Despite the detailed critical attention given to the study of cinema in the present day and the obvious desire of researchers and reviewers to explore previously unexamined aspects of the medium, surprisingly little analysis has been directed towards the opening title sequences of films. This seems an odd oversight given the significance of titles, for they represent the critical and fragile moment of first contact between a film and its audience. Title sequences serve to arrest the attention of the viewer, ushering them into the imaginary world of the cinemematic experience. For the film’s makers, the credit sequence represents their opening gambit, a green light signalling us, demanding our attention, telling us that the stream of trailers, advertisements and promotions that precede the main event are over. Now is the time to settle in our seats, to focus and enter the private space of the film, to suspend our disbelief and block out the reality that we are surrounded by others who are also entering the mysterious play of light and sound. As design writer Ken Coupland has put it, ‘the first few minutes of a film can be compared to that curious stage of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep’.

Given the predominance of the visual and auditory character of cinema there is an appealing irony in the fact that we ‘read’ our way into a film. Like an aperitif, titles stimulate our senses, excite us with the expectation of what is to follow. The appearance of the title and the roll call of its stars establishes the lexicon of the film, the grammar of cinema. And like all first impressions, a bad one is difficult to overcome. Just like a musician’s first note or a comedian’s opening joke, to fall flat here spells potential
disaster. As Shiela Benson has said,

A movie is never more vulnerable than at its opening. Within those few minutes it will seem crass or sophisticated, flat or intriguing, bombastic or subtle. It is the title sequence of images and their vital other half, the film’s music, that place us at the emotional centre of the movie.²

It is generally held that a film’s title sequence will offer strong indicators to its audience, clues to the genre, style and mood of the film. Thin letters for comedy, thick ones for murders, bouncy and buoyant letters for romance³ is how Hollywood title designer Harold Adler saw his formula for successful titles. This is in line with the classical model of screen titles, which advocates an organic continuity between title and film so that opening sequences become a window into the film itself, representing in miniature the thematic concerns of the work, sending us pre-emptive messages – this is blockbuster, this is slapstick, this is art, this is low budget, this is independent. However, in Australia the messages we received from the titles of our films during the 1950s were a little different – this is exotic, this cultural cringe, this is searching for an international market.

The aesthetic significance of film titles was not widely recognized within the film industry until the 1950s. The turning point came when Otto Preminger’s The Man With The Golden Arm (1955) burst onto the screen. The great American title designer, Saul Bass, created an opening title sequence for Preminger that is seen by many, especially the American film world, as the movie that turned opening titles into an art form. Bass’s partnerships with Preminger and Alfred Hitchcock created some of the most memorable title sequences seen to this day. Along with The Man With The Golden Arm, his work on films such as Vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958), Anatomy of a Murder (Preminger, 1959), Exodus (Preminger, 1960) and Psycho (Hitchcock, 1960) was etched into movie-watchers’ memories. Australian film-makers were quick to recognize the potential of more sophisticated title sequences to capture an audience from the outset. They quickly abandoned the low-key titles of British films and opted for the more innovative methods of Hollywood.

Title artists such as Sydney’s Will Cathcart, ‘The Father of Australian titles’ as director Lee Robinson⁴ has called him, saw this as a great opportunity to extend the boundaries of their craft. Creating his first titles for the Wilfred Lucas film, The Shadow of Lightning Ridge in 1919, then Raymond Longford’s The Sentimental Bloke in that same year, Cathcart was set on a journey that lasted some fifty years. To track his career is to write a history of Australian titling from silent film through to the industry’s timely renaissance, where he could still be found creating hand-painted titles in his Burwood studio into the early 1970s.

Cathcart and his long-time partner, Harry Dale, would have found the going tough through the 1950s. Shortly after the Second World War, Australia’s film industry was in dyer trouble of becoming another postwar casualty. Making and distributing a feature film during Robert Menzies 1950s was, in no uncertain terms, a challenge. Australia’s government was sending a clear message to its film industry. Its allegiances in the corporate film world lay elsewhere and local film-makers were left to sink or swim. For quite a while in the ’50s and ’60s, the Australian film industry was doing some serious dog paddling and getting nowhere. During the entire 1950s only a little over twenty feature films were made in Australia, a number of these being offshore financed and produced films.

