

## **Cinedesign: typography in motion pictures**

Typography, graphic design, movie titles, movie credits, cinema.

An overview of the major work, a doctoral dissertation, *Cinedesign: typography and graphic design in motion pictures* (2006), where the elements and principles of audiovisual design are analyzed in two great categories of graphic design in the movies, i.e., Narrative Typography and Informational Typography. *Cinedesign* is part of audiovisual design, a major branch of graphic design, resulting from the combination of graphic images with action images and sound. Visual communication methods and processes merge with narrative techniques in order to convey and communicate ideas and feelings.

### **1. Graphic design and cinema**

The advent of the computer as a work tool in contemporary culture implied a radical transformation in the means of production, promoting new communication and entertainment forms in which graphic design is thoroughly inserted. The current notion that we live in a civilization of images, in which reading is relegated to a secondary level, does not really translate the true importance and significance that reading has in our contemporary life. A new form of orality, of an audiovisual nature, is present in the most important media, therefore demanding a literary and visual education. More than ever, in times of intense traffic of information, we are still a civilization based on reading and writing; speaking and writing are at the heart of the informational structure (Roland Barthes in Innis, 1985: 190-205).

The more refined, complex and diversified word-images relationships are, the more knowledge and skills to deal with new forms of creation and production in graphic and typographic design are required. In television, an important contemporary graphic design field, the use of kinetic and expressive typography is constantly seen in commercials, television show openings and credits, thus enhancing metaphorical qualities of the moving word. The growth of the persuasive function of graphic design, as a result of the interaction of semantic and aesthetical qualities, coincides with the advent of the art and technologies of photography, cinema, television, telephony and later, with computers. The dynamics of the persuasive function with the informative character of typography promoted changes in the functions played by the written word, which led to modifications in letterforms, typographic design and language itself.

The technology of writing played – and still plays – a fundamental role in human development (Ong, 1993: 81-83), associated with the potentiality of knowledge and cognition, and shapes our way of thinking and acting. After the Phoenicians invented the alphabet, more than three thousand years ago, the ability to read and write became a dominant technology, shaping cultures around the world in which writing became both an art and a skill. With the advent of typography – printing with moveable types – many centuries later, during the period of the Renaissance in Europe, art and design merged firmly together to consolidate graphic activity.

Based on the solid tradition of calligraphy and developing from the new industrial processes that characterize modern era, the graphic arts activity became more complex and specialized, requiring diversified skills in type design, typographic composition and printing. Text, whether carved in stone, written on parchment or printed on paper, is part of a living tradition, a product of classical standards based on clarity, order, rhythm, balance and beauty, which were defined in the common ground of good taste and functionality.

The dialectical match between tradition and innovation promotes visual communication games that define the way messages are conveyed, while at the same time, characterizes the era in which we live, an age of communication games. Starting in the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, with the inception and implementation of the technologies of photography, motion pictures and television, new graphic and typographic design fields were created, generating new trade implications and opening new institutional, political and experimental possibilities.

The computerization of households, industrial plants and offices in the 1980s, as a result of new informational and digital technologies, has promoted a huge cultural impact which, in its diversified manifestations, greatly affected graphic design as a whole.

Long ago, writing was the privilege of a limited and special group of people – priests and monarchs – making it a divine and restricted activity. Although unfortunately illiteracy still exists around the world, mainly in poor countries or in those with large social and economic discrepancies, literacy is nonetheless a requirement for citizenship to ensure conditions for everyone to access cultural and material goods. Moreover, we have to be well prepared to face the fierce competition that has resulted from the dissemination of information and educational specialization. At the same time, new technologies promote communication processes that spur inventions, resulting in elaborated audiovisual languages. A cultural revolution is underway now; a digital revolution requiring well formed and informed graphic design professionals who know how to deal with words, images, sound and animation.

