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GRAPHIC DESIGNERS IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

A Comparative Study of Commercial Graphic
Design and Graphic Prop-making

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A Comparative Study of Commercial Graphic Design and Graphic Prop-making

The profession of a graphic designer is extremely popular and commonplace today, but few are aware that there are employment prospects beyond commercial work. While graphic design is mostly associated with advertising and marketing, there is also a demand for graphic designers in film and television industry. Due to issues with copywrite and complicated legal obligations, film and television productions opt for creating original artwork within the art department rather than using existing design as props and set decoration.

Graphic designers working in filmmaking create props that are considered graphic. These graphic props can be anything with writing, a pattern, or a picture in it. Often, they are things that a graphic designer would create in the real world. Yet, there are aspects to the job that require skills that are not directly transferrable from commercial graphic design.

This thesis explores the lesser-known job role of a graphic designer working for film and television. While graphic design is widely accessible to study, specialising in filmmaking is not as easy. For the purpose of providing applicable information for graphic designers specifically, this thesis compares graphic prop-making to commercial graphic design.

The study analyses the two job roles in their processes, techniques and tools, contexts, and objectives. It compares stages in the design process and explores the significance of research behind design. The study demonstrates how opposite aims differentiate them, yet storytelling remains a common aspect. It provides examples of comparable elements and expands on those aspects of graphic prop-making that are very different from commercial graphic design.

This comparative study aims to offer the reader an idea of where these two jobs differ, and to point out the additional skills and knowledge that employment in the film and television industry requires from a graphic designer.

KEYWORDS:

Graphic design, prop-making, graphic prop, commercial graphic design, filmmaking

Nea Suurhasko

ELOKUVA-ALAN GRAAFISET SUUNNITTELIJAT

Vertaavatutkimus kaupallisen alan graafisesta suunnittelusta ja graafisten lavasteiden suunnittelusta

Graafisen suunnittelijan ammatti on erittäin suosittu ja yleinen, mutta harva tietää työllistymismahdollisuuksista alalla kaupallisten töiden ulkopuolella. Graafinen suunnittelu liitetään yleisesti mainontaan ja markkinointiin, vaikka graafisille suunnittelijoille on kysyntää myös elokuva- ja televisioalalla. Tekijänoikeuksien ja monimutkaisten lakivelvoitteiden takia elokuva- ja televisiotuotannot tuottavat teoskynnyksen ylittävät lavasteet tuotannon sisällä, ennemmin kuin käyttävät olemassa olevia tuotteita ja teoksia.

Elokuva-alalla työllistyvät graafiset suunnittelijat luovat lavasteita, joiden voidaan ajatella olevan graafisia. Nämä graafiset propit voivat olla mitä tahansa elementtejä, jotka sisältävät tekstiä, kuvia tai kuvia. Usein kyseiset lavasteet vastaavat samoja töitä, joita graafiset suunnittelijat toteuttavat todellisessa elämässä. Työnkuva kuitenkin vaatii taitoja, jotka eivät ole osa kaupallista graafista suunnittelua.

Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii graafisen suunnittelijan vähemmän tunnettua roolia elokuva- ja televisioalalla. Vaikka graafisen suunnittelun koulutustarjonta on laaja, erikoistuminen elokuva-alalle on hankalaa. Jotta tutkimus tarjoaisi sovellettavaa tietoa erityisesti graafisille suunnittelijoille, se vertaa graafisten lavasteiden suunnittelua kaupallisen alan graafiseen suunnitteluun.

Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan kahden aihealan prosesseja, tekniikoita ja työvälineitä, konteksteja ja tavoitteita. Se vertaa suunnitteluprosessien vaiheita ja taustatutkimuksen merkitystä suunnittelutyössä. Tutkimus osoittaa, että toteutettavilla töillä on vastakkaiset tavoitteet, mutta tarinankerronnallisuus on yhdistävä tekijä. Teksti sisältää esimerkkejä vertailtavissa olevista elementeistä ja valottaa niitä puolia graafisten lavasteiden suunnittelussa, jotka poikkeavat merkittävästi kaupallisella alalla työskentelystä.

Tämän vertaavan tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarjota lukijalle käsitys siitä, miten nämä kaksi graafisen suunnittelun alaa eroavat toisistaan ja mitkä ovat ne tiedot ja taidot, joita työllistyminen elokuva- ja televisioalalla graafiselta suunnittelijalta vaatii.

ASIASANAT:

Graafinen suunnittelu, lavastus, graafinen propi, kaupallinen graafinen suunnittelu, elokuva- ja tv-ala

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2019, I worked as an extra in a film that was filmed in Cornwall, England. The long days on the film set offered me a glimpse of a world I had always been fascinated by. It felt surreal to find myself in the midst of a film crew, everyone so focused on their individual tasks, surrounded by equipment I had never seen before, despite having studied film alongside my studies in advertising. To me it seemed like a very organised chaos, and all of us extras, pretending to sip cocktails and socialise in a beautifully dressed pub setting, were happy to do what we were told to – stay out of the way. I felt like a fly on a wall, absorbing all the information I could get out of the experience.

It was then, it became concrete to me that my thesis would, to some extent, deal with the subject of filmmaking. As a student of creative advertising and graphic design, I only had to find a link between the subjects. I was unaware then, there on the set of that film, that I was looking at the link on front of me. As a graphic designer, I was naturally drawn to the posters the set decorators had dressed the walls of the pub with, long before the extras were brought in. The posters were all promoting fictional musicians and bands, but what never crossed my mind back then, was that they would have been designed especially for the film by a graphic designer.

It was not until a year later, I discovered that most film and television productions nowadays have at least one graphic designer working for the production's art department. Out of personal interest I started researching who these professionals were and how they ended up in the film industry. I learnt that most of them had a background in commercial graphic design, but as I delved deeper into the world of designing graphic props for film, it became clear that graphic design for film was, in fact, entirely opposite in its aim to commercial graphic design work.

