

## **Sound Bridging the Apocalypse:**

### **Sonically Integrating the Title Sequence as Audiovisual Paratext in THE WALKING DEAD (2010–2022)**

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In 2010, the American cable channel AMC launched what would become one of its most popular and longest-running television series, *THE WALKING DEAD* (AMC, 2010–2022; hereafter TWD), with 177 episodes across 11 seasons and spawning multiple spin-off series. The series, based on Robert Kirkman's comic book series (2003–2019) – with which certain narrative arcs converge while others diverge from it – follows protagonist Rick Grimes, a sheriff's deputy, in a post-apocalyptic America overrun by infectious zombies. As the series progresses, the emphasis shifts from mere survival amid the zombie threat to attempts at reconstructing communal living and the violent conflicts between communities with different moral codes and political systems. The series is both an explicitly gory horror show in a sheer visceral sense, but also a Hobbesian-*contra*-Rousseauian philosophical inquiry into questions concerning humankind stripped of civilization and the grounds upon which civil life is to be rebuilt.

In this article, I analyze how the title sequence of TWD as an audiovisual paratext is sonically integrated into the textuality of the series, creating a consistent aural style across the series and maintaining a particular sonic flow within the episode that facilitates the transition into and out of the paratext. In doing so, I build on existing theorizations of television's audiovisual paratexts, particularly those of Jonathan Gray and Annette Davison who have applied Gérard Genette's idea of the paratext as a liminal zone between text and non-text from the literary domain to that of television and theorized the title sequence and end credits as significant televisual paratexts (see Genette 1997; Gray 2010; Davison 2013a; 2013b; 2014). As Gray mentions, paratexts »create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them« (Gray 2010, 6) and that »the secret to understanding paratexts lies in working out their relationship to textuality: What is the paratext in relationship to the text? How does it con-

tribute to the process of making meaning? And how does it energize, contextualize, or otherwise modify textuality?» (Gray 2010, 23). By examining the way audiovisual paratexts such as title sequences are sonically embedded within a series, I aim to shed a light on these questions.

I use TWD as a representative case study for three main reasons. First, its long-running period allows for a thorough analysis of both the variation and consistency of the sonic strategies that are employed, enabling me to propose a categorization that may be applicable to other series. Second, the series was designed for linear broadcasting but became available for non-linear viewing, such as on DVD and Netflix, which allows for a reflection on how the sonic embedding of paratexts can be experienced across different modes of spectatorship and their corresponding audiovisual flows. Third, it offers the opportunity to examine moments of sonic integration as part of the overall aural style of a series, which in the case of TWD largely depends on the musical conventions of the horror genre.

In what follows, I provide a general framework that focuses on the sonic integration of title sequences, as these can be seen as the most recognizable audiovisual paratexts in television series. A thorough examination of the sonic integration of other paratextual elements, such as the end credits, transcends the scope of this article but is encouraged for further research.<sup>1</sup> By sonic integration, I refer to the process of sonically embedding audiovisual paratextual elements into the textual fabric of a television series. As mentioned above, these paratextual elements occupy a liminal zone, yet they establish a distinct relationship with the series' textuality and form a necessary part of the audiovisual flow of individual episodes. The analytical focus of this article lies in how a series sonically transitions into and out of these paratexts. As I demonstrate, such transitions involve specific sonic material that connects the paratexts to the text in various ways. Here, I distinguish between the term *sonic integration*, which denotes the process of incorporating paratextual material, and *sonic connectors*, which are the particular sonic elements that link a paratext to the audiovisual flow. Through the use of specific and consistent

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<sup>1</sup> I will not be discussing the title sequence of TWD itself in depth, as my main analytical focus is on the way they are sonically embedded within the series. For a useful categorization of the various types of title sequences and end credits, see Halfyard 2016, 44–72.

sonic connectors, sonic integration can contribute to shaping a series' aesthetic and sustaining audiovisual consistency. In the case of TWD, the sonic connectors to the title sequence share common musical features with the title music: the opening ostinato figure is used as a sound bridge, and the build-up cues also resemble the sonic identity of the title music, in which overtly musical elements are combined with more sound-design-like elements – for example, the whooshes that mark transitions to different harmonic areas, the wailing of the electric guitar, and the rattling chain sound effects (see Figure 1 for my annotated transcription of the title music).

The figure displays an annotated musical score for the title sequence of *The Walking Dead*. The score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of four staves of music, each with various annotations above and below the notes.

- Staff 1 (Measures 1-3):**
  - Annotation: "Strings play tremolo throughout" (above the staff).
  - Annotation: "Gm" (above the first measure).
  - Annotation: "Percussive boom" (below the first measure).
  - Annotation: "Chain rattling hits on first two accents" (below measures 2 and 3).
  - Annotation: "Electric guitar sneaks in on a high G" (above measure 3).
  - Annotation: "Riser" (below measure 3).
- Staff 2 (Measures 4-6):**
  - Annotation: "Electric guitar plays a high, wailing Gb, slowly descending to an Eb" (above the staff).
  - Annotation: "Eb" (above measure 4).
  - Annotation: "Cm" (above measure 6).
  - Annotation: "Percussive boom" (below measure 6).
- Staff 3 (Measures 7-9):**
  - Annotation: "Gm" (above measure 7).
  - Annotation: "Rhythmic metallic effects in 16th notes" (above measure 8).
  - Annotation: "Whoosh to percussive boom" (above measure 9).
  - Annotation: "Metallic riser" (below measure 7).
  - Annotation: "Percussive boom" (below measure 8).
  - Annotation: "Chain rattling hits on first two accents" (below measures 8 and 9).
- Staff 4 (Measures 10-12):**
  - Annotation: "Subtle rising sound effect in the background" (above measure 10).
  - Annotation: "Additional strings play subtle tremolo on D" (above measure 11).
  - Annotation: "Percussive boom" (below measure 10).
  - Annotation: "Chain rattling hits on first two accents" (below measures 11 and 12).

