

Student Name: Bronwyn Eccleson

Student Number: 2304916

Module Code: ADA5004

Research In Practice – Proposal Essay

Word Count: 2706

In this research in practice essay, I will be looking at the role of a graphic designer for film and the part they play in the **world-building** which we see on screen as well as their history in the film industry. I will explore the practice of **sign painting**, focusing on it's popularity throughout history and why it is making a comeback. Finally, I will be researching the history of the **book cover** and how it has evolved into what we know today.

World-building

Despite official recognition of a graphic designer within the film industry only occurring in the last 20 years, "the relation that exists between graphic design and the image in movement is as old as cinema itself" (Solana and Boneu, 2007, p. 9). Since the first films, graphic design is found in movie posters and opening credits, although the designers themselves went uncredited for many years. Other graphic elements in film which often go unnoticed are all the graphic props that appear in a scene.

For film the graphic designer is responsible for designing any item which "has lettering, a pattern, or a picture on it" (Atkins, 2020, p.12). In the past, these pieces would have been created by different members of the art department, or if they existed already, would have been borrowed. However, as copyright lawsuits over the inclusion of different products became more frequent, studios decided to hire graphic designer as "someone who could produce original artwork that the production company would legally own" (Atkins, 2020, p.12).

Although little is known by the public about graphic designers in the film industry, a few graphic designers have become more renowned for their work and have raised the profile of the profession. Most well-known is the designer Annie Atkins, recognised for her graphics in the films of the American director Wes Anderson, after they started working together on his 2014 film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Miraphora Mina and Eduardo Lima rose to prominence through the graphic world they created for the Warner Bros. *Harry Potter* series.



Figure 1, Diagon Alley set from the *Harry Potter* films, 2001 - 2011

Alongside creating all graphic elements specified in the film script, the graphic designer is also responsible for creating the wider graphic world that will appear on screen in the background in order to make it believable, because as in the real world “everything involves design”, “you see it everywhere” (Lima, cited Pocock, 2019). Atkins says “95% of my work will never be seen” by someone watching the film, but it is still important for these pieces to be present on set to “help the actors and director transport themselves into another world” (Adobe Creative Cloud, 2016). Creating pieces which blend into the scene and do not distract is important, not only for the actors, but as graphic designer Robert Bernard states, the extra detail that is

included but not focused on is there to “help the audience suspend disbelief and keep the focus where it needs to be: the story being told” (LaSane, 2019). This contrasts directly with commercial graphic design where the work is made to stand out and grab attention. Figure 1 shows the set of Daigon Alley in Harry Potter, all of the shop signs will have been designed, as well as all the products which can be found in them to create the most realistic set possible.

Some graphic props, however are included to be noticed; they are used to tell part a of the story, or might play a vital role in it. These props “that are given a character of their own, or that are given a close up” (Atkins, It’s nice that, 2015) are known as ‘hero props’. For example, an important letter that the audience is aware of which appears multiple times throughout a film, or the headline of a newspaper article conveys an event that is relevant to the plot.



Figure 3, Ludwig's Prison Escape Map, Annie Atkins, 2014



Figure 2, Ludwig's Prison Escape Map Folded, Annie Atkins, 2014

Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is host to a number of hero props, designed by Atkins which are integral to the story. One of these is Ludwig's prison escape map (Figure 2). Although only the map was specified in the script, Atkins had to create further graphic elements for its reverse – “as it was meant to look as if it

had been drawn on a piece of packaging paper. If we were to make packaging paper we would need a packaging label. A packaging label would need franking marks. Franking marks would need postage stamps – and postage stamps for a fictitious empire would need a fictitious emperor, too” (2020, p.83), (Figure 3).

Voices such as Atkins and MinaLima have brought attention to this profession in the film industry to a new generation of upcoming designers. Tina Charad, who has worked on films including *The Batman* and *Tomb Raider* said, “I didn’t know my current career was possible back when I first started 20 years ago,” (Levenson, 2022). As LaSage has argued “graphic designers for film and television may not be the most lauded names in the credits, but they’re among the most important” (2019).

Sign Painting

Signs are everywhere. A visual advertisement, whether for a business or a specific product. A sign “strives for clarity” (Powers, 2012), but can also be “decorative and informative at the same time” (Vandervaat, cited Levine and Macon, 2013, p.140). It is there to attract people, to draw you in; the more interesting a sign the more likely you are to go into the shop or investigate the product being advertised.

