

Representations and imaginaries of cities in the opening sequences of three U.S. TV series: *The Sopranos*, *Weeds* and *House of Cards*

Representaciones e imaginarios urbanos a través de los *opening*
de tres series estadounidenses: *The Sopranos*, *Weeds* y *House of Cards*

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Abstract

The opening sequence of a series or film acts as a preamble that encapsulates various key elements of the plot or presents aesthetic and iconographic features that appear in the story. In this research, we analyze the representation of the modern-day American city in the opening sequences of three recent series that were very well received: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018). To this end, we characterize the urban spaces presented in these intros, analyzing how their different elements are represented and used, the differences (or not) between “reality” and fiction, as regards their spatial and urban layout, together with the projection in the media of the different urban contexts.

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The Sopranos and *House of Cards* offer a brief, but highly detailed, picture of two world-famous metropolises (New York and Washington DC) and their different functional aspects. *Weeds*, and to some extent *The Sopranos*, offer the viewer an insight into suburban areas, as an example of urban sprawl in idealized family residential areas. These images are in sharp contrast with the cultural, historical Washington portrayed in *House of Cards*. In this way, the three opening sequences present and help create many of the stereotype images that make up our collective imaginary of the urban landscape of the East and West coast of the United States.

Key words: urban space; suburbia; title sequence; visual representation; United States.

Resumen

Las secuencias de apertura de una serie o de una película funcionan como preámbulo en el que se encapsulan elementos denotativos de la trama o se insertan atributos estéticos e iconográficos directamente relacionados con la historia. Este trabajo analiza la representación de la ciudad contemporánea estadounidense a través de los *openings* de tres series recientes con notable recepción: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005–2012) y *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018). Se lleva a cabo una caracterización de estos espacios urbanos, la representación y uso que se hace de sus elementos, la diferenciación (o no) entre “realidad” y ficción en cuanto a la configuración de su dimensión espacial y urbana, junto con la proyección mediática de los distintos contextos urbanos. *The Sopranos* y *House of Cards* dan cuenta de la figuración y funcionalidad de núcleos urbanos conocidos globalmente (Nueva York y Washington DC) y de su espacio metropolitano. *Weeds*, pero también *The Sopranos*, detalla lugares del ámbito suburbano, ejemplo del *urban sprawl* estadounidense e ideal residencial familiar, en contraposición con la ciudad vinculada a la cultura y la historia de *House of Cards*. Las tres secuencias de apertura conforman y representan los estereotipos del imaginario colectivo que tenemos del paisaje urbano de la costa este y oeste del país.

Palabras clave: espacio urbano; paisaje suburbano; secuencia de apertura; representación visual; Estados Unidos.

1 Introduction

Audiovisual representations are a vital part of the media that enable us to understand the world around us. At a research level, this is reflected in the fact that within disciplines as diverse as geography, town planning, architecture, history, literature, audiovisual communication and

cultural studies, there is increasing interest in the relationship between cinema and place (Hallam, 2010). This is because audiovisual productions such as cinema, TV series, video games, video clips and documentaries, among others, help create the cultural, social or geopolitical imaginaries of cities in the past, present or as we imagine they may be in the future. These imaginaries are in turn related with the creation and formation of identities (Lukinbeal, 2004) of both city and country dwellers (Gallardo & García-Reyes, 2018). Audiovisuals enable us to imagine a wide array of different issues and their consequences, many of which we rarely experience in our daily lives. This means that the viewers only gain a partial, fragmented and sometimes even manipulated view of the city (Antoniazzi, 2019), which influences our perception of urban spaces and of the different urban elements explored in the stories they tell (Zimmermann, 2007; Gámir, 2012), whether they be fictional or documentary. In addition, the different perspectives that they offer us, which can touch on questions as varied as post-industrialization, housing, gentrification, alienation, delinquency or racism, are always subject to our own particular interpretations, given the variety of our individual experiences and perceptions of the city (Lima, 2008).

Human development over the last hundred-plus years has been carefully documented in cinema, with filmmakers trying to capture the wonders and attractions of modern urban existence, its transport systems, lifestyles and human conditions (Bickford-Smith, 2013). Antoniazzi explains it like this (2019, p. 16):

Ever since cinema first appeared, it has tried to depict the city. It developed in a period of great transformations (urbanistic, social, economic, technological) which radically altered the appearance of our cities and of the way we perceive and experience the urban space; it came to be viewed as the most suitable tool for portraying the nascent metropolis and the frenetic pace of modern life. This relationship remains alive and well today.

In addition, the film industry and a growing number of Film Commissions have provided an important economic boost to many different areas, with knock-on effects for example in urban planning or regeneration and in the preservation of historic heritage (Matthews, 2010; Koob, 2019).

Through TV and cinema, the urban phenomenon is presented as a global reality that encompasses all social practices. This, together with their depiction of the physical urban space, projects a reality and a vitality that are specific to cities (Lefebvre, 2003). This has given rise to

numerous studies of the visual representation of the urban landscape or *cityscape*, its different elements and its inhabitants. Examples showing the diversity of approaches can be found in Giardina (2005), who analyzed sport as a representation of popular urban culture in America and of the associated racial issues; Meissner (2012), who reported on the urban imaginary of global financial crises; Bickford-Smith (2013), who explored the perceptions of South African metropolises in cinema from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries; Fichera (2018), who analyzed the stereotype images of suburban Italy presented in different films; or Martens (2020), who studied how delinquency is represented in Jamaican cinema; to cite just a few of the countless works that cover similar lines of research to those explored here. In this way, the sensations transmitted by the different places portrayed in cinema can influence how people perceive their own city or other cities unknown to them, and whether they view them as desirable or undesirable (Bickford-Smith, 2013).

1.1. The city in American audiovisual production

Through cinema or television, we come to recognize urban spaces and architectural landmarks that we have never actually visited, assimilating our knowledge of these places through their depiction on screen, unconsciously learning to distinguish emblematic (or ordinary) places thanks to their portrayal in films or series. In this way, the United States projects an image of itself that extends far beyond its frontiers.

In the 1950s, the American authorities realized that television could be a way of promoting and exporting American values and culture. Bourdon (2008) states that almost everyone throughout the world has at some time consumed products of American culture, either directly or indirectly, often without realizing it, through adaptations of format, producing a gradual process of Americanization. This is because even outside television series or cinema theatres, as Baudrillard (1987, p. 79) makes clear, the entire country emanates a cinematographic image. Coate et al. (2017) drew up a list of 311 cities that had featured in films, ranked according to the number and variety of the films in which they appeared, their presentation at festivals, the box-office takings or the infrastructure employed to make them, among other criteria, concluding that three of the five cities with the greatest *cinemability* were American, namely Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. The other two cities were Paris and London. This hierarchical distribution gives us some idea of the dominant role played by the American audiovisual industry worldwide, giving its cities an enormous power of attraction in economic, tourism and consumption terms and in the creation of imaginaries.

