

***THE STUDENT'S
CHEAT SHEET
FOR
UNDERSTANDING
COMICS AND
GRAPHIC NOVELS***

OR

***CLOSE READING:
IT'S NOT JUST FOR TEXTS
ANY MORE***



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OK, I KNOW WHAT COMICS ARE, BUT WHAT'S A GRAPHIC NOVEL?

LONG-FORM WORKS MADE UP ONLY OF PICTURES OR PICTURES IN COMBINATION WITH TEXT HAVE EXISTED SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY. BUT THE TERM "GRAPHIC NOVEL" DIDN'T BECOME COMMON UNTIL THE LATE 1970S.

CURRENTLY, WE CALL TEXTS "GRAPHIC NOVELS" IF THEY HAVE THESE CHARACTERISTICS:

- A BOOK-LENGTH STORY
- PUBLISHED IN A SINGLE VOLUME
- TOLD WITH SEQUENTIAL IMAGE PANELS
- THE ART IS OF EQUAL OR GREATER IMPORTANCE THAN THE TEXT.

TEXTS WITH THESE CHARACTERISTICS CAN BE CONSIDERED GRAPHIC NOVELS, NO MATTER THEIR GENRE. WORKS OF FICTION, NON-FICTION, REPORTAGE, BIOGRAPHY, AND MEMOIR CAN ALL BE GRAPHIC NOVELS.

I CAN LOOK AT PICTURES, SO HOW HARD CAN READING COMICS OR GRAPHIC NOVELS BE?

IT'S NOT THAT IT'S DIFFICULT, BUT THERE'S ANOTHER WAY OF CREATING MEANING – VISUAL RHETORIC – THAT YOU NEED TO RECOGNIZE AND INTERPRET.

AND THERE'S ANOTHER LEVEL OF LITERACY – VISUAL LITERACY – THAT YOU NEED TO PRACTICE.

VISUAL RHETORIC

AT ITS MOST BASIC, THIS IS THE USE OF VISUAL IMAGES TO COMMUNICATE MEANING. BUT IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT DESIGN AND AESTHETICS. IT IS ALSO ABOUT HOW CULTURE AND MEANING ARE REFLECTED, COMMUNICATED, AND ALTERED BY IMAGES.

VISUAL LITERACY

THIS IS WHAT IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO: THE ABILITY TO DECODE, INTERPRET, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE TEXTS THAT COMMUNICATE WITH IMAGES AS WELL AS, OR INSTEAD OF, WORDS. THIS PROCESS COMES WITH ITS OWN VOCABULARY AND ANALYTIC PROCESSES.

LOOKING AT VISUAL TEXTS

EXAMINATION OF AN IMAGE IN CONTEXT

THE CONTEXT OR ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH A TEXT IS CREATED OR RESPONDED TO IS AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU FIRST TRY TO UNDERSTAND AN IMAGE OR VISUAL TEXT. WE BEGIN BY EXAMINING THE IMAGE AS A WHOLE.

THESE QUESTIONS BELOW ARE A GOOD WAY TO START THIS ANALYSIS. YOUR ANSWER TO EACH QUESTION SHOULD BE ABLE TO POINT TO SOMETHING IN THE IMAGE TO SUPPORT IT.

ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS CAN SPARK DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE IMAGE. THESE THEN FORM THE BASIS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND EXPLORATION.

1. WHERE DOES THIS IMAGE COME FROM? IS IT PART OF A SEQUENCE (A PAGE FROM A BOOK OR SITE; A CLIP FROM A FILM) OR DOES IT STAND ALONE (ART WORK, POSTER, ADVERTISEMENT)?
2. WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?
3. WHO IS IT FOR?
4. WHAT IS IT ABOUT?
5. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT IT? WHY?
6. HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL? WHY?
7. WHAT PUZZLES YOU ABOUT IT?
8. WHAT DOES IT REMIND YOU OF?
9. WHAT CONNECTIONS CAN YOU MAKE TO OTHER TEXTS AND EXPERIENCES?
10. HOW DO YOU THINK THIS TEXT IS POSITIONING THE VIEWER/READER?
11. WHAT MIGHT BE MISSING FROM THIS IMAGE?
12. WHY IS THIS IMAGE SHOWN IN THIS WAY? HOW ELSE MIGHT THIS BE SHOWN? WHAT DIFFERENCE MIGHT THIS MAKE?

L. I. E.

THE THREE LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING AN IMAGE

THIS FOCUSED AND SEQUENTIAL PROCESS MOVES THROUGH THREE GRADUATED LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING CONCERNING AN IMAGE. IT BEGINS WITH YOUR OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS AND ENDS WITH AN ANALYSIS THAT MOVES WELL BEYOND THE IMAGE.