## 2. Concepts of Cinedesign

Cinedesign is part of Audiovisual Design, a major branch of graphic design, resulting from the combination of graphic images with action images and sound. Visual communication methods and processes merge with narrative techniques in order to convey and communicate ideas and feelings. The great difference between printed graphic design and kinetic typography is the addition of the two cinematic elements of movement and sound, which are simultaneously essential and differential, both depending on the continuity of time.

Audiovisual design is a branch of graphic design encompassing basically two fields of activities, namely cinema and television and video, which are similar and greatly disparate at the same time. Although videos and movies are used in multimedia productions, this professional area is under the direct influence of interactive design, another branch of graphic design, where we find Webdesign and other internet and digital activities that have very singular requirements, and are related to virtual navigation.

Anyhow, the great difference is established by the addition of the time element embedded in the film narrative structure, which affects both motion and sound. In printed graphic design the time element is upon the viewer, i.e., time is at his or her disposal, as when the reader goes past a poster on a wall, or is skimming through a magazine, or reads a road sign while driving. Conversely, time is an active part inside the designed product, being of a linear and narrative nature made of a succession of static design renderings.

### Elements of Cinedesign

As time went by, two completely new additions to graphic design, movement and sound, come into play and make a difference. When typography is applied to the film, cinematic elements are incorporated into graphic design. The cinematic elements are those related to the making of a film, i.e., those elements that are part of, and live inside the movies we see in theaters or home videos. Cinematic, according to the French tradition on film theory are those aspects related to aesthetics and the internal structure of the art and the technique of making movies. At the same time, as opposed to the concept of Filmic, Cinematic relates simultaneously to all exterior aspects of film and to the interiors of film as art and discourse, while “filmic” is concerned with a singular movie shown to an audience, from an aesthetical and semiological point of view, where the movie is a closed discourse perceived by the spectator (Aumont e Marie, 2001: 51-52, 128). Eventually, we have three basic cinematic elements to highlight – motion, rhythm and sound.

### Motion

Action is the most basic filmic aspect in cinema and motion is its fundamental element, in fact, virtual motion because cinema is made of a succession of static images that are displayed sequentially. Usually – but not always – typography is a matter of animation because, of course, letters do not move by themselves, but we will see that over the course of the AMPAS' Awards for Best Picture, and in the history of cinema in general, some movie titles and credits are produced with filmed objects containing written information.

Again, there are basically three kinds of motion in Cinedesign:

- *Action graphics: objects filmed by a fixed or moving camera.*
- *Animation: movement produced by photographing sequences of drawings, designs or objects. There are other animation techniques that may be better understood in specialized publications.*

- *Transitions: a singular type of animation used to connect different scenes or projected text cells. Transitions work both as punctuation marks and the linking part that perform the raccord in the film's visual narrative. There are many effects that may be applied when*

*changing scenes, but in Cinedesign, the most frequently used effects are dissolve and fade.*

### A note on Rhythm

Of course there is an internal rhythm in a static image of any kind, whether a photograph or artwork, but rhythm in Cinedesign is an essential element that is embedded in both motion and sound. Rhythm depends on the articulation of all cinematic parts and components to assure fluidity of image and sound sequences, where action, titles, credits and soundtrack act at the same time.

### Sound

Although sound is outside of the universe of images, their association results in a very dynamic and expressive process. Sound has a natural bias to express emotions and sensations, as we may observe in the musical soundtrack or even in sound effects. Sound can either participate in the narrative by means of music, sound effects and dialogues or narration, or enhance emotionally narrative situations with musical scores or incidental music. The famous bathroom scene in the movie *Psycho*, for example, nominated for four Oscars in 1961, is inseparable from the pungent incidental music over the dynamic image sequence. There are also three levels for soundtracks:

