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Essay Proposal
Research in Practice
ADAD5004
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AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Essay – 2436 words

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Introduction

In this essay I will present the findings of my research into three key words that have led me to a question to use as the basis for my third-year independent project. Within these three areas of research, I have included key thinkers and images to support my writing. The key words I have chosen are *Humour*, *Design* and *Documentaries*. When presented with this brief, it was described as an 'upside-down essay' in that we are meant to end with a question, not begin. I already have a strong idea for my independent project next year, so this will be an upside-down and backwards essay. I would like to make a documentary about an album I'm recording, so the concepts behind my three key words will be translated to filmmaking in the conclusion.

Humour

Humour is an effective way of both disarming and engaging people, both in art and in social situations. Matt Abrahams of Stanford Graduate School of Business likens humour to a 'Swiss army knife' (Abrahams 2020) and that it can

[allow] you to connect with your audience, it can diffuse tension, elevate status, compel others to your point of view, and that's not all. Humor can help you and your message stand out (2020)

In this chapter I will explore how humour can be used to entertain and change the emotion of a design, as well as make difficult information or themes more palatable, researching key artists David Carson and Banksy.



Fig 1. Valentine's Day Mascara (Banksy, 2023)

Palatability

Banksy's work titled *Valentine's Day Mascara* (2023) is an example of environmental storytelling and of humour used to make a difficult message more palatable. It depicts a woman in mid-century housewife attire, shoving a man's body, presumably her spouse, into a discarded chest freezer. The woman also has a missing tooth and a black eye. The piece was intended to depict the woman's retaliation against domestic violence, in particular the spike in tensions every February 14th.

Whilst specific Valentine's Day figures are not reported, anecdotal evidence from domestic abuse charities such as Women's Aid suggests that emotionally charged occasions, combined with societal pressures, can escalate tensions in abusive relationships. (Foresight, 2025)

Valentine's Day Mascara utilises humour in the form of a very tongue-in-cheek picture to raise awareness of a very serious crime. The woman is smiling and her swollen eye acts like a wink, softening the fact that she is visibly injured. It is also more humorous to see only the man's feet protruding from the freezer, rather than knowing exactly what she has done to him. This further influences the viewer to be on the side of the woman by the man only

appearing as a pair of shoes and not a face, not allowing us to sympathise with his condition and focusing only on the harm he has caused.

The humour of this piece will furthermore make Banksy's message more memorable.

humor helps with engagement in part because laughter, when we laugh, the reward center of our brains is flooded with the neurotransmitter, dopamine. So, this engenders deeper focus and better long-term retention. (Bagdonas, 2020)

Simply put, humour can make a message, piece of art, product, or point of view not only more engaging to the recipient, but more memorable in the long term.

