

FILM CREDIT

by

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A Dissertation Presented to the
FACULTY OF THE USC GRADUATE SCHOOL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(CINEMA-TELEVISION: CRITICAL STUDIES)

August 2013

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DEDICATION

For Adrian, Lena, Mathias, Meredith, and Lady

In Memory of Anne Friedberg

PREVIEW

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No dissertation is completed in isolation. Credit—and the inevitable, terrible pun!—goes to the Critical Studies Division at the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts, its faculty and staff, and the friends and colleagues who have supported me along the way. I have been thoroughly fortunate to receive financial support through a USC Provost’s Fellowship, which afforded me every luxury a scholar could hope for: a room, ample time to think and write, funding for research travel, and a community of challenging and gifted scholars, all of which aided me immeasurably in developing this project. My presence at USC is indebted to the late Anne Friedberg, who was a formidable scholar and a singularly gracious individual. Her advocacy brought me into the Critical Studies program, and though I was only able to benefit from her tutelage for one semester before her untimely passing, Anne’s kindness and generosity in that short span have stayed with me these past five years. Anne still remains a lasting intellectual influence in my life. This dissertation is dedicated to her memory.

The members of my dissertation committee have been invaluable to my intellectual and personal growth, and I cannot thank them enough for their notes, their counsel, and their encouragement as I completed this manuscript. Not enough commendable things can be said about my dissertation chair, Rick Jewell, who has been tireless in his support. Rick was my entry into the wonders of Classical Hollywood cinema, and I have been learning from him since my second week at USC. I will be eternally grateful for the way he shepherded me through this project when matters turned fraught, and thank him dearly for his unwavering support of my intellectual growth and for his faith in my future. Rick is one

of the few people about whom it can honestly be said: he is a gentleman and a scholar. Tom Kemper, a gifted film historian, has also been a trusted mentor and friend throughout my doctoral degree. Tom was instrumental in opening up the study of cinema and media industries—denaturing them, making them strange, and putting pressure on realms of intellectual enquiry I scarcely knew existed. When he threatened to write *Film Credit* if I didn't, Tom unwittingly became the impetus for this dissertation, and I am deeply thankful for the notes he gave me during this project's infancy. The guidance he has provided, in completing the manuscript and beyond, has meant the world to me. Nitin Govil's intellectual gifts were also extraordinarily helpful in completing *Film Credit*. Long before he was employed at USC, *Global Hollywood 2* reoriented my thinking in a way that was instrumental to help me think and write about film labour. When he became part of the Critical Studies faculty, I welcomed the opportunity to learn from him in person. His expansive, capacious, and febrile mind was essential for pushing this project across the goal line, and his interventions been immensely helpful in expanding this project as assumes its (hopefully) longer life.

The supportive intellectual climate at USC has been vital to making me the scholar and person I am today. Coursework with Professors Priya Jaikumar, Akira Lippit, Michael Renov, Ellen Seiter, Kara Keeling, and Richard Meyer challenged my assumptions and made me a better and more probing academic. David James was especially generous to me during a particularly charged moment as I completed my manuscript. Though I was never able to profit directly from David's teaching, I am grateful for his kindness, and for the atmosphere of support he has fostered in the Critical Studies Division. Bill Whittington, Alicia Cornish,

Kim Greene, Jade Agua, and especially Linda Overholt have been steadfast in their support, and I am thankful for the various ways that they have kept me on the straight and narrow. I have also benefitted immensely from the research help of Ned Comstock, USC Cinema Librarian extraordinaire, and from the drop-of-the hat archival assistance of Jonathon Auxier at the USC Warner Bros. Archive. My deepest gratitude goes out to them both.

