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Introduction

Throughout this essay I will research and decode three key words that are important to me in design, and why, to help me form a question for my dissertation essay.

Finding my three words was difficult but after going through my own work and previous inspiration it became clear to me that there are some patterns. The three words I have chosen are “geometric”, “double meaning” and “typography”. My favourite designers and illustrators make use of these in their design, and they are often tools I use in my own work.

Geometric Shapes

On a mathematic level, Euclid “defined... angles, circles, triangles” and “other polygons” (Artmann, 2025) but what’s the importance of geometric shapes in design? Plato’s Timaeus forms connections between geometric shapes and philosophy claiming that certain shapes reflect elements and that “the dodecahedron, is “used for the universe as a whole””. (Zeyl, D. and Sattler, B., 2023)

Plato underlines the idea that geometric shapes can go beyond their mathematical value and represent bigger, more abstract ideas. Designers utilize geometric shapes consciously and unconsciously in most designs, however, conscious use can lead to further impact. Wassily Kandinsky, who taught at Bauhaus and was subsequently promoted as an “art theorist” (Wassily Kandinsky, 2018) believed “that the triangle embodied active and aggressive feelings... the square represented peace and calm” and “the circle suggested the spiritual realm.” (Guggenheim New York, n.d.)

Kandinsky believed that shapes had a “spiritual value” (Kandinsky 1910) which connects with Plato’s belief that the dodecahedron, with its multitude of sides, could

represent the universe. While subjective depending on the viewer, these theories suggest that shapes can be used to promote certain messages, views or feelings within design.



Fig 1 (Karl James Mountford, 2026, 'Dracula Cover')

During a lecture he gave in UWTSD, Illustrator Karl Mountford brought our attention to his cover for Dracula because of its use of symmetry and geometry. He believes humans are 'drawn to symmetry' (Mounford, 2026) and that in addition to being visually appealing, geometric shapes can be used as a form of hierarchy to draw attention to specific points. This connects to Kandinsky's views that lines are the "track made by the moving point" (Kandinsky, 1947, p.57) suggesting that they create paths for your eyes to follow.



Fig 2 (Abram Games, 1951-9, 'The Manewspaper')

Abram Games' use of lines and triangles in his poster above is also impactful because, as previously theorised, the sharp lines do create a sense of movement and urgency. Marianne Kalemi (2014) believes that "the impetus of his design comes from bauhaus and constructivism, with geometric strictness and bluntness". We can see the strict use of shapes in this piece and the atmosphere that it creates. They are also used to create some form of caricature of an archetype of person suggesting that shapes can reflect personality as well. Kalemi mentioned Games being inspired by "Constructivism" which is a "movement that started in Russia... built" in part "on geometric abstraction" (Sandu, 2026) 'Geometric abstraction' is when "the emphasis on geometric forms" (Meyer, 2024) isn't used to create recognizable objects. The focus is instead on the "visual" language of the shapes and what they represent.



Fig 3 (Alexander Rodchenko, 1924, 'Books (Please)! In All Branches of Knowledge')

Alexander Rodchenko's work was heavily influenced by Constructivism and connects "to the political and social context of his time." (Meyer, 2024) His use of triangles here implies volume and speech and the direction suggests an increase in volume or a direction for the projection, once again connecting to movement.

Triangles also have a deeper historical context as an upside-down triangle was used to categorize Auschwitz prisoners in Nazi Germany. Different colours were used for different 'categories of prisoners'. This suggests it is possible for shapes to provoke traumatic responses. It conveys that sometimes shapes only have as much power as the context that we give them negative or positive.



Fig 4 (The Silence = Death Collective, 1986, 'AIDS activism poster')

“Pink triangles” were used when marking “homosexual prisoners” (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2026) in Nazi Germany but was later repurposed and used as a positive and powerful symbol in a campaign against the stigma surrounding AIDS. The simple act of pointing the triangle upwards gave it a new meaning so that people could reclaim it and feel pride in who they are. According to TIME “the brightly colored symbol is now often worn proudly” (Waxman, 2018), proving that context effects the impact. Finally, I want to highlight Illustrator Maria Picasso who utilizes shapes to create simplified caricatures. It can be argued that these shapes are also driven by context but in a completely different way.



Fig 5 (Maria Picasso, n.d., 'Robert Downey Jr/ Iron Man')

Her illustrations are incredibly interesting due to how simple yet easily recognizable they are. We see Robert Downey Jr here because the shapes are given context. Also, in a similar way to Games' work, it can be said here that the positioning of shapes also gives her caricatures personality.

Double Meaning

I'm drawn to designs with double meaning whether through semiotics, negative space or design where one thing becomes another. Roland Barthes' stated, "Myth is not defined by the object" but "the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes, 2009, p131) because it is a mode of "signification". We give design meaning by giving it context and designers have control over what context that is. Negative space is an extremely impactful way of deepening meaning, it isn't "the absence of design—it is an active, intentional design element." (Graphic Eagle, 2026) Noma Bar and Abram Games are great examples of how powerful utilizing negative space can be. Noma Bar stated, "I am after the maximum communication with minimum elements" (Rook & Raven, n.d.) whilst Abram Games followed a similar motto of "maximum meaning, minimum means". (Games, cited by Games, 2003) Both quotes at their core highlight that messages can be stronger when kept clean but clever.