With little prospect of locally produced features being made in the near future, the queue to get through customs and out of Australia’s cultural wasteland was growing. Many young people trying to sustain a career in film decided they could no longer learn their craft in the dying Australian film industry, so they sort experience elsewhere. ‘We were told by the Menzies regime that there was nothing for us here, that we weren’t good enough’, says film-maker and producer Anthony Buckley, ‘and if you look at Australia in the ’50s, it was pretty dull and listless’.⁵ In the 1960s, one of Australia’s leanest decades for feature releases, the amount of films produced dropped even further. Compare these two decades to the beginning of the Australian film industry’s renaissance, the 1970s, where by the end of 1973, the movie output had already exceeded that of the ’50s and ’60s combined. As film writer Tom O’Regan once wrote:

You go through the 1950s to arrive elsewhere: whether at the agitation for a film industry of the 1960s and the resulting film revival of the 1970s, or backward to the frustrated aspirations of the 1940s and the Cinesound years of the 1930s.⁶

Despite the many problems encountered during this difficult period, the quality of film titling seemed to get through this diff-
ficult period relatively unscathed. When discussing Australian films of the '50s, director Lee Robinson said recently, 'You might not always get the right result with Australian films, but the titles would always be world class, because we had guys like Will Cathcart'.

**HOW HARD CAN IT BE?**

IN THE EARLY TO MID 1950s, APPLYING the opening titles to feature films, documentaries and newsreels was a complex and intricate art. There were various methods of producing the title cards. The simplest technique was to use white painted type on a black card and then film it. A more effective method was developed by painting the titles directly onto a plate of glass. Title artists found that, while more difficult to handle than pieces of card, glass gave the sharpest and best finish of all mediums. It also offered the added advantage of getting the title and background in 'one shot', simply by laying the glass over the desired background.

The title artist started with a piece of glass approximately three foot square. As a sign writer might do on a shop window, he paints his titles on the reverse side of the glass, with the type reading backwards. This means that all the imperfections of the paintwork are on the reverse side of the titles. When seen from the front, the titles appear smooth and consistent, with no strokes or paint build up, and all the faults left on the backside of the glass. Mistakes on glass could be easily rectified with the aid of a sharp razorblade. If the opening titles were to feature a painting or still photograph behind the titles, the glass would simply be laid down on top and filmed. Subtle drop shadows could be achieved by sitting the glass titles fractionally above the surface of the background and lighting the type accordingly, thus casting a small shadow. Light intensity dictated the strength of the shadow.

There were, however, obvious problems in handling large sheets of glass. Great care needed to be taken in the setting up prior to shooting. Director Bob Walker remembers his tussles with glass titles in
the '50s. 'They were a curse', says Walker, 'because they would get reflections all over them, so you've got to have black over everything. And the bloody thing reflects the camera, because the glass had to be at 90° to the lens'. With these hitches solved, the titles were then shot on a high contrast film stock. It was vitally important that when shooting the titles the extremes were captured, the darks and the lights, with no greys in between. If you shot the titles with a regular film stock, you were in danger of picking up some greys in the black card or even reflections off the glass. The high contrast stock would only pick up the blacks and whites off the title cards.

A popular film stock that achieved these results in the '50s was the Bell & Howell Perforated High Contrast 35mm film stock. It provided excellent contrast, and also extra stability when it was fed through the sprocket claws. The Bell & Howell stock had smaller and rounder holes that ran down the side of the filmstrip, as opposed to the larger, squarer holes of normal 35mm film. This meant that when it was fed through the printer to be married to a moving or stationary background there was no movement in the titles. In some early films you can see a slight wobble in the titles when they are shown on the screen. This is due to the film stock moving around in the printer when it was married to the background. The smaller, tighter holes in the Bell & Howell stock prevented this.

Putting the opening sequence together was a time-consuming and precise operation. It involved three pieces of film. Firstly, the background film, which would contain the image sitting underneath the titles. This could be a moving image, like a slow scan of a landscape; a still image, such as a painting or photograph; or simply a flat coloured or textured background.

The second strip of film was a positive print of the titles. For example, if you were shooting white type on a black card, each frame of the film would contain clear type on a black background, as the white does not print. The third and final piece of film was the negative version of the titles, the reverse of the positive, i.e., black type on a clear background.

The first piece of film, the background, would be married to the third piece of film, the title negative. They would both go into the printer together to make what is called a 'mat print'. Basically this is the background with black type (which could be the desired result in some cases). To achieve white titles, the still undeveloped film was wound back to the start and the positive version of the titles was then added in the printer. It lined up exactly with the negative type. When exposed again, the clear areas on the positive film, the titles, let the light through to cause the black shapes to turn white, giving you white titles.

When colour film became popular, a filter could be added to this final process to achieve coloured titles. Because the Bell & Howell Perforated High Contrast Black and White stock achieved such outstanding results when shooting titles, it was still preferred for titles over colour stock. Its amazing high contrasts of black and white made it the only option.

