior to the appearance of writing, which now seems secondary. The pause of variable length, between the moment in which a panoramic image settles and that at which



words make their first appearance, would become an instinctively familiar part of the rhythms of the post-Second World War film.

This restriction of the expressivity of the written word was not consistent across post-Second World War cinema, of course. The cinemas of the 1950s and 1960s are not marked by the consistent reduction of credits so much as by a decline in any consensus as to what they should do or what form they should take. This period will see the diminution of credits in some films, but it will also see credits become more elaborate, inventive and ornamental in others. Just as credits seem to wither in the gritty urban dramas of the 1950s, they will become even more extravagant, detachable and frivolous in other kinds of films – in the sex comedies that proliferate by the end of the decade, for example, and in the large-scale musicals of the 1950s that foreground their roots in theater. Indeed, between the 1940s and 1960s, credit sequences move – to two extremes – one marked by the repression of written textuality in films, the other by an investment in the exaggerated expressivity of written texts and graphic forms. Between the credit-less opening of Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* and the detachable cartoon sequences that open the Pink Panther films lies a lengthy, never resolved negotiation over the relationship of credit sequences to the formal integrity of the feature film.

The most striking and well-known feature of Hollywood film credits, by the late 1950s, is the consolidation of the self-contained, animated credit sequence as a form. A rich example of this tendency is the credit sequence to the film *Boy's Night Out* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1962). This sequence recovers some of the exuberance with which, in credit sequences of the 1930s and 1940s, words wandered onto urban surfaces within a fictional world, but this wandering, in *Boy's Night Out*, is confined to the deliberately self-contained world of the animated credits. Nevertheless, this sequence relishes the mobility of city life: actor's names are affixed to taxis that drive off, characters come together in groups and then glide away, the briefcases of office workers open to reveal bits of text. All of this takes place within a cityscape marked by bright, artificial light reduced to its simplest forms. We are as far as we can be here from any version of postwar urban realism; the city is imagined, in almost anthropological terms, as a sexual playground, or as a space for the encounter of sexualized geometric forms (see, for further discussion, Straw 1999).

Animated sequences such as these invite us to explore analogies between film credits and the architectural entrance. The notion that film credits, as zones of passage, bear an equivalence to the architectural threshold has been noted before (Tortajada 2003; see also Straw 1999). We may point, incidentally, to the cluster of films made in 1946 or 1947 that rendered this equivalence literal by moving, as credits concluded, through the window of a house or apartment. These films include *Black Angel* (dir. Roy William Neill, 1946), *Nocturne* (dir. Edwin L. Marin, 1946), *The Velvet Touch* (dir. Jack

Gage, 1948) and *Repeat Performance* (dir. Alfred L. Werker, 1947). Insofar as architectural thresholds serve, like other communicational structures, to join and transmit, we may see the passage from words to window as one more example of the intermediality of the credit sequence, its recourse to other forms so as to extend its reach into the world of the film itself.

Credit sequences are not doors or windows, of course, but as the entrances into particular kinds of structures they announce these structures in ways that, by the 1950s, were no longer self-evident. The wide variety of credit sequence forms in the decades after the Second World War springs from the withering of a consensus over the extent to which the openings to films should be autonomous or integrated, ceremonial or unobtrusive, loud or silent. Such tensions over expressivity and restraint are part of the moral subplot of twentieth-century aesthetics, of course, and of design in particular. For my purposes, they have much to do with the cinema's relationship to cities as places filled with words and texts. The playful credit sequences of the 1930s, like the animated credits of the late 1950s, were marked by their busy interaction with the spectacles and surfaces of urban life, from which the films to which these sequences belonged took much of their exuberance. In contrast, the silent, solemn credit sequences of the 1950s urban drama found seriousness in their retreat from this traffic, in their search for images of a cityscape whose sounds were muted and from which printed words and graphic forms were all but absent. Strikingly divergent as these two lines of development were, they led film credits to break decisively with their roots in the opening rituals of the printed book or theatrical performance.

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