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Kinetic typography in movie title sequences

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Abstract

Increment of visual, auditory stimuli in the environment, fast pace of life made compulsory of presenting the information to the audience in a short time by attractively and intensely. Newly communication medium of globalized world, digital media, have higher visual, auditory, interactional features and increase the importance of designing for these areas. Today’s new media allows changing of the format, size, assignment and movement and also diversify the common typographic concepts into kinetic typography. Kinetic typography which is most commonly encountered in commercials, motion graphics, music clips and film title sequences, constitutes an important part of TV and cinema graphics. In kinetic typography, letters have dynamic structure that can enter from the different aspects of the display, and changes in style and color according to the word’s meaning, music/sound rhythm. In this sense typography has a great importance being a visual language, style, identity as much as its dynamic communication tool with multi-faceted structure.

Keywords: Graphic design, kinetic typography, motion typography, movie title sequences;

1. Movie Title Sequences and Their Development Process

“Jenerik” is used in Turkish meaning “movie title sequences” as the French equivalent of “generique.” In the movie world, it is used to describe the part, appearing before and after the movie, where the title of the movie, the names of the actors, the director, the technical team, and the producer are listed. Movie title sequences can be used in two ways, one being before the beginning of the movie and the other being after the end of the movie. The one used at the beginning of the movie is known as the opening credits where the title of the movie, the leading actors, and the prominent members of the production are listed alongside with accompanying scenes. The opening credits are significant in that their purpose is not only to introduce prominent names but also to prepare the audience for the content-theme of the movie. Walter Murch underlines the significance of the opening credits as such: “The head scene of a movie is like the frame around a painting. It should keep the audience in suspense as to what the movie has and should elevate the audience’s curiosity, should address the audience’s emotional style, should inform the audience about the story, and should make the audience comment on the visual style of the movie to be found by the audience themselves” (Krasner, 2004, p. 36). The detailed movie title sequence found at the end of the movie listing all those who labored for the movie such as the cast, the technical team, and the sponsors working in the production is called the closing credits. Although the duration of opening and closing sequences has varied since the beginning of cinema, the closing movie title sequences are longer than the opening sequences and most of the time they are

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presented to the audience over a detailed scene telling about the movie or over the last scene. Las-Casas, who investigated the graphic design elements and the different uses of typography in movies (2008), calls movie title sequences “informational typography.” According to Las-Casas (2008), informational graphic design, of which movie title sequences are a part, is a congenial commentator that transmits information and gets emotion over to the audience and works on a complementary basis; it also encourages different readings of the movie’s story. Graphic designer and the doyen of movie title sequence designs Saul Bass defines the sequences as “a component of graphics, typography, motion picture and music; a foreword that has a significant contribution to the process of storytelling” (Noyan, 2006, p.4). Bass, talking especially about the credits of the famous West Side Story (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961), defines the opening credits as a preparation before the movie and defines the closing credits as a “decomposition chamber” for the audience to relieve the effects of the adventure they went through following a dramatic final.

When the historical development of movie title sequences is studied, it is apparent that alongside with the design tendencies of the era, the means brought about by the digital media and technological developments are among the significant factors that affect and change movie title sequence design. Although they change over time, Deborah Allison classifies the general functional and characteristic features of movie title sequences as such:

1) Movie title sequence typography; Size of the font, its arrangement & duration on the screen, the title of the movie
2) Movie title sequence background look; Simple backgrounds, Stable backgrounds, Scenes in which the leading character is introduced, Backgrounds in the form of a book page, Orchestra, Animation, Backgrounds with minimal motion, Backgrounds composed of action scenes
3) Theme song (Deborah, 2001).

Movie title sequence typography is a powerful design element that not only can allude to the story of the movie but also to the genre and the general atmosphere of the movie. When one studies the history of title sequence design, it is seen that specific fonts have been identified with specific movie genres. For instance, while Goudy Text, one of the old British style fonts in handwriting form, has been used more in title sequences of movies about ancient European history, bold square serif fonts like Playbill have been identified with western movies. Title sequence backgrounds, on the other hand, are among the significant parts that are able to offer the style of the movie in an effective way. Background images, which are the most outstanding field of visuality, are powerful graphics that transmit the theme of the movie to the audience through the presentation of the atmosphere of the movie and the scenes, editing, and visual effects. For example, the title sequences of a drama that has a stable background with a single scene and the title sequences of an adventure movie that has sliding scenes arouse different emotions about the movie in the audience. The theme song also has a very important role in creating the general atmosphere of the movie. While the music goes parallel to the editing and the story in the overall movie, it is generally differentiated in the title sequences. This situation tells the audience about the genre and the feeling of the movie. For example, “…title sequences of a comedy movie generally use musical pieces with a high, fast beat that carry happy feelings.”

