



TITLING HOME MOVIES, MITTEN'S WAY

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Back in the days before desktop technologies like iMovie and Final Cut Pro, the easiest way to create titles for 8 mm or 16 mm home movies was actually not easy. In fact, it was ridiculously messy and cumbersome. Yet it was the only way for the do-it-yourselfer to learn a little something about type and lettering while snazzing up the old celluloid. The results weren't always pretty, but making film titles with Mitten's Movie Titles, Struhl Movielux Titling Set, or any of the 'Ersatz' letter systems like Judy's Alphabets (originally plastic letters made for children but adapted for films) was how any novice filmmaker could, as the promotional slogan went, 'Give your titles that Hollywood touch'.

Although most weekend cineastes couldn't be bothered to spend their time composing the individual two- and three-dimensional letters, gluing, filming, and splicing the film, titling was being pushed as a big enough hobbyist's business that guidebooks were written, lettering sets were produced and hardware was manufactured to encourage 'attractive' (which was the mantra) home movie typography.

According to the leading expert in the field, James W. Moore, in his book *Titling Your Color Movies*, the three elements necessary for any 'well-prepared' title card were: 'The card itself, or background; the lettering or letters which go on it; and the decoration which may or may not be used to enhance these two practical elements'. It all seems fairly fundamental but never underestimate the ability of even the most serious amateur to screw things up. I know: in the fifties,

I remember my father trying his best to compose the titles, getting impossibly frustrated, and then fobbing the entire job onto me. It's a wonder, given the trauma I went through, I don't get hot and cold chills whenever I see a Mitten's box. It is even more incredible that I love still typography after suffering through the aborted titling tasks I was given to do.

Nonetheless, amateur movie titling is a slice of popular culture, a remnant from the time before computer 'automation', and an artifact - the letters themselves - that is reprised in contemporary practice by designers who use the letters to create 3D typographic illusions without resorting to digital tricks - a satisfying anomaly.

There were five fundamental ways of creating titles: with a typewriter; with movable letters - either flat or raised; with draftsmen's lettering guides; with press (actual typeset) printing; and with hand lettering - either traced or free-hand. The masters of titling had certain rules that made 'execution more effective'. They are worth nothing. First, the typewriter: 'Typefaces should be freshly cleaned and free of all embedded ink. A studied evenness of touch in hitting the keys should be practiced. The ribbon should be set in the "stencil" position to get soft, textured outlines to avoid unattractive magnified projection.'

1 Uncle John using his home copy stand to shoot Mitten's letter on a black background.

2 Plaster letters were used on home-made educational films, in this case for a high school drivers' education class.

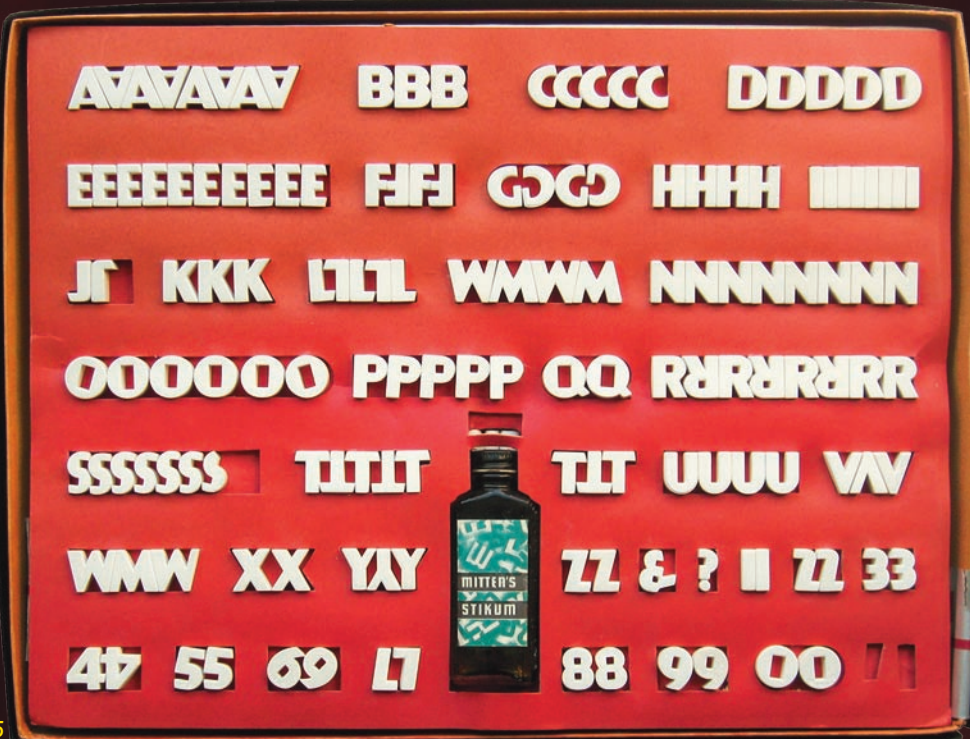
3 For Uncle John's vacation to San Francisco he painted a picture of a TWA Constellation flying over the bay and titled it with dimensional letters.