In this way, throughout its history, American cinema has displayed and continues to display an enormous urban diversity depending on the atmosphere it wants to present on screen; we find, for example, idyllic or idealized cities (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961, Blake Edwards), invisible cities (*Taxi Driver*, 1976, Martin Scorsese) or varying visions or models of future cities (*Blade Runner*, 1982, Ridley Scott; *The Truman Show*, 1998, Peter Weir). These projections can be extrapolated to television series such as for example the New York of *Sex and The City* (HBO, 1998-2004) or the San Francisco of *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995). In studies of American films, the filmed city has also been represented as a pleasurable space (Sadler & Haskins, 2005), a place in decline (Roe, 2019) or as a destination for migrants (Clapp, 2009).

1.2. Opening sequence

Over the last two decades, the consumption of television series has gradually increased in line with a similar steady increase in the different forms of consuming television, ever since the consolidation of pay TV worldwide. A series-watching culture has developed and is now deeply rooted as technology; the leisure habits developed by the younger generations have been changing towards more home-based models, as compared to earlier cultural routines that involved going out to the cinema, theater or other cultural events. In this way, TV series offer their viewers a multimodal narration, which can be seen today through a large array of pay platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, HBO Max or Disney +. These new habits are linked to the feedback provided by users/viewers who become prosumers (Toffler, 1980). This is further extended by the dissemination of this feedback across many other media and platforms (Scolari, 2013). The opening sequence has acquired a crucial role in this process, in that it helps stimulate the creation of *fan fiction* which pays homage to, parodies or extends either the trailer or general and specific aspects of the series itself. An opening sequence is therefore of great value as a way-in to a series and makes up, as a separate but complementary section, a small fragment of the audiovisual story that the viewer is about to watch, regardless of whether they are watching the series from the beginning (from the pilot episode) – and successively from then on – or whether they happen to chance upon any random individual episode.

The opening sequences may be considered as narrative and aesthetic devices that complement the serialized story that they are introducing. In this way, they serve as a preamble to the series and also as a means of promoting it. They are therefore a fundamental part of the series in which they normally present the characters, the story and the context in which it takes place (Bednarek, 2014), so connecting the fiction with the viewers' world (Pötzsch, 2012). Their main function is to

transport the viewers to imaginary spaces that captivate them and lead them into the fictional world of the story in a matter of seconds (Flückiger & Fahlenbrach, 2014).

In the early days of cinema, the title sequence was little more than a series of signs with text captions and the opening credits were not fully animated until the mid-20th century (Blancas, 2016). Creators such as the designer and filmmaker Saul Bass became leading figures in this field. Nowadays, there is growing interest in the development and innovation of these introductory sequences, and larger budgets are available for their production; a situation which together with the development of different software and technology has led to much greater aesthetic sophistication and planning in the design of the opening sequence, so highlighting the importance of having a good 'business card' as a means of positioning and promoting the series. In fact, the *Emmy Primetime* awards now have a specific category called "Outstanding Main Title Design" in which the best opening sequences from television series compete. This demonstrates the high consideration and status acquired by these title sequences.

For platforms such as HBO, Showtime or FX, these sequences also act as a vehicle for promoting their brand and customer identification with it. They also offer them a way of differentiating themselves from competing pay-channels and from the products offered by traditional television (Picarelli, 2013). High budget series try to differentiate themselves by applying complex visual and sound techniques and try to attract a wider audience by adapting styles more typical of cinema than of TV (Flückiger & Fahlenbrach, 2014). In some cases, they are directed by film directors and have highly-rated film stars playing the leading roles.

In conjunction with this, there is growing demand from the audience for opening sequences that offer much more than just a basic introduction. Nowadays, there are numerous websites and online journalists who explore these questions as well as related contents created by viewers who emulate each shot that appears in the most iconic introductory pieces. However, there are still relatively few academic articles that analyze the role of opening sequences in cinema and television series, a subject that tends to be ignored or omitted in the analysis of the film or series as a whole.

Goh (2018) stated that the difference between opening sequences and title sequences was based on the fact that the former are not aimed simply at the alphabetical, at the text, but also provide an aesthetic introduction and cultural analyses linking the imaginary world of the film with the real world. In this sense as Klecker (2015) pointed out, the main academic discussion on the paratexts in cinema tends to center on the titles. There are also a number of research papers on

the technical aspects (duration, edition, type of shots, style, etc.) of the opening sequences of films and/or series. Others, albeit less frequently, analyze the contexts in which the sequences are presented or even the music or sound. Analysis of the opening sequences of films can be found for example in Pötzsch (2012) or Goh (2018) and of documentaries in Nichols (2022). More specifically, applied to television series, we could cite the papers by Flückiger & Fahlenbrach (2014), who analyzed the American series *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005) and *True Blood* (2008-2014); or Moylan (2019), who analyzed the American series *Treme* (2010-2013).

In this paper, our aim is to observe how the city and the contemporary urban landscape of the United States are represented in the opening sequences of television series. This will be done by analyzing the following three examples: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), which due to the large worldwide audience that they obtained and continue to enjoy, have contributed to creating the collective imaginary that people have of cities on the East and West Coast of the United States.

2 Methodology

The Sopranos, *Weeds* and *House of Cards* were produced over a period of roughly two decades (2000-2020) (Table 1). The three productions were highly successful in terms of ratings and critical acclaim, and remained on air for at least six seasons, covering more than 70 episodes. The duration of the opening sequences varied and was proportionally linked to the average duration of each episode, which was always less than 50 minutes.

Table 1. Technical characteristics of the three series analyzed

Characteristics	<i>The Sopranos</i>	<i>Weeds</i>	<i>House of Cards</i>
Genre	Crime drama	Crime dramedy	Political Thriller
On air	1999-2007	2005-2012	2013-2018
Number of seasons	6	8	6
Number of episodes	86	102	73
Av. duration of each episode	50 min.	30 min.	40-50 min.
Duration of opening sequence	90 seconds	54 seconds	95 seconds

Source: authors' own elaboration

The city is an omnipresent feature of the opening sequences of all three series and in *House of Cards* and *Weeds* could be regarded as the protagonist. The characters in the story do not appear in these sequences and in the shots containing inhabitants of the city, they are merely complementary aspects of the general urban scene. In the intro to *The Sopranos*, by contrast, the main character takes us on a car journey through the metropolitan area of the largest urban agglomeration in the United States.