My graduate student colleagues at USC have been an indispensable source of support and intellectual challenge for the duration, and I truly cannot imagine having made it through this process without them. Casey Riffel, my roommate and dear friend, has been a sounding board for my more ludicrously brazen flights of intellectual fancy. Eric Hoyt, my trusted workout buddy, has been a singular champion of my work, and is the very model of a young scholar. Leah Aldridge, my verbal sparring partner both in and outside academia, has been a cherished grounding presence, and a generous source of sage counsel. My dissertation-writing group—Kate Fortmueller, Stephanie Yeung, Brett Service, Elena Bonomo, Courtney White, Feng-Mei Heberer, and Shawna Kidman—helped propel this work forward in its various stages, and I am privileged to call you my friends. I am thankful that Patty Ahn, Lara Bradshaw, Nadine Chan, Ghia Godfrey, Tim Holland, Brian Jacobson, Chera Kee, Alison Kozberg, Dave Lerner, Sangeeta Marwah, Luci Marzola, Taylor Nygaard, Ken Provencher, Jennifer Rosales, Kelly Wolf, and Genevieve Yue have been my fellow travellers within the Critical Studies program. I am also grateful that Emily Hagenmaier, as well as my USC MFA friends Jeff Chanley, Ryan Lipscomb, Alan Miller, and Eddie Ng have all given me valuable perspective from without.

On a personal level, I have been left agog, agape, and struggling for words when I try to understand the unstinting affection and encouragement of my family: my mum, Lena Crawford, my dad, Adrian Crawford, and my brother, Mathias Crawford. They are the smartest, most wonderful, most caring people I could ever hope to know, but the greatest of their gifts is the truly boundless love and support they have given me. I have always been told to pursue whatever makes my heart sing, without caveats or qualifications, which is perhaps the greatest thing that parents could give to their son. Or perhaps it's these: thanks Dad, for always being there when we came home from school, and for teaching us that lifelong learning is the most awesome thing there is. Thanks Mum, for getting your law degree despite dealing with two incorrigible kids, and for proving it's never too late to go back to school. Thanks Sabu, for always being nearby, and for being my best friend. Without your love and support, I would never have been able to complete my dissertation and become a (real) doctor.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the aesthetic, industrial, and legal considerations that determine the rhetoric, structure, and function of screen credit in American film industry. Appearing in the opening credits that precede the film, and in the final crawl that follows the film, credits are the names and job titles that which individuals or corporations were responsible for what contributions to a motion picture, creative or otherwise. Credits, in their form, syntax, and function, appear fairly straightforward. Yet they are subtended by a number of wide-ranging regimes and complex structural systems: visual experimentation within the collaborative creative practices of film production; collective guild and union bargaining with film producers (as well as one-to-one negotiation between film employees and employers); and a labour law backbone that regulates and reinforces these negotiating regimes. Accordingly, this dissertation argues against considering credits solely in relation to the films that they inaugurate (or follow), and instead posits that credits are semi-autonomous entities, properly intelligible in their own right. By reading the opening credits and final crawl, we learn about the aesthetic values and industrial function of the American film industry in ways that can often surpass analysis of the diegesis itself.

Focussing primarily on the era immediately following the Paramount Decrees of 1948, this dissertation highlights a period when credits assumed greater importance within the American film industry. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a proliferation in the visual experimentation of opening title sequences, particularly through the creative efforts of Saul Bass, Maurice Binder, Robert Brownjohn, and Pablo Ferro. These practitioners, who moved from commercial advertising into the cinema, imported discourses from other artistic

and business practices into their title sequences—including typography, print design, lithography, and fine art. These artists and others also used title sequences to engage with and challenge the conventions of and boundaries between cinema and the visual arts practices that flourished during this period. When the Paramount Decrees ordered the Hollywood studios to divest themselves of their holdings, credits also assumed greater importance to industry professionals. Without the institutional memory guaranteed by vertically integrated film studios, media professionals, working within more ad-hoc production environments characterized by more fluid employment relationships, increasingly relied on credits to certify their professional résumés. The mid-1960s dispute over the possessory credit testifies to the importance of credits during this period and beyond, as writers and directors engaged in a legal battle over who should have the right to the credit “A Film by...” This protracted controversy, which embroiled the Directors Guild of America, the Writers Guild of America, and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, reveals how credits became a deeply coded matrix built on decades of legal manoeuvring and industrial practice, with meanings that go far beyond the surface. Credits became laden with fraught and vital semantic differences, which are inflected by a long historical tail of professional relations in the industry. This semantic evolution is also reflected in the evolution of the final crawl, i.e., the protracted list of names and titles that follow virtually every feature film. The history of the final crawl, which dates back to the late 1930s, is a history of below-the-line industry workers, whose contributions became recognized with greater frequency. In addition to their numerical proliferation, these job titles have also changed in their valence—Sound Editors have become Sound Designers, for