1: LITERAL:

LOCATE, RECALL, CONNECT.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

THE ANSWER IS IN THE IMAGE. SUPPORT YOUR ANSWERS WITH EVIDENCE FROM THE TEXT.

2: INFERENTIAL:

INFER, INTERPRET.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS MEANS? WHY?

WHAT EVIDENCE IN THE TEXT SUPPORTS YOUR ANSWER? USE THE LITERAL INFORMATION, COMBINE IT WITH OTHER INFORMATION FROM THE IMAGE OR CONTEXT, AND THEN ANY PRIOR KNOWLEDGE YOU MIGHT HAVE TO MAKE INFERENCES BASED ON THIS INFORMATION. THIS REQUIRES CLOSE ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT AND MORE THOUGHT ABOUT HOW THE TEXT DOES WHAT IT DOES.

3: EVALUATIVE/APPLIED:

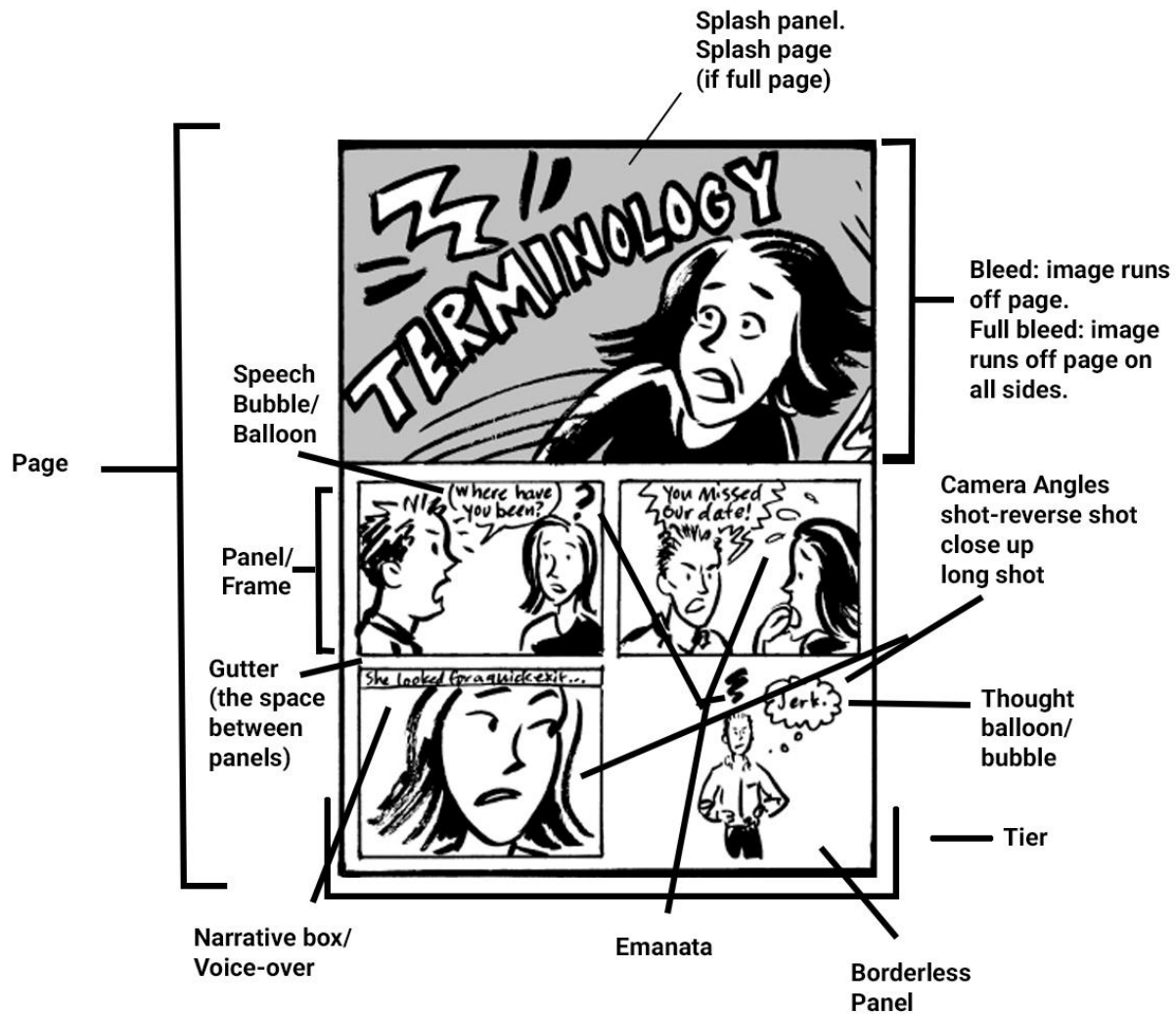
*EVALUATE, GENERALIZE, HYPOTHESIZE,
SYNTHESIZE*

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THIS?