In our analysis of the opening sequences, we will be exploring the urban context in which they take place (*The Sopranos* in New York and New Jersey; *Weeds* in a suburban residential complex on the West Coast of America; and *House of Cards* in Washington D.C.). We also offer a brief synopsis of the series and observe, for each one, the different elements that make up the urban landscape (Figure 1): its streets and buildings, the people who live in them and their interaction with the city, the transport systems they use, etc. We will also be identifying and analyzing the similarities between the places, and the dominant elements and themes in the narrative and the plot. We also look at the specific locations and architectural features displayed in these opening sequences and the diegetic time in which the action takes place. Throughout this research, we have collected a great deal of bibliographic and scientific information, so as to be able to contextualize and interpret the aspects observed and analyzed in the series. This enabled us to establish analogies with the real situation in these urban and residential areas on the East and West coasts of the United States, in order to clearly identify the image that is being projected of them in these sequences.

The aim of this analysis is to try to find answers to the following questions:

- What urban model can be observed in the opening sequences? What are its characteristic features?
- What sort of buildings, streets and transport systems do the characters use?
- Who lives in them?
- Which urban landmarks of the different places can be seen?
- What is the relationship between the urban landscape and the people who appear in it?
- Are there any differences between the urban features that appear in the series and “real life”?
- Are they stereotype spaces?

These results were complemented with 13 interviews of both viewers and non-viewers of the series, carried out face-to-face between January and March 2022. The interviewees were aged between 25 and 70. An announcement was placed in social networks after which we selected

people resident in the Madrid region who were available and had access to at least one streaming platform in their home. During the individual interview, they were shown the three opening sequences, and were then asked to explain which urban elements they had observed and reflect on how they were depicted. In this way we were able to verify whether these sequences coincided with the imaginary of American cities that they had in their heads.

Figure 1. Questions about the urban landscape

Distribution	Ordered urban space		Irregular or disordered urban space				
Urban elements	Urban design they make up	Public space: streets, avenues, squares and other roads, buildings, monuments.	Private space: houses, shops	Green infrastructure: Parks and green spaces	Blue infrastructure: rivers and wetlands		
Urban function	Political and/or administrative	Residential	Commercial	Industrial	Tourism	Cultural	Multifunctional
Use	Space for living	Meeting place	Space for transit	Abandoned space	Segregated space	Non-place	
Transport	Car	Taxi	Bus or train	Plane or boat	Bicycle or scooter		On foot
Characters	Physical characteristics	Gender	Social characterization	Psychological characterization	Economic status	Cultural and/or ethical values	Relationship with surrounding area
Emotions and/or sensations	Positive: pleasant, safe, clean, healthy, majestic		Negatives: violent, unpleasant, unsafe, dirty, hostile, oppressive, empty		Neutral: aseptic, boring, lonely, quiet, anodyne, monotonous		
Locations	Real		Fictional		Changes undergone		

Source: authors' own elaboration

3 Results

Despite their diverse plotlines, the three series analyzed present the same general idea of the success and the privileges enjoyed by members of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) community. This is manifested in the important positions they occupy in society and the exclusive places in which they live, from which outsiders are barred. They also reflect on how the characters use this power and success. This trend is in line with the emphasis placed by the American audiovisual industry on repeatedly reinforcing the liberal ideal that personal success has nothing to do with place of birth or socioeconomic class.

We now present the results of our analysis regarding the characteristics of the cities and their particular features, characters and locations as depicted in each of the three opening sequences, in order later to make comparisons between them.

3.1 *The Sopranos*. A journey through the metropolitan area of New York

The Sopranos (HBO) is a TV series created and produced by the showrunner David Chase, which was broadcast between January 1999 and June 2007. The series charts the trials and tribulations of Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), an Italian-American mafia boss from New Jersey who has to deal with the different situations that arise within his two families: his domestic family, made up of his wife Carmela (Edie Falco), his children, mother and sister; and his crime family, made up of a range of different characters, some of whom are also relatives.

Tony Soprano is the archetypal Italian-American as portrayed in films and TV: a violent, cigar-smoking, overweight gangster, who is heavily involved in various shady forms of business. As Clapp (2009) argued, most Americans are “hybridized”: they are African-Americans, Asian-Americans, or Americans of Irish, Hispanic or Italian descent, and continue to identify as such as a means of affirming their individual identity and their membership of a community. Tony and his two families, his work family and his blood family, define themselves as Italian-Americans and live in one of the regions (New Jersey) that received most Italian immigrants at the end of the 19th century. Even today, 15% of the state’s population continue to regard themselves as Italian-American (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

In the opening sequence, we see the mafia boss returning, presumably from work, to his luxury home. He is cast as a driver who is transporting the viewers in his car on a trip from the most widely recognized urban space in the world (New York City) to a large house in the outlying area. We become active participants in his journey, which takes place during the day and is

presented in a chronologically linear scene with about 20 cuts. On his way, he drives through the Lincoln Tunnel to the New Jersey Turnpike. This tunnel, a feat of engineering that runs underneath the Hudson River for 2.4 km, connects the Island of Manhattan (New York) with the State of New Jersey. As he emerges from the tunnel, in the distance we can see emblematic buildings on the Lower Manhattan skyline (Figure 2), including the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and slightly later, the Statue of Liberty.

Figure 2. Manhattan Skyline at the exit of the Lincoln Tunnel



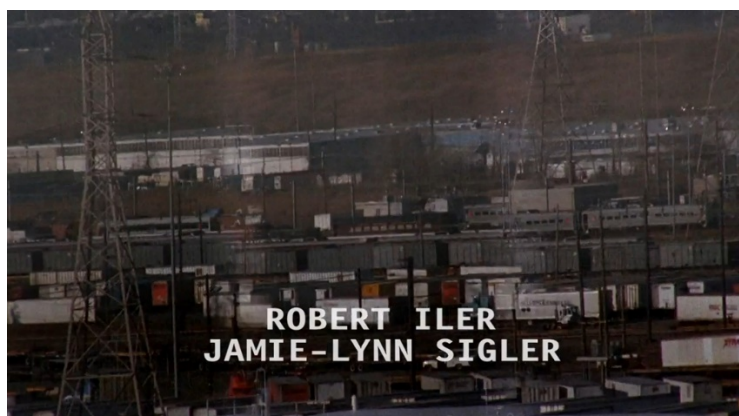
Source: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007)

Once he enters the New Jersey Turnpike, we are shown the turn-offs to Newark and Elizabeth, the first and fourth most populated cities in the state, respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The Turnpike is one of the most frequently used toll roads in the United States, connecting various towns in New Jersey and Newark airport. It also has links to New York, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. In fact, New Jersey has the highest population density in the United States and the largest number of miles of roadway per square mile of land (Wenzell, 2017). In this journey home from work, the main character, and the viewers who accompany him, only catch partial snapshots of the landscape around them.