Whereas one aims to stand out in the oftentimes overwhelming number of commercial messages we process every day, the other, most of the time, is meant to blend into the blurry background of a film unnoticed. Yet, these two jobs have a lot of similarities too, evident from having the same title and often the same educational basis. I had found the link I was looking for. As I begun to form a clearer idea of all the differences and similarities between the jobs, my thesis took the form of a comparative study of commercial graphic design and graphic prop-making for film.

Early on in my research process, I realised that there was not a lot of information about graphic design in filmmaking out there, due to the job role being relatively new and unknown. With my initial keywords I came across one name above all: graphic designer Annie Atkins. At the time, in early 2020, she was just about to publish her book: *Fake Love Letters, Forged Telegrams, and Prison Escape Maps: Designing Graphic Props for Filmmaking*. The book gave me a great deal of insight into what it was like to work as a graphic designer in the film and television industry and helped me find ties to commercial graphic design. I was able to find only one academic text that deals with graphic design and prop-making. Inês Ribeiro explores in her thesis (Ribeiro 2019, *Harry Potter: Graphic Design Methods of Converting Textual References into Film Props*) how graphic designers turned items described in the Harry Potter book series into props for the film adaptations. Her extensive work inspired me to look into some of the sources she used in her work.

Through literature, articles, and videos that interview film industry professionals, I was able to develop an understanding of the role of a graphic designer within film. I then began to analyse different aspects of the job, comparing them to what I considered equivalent stages in the design process, techniques used, and overall objectives, in commercial graphic design. As a result of this analysis, I was able to point out where additional skills and knowledge are required.

There is no straight-forward path from commercial graphic design to employment in the film industry. In the United Kingdom there have been a few workshop opportunities to learn graphic prop-making, but there are no extensive courses to specialise in filmmaking as a graphic designer. While this career prospect remains unknown and the demand low for this specific kind of professionals, there may not be a need for one. There are graphic designers and other creatives, like myself, who stumble upon this niche segment within graphic design and want to learn more about it.

I wanted my thesis to be a source of information that offers an overview of the job role and the work environment of a graphic designer working in filmmaking, opposed to what graphic designers may already know or can expect from working in commercial graphic design. My work explores what skills are transferrable and what new skills and knowledge to acquire before possibly pursuing a career in film further. My hope is that my thesis will give its reader a theoretical foundation on which to build up on.

1.1 Commercial Graphic Design

Commercial graphic designers are creators of visual concepts for marketing communication. Graphic designers can also work with publications or design product packaging, but this thesis focuses on graphic design for advertising and marketing purposes. In general, their job is to create layouts: shape and arrange elements to achieve a balanced visual space.

Commercial graphic designers promote products or services through visuals that capture the attention of the target audience. Good marketing content condenses big ideas into simple visuals and messages that aim to generate interest or positive emotional responses in the consumer. Whereas graphic design in films is meant to blend into the background, commercial graphic work aims to do the opposite – stand out, grab attention and be remembered. Graphic designer for film Martin T. Charles explains that on the screen you have split seconds to communicate your ideas, so the graphics have to be absolutely clear because the audience does not have the time to figure out your thoughts (LaSane 2019, *Graphic Design in Film: Substance of Visual Storytelling*). In real life the viewer of a graphic design piece, like an advert, has more time to process the message and visuals compared to graphic design on screen. On average, adverts may not be viewed for more than a few seconds, but the aim of designing advertising is that the person viewing it would stop to think about the idea behind it.

Creative teams in advertising agencies dramatize the marketing strategy of the client company and create a concept that is the foundation to campaigns and individual adverts. Marketing can have cognitive, affective, or conative objectives that the graphic designer translates by visual means into simplified messages for the consumer. Even though, compared to film, the work of a commercial graphic designer gets more exposure time, simplicity is still key.

Work Environment

Graphic designers traditionally work in advertising agencies, but they may also be employed by a company's marketing department, publications like magazines and newspapers, or be self-employed as freelancers. Nowadays when client-creator connections can be made online, on platforms like LinkedIn, anyone can choose to work

independently. Websites like UpWork, where freelancers around the world can find projects suitable for their skillset, make it very easy find work. Freelancing graphic designers benefit from knowledge in marketing, as they are often required to wear many hats in order to offer a service competitive to an agency's.

An agency career usually starts as an assistant or junior graphic designer, and after a few years of experience they may be promoted to senior level graphic designer, creative director or art director. Art or creative directors lead creative teams of graphic designers, copywriters and possibly other creative professionals. There are also art directors in the film industry, but the role is more managerial than hands-on creative compared to the role in an advertising agency.

Designers working in agencies have the luxury of a steady income, whereas freelancers must be self-starters and make connections to support themselves financially. On the other hand, freelancing has its perks, like independence and variety, the ability to choose what to work on and when. The typical working hours of a commercial graphic designer is 37 to 40 hours a week (<https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/graphic-designer>, n.d.).

1.2 Graphic Design in Filmmaking

A common presumption might be that a graphic designer working for film and television designs film titles and posters. That assumption is not necessarily wrong because graphic designers create films' promotional materials as well. However, poster designers work on the commercial side of the film industry, while a graphic designer employed by a film or television show's art department works behind the scenes. Graphic design is traditionally associated with marketing and advertisement, but there is a whole secret world of graphic design in filmmaking.

In a film when a character picks up a newspaper, receives a letter, or looks at a map, these objects would be designed by a graphic artist working in the film's art department. However, vast majority of the graphic designer's work stays in the background, contributing to the bigger picture: signage on shop fronts, documents on an office desk, or food product packaging on a breakfast table, for example. Set pieces and props that graphic designers are hired to create for a film or television show are called graphic props.

Today a film or television production employs from at least one graphic designer to a whole team of designers and their assistants who are responsible for graphic props. American labour union for film, performing arts, commercials, and exhibitions the United Scenic Artists recognises Computer Artists as one of their member categories. According to their official website, computer artists are professionals who work in the art department of television shows, feature films and commercials.