Entertainment

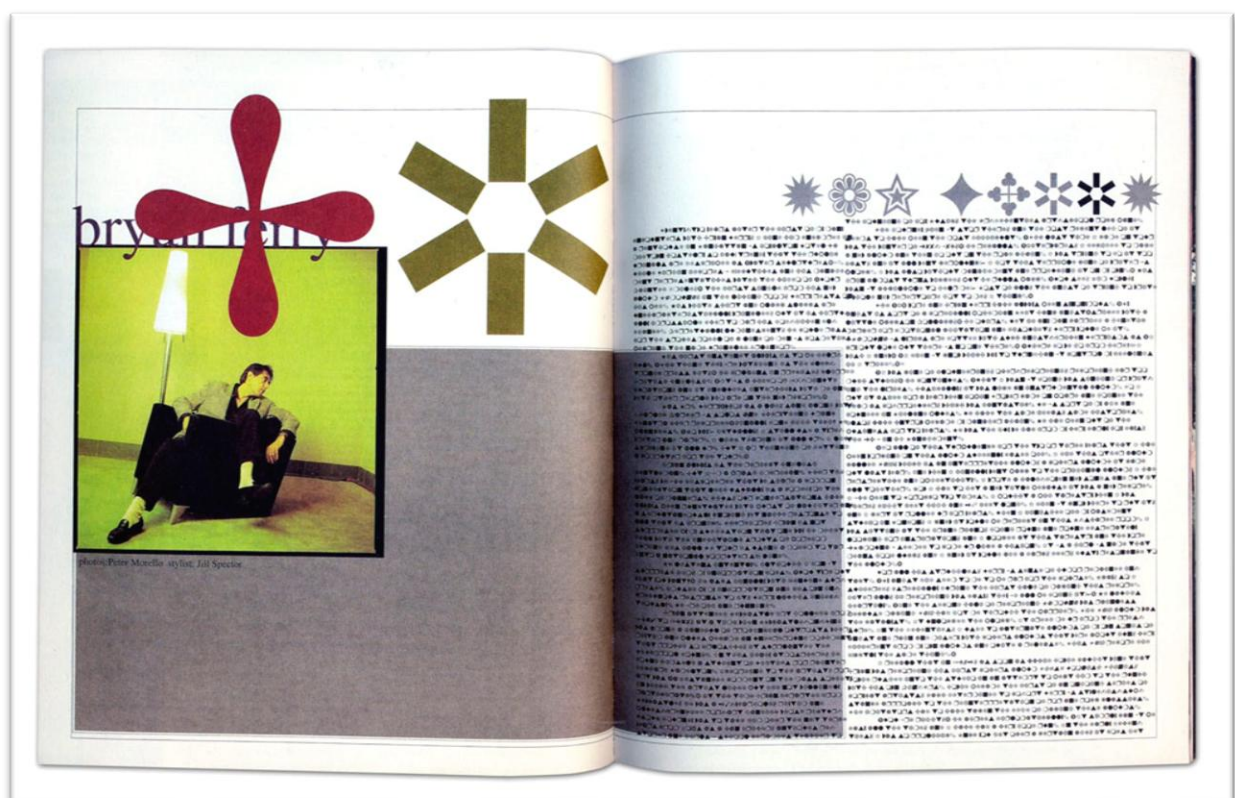


Fig 2. Bryan Ferry Interview (David Carson, 1994)

Humour can also be used to make the mundane more entertaining. Fig 2 shows a spread from a 1994 issue of Raygun containing an interview with musician Bryan Ferry.

The designer David Carson was Art Director for the alternative music magazine and responsible for the spread. He described the interview as boring, and subsequently typeset the text to Zapf Dingbats, rendering it unreadable. Carson is well known for blurring the lines of legibility in his work,

often using reverse leading, text columns rotated horizontally or even crammed and overlapping with one another, extreme letterspacing, and other unusual layout techniques that challenges a reader to engage and decipher the message (Miranda, 2020)

Despite the illegibility of this spread, his design choice had enhanced the entertainment and engagement value for the viewer with its absurdity, sparing them from a dull read. The spread has become infamous in the design world; even though it is effectively unreadable, it evokes a more powerful emotional response, for better or worse, than the original dialogue could, and that emotional response to a piece is something Carson strives to create.

I'm a big believer in the emotion of design, and the message that's sent before somebody begins to read, before they get the rest of the information; what is the emotional response they get to the product, to the story, to the painting – whatever it is. (Carson, 2003)

Design

The design I refer to within filmmaking revolves around typography, props, and titles. In this chapter I will explore the importance of these elements and how they help shape the film around them. My research led me to the design within several films including, *All The President's Men* (1976), *Big*, (1988) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).



Fig 3. The Grand Budapest Hotel props (Annie Atkins, 2014)

A filmmaker that really showcases these elements is Wes Anderson; who's films have a very distinct aesthetic. '...you immediately enter a world ripe with fantasia, mystique, and otherworldliness yet still remain amid objects, the palette, and feelings of the familiar,' writes Jeff Goldblum in the forward to *Fake Love Letters, Forged Telegrams, and Prison Escape Maps* (Goldblum, cited Atkins, 2020, P7). In his essay titled *Intentionally Anderson* within the exhibition companion *Wes Anderson: The Archives* (Agerman Ross et al, 2025) he mentions how the contents of Anderson's movies, 'whether it is a set, costume, or prop, is a heightened version of what it is' (Adamson, 2025, P201) The prop, signage and typography

design within Anderson's films harken back to different eras of recent history, which invoke a sense of nostalgia and vintage chic, as well as a kind of comforting, homely feel.