From this point on, the journey can be viewed as a transition between two quite different places, as the landscape through which the car travels turns gray. Baudrillard (1987, p. 76) argues that highways do not denaturalize the city or the landscape, and instead travel through them, so providing an ideal way to enjoy the pleasure of driving. Tony Soprano seems to share this feeling, as exemplified by his calm driving as he smokes a Havana cigar, another pleasure in which he often indulges. The landscape he is driving through is now less harmonious, as the

wastewater treatment plants and refineries in Newark come into view, together with the airport and the shipping container terminal (Figure 3). He also passes other places such as gas stations or the Kearny Cemetery, before coming to the Meadowlands, a natural “oasis” within what is a highly industrialized area, wetlands which for a long time suffered environmental abuse due to urban development, road building and frequent illegal dumping, but today enjoy some degree of protection (Marshall, 2004). From here, we return to a much more urban atmosphere, with a succession of streets with two-story homes typical of the East Coast, and assorted stores some of which are closed. For less than one second, we catch a glimpse of a group of young African-American and Hispanic pedestrians, and later other detached houses of higher standing in the Cedar Grove area of Kearny. In this way, the impression we receive of the Northern part of New Jersey is of a place dominated by residential developments and segregated industrial areas, with examples of some of the main economic activities in the state related with transport and industry.

Figure 3. Industrial activity



Source: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007)

In fact, the industrial and urban areas pictured in this series have undergone rapid change in the last 15 years since filming ended. Various places have disappeared such as the “Pulaski Savings” bank or the building that contained the “Satriale’s Pork Store”, a butcher’s shop where the characters would often meet. Another visible landmark on Tony’s journey home is “Hydro-Pruf”, a ruined, old factory specializing in waterproof materials which was abandoned in the economic recession that hit the United States in the 1980s and whose famous sign became well-known worldwide after the series. It is now in an even worse state of conservation than it was when the series was on air. However, the fast food restaurant “Pizzaland” at 260 Belleville Turnpike and the iconic “Wilson Carpet Guy” advertising statue of a man holding a roll of green carpet can still be seen today.

In the opening sequence, Tony is seen commuting, one of the most frequent everyday activities of the average American citizen. The character lives in a luxury house (located at 14 Aspen Drive, North Caldwell) in a suburban area in which he needs to use private transport, not only to travel to work but for any other activity he feels like doing, evidence of the dependence of the American people on private cars in their daily lives. His house is a mansion, which represents the American ideal of a large detached house in the suburbs; a type of urban growth which in New Jersey has been steadily increasing since the 2000s (Wenzel, 2017). This trend was reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic when many people sought to move to a safer environment with more space and leisure facilities (Anacker, 2021), something which does not apply in the case of the family in *The Sopranos*, whose lives are surrounded by violence and crime.

Although New Jersey lies on the outskirts of New York, in the series it is depicted quite differently, in often gray, grubby urban contexts that symbolize a dark hostile environment. The image presented by the series has nothing to do with the typical tourist panoramic view of the city of New York or of New Jersey, although the opening sequence does present the most representative buildings in the downtown area of Manhattan. Sadler & Haskins (2005) point out that in *The Sopranos*, although the action rarely takes place in New York itself, the city is always present, appearing in the distance as an ideal icon embodying the characters' aspirations to something better.

This opening sequence hardly varied over the course of the six seasons. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York (from the fourth season onwards), the shots of the Twin Towers were removed and replaced by other images of no iconic significance. These included a bridge and an industrial area in which various different high-voltage electricity pylons and posts can be seen.

3.2 *Weeds*. The place where we would all love to live?

Weeds (Showtime) is a TV series created by the showrunner Jenji Kohan, which was broadcast between July 2005 and September 2012. This is the longest of the three series analyzed although it had shorter individual episodes, something that was also reflected in the duration of the opening sequence. Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker) is a young housewife who is left widowed with two small children whom she has to maintain. Faced with a very urgent economic problem and wanting to maintain her lifestyle in the upper-middle class Californian residential development where she lives, Nancy decides to become a marijuana dealer, and starts supplying many of her neighbors. Her decision to begin a career in crime will affect the future of her family and of her own life, over the course of the different plot situations that gradually unfold.

The opening sequence produced by TCG Studios is the work of the designers Robert Bradley and Thomas Cobb. It varied several times while the show was on air, incorporating one or various scenes related with the content of the episode in question. In the first seasons, the intro began with a brief animated sequence with an aerial view of the construction of a residential development of detached homes in a suburban area (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Aerial image of the construction of the development



Source: *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012)

Although the title sequence does not include characters from the series, it does highlight certain typical features of the life of the average well-off American, with a serialized reproduction of the standard type of houses and cars and of its inhabitants going about their daily activities, such as jogging, drinking takeaway coffee or getting off the school bus. One after another, lines of “clones” perform the same activity, so embodying the caustic lyrics of the title song, “Little Boxes” (1963), composed and performed by the American folk singer Malvina Reynolds, which over the course of the different episodes is covered by a varied group of different artists. The song also highlights the multitude of stereotypes of the American lifestyle presented in the intro.

Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky, little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same [...] And the people in the houses, all went to the university, where they were put in boxes, and they came out all the same. And there’s doctors and lawyers, and business executives, and they’re all made out of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same. And they all play on the golf course [...]. And they all have pretty children and the children go to school [...] and then to the university, where they are put in boxes and they come out all the same.

The series takes place in “Agrestic”, a fictional suburban residential development set in Stevenson Ranch, in Los Angeles County, California. *Pleasantville* (1998), a dystopic film directed by Gary Ross that was critical of the ideal home and the ‘American Way of Life,’ was filmed in the same location. The first shot of the opening sequence is an aerial view of the construction of ‘Agrestic Luxury Homes’, from an advertisement that seeks to attract potential buyers to a healthy, natural environment in an attempt at fake ruralism (Figure 5). In this enormous, exclusive container of serialized detached houses, with a pleasant, always sunny climate, we see several white cars, followed by a series of identical black SUVs. We also see identical middle-aged men and younger women running along clean pavements and through well-kept green areas (Figure 5). Lefebvre (2003) argued that a city is not a city without a park, without some form of simulated nature, an idea that is very well represented in the introduction of the series, with the fountains and green areas. In addition, the type of cars presented, SUVs, are typically associated with people who are keen to show off their high status as a way of expressing and positioning themselves within society (Herberz et al., 2020), a clear symbol of the aspirations of the characters in the series.

Figure 5. Middle-aged men running through urban green areas



Source: *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012)

In later presentations, small changes can be observed, with additional images of slightly overweight children getting off the classic yellow school bus and of blonde girls who are playing on swings or on a slide in an immaculately clean sandpit. In another brief sequence, a family group are shown sitting in garden chairs in the street, enjoying the cool evening air, as the sun is going down. The overall picture is of a very chic-looking development that seems safe, sophisticated and homogenous, in terms of both its architecture and layout, and in terms of the

residents and their social, economic and ethnic level. In this way, the intro presents a sequence of images of each age group that live in family communities of this kind, with children, young working adults and middle-aged people who are nearing retirement and have taken up sport as a means of keeping healthy and active. All these people are residents of a place where, apparently, peace and happiness reign and the children can play in the street, in much the same way as displayed in 1998 in the film *The Truman Show*, but in which, however, social relationships are non-existent and the individuals behave asocially. This ideal, suburban 'American Way of Life' in self-contained residential developments is displayed, as Harvey (2013, p. 35) makes clear, as incoherent, anodyne and monotonous.

