

Research in practice

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AI Statement

For this assessment, I confirm that I have NOT used Generative AI to support me in structuring my submission, including creating a draft argument structure, identifying parts and headings. |

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Introduction

The three keywords are important to me because in a world we receive information visually these are areas that catch my eye most frequently. The first area I am going to explore is film and television. This takes up lots of my down time, so it is a key aspect of my life. While being immersed in fictional worlds, it is interesting to consider the props and graphic design used to make the imagined world appear real to the audience. The next keyword is the road signs. The signage system is something everyone experiences daily and has a substantial impact on our lives. Similarly, the final key area of discussion will be the design of emergency service vehicles, as these are required to communicate quickly and need to be easily accessible to an international audience.

Topic 1 Films and Television Shows

Real world brands used in films

In the imagined worlds of films and television shows, fictional brands are often used to create a feeling of reality. For some ambitious stories like *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] Stanley Kubrick approached real world companies and requested prototypes for how they imagined their products and technologies to look 50 years into the future (Addey, 2018). Some companies used in the film no longer exist. Pan am for example was depicted as a key space tourism company with the flight attendant wearing branded Velcro shoes (fig 1). Other products shown included a video system that made its debut in 1964 at New York world's fair. This system showed a booth where users of this system would take their phone call (fig 2). The system did not take off at the time; this is for many reasons such as costs and being impractical. It was an idea ahead of its time. This uses of branding sets the film in a believable environment as the companies will be recognised by the audience even if the products are foreign.



Figure 1: Velcro Shoe with Pan Am Branding Featured in 2001: A Space Odyssey. Screenshot by Dave Addey



Figure 2: picturephone booths at the 1964 New York World's Fair (courtesy AT&T Archives and History Center).

The branding and product design in the examples above were used to create a plausible future world within the films. Annie Atkins said about designing for film props

Film sets don't look like the beautifully composed pictures we see on cinema screens: in reality, they are full of cables, floodlights, and crew member drinking coffee out of styrofoam cups. Dressing this weirdly artificial environment with some small authentic details can help create a more fully realised world for the director and the cast to work in-even if these pieces are never seen up-close by the audience (Atkins, 2020).

Another area where Kubrick attempted to predict the future with a product that would still look impressive to today's audience, was cars. The adverts for cars can be seen on the entertainment screens in the films during the space flight, including a Ford Motor group concept. This car imagines how life would be lived in the future; this 1960s concept car looks like it belongs on another planet (fig 3). The concept car used a pointed aero dynamic shape and has a very low style compared to cars of the 1960s. This use of real-world brands makes the events of the film seem believable and the brands feel like they belong in the setting of the movie. The designs are concepts that would be largely unknown to the movie's audience at the time, making them credible examples of futuristic brands and products. Their effect on the audiences living after 2001 however, is debateable. It could be argued that the designs situate the film in one time period and no longer feels futuristic as modern technology does not look the way it was anticipate in the 1960s.