**Figure 1:** Author's annotated transcription of THE WALKING DEAD's title music title sequence

In short, this article aims to demonstrate how music and sound can function as a bridge between text and paratexts, emphasizing a more permeable relationship between the two. I show how the sonic paratextual integrations relate both to the text as it offers narrative or dramatic significance and relates formally to the paratext in its preparatory function. Before presenting my analysis, I discuss sonic integration of paratextual elements in relation to the increased attention to detail that characterizes what scholars have termed quality television. This research may inspire further research on other sophisticated sonic mechanisms that bridge audiovisual paratexts and texts, and on how these instances

mediate (para)textuality in refined television series. Additionally, this angle proves useful for analyzing audiovisual flow in diversified television-viewing modes in which viewers may choose to skip paratextual elements. From a viewer's perspective, this offers insight into the alternative sonic flows that different viewing modes offer. From a creative perspective, this helps bring to light the distinct choices that creators can make to maintain a certain audiovisual flow even when the paratexts are skipped.

### *Quality TV*

The deliberate and carefully constructed sonic integration strategy of TWD exemplifies the highly detailed production practice characteristic of high-end television. TWD consistently treats the title sequence as an integral part of the sonic flow, with artistic and perhaps pragmatic choices establishing continuity across the series. This can be seen as part of an aesthetically shaped »signature style« (Schlütz 2016, 103) that is characteristic of what scholars have called »quality television« (see McCabe/Akass 2007).<sup>2</sup> According to Daniela Schlütz, quality television »offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value« (Schlütz 2016, 101). For Sarah Cardwell, quality television is characterized by

»high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative camerawork and editing, and a sense of *aural style* created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music« (Cardwell 2007, 26, my emphasis).

While Cardwell's criteria of »appropriate« and »original« music are not in themselves definitive markers of quality television, what matters here is how the attention to aural style aligns with the nuanced complexity of the narrative and the distinctive visual aesthetics characteristic of quality television. I argue that the various sonic integration strategies of the title sequence are part of TWD's signature aural style, which maintains a sense of coherence throughout the series.

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the critical engagement with the term »quality television« and its relation to similar, overlapping labels for the growing sophistication of series production (e. g. peak TV, prestige TV, complex TV). For the sake of the conciseness of this article I will refer to this trend as quality television. For complex TV see Mittell 2015; for prestige TV see Friedman and Keeler 2022; for the use of music and sound in peak TV see Halfyard and Reyland 2024.

Additionally, the sonic integration in TWD contributes to several functions of the title sequence that scholars have addressed in relation to quality television. Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Barbara Flückiger argue that title sequences facilitate an affective and aesthetic priming of the entire series, as they »provide the viewers with dominant hedonic qualities that they are supposed to experience during the show [as their] highly sophisticated styles are often densely studded with affective cues that promise us specific emotional gratifications« (Fahlenbrach/Flückiger 2014, 87). The consistent aural style and sonic integration strategies in TWD cooperate with the title sequence in this process of affective and aesthetic priming as I will demonstrate in more detail in the analyses below. Central to Fahlenbrach and Flückiger's point is that title sequences prepare the viewer for what Carl Plantinga calls the »feeling tone« (Plantinga 2009, 166), that is the overall mood or atmosphere of a film or series. In the case of TWD, this tone strongly connects to the aesthetic and affective codes of the horror genre, which are present in title sequence. The aesthetic tone of the decayed and distressed images of the fragmented montage collaborate with the minor-key ostinati, sudden modulations and tense sound effects to prime a feeling tone of dread, shock, and suspense. This relates to Stacey Abbott's research on how the title sequences of horror series establish »generic expectations« in its aesthetic approach to horror (Abbott 2015, 110) and organize »interpretative frames to which we understand them as horror« (ibid., 124). In her discussion of TWD, she addresses the series' emphasis on institutional collapse and the dismantling of social structures which are evoked by the title sequence's gritty visual montage of abandoned places, deserted streets, and objects rather than people (ibid., 124). This approach to horror fits the conventions of the post-apocalyptic zombie genre, with its general focus on societal collapse and the survival thereof.

