


Imaginary use of typography in Hollywood movie posters

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Abstract

Posters are visual or illustrated advertisements announcing various cultural, commercial, and social events. There are basic elements that enable these events to be announced and should be included in the poster. These elements are typography and image. Without these two elements in posters, effective expression cannot be achieved to communicate the content to the target audience. The discipline of graphic design, and therefore the trends and approaches to poster design, are changing and evolving in this direction, as many things do with technology. This study examines posters from the 2000s onward, where typography has become more prominent in Hollywood movie posters, especially in recent years. The historical method was used in the study. The results show that typography is used as eye-catching and striking as the image and that this trend is a popularizing technique, and these techniques are classified through this study.

Keywords: poster, typography, movie, hollywood

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Hollywood film afişlerinde tipografinin imgesel kullanımı

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Öz

Çeşitli kültürel, ticari ve sosyal etkinliklerin duyurulduğu resimli ilanlara afiş denir. Bu etkinliklerin duyurulmasını sağlayan ve afişte yer alması gereken temel öğeler bulunmaktadır. Bu öğeler tipografi ve imgedir. İçeriğin hedef kitleye duyurulmasını sağlayan afişlerde bu iki öğe olmadan etkin bir anlatım sağlanamaz. Teknoloji ile değişen birçok şey gibi grafik tasarım disiplini dolayısıyla da afiş tasarım eğilim ve yaklaşımları bu doğrultuda değişmekte ve evrilmektedir. Bu çalışma; özellikle son yıllarda Hollywood film afişlerinde tipografinin daha belirgin kullanıldığı 2000'li yıllardan sonraki afişleri incelemiştir. Çalışmada eserler incelenirken tarihsel metot kullanılmıştır. Bulgular tipografinin, imge gibi göz alıcı ve dikkat çekici kullanıldığını ve bu eğilimin popülerleşen bir teknik olduğunu göz önüne sermiş, kullanılan bu teknik ve benzerleri, bu çalışma sayesinde sınıflandırılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: afiş, tipografi, film, hollywood

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Introduction

During recent years, the development of technology has had and continues to have a dramatic impact on human life, with an unexpected acceleration. The invention of computers, their marketing to individual users, their widespread use, the discovery of the internet and its use all over the world, the introduction of mobile phones and then smartphones have brought about huge changes in most of our daily practices. All these developments have also affected the professions and changed work practices. If we look at the changes in the field of graphic design in particular, this discipline was practised very differently than it is today, when computers had not yet been invented. Each product and the materials that go into creating it were assembled by hand. Then came the invention of the printing press, the camera, and the computer. Now the process of designing a brochure, flyer or poster and advertising it to people can be very practical without the need to physically print it and put it up.

In terms of technological developments, designers now use computers, tablets, and software to produce graphic design products. They can easily share and distribute their products through online platforms. Thanks to the tools provided by these opportunities, we can see that the elements that make up the poster go beyond their traditional roles and even change their position from time to time. In traditional trends, typography aims to communicate information to the target audience, which is the reason for the poster's existence (Yeraltı, 1995, p. 8). The image, i.e., illustration or photography, plays an essential role in supporting this information. It gives the audience an idea of the content and aims to attract their attention by creating an impressive impression with the composition created by typography. There are some unusual changes in the role of typography in the examples examined in this study. Typography goes beyond mere writing to play a role in image creation. The use of images within text, as well as letters that take on visual characteristics, exemplify this. This study aims to explore the creative use of typography in Hollywood movie posters produced since 2000 and to categorize these designs according to their usage trends, which is a previously unexplored area in this field.

The historical method was used in this research. The historical method is the method used by the researcher in his/her analyses of related sources and publications. Every research topic and problem has a history. The researcher must analyze it (Kaptan, 1991, p. 56). Those who want to research a topic are within the scope of this method by examining the studies conducted in the past on this topic, i.e. literature review (Çepni, 2001, p. 44). When evaluating the data using the historical method, it is necessary to carefully determine who the documents belong to, their originality, place and time, i.e. external validity; the

meaning and accuracy of the documents, i.e. internal validity (Kaptan, 1991, p. 56). The data obtained because of the research was analyzed and interpreted in terms of basic design principles. In particular, Hollywood film posters (after 2000), where typography comes to the fore and replaces the image, were selected and the designs were synthesized and analyzed.