“Computer Artists are responsible for breaking down (listing and detailing) the scripted graphic elements of a production, reading ‘between the lines’ of a script for additional graphic needs, collaborating with other departments to make design choices, and managing the creation and fabrication of those elements to be used on set. Typical projects include: logo design, signage, packaging, newspapers and books, photo editing, motion graphics, screen graphics and prop concept design, among others.” (<https://www.usa829.org/Membership-Info/Member-Categories>, 2017.)

Graphic designers can be considered a sub-category to computer artists which is a broader term that covers other professionals as well. Motion graphics, for example, are not produced by graphic prop designers, but are the work of an entirely different production employee with a very different skillset.

Graphic designers in film, in simple terms, create anything that a graphic designer would in the real world. They are a part of the group of artists and craftspeople that create the world of the film. All these professionals work together to design, build and decorate the sets to realise the director’s and the production designer’s creative vision. A graphic designer’s job is to fill the sets with details that make it feel authentic, details that make the surroundings so seamless that the viewer does not even think about it. Yet, all of it is a part of telling the story.

Work Environment

A film or television show’s art department is overseen by a production designer and managed by an art director. It has several sub-departments, like design, construction, décor and props. Bigger productions have a designated graphics department within the art department. Even as a separate department, graphics work closely with the prop department, because there are a lot of grey areas in prop-making responsibilities between these two. The art department is often located close to the set in a warehouse or a trailer.

Typically, the graphic designer is one of the final members to join the art department. However, it is not always the case that they work close to the action, they may also be able to work remotely. Graphic designers are very low in the production hierarchy. They have to share their time between different department heads, the art director and the production designer, the latter being the highest in the hierarchy and therefore the graphic artist reports to him or her first.

Graphic designers that work in the film and television industry are normally freelancers that are hired by production companies for individual projects. Employment is often unpredictable and making a career in the industry is infamously about “who you know”. Once a designer is hired by a production, it means intensive work and long hours, but only for a few months at a time. According to United Scenic Artists union, computer artists are generally required to work a 10-hour day in an art department office environment, which means they work considerably more hours per week compared to commercial graphic designers. Once a project wraps up, it may take while to find the next one. Graphic designer Annie Atkins said in her presentation at *Here 2015* festival in London that she would work from 8 to 9 months on film or television productions each year. It is not uncommon that graphic designers for film do commercial work in between film and TV projects.

1.3 Graphic Props

A graphic prop can be anything that has writing, a pattern, or a picture in it, from a box of matchstick to a billboard. The graphic artist may also be responsible for designs built into sets, like stained glass, wallpaper, or floor-tiling patterns. In graphics department terms, there are dressing graphics – props made to dress the sets, construction graphics – designs built into the sets, and action graphics – props handled by the actors (Atkins 2020, p. 13). Action graphics can be so called “hero props” if they appear on camera and are important to the story.

A graphic designer’s work on a film screen is a lot less visible than of those who work in the commercial world. Graphic set pieces are, in fact, not meant to be seen at all otherwise they would distract the viewer from the acting and the story that is unfolding. According to graphic artist Robert Bernard, “In many parts of the job, things are simply what they are: company logo, a billboard, a newspaper, a tube of toothpaste, etc”, he goes on to explain, “as the graphic artist, it is important to know when your designs will

need to be the centre of attention or need to blend into the background so as not to distract from something else going on.” (LaSane 2019.)

Most graphic props appear on screen for split seconds, if they are seen at all, but they have a very important purpose when the camera is rolling. For the actors, being able to hold and interact with real props can help them deliver their best performance. Authentic feeling sets, with little graphic details, not only take the actors to the world of the film, but also help the director in their job. Graphic props create a sense of realism and authenticity that ultimately transfers across the screen to the audience. Miraphora Mina, one of the graphic designers behind the graphic props seen in the Harry Potter film franchise, says that even though some objects may only flash by in a second, the audience will feel the effects of an immersive experience. Mina and her design partner Eduardo Lima think that background objects should never be given any less detail or attention than those seen in close up. (Revenson 2016, p. 11.)

Using Real Brands and Products

In the past graphic props were made by different professionals working in the art department, like propmakers, trainees, or assistants. Back then, there was no need for an artist specialising in graphic props. Before things could be designed digitally, they would be drawn by hand or mostly just borrowed.

“As late as the 1990s, if you needed a ‘for sale’ sign for a character’s front yard, you could just call a local realtor, jump in the car, and borrow one for an afternoon. But as the scare stories about copywrite lawsuits began to circulate around the industry, the role of graphic designer – someone who could produce original artwork that the production company would legally own – became almost mandatory.” (Atkins 2020, p. 12.)

Since then, the industry has become more careful with copywrite laws. Today, using actual real-life brands and other graphic artwork involves a lengthy legal process, it can take a significant chunk of the production budget, and potentially be a logistical nightmare. Hiring a designer to create these set pieces as original designs within the production is more practical, cost-effective, and eliminates the copywrite issues. Film productions are, in fact, able to gain back some of their budget after wrapping up by holding auctions selling the props and set pieces created for the film.

Nowadays, choosing to use real-life products in a film or television show is a very conscious choice. The production may work in partnership with a brand and choose to

do product placement. Sometimes using actual existing products can also support the story. To make a film set in a specific place or time period feel realistic, it can be beneficial to use real products that we associate with that setting. Especially films based on true stories tend to opt for replicating real-life objects and products. The responsibility to produce these replicas is on the props and graphics department as well as any fictitious prop.

Examples of Graphic Props in a Film Scene



Image 1. Screen capture from Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)

Director Wes Anderson makes a good case study for graphic design in filmmaking, because he employs a lot of design and art in creating his signature look, where every frame is a beautifully and carefully constructed piece of art in itself. The image above is from Wes Anderson's film *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) that is set in a fictional European country in the 1930s, the Republic of Zubrowka. In this scene a character called inspector Henckels, played by Edward Norton, is reading a newspaper in his office.