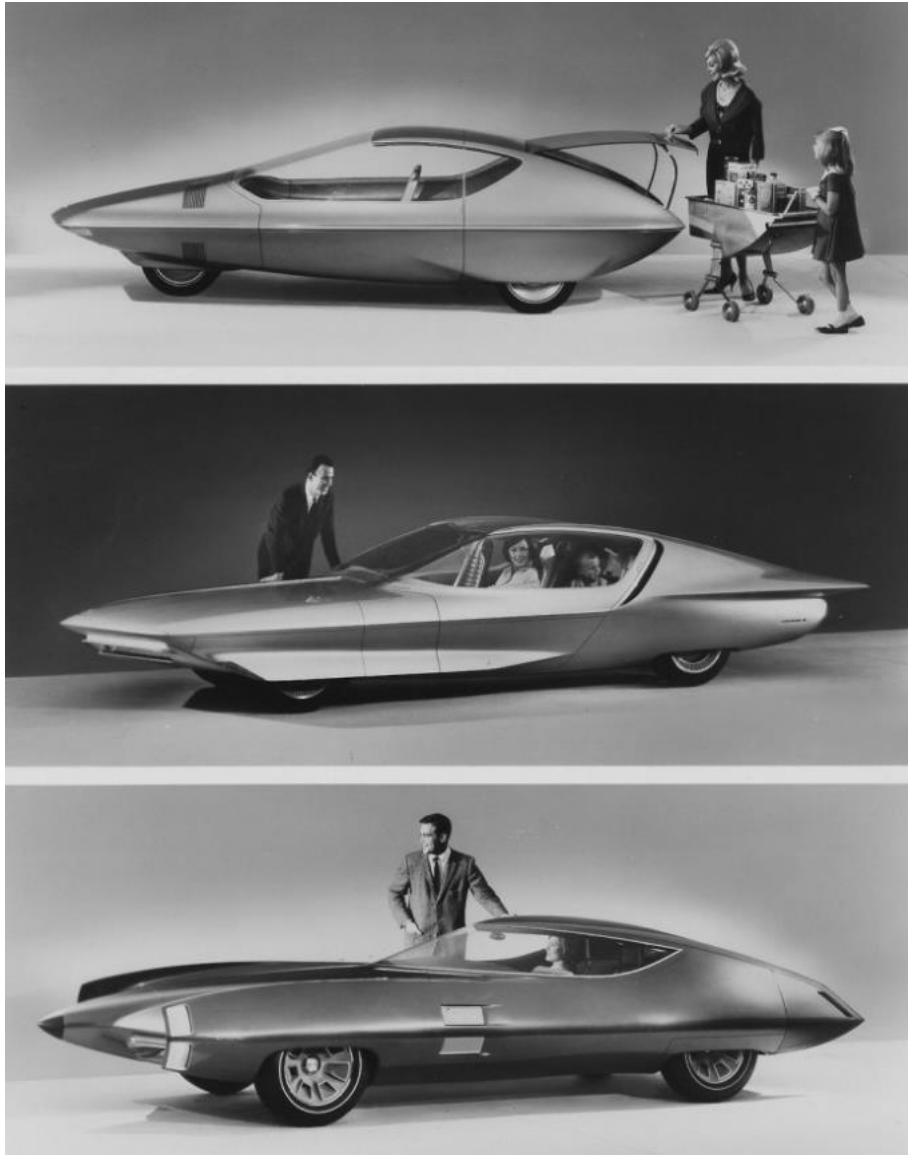


Figure 3: GM Runabout, Firebird IV, GM-x/Stiletto Concept Images From GM

Typography in Making Brands Believable

An alternative to using real world brands and continuing to have a believable world where the story takes place, is to make products using recognisable materials, combining new brands with what we know. Sci-fi films do this well. Many prop designers use Letraset transferable letters when adding typography to props. For example, when making alien languages, graphic designers for films have used old sheets of Letraset, and on some occasions the header and footer of the sheet of Letraset were used on the props. Other times the characters and letterforms were broken by not being completely transferred. A good example of this is the control panel

keyboard in the film *Alien* [1979] (fig 4). Some of the keys featured on this keyboard have strange words that can be explained by the design choice and influences. Dominic K. explains that “when Simon Deering painted in the buttons of the autodestruct panel been influenced by reading the Secret Doctrine by Madame Blavatsky during his in the production of the movie *Alien*” (Dominic K. 2009). This reinforces the idea that thoughtful use of typeface makes the props and branding believable. Other examples of typefaces that help audiences believe that what is happening on screen could be possible can be seen across the *Star Trek* franchise. The designers for *Star Trek* are responsible for popularising typefaces like Eurostile bold extended, alongside typefaces like Pump demi and Stop. Stop is a key typeface for convincing audiences that the events on screen are close to reality as custom variations of it show up everywhere and in lots of logos (fig 5). Designs that audiences see regularly in the world around them can connect them to the sci-fi films that feature this typeface. The typeface Eurostile bold extended is often considered a futuristic typeface. There are many arguments for this, with one being that sci-fi films made it popular. it was designed to be in small areas, so when expand on a large surface, the details look clearer. Another argument is that it was designed during the modernist era, where design was functional and timeless. When the design of typefaces in Italy started to become more independent and less decorative, there was a quest to make typefaces as small as possible (Bernstein, 2018). The Art school where the Designer of Eurostile taught was part of this movement making a typeface that is effective and small. This is evidence of the modernist mentality where the form follows the function, the function being legibility when the type size is extremely small. When we see these typefaces on screen in films and television, they are shown extra large so the humanist qualities of the typeface are exaggerated.