- *Musical track: music has such an impact in the emotional life of people that it makes it fit perfectly as part of cinematic narrative. Sound has these attributes of feeling expression, a mimesis by reproducing sounds pertinent to the action; entertaining, because it is just good to listen to good music; and, as a true part of the film, music can be an identification device. Divided into other three subcategories, there are the musical score, theme song, incidental music and live action music.*
- *Sound effects: noise is a very special kind of sound manifestation with a strong fictional character, as sound effects are usually produced by very unusual objects, thus reinforcing the elusive and magical qualities of cinema, as described in Machado (1997, pp. 36-56). Anyhow, soundtracks have a very strong dramatic appeal.*
- *Speech: this is the most mimetic sound representation strongly connected to the action and narrative. Speech is the result of human voice which, in the cinema, is presented in the form of dialogues, the character's voices, or in the form of voice-over narration.*

### A Note on Books

Towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century, there was a backlash in Europe and the USA against pornography and vaudeville style of movie productions by promoting "high culture" through associations of movies with literature (Machado, 1997 – pp 78-85). With the development of cinematic language through the linearization of story and the advent of the narrator, adaptations of written fiction and history became more frequent. Fiction and non-fiction literature have largely influenced the language and aesthetics of cinema, as reflected in peculiar form of "writing" for cinema and the traditional AMPAS awards for best adapted and original screenplay.

Figure 1: Millions have read this great novel... millions more will see an even greater picture ! Besides the book-like presentation structure of the text and the graphic qualities of the title cards, in *How green was my valley* (1941, 20th Century Fox), a very successful movie made from a very successful novel, titles and credits are presented by transitions mimeicking the flipping of book pages.



If movies were influenced by written text and literature, so did movie titles and credits. As many movies' narratives and presentations show, many of the formats to display typography on the screen are similar to those of printed book pages (figure 1). As we shall see, much of the way written information is presented and the cinematic presentation formats of graphic design resemble book layouts. It took quite some time until movie titles and credits acquired a truly cinematic character, that is, when movement and sound were expressively used with rhythm and legibility.

### **Cinedesign Components**

In attempting to answer the question "What are the manifestations of graphic design in the movies?", a profound analysis of the films was conducted. Every manifestation of typography or graphic design was registered and described by means of written descriptions – both phenomenological and formal descriptions – and movie clips recording. After organizing the collected material in groups according to their design and cinematic nature, the most expressive, pertinent or singular ones were selected and digitally captured in still images.

When I started this study, I was attracted mainly by the Main Titles presentations of which I have been a fan for a long time, but over the course of the research I have been amazed to find another great category of typography in film. There are quite a lot of graphic design manifestations, – especially typographic –, that are an active part of movie narrative, thus defining the two great typographic manifestations of Cinedesign:

1. Narrative Typography and Graphic Design, which are related to screenplay and art direction, are part of a movie's visual narrative. It can be divided into Additional Typography, Scenic Typography and Graphic Interferences, which are related to superposed credits, typographic objects and visual-narrative graphics over the action image, respectively.
2. Informational Typography as the character of movie titles and credits. It is hard to define a strict organization for this Cinedesign category, as it is likely to change over times. Anyhow, it may be divided in three sections of titles presentation, that is, Main Titles, Opening or Main Credits, and End or Complementary Credits, according to their positioning in the movie narrative or their importance in the billing. Billing is the hierarchy defined by the placement, relative size, and positioning of names in the listing credits.

Main titles are the soul of a film's presentation while establishing a pattern for the development of the visual communication of the whole movie production, as the result of a strong interaction between functional and persuasive qualities. By defining a consistent typography, a cadenced audiovisual rhythm and a congenial color and style, the main title sets the spectator in the proper mood (Bass, 1977). The movie really begins with the titles, whose durations is included in the total movie's running time. When placed at the end of the story, the main titles take a slightly different form, that is, the details of the story; end credits, then, tend to have a more informative than persuasive function. But, much more than its informative nature, the main title placed at either the opening or the end is a powerful tool of art and communication which permits alternate narratives and, by introducing the spectator into the story or by complementing the storyline, partakes in the story itself, and becomes a legitimate object of aesthetic appreciation.

