

How do title sequences and short-form advertisements mobilise the same motion graphics toolkit through different logics of composition and meaning?

Content

Key words.....	1
Draft introduction.....	2
Draft Literature review.....	2
Research methods outline.....	5
General outline of each chapter.....	5
Draft chapter	
1 Title Sequences as Paratext: Motion Graphics and the Logic of Framing.	7
1.1 The Crown : Paratext Logic as Institutional Burden.....	7
1.2 Lessons in Chemistry : Paratext Logic as Liberation	8
1.3 What the comparison reveals.....	9
Reference list.....	10
Indicative bibliography.....	11

Key words

motion graphics, title sequences, short-form advertising, paratext, semiotic analysis, dynamic branding, audio branding, motion design, text-image composite, compositional logic

Draft introduction

Motion graphics is everywhere and nowhere in particular as a field of study. As a practice, it saturates contemporary visual culture, from title sequences that open television series to brand films and commercials that circulate across broadcast and digital platforms. However, research-wise, it remains fragmented. There is a design-centred exploration of title sequences as semiotic and paratextual objects, alongside communication studies examining short-form advertising for its effectiveness in driving brand recognition and audience engagement. Neither field addresses the other. The result is a discipline that knows what motion graphics does within each format, but cannot account for what is integral to the medium itself.

This thesis addresses that gap through a formal and semiotic comparison of two audiovisual formats that deploy an identical toolkit, but under completely different compositional logics. Drawing on motion design theory (Stone & Wahlin, 2018), where there is semiotic analysis of text-image composites (Betancourt, 2019), paratextual theory (Gray, 2013; Stanitzek, 2009), and dynamic branding research (Mohamed, 2025; Minsky & Fahey, 2017), it argues that the title sequence operates under paratextual logic while the advertisement industry operates under persuasion and recognition logic. The former organises formal elements around identity construction and audience priming, while the latter optimises these elements for brand activation and behavioural response. By holding the formal toolkit constant and varying the format, the study maps the points at which these two compositional logics diverge and the differences they reveal about motion graphics as a medium. This is not a question either field has explored before. It is the question this thesis is positioned to answer.

Draft Literature review

Motion graphics serve both decorative and technical purposes, as they are systems that create meaning. The formal toolkit, including typography, imagery, texture, motion, and sound, works

together across the production workflow (Braha & Lorenceau, 2018, ch. 1). Stone & Wahlin (2018, p. 12) define the field as an interdisciplinary creative practice consolidating motion, graphic design, animation, and storytelling, in which technology underlies but does not define the communicative act. Gallagher & Padly explain that motion “gives life to inanimate words and images, encoding them with a message for an intended audience” (Stone & Wahlin, 2018, p. 54). Betancourt (2019, pp. 30, 33) speculates on the relationship between these elements and the text-image composite: a visual combination of words and images that communicates through the models of figure-ground, calligram, and rebus structures. Critically, “audience understanding of the relationship between typography and image determines their meaning” (Betancourt, 2019, p. 50). None has meaning in itself. Motion introduces time into this system as Stone & Wahlin (2018, p. 166) describe this as “verb, not a noun,” directing perception and reorganising how the elements are read (p. 13). Unlike static design, motion graphics uses change itself to produce meaning (Betancourt, 2019, p. 123). Maselli & Panadisi (2025, p. 1) extend this through the concept of synaesthetic motion design following Saul Bass’s merger of Bauhaus graphic logic and the temporal moving image. Sound, movement and image fuse into a single expressive unit, in other words, a choreography that is not only visual but musical in nature.