Definition and history of poster

The term “poster” originated from the French word *affiche*. According to the Dictionary of the Turkish Language Association, it refers to a “painted wall advertisement, usually pictorial, prepared to announce or advertise something, and hung where it can be seen by the public” (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2023). According to Susan Sontag (1979, p. 196), a poster serves not merely as an announcement but also motivates designers and artists to produce products that strike the audience by ensuring the harmonious use of text and image in a particular composition. With these definitions in mind, it can be claimed that a poster is a designed product that announces various events, comprising text and images, and seeks to efficiently convey its message to the target audience. Posters come in different sizes and are preferred depending on the purpose they are used for (Artan & Uçar, 2018, p. 15).

Movie posters are used for promotional purposes in movie theaters as well as billboards and bus stops, generally in public places. Dimensions that change depending on the usage also alter the components of the poster. Typography and images of designs that the audience can see more closely can be applied in smaller sizes. This allows people to easily get the content because they have more time. On the other hand, typography and images should be used in large sizes in designs that people need to see as they pass by quickly, such as billboards. Compared to bus stop designs, people only have a few seconds to consume the content on billboards, and the designer designs the content accordingly and delivers the message to the target audience (Emerson, 2008).

The history of posters indicates that Art Nouveau was the period during which the first real instances of posters emerged towards the conclusion of the nineteenth century. Aristide Bruant –a French singer, comedian, and proprietor of nightclubs Ambassadeurs and Eldorado– commissioned Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to construct a poster for his performances in 1892 (Uzuner & Şahin, 2019, p. 262). Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed Bruant’s authoritarian character in his famous portrait, adorned with a wide-brimmed hat, black cape, and bright red scarf, which he later turned into a poster (Image 1). Toulouse-Lautrec, but also had artistic significance and was closely linked to the field of fine arts (Eskilson, 2012,

p. 49). This era is documented as a time during which the fields of illustration, books, and posters yielded highly effective examples (Becer, 2005, p. 100).

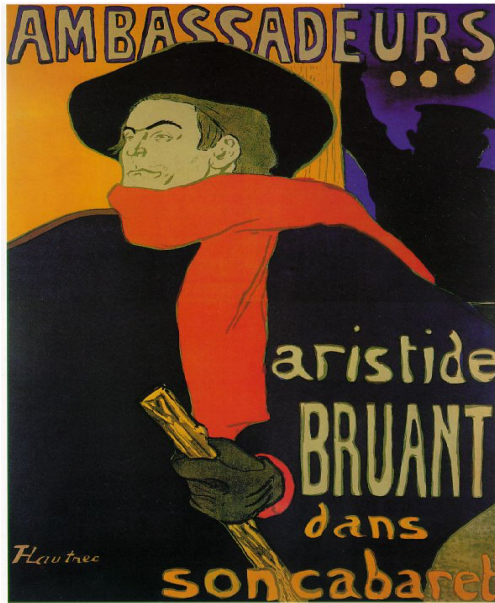


Image 1. *Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant* (Toulouse-Lautrec, 1892)

When analyzing modern art and design movements, one can observe posters that are primarily created using traditional methods. The typography used within these posters effectively conveys the message, with the image serving a supportive role in providing the information presented in the content. In contrast, within the Dadaism art movement, it is common to encounter typography-based posters that do not feature any images. Traditionally, typography's main objective was to link a message to the audience through text. However, in the examples shown, typography functions as an image, communicating the message in a new way. From a graphic design perspective, Emre Becer classified posters into three fundamental categories (2005, p. 202):

- 1) Advertising posters: These posters promote a product or service and are commonly used in five sectors: a) Fashion, b) Industry, c) Corporate advertising, d) Media, e) Food, f) Tourism. Overall, the text already adheres to most of the principles mentioned except for a few grammatical errors which were corrected. These posters promote a product or service and are commonly used in five sectors: a) Fashion, b) Industry, c) Corporate advertising, d) Media, e) Food, f) Tourism.
- 2) Cultural Posters: This category includes posters promoting cultural events such as festivals, seminars, symposiums, balls, concerts, cinema, theatre, exhibitions and sports.
- 3) Social Posters: In addition to educational and cautionary posters on topics such as health, transportation, civil defense,

and the environment, social posters encompass those that promote political ideologies or parties.