This particular scene, like office scenes generally, has a lot of graphic elements in the surroundings, but also as a part of the action. The inspector is working on a murder case and the office is full of documents related to it. On the board behind the inspector there is a map, photographs of the suspects, and some newspaper articles that are all examples of graphic props. In crime TV shows and films, this so called 'detective wall' is a classic example of something that would be assembled by graphic designers.

Because the Republic of Zubrowka does not exist, the map would have been illustrated possibly referencing a similar location in the real world. For the detective wall someone working in the art department would have photographed the actors who played the suspects in costume and make up. Annie Atkins who worked on the film's graphics department tends to employ antiquated methods in her work, so it is possible that they would have developed those photos in methods used in the 1930s.

The action prop in this scene, the newspaper, would have been printed in multiple duplicates, in case the prop got damaged in the hands of the actor. In a video filmed at *Here* festival in London (It's Nice That 2015) Annie Atkins describes Wes Anderson's style of working very particular and thorough, and that he tends to do more takes than the average director. The more takes can be expected, the more of these duplicates, that in the industry are called repeats, have to be made.

On the desk to the right of the inspector there is a document with fingerprints and to the left a notebook and some booklets. These graphic props, likewise, would have been the graphics department's responsibility to produce. The graphics team would have also had to pre-empt any additional graphics in the office setting, like the documents seen in the top right corner, the files in the folder on the desk, and any other graphics elsewhere out of shot. In order to create all of this, the graphics team would have researched what kind of paperwork and other objects would be in an inspector's office in the 1930s. Seen in the top left corner is an illustration of the imaginary emperor of Zubrowka. The illustration was originally created for a postage stamp used in another prop, but it was also enlarged and framed for this office scene.

2 STAGES OF PROCESS

When comparing the working processes of graphic designers in film and advertising, they have a similar structure to them. The processes both start with a work assignment, a brief or a script, and breaking them down to specific design needs and objectives. They also involve research to some extent, communication, and seeking approval for designs that are created. Products of graphic design are used in different ways in the two industries, but processes that lead to the final piece advance in similar stages.

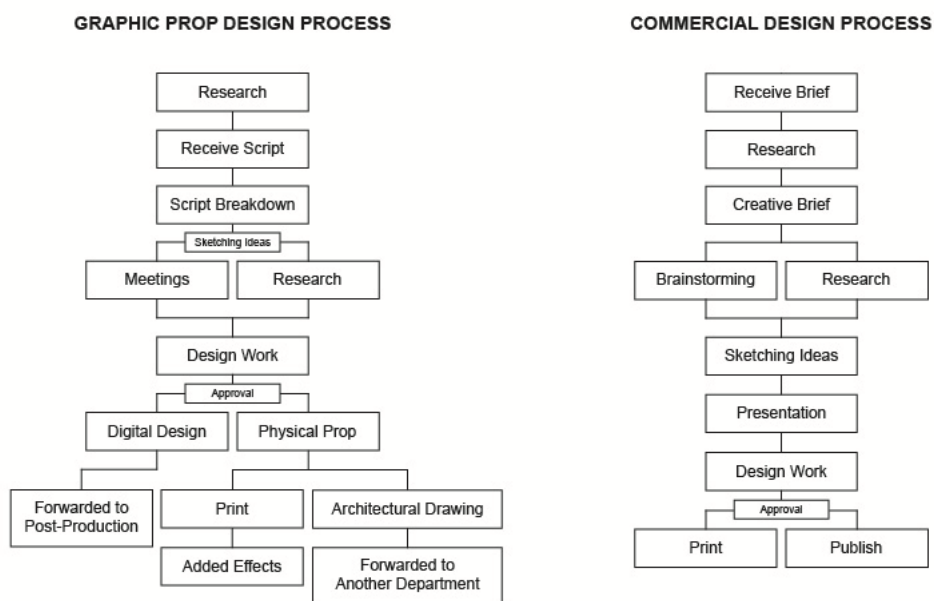


Figure 1. Design processes comparison graph

2.1 Project Assignment

A commercial project is assigned to a team or an individual in the form of a brief. The brief in this example refers to a marketing campaign including graphic work. In an advertising agency, often the person receiving the brief is a project manager or other senior level employee. They conduct market research and gather information that is relevant to the case but is not included in the brief, and then go on to prepare what is called a creative brief. A creative brief is a document detailing to the creative team working on the project the aims of the communication: What is the desired reaction? Who are the target audience? What is the key response? What is the brand identity and tone

of voice? It also determines the medias, budget, and competition, among everything that may be useful information to the team. The purpose of this practise is to help the creative team better understand the project before they begin brainstorming for ideas.

The equivalent to a brief in graphic design for filmmaking is the script. The working process varies depending on the scale and nature of the production, but it always starts with a script. Martin T. Charles says that he would research the production designer and the director prior to everything else. He explains that upon reading the script it is important to keep in mind that the production designer would already have an idea of what the graphics would look like (LaSane 2019). Likewise, in commercial graphic design, the designer needs to acknowledge that the client would also have some kind of an idea of what they are looking for. Graphic designers in both industries are providing a service that is both accommodative and offers expertise, which is why good communication skills are an important asset to any graphic designer.

When starting work on a new project the first step is to break the script down to the graphic elements. For Annie Atkins this mean going over the entire scrip with a highlighter, marking out every part that mentions or refers to props that would be the responsibility of the graphics department (Atkins 2020). A script does not mention all the props, so the graphics team has to pre-empt what additional graphics each set might require. Breaking down the script is reading between the lines. To an experienced graphic artist, a street scene in the script, for example, indicates a high volume of graphic work.

Because the script is subject to change, no additional markings or notes are made in the script documents. The common practice is that when changes are made to the script, those pages are replaced with revised ones printed on coloured paper different each time, so that every revision patch can be identified by its colour. Every prop mentioned in the script and the ones derived from it, are listed in a separate sheet document and referenced by their scene number, location, if it is a day or night-time scene, interior or exterior scene, and other relevant aspects. This breakdown document is similar to a creative brief because it is drafted from the original assignment by a team leader, in filmmaking the graphics department head, and acts as guideline to the creative team that produces individual design pieces.