Signs

The designer who created the lettering and illustrations for the props and signage in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Fig 3) was Annie Atkins. She's a Welsh designer who also worked on Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* (2018), as well as *Bridge of Spies* (2015), *The Tudors* (2007) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014). Goldblum goes on to describe her as a 'master craftswoman' (Goldblum, cited Atkins, 2020, P7) and compliments how she 'coaxes the transcendental into a meat-and-potatoes emotional logic ... Annie makes the unreal seem hyperreal, and the real more supremely alive and utterly magical.' (2020)



Fig 4. The Grand Budapest Hotel signage, Annie Atkins (Jack Clements, 2026)

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) is set primarily in the 1930s but passes time through to the 1980s during the film. Because of this, Atkins had many time periods of typography draw from. She details the different styles of lettering just on the signage for the hotel was based on how in the early 20th century, 'lettering was dictated by material' (Atkins, 2020, P78), and that the blacksmiths and printers who would have made the letters for metal signs and stationary, respectively, would never have even seen each other, let alone collaborate to create a cohesive brand identity like a business would today. She includes sketches of the various signs (Fig 4) in her book, stating,

The printed letterhead on the hotel's 1930 stationary shows a hand-drawn double-lined style, while the name above the main entrance has a rounded, more flourished lettering, as if it were shaped from brass. The bulb-lit letters ... are different shapes ... designed to fit the arches of the window frames. ... simple sans-serif capitals are lined up on a rail on the communist-era roof (P78)

All of these styles subtly show the passing of time through the film without altering the pacing and cement the hotel as a fixture of longevity through the story.

Hero Props

In her book *Fake Love Letters, Forged Telegrams, and Prison Escape Maps*, Atkins writes about hero props and their importance. She describes a hero prop as 'a piece that has to pass the scrutiny of the camera, with a character all of its own.' (P8) She goes on to detail hero props from various films, without which the plot would not progress. One she sites is the golden ticket in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) – without which the titular protagonist does not get to go to said factory and the story ends.