Figure 4: Composition of Screenshots of Self-Destruct Panel in Alien Film Photoshop by Dave Addey



Figure 5: A Logo Using Custom Stop Typeface from the Community Database of Custom Stop Typeface

Products and technologies in films become believable when the designer controls what information audiences look at. This is especially the case for heads up displays and computer screens, where the viewer will often lose focus on the action or dialogue if they are reading a computer screen. To counter this, designers occasionally use blocks or shapes that could look like text from a distance or type that is too small. A good example of this is *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (fig 6). The custom UI system designed by Mike Okuda sorts the information so that when we see the characters operating the ship they are pressing sensible buttons but without distracting excess information. Sometimes the screens that are seen in television shows and movies display essential information for the plot of the film. When this is the case, the information is split on the fictional UI system, leading audiences to believe that there is more information available that only the characters have access to.



Figure 6: User Interface in the Star Trek Next Generation Television Show Screenshots by Don

Topic 2 Road signage

The next topic this essay explores is the way that road signs are understood internationally. The system for United Kingdom (UK) road signs was commissioned in 1958 because of the number of road users increasing and the speed of cars increasing.

This saw the initial signs of the new system being introduced on the first motorway. This is something that followed the system that was already in place in Germany with the white type on a blue background. When Jock Kiener and his assistant Margaret Calvert received the commission from the transport authority, they chose to ignore the committees' request to use the same typeface as in Germany (Calvert, 2026) as they believed that it was not British enough, so they designed what is now the transport typeface. Famous designer David Kindersley was extremely against the sign system proposed for the UK. As a traditional type designer who trained under Eric Gill, Kindersley was in favour of a serif all caps typeface influenced by Roman letter carving instead of what was proposed (Loxley, 2004). The Anderson committee cited the findings of American and German research (Loxley, 2004). Where they conducted tests to discover the best type for road sign design. One limitation of this research is that it focused on the capitalisation and not on serifs. Kindersley argued for the recognisability of place names when capitalised and that the signs with mixed cases would need to be bigger because of the upper and lower case letters competing. Despite his valid arguments, the signs changed to the style shown in fig 7.

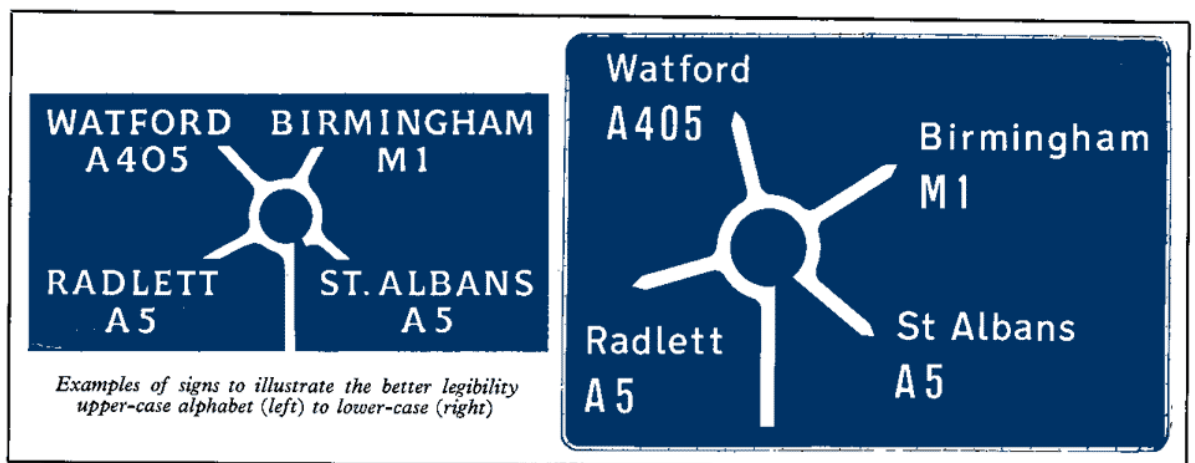


Figure 7: signs proposed by Kindersley and Jock-Kiner published in an article in 1960

As well as typeface, a large part of this commission was the pictograms. Margaret Calvert was responsible for the famous signs of children playing and men at work. Calvert often based her drawings on real experiences. The children crossing sign is

based on a photo of her as a child (fig 8). Her pictograms could have been influenced by her education, first as an illustrator doing life drawing with a visiting graphic design lecture, her future partner Jock Kiener. It can be argued that Calvert's designs are clear enough to be instantly understandable. In semiotic terms, they signify a recognisable message, through the use of a silhouette shape, and often on signs giving instructions just a few lines or arrows, as the sign the context shapes the meaning as it is framed on the side of the road and the signified meaning is the agreed instruction that we follow as a society (Berger, 2008).