Movie elements that can be called movie credits were first used in silent movies. Cards containing the texts were handmade with brushes and after having been photographed they were added to the movies. Then, with the introduction of voice to cinema, different approaches like reading the title sequences were born. For instance, opening movie credits are read by a voice-over in The Magnificent Ambersons (Orson Welles, 1942), Fahrenheit 451 (François Truffaut, 1966), and M.A.S.H (Robert Altman, 1970) (Sayın, 2011. p.58). Erwin Panofsky talks about his days in Berlin in the 1910s when he went to the movies: The producers were using definitive methods like those in the arts of the Middle Age. One of them was the subtitles or titles which were equivalent to the long, definitive book titles and decrees of the Middle Age (Before that, there were even commentators who would tell the audience about the event and they would shout: “Now the man thinks that his wife is dead but she has not died” or “I do not want to offend the women among the audience but I do not think that even one of them would sacrifice herself this much for her child”). These commentators had found a guild in Japan and had been so powerful as to delay the development of talking pictures (Wollen, 2004, p.108). “Today we still have voiceover title sequences in
Azerbaijani television” (Noyan, 2006, p. 4). These approaches were left soon and some trials like not having title sequences or having sequences only at the end of the movie were also carried out. In the 1920s the names of the leading actors, the director, and the producer were listed in title sequences that took a minute the most. There were no closing credits in those years. But people found it appropriate to have the stars’ names also at the end of the movie in time. “At the end of the 1930s the studios created their own title sequence styles. For example, The Warner Bros Studios was one of the first who created its own style. The studio mainly designed title sequences through using the wipe technique by placing the names of the main characters’ on their portraits. MGM, on the other hand, preferred to use the lion portrait as a background for sliding names. Twentieth Century Fox rather used backgrounds woven with decorative typography (Deborah, 2001).

Beginning with the 1930s we come across very different trials and innovative designs within the context of their relation to the movie. Major film companies started to work with artists such as Al Hirschfeld, George Petty, Ted Ireland, William Galraith Crawford, Symeon Shimin, “Hap” Hadley and Jacques Kapralik for their movie title sequences from the middle of the 1930s to the end of the 1940s. Some artists also saw this opportunity to prepare the audience for the movie by creating the atmosphere before the movie began. When the 10% increase in box-office returns proved that this change also brought about more income, movie title sequence design was born. Allison (2006) cites many examples that undermined an understanding of movie title sequences consisting of only texts on a solemn background in movies which were able to convey the atmosphere of the movie only through music until the 1950s. In those years movie title sequences consisting only titles painted on a piece of glass which was placed on a picture or an appropriate background were very common (Noyan, 2008).

The 1950s and the 1960s were the most interesting decades of movie title sequence design. Title sequences created by designers, who up to that time worked in the studios and held in the background, the fact that the directors and the designers became independent through partially getting rid of the studio system enabled the creation of different and original approaches. The relationship between the designer and the director, such as the one between Saul Bass and Otto Preminger, began to replace the relationship between the studio and the company. Alongside with this, the progress brought about by technology and industry and the clarification of the distinction among genres increased the value attached to movie specific title sequence design. With the strengthening of the Hollywood unions, in the 1970s and the 1980s that the names of the entire movie crew were began to be listed in the closing title sequences (Şenyapılı, 2003). Today, movie title sequences are a significant part of the film industry because of their contribution to the narration of the movie and to the experience of watching movies. Thanks to the significance attached to the movie title sequences the audience’s concentration on the movie intensifies and it enables the audience to see themselves as a part of the movie. Therefore, movie title sequence designs are created with utmost care, just as it was an important scene in the movie.