The practice of painting signs is one of the oldest professions which dates back to Roman times. Prior to the nineteenth century most painted signs were pictorial depictions of the message they were communicating as imagery was understood by everyone whether they could read or not. In the UK, during the Victorian era with the rise of retail and literacy rates, signs became increasingly text based. Although most signs nowadays are typographic, in specific contexts pictorial elements prevail, as seen on pub signs which date back to the end of the fourteenth century.



Figure 4, Horse drawn vehicles and barrows in Borough High Street, London, 1904



Figure 5, Peckham High Street, London, UK, Colin Underhill, 2016

Once it was common place for nearly all written signage to have been painted (Figure 4). However, the 1960s saw signs made from other materials such as acrylic start to appear and the digital revolution of the 1980s accelerated the replacement of painted signs with vinyl, leading to a rapid demise of the sign painting profession.

Designed on a computer, made for a fraction of the price and quick to produce, vinyl signs became much more accessible and changed the look of the high street as they covered up the signs of the past signage (Figure 5). The more recent influx of chain stores further homogenised the appearance of the high street through their standardised branded.

The economic state of the world we are in now, compared to the past might also have had an impact on the loss of the painted sign on the high street. As Ira Coyne says “signs used to be painted to last a lifetime. A couple of generations ago, when people started businesses, a sign was a permanent thing. A guy could pass on his business to his family. That doesn’t happen anymore. Business owners don’t paint their buildings for the same reason that they don’t paint their cars: because often they don’t even own them, the banks do, and they have to think about reselling in case they go under.” (2013, cited Levine and Macon, p.68).

Despite many of the painted signs being covered up by the new materials, the painted method is still visible in ‘ghost signs’ of the past which are now seen fade on buildings. They are a material reminder of the history of signage that we can still see today. Ghost signs become part of the fabric of the city, “old signs become art” (Vandervaat, 2013) as well as landmarks. They intertwine with the history, memory and identity of a place. Once a functional advertising sign, they become a sign of the past. It is not the same for the plastic signs and digital billboards used today which will leave no trace of their history once removed. As Rick Wagner says, “you can put a sticker on a brick wall, but it will come off. With paint, it will stay put.” (Handcraft Creative, 2020).

To become an accomplished sign painter it takes years of practice to develop an understanding of letterforms and design whilst building the skill of using a brush to produce painted signs that work. Despite the digital revolution leading to the decline in demand for sign painters, there was enough work out there to keep a small number of professionals working who could also train the next generation.

In today's technology-heavy world, people are starting to show a greater appreciation for traditional handmade crafts and their unique character. This has led to a resurgence and interest in people taking up specialist trades. For sign painting, Sam Roberts explains: "This is a generation that has grown up with computers at the heart of their work and who are seeking to engage with the physical processes that go into producing letter forms" (Guardian, 2015)

There is also wider public appreciation for the bespoke nature of a painted sign and the "joyful, expressive, and utterly unique" (Adamson, cited Levine and Macon, 2013, p.15) identity that the printed plastic signs which have taken over the commercial world lack. "Hand-done stuff has heart; it's got a soul and it has life" (Barber, 2013, p. 133). When looked at against the busyness of everyday life they have "the trace of a slower, less hurried era" (Adamson, cited Levine and Macon, 2013, p.15 and 18) which is a feeling people are increasingly striving for.



Figure 6, Black Sheep Tattoo in Brislington, Tozer Signs



Figure 7, Breddos Tacos, London, Ged Palmer, 2017

Some high street business owners are buying into this, recognising that a hand painted sign gives “a sense of specific, place-based identity that digitally printed or vinyl-cut texts could never have provided” (Adamson, 2013, p.16) they have been commissioning new works. This is starting to grow the profession again and hand painted signs are being seen again in many towns and cities again (Figures 6 and 7).

Book Covers

The saying goes ‘you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover’, the reason being the content of the book is far more important and the cover is literally superficial. However, in today’s world where the cover is used as a selling device, a form of advertising for the literature within, designed to stand out and grab attention in a plethora of other books all wanting to be chosen, we are constantly being asked to judge a book by its cover rather than its contents. But leaving it at this is too simplistic and diminishes the varied effects of book covers and their relationship to what is within. As Mendelsund and Alworth argue, “the cover functions simultaneously as an invitation to the potential readers and as an entryway into the universe that the writer has created” (2020, p.65). Furthermore, for the reader the cover becomes part of the identity of the book, present every time it’s picked up, put down, or passed by and becomes bound up with its contents in their memory.