COMBINE THE LITERAL AND INFERENTIAL INFORMATION FROM THE TEXT WITH OTHER IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE TO EXTEND YOUR THINKING BEYOND THE TEXT.

SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

Comics and Graphic Novels Terminology



Indicia: important copyright and other legal information printed in a book, usually at the beginning.

Inks: the final stage of a comics drawing (applying ink to the pencil guidelines).

Mockup: a rough layout of pages to plan a book.

Paste-up: the final artwork pages ready for printing.

Pencil: a relatively defined drawing preliminary to the final inked stage.

Printer's spread: the layout of pages for printing. Not the same as a spread in a printed book.

Recto/Verso: pages in a spread - **recto** = right page, **verso** = left page.

Spread: two facing pages in a printed book.

Tier: All the panels in a horizontal line on a page or spread.

Thumbnail: a rough sketch of a comic, delineating placement of figures, word balloons, and background elements, as well as content of word balloons.

SEEING IS FRAMING

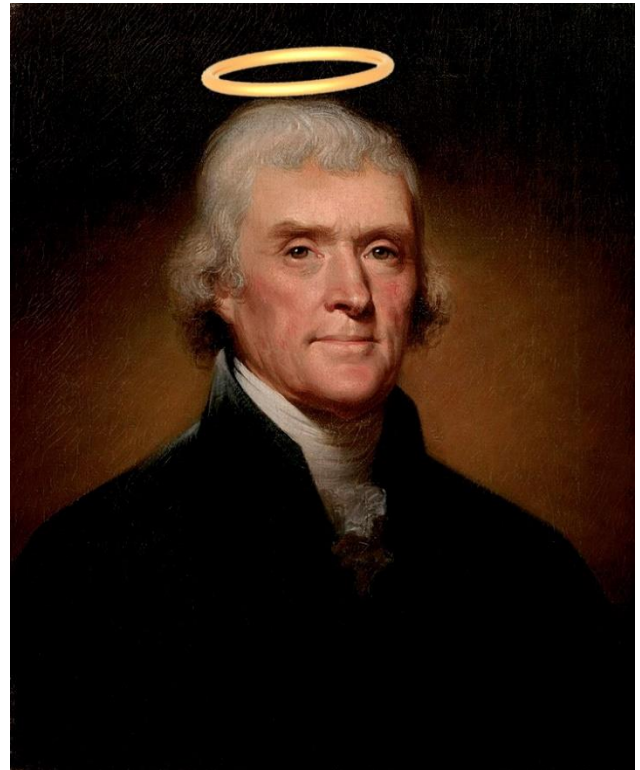
WAS THIS MAN . . .

A HERO?

A ROLE MODEL?

**A FOUNDING
FATHER?**

**A CREATOR OF
AMERICAN IDEALS?**



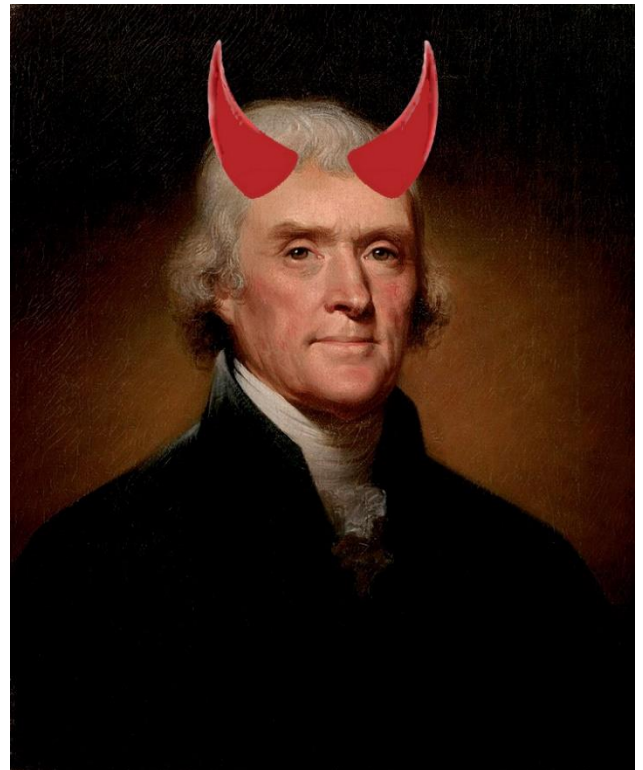
OR WAS HE . . .

A HYPOCRITE?

A RACIST?

A SLAVEHOLDER?

A CHILD RAPIST?



DOES ANY OF THIS MAKE YOU SEE THIS IMAGE DIFFERENTLY?

* Jefferson's "original Rough draught" of the *Declaration of Independence*, called slavery "this execrable commerce" and "this assemblage of horrors."