In relation to title sequences in quality television, Enrica Picarelli observes traits such as »commitment to detail, self-reflexive status, high-production values and use of advanced animation technology [that] conflate in a rich audiovisual experience« resulting in title sequences becoming »the object of mounting audience interest« (Picarelli 2013). She borrows the term »quality openers« from John Sellers (Sellers 2012) who witnessed a rise hereof after the success of *THE SOPRANOS* (HBO, 1999–2007). In the case of TWD, Picarelli writes that its title sequence's »semiotic richness conveys *THE WALKING DEAD*'s

intent to explore the meaning of being human in inhuman situations« (Picarelli 2013), which resonates with Abbott's point explained above. The increased production value and closer attention to detail become indicators of the series' sophistication or, as John Ellis comments »the title sequence is becoming the audiovisual equivalent of hardback binding on a book, denoting quality, seriousness of intent and the buyer's willingness to pay more« (Ellis 2011, 61).

Regarding these quality openers, I argue that the method by which these are integrated within the text of the series is another marker of this commitment to audiovisual finesse. A carefully constructed sonic integration allows for more refined and fluid transitions between textual and paratextual elements, enabling the paratext to become a less sharply demarcated part of the series. To my knowledge, there has not been much academic interest in the way that title sequences are structurally integrated into the sonic flow of episodes, in contrast to the scholarly attention given to audiovisual paratexts in general.<sup>3</sup> TWD offers a relevant entry point into this area of inquiry because of its sonic connectors that are applied consistently throughout the entire series, among which the anticipatory ostinato and its blend with the antecedent cue are the most original. In this sense, this study serves as a stepping stone to further research on the sonic embeddedness of audiovisual paratextual elements in television series.

#### *TWD's Sonic Connectors*

As previously stated, my primary focus is on the sonic connection that leads into the title sequence. By analyzing the various sonic connectors used across the entire run of TWD, I identify four main categories, some of which can be further subdivided: (i) no sonic preparation, (ii) build-up (rhythmic or textural), (iii) cue transition, (iv) sound bridge (merging with the title music or not). The following analysis explores how these categories are employed in TWD, how these mediate textuality and paratextuality, and how they contribute to the series' distinctive aural style.<sup>4</sup> Examining the full span of a long-

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<sup>3</sup> For recent examples that discuss the title sequence as an audiovisual paratext and its (musical) relation to the textuality of the series see Broad 2020, Dosser 2023 and Halfyard/Reyland 2024.

<sup>4</sup> While TWD is my main focus, I will also briefly reflect on how these categories manifest in other series, offering a broader perspective on how paratexts are embedded within serial television.

running series like TWD, allows us to address questions such as: Is there a sense of continuity and/or variety in how sonic connectors are employed across the series? How do the sonic integration strategies relate to the overall aural style of the series? How do the sonic connectors correspond to genre-specific features and expectations? In what ways do they influence the narrative text? And to what extent does the series demonstrate originality in its approach to sonic integration?

In TWD, a silent fade to black separates the title sequence from the ensuing narrative action that follows the opening scene, providing the viewer with a brief moment of breathing space before the story continues. This separation plays an important role in the series' overall strategy of tension and release across the audiovisual, dramatic, and narrative domains. The title sequence temporarily suspends the story yet sustains the dramatic and narrative tension introduced in the preceding scene – tension that may or may not be resolved in what follows. Sonically, the tense title music and the sonic connector from the cold open work together with the jittery montage of the title sequence to heighten audiovisual tension, which the final tutti G and the ensuing silent fade to black momentarily release. How the following scene responds to this brief resolution varies sonically: it may extend the sense of aural rest through neutral ambient noise (for instance, birds, crickets, or other diegetic natural sounds) or through a calm musical cue; alternatively, it may reintroduce tension via a hectic soundscape or suspenseful music. This sonic material, however, adheres more closely to the narrative text of the series than to its paratextual elements, and therefore lies beyond the scope of this study on sonic integration. Also excluded from consideration – though worth noting – are the sonic transitions leading to and from certain interruptions such as commercial breaks, episode recaps, and previews. These moments can receive sonic treatment similar to other paratextual elements, especially the transitions to commercial breaks, which often follow minor cliffhangers comparable to those preceding the title sequence. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, this study confines itself to the examination of the title sequence. This focus is also informed by pragmatic considerations, as I do not have access to the original broadcast versions of TWD. This discussion of these interruptions, then, also highlights a major distinction between linear broadcasting, with its scheduled commercial breaks and non-linear streaming formats, where such breaks are generally absent or depend on the sub-

scription tier. Nevertheless, the musical cues that once led into commercial breaks in the original broadcasts still remain in the non-linear versions, now functioning less as transitions to extradiegetic material and more as dramatic connectors within the narrative flow.