This model remains popular in many parts of the world, proclaiming the excellences of life in distant, segregated communities, which are supposedly private and safe, often with perimeter walls and gates to close them off from the outside world. In many cases, however, the refined lifestyle promised by the developers in fact results in increasingly individualistic isolation (Harvey, 2013, p. 35).

The image of the 'It's a Grind Coffee House' is a recurrent feature of the opening sequences in all the seasons. The Coffee House is an enormous café with large windows and a white façade, where executives can be seen walking in and out, talking on their phones and carrying takeaway coffee. This style of consumption, which is closely associated with our collective imaginary of American citizens as big coffee drinkers, as represented in numerous films and other audiovisual products, is currently being exported across the globe to other countries, where coffee has become institutionalized, as a necessary input to enable people to carry out their daily obligations without time for rest.

From the fourth season onwards, an important change can be observed. The key features in the intro (the houses, the park, the cafe, the fountain) are destroyed in a fire, as happens in the story. The ideal American home goes up in flames and the urban area is left deserted. Agrestic is then absorbed in both administrative and economic terms by Majestic, a neighboring rival residential development (which in season eight appears as Regrestic, when Agrestic rises from the ashes). In the eighth and final season, the opening sequence returns to the cover versions of "Little Boxes" and is hand-drawn with a black marker pen detailing the different contretemps encountered by the Botwin family and their changing circumstances, on a journey taking the characters in this series to places as diverse as San Diego, Tijuana (Mexico), Seattle, Montana, New York, Connecticut, Michigan or Copenhagen (Denmark).

In the same way as the opening sequence of the series *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-2019) presented the town of Monterrey in northern California, as a form of happy residential Arcadia, the intro to *Weeds* clearly presents an elitist, individualistic society with a lifestyle from which all those who do not belong are excluded and which rejects economic, social, cultural and racial diversity. Within this framework, when racial or ethnic differences are presented, they tend to be in the form of exotic characters. For example, the people who supply the Botwins with marijuana are an African-American family and the person Nancy marries, so reaching the pinnacle of the criminal world, is an important Mexican politician and drug dealer, other stereotyped images of "real life". In this sense, the radiant, healthy California enjoyed by the white population, as embodied by the Botwin family and their drug-selling business, clashes with the dirty realism, the almost warlike atmosphere described in *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), where young African-Americans seem obliged to begin dealing and consuming drugs in the grimy, abandoned suburbs of Baltimore, surrounded by the corruption of the city.

3.3 *House of Cards*. Washington - a city that doesn't sleep

House of Cards (Netflix) is a television series created by the *showrunner* Beau Willimon, which was broadcast between February 2013 and November 2018. The main character, Frank 'Francis' Underwood (Kevin Spacey) is an American Democrat Congressman, whose ruthless determination and thirst for power leads him to commit all manner of unscrupulous deeds to get to the top. In this turbulent journey, he is accompanied by his wife, the equally ambitious Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) and by Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), his loyal and relentless chief of staff.

The series is based on the novel of the same name by Michael Dobbs (1989), which depicted British politics during the 1980s and the struggle for power within the Conservative party after the resignation of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1990. It is also based on the British miniseries *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990) and its respective sequels, *To Play the King* (BBC, 1993) and *The Final Cut* (BBC, 1995), which were all adaptations of novels by Dobbs with scripts by Andrew Davies.

As a result, the opening sequence of the American series is inspired to some extent by the opening sequence of the BBC miniseries, which shows via an aerial view of London, the River Thames, Big Ben and the British Houses of Parliament. Over the course of the six seasons of the Netflix series, there were no changes in the structure of the opening sequence. The images were accompanied by a soundtrack composed by Jeff Beal, which evokes a ceremonial march. Of the

three series analyzed, this is the only one that uses music expressly composed for the opening sequence. In over 30 cuts, the introduction takes us on a fleeting journey through Washington DC. The daylight hours are condensed and speeded up, in a reference to the high speed of life in the American capital, which does not sleep; the cars shoot by, as do the clouds and the setting sun. The passage of time at seasonal level from autumn to winter is also speeded up.

In a loop from daybreak in the city that governs the world until nightfall, we are offered a panoramic view of the city and in particular of its main monuments and architectural landmarks, almost exclusively centered on the streets that fall within the National Mall, the Federal Triangle and the downtown area. Two iconic symbols of the city and of the entire country can be identified: the obelisk of the “Washington Monument” and the Capitol building, seat of the United States Congress and symbol of the country’s national sovereignty, and a guarantor of the democratic system ushered in by the founding fathers of the nation over 200 years ago. The first shot in the opening sequence clearly defines the complex main space in which the series will unfold, emphasizing in the six second-duration of the scene, the geographic dimension of political power in the U.S. This is also the site of “The Ulysses S. Grant Memorial”, a group of sculptures created by Henry Shradley between 1902 and 1924. This is the most featured sculpture in the opening sequence, which also offers details of its pedestals with lions and battle scenes. Grant, a Civil War General and later a Republican politician, was known for a series of corruption scandals during his presidency at the end of the 19th century (Abbott, 2013), so establishing a link with the main character in House of Cards.

At the crossroads between Pennsylvania Avenue, the road that leads into the heart of Washington and connects the White House complex and the Congress with 10th St., we come to the FBI Headquarters and a complex of buildings belonging to the US Department of Justice. There is also a modern building which once housed the Newseum, an interactive museum of news and journalism, with a distinctive marble façade with the engraved text of the first Amendment of the American Constitution¹ and details from a temporary exhibition about the former US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (“Museum Celebrates Freedom”, February 2013). The museum, which was inaugurated in 2008, was forced to close to the public in December 2019 due to economic problems. Today it is the headquarters of the School of Advanced International Studies of the John Hopkins University and also contains luxury apartments. The tablet with the first amendment was donated to the Philadelphia History Center.

1 NEWSEUM. <https://www.newseum.org/about/>

In the Federal Triangle we are shown the front of the Ronald Reagan Building, the head office of the US Postal Service, and various monuments such as the equestrian statue of General Winfield Scott Hancock (1896), "The Stephenson Grand Army of the Republic Memorial", in honor of a military surgeon from the American Civil War, or the John Marshall Place Park with the "John Marshall Monument", a seated statue of a renowned former Chief Justice of America. At a more oblique angle we see other emblematic buildings or monuments such as the National Gallery of Art, the Kennedy Center or the "Lincoln Memorial". Another recognizable landmark is Union Station, the city's main railway station with its railway lines and trains. The shot offers a detail from the front of the main building with a statue of the Greek philosopher, mathematician and astronomer Thales of Miletus, an allegory for electricity, which is part of a group of granite sculptures called "The Progress of Railroading" by Louis Saint-Gaudens (1908).