* Despite writing that "all men are created equal," Jefferson kept over 600 other humans in bondage.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote that one hour of slavery is more miserable than ages of British tyranny.¹ He was willing to rebel against British tyranny, but never gave up his position as a slaveholder.

* Jefferson routinely lied about keeping Sally Hemings, a slave, as his mistress and mother of his children. He fathered six children by her. And although he did free those children as adults, he exposed them to the Fugitive Slave Law, listing them as "run away" in his records at Monticello.

* Jefferson never freed the mother of his children from her enslavement to him. (Jefferson's daughter did so only after his death.)



**A POLITICAL CARTOON
CARICATURE OF THOMAS
JEFFERSON AND SALLY
HEMINGS, CA.1804.**

(ATTRIBUTED TO JAMES AKIN)

¹ Here's the full quotation: "What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him through his trial, and inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose."

EVERY IMAGE HAS FOUR FRAMES.

***WHAT YOU SEE DEPENDS
ON HOW YOU FRAME IT.***

<h2>The Subjective Frame</h2>	<h3>How do you react?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it make me feel? • What does it remind me of? • What is it trying to communicate?
<h2>The Structural Frame</h2>	<h3>How is it doing this?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition • Framing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shot POV Viewing angle • Saliency • Vectors/Lines • Foreground/background • Gaze • Body language • Color and lighting • Contrast • Symbolism/icons
<h2>The Cultural Frame</h2>	<h3>What are its contexts?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical • Social • Political • Viewer's contexts
<h2>The Critical Frame</h2>	<h3>How can we read this?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps and silences • Manipulation of the image • Positioning of the viewer

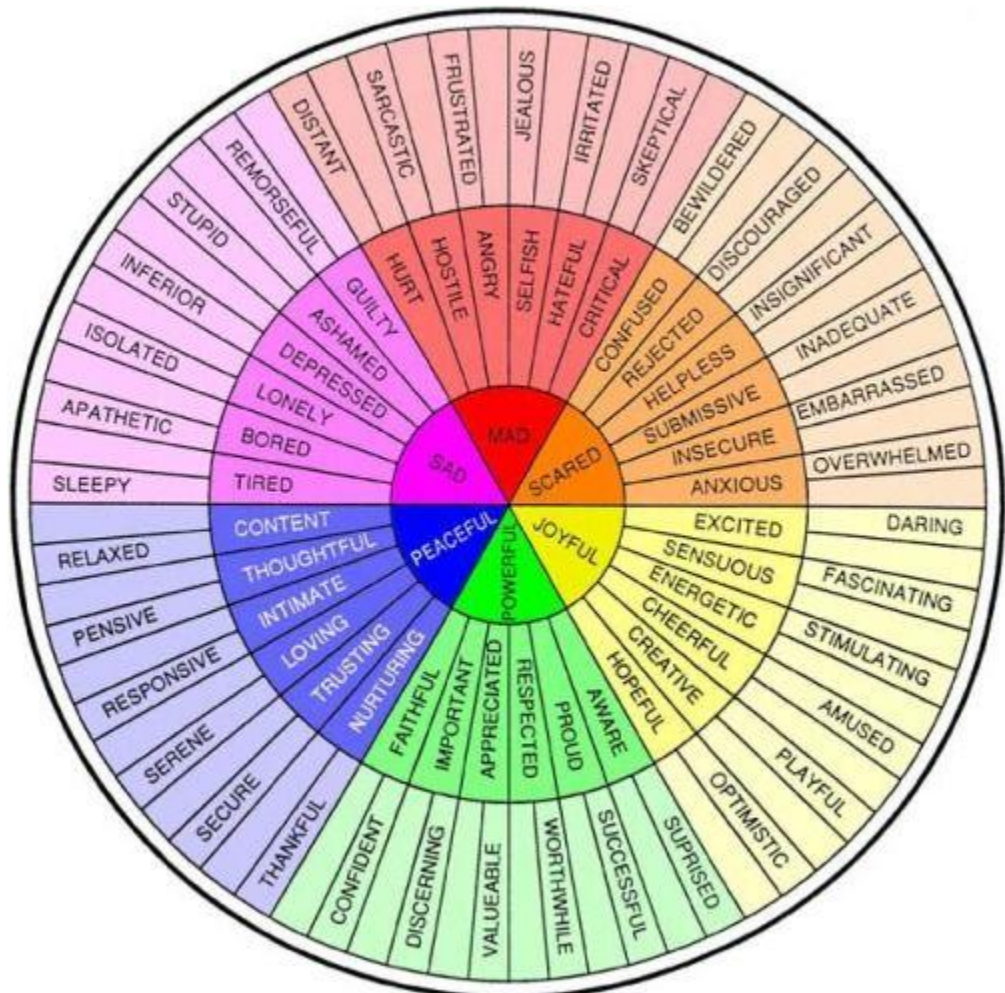
The Subjective Frame

How do you react?