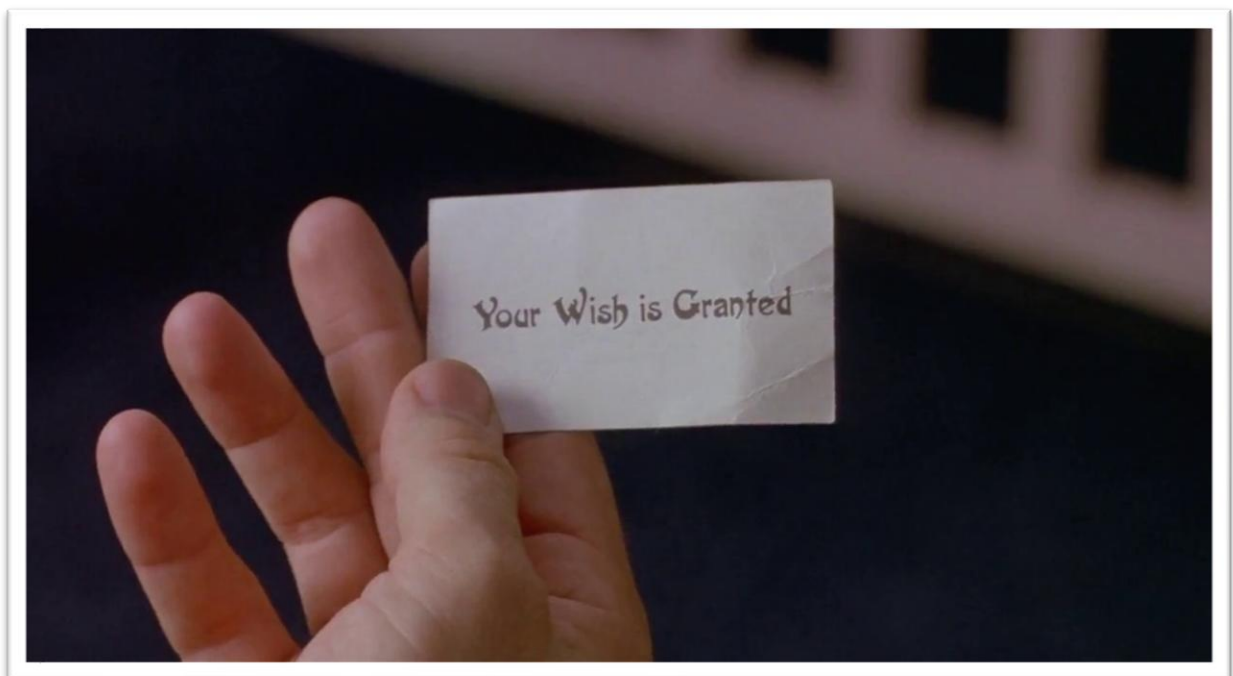


Fig 5. Zoltar Card (20th Century Fox, 1988)

In the movie *Big* (1988), a thirteen-year-old boy wishes he was 'big' because he was too short to ride a roller coaster, then wakes up as a thirty-year-old man. Josh Baskin goes up to an antique fortune teller machine at a fairground and makes his wish. A card comes out of the machine (Fig 5) which reads 'Zoltar Speaks!' and 'Your Wish is Granted' on the back.

The card is a hero prop, its close-up showing off a carefully considered carnivalesque lettering (it seems unlikely that its wording would have had the same eerie effect had it been typeset in all-caps Helvetica) (P10)

The design of these props must immerse the viewer in the story to help suspend their disbelief. As explained by Atkins, props must be suitably designed to be integrated seamlessly within the production.

Titles



Fig 6. Some Like It Hot opening titles, uncredited (Jack Clements, 2026)

The choice of typography is also important in the opening titles, which also help set the tone of the film. Fig 6 shows the opening titles of *Some Like It Hot* (1959) which has a manual typeface in 'the purest style of comics and animated shorts conceptually intended to suggest the idea of comedy to the audience from the very first still' (Soana, Boneu, 2007, P20). We have come to expect comedies to be colourful, to reflect their playful, humorous nature. However, when this film came out in 1959, colour cinematography existed but wasn't nearly

as common, therefore, aside from the content of the film itself, comedies had to rely heavily on the packaging of its titles (and music) that set the audience up for what they were about to see.