Since the start of the printed book, the form and function of the cover and its look have changed dramatically over time reaching the visual elements we're familiar with today from the late 19th century onwards. The first book covers were created to protect rare religious and academic manuscripts. The invention of the printing press and subsequent print revolution from the mid 1400s onwards led to significantly more books being added to the libraries of institutions and private homes. These books were sold in temporary covers surrounded by plain paper dust jackets which were discarded when the purchaser got the book bound in leather in a style of their choosing.

Rising literacy rates in nineteenth century Britain led to a greater appetite for reading, and more novels were written and published to meet these needs. By the 1890s books changed from being leather-bound to being surrounded by cloth-covered boards with an accompanying plain protective dust jacket. Some dust jackets started to see the "addition of an image taken from the interior of the book or some form of random decoration" (Salisbury, 2017, p. 11) printed on them. Dust jackets were still often discarded as they were considered functional and separate from the book. As Salisbury comments it is "ironic that for today's book collectors the jacket is key – the presence of an original jacket on a sought-after first edition now greatly adds to its value." (2017, p.11).

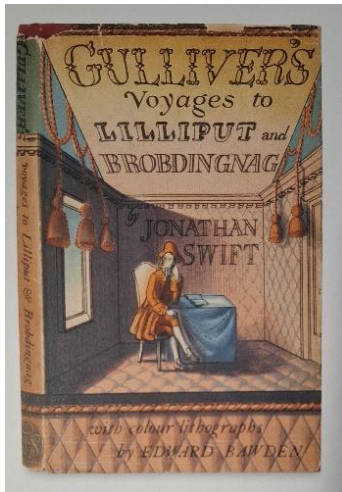


Figure 8, *Gulliver's Voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag*, Jonathan Swift, cover design by Edward Bawden, 1948

By the 1920s with many more books available “publishers needed fresh ways to distinguish their wares from those of their competitors” (Horowitz, cited Menelsund and Alworth, 2020, p.60). Inspired by the recent rise in branded product advertising they began establishing distinct visual brand identities across their covers, as well as using different styles to visually separate book genres so they were “more easily identifiable for the convenience of the customer” (Powers, 2001, p.7). Some British publishers employed well known artists of the time, such as Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden and John Piper to create illustrated dust jacket designs. (Figure 8)

In contrast, Faber & Faber, a publishing house founded in 1929, decided to create their brand identity using predominantly typographic-based cover designs which continues to this day (Figure 9).



Figure 9, *Faber & Faber Typographic Book Covers*, various artists, 1950-1959

The introduction of paperbacks, which didn't need dust jackets, by Lane at Penguin in 1935 offered new opportunities for cover designers, as often publishers didn't have the rights to use original designs from hardback editions and they wanted to create a cohesive identity for their run of paperbacks. Raising the status of cover design "in 1946 Allen Lane hired the famous designer Jan Tschichold, the first of many designers and art directors who ensured Penguin titles were not only cheap and well-edited, but designed to the highest standards" (Powers, 2001, p.58).

Cover design from the 1940s onwards saw a move away from the hand drawn illustrated practice of the previous decades. Introducing a range of styles which reflected general cultural shifts and ideas of the time. The 1960s saw the use of bright colours and bold shapes, inspired by new psychedelic art, and started to include photography within designs. Developments in digital technology in the 1990s saw computer-aided design incorporated on covers. Since then there has been a diverse range of cover designs following trends, and going against them – all trying to get you attention so you will pick up and buy the book. "To stand by any book-stall or to enter any book-shop is to witness a terrific sense of internecine warfare between the innumerable latest volumes, almost all of them violently vying with one another for one's attention, fiercely striving to outdo the rest in crudity of design and colour." (Beerbohm, 1959, cited Salsbury, 2017, p.6). Despite being written nearly 80 years ago, this observation can be as applicable today as it was then.

There is similarity between the final outcomes of these areas as all of them function to serve something else; they are created because of this rather than existing independently. The graphic props in film are there in a supporting role to develop the world of the story to make it believable. A painted sign is visual advertising for a business or product. The book cover is a protector for the text inside as well as serving as the initial connection between the outside world and the contents within.

They also all link to memory – the ghost signs remind us of what was there before, the imagery of a book cover will stay with us whenever we remember a book which has had a lasting impact on us, and often the graphics designed for film will be inspired by or alluding to styles and imagery from the past or present which we recognize to place the film in a specific location or period.

These similarities bring up themes of memory and nostalgia and looking at why we create certain attachments to different moments of the past even if we do not have first-hand experience of them. With these themes in mind, my independent inquiry could look into ways in which different methods of storytelling use visual forms to evoke memory and create nostalgia.