- What does it make me feel?
- What does it remind me of?
- What is it trying to communicate?

This frame considers your initial response to the image or text. It asks you to poll your emotions, look into your memory, and try to reach into the object at hand.

The Subjective Frame What does it make me feel?



You can have a number of emotional responses to a text or image. They're the first step in a decent analysis.

The Subjective Frame What does it remind me of?



Textual allusions are our stock in trade, but we need to consider visual allusions as well. This cover recalls Rockwell's sense of Americana at the *Saturday Evening Post*.



Michelangelo's *Pietà*

The dramatic pose, the religious connotations, and the overall aesthetics of this sculpture should put us in mind of death and subsequent mourning.

So the artists here use our familiarity with the sculpture above as a kind of shorthand to help us quickly identify the plot of the book.



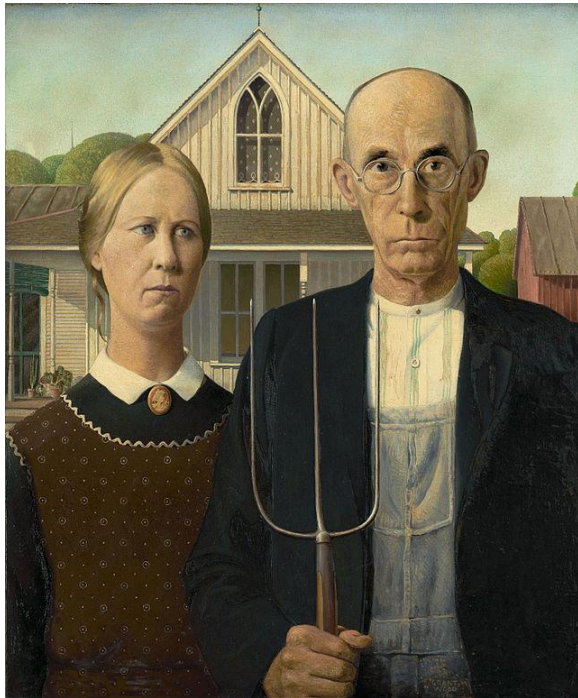
George Perez

John Byrne

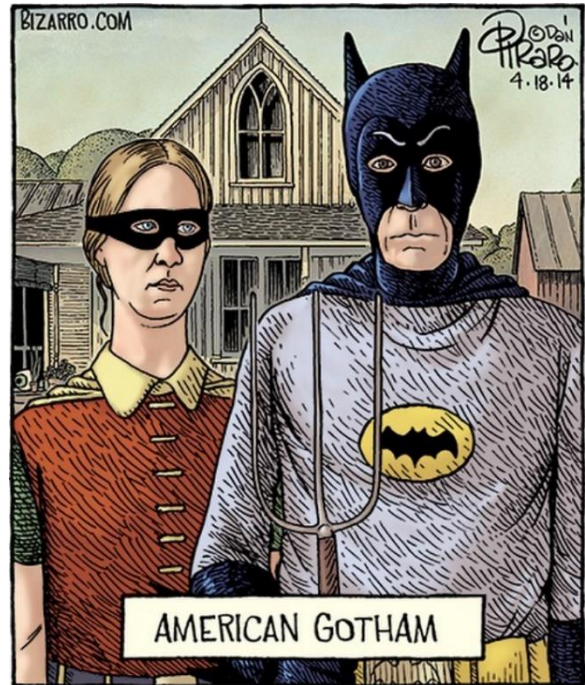
Jack Kirby

Frank Miller

Some artists rely on our familiarity with iconic images in order to make their point. Dan Piraro's Bizarro cartoon doesn't make much sense unless you know a bit about Batman and are also at least familiar with Wood's *American Gothic*.



American Gothic
Grant Wood

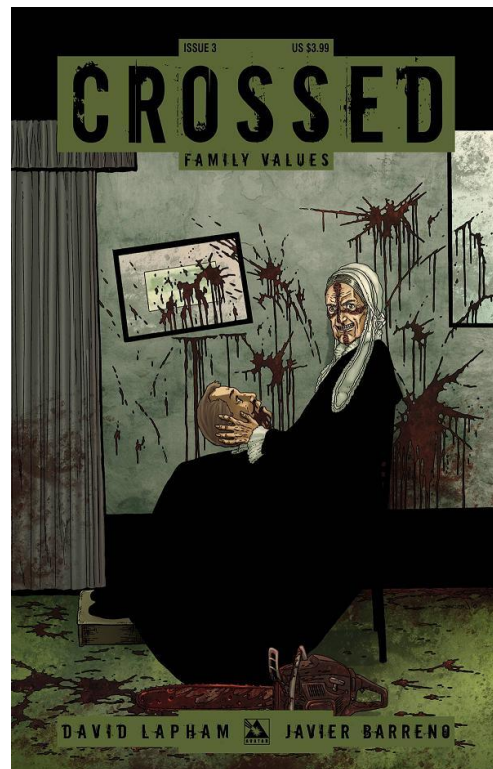


American Gotham
Dan Piraro

Jacen Burrow's covers for the *Crossed: Family Values* series made great use of this technique.