| Category:                         | Sub-category:          | Episode:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No sonic preparation<br>(= 0,56%) |                        | 5.1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Build-up<br>(= 51,98%)            | Textural<br>(= 44,63%) | 1.5, 2.7, 2.10, 2.11, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 3.12, 3.13, 3.14, 4.1, 4.5, 4.14, 5.2, 5.3, 5.10, 5.11, 5.14, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9, 6.10, 6.13, 6.15, 6.16, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.8, 7.10, 7.12, 7.15, 7.16, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, 8.6, 8.7, 8.9, 8.10, 8.11, 8.12, 8.15, 9.3, 9.4, 9.7, 9.9, 9.10, 9.14, 9.15, 9.16, 10.2, 10.5, 10.7, 10.8, 10.9, 10.10, 10.11, 10.12, 10.19, 10.22, 11.1, 11.2, 11.3, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 11.8, 11.9, 11.10, 11.13, 11.15, 11.16, 11.17, 11.19 |
|                                   | Rhythmic<br>(= 7,34%)  | 3.9, 6.1, 7.7, 8.8, 8.13, 9.5, 9.8, 9.11, 9.12, 9.13, 10.3, 11.12, 11.22                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Cue transition<br>(=1,13%)        |                        | 2.2, 7.13                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Sound bridge<br>(= 46,33%)        | No merge<br>(= 31,07%) | 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.8, 2.9, 2.12, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.16, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, 4.9, 4.11, 4.13, 4.16, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.12, 5.15, 5.16, 6.2, 6.3, 6.6, 6.12, 6.14, 7.9, 8.16, 9.1, 9.2, 9.6, 10.1, 10.4, 10.6, 10.14, 10.15, 10.17, 10.18, 11.7, 11.14, 11.18, 11.21, 11.23, 11.24                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                   | Merge<br>(= 15,25%)    | 2.1, 2.3, 2.13, 3.5, 3.8, 3.10, 3.11, 3.15, 4.7, 4.8, 4.10, 4.12, 4.15, 5.13, 6.11, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.11, 7.14, 8.14, 10.13, 10.16, 10.20, 10.21, 11.11, 11.20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

**Table 1:** Sonic connectors to THE WALKING DEAD's title sequence

Table 1 presents my taxonomy of the integration of the title sequence across the entire span of the series. I will first discuss some general noteworthy observations before discussing the individual (sub)categories in more detail. As the table shows, there is almost always some sort of sonic preparation for the titles, save one episode where the title sequence arrives quite suddenly. In episode 5.1, the titles enter after an explosion that eventually rescues the protagonists from a dire situation. This explosion and the gunshots here could be seen as a build-up driven by sound effects that provides no moment of rest between the end of the scene and the title sequence. This category is, musically speaking, the least interesting to discuss, although the suddenness of such a transition is

not without merit. Without musical preparation, the titles can catch the audience by surprise, thereby standing out. However, total moments of silence in audiovisual texts are quite rare as there is usually some sort of set or ambient noise present, which can provide a moment of rest before the title sequence.<sup>5</sup>

There are only two instances where there are clear isolated cue transitions to the title sequence. In the category of cue transitions, the focus is not necessarily on increasing tension, but on establishing a transition from the antecedent cue to the title music usually via harmonic, pitch and/or melodic content. What matters here is that the antecedent cue is different from the title music but musically related to it to facilitate a specific transition into the title sequence.<sup>6</sup> In episode 2.2, the same cue that has merged with the ostinato in episode 2.1 plays and spills over into the title sequence and merges (while clashing in pitch, making the transition more jarring) with the ostinato there; in episode 7.13, we hear an acoustic guitar theme connected to King Ezekiel ending on a G–D dyad, which sets up a more organic transition to the Gm ostinato. Typically, TWD incorporates an approach in which cues from antecedent scenes merge with the ostinato figure of the title music, which might explain the scarce use of cue transitions in this series.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Build-up*

Most of the sonic connectors (51,98%), however, fall under the build-up category and the most commonly used connector here is the textural device of the riser that increases in pitch and intensity – by rising in volume or by expanding the density of the sonic spectrum – and pushes toward a climactic point, which in this case is the title sequence. This is not surprising, as it can be seen as a genre-affirming device. Nick Redfern, writing about the riser in horror trailers, states that »[i]t plays a crucial role in the horror genre in

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<sup>5</sup> BETTER CALL SAUL (AMC, 2015–2022), for example, frequently uses neutral ambient sounds to provide an instant of narrative and dramatic stasis before the title sequence kicks in. The brief fade to black before the titles, then, functions as a short passageway to the title sequence, which opens with the twang and reverb of Little Barrie’s guitar.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the pilot episode of OUTLANDER (Starz, 2014–2026), the opening cue centers on a low sustained D with a Scottish-tinged melody that directly transitions into the main titles in which an unaccompanied female voice sings the title theme, also in D.

<sup>7</sup> Take for instance episode 1.4 where the sustained note merges with the ostinato through a pitch-match.

creating a sense of approaching terror leading to a climax of narrative action« (Redfern 2020, 58). This can also be seen as the more pragmatic, and perhaps less artistic, way to transition into the title sequence as it requires no melodic or harmonic planning and therefore the tension-building texture is very flexible in its aural implementation. As we see, the riser is particularly prevalent in later seasons although other approaches persist as well (see Table 2 for the percentages of sonic connectors of each season).<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning, though, that the merging sound bridge has more artistic merit in the earlier seasons than in the later ones, as I will discuss below. This indicates a decline of artistic quality of the integrations as the series progresses, which might also be the result of a certain pragmatism in composing for a long-lasting series.