As Becer stated in his book, movie posters are designed to announce movies to the public and are very crucial in promotion. Posters that aim to unite people culturally are notably more artistic than other types of posters, and this has resulted in increased importance placed on the techniques utilized and the final designs produced. It goes without a doubt that artistic techniques used to convey artistic content are more effective in influencing the audience. Of course, this phenomenon advances in direct relation to the accurate transmission of the poster's contents during the design phase, in addition to the proficient application of its components in accordance with design principles.

Fundamental elements of a poster

There are two important components for the poster to do its basic function properly. These are typography and image. Typography represents the text on the poster, while image refers to all kinds of visuals to be used. With these two elements, designers create posters by effectively applying basic design principles. The placement of typography and image in compositions may vary according to the designer's style or the trend they choose. The integrity to be used in the design, the balance of space, the use of positive and negative space in place and in accordance with the basic design principles determine the quality of poster designs (Lehimler, 2019, p. 408). In addition to the basic components of the poster, Becer, in his book *İletişim ve Grafik Tasarımı*, explains what should and should not be in the poster as follows (2005, p. 204):

The essential components of a poster are as follows: it should capture the audience's attention, impart information and/or generate appeal, and motivate and prompt action. The essential components of a poster are as follows: 1) It should capture the audience's attention, impart information and/or generate appeal, and motivate and prompt action. Unnecessary features in a poster include an attempt to alter the viewer's worldview. 2) It is not required for the poster to possess ornamental or aesthetic value. 3) It should not express the poster designer's personal beliefs. 4) Rather, the poster's primary objective is to convey a message

Typography and imagery are two crucial elements that must accompany the aforementioned rules for the poster to effectively fulfil its purpose. Typography represents the writing on the poster, while imagery refers to all types of visuals to be used. Typography is the key and most basic component in transferring content to the target audience in all design products. Because writing is one of the simplest means of communication (Sarıkavak, 2006). According to Becer (2005), typography encompasses a diverse range of fields including handwriting, calligraphy, graffiti, architecture, posters, symbol systems, advertising, and moving writings in cinema and television. Typography reflects language,

humanity, and existence through its forms and shapes. When discussing calligraphy, one naturally thinks of the hand-written form of this art (Jean, 2001, p. 84). It is worth mentioning its history: While writing was an element that could only be written by hand until the fifteenth century, the printing process invented by Gutenberg was one of the most important turning points in the history of printing. Letterpress printing, developed by Gutenberg in Germany in 1450, can be defined as the pressing of separate cast letters adjacent to each other, being inked and printed onto paper (Taşcıoğlu & Siretli, 2016, p. 196). Printing with movable letters was developed in China in the eleventh century and in Korea in the early fifteenth century, but its use remained limited due to the unsuitability of Asian languages that have thousands of characters. In the West, however, the application of the letterpress printing technique with the Latin alphabet brought about a revolutionary change in writing (Lupton, 2004, p. 13). The widespread use of letterpress compounded its impact.

Another essential element of a poster is its image; it may include photographs, pictures, symbols, or illustrations. The visual factor is crucial for an effective poster, as it helps convey the slogan through typography and enhances the message's impact. Given that people can interpret images in various ways, posters' images can elicit different emotions, leading to diverse meanings. At this point, typography comes into play in line with the effective application of design principles and eliminates confusion. Photographs or illustrations on posters are often used in larger sizes than typography to make the poster striking and aim to attract people's attention. The trends that change from time to time, especially the examples to be examined, move away from the traditional use of images. Typography can replace the image by using the image again. With all of this information, the selected posters will be reviewed, and the necessary categories will be created.