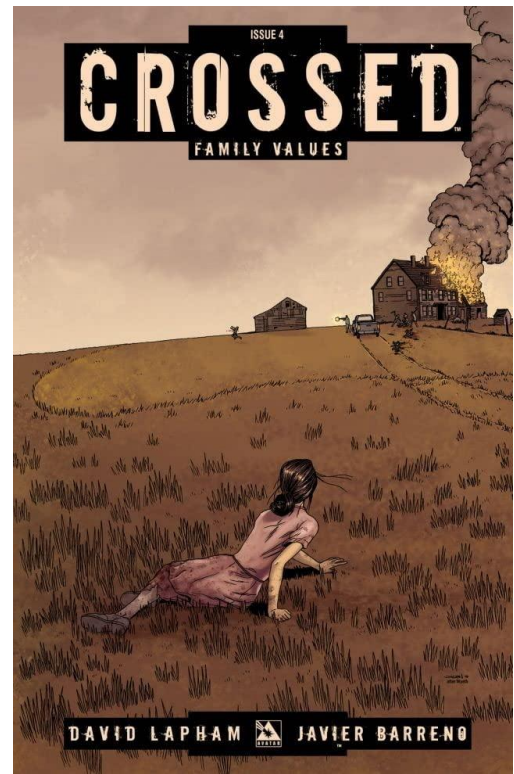


Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1
James McNeill Whistler
(better known as *Whistler's Mother*)