| Season | Textural | Rhythmic | Cue Transition | Sound Bridge (No Merge) | Sound Bridge (Merge) |
|--------|----------|----------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1      | 16.7     | 0        | 0              | 83.3                    | 0                    |
| 2      | 23.1     | 0        | 7.7            | 46.2                    | 23.1                 |
| 3      | 37.5     | 6.25     | 0              | 25                      | 31.25                |
| 4      | 18.75    | 0        | 0              | 50                      | 31.25                |
| 5      | 31.25    | 0        | 0              | 56.25                   | 6.25                 |
| 6      | 56.25    | 6.25     | 0              | 31.25                   | 6.25                 |
| 7      | 50       | 6.25     | 6.25           | 6.25                    | 31.25                |
| 8      | 75       | 12.5     | 0              | 6.25                    | 6.25                 |
| 9      | 50       | 31.25    | 0              | 18.75                   | 0                    |
| 10     | 45.5     | 4.5      | 0              | 31.8                    | 18.2                 |
| 11     | 58.3     | 8.3      | 0              | 25                      | 8.3                  |

**Table 2:** Percentages of sonic connector categories per season

The cold opens of TWD usually present a scene that grabs the viewer's attention through either a moment of revelation, a character's realization, confrontation, shock, or surprise, which then lays the groundwork for the rest of the episode. The musical build-ups that emphasize these moments then maximize the impact of the narrative situation and increase intensity to allow a tense transition to the title sequence, which in itself provides an additional sense of urgency to the situation with its agitated ostinati. The music here

<sup>8</sup> I have excluded the category of no sonic preparation because of its scarcity. Therefore, the percentages for season 5 in the table add up to 93,75%; the remaining 6,25% is accounted for by episode 5.1.

commonly features an emphasis on the increase in pitch and volume, e. g. rising string glissandi, or a form of an integrated soundtrack, to borrow Danijela Kulezic-Wilson's term (Kulezic-Wilson 2020), in which music and sound design collaborate to establish an increasingly intense texture – e. g. the use of growling and hissing zombie sound effects in combination with glissandi (e. g. episodes 8.4, 11.1, 11.2). The riser primarily functions as an exclamation mark to the cliffhanger and conveys less of a narrative underscoring than the other categories discussed below and particularly references the typical aural characteristics of the horror genre. As Joe Tompkins notes, horror film music is largely constructed to have an

»assaultive character« [e.g. through] sheer volume (as in »noisy« outbursts that erupt on the soundtrack each time a monster appears or violence ensues), musical timbre (in characteristic instrumental sounds like »screeching« violins or »haunting« electronic synthesizers), or specific musical techniques, such as repetitious drones (tension built in and through sustained notes), clashing dissonances (unusual combinations of notes), and stingers (sudden musical blasts that coincide with moments of shock and revelation)« (Tompkins 2014, 190).

These aesthetic elements are, according to Tompkins, only part of horror film music's discourse since the discursive elements, i. e. the cultural associations and the familiarity of the genre that guide audience expectations, also shape viewers' perception of and reaction to horror scores. Within the domain of the paratextual integration, the riser particularly mobilizes the discursive and aesthetic elements of horror soundtracks to energize the opening titles as it helps to sonically determine the build-up to the cliffhanger as a climactic moment, and it maintains a sonic tension by transitioning to the agitated ostinato while the narrative is put on hold.

The build-up can also feature a primarily rhythmic element that grows in intensity in its anticipation of the titles.<sup>9</sup> Often, this rhythmic build-up is combined with a riser to maximize the impact of the transition to the title sequence (e. g. episodes 9.13 and 11.22). Still, it is worth separating the transitions that solely use a riser from the transitional

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<sup>9</sup> Series such as *HOUSE* (Fox, 2004–2012) and *PRISON BREAK* (Fox, 2005–2009, 2017) also frequently incorporate a rhythmic build-up to accentuate the tense narrative moments at the ends of their cold opens. Interestingly, the title sequence music of both series starts rather calmly, which makes them a form of resolution to the tension created by the build-ups. This manner differs from series that use a tenser title sequence, such as *STRANGER THINGS* (Netflix, 2016–2025) or *TWD*, which sustains the suspense created by the build-up and which the scene after the titles may resolve.

moments that emphasize rhythmic content combined with a riser, as the anticipatory function of the latter is generally longer and develops in a more gradual way. In the opening episode 3.9, we see a group of surviving protagonists infiltrating Woodbury – the stronghold of the Governor, the main antagonist from seasons 3 to 5 – to rescue a member of their group. The rescue mission involves breaking down some of the fortified town's fences so that zombies can enter and wreak havoc while the protagonists escape. Amid the chaos, the Governor is depicted walking directly toward the camera, his expression one of stoic determination. The camera zooms in on the vengeful expression on his face, signaling a critical turning point toward an unavoidable violent conflict. Musically, this scene is underscored with a pulsating synthesizer cue, which is in fact the Governor's theme, combined with tense and jittery string glissandi played in tremolo that merge with the chaotic sound effects of the tumultuous scene. This builds in intensity toward a medium close-up during which the string glissandi ascent and the entire sonic cue rises toward the climax: the onset of the title sequence.