We are also shown two bridges over the River Potomac: the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge which crosses the river island and the "Theodore Roosevelt Island National Memorial" National Park, and the Arlington Memorial Bridge which connects the two sides of the river with the "Lincoln Memorial". The city of Washington was developed in the basin of the River Potomac, a navigable river that has been plagued by pollution (Harris et al., 2018), one of the few examples in the United States of a name given by the Algonquins, native American peoples who called one stretch of the river's long course *Patawomeck* (Scheel, 2004). Nearby, we can see the Thomas Jefferson Memorial and on the other side of the river in the state of Virginia, the Monument to Iwo Jima, inspired by the photograph "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" (Joe Rosenthal, 23rd February 1945), the popular name for the "Marine Corps War Memorial" (1954), situated at the entrance to the Arlington National Cemetery. The Anacostia River, a subsidiary of the Potomac, is shown amidst various signs of decay, with a black metal drum on its bank, several cranes and the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge (before its refurbishment), and also of modernity with the Nationals Park baseball stadium, home of the Washington Nationals. Today, this area is undergoing regeneration and since the year 2000 has hosted the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative², a government project aimed at cleaning up the river banks, revitalizing the neighboring districts, building parks and recreational areas and improving the multimodal transport system; the results of this initiative can be observed for example in the renovation of the Frederick Douglass Bridge, which now has three modern arches which *House of Cards* viewers would not recognize as they were installed after the intro to the series was filmed.

2 Anacostia Waterfront Initiative. <https://www.anacostiawaterfront.org/>

At a less monumental level, we are also shown images of Eckington, one of the oldest neighborhoods in DC and of Bloomingdale. We see terraces of Victorian houses running along both sides of the central stage of North Capitol Str., a long way from its more industrialized periphery. On H-Street Bridge, behind Union Station, there is a large mural entitled “Hopscotch Kids”, by Deirdre Saunder (1997), an urban artwork that converted a wall of aluminum and graffiti into a mosaic-tile image of 40 children playing hopscotch. The opening sequence also highlights some of the last vestiges of the architectural evolution of the city we see today. At the crossroads of G St NW with 10th St NW, there is a two-story office building, home to a company called Webber Shandwick, alongside St Patrick’s Catholic Church (1794), with neo-Gothic lines, or the classical streetlights typical of Washington. This creates a historical atmosphere that projects the idea of a classical city. The city center includes housing with more modern apartment blocks and terraced Victorian houses, with administrative and service buildings, creating a combination of uses and styles in which the pickaxe and the wrecking ball have been laying waste to nineteenth century Washington, made of brick and stone, as opposed to the current popularity of steel and glass architecture.

The passage of time in the most powerful city in the world is materialized as day turns to night, and all the urban spaces (always exteriors) are displayed devoid of people (Figure 6). No local residents or tourists can be seen. All we see are cars driving from one place to another. Their occupants are invisible in much the same way as the money circulating around the economy. The only humans depicted are in statues of national dignitaries or heroes (Figure 7).

Figure 6. A monumental city with deserted streets



Source: *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018)

Figure 7. Example of the numerous sculptures displayed



Source: *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018)

In this way, the opening credits of *House of Cards* capture the majesty and grandeur of Washington DC while at the same time portraying it as a cold, empty city, devoid of all humanity, indifferent to the concerns of normal people and exclusively focused on the symbols of power, in other words on the games of intrigue and tension that will be played out over the course of the series. Making the people of the city invisible is a way of emphasizing the politicians' lack of interest in them: they are completely irrelevant to those in power. In addition, the intensity of the city's economic processes and the associated acceleration of its inhabitants' way of life is illustrated by the cars that flit to and from across the scene. The result is the loss of social life, of real connections between people. This presents an almost apocalyptic glimpse of the future in which similarities can be drawn with the opening sequence of the series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-2022), which shows empty streets and abandoned buildings.

Likewise, as Lefebvre (2003) pointed out, the city presented as a monument projects a conception of the world that contrasts with the established idea of the city and its projection as a center of social life. He asserts that monuments are heroic testimonies for posterity or icons of the progress made by past, present and future generations, and that "Any space that is organized around the monument is colonized and oppressed...The extension of monumental space to habiting is always catastrophic, and for the most part hidden from those who are subject to it". This fact can be observed to perfection in the opening sequence of the series.

In real life, however, DC is a vibrant diverse city where locals and tourists walk, shop and eat in its countless cafes and restaurants. In fact, its status as a monumental city (as highlighted in this

series), has made it the most photographed city by tourists in the United States and the third most photographed by local people, a statistic that is particularly striking given that as a destination it is below the national average in terms of the number of visitors (Li et al., 2018). Although tourists and residents tend to move around different areas, the former with a clear preference towards the center of the city and the latter with a much more disperse pattern, most of the points of interest that they visit (Li et al., 2018) are shown in the opening sequences.

The series emphasizes the economic and political opulence of the United States, whose flag appears upside down merging with the word "HOUSE" in the credits. The frame with the 50 stars representing the 50 states of the Union appears in the bottom right-hand corner and the 13 stripes of the founding colonies are distributed above and around it, a scathing reference to how the characters are going to turn the established order in the country upside down.

3.4 Similarities and differences between the three opening sequences

Table 2 offers a summary of the different urban elements analyzed in the three opening sequences, the main characteristics of the people depicted, the emotions and sensations transmitted by these images of urban areas and the timeframe in which they take place.

The three opening sequences analyzed here all present well-ordered urban distributions, although some striking differences can be observed. During the journey home in *The Sopranos* we can see, albeit at a distance, the reticular urban development of Manhattan Island (in a similar way to the portrayal of Washington as the capital city in *House of Cards*) and its skyscrapers, the more irregular industrial zones and the more open residential areas of different towns in New Jersey. This contrasts with the residential development of single-family detached houses in *Weeds*, a residential space with more irregular distribution. In all three sequences, there is a preference for showing the public space (streets, squares, etc.) as compared to the very few images of private space, focusing above all on housing. There are also examples of green infrastructure, such as parks, especially in *Weeds*, or blue infrastructure, such as the Hudson River in *The Sopranos* or the Potomac and Anacostia rivers in *House of Cards*.

As regards the functions of these urban areas, we should highlight the multifunctionality of the metropolitan area of New York displayed in *The Sopranos* and of Washington in *House of Cards*, as compared to the purely residential and commercial functions of the West Coast residential development depicted in *Weeds*. All the intros show spaces in which people live and work, while also highlighting abandoned areas (such as the industries featured in *The Sopranos* or the absolutely deserted streets portrayed in *House of Cards*), in some cases cut-off non-places:

different neighborhoods and spaces on the outskirts of New York, shown during Tony Soprano's journey home or the upper-middle class residential development presented in *Weeds*. These contrast with the images of the American capital as a historical place with architectural identity presented in *House of Cards*.