examples—which have elevated the creative esteem of positions that were previously seen as mere “craft” inputs. The history of credits in cinema is therefore tending towards ever-greater stature garnered for its practitioners, ranged against the perceptions of film critics and audiences who viewed this proliferation of credits as an example of distasteful Hollywood self-aggrandizement.

This dissertation argues that credits are a vital tool for understanding the American film industry because the opening titles and final crawl are the only two places in narrative film where its aesthetic, industrial, and legal determinations are written directly onto the screen. The structure and function of credits have broader consequences and determinations into how film texts come to be made, and reveal the machinery of creative labour that goes into making any motion picture.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Connie: Stanley, you knew the deal when you signed on.

Stanley: Oh, come on. The deal's changed! Sure it has!

Connie: Let's re-think that ambassadorship. I'm talking London, I'm talking Paris, I'm talking a secret account for all your extra expenses, getting laid whenever you want. Marine guards will salute you all the time.

Stanley: No, it's tempting, but I gotta answer to a higher calling—art.

Connie: Money?

Stanley: You think I did this for money? I did this for *credit*.

Connie: You always knew that you couldn't take the credit, Stanley.

Stanley: That's one thing, but I'm not going to let two dickheads from film school take it.

Connie: Stanley, listen to me. No fooling—you're playing with your life now.

Stanley: Oh, fuck my life. Fuck my life! I want the *credit!* *The credit!*

—Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman in *Wag the Dog* (1997)

In the commercial narrative cinema, two facets are virtually guaranteed as certain: the opening credits and the final crawl. The former ranges widely from stark letters on black title cards to a profusion of unique typography and computer-generated imagery, inaugurating the spectator into the world of film. The latter contains a protracted parade of names and the roles—often scarcely known to the public—they fulfilled during production. The opening credits and final crawl are endemic to cinema practice—indeed, almost every film made in discursively major or minor cinema traditions is accompanied by some indication of the film's title and who was responsible for it. And yet, in both popular and academic discourse, these elements have been marginalised in a number of ways. Film credits have been treated as an unwelcome distraction into the diegesis, disrupting spectatorial immersion into the narrative world of a film. They have been treated as peripheral to the text, for a film does not truly begin until the opening titles have ended, and a film is over once the action fades to black; the final crawl too is a mere addendum to what has just transpired, and as such is rarely watched by all but a few dedicated theatregoers. Credits have frequently been derided as an indicator of Hollywood avarice; for example the disputes

between two equally prominent actors over who should be given first billing have been disparaged as the ultimate in egotism. Yet these disagreements involve a high degree of investment into what seems, from an outsider's perspective, to be a trivial matter of semantics. Despite their generally understood status as peripheral or even marginalised objects, credits are vitally important to the individuals who work within the film, television, and new media industries, because they are one of the few mechanisms by which these workers can build their professional careers. Since the 1950s, credits moreover have evolved a high degree of visual sophistication, and become a semi-autonomous art in their own right.

Accordingly, this dissertation treats credits as worthy of serious enquiry. What appears as an ancillary discourse is in actual fact subtended by a number of wide-ranging regimes and complex structural systems: visual experimentation within the collaborative creative practices of film production; collective guild and union bargaining with film producers (as well as one-to-one negotiation between film employees and employers); and a labour law backbone that regulates and reinforces these negotiating regimes. Together, these discourses weave a complex, deeply coded matrix of meanings and semantics that goes far beyond the mere presence of words and images on screen. In that vein, this dissertation is something of a corrective, because it takes the opening credits and final crawl, those under-scrutinized yet vital parts of cinema practice, very seriously, and makes them worthy of academic investigation. *Film Credit* delves into the as yet untold aesthetic, legal, and economic-industrial considerations that play a part in the rhetoric, structure, and function of screen credit.