The paratextual logic integrates through the functions and forms of title sequences. Gray (2013) argues that these are “greeters, gatekeepers and cheerleaders” of media, framing through stylised typography, colour, pacing, and animation. They are not just listings, but tone, genre and cultural prestige defined with aspirational formal choices. Stanitzek (2009, p. 45) characterises them as semi-autonomous works with their own rights, “a film within a film,” in which openers have their own internal logic and aesthetic coherence. Davidson (2012, p. 3) adds a temporal dimension, showing that credits accumulate meaning through repetition and build cumulative meaning over time, as shown in *Six Feet Under* (2001) (Davidson 2012, p. 18). These synchronised “hit points” are analysed and found to create a near-bodily satisfaction that rewards rewatching, proving that credits can serve both as a threshold in a single viewing and as a ritual that gains meaning through serial repetition. The framing function also operates physically. Elsaesser & Hagener (2010, p. 47) define the “sensory threshold” as the point at which a stimulus becomes perceptible, arguing that sequences prepare the viewer intellectually and bodily. As Sobchack argues, we experience film through the “full history and carnal knowledge” of our bodily sensorium (cited in Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010, p. 127). Betancourt’s (2019, p. 122) semiotic layering mechanism explains how complex story worlds can be communicated in a matter of seconds. Figure-ground, calligram, and rebus structures allow the viewer to process different layers simultaneously. Paratext logic,

therefore, organises the formal toolkit around identity construction and audience priming rather than persuasion. Rahnadeini & Wempi (2025, pp. 137, 146 and 148) extend on this by examining the factors that the audience actually experience through short-form audiovisuals, which evoke feelings of engagement, trustworthiness, and memorability.

Commercials, branding, and other digital formats share the same formal toolkit but are adapted with different compositional logics that support recognition and influence audience behaviour. Yan & Goh (2025, pp. 14 and 16) study how elements such as typography, colour, and animation enhance attention comprehension and brand recognition, and advise that excessive formal complexity can lead to cognitive overload. Mohamed (2025, p.104) contends that dynamic branding is defined by animated visual identities across digital touchpoints. Here, motion integrates speed, tempo, and direction to reinforce brand personality. Das (2024) emphasises the necessity of visual consistency in motion graphics to maintain brand recognition and foster brand affinity over time. In contrast to title sequences, which build identity from the outset through paratextual logic, advertising extends and establishes identity into motion. Sound is equally integral: Minsky and Fahey (2017, p. 3) define audio branding as the auditory representation of a brand exemplified by a sonic logo. The Sonic logo uses a brief musical signature to enable recognition without visual cues.

Graakjaer (2014) supports this in the TV commercial context, explaining that music is meaning-constructive rather than decorative, and that sound and image function semiotically. Therefore, audio branding in advertising should not be treated as background noise, as it is essential for brand recognition and recall. The structural distinction between the two formats is significant. While title sequences seek to immerse the viewer, short-form advertisements have the same elements to achieve rapid recognition and generate actions of recalling or purchasing. The contrast reinforces a logic of persuasion and recognition in advertising, where each element is optimised to activate brand identity and direct audience response, unlike title sequences, which focus on constructing meaning and priming interpretation.

Scholarly research on these two formats remains largely classified, a gap that this thesis seeks to address. Betancourt (2019), Maselli and Panadisi (2025), Stanitzek (2009), Gray (2013), and Davidson (2012) develop analytical structures solely within the domain of opener's scholarship, with no engagement towards advertisement. As noted by Yan and Goh (2025), Rahmadieni and Wempi (2025), and Mohamed (2025), advertising effectiveness, engagement, and dynamic branding are the main focus. The lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue prevents either field from addressing the central question of this thesis: when the same formal toolkit is applied to both formats, what do differences in outcome reveal about the medium itself? This thesis addresses this gap through close

formal and semiotic analysis of four case studies: two title sequences and two short-form advertisements, using a consistent analytical framework for both.