### *The Sound Bridge*

In the final category, the sound bridge, part of the title music is already audible in the antecedent scene. This may be present in its original or a remixed form, merged with the music in the antecedent scene or on its own. In this moment, part of the title music can take on a brief narrative, dramatic, or formal function outside the title sequence itself.<sup>10</sup> The sound bridge can be further divided into two subcategories, based on how it incorporates and merges with music from the antecedent scene. Here, I argue, TWD demonstrates a degree of originality, especially in its earlier seasons, as it occasionally blends the ostinato figure of the title music with the cue of the opening scene, which represents an interesting amalgamation of textual and paratextual musical elements. A more com-

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<sup>10</sup> SHERLOCK (BBC One, 2010–2017), for example, uses a short segment of its title music, the drum intro, in the antecedent scene usually as an exclamation mark to an intense moment surrounding the main character. This drum intro forms a key component of the rest of the title music and thus functions as a distinctive identifier of the title sequence, rather than merely acting as a rhythmic lead-in. HOUSE OF CARDS (Netflix, 2013–2018) also frequently uses a sound bridge to transition into the title sequence. In the first season, the bassline – the rhythmic foundation of the title music – is used to prepare the titles, whereas later seasons frequently incorporate the ascending string motif, which the composer Jeff Beal added as a change to the title music after the first season, as a sound bridge.

mon strategy throughout the series is the use of the isolated ostinato figure as a sound bridge to the title sequence. With these sound bridges, part of the title music obtains a brief dramatic narrative function as well.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to the build-up approach, the sound bridge typically emphasizes moments of revelation and creates instances of heightened awareness for the audience to a particular narrative event. Interestingly, this strategy is used in the pilot episode: an *in medias res* scene, where Rick encounters and ultimately kills a little zombie girl, watching in shock as he must come to terms with this new dire reality. The ostinato figure – which is, in fact, the first piece of music we hear in the series – not only anticipates the title sequence but also provides an extra dramatic tension to the scene as it stresses the fear and disbelief we see in Rick's eyes. Besides that, this allows for a smooth transition into the opening titles and emphasizes a clear musical connection between text and paratext. Composer McCreary commented on this strategy, stating that the musical anticipation of the title sequence was »the little hook – that little thing that, whenever you hear it, it takes you to the series« (McCreary 2010). This emphasizes the denotative function of the musical theme that conjures up the image of the series as a whole: this ›little hook‹ becomes the vital musical expression that refers to the series. Its anticipation within the episode strengthens the audience's connection to the sonic signature, as McCreary states:

»I thought that would take tension away with the audience knowing the scene is about to end, but I've found it actually does the opposite. It actually ramps it up [...] I feel that it has kind of had an interesting, Pavlovian effect over the years – their reaction to hearing it and that thing over scenes of extreme tension, over and over and over, and I think it's sort of burrowed into their brain.« (McCreary 2019)

As with the use of the riser, McCreary effectively incorporates discursive elements of horror music, employing the stylistic code of the menacing ostinato to generate narrative and sonic tension.

This strategy also applies to moments in which the sound bridge merges with the antecedent cue, which creates a more nuanced narrative meaning as it moves the ostinato into a different emotional and dramatic register. The most elaborate merge of the series

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<sup>11</sup> The use of title music that invades the narrative of a series is a common approach and happens, for example, in *GAME OF THRONES* (HBO, 2011–2019), see Broad 2020.

occurs in the first episode of season 2 where we hear a poignant theme (the tail end of the cue named ›Message to Morgan‹), that plays over a montage of the main group of survivors journeying toward an army post in the hope of finding a safe haven.<sup>12</sup> They must leave their current camp behind and Rick radios his friend Morgan, who helped him during his first days in the apocalypse, to explain their voyage and to say goodbye. This moment in the series signals a turning point as the group adapts to the changing circumstances and decides to leave their familiar surroundings. The theme, featuring the harmonic progression Gm–C–E<sup>b</sup>–D–Gm played by the string section (see Figure 2), underscores this moment and eventually merges with the opening ostinato, also in G minor, thereby increasing the dramatic tension of the situation.



**Figure 2:** Author's score reduction of ›Message to Morgan‹ composed by Bear McCreary

McCreary explains that this musical decision was made to refamiliarize the audience sonically with the series at the start of the second season:

»The first few minutes of this new season needed to bring the audience back into the world, but also generate the excitement of anticipation. The cue starts off with ambient strings, and slowly introduces new layers as it builds energy [...] In this case, the Main Title strings actually start early enough that the cues blend together. The incoming G-minor Main Title co-exists with a peaceful and serene C Major and Eb Major chords in the score, which completely re-harmonizes it. This gives the Main Title ostinato a whole new emotional quality [...] I love taking something so familiar as the Main Title theme and giving it a subtle, but powerful, harmonic make-over.« (McCreary 2011)

<sup>12</sup> ›Message to Morgan‹, track 6 of *The Walking Dead (Original Television Soundtrack)* written by Bear McCreary, released in 2017.