**TEX-MEX, LEFTIES AND PARADISE**

**OFTEN THE TITLE SEQUENCES OF**

Australian films reflect the type of cultural ambiguity symptomatic of the Australian film industry in general. They reflect a desire to take part in the shaping of a distinctly national cinema, but with one eye firmly fixed on the lucrative overseas market. While the films and their title sequences are often driven by attempts to depict the character of Australia, they also look to conform to the established protocols and dramatic conventions of Hollywood.

One of the earliest and most striking instances of this cultural ambiguity is found in Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955). Chauvel had originally planned a title sequence that would be dominated by Aboriginal imagery with a quasi-Indigenous typeface. The title sequence was to announce the authenticity of his work, his classic Australian drama that would bring the vexed issue of race relations to the big screen and feature the Aboriginal actors Ngarla Kunoth and Robert Tudawali.

In a perfect world, this is how Chauvel would have begun *Jedda*:

**FADE IN: CREDIT TITLES**, which are carried out in decorative Aborigine [sic] designs and colours – superimposed on a paper bark motif. Black hands tear the paper bark slips away. Dissolve to primitive landscape.

However, Chauvel changed his mind somewhere along the production trail and what we end up with is a title sequence
that conforms more to the established format of the American Western than anything Australian. *Jedda* opens with the Chauvel Productions cross-cultural logo, with its Wild West image of the tilted wagon wheel set in front of a futuristic cityscape (an image which negotiates two cultures in a single frame). Chauvel's logo then gives way to a hand painting of a desert-scrape that looks more like the Rio Grande than the Never Never and the word 'JEDDA' appears on the screen in stock slab serif, Western typeface. Slab serif faces are so called because of the squarer, deeper serifs or slabs at the end of the strokes. Meanwhile, an epic Tex-Mex symphony builds in intensity. The opening sequence then cuts to a map of Australia (a recurring device in Australian films of the '50s), which both establishes the unknown and exotic space for international audiences, while also making an implicit connection with the Western frontier saga. A printed narrative gives way to a spoken monologue by actor Paul Reynall: 'My name is Joe ... this is Australia ... this is Australia's dead heart'. Joe's vocal presence in the title sequence provides an early indication of his complex and culturally ambiguous role in this drama of race. He is the son of an Aboriginal woman and an Afghan camel-driver, brought up by a white family in the outback. However, his narrative voice belongs to that of a highly educated white man, and there is a strong sense that he represents an 'ideal' product of white-black relations. While Joe absorbs, and profits by, white society, the girl he loves, Jedda, is torn between the claims of the two cultures. Joe represents one option for the young Aboriginal woman; however, Jedda is drawn to Marbuck, the wild 'noble savage', who embodies the more potent and more tragic alternative. The confusions of identity that drive the drama of the film are evident in its opening sequence. Just as Jedda must negotiate two cultures, Chauvell finds himself announcing his quintessentially Australian film with a B-grade Western title sequence.

Like Chauvel's *Jedda*, Cecil Holmes's *Three in One* (1957) deals with matters close to the heart of national identity. *Three in One* is a rare sapphire in Australian cinema. Influenced more by Europe-an cinema than Hollywood, it presents three short films integrated by narration from John McCallum. The film's left-wing sentiments ensured it did not receive a wide distribution, despite favourable international reviews. This was unfortunate. Even in a Cold War climate, the film's politics were not overtly radical and a chance was missed to embrace a film that one French critic celebrated as a 'determined step to create a national style',16 a film that should have been 'a landmark in the development of the Australian cinema'.11 In a rather unique opening sequence, narrator McCallum and filmmaker Holmes play out a 'prologue' in McCallum's dressing room at the Tivoli, where he has just left the stage. Still wiping makeup up from his face, McCallum provides an 'impromptu' account of what the film we are watching is all about.

McCallum dwells on the forward march of industrial progress and expansion in modern times, but assures us that some things do not change, that some essential quality of Australian life remains untouched. This quality that defines the Australian character is the ideal of 'mateship'. McCallum's introductory speech aims to make a seamless connection between Australian tradition and folklore and the solidity and collective practices of working-class Australians. The three films of *Three in One* all deal with the idea of sticking together in times of adversity, yet, at times, the desire to associate the often conservative notion of traditional Australian values with a working-class political ethos creates uncertain and awkward moments and these are illustrated in the film's opening title sequence. The film opens with a rough animation of a spinning globe, which stops at Australia as the camera tracks into a close-up. 'Australian Traditional Films' is superimposed over a panning camera that crosses the cityscape of Sydney before settling at the doors of the Tivoli Theatre and then the dressing room of John McCallum. This initial imagery, with its suggestions of tradition and culture, is, however, undercut by the roughcast hand lettering of the titles, which write themselves across the screen and evoke a sense of workaday simplicity, informality and sardonic humour. This air of lightness is supported by the comic speed of the soundtrack, played by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Here the interplay between the traditional, the high cultural and the common man's wry and laconic take on life create an ambiguity that is symptomatic of the title sequences of the period. As in *Jedda*, much of the attempt to capture an authentic Australianness is broken down by the estrangement and cultural cringe of the narrator's accent. John McCallum's insights into the traditional Australian character and the essence of national identity seem defeated by his own relinquishing of an identifiable Australian accent and cultivation of an
English idiom which seems to mock the whole notion of Australian identity.