Betancourt's (2019) text-image composite and Stone and Wahlin's (2018) motion design theory serve as tools for examining how the five formal elements work within each compositional logic. By maintaining a constant toolkit and varying the format, the analysis identifies where paratextual, persuasive, and recognition logics diverge, and what these divergences reveal about motion graphics as a cross-format practice. A preliminary comparison of *The Crown* and *Lessons in Chemistry* title sequences, both produced by Elastic, demonstrates this method in practice: the same studio employing the same toolkit achieves different results. This framework can then be extended to branded motion graphics. *Hermès* and *Nike/SWOOSH* illustrate how motion design adapts to different communicative aims. They shift between luxury storytelling, object symbolism, as well as brand recognition.

Research methods outline

This thesis employs a comparative qualitative methodology through close formal and semiotic analysis of motion graphics across two short audiovisual pieces: title sequences and advertisements. Four case studies will be selected; two from each format. This guarantees comparable production contexts while having form variation. Criteria for piece selection include formal complexity, the availability of supporting production or critical materials, and relevance to existing scholarly discourse. Case studies will mostly involve typography, imagery, texture, motion, and sound, while maintaining the wide range of options available.

The analytical framework integrates Betancourt's (2019) model of text-image composites with Stone and Wahlin's (2018) motion design theory. Each case study will be analysed using a consistent set of questions that address the configuration of formal elements, their compositional interaction over a period of time, and the semiotic functions they meet in their respective contexts. Special focus is placed on how meaning is considered and rendered legible within seconds, as well as on the mechanisms by which each format constructs or activates identity.

Instead of testing a hypothesis, this study constructs a structured comparison between two fields that are seldom analysed in tandem. By using a unified analytical framework, the research aims to clarify how motion graphics function approaches differently, as paratextual as well as immersive systems in opening credits and as persuasive, recognition-oriented systems in advertising. This approach contributes to broader scholarly discussions on visual narrative and audience engagement within digital media.

General outline of each chapter

Chapter 1 : Title Sequences as Paratext: Motion Graphics and the Logic of Framing

This chapter analyses how the formal toolkit of motion graphics, including typography, imagery, texture, motion, and sound, is used. This operates under paratextual logic in two title sequence case studies produced by Elastic studio: *The Crown* (dir. Patrick Clair, Netflix, 2016) and *Lessons in Chemistry* (CD Hazel Baird, Apple TV+, 2023). The research question motivating this chapter is to explore how the same five formal elements, deployed by the same studio within the same format, produce irreconcilably different semiotic outcomes. Scholars that are included are Betancourt (2019), whose text–image composite and rebus mode provide the primary close-reading method; Gray and Picarelli (2013), whose concept of the aspirational paratext frames the logic governing both sequences; Stanitzek (2009), who establishes the title sequence as a semi-autonomous 'film within the film'; Davidson (2012), who extends this into serial cumulative identity; and Stone and Wahlin (2018), who supply the formal vocabulary for analysing motion as a meaning-producing mechanism. The chapter addresses the research question by demonstrating that paratext logic is not only a stylistic choice, but also a structural condition of the format. This way, the toolkit can be adjusted within this framework to produce any semiotic register required by the primary text.

Chapter 2 : Advertising Case Studies: Nike .SWOOSH and Hermès

This chapter analyses two short-form audiovisual advertising works: *Nike .SWOOSH* (Territory Studio, 2022) and *Hermès: It's Time for a Joyful Show* (dir. Alice Kunisué, 2023) and will examine how the same formal toolkit is organised under persuasion and recognition logic. The research question driving this chapter will explore how typography, imagery, texture, motion, and sound function differently when the communicative goal shifts from identity construction to brand activation and behavioural response. Researchers like Betancourt (2019) and Stone and Wahlin (2018) used the overarching analytical framework, alongside Mohamed (2025) on dynamic branding, Minsky and Fahey (2017) on sonic identity, and Yah and Goh (2025) on motion graphics and brand recognition. The chapter answers its research question by showing that persuasion logic does not prescribe a single formal approach. Even having *Nike .SWOOSH* and *Hermès*, using diametrically opposed formal strategies, they share a communicative orientation towards rapid recognition and sensory brand differentiation.