Table 2. Main characteristics of the three opening sequences

	<i>The Sopranos</i>	<i>Weeds</i>	<i>House of Cards</i>
Distribution	Ordered urban space	Ordered urban space	Ordered urban space
Urban elements	Public space: streets, avenues, roads, ports, industrial, religious, residential, administrative buildings, monuments. Private space: house, car. Blue infrastructure: rivers and wetlands	Public space: Streets, avenues, squares, residential, commercial and educational buildings. Private space: houses, private gardens, shops. Green infrastructure: parks and green spaces	Public space: streets, avenues, roads, squares, religious, residential, administrative, sports, office and cultural buildings, monuments. Private space: houses Green infrastructure: parks and green areas Blue infrastructure: rivers
Function	Multifunctional	Residential and commercial	Multifunctional
Use	Space for living; traveling through; abandoned; segregated; non-place	Space for living; meeting place; segregated; non-place	Space for living; meeting place; traveling through; abandoned
Transport	Car, airplane, boat	Car, on foot	Car, train
People portrayed	WASP. Middle-aged man. High economic class. No relationship with surrounding area	WASP. Middle-aged men and women, young people and children. Upper-middle class. Very limited, but harmonious relationship with the surrounding area	No people appear
Emotion and/or sensation	Safe, dirty, deserted, hostile	Pleasant, clean, quiet, healthy, safe, lonely, boring, monotonous, anodyne	Majestic, safe, aseptic, clean, deserted, hostile, empty
Timeframe	Approximately 40 minutes	Months	24 hours during different seasons of the year

Source: authors' own elaboration

The private car is the predominant means of transport shown in all three series, although other forms of transport also appear in the distance or in the corner of the image, such as airplanes in *The Sopranos*, a train in *House of Cards* and pedestrians in *Weeds*. It is ironic that Washington D.C. is in fact one of the most walkable cities in the United States, with great pedestrian activity due to its profusion of shops, services and architectural monuments among others (Pozueta et al., 2009), but these people and activities seem to have been intentionally deleted by the editors of the intro.

With the exception of the deserted streets of the American capital, most of the people shown in the opening sequences are white, heterosexual, middle-aged people on high incomes, who have no or very little relationship with the city: they use it as a place of work, of transit or simply as a place to sleep. They are individuals who live in or travel through places that are often deserted but quite safe. The monotony of *Weeds* is contrasted with the majesty and emptiness of *House of Cards* or with the dirty hostile areas portrayed near the railway tracks and the rundown industrial areas in *The Sopranos*.

Finally, the timeframe covered by the narrative of the three pieces also varies quite considerably. It would take Tony Soprano about 40 minutes to do the journey shown in the introduction. In the presentation of *Weeds* we are shown a time-lapse sequence tracing the building of the residential development and various sequences showing everyday life over what is probably several months. For its part, the Washington of the Underwoods is depicted as day turns into night and over the course of different seasons.

As regards the results of the survey we conducted, we should make clear that 23% of the people consulted had not seen any episodes of the series analyzed, 31% had seen at least one complete series, and the remaining 46% had seen at least part of one series. After watching the opening sequences, the respondents detailed different parts of the urban landscape such as residential developments, skyscrapers, avenues or highways and various features from the picture postcard images of the cities of New York or Washington, mentioning buildings such as the Capitol or the Twin Towers. They also highlighted the standardization and cloning portrayed in *Weeds* and certain other features such as the use of the private car and of “artificial” green areas. Five people remarked that the opening sequences presented an individualistic, asocial society, while two considered that the urban landscape depicted an idyllic image aimed at privileged individuals, in which there was no space for or representation of either working-class people or of the enormous racial diversity in the United States.

4 Discussion

Audiovisual productions enable us to visit different landscapes and historic and current features of our cities and even to venture into a more or less distant future. These productions can try to represent a particular period in time as it really was or as imagined by the technical and artistic team and by the viewers that consume these stories. In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that the images they offer us of American cities provide quite a homogenous, standardized picture of their true diversity (Augé, 2000). They show us some buildings, streets and other

features that still appear in today's street maps and others that have since disappeared due to their subsequent deterioration or as a result of urban regeneration policies. Nonetheless, films and television also present a reality constructed on the basis of the stereotypes created or reinforced by these fictional accounts. One clear example of this can be found in Njambi & O'Brien (2021), who analyzed the reductive polarized representation of Africa and its cities in Hollywood movies, in which they are either depicted as exotic, colonial centers or as chaotic cities fraught with crime and poverty; there is also the stereotype vision of a continent covered by nature and wildlife in which the urban does not even exist. Sadler & Haskins (2005) cited another form of stereotype imaging in which New York is shown in different TV series as an idyllic picture postcard city.

In a similar way, TV shows often present idealized versions of real-life behavior, in our case, the American dream of a family, whose ideal is to live in a leafy suburban area (Anderson, 2010) surrounded by green spaces and forests, superficially refined and safe (although this is not the case in *The Sopranos* and *Weeds* where the main characters are or become career criminals), while the center of the city is left for single people or couples without children, as pictured in other series such as *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), *Sex and the City* or *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015).

In the three series we selected, the automobile is presented as the predominant means of transport and as an intrinsic, inseparable part of life for the average American. In many parts of the country, anyone who decides to leave their car at home and walk may be regarded with suspicion, as walking is associated with "being a threat to public order" (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 82). Finding a parking space becomes an obsession and optimum traffic management a priority. This has negative consequences for urban and social life at both an individual and a collective level, in that the elimination of streets and of spaces where people can mix and come together reduces the city to little more than a dormitory (Lefebvre, 2003), as happens in *The Sopranos* and *Weeds*, and as can be deduced in *House of Cards* by the fact that the streets are deserted.

The urban spaces displayed in the opening sequences are characterized by individualism and the representation of power. They are idealized places that confirm our preconceived ideas of suburban America and of Washington and New York, highly cinematographic cities. They offer landscapes that we recognize although we have never actually seen them in person (Augé, 2000). In *House of Cards*, the opening sequence conveys the city's architectural identity, as

exemplified by its monuments, but says little about its status as a multifunctional historic center (Aertsen et al., 2018), in contrast with the non-places depicted in the other two series.

Although the urban is an omnipresent feature of the opening sequences, there is no real relationship between the characters and the city, apart from being the place where they live and/or work. The urban landscape becomes little more than a backdrop. There is no sense of place, but there is an urban identity, as opposed to a rural identity, albeit devoid of meaning. On this question, Barranha (2008) makes clear that Hollywood has preferred to explore aerial perspectives of American cities in order to emphasize their spectacularity and grandeur (or terror) rather than viewing them through the eyes of a *flâneur*. In his book, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire defined a *flâneur* as someone who walks around the city as an observer, to experience it and understand it. In both the opening sequences and the general storyline of the three series analyzed, this figure does not exist.