Analyzing the posters

In this study, the posters with the most effective imaginative use of typography from 2000 to the present are selected, examined considering basic design principles, and categorized. Today's examples of imaginative use of typography come to the fore with widely varying applications. However, it is essential to categorize these practices. With this categorization, any potential research can be done in the future with more precise and clear categories.

Fundamental elements of a poster

This chapter analyses a poster similar to the effects of the Dada movement in the early twentieth century, which Abdulhamit Gümüşlü discusses in his dissertation. Typography was characterized by a “tranquil” state until the political unrest and propaganda posters of the nineteenth century, as well as the erratic and jarring movements of the twentieth century, such as Dada. At the turn of the twentieth century, typographic designs began to shift and produce distinct aural effects (Gümüşlü, 2008, p. 28). The emphasis on varied voices can also define resonance here; the unusualness and almost vocalization of typography as it bends, twists, turns and changes shape (Image 2).

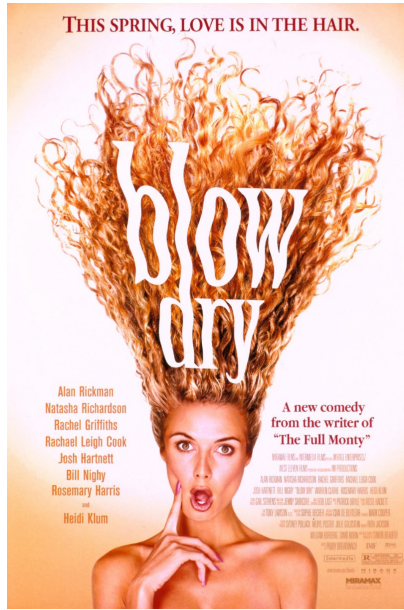


Image 2. *Blow Dry* movie poster (MaD Creative, 2001)

The movie poster for *Blow Dry* (Paddy Breathnach, 2001) employs the title of the movie in conjunction with the shape of the hair. This creates an audible quality to the typography, providing an emotional effect and allowing the audience to engage with the message. The design avoids static imagery in favor of an approach that is more dynamic and expressive.

Large scale typographic weighted examples

Typography can substitute the image and assume a role in changing trends. In this section, the examples will be examined where typography is employed on a large scale to capture the audience's attention instead of imagery. Although impressive images typically attract the audience's interest, these instances foreground the movie titles and slogans through typography. It is worth noting that post-2000 trends in movie posters feature a technique that was not widely used before. While typography was predominantly limited to the movie title, actor names, and other particulars, these trends relied heavily on slogan-like phrases to draw attention (Image 3). These marketing slogans, which may even be prioritized over the movie title, will also appear in other case studies.

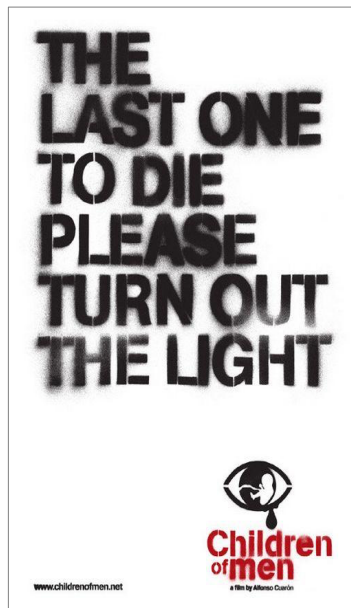


Image 3. *Children of Man* movie poster (Creative Partnership, 2006)

In these examples, the movies' names are used on a large scale to emphasize the names of the movies, without any slogans or advertising phrases, and sometimes no images are used at all, while at other times there are effective uses where the image takes up very little space (Images 4, Image 5, Image 6).