Bibliography

Adobe Creative Cloud. (2016) *The Secret World of Annie Atkins, Graphic Designer for Films*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flMespYYwTw> (Accessed: 4 February 2025)

AGIAdesign. (2017) *Annie Atkins | The Secret World Of Graphic Design For Filmmaking*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzGvEYSzHf4&list=WL&index=54> (Accessed: 4 February 2025)

Atkins, A. (2020) *Fake Love Letters, Forged Telegrams, And Prison Escape Maps: Designing Graphic Props For Filmmaking*. London: Phaidon

BBC Bitesize (2021) *Graphic design: I designed the graphic props for the Wizarding World*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zhf7qp3> (Accessed: 18 April 2025)

BBC Scotland. (2021) *Reviving the Art of Sign Painting | Loop*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJujg3P2bKw&list=PLJtTu06EoktGnb4s1H99Wqa4VgCVsiCwD&index=7> (Accessed: 21 April 2025)

Better Letters. (2019) *Meet Josef Samuel, Vienna's Last Signpainter*. Available at: <https://bl.ag/meet-josef-samuel-viennas-last-signpainter/> (Accessed: 16 March 2025)

Better Letters. (2024) *What is Sign Painting? Or Even Signwriting?* Available at: <https://bl.ag/what-is-sign-painting-or-even-signwriting/> (Accessed: 16 April 2025)

Better Letters. (2021) *When Better Letters Met Barbara Enright*. Available at: <https://bl.ag/barbara/> (Accessed: 16 March 2025)

Black Dog. (no date) *Bath Ghost Signs, Murder & Mysteries Tour*. Available at:

<https://www.blackdogtiles.com/walking->

[tour2.php?sid=34b432c29e66d773fe2c9934313b45ff](https://www.blackdogtiles.com/walking-tour2.php?sid=34b432c29e66d773fe2c9934313b45ff) (Accessed: 22 April 2025)

Connolly, J. (2009) *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design*. London: Faber

Guden, C. (2021) *The History and Future of Book Covers: The Influence of Cover Design Within The Publishing Industry*. Available at: <https://wearewhitefox.com/the-history-and-future-of-book-covers-the-influence-of-cover-design-within-the-publishing-industry/> (Accessed: 30 March 2025)

Handcraft Creative. (2020) *Writing On The Wall // Full Documentary*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27MEdg7vbcg&list=PLJtTu06EoktGnb4s1H99Wqa4VgCVsiCwD&index=6> (Accessed: 21 April 2025)

It's Nice That. (2015) *Here London 2015: Annie Atkins*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=->

[MK5VGBvOho&list=PLJtTu06EoktGnb4s1H99Wqa4VgCVsiCwD&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MK5VGBvOho&list=PLJtTu06EoktGnb4s1H99Wqa4VgCVsiCwD&index=2)

(Accessed: 21 April 2025)

LaSane, A. (2019) *Graphic Design in Film: The Substance of Visual Storytelling*.

Available at: <https://blog.frame.io/2019/02/07/graphic-design-in-film/> (Accessed: 18 April 2025)

Levenson, J. (2022) *Graphic Design on Screen: Inside Once Upon a Time in*

Hollywood with Tina Charad. Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/tina-charad-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood-graphic-design-film-110822> (Accessed: 17

April 2025)

Levine, F and Macon, S. (2013) *Sign Painters*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press

Luchetta, E. (2022) *Graphic Designers and the Iconic Printed Items That Appear on the Big Screen*. Available at: <https://www.pixartprinting.co.uk/blog/graphic-designers-cinema/> (Accessed: 18 April 2025)

McPherson, P. (2015) The Revival of the Handpainted Sign – In Pictures. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2015/jan/14/revival-handpainted-sign-high-streets-in-pictures> (Accessed: 1 May 2025)

Mendelsund, P and Alworth, D.J. (2020) *The Look of the Book*. New York: Ten Speed Press

Merson Group. (2022) *Signage Through the Ages: A Retrospective*. Available at: <https://www.mersongroup.com/our-company/blog/signage-through-the-ages-a-retrospective/> (Accessed: 16 April 2025)

Oliveira, N. (2022) *What is the Role of a Graphic Designer in Movies and Television?* Available at: <https://medium.com/melted-design/role-of-graphic-designer-movies-television-5ec5c321ad69> (Accessed: 18 April 2025)