Reviled from without the film industry, but treasured by those within, credits are caught in a fraught push-pull between public perception and private necessity. That divide is evidenced by two very different film texts, from two different decades, made under two vastly different production regimes: *Bacall to Arms* (1946), a Warner Bros. animated short; and *Wag the Dog* (1997), a feature directed by Barry Levinson and co-written by David Mamet. *Bacall to Arms* lampoons the screen coupling of Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, and is structured around the experience of watching a film program in the cinema, from the newsreel to the main feature. The audience is filled with anthropomorphic animals, there to see *To Have- To Have- To Have- To Have...* (these two words of the title flash repeatedly on the screen), a clear parody on the Bogart-Bacall vehicle *To Have and Have Not* (1944). After the title comes the opening credits, a list of “Cast Off Characters” [sic] that scroll upwards on the screen at a pace that makes them all but illegible. When the credits appear, a corpulent pig leaves his row in the theatre, taking this occasion to go to the bathroom. Others choose to sleep in their seats while the credits continue to roll, *ad absurdum*. The joke is that the credits are overlong and audiences ignore them because they present an unwanted distraction. They sit between the beginning of the picture, signalled by the opening title card, and the true beginning of the film’s narrative, and so interrupt the audience’s immersion into the diegesis. Credits here exist in a liminal space, in between extra-diegetic and diegetic worlds, put up on screen as necessity, but unwanted, unloved, and most importantly, unwatched—at least by those present in the theatre.

Wag the Dog occupies the other end of the spectrum, creating an environment where credits are paramount, and are pursued for the sake of reputation until the very literal end.

Days away from the end of a presidential re-election campaign, political consultant Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) hires producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman, in a delightful imitation of über-executive Robert Evans) to create a plausible war. The campaign's intent is to distract public attention away from the president's alleged sexual scandal involving an underage "Firefly Girl" (i.e., Girl Scout). Stanley brings the full weight of his considerable Hollywood experience to the enterprise, drafting a nonexistent military special forces unit, and creating fake vignettes of battle scenes from an illusory war with Albania. Cynical of statecraft as nothing more than elaborate stagecraft, *Wag the Dog* also demystifies much of the Hollywood machinery by focussing on Stanley and his creative decision-making, answering the question: What does a producer do? Germane to this dissertation, *Wag the Dog's* climax ultimately hinges pivots around credit. At the end of the re-election-*cum*-war movie operation, political pundits attribute the president's success to a series of soporific middlebrow commercials. Incensed, Stanley wants to call the network to set the record straight and claim his proper credit for the president's re-election, but Connie stops him, leading to the dialogue that inaugurates this dissertation. The exigencies of state secrets mean that the story—the specious war, the fake POW, all of it—can never be told, but Stanley remains unbowed. To this maverick producer, credit is more important than everything else—more than money more than perks, more than the thanks of a grateful president, even more than his life—which is what Stanley surrenders when he can't stay silent. The film's denouement is Stanley's funeral, his heart attack faked by the CIA. To the end, he insists on getting the credit due to him, which acutely encapsulates a broader need for public recognition that permeates the film industry. As Stanley reasons, though actors

and directors receive individual Oscars for their work, there is no Academy Award for Producing,¹ meaning that relative to these positions, the producer's contributions go largely un-heralded. Though privately, a select few individuals may be aware of Stanley Motss' efforts in producing the war or indeed a motion picture, it is of far greater importance to the producer that his work be publicly and prominently recognised via screen credit.