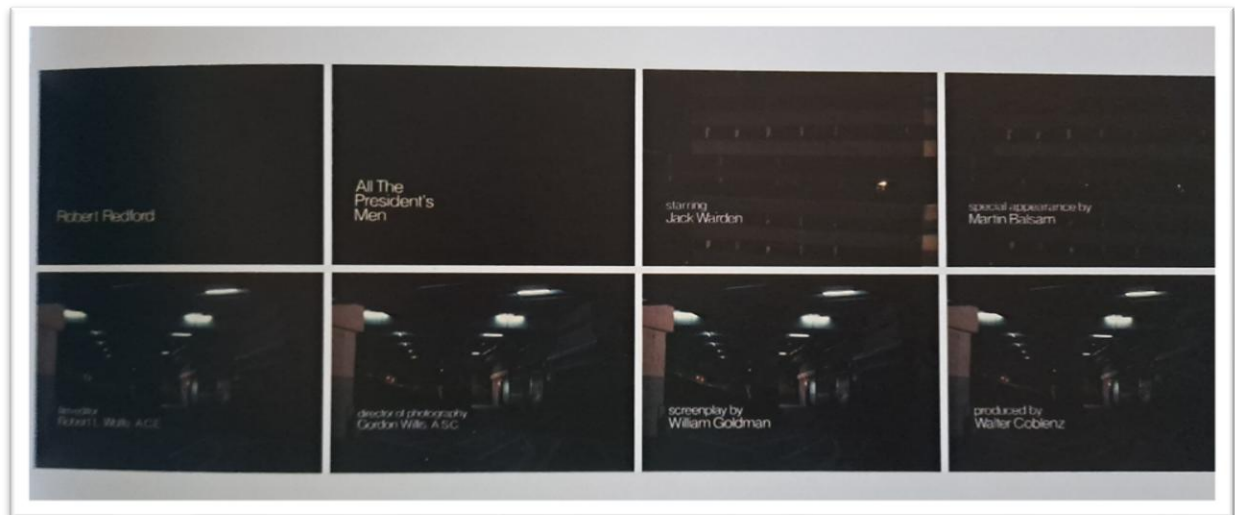


Fig 7. All The President's Men opening titles, E. McKnight Kauffer (Jack Clements, 2026)

Fig 7 shows the opening sequence from *All The President's Men* (1976) which employed the typeface Helvetica,

at a time when typographic excesses were still the rage, the clarity and intentional dryness of the composition, and the absence of music make for a title sequence very advanced for its time (P24)

Like the previous example, these titles have a particular packaging that sets the tone. In this example, though, it relies entirely on the typesetting (aside from cinematography) to do this, as the film, at this point, is silent.

Documentaries

This chapter regards how documentaries use graphics to enhance visuals and storytelling. Graphics can be quite subtle in this genre of film as it is mainly focused on the subjects, so typography, for instance, only tends to be seen in titles, and introductions to people or places. However, some designers are very creative with how this is done. Others are very graphic heavy, utilising motion graphics to provide much needed context and fill in blanks where footage is not present. My research includes the series *Sonic Highways* (2014), and the journalism site Vox.



Fig 8. Sonic Highways (Foo Fighters, 2014)

Script

The series *Sonic Highways* (2014) is based around the recording of a concept album by the band Foo Fighters. It was recorded in 8 cities across the US and the premise is that the city itself shapes the music that it produces. With this in mind, the band goes to different locations, immerses themselves within the musical history of the city, then writes a song. Each episode delves into these histories, interviewing key people, and documenting the recording process of the song, with a performance at the end.



Fig 9. In The Clear music video (Foo Fighters, 2014)

Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl spearheaded this project, conducting the interviews and directing the series, as well as writing the lyrics, the inspiration for which came from his research and interview transcripts. A script typeface based on his handwriting was created for the show, which appears in several places, most notably in the music video at the end. As the band performs, the lyrics appear around them in Grohl's handwriting (Fig 9).

Research shows script typefaces 'are perceived as more approachable (Mackiewicz, cited Zhang et al, 2025), and this is because they '[create] perceptions of human presence and thereby enhance consumers' emotional attachment to the product.' (Scholl et al, 2018). The inclusion of Grohl's handwriting adds a personal touch to the stories being told, which is fitting because it's about the people of these places and the music they made. Informal script typefaces emphasise a handmade, human aspect.

Context

The University of Greater Manchester sites three ways in which visual journalism is important and effective, '[crafting] a narrative where the audience doesn't just passively consume the news, but they feel it.' (2023)

1. It grabs attention: In an era of information overload, capturing someone's attention is gold. Visuals break the monotony and immediately draw your eyes in.

2. It makes complex ideas digestible: A single image or graphic can often explain what thousands of words might struggle to.