Pockros, A. (2021) *The Endless Life Cycle of Book Cover Trends – What You See On a Cover is the product of intermingling cultural and economic forces*. Available at: <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/the-endless-life-cycle-of-book-cover-trends/> (Accessed: 30 March 2025)

Pocock, E. (2019) *Designing J.K. Rowling's Wizarding World: Graphic Design Duo MinaLima On 'Harry Potter' & Beyond*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emmapocock/2019/06/09/designing-j-k-rowlings->

[wizarding-world-graphic-design-duo-minalima-on-harry-potter-beyond/](#) (Accessed: 22 April 25)

Powers, A. (2001) *Front Cover: Great Book Jackets and Cover Design*. London: Mitchell Beazley

Powers, A. (2003) *Children's Book Covers: Great Book Jackets and Cover Design*. London: Mitchell Beazley

Salisbury, M. (2017) *The Illustrated Dust Jacket 1920-1970*. London: Thames & Hudson

Sign Painters (2014) Directed by F. Levine and S. Macon. Available at: <https://www.signpaintersfilm.com/#watch> (Accessed: 5 March 2025)

Solana, G and Boneu, A. (2007) *Uncredited: Graphic Design & Opening Titles in Movies*. Barcelona: Index Book

Suurhasko, N. (2021) *Graphic Designers in the Film Industry – A Comparative Study of Commercial Graphic Design and Graphic Prop-making*. Bachelor's Thesis. Turku University Of Applied Sciences. Available at: https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/497808/Suurhasko_Nea.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y (Accessed: 17 April 2025)

Technical Signs. (2018) *The Lost Art of Signwriting & Why It's Making a Comeback*. Available at: <https://www.technicalsigns.co.uk/the-lost-art-of-signwriting-why-its-making-a-comeback/> (Accessed: 14 March 2025)

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) Directed by W. Anderson. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Tude, H. (2020) *Design & Cinema: A Timeline of Graphic Design in Film*. Available at: <https://publication.avanca.org/index.php/avancacinema/article/view/174/337>

(Accessed: 17 April 2025)

VICE. (2012) *The Art of Sign Painting With Steve Powers*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKd6HmlzvyY&list=PLJtTu06EoktGnb4s1H99Wqa4VgCVsiCwD&index=8> (Accessed: 21 April 2025)

Who's Flying The Plane? (2021) *The World of Sign Painting With Georgina Tozer | WFTP In the Studio*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbKSv96cUlc>

(Accessed: 7 March 2025)

List of Figures

Figure 1: *Diagon Alley set from the Harry Potter films, 2001-2011*. Available at:

<https://www.wbstudiotour.co.uk/explore-the-tour/sets/> (Accessed: 1 May 2025)

Figure 2: *Ludwig's Prison Escape Map, Annie Atkins, 2014*. Photo from *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) Directed by W. Anderson. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Figure 3: *Ludwig's Prison Escape Map (Folded), Annie Atkins, 2014*. Photo from p.85 of Atkins, A. (2020) *Fake Love Letters, Forged Telegrams, And Prison Escape Maps: Designing Graphic Props For Filmmaking*.

Figure 4: *Horse drawn vehicles and barrows in Borough High Street, London, 1904*.

Available at: <https://www.mediastorehouse.com.au/heritage-images/horse-drawn-vehicles-barrows-borough-high-street-15182214.html> (Accessed: 2 May 2025)

Figure 5: *Peckham High Street, London, UK, Colin Underhill, 2016*. Available at:

<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-peckham-high-street-london-uk-123106877.html?imageid=F7CFB05A-E0B2-44A2-8A58-A85721EAED92&p=14086&pn=1&searchId=249679a487dd745336024d354ca4baae&searchtype=0> (Accessed: 2 May 2025)

Figure 6: *Black Sheep Tattoo in Brislington, Tozer Signs*. Available at:

<https://www.tozersigns.com/work#/fascias/> (Accessed: 1 May 2025)

Figure 7: *Breddos Tacos, London, Ged Palmer, 2017*. Available at:

<https://www.gedpalmer.com/#/new-gallery-1> (Accessed: 1 May 2025)

Figure 8: *Gulliver's Voyages to Liliput and Brobdingnag, Jonathan Swift, cover design by Edward Bawden, 1948*. Photo from p.49 of Salisbury, M. (2017) *The Illustrated Dust Jacket 1920-1970*

Figure 9: *Faber & Faber Typographic Book Covers, various artists, 1950-1959*.

Photo from Connolly, J. (2009) *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design*