2. Kinetic Typography in Visual Design

If one defines the basic function of writing as the transfer of ideas and information through signs, typography is a step further away than this definition; it is, in a way, a dimension of “creating art/design through writing” (Uçar, 2004:106). Typography, not only refers to the transmission of information and message through an understandable form language but also to an element that is put forward as a style, a personality, a visual language, and a different image. From the selection of fonts to the size of letters, from the planning of spaces to their location on the background they are presented, the co-organization of the visual and functional order is among the general problems of typographical communication. Typography should enable the receiver to experience the pleasure and should affect the receiver alongside with its main task to have the receiver “read” the message. The understanding of typographical organization through affecting, surprising the audience visually has always directed designers to find new ways. The increase in new technologies has removed typographical communication from the boundaries of printed publication and made it available to be effectively used and designed in many media like television, video, cinema, web pages, and interactive CDs. Today’s digital technologies that enable artists to change, size, and animate
forms and the quest for different, original, and interesting forms of expression give way to kinetic typography by diversifying the already known understanding of typography. Kinetic typography, as different from the known styles of typographic organization, is a technique by which the message can be expressed in an original and extraordinary way. “Kinetic typography is a discipline that unites technology, motion, voice, narration, and typography as a visual communication tool” (Hoestler, 2006). Kinetic typography, mostly used in animated movies, graphic videos, and movie title sequences, is described by theorists as “the union of typography and motion” or “texts that move and change in time” (Brownie, 2007). Barbara Brownie, however, suggests that the definitions are inadequate for kinetic typography that has a much more complicated structure. She states that these definitions refer to the display of moving texts on the screen at specific scales, to their having an integrated motion structure in their entry and exits to the scene, and to their repetition without being deformed. But, in kinetic typography the letters can be differentiated individually independent of words, they can be formally deformed by dividing and uniting. Within this framework Brownie describes kinetic typography as the technique of the animation of words (Brownie, 2007). According to Brownie, typography also covers the concepts of type in motion and fluid typography. While type in motion is used for texts that change in their screen positions and that repeat the motion of sliding in one or more than one specific way, fluid typography refers to the formal change of letters as a result of deformations in their anatomical structures. The flow of texts in closing movie title sequences is an example of fluid typography.

3. Kinetic Typography in Movie Title Sequences

Each font used in typographic designs has specific features of its own and different associative relations. The designer can reflect the meaning of the word or the characteristic of an image of the word he/she writes by choosing the font, and add up a visual tonnage, seriousness, sincerity, plausibility, and style (Meggs, 1989:120). In accordance with this, the selected font can support the message to be transmitted to the audience but it, at the same time, may cause confusion about the content of the movie if not used in a right way. The problem that the designer faces frequently is the question that what the typographical organization will visually evoke. There are various and successful examples of typographical expression in the opening and closing movie title sequences. An ample number of movie title sequences in movies like Hollow Man, Wax House, Zathura, Alien, and Bewitched mostly have visually stable typographical organizations that offer direct information about the story of the movie. Although the use of kinetic typography in movie title sequences is highly effective visually, it is used in a limited number of movies in the cinema industry because it is not budget friendly technically and because it is time consuming. In spite of this, the number of design studios working on kinetic graphs is on the rise and they are being commonly used especially in television shows, computer games, and trailers.

The opening title sequences designed by Saul Bass for Alfred Hitchcock movies North by Northwest (1959), Psycho (1960), and Vertigo (1958) are among the early examples of the use of kinetic typography in movie title sequences (Lee, Forlizzi, Hudson, 2002). The American graphic designer Saul Bass was the representative of the progressive school in film industry during the 1950s and created title sequences for directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, and Otto Preminger that were individually mini-movies in themselves and were well remembered by the audience. Saul Bass explained the relationship between the movie and the title sequences that he established when he started designing his successful title sequences as such: “I saw that the title was a motivating method for the audience and thus, when the movie actually started the audience would already have established an emotional relation with the movie” (Krasner, 2004, p. 38).