The dichotomy in credits that plays out in the space-between *Bacall to Arms* and *Wag the Dog*, represented—a friction of two discourses—motivates this dissertation. The first, dominant and predominantly external to the film industry, constructs credits as marginal, unimportant, a nuisance, or otherwise trivial. The second, subordinate and internal to the film industry, sees credits perhaps not so significant as a matter of life and death, but certainly vital, central, and important to those who work within its strictures. As Richard Caves demonstrates in *Creative Industries: Between Art and Commerce*, it is possible to hold these two ideas in the same space, without experiencing cognitive dissonance. “Screen credits for film participants,” Caves writes, “work exactly as vita entries:... the bricks from which the structure of career and reputation are built. Any large film advertisement hence contains a block of credits. The type is microscopic, and most of the names are unknown to the vast majority of readers.”² Caves thus provides an apt summation of credits' structure and interpretation, both on and off the screen, ultimately related to the challenges of legibility. A “billing block” of text appears on every film poster, so small and compact that it begs to be approached and read closely, but ultimately frustrating and opaque because the names (in addition to job titles) are largely unknown and indecipherable to the public that scrutinises them. The “billing block” resists interpretation, at least by individuals who are

not cognisant of the specialised language and vocabulary of the film production industry. And in response to this inability to read and decipher, frustration arises—typified by a 1984 article in the *New York Times*, “What’s a Gaffer, Anyway?”³ In it, Chris Chase begs readers to “Remember when the credits for movies were simple? And intelligible?” He lays the responsibility for contemporary proliferation of inscrutable job titles and their accompanying names at the foot of so much Hollywood ego. Credits are therefore dismissed in popular critical circles, which ill attends to the vital functions that they serve for film industry professionals. *Film Credit* seeks to perform that due diligence and examine the structures and mechanisms that make credit work in the American film industry.

Literature Review and Intervention

Academic writing has treated credits with greater gravity, though it remains a minor movement in cinema studies. French scholarship, especially the writings of Nicole de Mourgues, Alexandre Tylski, and Laurence Moinereau have occupied themselves in trying to divine the purpose, meaning, or *raison d'être* of opening credits. They are particularly rich in their analysis of the role and function of *génériques* from a structuralist perspective, expending great effort establishing its status and ontology as a discursive object, especially in relation to the films that they inaugurate.⁴ De Mourgues, Tylski, and Moinereau are particularly indebted to Gerard Genette’s formulation of the idea of the “paratext,” which they have adopted from its original context and applied to the cinema. Like many other theories applied to film, the paratext is literary in origin, and includes those elements that do not belong to the text proper—such as prefaces, dedications, book covers, and front matter

with publishing details, etc.—but are still routinely included in published works. Like dedications, they may be important to the individual author, but otherwise peripheral; as with front matter, they may be vital to bibliographic organisation, but otherwise un-read. Because the paratext constitutes a demarcation around the text, Genette describes it as that which “enables a text to become a book and offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public.”⁵ Genette also defines the paratext as something

more than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is rather a *threshold*...that offers the world the possibility of either stepping inside or of turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between inside and outside, without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text) ...a zone not only of transition, but of transaction.... (Original emphasis)⁶

The paratext is what creates the book *per se* because its boundary allows the book to be organised and circulated within social and economic frameworks. French cinema scholarship takes this fundamentally literary character of the paratext and applies it to film opening title sequences, finding both equivalences and divergences between the two in functional structural terms. De Mourges and Tylski argue that the credits are the *petit texte* that paves the way for the *grand texte* that is the diegesis.⁷ Tylski also argues, in contradistinction to de Mourges and Moinereau, that it also more properly functions as an overture, similar to those found in musicals, setting the tone for the narrative to come.⁸ Moinereau is much more expansive than his French counterparts, arguing that title sequences can have up to seven different functions, among them: non-figurative, much like an abstract film; emblematic, containing a visual reference to something appearing the film

to follow (a technique espoused by Saul Bass, as we shall later see); thematic, alluding to themes and subjects that will appear in the diegesis (another familiar Bass technique); and as a short film, understood as a textual object apart from the main narrative.⁹ As we shall see later, this dissertation, particularly in Chapter Two, subscribes to this last of Moinereau's functions; I argue that credit sequences should be understood as semi-autonomous objects, intelligible in their own right. For the most part, however, this tradition of French scholarship is largely aesthetic in nature, and sees credits as too deterministically subservient to the narrative. Moreover, this tradition of credits-as-paratext gives too short shrift to the labour and industrial forces at work in creating credits because it does not sufficiently account for ways that credits are necessary to enumerate and identify the labour contributions made on any film.