Fig 6 (Noma Bar, 2010, 'Gun crime kills')

The impact of the simplicity in Bar's gun crime kills illustration is interesting because it suggests a cause and effect without explaining the connection. The fact that they are part of one shape is a signifier that they are connected whilst the suggestion that

gun crime leads to death is ultimately signified. “Every Image embodies a way of seeing” (Berger, 1990, p.10) and as Noma Bar’s work shows, the message is dictated by the context..



Fig 7 (Noma Bar, 2013, ‘drugs and doping in professional cycling’)

Another example is his illustration of “drugs and doping in professional cycling” (Digital Synopsis, n.d.) Noma Bar’s “masterful use of negative space and minimalist visual wit” (Dutch Uncle, 2026) combines a bike with a syringe. These illustrations rely heavily on semiotics because we know the shape of a bike, and we know that the context of a syringe is to inject. One flaw however, is that without the context of drugs we don’t know the purpose of the syringe. Whilst yes, it does have to be simple, the elements must be clear enough that we’re sure of the message. I find the drop of blood here is slightly misleading and could be misconstrued as the injection being a blood test. On the other hand, that may have been intentional, showing testing for drugs rather than the injecting itself. Nevertheless, I think that part of the message is unclear.



Fig 8 (Noma Bar, 2012, 'Extra leg room')

The technique also works commercially and can be humorous. In the example above, the shape of the plane forming into legs to indicate more leg room is a playful and simple way of promoting the airline.

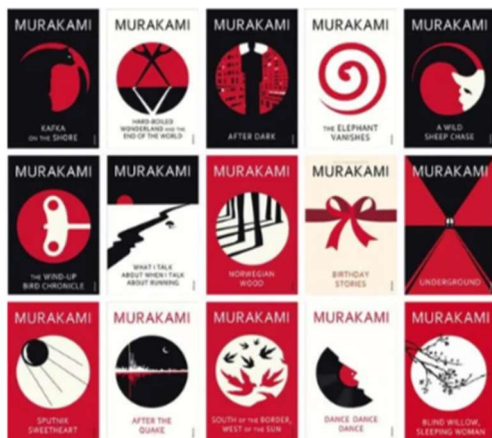


Fig 9 (Noma Bar, 2012, 'Murakami covers')

Bar has also designed numerous book covers for authors such as Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo and Haruki Murakami. Bar proves that negative space design works extremely well on covers because it almost acts as a second blurb. The first impression of a book is always its cover, therefore, why shouldn't the cover tell its story? When used correctly in, "negative space plays a crucial role in capturing the reader's attention and conveying the essence of the story." (Mantooth, 2024) Book

covers are more successful when “appealing to consumers’ subjective aesthetic preferences” and when “used as information and communication tools” (Carneiro, 2005 cited by, Amaro et al, 2018) and this form of design can target both, possibly boosting book sales. It’s imperative that cover design is both aesthetically pleasing and relevant as “more attractive book covers” are proven to “lead to greater consumer interest” (d’Astous et al., 2006 cited by, Amaro et al, 2018)



Fig 10 (Abram Games, 1970, ‘Anti-smoking poster for Cancer Research Campaign’)

Abram Games also utilizes negative space, as seen here, in his anti-smoking poster. Once again, there are the two separate ideas of a hand holding a cigarette and a coffin, however, because they are part of the same image there is a clear suggestion that there is a cause and effect signifying that smoking kills. As John Berger states in *Ways of Seeing*, “the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions”. (Berger, 1990, p.11) This idea of “learnt assumptions” links back to the idea of context. In this piece specifically the coffin is the signifier, however, without our “learnt assumptions” and social context that coffins mean death and mourning we wouldn’t know what the coffin is signifying.

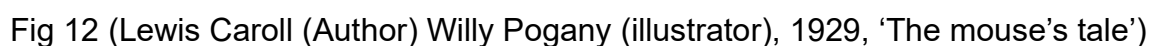


Fig 11 (Abram Games, 1942, 'Grow your own food')

Another powerful way of enriching a message in design is having one object turn into another and Abram Games does it often. Transforming a Kitchen table and cutlery into a patch of dirt with crops and gardening tools presents a clear message whilst also being visually appealing. The directions the design gives are clear and don't leave room for misinterpretation. I also admire the way the design points towards the title in this poster, turning it into a form of visual hierarchy as well.