School children crossing sign, designed in the early 1960s and still used throughout the UK road network. The pictogram, drawn by Margaret, is based on her as a child (opposite).



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Figure 8: Photo of Margaret Calvert and children crossing sign inspired by the photo scan from book Woman at Work Margaret Calvert

Internationally, road traffic signage is governed by the Geneva convention for road traffic. Erik Spiekermann had a significant impact on the type design for transport systems after the Berlin wall came down, uniting east and west Europe. An interesting feature of graphic design in traffic management is in Amsterdam, where limits have been reduced to 30kmph. Design studio martens & martens have added a textured

design to the centre lane markings to narrow the lanes. With the majority of countries, especially in Europe, taking inspiration from the Kiener Calvert design, designers who adapted or created variation on the Kiener Calvert design should be celebrated. While other road signs under a different system to that of Kiener Calvert are still highly effective, the influence of the UK sign system is so great that the signs can be recognised internationally. While it may only be small edits that set the signs apart from the standard set by this famous design duo, it is disappointing that the designers are not celebrated.

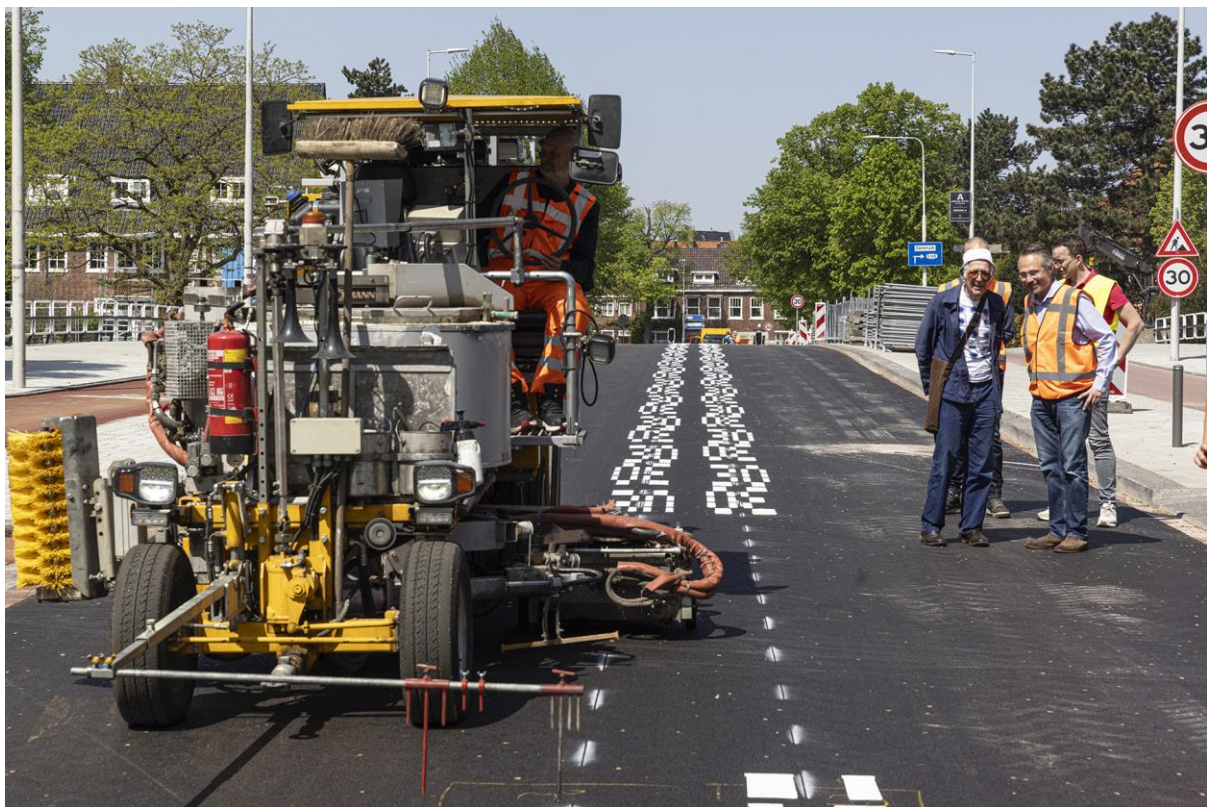


Figure 9: new road markings being painted in Amsterdam photo by martens & martens