Chapter 3 : Comparative Analysis and Discussion

This chapter synthesises the findings of Chapters 1 and 2 through a structured cross-format comparison of all four case studies. The research questions driving this chapter are examining where exactly paratext logic and persuasion, and recognition logic diverge in their organisation of the formal toolkit. If the contrast between *Nike .SWOOSH* and *Hermès* in advertising mirror the contrast between *The Crown* and *Lessons in Chemistry* in their title sequences, and suggest that compositional logic, not format, is the primary determinant of the semiotic outcome. And what do those divergences reveal about motion graphics as a medium. Stone and Wahlin (2018) and Betancourt (2019) function as the overarching framework; all case study sources are applied comparatively. The chapter argues that motion graphics is best understood as a shared semiotic system whose meaning-producing capacity is determined not by the elements of the toolkit but by the compositional logic applied to them. This is a claim that can only be made here, where all four cases are held simultaneously in view.

Draft chapter

1 Title Sequences as Paratext: Motion Graphics and the Logic of Framing

This chapter applies the comparative structure developed in the literature review to two title sequences produced by Elastic studio: *The Crown* (dir. Patrick Clair, Netflix, 2016) and *Lessons in Chemistry* (CD Hazel Baird, Apple TV+, 2023). Both sequences deploy the same formal toolkit through typography, imagery, texture, motion, and sound, and yet produce sharply different on-screen identities. By analysing how each sequence organises these elements under paratextual logic, this chapter demonstrates the analytical method that will be applied across all case studies in the thesis and begins to map out what format-specific and medium-specific choices look like in practice.

1.1 The Crown : Paratext Logic as Institutional Burden

The Crown's title sequence choreographs all five formal elements to create the entire argument of the series into ninety seconds. In the imagery and motion, the raw gold is transformed into filigree designs and finally into a crown. This is to be understood as enactment, rather than illustration, via Betancourt's (2019) text-image composite framework. The gold does not indicate the process of becoming a monarch; it enacts it, encoding duty and irreversibility into the motion, not into any single frame. Here, the formulation by Stone and Wahlin (2018, p.54) is precise. The movement is decorative but argumentative. What moves in the scene becomes the meaning.

The sequence is in Betancourt's (2019, pp. 30, 77) rebus mode as credits appear in close proximity to the forming filigree, the physical material becomes a rhetorical juxtaposition encoding institutional duty and the crushing weight of monarchical identity. Raoul Marks reveals that the client requested an 'experimental kind of bleak' look, forming a “godlike image” from “elemental earth” (Marks, 2026). The focus on flaws of the gold on a macroscopic level encodes the human behind the symbol. This serves as a reminder, as Marks writes, of how “perfectly imperfect us humans really are” beneath the crown. This meaning is held in Betancourt's (2019, p.92) semiotic suspension: disclosed gradually across the season rather than declared in any single frame.

Motion operates as the sequence's central structural argument. The deliberate, contemplative pace is precisely what Gray and Picarelli (2013) identify as the formal marker of prestige television openers — a choice that signals 'elegance and perfection' and positions the work within the 'values of high culture.' The slowness is not compositional restraint but a queue that asks the viewer to settle, to attend, to receive what follows as a serious cultural artefact. Typography reinforces sparing serif letterforms with liberal tracking in order to produce an engraving effect. The credits certify the series rather than announcing it, performing what Gray and Picarelli (2013) call 'industrial authority' through formal choices alone. Stanitzek (2009, p.45) argues that the title sequence 'establishes itself as distinct from the main film' through its autonomous formal coherence, and *The Crown's* typography confirms this: it reads not as a threshold to the show but as an institution already in existence.