“Letterforms, shaped and refined through hundreds of years... are today available to use in many different styles as a means of communication.” (Frutiger, 1928, p.199)

However, typography doesn’t have to be confined to traditional communication, it can be powerful when letterforms and typography become a part of the design itself and are used imaginatively. According to Frutiger “lyric poets have repeatedly tried to break through the hard, conventional grid of typesetting by means of the pictorial arrangement of verse.” The use of “calligrams” in the ““Mouse’s Tail” poem in Alice in Wonderland” is an example of “turning script back into letters” (Frutiger, 1928, p.190)



As it can be seen in the image, the poem is laid out to look like a mouse's tail and adds visuals to the story through typography. The way the typeface is morphed is also interesting because it seems to create a sense of movement. William Morris, had a pivotal influence on graphic designers with his 'Kelmscott Press'. He believed

in “attractive and functional visual communications” (Megs, 2025) suggesting that to be functional does not necessarily mean void of essence or life. “Morris’s concept of the well-designed page, his beautiful typefaces, and his sense of design unity” (Megs, 2025) is said to have “inspired a new generation of graphic designers.” Furthermore, despite being decorative and ornamental, his letterforms were designed with “readability in mind” (Megs, 2025) ensuring that the technicality and clarity wasn’t lost in the aesthetics.



Fig 13 (Paula Scher, 1990, 'Maps')

Paula Scher’s typographic maps show that sometimes typography is the best way of delivering a visual message. The maps serve as a “reaction against information overload and the constant stream of news” (Pentagram, n.d.) which is very clear and beautifully translated. The piece does feel like an “information overload” and it wouldn’t have that affect without the use of words and typography. It emanates importance and begs to be read whilst also being so overwhelming you wouldn’t know where to start. The painting represents and mirrors how the news can “present

skewed versions of reality in a deceptively authoritative way.” (Pentagram, n.d.)

Sometimes, we can be convinced of lies by being fed so much information we assume it’s undeniable, the painting has the same sense of unquestionable authority. Whilst also mirroring the distortion, her pieces serve as the antithesis, because “each piece goes beyond the literal by including personal anecdotes, humorous captions, and secret messages, encouraging viewers to uncover the narratives hidden.”

(Singulart, 2024) This mission to seek truth and humanity in the painting is something that should be exercised more in daily life.



Fig 14 (Craig Ward, 2009, 'You blow me away')

Demonstrating how type can communicate when used dynamically, Craig Ward's destruction of a typeface through combining typography and photography tells a story and creates an atmosphere that couldn't exist otherwise. Ward states, the images from this experiment "are also studies in the boundaries of legibility" (Ward, 2009) and I believe this image is the perfect balance of legibility and impact. The communication doesn't come solely from the words written but from their fractured, destroyed quality.



Fig 15 and Fig 16 (Abram Games, 1951, 'Jersey' and 'Orient Line')

Abram Games demonstrates how type can be used as extensions of an image to elevate the design further than by overlaying a title over an image. By combining the two we are being told a story and the posters feel more playful, engaging and organic. In all his work "Abram Games made the lettering an integral part of the image... he always used typography and image to create a new entity." (Kalemi 2014) This ideology is part of why his work is so impactful, he doesn't treat the images and text separately but as part of one message, one design. It creates a unity in his work that helps strengthen the desired message. In Game's own words, "My work has been called symbolic, but I regard it as integration, a combination of all the parts into an inevitable whole." (Games 1960 cited in Kalemi 2014) His use of the word "inevitable" suggests that this is how it should be, each separate element of the design has been made to be brought together and that should be embraced and highlighted.

Conclusion

I enjoyed researching for this essay and it took me down an unexpected journey. Researching geometric shapes taught me a lot about the history of design and the importance of symbols. I've learnt that when used effectively one shape can hold extreme power. Whilst looking into double meaning I was further exposed to Noma Bar's work and found a new designer to aspire to. Finally, I discovered that William Morris had a pivotal influence on graphic design as well as designing patterns, and I enjoyed looking into his typographic work. This essay also gave me the opportunity to further research into Abram Games, one of my favourite Graphic Designers, and I found it interesting that I could link him to each of my key words. Despite being about different types of visual design I do think the key words link together as they all highlight the importance of context and how simplicity in design is effective, more so in the first two. Researching typography, however, also showed the opposite can be true and if done intentionally like Paula Sher, overloading designs can be extremely powerful. I enjoyed each key word so much I struggled to choose what to carry forward, however, I have narrowed it down to two areas of Interest.

Option 1: The great Triangle: The power of symbols in Graphic Design

I really enjoyed researching Geometric shapes and found many interesting paths I didn't expect. I enjoyed the history aspect and feel it could be something I'm interested in exploring further, especially the effect of the triangle. It would be interesting to discover other symbols that had historical relevance and impact.

Option 2: How pivotal was Abram Games' influence on Graphic design and would his work still be relevant today?

Games' is one of my favourite Graphic designers I believe it could be fun to continue to research his work and learn more about his techniques and influence. This question could also lead into a practical project where I would use Abram Games' style to create posters on current world events and see if his work would still be relevant today. The idea of that project excites me so I'm leaning more towards this option.

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