### **3. Narrative Typography**

Typography has been used as a narrative tool in motion pictures since the earliest days of silent movies, serving as a response to the limitations of trying to tell a story by visual means alone. Along with the traditional Opening-Titles, Subtitles, and End-Credits, a film's narrative written text was – and still is – a vital element in understanding the development of a storyline.

Narrative typography (figure 02), is the manifestation of graphic design integrated to a movie's plot. It is the design that tells stories and takes part in the action, an interpreter of the narrator's voice, appearing as part of the set design or sometimes written directly on the screen. Narrative design is an internal part of the picture, one of the visual components employed to compose the narrative, according to a pre-established script. It is worth mentioning that, as such, narrative typography works differently from informational typography, typical of the opening titles and personnel credits of a movie, which are primarily intended to identify persons and their

activities, acknowledging authorship of the several artists, technicians and executives who take part in the making of a motion picture. In this case, graphic design is an external element which is

incorporated into an elaborated story, providing data and information.

The difference between the functions performed in moving pictures by these two graphic design categories in cinema determines different visual approaches for each one of them; while narrative graphic design is adapted to the script and to the particularities of the picture's context, informative graphic design works as a congenial interpreter that informs and transmits sensations, acting on a complementary basis while – at the same time - promoting a typographic rereading of the movie. The history of cinema and of AMPAS Awards is full of varied instances of the utilization of narrative graphic and typographic elements in films' structures, which allows their organization into two major groups, according to the function they perform, and considering the context and the nature of their elements.

Figure 2: Three examples of Narrative Typography: in frame "a", Chariots of fire (1981, Enigma Production), supertitles indicating the place where the cinematic sequence happens; in frame "b", same movie, a daily life object, a newspaper first page informs the audience about the developing plot; in frame "c", A beautiful mind (2001, Universal Studios and DreamWorks LLC), the fingers of the characters light up the stars in the background.



First, there is a typography and design group that is subsequently applied to the action images of the edited film; that is, a typography and design that are externally produced and afterwards superimposed on the screen. These are texts and images that are complementary to the action and contribute to the development of the visual narrative; or, alternatively, that translate foreign languages by means of written words and that are herein denominated as Additional Typography and Graphic Design.

Secondly, there is the scenographic typography group, consisting of a typography and graphic design that are either incorporated into the scenery and costumes as a design that transmits information and helps the spectator to better understand the plot, or else as a design that visually emphasizes meanings, feelings, or sensations. These are herein defined as Scenic Typography.

It is necessary to mention a specific subcategory of Additional Typography, which, although technically elaborated as a visual/optical effect, and thus a subsequent addition to a film's production, is worthy of discussion for its own merits and significance at the level of cinematographic discourse, becoming a category unto itself. In more recent movies we may notice the more intense use of graphic elements coupled with the movie's action, here denominated Graphic Interferences.