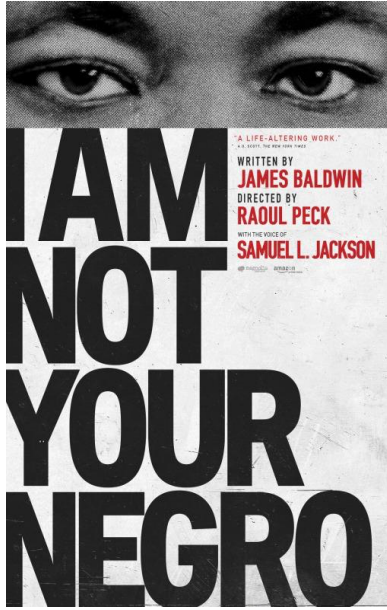


Image 4. *I Am Not Your Negro* movie poster (Gravillis, 2017)

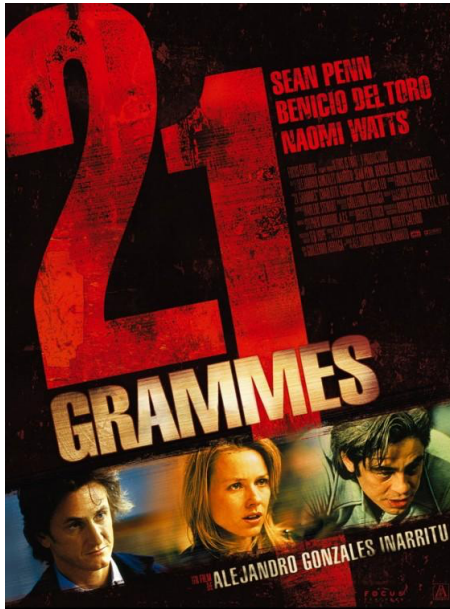


Image 5. *21 Grammes* movie poster (Concept Arts, 2003)



Image 6. *Kill Bill* movie poster (Kellerhouse, 2010a)

These new approaches to typography, far removed from traditional applications, grab the audience's attention, and create memorable images with the unique designs of the movies.

Images masked by typography

Since 2000, the optimal implementation of movie poster trends has been accomplished by masking imagery with typography – that is, by integrating images within the space allotted for typography. Examples in this classification exhibit the use of typography as a full replacement for the image, to the extent that solely with typography and space, the area filled by typography is generated from the movie's images, thereby creating a dual impression. To create an effective design, it is vital to choose bold fonts, i.e. filled fonts, as opposed to the fonts used in ordinary movie posters. According to common knowledge, bold fonts are a valuable choice for laying out images in typography as they cover more substantial areas.

A crucial consideration here is the spacing between letters, known as kerning. When there is too much spacing between letters, the image is hard to perceive, whereas when the spacing is too little, the text becomes hard to read. In this instance, the design of the poster for the film *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006) is a prime example of the trend to incorporate images within text. In this instance, the design of the poster for the film *The Departed* is a powerful example of the trend to incorporate images within the text: There is enough space to place the image by using a bold font, but the letters in the text are too close together, making

it difficult to read (Image 7). To prevent this situation, the name of the movie was used again in smaller sizes in the design.

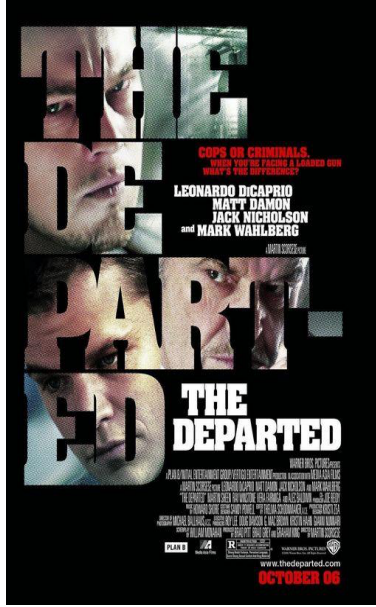


Image 7. *The Departed* movie poster (The Cimarron Group, 2006)

When using embedded images in text, it can be challenging to ensure that both the image and text are easily readable. When using embedded images in text, it can be challenging to ensure that both the image and text are easily readable. To address this issue, this example showcases the use of a single background color to enhance text clarity while maintaining image visibility.