Sound brings closure to the process of the semiotic layering. The soundtrack written by Hans Zimmer, whose melancholic melodies evolve towards a strong percussive climax, is in effect synaesthetic motion design as proposed by Maselli and Panadisi (2025, p.1). This theory posits that sound, image, and motion converge in one expressive unity instead of following parallel tracks. This sound does not complement the imagery but adds to its power through the transformation of the solidifying mass of the gold into acoustic terms that are experienced physically by the viewer before being analysed intellectually. From the perspective of seriality postulated by Davidson (2012), the film soundtrack builds up through each viewing and serves as a conditioned ritual signal, or “curtain music,” separating what comes after from everything else and implying a heavy emotional baggage on the audience's side prior to the first scene begins.

1.2 Lessons in Chemistry : Paratext Logic as Liberation

Where *The Crown* operates through weight and institutional gravity, *Lessons in Chemistry* operates through lightness and propulsive energy, yet the compositional logic governing both is structurally identical. Both sequences use paratext logic: the organisation of formal elements around identity construction and audience priming rather than persuasion. What differs is the semiotic register in

which that logic is applied. The sequence opens with anthropomorphised pencils, being tools Creative Director Hazel Baird identifies as 'pivotal elements' representing the agency of protagonist Elizabeth Zott (Baird, 2023). Betancourt's (2019, pp. 30, 77) rebus approach is especially apt in this case because rather than symbolise Elizabeth, the pencil enacts her in order to create meaning by virtue of the space that lies between the signifier and the signified. Not a metaphor for agency, the drawing pencil that writes, erases, and dances is an instance of agency captured in action. Through the writing out of a chemical helix on graph paper, the dissolving into batter, the sequence reveals the series's thesis statement that domestic cooking is, in fact, chemistry.

It can be seen from the following quotation that there is a tone conflict in this sequence that was posed by Baird himself: "How are we going to have this bright, positive sequence knowing that something that is quite horrific is going to happen?" (Baird, quoted in IndieWire, 2023). This sequence does not reconcile the conflict but creates an international conflict throughout the series. As mentioned by Gray and Picarelli (2013), the sequence is not related to the darker side of the show but primes the audience for the same.

Colour and texture perform this function at the material level. *The Crown* uses metals and chiaroscuro to signify enduring institutions; *Lessons in Chemistry* uses flat matte notebook paper, graph paper, and grain textures to signify the remains of thinking as process rather than thinking as monumentalisation. Pastels are the index of the 1960s (Baird, 2023). In other words, before the story, the 1960s had been settled. Molly Bailey's jazz soundtrack is the same synaesthetic effect played out that Zimmer achieves in *The Crown* (Maselli and Panadisi, 2025, p.1). However, while Zimmer uses strings to create gravity, Bailey uses brass to create release. Same technique, opposite effect. Through Davidson's (2012) serial structure, the jazz track accrues at each episode's start until it becomes ritualised, with its "gapped quality" providing the returning viewer with increasing resonance.

1.3 What the comparison reveals

The juxtaposition of these two sequences confirms the central methodological premise of this thesis: the formal toolkit of motion graphics does not carry inherent meaning. Meaning is produced by the compositional logic applied to it. Both sequences are organised under paratextual logic, both construct identity, prime the viewer, and operate as semi-autonomous paratextual works in Stanitzek's (2009, p. 45) sense. Yet they produce irreconcilable on-screen identities from the same elements, the same studio, and the same format. The contrast between the molten-gold textures at the macroscopic level in *The Crown* and the propulsive, pencil-led choreography of *Lessons in Chemistry* demonstrates that the semiotic outcome is determined by the thematic context of the

primary text, not by the technical affordances of the studio. This is the strongest evidence that paratext logic is a structural necessity of title sequence form rather than a style choice, and in which the five formal categories are capable of being arranged in a way as to create any register of semiotics required by the work. The toolkit is not the meaning. The logic is the meaning. In the following chapter, the same analysis is applied to short-form audiovisual advertising, investigating whether another compositional logic, based on persuasion and recognition logic, results in a systematic difference.

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