#### 4. Informational typography

##### Movie titles and credits: typography, identity, art and design

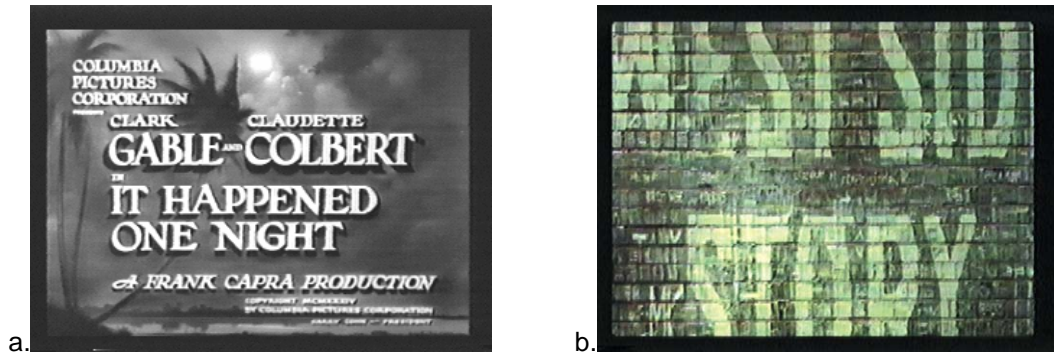
It has been a while since movie titles became an important element in the development of a motion picture's narrative. Youngsters nowadays, and movie fans always, often discuss about interesting titles in certain films – those that attract and win over their attention. There are memorable movie titles, but it is important to note that narrative language in the cinema – as far as written information and writing styles are concerned – has not always been that impressive. For quite some time, conventional introductions that were much like the pages of a textbook, with a title page, credits, copyright, dedication and all those other preliminary pages, generally prevailed in cinema.

Aspects related to congeniality and expression appeared very timidly and were restricted to the choice of types and fonts, to certain correlation between figure and ground, to the development

of brands and logos, and sometimes, the use of illustrations, all static, fixed elements (figure 3a). Typography superimposed on action images would be later used, when the language in titles starts to take on a more consistent pace and with more emphatic cinematic characteristics.

It was in the mid-1950s that the graphic design approach in cinema began to change dramatically, when graphic designer Saul Bass settled in Los Angeles to work, initially promoting films and later devising movie opening titles (figure 3b). Saul Bass is considered by critics as the artist/designer “who invented the opening credit sequence as a free-standing movie-before-a-movie and elevated it into an art” (Thomas Jr., 1996).

Figure 3: Main titles: in frame “a”, the movie *It happened one night* (1934, Columbia Pictures Corporation), which features various items of static information on the same title card, with illustrations and, in frame “b”, *West side story* (1961, Beta Productions), featuring graffiti in an action image and showing in the end of the film, designed by Saul Bass.



No wonder that the period of U.S. history where Mr. Bass appears in the cinema graphic design environment overlaps with a thriving post-war period of arts, sciences, and technology in the U.S., just as design itself. This was also when TV became popular, and when a great deal of discussion and debate took place on the differences and convergences between cinema and television, as can be demonstrated in the following evaluation on the topic made by graphic designer and educator William Longyear, Dean and Director of Pratt Institute at that time (Longyear, 1954, 103):

' Conventional TV titling may or may not survive the present tendency to go overboard with movement and effects. With all the recent emphasis in TV circles on animated titles, it is interesting to note that major motion pictures studios, with all the facilities for making animated titles at their disposal, practically never do so. In fact, the titles of animated cartoons are rarely ever animated. This is not intended to suggest that because a pattern has become established in Hollywood, it is somehow inviolate and henceforth never to be questioned.'

At that time, there was absolute mistrust (and sparingness) regarding the use of animation and special effects in movie titling; TV advertising and movie trailers, however, used to draw on very eloquent typographies, editings and animations. At that time, the use of more expressive animations was considered an exaggeration for cinema serious subjects, so it was more suited for advertising.

Once had passed this moment, when there was a certain confusion as to the direction of graphic design and kinetic typography were taking, from the mid-1960s, a substantial change took place in the language and aesthetics of movie introductions and graphic identification. In a certain way, movie titles have become short movies before the actual picture, as mentioned earlier. There was room for sensitive expression of an artist/designer, a sort of dramatic interpretation in a graphic and audiovisual fashion of the contents and plot of the film at hand. In this environment, new acting designers emerged as a historical reference in this art, where Saul Bass, Maurice Binder and Pablo Ferro, are outstanding performers.

Graphic design of movie titles is essentially the result of the three fundamental principles of communications design: information, identification and persuasion. In this case, i.e., graphic design in the credits and introduction of a film, the first two principles are interwoven in such a way that they become inseparable because crediting and naming means essentially informing and identifying, whereas persuasion, though it is a permanent factor in the fundamental principles, will have a greater or lesser intensity on a movie-by-movie basis, being therefore complementary, though extremely differential.