When two different posters of the 2012 movie *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2013) are examined, it is quite clear how comfortable the image looks with a bold font choice (Image 8). However, in a font with less thickness than the horizontal poster, the difficulty of the images to be seen is easily noticed (Image 9).



Image 8. *Zero Dark Thirty* movie poster (BLT Communications, 2012a)

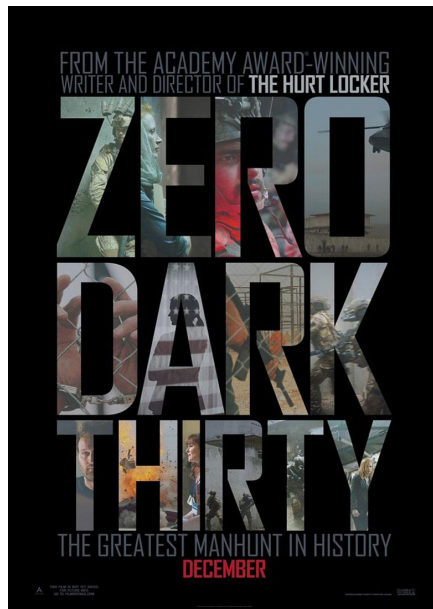


Image 9. *Zero Dark Thirty* movie poster (BLT Communications, 2012b)

In the posters analyzed thus far, the font size has been selected to be relatively large, to conceal the image within the movie title while maintaining the visibility of both elements. In contrast, there are also highly successful examples of posters that incorporate images within small text areas. A noteworthy case in point is the 2011 poster for *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011), starring Gary Oldman (Image 10). This poster represents an early use of imagery in small type

spaces, with many similar examples existing. From an aesthetic viewpoint, the example is impressive. However, the poster for the film *Where is Robert Fisher?* (Charlie Minn, 2011) from the same year is a leading example in the field, though less aesthetically effective than *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (image 11).

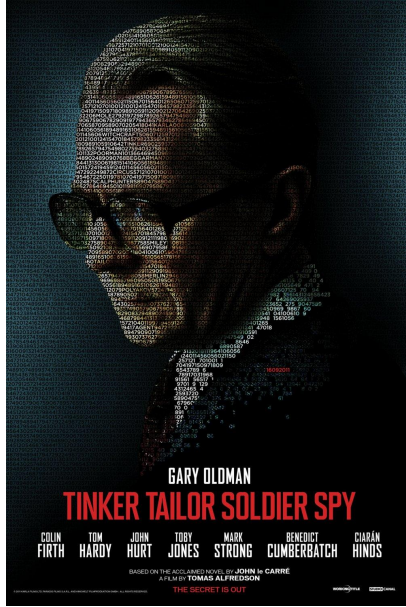


Image 10. *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* movie poster (Empire Design, 2011)

Although the image is mostly used in the text area, an effective transition effect is created by using text in areas with blue tones planned as the continuation or background of the image on the right and left parts of the poster. In this example, unlike the previous designs, the image was not masked inside the movie name. The name of the movie was written separately, and the actor names were placed just below it.

Readability was brought to the forefront, and at the same time, a very effective design balance was achieved by having the image in other writing areas. Finally, by choosing a black color in the lower right part of the poster, a transition with the character was provided and this transition was shown by the disappearance of the letters. The spilling effect of the letters adds a distinct impressiveness to the poster.