2.2 Seeking Approval

In an advertising agency, after the team receives a creative brief, they have brainstorming sessions and prepare a response to it. They summarise the objectives, ask additional questions, point out needs for further research, and develop rough ideas for the course of the advertising campaign. The team along with the project manager go on to map out an overall idea of the starting point, aims, market, means, message, budget, schedule, and their ideas for the creative solutions, ultimately concluding everything in a presentation to the client. This process ensures everyone involved in the project is on the same page, and most importantly that the client gets what they were looking for in their original brief. Once the client is happy with the agency's response, the creative team starts working on the campaign.

In the film industry, every department goes through the process of carefully reading through the script for things relevant to them, meanwhile the assistant directors plan a filming schedule. After breaking down the script, the graphics team researches stylistic influences and references, and start sketching up ideas. Meetings with the department heads and the production designer take place ensuring a coherent visual direction across the art department. This is a point equivalent, in a sense, to a presentation in the commercial graphic design process, where the creative team either goes back to develop ideas further or receive a green light to move into production.

2.3 Design Process

The design process of a graphic designer, no matter if they work in advertising or filmmaking, moves forward in phases that repeat a circle of designing and seeking approval.

Once the order in which a film is shot is released, a graphic designer can start prioritising. A stain glass design, for example, may take weeks in production, and if the scene where it is needed is early on in the schedule that would be a high priority graphic. Once the production starts filming, props need to be ready and in place at their scheduled time. In a professional profile video (Academy Originals 2016) Martin T. Charles says that working in pre-production is much easier because there is time to make changes to designs, but once the production starts filming "it's all about getting it done". He explains

that it can be a matter of days, even hours, to produce something for the camera, and that prop takes priority over everything else.

The design process also involves making 5 to 6 identical duplicates of each prop for continuity. For every action prop there should be from 12 to 30 repeats, because they are handled by the actors and sometimes even destroyed on camera. Errors in continuity are very distracting for the audience, if they are not caught in the production process.

3 RESEARCH BEHIND DESIGN

Graphic design existed before graphic designers, instead the creator of these historical designs would be called craftsmen, calligraphers, printers, welders, or stonemasons. A graphic designer's job in the film industry is to imitate the art of these professionals of the past. When a film is set in more recent times, the graphic artist often ends up replicating or referencing the work of their own colleagues.

Research behind commercial graphic design means becoming familiar with the client's business, previous marketing, their marketplace, and target audience. Working in creative advertising and marketing also means keeping up with current trends and social phenomena. Compared to designers working in film, the research looks to different directions, one to the past, the other to the present and even the future.

3.1 Research for Film

A graphic designer for film should be interested in history and curious about ephemera because research is essential in their work. Annie Atkins says that research is a huge part of her working process, and she would usually start working on a film about 6 to 8 weeks before the camera starts rolling (AIGAdesign 2017). Considering an average length film takes up to three months to film, the research phase can take a third, even half, of the overall time spent on a film project.

Atkins's advice is to steal, borrow, and take from real life, no matter if the film is based on modern life, a historical era, set in a time a hundred years from now, or in an entirely fantastical world, every graphic prop she creates has its base in the real world. Creating graphic props is not just imitating the visual aspects of an existing design, it is the process of making it as well. To achieve the most authentic results, it is important to understand what materials were used, how the piece was made, and utilise those methods in the process of producing the prop.

Using real references is important because they might be surprising, even if the designer was familiar with the history of graphic design. For example, you might find a reference piece from a certain period that uses a typeface that you would have otherwise associated with an entirely different time period. Yet, historical accuracy is not the main

thing in mind when designing graphic props, they serve one purpose above all: telling a story. Using newspaper headlines is a common way to advance the story or give it context, but it wasn't until the mid 20th century that newspapers started printing headlines on the front page. Sometimes historical accuracy gets compromised for storytelling reasons or to avoid filming expensive scenes.

Basing props on real things is not just Atkins's way of working, but a common practice in the industry. Likewise, design studio MinaLima amended the magic in their graphic props for the Harry Potter films from simply shifting reality.

“Their work has such a strong impact because it is thoroughly researched. The subject matter may be fantastic, but you see all kinds of influences from art and culture – whether ancient runes or Victorian typefaces – that give a sense of history to their work. This clever pastiche produces mysterious echoes of things that are strangely familiar or that you might dimly understand – quite like magic.” (Sibley 2012, as cited in Ribeiro 2019.)

Miraphora Mina explains the design philosophy of their team, “On the whole (...) our design style was to take the reality we knew and shift it by a few degrees instead of creating a completely new world.” (Revenson 2016, p. 12.)

Sources

Whereas market research can most of the time be done on front of a computer, the internet can rarely provide reliable information when conducting research for a film, especially those set in time periods of the past. Annie Atkins says she looks for reference pieces at flea markets, libraries, book shops, and museums, even her grandmother's attic. She points out that the internet is not a reliable source because, even if you were to find a good reference piece, it is hard to determine the scale, material, or other perspectives from a single image (AIGAdesign 2017). Atkins says that she spends a lot of time collecting things from the past that she can refer to in her work. She also states that, “By studying and researching pieces of graphic design from the past, I'm actually more inspired in my contemporary work.”

There are also other elements, than just style, shape, and material, that can be observed from reference pieces for graphic props. Miraphora Mina and Eduardo Lima created a lot of books for the Harry Potter films and ended up accumulating a considerable number of old books in their research. They would look at the binding and contents for reference, but they were also used to see how a book would age in years of use.