Hence, there are two major approaches to movie titles: a persuasive approach, i.e., the use of graphic and cinematographic expression to interpret the meanings in the title of the motion picture and its narrative in a congenial manner so that it is genuine and therefore convincing and true – called expressive approach here (figure 4); and what we have come to call a neutral approach, i.e., an approach defined by the use of a transparent typography that facilitates clear and easy reading (figure 5). As a matter of fact, even a transparent typography always has a certain

degree of congeniality and interpretation since the designer is driven by some reason or emotion when choosing the typographic font, as well as the use and pace of transitions, and the type of background to support letterforms.

Figure 4: Cimarron (1931, RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.) provides a demonstration of the expressive and interpretive use of typography and design in the movies, where the letterforms are developed so as to provide an interpretation of the title of the film, which portrays the history of conquest of the west and the geographic consolidation of the USA. Note that the weight and volume in the fonts and layout, express soundness and power, while use of sans-serif fonts points to modernity which, reinforced by the rising sun at the background, conveys the notion of a rising nation.

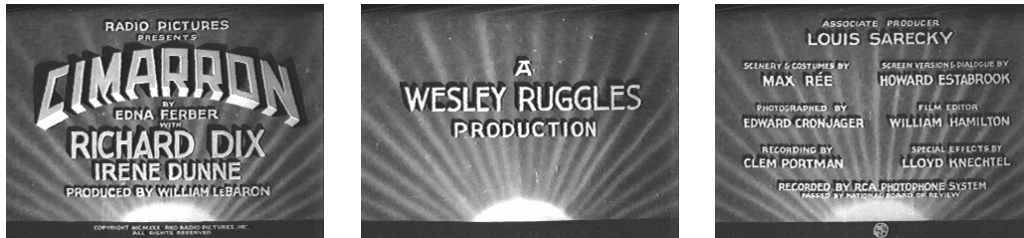


Figure 5: An example of hardly personalized, virtually indifferent typography in Ordinary people (1980, Paramount Pictures). The black background, monotypography and discreetly elegant old style font reflect neutrality and a certain sense of detachment. On the other hand, this “neutrality” and “indifference” somehow translates the contents of the picture, which is about the life of an “average” family living in the suburbs of a big city, a discreet refuge for the middle class; and so the subtle interpretive and congenial facet of this graphic design emerges.



Movie titles are comprised of three main parts that have undergone substantial changes in their structure and components over the course of time. Hence, there is the Main Title, which is traditionally preceded by a brief listing of producers and makers; the Main Credits, which basically shows the names of the actors, director and producers; and Supplementary or End Credits, with several items of information on the technical staff and overall information about the making of the movie. It should be noted, however, that during a long period in the history of cinema, films finished with a glaring “THE END”, a sort of cinematic full stop to ensure viewers had come to the end of the story and to start bringing them back to reality, which became a sort of an icon of graphic design and cinema narrative.

## 5. To be continued...

If the advent of television and motion pictures has had a tremendous impact on our society, the use of microcomputers and digital technology is having an even stronger one, as they affect our society’s means of production. As a result, the use of computers and related technology in the visual arts is responsible for an enormous transformation in the graphic design profession. The ancient secrets of printing-related work are now available to anyone with access to computers, professionals and laity alike. To better understand the communication process, of which the written word and typography are basic components, professional expertise and a developed sensibility are important requirements.

The function of a designer-professor involves much more than teaching students to manipulate certain pieces of software suitable for audiovisual design. Rather, it is to penetrate the universe of sound, image and animation with the aim of discovering the kinetic qualities of graphic design, and to combine moving image, sound, narrative and storytelling with congenial attributes, in order to establish a stable connection between form and contents.



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