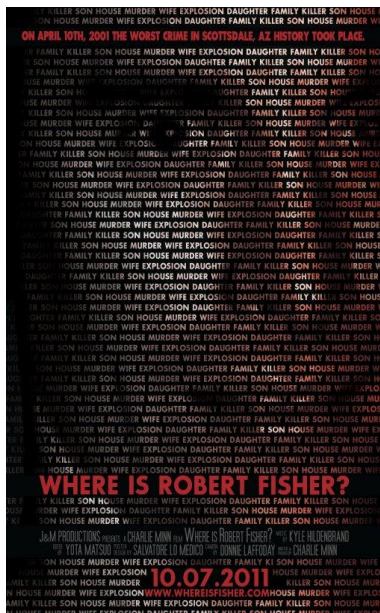


Image 11. *Where is Robert Fisher* movie poster (Medico, 2011)

The poster’s entirety is comprised of the masked image enclosed in text, unlike the *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* movie poster. Similarly, to the mentioned poster, the movie’s title, cast, and release date are written separately and removed from the text in which the image is contained.

Images replacing letters in text

In certain movie posters, the image can become part of the text, as the typography becomes imaginary. By selecting letters that can effortlessly fit the shape of the human body, the actors in the film can embody that letter by substituting it. In the 2001 Disney feature *Max Keeble’s Big Move* (Tim Hill, 2001) the character takes the place of the letter A in Max’s writing and embodies that letter. The image is completely typified and becomes a component of it (Image 12). The film *John Wick* (Chad Stahelski, 2014) from 2014, featuring Keanu Reeves, was created with a comparable design trend (Image 13).

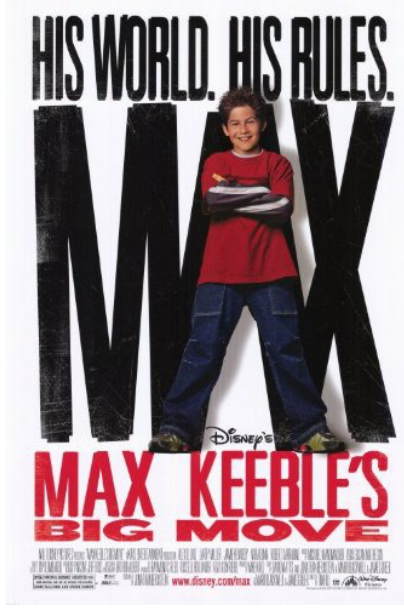


Image 12. *Max Keeble's Big Move* movie poster (Ripper, 2001)



Image 13. *John Wick* movie poster (Ignition, 2014)

Slogan or content driven trends

The examples examined in this classification share a common feature: a large slogan of the movie, derived from its content, is prominently displayed on the background and supersedes the movie title in terms of visibility. The movie poster

for *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), depicting the founding of Facebook, is significant as it represents an early and successful instance of this trend (Image 14). In 2011, *The Adjustment Bureau* (George Nolfi, 2011), featuring Matt Damon, followed this trend with a poster that effectively employs a slogan with less text than the poster for *The Social Network* (Image 15).

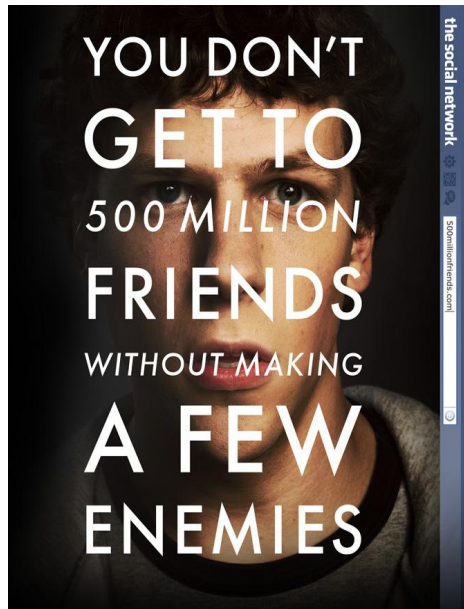


Image 14. *The Social Network* movie poster (Kellerhouse, 2010b)

The movie's title is written vertically in a small font at the upper right corner. However, this effective example reveals how the catchy slogan stands out, creating a sense of intrigue in the movie poster. Such typographic movie poster trends offer more information about the movie, increasing audience interaction and curiosity.