Although there are several other instances where the title music merges with antecedent cues, this opening of the second season is the only actual re-harmonization of the title music of the entire series. Most of the blends feature a less intricate harmonic amalgamation where often the ostinato merges with a lingering G-note from the antecedent scene; other blends mix the ostinato figure with a more ambient-based cue, or combine a build-up approach with the ostinato.

| Type of merge                     | Episode                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Re-harmonization                  | 2.1                                                                                                                      |
| Merge with just final note of cue | 3.10, 3.11, 4.7, 4.8, 4.10, 4.12, 4.15, 6.11, 7.6, 10.21, 11.11                                                          |
| Merge with ambient cue            | 2.3, 2.13, 3.5, 3.8, 3.15 (also lingering G), 5.13, 10.13, 10.20,                                                        |
| Build-up                          | 7.4 (riser), 7.5 (riser), 7.11 (riser), 7.14 (riser), 8.14 (riser), 10.16 (rhythmic build-up), 11.20 (rhythmic build-up) |

**Table 3:** Different types of merging sound bridges

Even if the merge is not harmonically complex, it can still provide a more nuanced narrative meaning in the lead-up to the titles. For example, in episode 3.10 a slow ethereal theme in G plays when Rick has a pleasant hallucination of his by-then deceased wife Lori, whom he sees in an angelic attire and who caresses him gently. At this point in the narrative, Rick becomes increasingly mentally unstable following the loss of his wife who dies in a traumatic childbirth while fleeing from zombies. This hallucination presents a moment of tenderness amid the bleak situation, which is fittingly underscored by the delicate cue played on an airy synthesizer pad. The juxtaposition of Rick's grimy appearance with Lori's immaculate look lets us know that the harsh reality is still lurking underneath this dreamlike moment. As Michonne watches Rick, we see through her eyes that Rick is indeed alone but still gestures according to his hallucination. When we see the worried look on Michonne's face, the lingering final note of the ethereal theme merges with the agitated ostinato which brutally brings us back to the grim reality and sonically conveys the growing concern over the mentally disorientated Rick.

The instances that merge the ostinato with a more ambient cue or a sonic build-up device generally function as the Pavlovian effect that energizes the lead-in to the title sequence,

as McCreary mentioned. For example, in episode 2.13, which combines the ostinato with a more ambient cue, we see the aftermath of Carl's (Rick's son) killing of Shane, the character who emerges as the main antagonist of the first two seasons. His gunshot attracts a horde of zombies toward the farm, the temporary refuge of the survivors. When the horde slowly approaches the farmhouse, we hear a cue consisting of a disconcerting cluster creeping up in the string section, which then merges with the ostinato to maximize the urgency of the threat. The cue then resolves to the note G in the upper register when the screen cuts to the opening titles to match the ostinato in G minor. In episode 10.16, the ostinato kicks in during a frantic rhythmic build-up that plays while Beta, one of the main antagonists of seasons 9 and 10 and a prominent figure of the Whisperers (a violent group of people who disguise themselves as zombies to blend in with them in order to survive), leads a gigantic zombie horde toward the hideout of the protagonists. The ostinato merges with the percussive build-up when Beta walks toward the camera and continues to play over an establishing shot that highlights the enormity of the zombie horde creeping toward the building where the main characters are hiding. The blend of the tense rhythmic build-up and the agitated ostinato intensifies the cliffhanger transition to the title sequence.

The analyses above focus on the way sonic connectors are employed to lead the narrative action into the title sequence. When discussing sonic integration, however, the way a title sequence transitions *back* into the narrative also merits attention. Before concluding, it is worth addressing TWD's paratextual *exits*, which can be roughly divided into two categories. The first involves a clearly demarcated re-entry into the narrative, typically achieved through a fade to black accompanied by silence. In such cases, the title sequence often exhibits a rounded-off structure, with a concluding musical gesture that transitions to the fade. TWD falls into this category, with its culmination on a tutti G that resolves the ostinato figures and sets up the fade to black – BREAKING BAD (AMC, 2008–2013) and BETTER CALL SAUL likewise employ a fade to black and silence to transition back into the narrative action. The second category involves a smoother transition, in which the title sequence ends with a sonic connector that leads back into the narrative action. These devices may be integrated into the musical design of the title theme itself to facilitate the transfer. The title music of STRANGER THINGS, for example, concludes with a textural

riser – a whoosh – that accompanies the zooming-in on the episode's intertitles, which then dissolve into the narrative scene, reintroducing the story world. This textural connector, then, simultaneously functions as a sound bridge that lets the music of the title sequence bleed into the narrative text. *HOUSE OF CARDS*, by contrast, does not employ a textural device but instead uses melodic and harmonic material of the tail end of its title music to lead the viewer back into the story. The oscillating bassline and the concluding harmonic movement from D minor to A minor – on piano (which is sometimes masked by other sonic material) – carries over into the succeeding scene after a brief fade to black.

### *Linear/non-linear TV*

TWD offers an opportunity to reflect on the shift from linear to non-linear television spectatorship and how this may affect the paratext and the viewer's relation to it. This marks an important turning point in the viewer's relation to contemporary television series and has drastic implications for the sonic integration of paratextual matter. TWD, lasting from 2010 to 2022, spans the period in which streaming increasingly emerged as an alternative to broadcast television.<sup>13</sup> Even though TWD maintained a weekly release schedule on AMC, earlier seasons were also made available on DVD and later on Netflix, enabling different modes of viewer engagement related to these separate media: from fixed viewing appointments to more »self-determined« viewing practices enabled first by the VCR, then by the DVR, and later by subscription video-on-demand streaming services (Horeck, Jenner, and Kendall 2018, 500). As has been argued by different scholars, this drastically influences the viewer's engagement with audiovisual paratexts, which may be skipped entirely (Davison 2013a; Halfyard 2016; Zündel 2019; Dosser 2022). Interestingly, there are no clear, identifiable changes regarding TWD's paratexts and their integration from broadcasting to streaming from a production perspective. This likely results from its original weekly release format and suggests that the titles are something that the creators expect the audience to watch. In the case of streaming, with the skip intro function, the viewer has the option to bypass the title sequence entirely to »make the

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<sup>13</sup> For a concise history of the various stages of television viewing see for example, Arditi 2021, 81–102, and Kelly 2022.

narrative flow feel more seamless« (Horeck, Jenner, and Kendall 2018, 500). However, even in this situation, the viewer can still choose to watch the title sequence and end credits. As Max Dosser argues, the fact that there is still space reserved for, specifically, the title sequence within series on streaming platforms aligns with this new, flexible manner in which the viewer determines the viewing practice instead of the broadcaster and can thus decide whether to skip the titles or not (Dosser 2022).