4 When lit from the side the plastic letters gave off a shadow and jumped off the page.

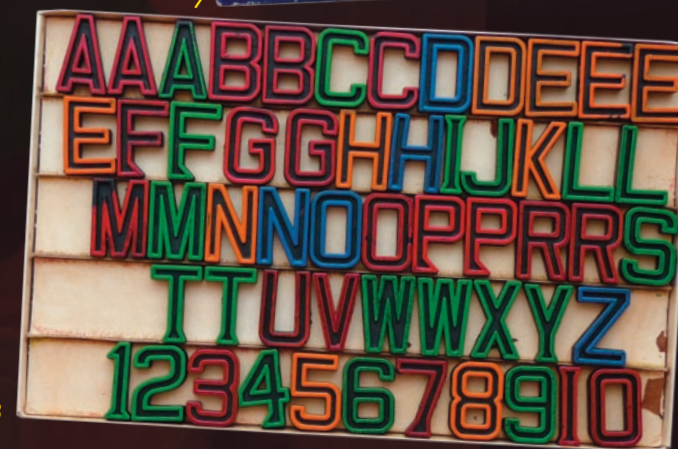


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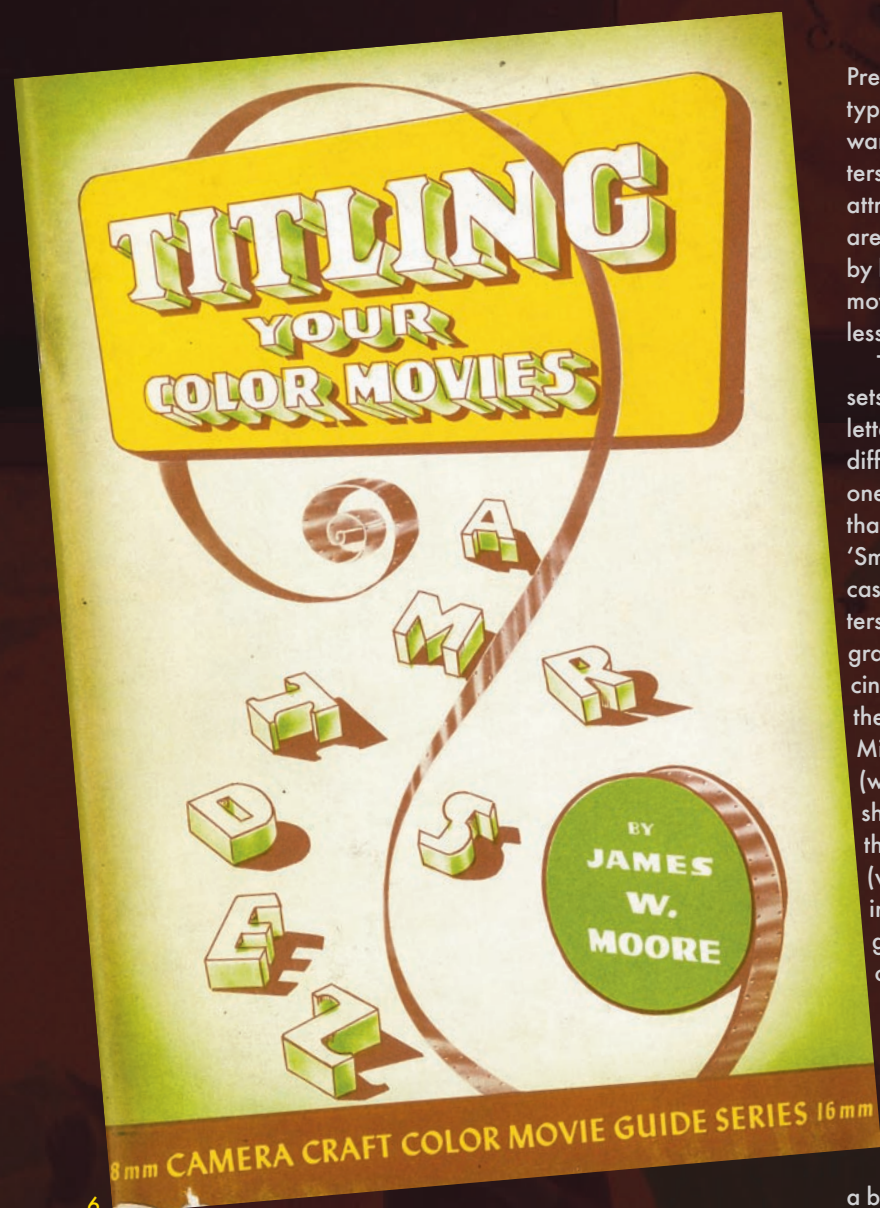
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5 A box of Mitten's letters: Note the prejudice against the letters Q, X, and Z.