American academic Leo Charney developed a thesis in the mode of this French tradition, and laboured to create contiguities between credit sequences and the diegesis. In his doctoral dissertation at New York University, Charney used Genette's creation of the paratext's "undefined zone" as an occasion to give film title sequences a definitive function in the experience of film spectatorship:

Classical film uses credits, title cards, and opening sequences to position the viewer outside the film and then lead her inside the action...Classical openings mark the point at which the viewer, outside the film, begins to be led into the film's action; they recognize film-viewing as the viewer's negotiation between exteriority and interiority.¹⁰

Charney thus positions titles as providing a necessary psychological function: to ease the viewer from the extra-diegetic world into the diegetic one, a stance very much in keeping

with Classical Hollywood cinema's ideals of minimizing ruptures in the film's artifice. Charney's intervention is a textually based construction of credits that does not adequately account for the forces of its production. Moreover, I contend that the opening credits do not serve necessarily as an apparatus that negotiates between the inside and the outside of a text. The main titles can also serve as a shock, or bump to the narrative because they are a reminder of its production circumstances, and evidence of the labour that went into production. Germany too has a tradition of studying *Vorspannen* (singular *Vorspann*), the most prominent scholar being Georg Stanitzek.¹¹ Stanitzek's article, "Reading the Title Sequence (*Vorspann, Générique*)" translated for *Cinema Journal* in 2009, frames his article in a similar manner to Charney, arguing that opening titles are first and foremost, geared towards "providing a focus that allows for transition into the movie." He also argues that credits function like a "cinematic form of publisher's imprint," very much in the mode of Genette's paratext.¹² He then goes into a wide-ranging excurses on its "constellations of medium and form," (i.e., modes of aesthetic expression), its legal-structural "inevitability," its "semi-autonomous role" in relationship to the associated film, and the interplay of writing and images in titles, amongst others."¹³ Stanitzek's overarching survey is a valuable resource setting the stage for this dissertation. Stanitzek's analysis is a well-founded overview, woven out of broad cloth he provides a brief overture to the fact that credits "serve a whole array of functions: copyright law, economics, certification of employment in the context of careers, movie title, entertainment, commercials, fashion, and art."¹⁴ As a totalising gesture, his treatment of credits is useful, but can benefit from a more nuanced

understanding of law, economics, and employment; he has left much room to colour in the spaces between those discourses.

English-language scholarship is far less extensive than its European counterparts. An article by Peter Hall, called “Opening Ceremonies: Typography and the Movies, 1955-1969” is misleading, because it is not an overview of traditions in opening credits, but rather an analysis of one designer, Saul Bass, and the novelty of his designs.¹⁵ Hall’s work is otherwise scant and glib in its analysis of other designers. Chapter Two of this dissertation seeks to redress that imbalance by exploring the work of Bass’ contemporaries. Will Straw’s essay “Letters of Introduction: Film Credits and Cityscapes,” performs insightful close readings of title sequences, tracing the history from pre-World War II credits that were fundamentally literary in character (books, scrolls, etc.) into a postwar era, where they were increasingly superimposed over the materiel of urban life—marquees, skylines, etc. Straw finds commonality in “the cinema’s relationship to cities as places filled with words and texts,”¹⁶ and is therefore a useful exemplar of how title sequences can be read with respect to extra-textual discourses. In so doing, Straw’s otherwise useful work does not account for the structure and function of credits on their own terms, especially with respect to their industrial necessities.

Promises in the Dark, Deborah Allison’s doctoral dissertation from East Anglia University, redresses that lacuna somewhat, by surveying industry-wide traditions of title sequences rigorously and deeply from the 1920s to the present day. She identifies historical periods where title design experienced particularly acute growth (e.g., the Saul Bass inspired period of the 1950s, the special effects boom of the 1970s, the computer graphics resurgence