

Saul Bass was an extremely influential graphic designer, known for his minimalistic, symbolic, direct, and illustrative style executing branding films and corporations, film posters and title sequences. In an interview conducted as part of the documentary “Saul Bass titles”, Bass comments on the credit sequences played at the beginning of films: “There seemed to be a real opportunity to use titles in a new way — to actually create a climate for the story that was about to unfold” conveying the innovative approach that he wanted to take during the mid-twentieth century. He revolutionised the film industry with these title sequences as it transformed bland credits, that were often disregarded, to something that prepares the audience for the following narrative, which can now be seen implemented in modern-day cinema. I will explore how he has done with his incorporation of symbols, reductive imagery, engaging motion sequences and the way in which he is able to manipulate and control the audience not only within the opening of a film but also before they even make the decision to watch it, through the marketing and print releases. I will consider how he subverts mainstream film conventions, using illustration instead of the films casts/characters, shattering “the notion that a movie had to be advertised with realistic elements from the story.” I will also be examining his ability to provide visual identities through symbols for films such as the dead corpse in the marketing of “Anatomy of a Murder” which symbolically visualises the movie’s narrative.

“The Man with the Golden Arm” film poster and title sequence were one of Saul Bass most famous pieces of design in which he was able to symbolize the film via a jagged arm and incorporate motion design to create an emotion impact. The film, released in 1955, is about a drug addict who reforms himself whilst in prison but goes back to his old ways when he is released. It was directed by Otto Preminger who was known for his controversial films and was a good friend of Saul Bass, working on many projects such as “Anatomy of a Murder”.

The poster conveys an arm that appears to be disjointed from a body and distorted to emphasise the struggle and pain of the drug addict in the film as he slowly gets engulfed back into his old habits. The arm is surrounded by cut out shapes to perhaps illustrate the

character struggle to escape his addiction demonstrating Saul Bass's clever use of minimalism to communicate big ideas. The colours are minimal, appearing flat which is a stylistic choice that is seen across Saul Bass's work, making the visuals direct and clear to the viewer. He encapsulates the mood of the film and informs that through title sequence which involves moving white tiles on a black background that slowly turn into abstract erratic, shapes and eventually transforms into a jagged arm, a symbol of distress. The contrast of the black and white adds to this feeling of chaos which is then accompanied by the music getting more intense. This shows that he is not only informing the design from the narrative but also through the music which makes the sequence more immersive to the viewer.

Through this piece of work, we see the importance in having a title sequence at the beginning of a film as it helps to condition the audience for the content that they are about see. For instance, the intensification of the shapes that lead to a disjointed arm would be metaphor in which the audience can associate it with the main character of the film. This expresses Saul's Bass's view that "[His] initial thoughts about what a title can do was to set mood and the prime underlying core of the film's story, to express the story in some metaphorical way." He wanted the audience to have an "emotional resonance" with the film before it began. Contrastingly, the static nature of the illustration in the print posters helps to tease rather than immerse an audience before they make the decision to watch it, a way of almost manipulating, inducing them through their curiosity to find out more. Once the movie begins, they see the illustrative elements come into motion which conveys the clever thought that Saul Bass had, combining, and relating the print release and introduction of the film. Bass sat with Otto Preminger (the director of the film) and suggested "why not make [the disjointed arm] move?" leading to an intrinsic opening that transformed dull, boring credits that were usually seen in films at the time and were mostly ignored to something an audience can engage with to get a sense or grip of "the story that was about to unfold".

Additionally, the disjointed arm becomes a visual identity that the film attaches itself as it successfully encompasses the main character's drug addiction which exemplifies the incredibly simplistic but effective way in which Saul Bass's can reduce complex ideas down to symbols to inform his design. He quotes when coming up with the symbol: "When I provided the disembodied arm as the logo for 'The Man with the Golden Arm,' it was the first time an advertising-publicity campaign was based on a single symbol." which shows Bass's motivation in being innovative. He goes against mainstream conventions of a film print release and title sequence within Hollywood as he focuses his design solely on illustration which implies that he didn't need to rely on the 'stars' of the film and further underpins his unique ability to grasp an audience through his illustrative approach.

Saul Bass also worked on the title sequence for the 1956 adaptation of Jules Verne's "Around the world in 80 days" where he informs his design on storytelling, he depicts scenes from the movie and deploys them into thoughtfully produced motion designs. The movie was directed by Michael Anderson, produced by Mike Todd and is about an English gentlemen Phileas Fogg posing a bet that he can navigate the world in just 80 days, so he goes through with the journey with his manservant Passepartout.

The title sequence for the movie "Around the world in 80 days" combines cut out illustrated elements that are animated expressing the movies adventurous storyline with "cartoony elements", "Victorian illustrations", and "cunning caricatures". As opposed to "The Man with the Golden Arm" title, this sequence is played at the end of the film and makes use of flat bold blocks of colour to capture the lively essence and voyage that the characters go on. The sequence is four minutes which perhaps is long, despite this Bass is still able to keep the attention of his audience with his ability to not only encapsulate the movie's genre with iconography of adventure but to also re-tell the story to his audience in his illustrative, minimal flair. He reflected scenes from the movie which provided familiarity for the audience, for instance, the implementation of cut out illustrated elephants that seamlessly

pushes into the next shot conveys the part of the journey when Fogg and Passepartout were travelling on elephants in India to make up for lost time.