In addition, as Rosati (2007) points out, the media, which includes cinema and television, is capable, in many senses, of making place irrelevant, of creating a distance between the real and the imaginary, opting to strengthen and represent hegemonic power. In this sense, the main characters in the series we analyzed share various common features: they are white, middle-aged, heterosexual and belong to the middle or upper-middle classes who live in quiet, clean urban spaces, in spite of having to use the car all the time and of their criminal activities. Tony Soprano is Italian-American and Catholic, but his minority group origins would seem to be an exception within the world in which he moves; he maintains his Italian-American identity as a means of conserving his reputation within the criminal society to which he belongs. The social difference created by ethnic exceptionality is also present in *Weeds* in the main character, Nancy Botwin, a white woman whose late husband was an engineer of Jewish origin. Nancy manages to escape the bounds of traditional maternal roles by becoming an antiheroine who defies the stereotyped expectations of female behavior (Bradshaw, 2013). The most extreme case is that of Francis Underwood in *House of Cards*, a southern politician and leading member of the United States Congress for the Democrat Party; in spite of his Catholic education, Underwood is a devious, Machiavellian schemer who is prepared to commit terrible crimes, and in the end opts for a Protestant Church, another example of his chameleonic nature as he climbs the political ladder.

Film and cinema serve not only as creators of imaginaries, but also as a means of marketing a city as an attractive destination for visitors, businesses and as a place to live. In this context, numerous

routes have emerged in which the fans of series can visit the same streets, buildings and other features as the characters in the series. One example are the various agencies who offer tours of the most iconic landmarks in *The Sopranos*, in both New York and New Jersey.³

All the depictions and images provided by film and cinema of the urban landscape, its features and its people are also useful as pedagogical tools in secondary school and university classrooms. On this question, Sigler & Albandoz (2014) emphasized that the huge variety of themes explored can facilitate investigation into subjects as diverse as poverty, the polarization of society, urban restructuring or growth, enabling researchers to analyze contrasts, possible cultural and political biases and even concepts of identity. Within our particular field of research, there are other examples of opening sequences in which the American urban landscape can be analyzed. From 1970s series, such as *The Streets of San Francisco* (ABC, 1972-1977) which also showed the Northern California city in its outro, to the hit soap operas of the 1980s such as *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) and *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) showing off the huge wealth of their business empires, and reproducing the downtown areas of Dallas and Denver, respectively (together with other rural areas of Texas and Colorado), American cities that are much less frequently represented in TV series, where Los Angeles, New York and Washington tend to dominate. In fact, New York is such a paradigmatic case that it can be found in a multitude of series set in the city, such as for example the opening sequence of the police series *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005), which includes images of Manhattan Island, the Brooklyn Bridge, Chinese New Year in Chinatown and the demolition of depressed areas; *Rescue Me* (FX, 2004-2011), in which Brooklyn and part of Manhattan are the main spaces post 9-11, following storylines that revolve around the life and work of New York firefighters; the city reduced to icons such as the Chrysler Building and other landmarks of New York glamour in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004); the representation of the historic city and its expansion in *New Amsterdam* (FOX, 2008); or a dystopic United States after a Second World War won by the Nazis and the Japanese in *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-2019), with very obvious references to New York, and also to San Francisco. Urban spaces are also represented in the opening sequences of animated cartoon series, such as *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-present), which introduces viewers to Springfield, a fictional average American city, or the parody *Futurama* (FOX, 1999-2013) featuring New New York, the future city of the year 3000. There is also the animation in the brief intro to *Silicon Valley* (HBO, 2014-2019), which emulates life simulation videogames in order to

3 On Location Tours. Soprano Sites Tour. <https://onlocationtours.com/new-york-tv-and-movie-tours/sopranos/>.

contextualize the urban area of the world's high technology business center *par excellence* in San Francisco Bay.

All these opening sequences and those analyzed in this paper make up and represent the collective imaginary we have of North American cities, because as Marc Augé (2000, p. 38) made clear, "Is there anything more realistic and in one sense more informative about life in the USA than a good American series?".

5 Conclusions

The audiovisual industry has enormous influence on the way viewers construct imaginaries of reality. The arrival of Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) platforms has brought about a revolution in the way people consume television and much greater access to fictional series, consolidating their position as one of the main forms of cultural consumption and leisure activity today. As a result, the opening sequences of these series become pieces that viewers can watch just once or as part of every single episode broadcast, so repeatedly conveying the information they contain. In recent years, thanks to the progress in technology and also to much greater budgets and finance, more elaborate opening sequences have begun to be developed, in a bid to capture the viewers' attention right from this very first introductory moment. In this way, they have become a section of the series itself (rather than an accessory to it). One good example of this is the opening sequence of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), which was enormously successful amongst the viewing public and which acted as a compendium that enabled the viewers to discover the places where the story was going to take place, without giving away any details of the plot. The maps unfold, encouraging the viewers to watch as scale models pop up of the territories that chart the course of the saga.

The representation of urban and social themes in film and television has been widely explored, evidencing the increasing interest in broadening our knowledge and our analysis of the perceptions, imaginaries and problems affecting the city, as regards the capacity to capture and express the complexity and diversity of urban areas. *The Sopranos* and *House of Cards* are structured around frontier areas, in other words they depict the central situation of a world-famous city (New York and DC respectively) and its metropolitan area, even encompassing neighboring cities and states (New Jersey in *The Sopranos* and Arlington, Virginia in *House of Cards*). In both these stories, this connection becomes more important, signifying not only social barriers but also laws and moral limits. In addition, *Weeds*, and the final cuts of the opening sequence of *The Sopranos*, present suburban and rural spaces, highlighting the urban sprawl typical of

American cities, the epitome of family residential housing: pristine, quiet and surrounded by vegetation (with which they have almost no contact), a question that can also be observed in series such as *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012). This contrasts sharply with the city associated with culture and history shown in *House of Cards*. These places are presented in a stereotype mode that reproduces and reinforces previous collective imaginaries, marginalizing the representation of the social, economic and racial diversity of the United States in general and of these cities in particular.

The three opening sequences analyzed from *The Sopranos*, *Weeds* and *House of Cards*, show that various different aspects of the urban landscape can be observed and analyzed in less than a minute. These range from the spatial dimensions of the urban atmosphere to the characterization and the use made of its streets, buildings or transport systems. The images help confirm the ever-present identification with socioeconomic class and family, as does the environment in which they live. In this sense, we believe that these sequences are valuable sources for the analysis of geographical and social issues which are sometimes ignored, so enabling us to visualize different components of urban life and a wide range of problems of enormous complexity. They can also help stimulate debate regarding the impact the audiovisual industry has or may have on the image of different urban areas.

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