In today’s movie title sequences the movie Catch Me If You Can’s (2002) opening title sequence distinguishes itself among other examples in its reflection of the Saul Bass style and the originality in its design language regarding visual and typographical elements. The designers of the title sequence, Olivier Kuntzel and Florence Deygas, stress the fabric of the 1960s in the general theme of the opening title sequence abiding by the era in which the story of the movie takes place. The designers state that they have underlined the concepts of “quality and drama” in the title sequence, in line with the director Steven Spielberg’s request, and they base their success on their
freedom to create a totally “handmade” design at their own atelier without the pressure of the studio (artoftitle). Although the visual organization of the movie title sequence looks like a digital picturing technique, all the details of the characters were created in fragments in the style of plastic seals by the designers and they were completed by hand through transferring those seals on to the paper. While uniting the scenes, typographical organization and the coloring of the plans were completed in a digital medium. The movies main theme and the characters, “the criminal Frank Abagnale who constantly changes his identity and the FBI agent Carl Hanratty who tries to catch him,” and the places they go to are covered by the entire movie title sequence. The kinetic typography used in the movie establishes an important link in the passages among the scenes and display structural changes in accordance with the rhythm of the music. The Coolvetica font, which was used for the American chain malls of the 1970s, was preferred for the movie Catch Me If You Can. The font is easily perceived with its simple, sans serif and powerful structure solidifies the visual design language of the title sequence in its sense of expression of the era. The chosen font enables extensions and shortenings among the scenes with its straight and equal width and does not have anatomical deformations, hence offering a simple and effective result with regards to kinetic typography.

Disney/Pixar Animation Studio’s Monster Inc.’s (2001) movie title sequence is one of the successful examples of animation movies. The title sequence of the movie, which talks about the story of sympathetic monsters Sulley and Mike and the human baby Boo who falls to a planet called Monstropolis where monsters live, is a visual feast on its own regarding kinetic typography and design. Bright colored hand-drawn visuals placed on to the black background of the movie title sequence constantly change places in the scene in line with the swinging rhythm of the music and the typographical elements used have direct contact with these visuals. Alluding to the theme of the monster appearing behind a door which is the nightmare of children, the entire movie title sequence has multicolored door drawings that open and close all the time which are not scary at all. The title of the production company dances on the stage by flowing through the each note of the clarinet, which is one of the visuals of the opening door visuals and creates a fun and interesting scene. The process of animating the letters individually and collectively in the movie title sequence excites the audience as if they were playing tag. The fact that a lovely monster coming out of the opening doors try to eat up the typography in the subsequent scenes and the process of the letters’ fighting against the monster, and lastly the creation of the kinetic typography making up the title of the movie by the monsters themselves are thoroughly impressive. The movie title sequence which was designed in accordance with the general design idea of an animated movie and which was created the profile of the audience it targeted is one of the examples where the formal changes in kinetic typography was successfully used.
Mission Impossible - Ghost Protocol (2011) movie title sequence designed by Kyle Cooper is one of the outstanding examples with its different, dramatic, and lively structure. The title sequence follows the scenes where the main character of the movie escapes prison; it is not placed at the beginning of the movie. The title sequence begins with the classical scene of the Mission Impossible series/movies that begins with the lighting of the match and the glowing of the fire continues with the follow up of the cable by the camera through the tunnel reaching the bomb. The typographical elements that move speedily according to the camera angle enter the scene and then they extend and perish in the smoke of the fire. The names of the actors, the director, and the producer take their places in the scene accompanied by voice effects in line with the rhythm of the background music. The typography of Ghost Protocol that immediately enters into the scene and names the present movie of the series is in the form of smoke supporting its meaning appears and disappears like a ghost. The sans serif, bold, and pressed from the top structure of the font creates an image in the form of a band in the general duration of the movie title sequence and the problem of legibility caused by motion and effect is minimized by the use of all upper case letters. The flow of a burning cable scene and the language of kinetic typography used in the movie, the continuity in the movie title sequence prove to be a successful work regarding effect and dynamism.

Consequently, based on many examples analyzed in the study one can say that an effective kinetic typography organization designed rightly in the movie title sequence strengthens the emotional attachment the audience forms with the movie, the visual appreciation, and the effectiveness of the movie. The movie title sequences designed are not only a part of the movie completing a task but they can also be transformed into visual tools on their own owing to this effect. The process of entry into the movie can be transferred to the audience in a much richer, original and interesting manner through appropriately chosen background images, theme related music, and a successful typographical organization.

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