For this title, Saul Bass uniquely closes the film rather than open it. He makes the audience reminisce about the movie they just watched by illustrating a recollection of major scenes from the movie in his minimalist, snappy and direct style. Audiences who were about to leave stayed in their seats to watch almost another movie but in the form of a title sequence. They were able to go on the journey again from start to finish as Bass uses a narrative structure with a beginning, middle and end, implying that his designs were informed through storytelling and thus allowed the audience to seamlessly travel through the sequence.

Furthermore, he was able to symbolize the characters within the film. For instance, “the running top hat watch of Phileas Fog, the penny farthing bicycle for Passepartout and the flowing veils of the princess” which reflect the characters persona, reinforcing Bass’s skill in incorporating reductive imagery. The idea that he initially designed the elements of the sequence and made it move whilst simultaneously aligning it with the music adds this layer of communication and immersive experience for the audience like that of a film reflecting his experience when moving into filmmaking: “The very first pieces of film that I did were really graphic designs translated to film. Graphic designs that moved. That was a very new notion.” It is said by well-known animator Shamus Culhane that when Bass made the sequence, he solved Mike Todd’s (producer of the film) predicament on “the pecking order” of the stars within the film with his clever inclusion of caricatures (comedic drawings that exaggerate features of a person) which appealed to the audience as it “mollified the paranoiac feelings of the actors and actresses”. This conveys that Bass’s title sequences were innovative, but also efficient.

One title sequence that Bass worked on had a very distinctly different approach to many of his other titles. “It’s a mad, mad, mad, mad world”, a film directed by Stanley Kramer in 1963, gives an insight to the comical masterclass Bass was able come up with to set the tone for the audience. The movie is about a group of characters listening to a dying man’s confession about hidden a stash of money, so they all hilariously compete to find the money.

The sequence combines a four-minute barrage of comedic sketches with bold, flat colours and illustrations. It is centred around an illustrated white globe which is tossed around countlessly within the sequence going into different forms such as an egg, an inflated balloon, a spinning machine etc. The title doesn’t have a direct link to the film’s narrative, which is the antithesis of many of his Bass’s other work, but rather it establishes the mood, warming the audience for the comedy they were about to see. This also gave Bass more freedom with the sequence, allowing him to be more experimental and creative with the outcome. In one amusing sketch Bass pokes fun at the order of credits in films as he sketches arms pulling out names of the cast from an opening in the globe, then having it change the order of the names repeatedly until it becomes one huge mess. This shows not only are his designs there to prepare an audience for the story, but it was also his way of challenging the industry norms and economical attitudes within Hollywood which play a role in reducing creativity. The implementation of the diegetic sounds such as the cracking of an egg, a balloon popping, etc adds to the comedic, witty nature which is further assisted by the in-sync music enhancing the hilarious visuals and absorbing the audience attention.

Throughout the sequence Bass makes the audience continually surprised and amused with the numerous sketches he incorporates, exemplifying the different ways he engages an audience. The animated sequence fulfilled the film’s frenetic nature through its fast-paced, lively, and energetic movements and successfully pushes jokes beyond a reasonable point. Bass had made the globe within the sequence few years prior to making the title, suggesting

that he thought it was the perfect symbol for the movie, despite already making it and reinforces his real concern “to give each film a unique individuality.”

To conclude, Saul Bass’ legacy was one where he had the ability to provide a visual identity for a film by informing his design through symbolic imagery as we see in “The Man with the Golden Arm” with the disjointed existence. He was able to orchestrate impressively composed motion sequences that utilised strong bold colours with succinct illustrations, taking the audience through that journey. Not only that, but he also steered the audience to the theatre with his unconventional film posters that utilised illustration rather than relying on the photographs of stars in the film, conveying his unorthodox approach. Saul Bass quotes: “In TV the main purpose is to have them keep their hands off the dial. In movies, where you have a captive audience, the opening is intrinsic to the film.” Bass’s title sequences gave an audience a taster of what was to come, he had invented a new visual art form within the film industry, something that replaced the previous tedious credits, allowing an audience to immerse into the film’s plot before it even began. It kept them far away from boredom, reflecting his view that “[he] had felt for some time that audience involvement with a film should begin with its first frame.” However, on the contrary, some people may argue that Saul Bass was just adding to the already popularising openings that films were beginning to implement in the early twentieth century. For instance, in the 1939 film “The women” had utilised stylish visuals with “images of animals that emotionally represented the characters” hinting at the story’s narrative. Though I would disagree as I see Bass’s approach to have expanded titles with great depth going into a new visual art form with its cleverly thought-out motion sequences informed by storytelling, use of colour, illustrations, symbolism, and narrative imagery pioneering the type of openings we may see in modern films.