While the title sequences of Jeddah and Three in One follow the conventional format of introducing the film via the promotion of the film's production company (an approach Rank, MGM, Fox and others turned into an art form), the 1956 Lee Robinson film, Walk Into Paradise, sought to use the title sequence to provide an immediate assault on the senses and maximise the dramatic effect of the action adventure film. As viewers, we are given no time to settle and surrender to the medium. Instead, we are captured unawares, thrust into an immediate confrontation with the primal, uncivilised and unknowable world of the film's exotic location. The audience is ambushed by George Auric's thundering score and the film's three word title in large hand-lettered searing magenta type on a black background. This stunning opening visual, along with the entire title sequence, was designed and hand-lettered by a friend of Auric's in Paris, where all the post-production took place. In the top left-hand corner of the screen appears a foreboding illustration of a primitive mask of the Arasaro and Wahgi Valley tribes of New Guinea; it appears to sit in judgement as the opening credits appear and disappear. From the outset, a sense of the primal and sensual is evoked as sound, colour and typography combine to announce the impending drama of action and adventure.

This impressive opening sequence also expresses a powerful irony. The Utopian sense of a walk into paradise is fiercely undercut by the provocative threat of the tribal mask and the exotic and erotic power of the magenta type. Beyond the ideal of paradise is the lurking threat of the demonic. The irony was discarded for the film's American release, where it was retitled Walk into Hell.

As the title sequence fades a more conventional structure begins to operate. A map of New Guinea locates the setting of the action as in Jeddah and Three in One, and Chips Rafferty's voice-over pronounces the epic endeavour of the 'brave Australian administrators' who seek to bring civil order to this untamed jungle.
While Rafferty’s monologue does not bear up well to ideological scrutiny, the issues it inadvertently raises regarding cultural conquest and colonisation are also reflected in an unexpected manner in the title sequence. As Pike and Cooper explain, Robinson and Rafferty’s collaboration, Southern International, was in an advanced stage of preparation when French producer Paul-Edmond Decharmé proposed a co-production with his organization, Discifilm. Just in time it seems, as Lee Robinson says, ‘The money wasn’t going to come from anywhere else’. Changes to the screenplay were made to allow for the inclusion of two French actors and Robinson was assisted by a French director, Marcel Pagliero. Two versions of the film were made, one in French and one in English. The film was edited in Paris and opened there as L’Odyssée du Capitaine Steve, with Pagliero given full credit as the director in the French title sequence.

In 1930, G.P. Kendall, an authority on the titles of the silent film, considered film titles to be ‘a simple thing’, ‘just a bit of film carrying some wording which is thrown upon the screen for the audience to read’. Today this ‘simple thing’ has become a complex art commanding large budgets and the input of many creative and technical minds. From a mere functional starting point to announce a film’s name and the hierarchy of personnel involved in its production, title sequences had by the ’50s evolved into a film within a film, a microcosm which projected the values, thematic concerns and aesthetic qualities of the film itself.

By the late ’50s, the earlier demarcation between title sequence and the main body of the film was breaking down. Increasingly, title sequences were becoming more sophisticated (though for a long time to come they would remain one of the last budgetary considerations) as they were integrated into the film proper, merging with or overlapping the dramatic action. Films such as Dust in the Sun (1958) and The Siege of Pinchgut (1959) ran their titles for five to ten minutes into the action and, in both cases, the early footage is not scene-setting preamble but a high point in dramatic intensity.

The role of typography in the title sequence also became a significant element of the film’s promotion and publicity. Billboard promotions and theatre advertisements often featured a still from the title sequence featuring the original typography. The conventions of typography meant that a prospective audience could instantly ascertain information about the film’s form and genre. In this respect, film typography and its role in the title sequence acts much like the cover of a book. It may not be an accurate guide to the quality of the work itself, but it will provide a recognizable code, a set of conventions by which a viewer can gain a foresight into the style, period, theme and genre of the film.

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ENDNOTES

7 Lee Robinson, personal interview with Peter White on 12 April 2001.
10 O’Regan, op. cit.
11 Ibid.