What needs to be taken into account when analyzing audiovisual paratexts, then, is Amanda Lotz's point that television as a medium should best be understood in its plurality – as »televisions« – to encompass the increasing diversity in technology, distribution, and platforms surrounding television(s) (Lotz 2018, 91). Additionally, Jana Zündel mentions that »old and new modes coexist and frequently contrast with one another«, which makes matters more complicated to study as findings regarding linear viewing may not apply to non-linear viewing modes (Zündel 2019, 197). As Zündel argues, the more recent treatments of paratexts (such as the option to skip title sequences, or the automatic skipping of a large portion of the end credits) facilitate and actually instruct a viewer to become a binge-watcher, or what she calls a »serial skipper« (Zündel 2019).<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is necessary to also consider the audiovisual flow of the binge-watching or serial-skipping viewing mode and see what is left sonically when the title sequence (or »intro«) is skipped. Particularly, the sonic integration of the title sequence is still part of the sonic flow even if the titles are skipped. In TWD's case, when the title sequence is skipped, the final resolution to G that accompanies the appearance of TWD's title is still present, which sets up the transition back into the textual content of the episode. The moments leading up to the sequence thus form a set-up to the resolved G (albeit with a short interruption caused by the skip), creating a slightly different sonic flow and a faster tension-resolution pattern than when one watches the full title sequence.

This changes the viewer's relationship with the paratexts, which entirely depends on their viewing preferences, which in turn may be motivated by viewers' degree of engagement with the series. This causes a complexity for the different functions of the specific integrations I will discuss. For the highly engaged fan, the sound bridge builds excitement

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<sup>14</sup> In her article, Zündel addresses Netflix, but her argument applies to other streaming services as well.

for the title sequence, which allows for a more intensified relation to an already ritualized viewing (Davison 2013a, 14) of the title sequence. But for those who skip the titles, it might function as a call to action to press the skip intro button. For the deeply invested fan, the merge of the sound bridge with the antecedent cue in particular might be an aesthetically pleasing vehicle through which the iconic theme is offered to them in slightly varied, refreshing ways. The sound bridge does, in any case, bring the most iconic musical element from the paratext, the G minor ostinato, to the main narrative text of the series, foregrounding the sonic signature of the series even when the viewer skips the intro. When the viewer skips the intro, the tutti note G of the tail end of the titles still sounds, which allows a resolution of this particular sonic integration. The riser causes a more sudden transition from the cliffhanger of the cold open to the titles, but when the titles are skipped, the preceding riser still resolves to the aforementioned note G. Similarly, the ostinato of the sound bridge and the rhythmic build-up also resolve to the note G when the titles are skipped, thus maintaining a momentum of sonic tension and subsequent release.

It should be noted, however, that the brief time it takes to press the skip button still allows for the opening ostinato to be heard. So, in practice, the sonic flow when the titles are skipped can best be considered as an interrupted tension-and-release phenomenon, whereas choosing not to skip allows for an uninterrupted sonic flow. In a sense, the viewer can control what Michel Chion calls the internal and external logic of the sonic flow (Chion 2019); internal logic refers to a more continuous flow, while external logic considers »discontinuity and rupture as interventions external to the represented content« (Chion 2019, 46). Viewers are thus able to choose the degree to which they are willing to allow ruptures within the sonic and audiovisual flow in order to maintain an uninterrupted, narrative flow.

### *Conclusion*

As I have demonstrated, the sonic integration of TWD's title sequence clearly connects this paratext to the narrative text through various recurring strategies. These brief moments sonically link textual and paratextual elements, forming a distinctive feature

of the series' aural style and signaling a commitment to audiovisual detail as part of an overall production sophistication that characterizes quality television. Even when the titles are skipped, the sonic integration maintains the tension-and-release phenomenon: dramatic momentum is built up, culminating in the cliffhanger of the cold open and finds resolution in the final note of the title sequence. Future research can further substantiate, and perhaps broaden, these categories of paratextual sonic in television series. This may offer valuable insights into the relationship between specific strategies, genre conventions, the aesthetics of cult/quality TV, the sonic identity of series, dramatic and narrative context, and viewer engagement. In relation to this last point, future research on this topic may also focus on the different sonic flows associated with various viewing modes in contemporary, non-linear television. It may raise questions about the sonic material that remains when paratexts are omitted and how an interrupted sonic flow relates to an uninterrupted flow in terms of dramatic, structural, and communicative implications. The sonic integration of paratextual elements discussed in this article serves as a crucial framework in this regard.

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