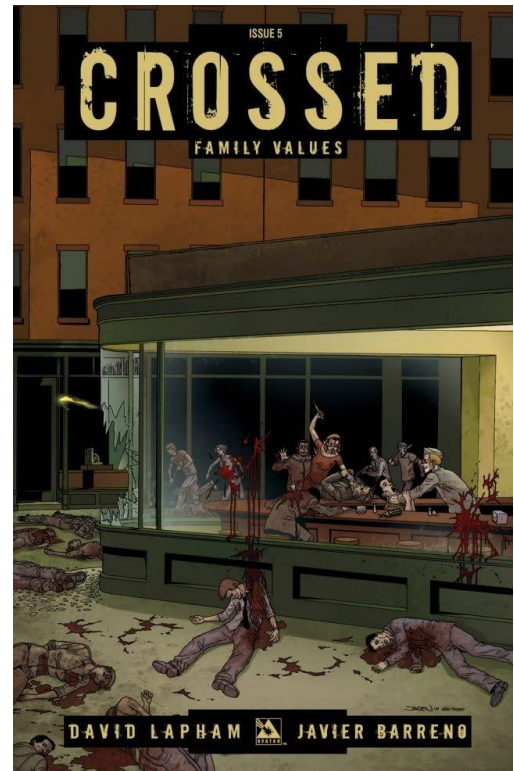




Christina's World
Andrew Wyeth



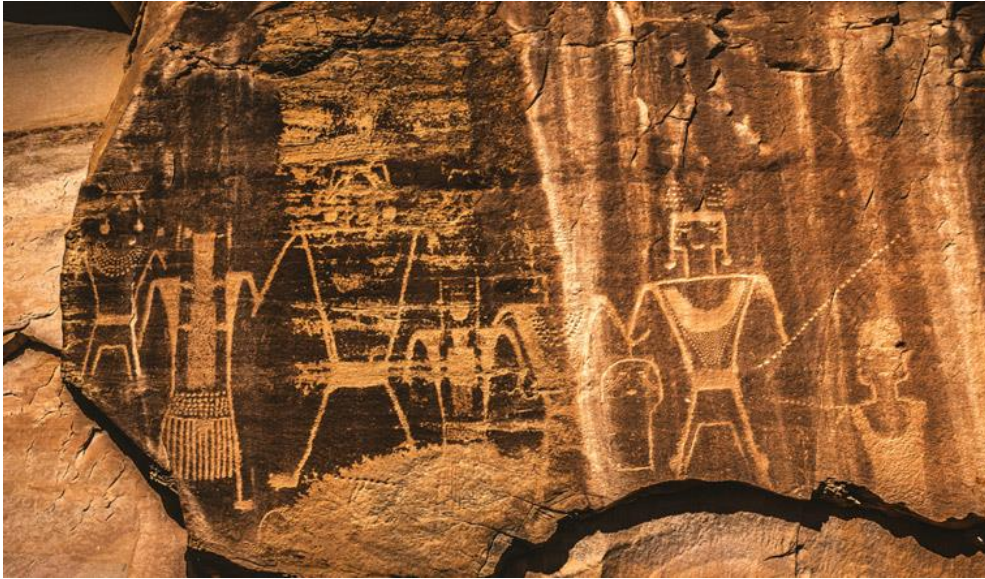
Nighthawks
Edward Hopper



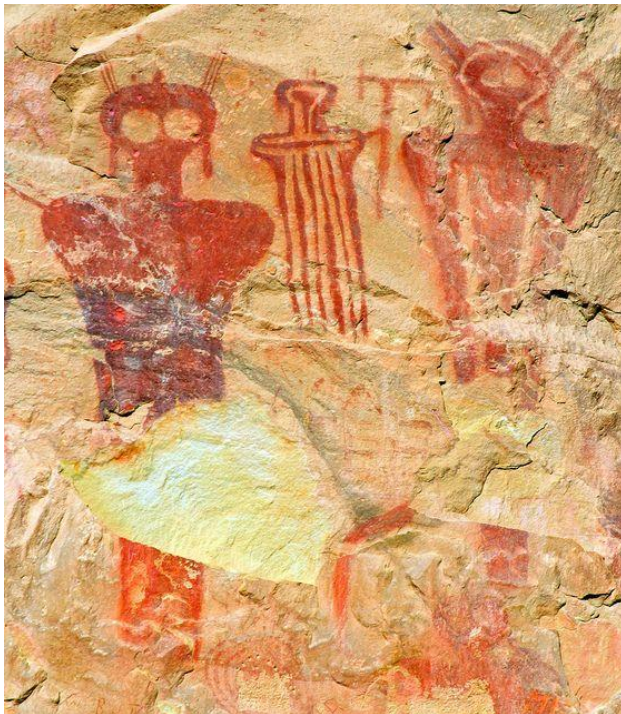
The Subjective Frame What is it trying to communicate?

We should ask if we can see anything in the image that might explain what the image is trying to communicate to us. The problem is that most initial impressions are ambiguous.

So we have to consider this initial understanding to be tentative until it is either supported, revised, or refuted by what we discover in the following frames.



These 5,000-year-old petroglyphs from Utah may show warriors holding severed human heads.



Or they may show repeated visitations from extra-terrestrial beings.

The Structural Frame

How is it doing this?

- Composition
- Framing
 - Shot
 - POV
 - Viewing angle
- Saliency
- Vectors/Lines
- Foreground/background
- Gaze
- Body language
- Color and lighting
- Contrast
- Symbolism/icons

The Structural Frame Composition

Many of the analytic tools and most of the analytic language for graphic novels has been borrowed from other graphic arts., like film and photography.

Mise-en-scène:

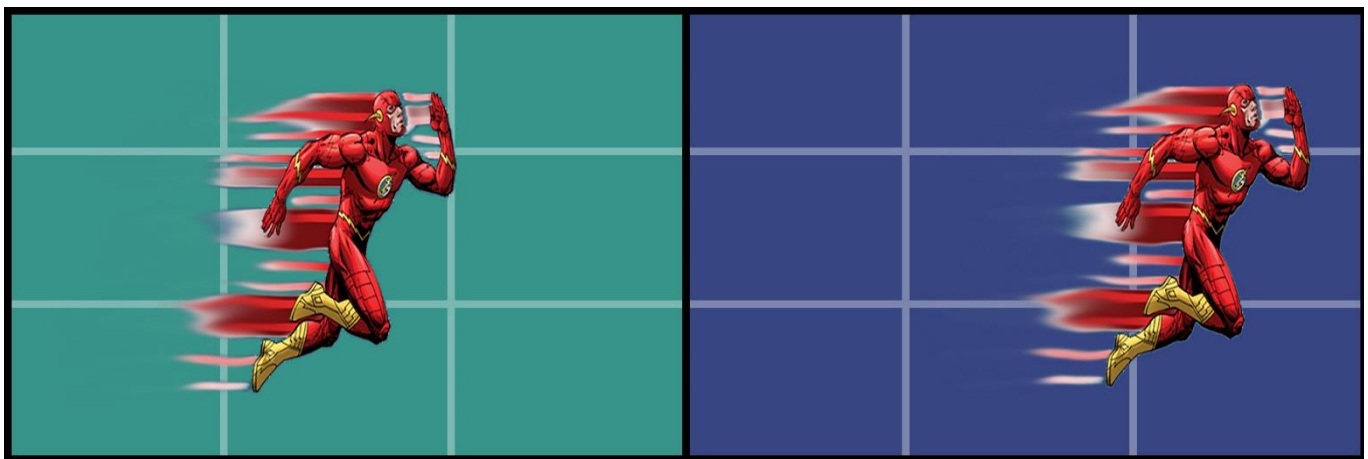
What's included in the image? What's left out? Why?