Context of Graphic Design in the Harry Potter Films



Image 2. Yule Ball pamphlet by MinaLima

Image 3. Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes product packaging by MinaLima

The story of Harry Potter takes place in the 1990s, and even though the wizarding world envisioned by the films' production designer Stuart Craig, would have its own visual architecture, the references of early digital design can be detected in a lot of the graphic props that design studio MinaLima created for the films. The image on the left is a pamphlet made for the film *Harry Potter and Goblet of Fire* (2005). The booklet includes the program of the evening of Yule Ball that was held in the wizarding school of Hogwarts in the film. The use of colours, fonts, effects, and borders on this particular graphic prop is reminiscent of graphic design in the 90s. To a modern graphic designer this layout, when put out of context, might look a little naive and chaotic. It is hard to say who would have been responsible for designing these pamphlets in the magical world created by J. K. Rowling, but it is safe to say that witches and wizards would most likely not be taught much about graphic design layout principles and complimentary colours in Hogwarts.

Miraphora Mina and Eduardo Lima perhaps had a similar thought process behind the work they created for the films.

The image on the right is a collection of the product packaging seen in the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes magical joke shop in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2009). Miraphora Mina says that creating these props was a designer's dream, as they would have been the work of two teenage boys who would probably not have much of a design sense. "We had to throw away all our ideas of good design and use clashing colours and dreadful printing techniques", Mina describes, "So, we looked at a lot of packaging for fireworks and firecrackers because they're really cheap and disposable, and the printing is always amiss." (Revenson 2016, p.155.) The influence of firework packaging is evident from these designs, as well as, again, the 90s. The style of graphic design in the 90s almost seems like a play with fonts, textures, colours, and heavily edited images. As computers became more widely available, it became easier to experiment, and there was a lot that a computer could do that was not possible before. There is similar kind of playful element to the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes product designs, which also works well within the context of the story.

4 TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

The digital age created the job of graphic designer as we perceive it now. The techniques of graphic designers 30 years ago and before that, like Letraset, typesetting, working with scalpels and tweezers, photocopying, and even printing have been long forgotten. In many industries digitalisation has changed how we work, in filmmaking, it has changed how films are made entirely. With the technology that is available now, you can create more, faster, and the editing process is easier. In the art department a lot of things are still made by hand today, but the advantages of new technologies, have also made prop-making more efficient and less time consuming.

Ability to use digital design tools is a key skill in any graphic design work. Graphic designers are expected to be adequate users of Adobe Creative Cloud, least of all Photoshop, InDesign, and Illustrator, but a graphic designer working for film has to be comfortable with different techniques beyond just digital tools. Mimicking antiquated methods and giving graphic props additional effects, like aging paper or adding stamps, handwriting, and smudges, is a part of their job as well. This means that the tool kit of a graphic designer working in film looks a lot different to a designer's in the commercial world.

4.1 Designing by Hand

Annie Atkins works by a mantra that if the graphic piece she is working on would be made by hand in the era the film is set in, she would also make the prop by hand. If, on the other hand, a referenced piece was made by a machine, she would allow herself to use a machine to produce the prop. "While there are all kinds of digital brushes and distressed fonts available (...) nothing says 'made by hand' like actually making things by hand." (Atkins 2020, p.186). Sometimes drawing by hand is also a quicker way to get the job done. Making digital fonts look like hand-lettering can become very time consuming, while picking up a pen and simply drawing can be a lot more effective. Hand-drawn work can be digitalised afterwards and further developed before printing or being forwarded to another department responsible for making the physical prop.

It is very rarely that commercial graphic designers utilise crafts or pen and paper in their work, except when sketching up ideas or, on some occasions, crafting a mood board.

Some designers may be accustomed to using a digital drawing tablet, but the ability to draw is not a necessity for a commercial graphic designer. Segments within graphic design like web design, for example, require a good eye for aesthetics, rather than artistic abilities as an illustrator.

4.2 Three-Dimensional Design

Graphic props can be more than just a sheet of paper, in some cases they can be three-dimensional. Graphic designers who create product packaging in the commercial world have more transferrable skills to graphic prop-making than those who mostly work with digital media. Creating packaging and labels for physical products is something that is a part of any graphic design degree programme, but often becomes someone's speciality in working life. In graphic prop-making designing packaging for milk cartons, cereal boxes, chocolate bars, or filling an entire shop with products is very common.

Sometimes three-dimensional props can be more complicated than just a box. In the world of Harry Potter 'a howler' is a magical letter that conveys its contents, often unpleasant, in the voice of its sender. A howler is first seen in the film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), and it is a computer animated version of a design Miraphora Mina visioned for the film. Mina says, "Instead of just having an envelope with a face on it, it tells its own story." For this particular prop Mina looked at origami for inspiration. "There were so many things that lent themselves to that. The ribbon that encircles the letter could turn into a tongue, for example. The white paper inside would turn into teeth within the red mouth." (Revenson 2016, p. 171.) Working as a graphic designer always requires a creative mind, but working on a project like the Harry Potter films, when letters talk, pictures on a newspaper move, and maps fold themselves challenged the creativity of design studio MinaLima in a different way.



Image 4. Design of a 'howler' by MinaLima

A lot of the time the graphics department is only responsible for the layout design of three-dimensional props, the physical props are constructed by the prop department. Shop front signage is often designed by a graphic designer but painted on the set by set builders. It is also the graphic designer's job to make architectural drawings for these designs, so that model makers, glaziers, metal workers, or other craftspeople are able to produce the prop. Similarly, commercial graphic designers can create design guideline documents as a part of their work. Like the architectural drawings, design guidelines work as stylistic instructions. A graphic designer may, for example, create a layout design for a website that a coder then interprets to create the actual site. Design guidelines can also be documents that detail the correct use of a brand's logo and its variations, official fonts, colour schemes, and imagery that are a part of the brand identity visioned by the graphic designer.

Graphic designers for film can also create designs for solely digital use. Sometimes designs are not turned into physical props at all, but are added onto the scenes digitally in post-production. Even though the graphics department is not always responsible for producing the final piece, compared to traditional graphic design work, working in the art department is a lot more hands-on and craftier.