6 James W. Moore was the titling guru back in the early 50s. He knew every trick in this book.

7-8 Judy's Alphabets and Numerals was a children's learning toy, but with the right composition it was used for movie titles too.

9 Inside every fragile box of Mitten's Letters was the bold logo that every amateur cineaste needed. And don't forget Mitten's famous Stickum.



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Predictably, however, typewriter type is risky, as James W. Moore warns: 'Titles set in movable letters are unquestionably more attractive than the typed title; they are therefore more widely used by both experienced and aspiring movie makers.' A lesson used is a lesson learned.

The most popular lettering sets were Mitten's white plaster letters, which came in eight different sans-serif styles, including one called Tempar and another that looked suspiciously like Kabel. 'Smartly designed and cleanly cast', these tri-dimensional tile letters were meant to have the most graphic impact under harsh cinematic lights. While they lack the grace of printed letterforms, Mitten's 'tri-dimensional bulk (which can be cross-lighted for shadows with dramatic effect), their upper and lower case fonts (which are almost mandatory in setting subtitles) and the general clarity and elegance of their design' were a plus. The minus is that they needed to be very carefully mounted on background surfaces, which could cause accidents.

Yet it wasn't simply enough to compose the letters on a blank surface; the lighting was critical. 'Directionally speaking, there are three ways of lighting titles: from the front, from the side, and from the rear. The last of these three lighting methods, since it requires that letters be in transparency, is used primarily in making double-exposed titles.' Systems for lighting were

surprisingly elaborate to achieve the 'hot spot' and capture the best possible shadow to increase dimensionality. For the advanced hobbyist, creating double-exposures was even more complex. A light box for the transmitted-light system of illuminating title letters required feats of engineering that required brains, brawn and patience.

The experts agreed that for linear sharpness, variety of styles and general clarity of design, 'the press-printed title is hard to beat', as Moore wrote. In addition to standard faces, lettering guides, used by architects and engineers, made 'workmanlike' title legends. Hand-lettering was generally recommended for use only in main and end 'title cards'. Type setting was best for 'credits'.

Mitten's offered the most versatile size options; and size definitely mattered. 'Intelligent care should be given to determining suitable letter size and spacing,' stated Moore, adding 'letter line up and spacing should be done with a ruler for absolute balance.' Since titling rules were aimed at the uninitiated 'typographer', the most valuable advice was this: don't overdo. 'In other words, keep it simple, keep it small, and keep it subdued. Remember that title art is an adjunct, not an end in itself.' Take that, Saul Bass!

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THE END

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