Topic 3 Emergency Service Vehicle livery

The final topic of this essay is the graphic design of emergency service vehicle livery. In daily life people are able to visually recognise vehicles from the police, fire, and ambulance service. Traveling outside the UK where Battenberg pattern is not the

standard can feel very odd to people used to this design. A very iconic design is the work of studio dumbar/DEPT for the Dutch police in the 1990s (fig 9). This uses a striped design, famously on white Porsche cars. The traffic police were required to use open topped vehicles so that they could direct traffic. The original designs were fully white with only the word Rijkspolitie in a large outline font (Berg, 2024) which made the fast cars hard to recognise. When the new blue and orange striped design were brought in, similar to the national flag, the officers felt safer. After the success of the police car design, system designer Gert Dumbar approached the Ministry of Interior & Justice and asked if he could do the ambulances and fire engines as well, as a corporate identity. The only thing he changed was the colour of the ambulances to yellow as “It was the most ergonomic colour in traffic which I learnt at The Royal College of Art in London”. These designs can be seen across a variety of vehicles in the Netherlands today. They are effective and look incredibly attractive. The recognisability of new designs meant that “the public thought the police had increased their presence on the streets, when in actual fact the number of cars had decreased” (Studio Dumbar/DEPT®, n.d.). This shows the success of the design, as when a good design idea is followed though, it can have a great positive impact.



Figure 10: Studio Dumbar designs for police vehicles Amsterdam photo from Studio Dumbar

The British Battenberg design has some criticisms as the checkered pattern, and for some vehicles with chevron patterns, the markings at the back of the car can affect stopping distances and drivers' ability to correctly determine the distance when following (Killeen, 2010). Unlike other countries that have copied the UK in adoption of this pattern, fluorescent colours seem unique to the UK. There are some designs that appear to be implanted by engineers or managers within emergency or government services with no design knowledge, where the emergency vehicles are not highly conspicuous. This can be due to the combining of multiple patterns and logos so that the final design looks overly complicated and cannot be recognised as an emergency vehicle, putting lives at risk. There are some arguments that it is the base colour of the vehicle that increase its visibility. As such, the EU has mandated a specific fluorescent yellow for use on ambulances. The Battenberg pattern replaced tartan Sillitoe pattern, as this was not considered highly visibility enough. Very few tests into how people recognise vehicles as belonging to emergency services have been carried out and the public could benefit from more research allowing for more effective and thought driven

design. This system of design is intended to aid the active systems already in use to alert people, such as sirens and lights. The passive method of the livery has proven to make the cars more visible.

Conclusion

After researching these keywords, the topic I would like to continue to research is the design of branding for products in fictional worlds. With there being so many aspects to this topic and the research in this essay focusing on sci-fi films there is more that I could say for prop design and branding in other films. I could also discuss paid promotion of real-world products in movies and the use of adverts to convince the audience of the story, looking at how adverts are built to sell fictional products to fictional audiences compared to adverts in the real world. A future essay could create a timeline of film branding discussing how prop design or branding has changed. This essay has looked briefly at type design and wider set design but there are many more aspects of films that could be explored like posters and title motion graphics.

Another area of research could be the real-world marketing of films where fictional brands are given real world products. A practical project could be expanding on a fictional brand that already exists, possibly rebranding it or introducing a new product or consider a film franchise that would benefit from better branding of a product that is featured in its universe.

From my own travels, I find the road signs under a different system to that of Kiener Calvert are still very effective, but I prefer the UK sign system as it is so influential to other countries and can be recognised internationally. It has been very fascinating to learn about the impact of this famous design partnership, their work and legacy. It could be interesting to look at a broader area of transport design as Margaret Calvert has had a big impact on the rail industry through her branding for the British rail which has persisted even after the privatisation of the railways in the UK and internationally there is a lot more contribution from famous designer in the area of railway design. Alternatively, Margret Calvert's contribution to type design is very fascinating. A practical project could be redesigning a road sign.

I struggled to find much information on the design of emergency vehicles in the UK, so there is a gap in this field. This could make for interesting research to fill this gap, but it might be a much bigger project. It would be a good experiment to redesign the livery for emergency vehicles but it is an area where there is little research and with such a high importance of this work for visibility it is vital that whatever design used is safe, making it difficult to research and improve on the existing design.

Both the prop design and road signs hold interest for me to look into further. In thinking of ways to combine these, one idea could be to focus on prop design but include a section that deals with wayfinding signs in film and television. By looking at wayfinding as a whole, it can widen the research to include schematics and maps.

A possible question for further research could be: **What role does graphic design play in the believability of imagined worlds of films?**

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