Added Effects

The process of aging paper is a common procedure in the art department. Giving paper the right look is an art form of its own. Finding the right balance is not always straight forward. As viewers, we are used to seeing yellow and brown paper or parchment in films and TV shows based in the Medieval times, for example. Yet, historically back then the material would have been brand new and white, but using white paper would contradict our idea of authenticity and be distracting. So, the graphic designer needs to find the perfect balance between historical accuracy and what we are used to seeing.

Aging paper often involves a lot of trial and error. Soaking paper in liquids like coffee, tea, balsamic vinegar, and bleach is a way of making paper look aged. Every graphic artist has their own secret recipes for the solutions they use to achieve certain looks. "You can't really print aging. (...) Sometimes we print a colour on the inside pages of a book that will read as old, but generally, each piece of paper must go through a process", Miraphora Mina explains. Her partner Eduardo Lima adds, "We have a secret formula. Basically, it is a combination of coffee, sandpaper, and love." (Revenson 2016, p. 41.)

Graphic props may require other added effects as well, like bloody fingerprints on a murderer's possession, spilled ink on a hastily written letter, burned edges on unsuccessfully destroyed compromising evidence, or an official's stamps on a telegram. When repeats of graphic props are created for continuity, it is very important that the added effects are also identical in each spare duplicate. Some stains and spots can be printed on the paper to ensure consistency.

These added effects are often in between the lines in the script. Creating graphic props for a character's office can be an opportunity to give insight to that character, for example, scattered and disorganised notes on documents and spilled coffee here and there paints a picture of a hard-working type. Through little details a graphic designer is able to support the story being told.

4.3 Printing

Using print media in commercial graphic design has become a rarer form of publishing. Graphic designers today mostly work with digital media that has become so vast and accessible that companies may not feel the need to invest their money on printing their advertising anymore. In the instances that they do, printing is outsourced from a printing house that offers their expertise as a part of the service. The graphic designer is mostly only required to submit their work in the right colour space, CMYK, and sometimes a 3-millimetre bleed around the work. Knowledge of different papers or cutting is no longer a necessary skill for a graphic designer in the commercial industry.

However, this is not the case in graphic design for film which is heavily based on working with print. Choosing the right kind of paper to print on is very important, and there is a particular kind of criteria that applies to it. Robert Bernard talks about some of the aspects that are considered:

“It's a learning process for learning which materials work based on where filming will happen, for installation at a location, on set, or if the work will be going straight to a playback company or post-production. A simple rule is that bright whites and glossy surfaces make the job of the DP (production designer) much harder, so it makes everything easier to avoid those unless specifically needed.” (LaSane 2019.)

Martin T. Charles says that apart from the computer his main tool is a printer. Whereas before cutting printed paper down to its indented size by hand was standard procedure for any graphic designer, nowadays printers can do that for you. Having access to a

printer makes it possible to produce graphic props on short notice. “You get a call for something the next day, it’s possible. 25 years ago, you’d have to wait two days for it”, Charles says (Academy Originals 2016).

5 STORYTELLING

Graphic designers, whether they work in film or advertising, tell stories through their work. Whereas the storytelling aspect in filmmaking is quite obvious, in the commercial world it is present when building brands and creating advertising campaigns. In today's crowded, fast-paced, efficiency driven, and highly automated marketplace businesses need to connect with their audiences on a deeper level than just as customers and service providers. In order to be more engaging marketing utilises storytelling, which is no longer a tool or unique approach, it is essential for any business that aims to create a loyal clientele. The story behind commercial graphic design and graphic prop-making is always at the end more important than any stylistic or visual aspect in the work.

5.1 Props Drive the Story

In films the story almost always begins with a thing or a person that comes along unsuspectedly and changes the course of the main character's life. Writers know this message or messenger as 'the herald'. If the herald is a thing, in the art department it is called a 'hero prop'. Hero props are props that have a character of their own or are given a close up. They can also be a relevant part of the story or appear on screen to offer insight into a character. Design studio MinaLima created a lot of hero props as characters personal items for the Harry Potter franchise. "For us, for every single design job we were given on the films, we had to enter the character of that person or the environment of that place or the history behind that moment, and it was our duty to try to help tell the story in that one moment with that one piece of graphic" (Revenson 2016, p.12). Creating hero props as personal items is a unique opportunity to step into the shoes of that character.

For the graphic designers, hero props are highlights in a project that require more attention to detail. Hero props can become iconic to a film, like Harry Potter's acceptance letter to Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001), Mendl's pastry box in *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), or Patrick Bateman's business card in *American Psycho* (2000). In the famous scene from the latter film, which is a rare example of graphic props being a part of the dialog, businessmen compare their business cards. All the cards look the same to the audience, but these graphic props would have involved a

careful thought process of choosing slightly differing typefaces and papers and have been individually designed for each character.



Image 5. Business cards seen in the film American Psycho (2000)

In filmmaking everything is placed on front of the camera for a reason. Graphic props, whether they are noticed consciously or not, can drive the story forward. Annie Atkins uses a particular piece she made for the film *Bridge of Spies* (2015) as an example of a prop that subtly gives the viewer a hint of what is to come. She made a sign for a scene filmed in the New York underground that said, “walk, do not run”, a few seconds after this sign appeared very briefly on screen the actors started running (Atkins 2020, p. 142). Most of the time graphic props contribute to the story more indirectly, as details in the background that bring the story to life. They add layers to the story and a lot of the time graphic design in film is rather more felt than it is seen.

5.2 Storytelling in Marketing

Where a graphic designer in film fails in their job if a graphic piece is too visible and distracting when it is not supposed to be, a commercial graphic designer fails in theirs if their work does not stand out. Even though graphic designers in the two industries have

opposite aims, the thought process behind commercial design is ultimately not that different from designing graphic props.

In filmmaking, the graphic designer's work is always tied to the story and the production designer's vision, commercial work, on the other hand, is dictated by a marketing strategy and conforms to brand personality. In a way, the marketing strategy is the story, and the brand personality is the visual concept that in the film industry guides the stylistic choices made in the art department. A graphic designer is required to think about the marketing content they produce in a larger context. Each piece is a part of a bigger picture, a story. A good campaign should be seamless and whole – a unified story.