3. It is emotionally engaging: A well-crafted visual story can tug at heartstrings, evoke laughter, or create a sense of motivation (2023)

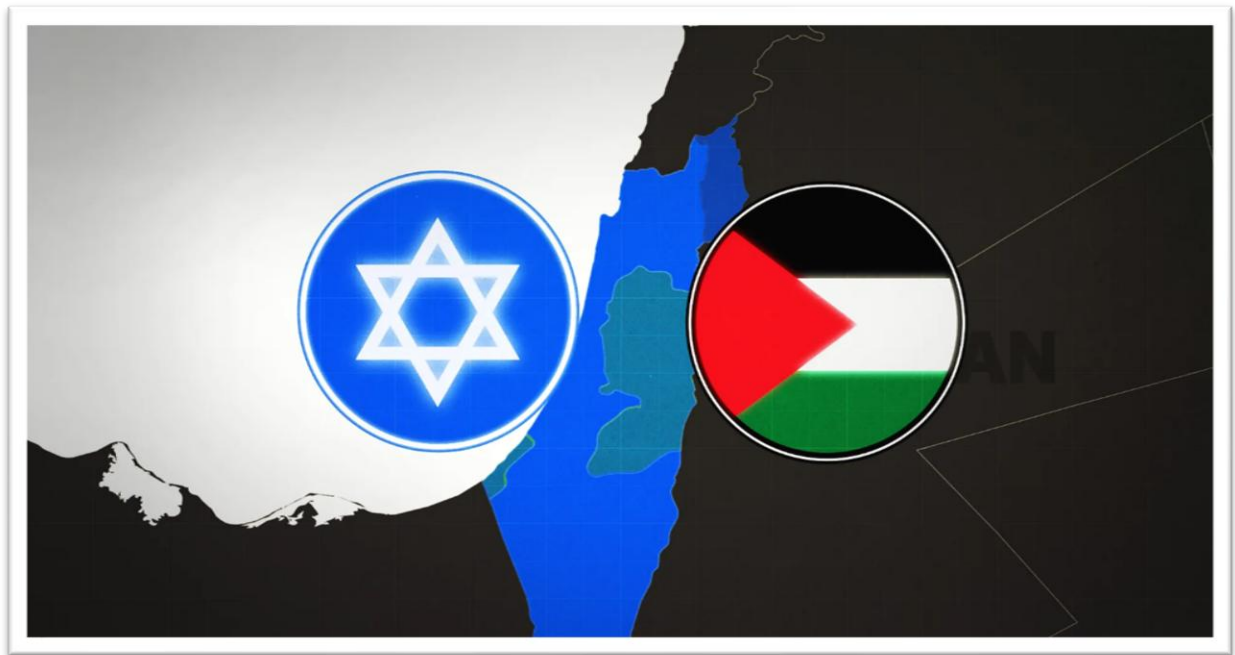


Fig 10. The Israel-Palestine Conflict (Vox, 2016)

Vox is an exploratory journalism site, well known for producing documentaries on a plethora of subjects. Ones regarding news stories, for example, may contain a majority or entirety of text and motion graphics, in contrast with Sonic Highways. *'The Israel-Palestine conflict: a brief, simple history'* (2016) contains some archival photos and footage but relies heavily on animated graphs and maps (with narration) to explain the subject to the viewer. Explanatory graphics like these are used,

'to provide explanatory notes, ideas, as well as information when the available footage cannot portray it sufficiently well. The CG-animated explanatory supplements can be very exciting and creative' (Darkin, cited Song, 2009)

As the title of the video suggest, many of Vox's stories are short form. This is partly due to a younger, online target audience. The documentary on the Israel-Palestine conflict, greatly benefits from the use of motion graphics, not just to help the viewer digest lots of key information and statistics, but to keep their attention and engagement up, in ways that a less dynamic, face-to-face interview style could not achieve.

Although this type of film contrasts with Sonic Highways, they are similar in that they both contain elements that reach for the audience's emotions to engage them with the story.

Conclusion

Research into *Humour*, *Design*, and *Documentaries* has led me to pose the following question, which will lead into my third-year project: **'How can graphic design enhance a documentary?'** In my film I will consider humour, motion graphics and infographics when maintaining audience engagement, the choice of visual style and typefaces when setting an appropriate tone, and finally, utilising my sense of humour when enhancing less engaging sections, as well as diluting any potentially negative emotions, where appropriate.

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Figures

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6 – Some Like It Hot opening titles, uncredited (Jack Clements, 2026)

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