Image 15. *The Adjustment Bureau* movie poster (The Cimarron Group, 2011)

There are variations in the typographic use of the slogan between *The Social Network* and *The Adjustment Bureau* movie posters. In both cases, the tagline appears on a grid, with words aligned on opposite ends. This layout is favoured for controlling spatial design and creating an organized aesthetic but may require resizing of typography to fit. This design approach was utilized in *The Social Network* movie poster to keep the layout consistent. In contrast, the alignment of text on both sides is achieved by spacing in *The Adjustment Bureau* movie poster. However, this results in inconsistent spacing between certain letters. This stylistic choice, which is based solely on design language, significantly influences poster trends.

Large scale typographic ground applications

The examples studied in this section provide a unique three-dimensional application utilizing the title of the movie as a backdrop. There are notable examples within their category, including the 2004 robbery gang movie *Oceans Twelve* (Steven Soderbergh, 2004) (Image 16).



Image 16. *Oceans 12* movie poster (Pulse Advertising, 2004)

The movie title is prominently placed in the foreground of the poster. Realistic shadows of characters walking on the number twelve add depth and make the poster effective. Another movie made exactly nine years after *Oceans Twelve* features a similar poster design. The 2013 movie *Now You See Me* (Louis Leterrier, 2013) tells the story of a gang of magicians and shows the influence of this trend. The movie's poster, where the three-dimensional effect is more noticeable, was not effective enough because the choice of colors did not have enough contrast. Furthermore, the movie's name was rewritten, except for the background, to ensure legibility (Image 17).



Image 17. *Now You See Me* movie poster (BLT Communications, 2013)

A comparable poster design appears in another movie made exactly nine years after *Oceans Twelve*. The 2013 movie *Now You See Me*, featuring a group of magicians, was impacted by a similar trend. However, the poster did not achieve its intended effect due to a lack of contrast in color choices, despite conveying a stronger three-dimensional impression (Image. 17).

Typographic imagery series posters

In this category, an example of the intertwining of typography and image through the use of color channels will be examined. At the same time, the examples will also show how such uses are serialized. In the series of movie posters called *Dope* (Rick Famuyiwa, 2015), the lead actors are matched with each letter, and it is one of the effective examples with an aesthetic design created by adjusting the color channels, rather than being completely masked in typography as in previous examples (Image 18).



Image 18. *Dope* movie poster (Gravillis, 2015)

The word Dope represents the main characters in the movie on a single poster. It is an effective series of posters that shows consistency in color selection and design principles. In addition, each character in the film is also used in a series of posters by creating a separate poster for each character, creating the integrity of the chosen concept. Technically, the typography is not fully imaged, but it effectively intersects with the image. In the previous examples, the typography enclosed the image, and the remaining areas were filled with white space or other images. As seen in this series of examples, the color channels in Photoshop software have been used to overlap the typography and image, and both elements are easily visible with color differences. Compared to other examples, it has a concept that can be considered remarkable in its use of space, color, and integrity in terms of basic design principles.

Conclusion

With each new tool used by designers, different design methods and thus noteworthy new trends have emerged. The use of different typographies, which can be seen as a touchstone during the Bauhaus period, is still being experimented with today. From the use of typography that reflects the content of sounds and feelings to typographic choices that do not reflect any emotion, designers continue to experiment with all kinds and methods. What makes this

work unique is the intersection of typography and image, two different elements of poster design. When typography, which causes role confusion, enters the field of image, the image is left behind and gradually moves away from its traditional use.

In this research, effective examples of changing typography and image usage within the framework of basic design principles were examined and evaluated in terms of graphic design principles. The classifications analyzed in detail the change and development of trends in the imaginative use of typography and six different main categories are formed. Some categories have more use of typography and some of them use less of it. But all of them have the typography as a main role in the posters.

Thanks to this categorization, researchers will be able to make deeper analyses by using this research, as there are no previous studies in which typography has taken precedence over the image. Poster design, an important part of graphic design, continues to change and develop with its rich history and technology today. Designers' experimentation with different methods today, as in the past, has led to new trends and provided data for this research. Thanks to this situation, this study has helped to discover different categories that have emerged, created a resource for the field and presented findings that will guide future researchers.

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