Graphic designers design visual concepts for brands that can include logos, colour palettes, typography and imagery. Creating entire visual brand personalities is a good example of storytelling in commercial graphic design. It is visualising the company's marketing strategy, values and story.

Graphic designers contribute to the brand image, the impression of the brand among the target audience. The brand image is also formed by tone of voice and values that are present in the company's communication. Consumers tend to favour brands that seem to care about things other than just profit, like supporting an important cause or making a positive impact on society. "A powerful brand story instils a sense of bigger purpose that is beyond the product or service" (Da Costa 2018). Consumers gravitate towards brands that feel more human, and humans by nature respond to stories. Something felt is more memorable than something just read or heard. A brand needs to be thoughtful, memorable and real.

Storytelling in marketing is about balancing emotion and information. A good story is easy to understand and simplifies bigger ideas. It creates a positive emotional response, that the viewer won't forget. Like the script in graphic design for filmmaking, a brand story acts as a guideline to commercial graphic designer's work. The job of a creative team or individual employed by a company, is to find new, innovative, and creative ways to visualise the marketing strategy and the story, in each new campaign.

6 CONCLUSION

The objective to create something new, different, and impactful is deep seeded in how a commercial graphic designer approaches their projects. Being able to create content that stands out is something that inspires many creatives. Working in the film and television industry means that a graphic designer has to, to some extent, unlearn how they operate as designers. When majority of the designs are created to blend into the backgrounds, to fill an entire world with details, quantity and timeliness may at times be more important than quality. Graphic design in filmmaking is about creating a collective piece of art, rather than designs that have individual value, like in the commercial world. Even though designing graphic props is also less about creating something new, than it is about borrowing from what already exists, it does not mean there is no room for creativity or innovation.

Annie Atkins says that working in the graphics department sometimes feels like play. Experimenting with different techniques and styles allows the graphic designer to challenge their creativity. Where commercial graphic designers today rarely do anything by hand other than sketching ideas, working with physical graphic props means that the designer utilises tools beyond digital, sometimes even antique. Researching and referencing historical design and styles can also be very inspiring and influence work outside that particular project.

Working on a film or a television show can be a unique experience for a graphic designer, yet very challenging. Atkins says that moving from commercial graphic design to filmmaking was a steep learning curve.

“While I was able to draw on my commercial design background for some aspects of the job – understanding the principles of layout design is an essential part of designing for any time period – I felt at a loss when it came to the craft of making actual physical, tactile hand props. (...) It was clear, suddenly, that a master’s degree in film production had taught me nothing about the practicalities of prop making”. (Atkins 2020, p. 158.)

Neither a degree in graphic design or filmmaking prepared Atkins for the graphics department, and she had to learn on the job what she was lacking in knowledge. Luckily for anyone who is interested in graphic prop-making today, she holds weekend workshops in Dublin, Ireland. It can be argued that studying set design and prop-making might be more beneficial for a graphic designer aiming to specialise in film. However,

like in Atkins's case, it is entirely possible to learn how to design graphic props by simply taking the job when an opportunity arises.

The professional skills of a commercial graphic designer, especially of those who are self-employed, align with the requirement of a computer artist. On United Scenic Artists union's website, it states:

“CA's (computer artists) must be self-starters, good at managing their own time and workload, and able to work under fast-paced sometimes stressful situations. Computer artists are also great creative problem solvers, highly organised and have good communication skills.” (<https://www.usa829.org/Membership-Info/Member-Categories>, 2017.)

The same skills are required from a graphic designer in commercial industry, with a highlight on communication and teamwork skills. Creativity and artistic skill alone, are not enough. Martin T. Charles says that to him the most interesting part of working in film is the interaction, because he is hired on projects not just for his skill, but the input he is able to give. When he first started, he had to read between the lines and suggest ideas to stay employed. Seeing a production designer accept his suggestions is very rewarding to Charles. “That interaction – without that, it's just having that skill and that craft without the real excitement.” Yet, he adds that producing graphic props is what he ultimately thrives on. (Academy Originals 2016.)

Annie Atkins says that to her one of the most exciting things about her job is that it feels like a secret world, because most of her work is hidden in the blurry background. “I never feel frustrated that my work isn't seen. I only ever feel happy and excited if it is seen.” (Adobe Creative Cloud 2016.) There can be something very exhilarating about seeing your work on a film screen, where it will live on with the rest of the film.

Closing Words

This thesis was a very personal project. The whole process was driven by my personal interest and aspiration to work in the film industry. I based a lot of the comparisons to commercial graphic design in what I had learned through the course of my degree programme and experienced working in marketing communications for over six years. In retrospect this approach resulted in overlooked opportunities to expand and add more substance to my work, especially as a comparative study.

When I started working on this thesis my focus was on understanding the job role of a graphic designer working in film and television productions. This felt natural because I was writing from the point of view of a commercial graphic designer. Where I should have taken a step back from the filmmaking side, and shifted focus towards commercial work, I failed to regain an objective perspective and kept writing about all the new and interesting things I was learning about graphic prop-making. The source material I gathered on the two subjects I was comparing was not equal, and therefore the text that was produced from it is not as much in balance as I intended it to be.

Choosing to compare something as broad as graphic design in general, even though I was focusing on advertising and marketing, to something as niche as graphic prop-making, made it difficult to find insightful comparisons. Interviewing graphic designers that have experience on both industries would have given me more to work with. Narrowing commercial graphic design down to something more specific, would have also made it easier to produce more examples of comparable aspects.

While there are things I would do differently now, this thesis does answer to the question I built my work around: How is working as a graphic designer in the film and television industry different from commercial graphic design? In the process of writing my thesis achieved my personal goal of building a comprehensive understanding of graphic design for filmmaking, and a lot of that knowledge I gained through this process can be read in my work.

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