Layout:

What's in the foreground? What's in the background? What's the relationship between the major figure(s) in the image and the background?

Balance:

Is it classically balanced, where the subject is centered? Or is it asymmetrical balanced, using the rule of thirds?



Classical use of the rule of thirds

Asymmetrical use of the rule of thirds

The Structural Frame Framing: Shot / POV / Viewing Angle

WALLY WOOD'S 22 PANELS THAT ALWAYS WORK !!!

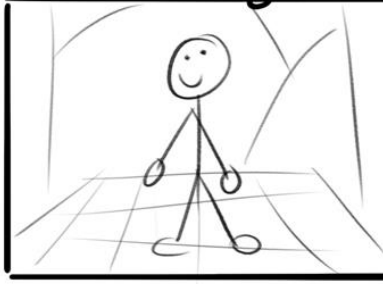
OR SOME INTERESTING WAYS TO GET SOME VARIETY INTO THOSE BORING PANELS WHERE SOME DUMB WRITER HAS A BUNCH OF LAME CHARACTERS SITTING AROUND AND TALKING FOR PAGE AFTER PAGE!



Very wide
(more background)



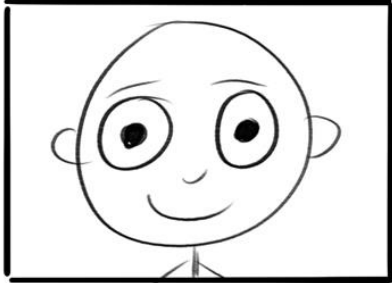
Wide
(full body)



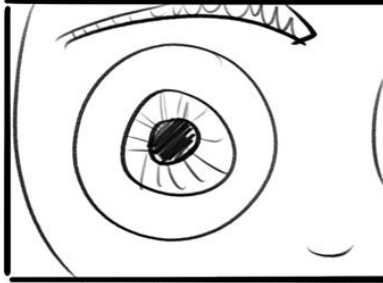
Mid
(1/2 body or head + shoulders)



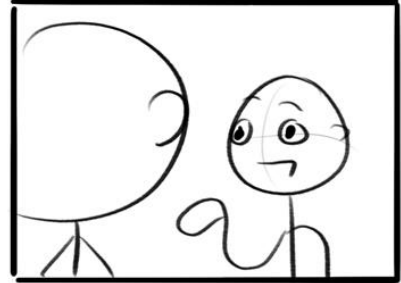
Close up
(use sparingly)



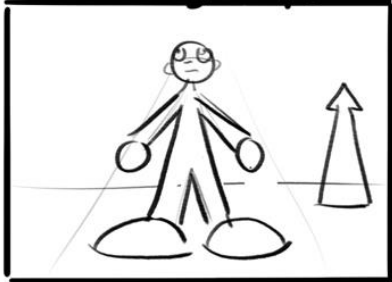
Very close up
(use rarely)



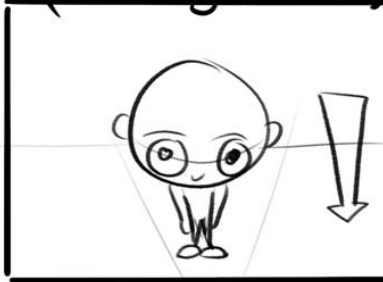
Over the
Shoulder (OS)



Low
(looking up)



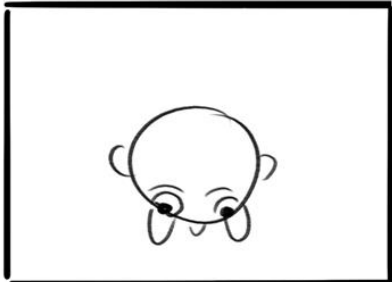
High
(Looking down)



(towards camera)



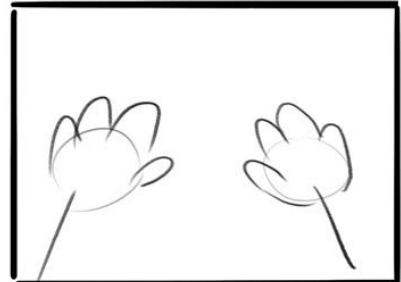
Birds eye view



(use blur or
action lines)



Point of view (POV)



from Jessica Emmett's *How Do I Make a Comic?* Jessica Emmett Studios, 6 March 2017. www.jessica-emmett.com/downloads/how-do-i-make-comics-a-kids-guide-to-the-basics.pdf

CAMERA ANGLES



EYE LEVEL



LOW ANGLE



HIGH ANGLE



HIP LEVEL



KNEE LEVEL



GROUND LEVEL



SHOULDER LEVEL



DUTCH ANGLE



OVERHEAD

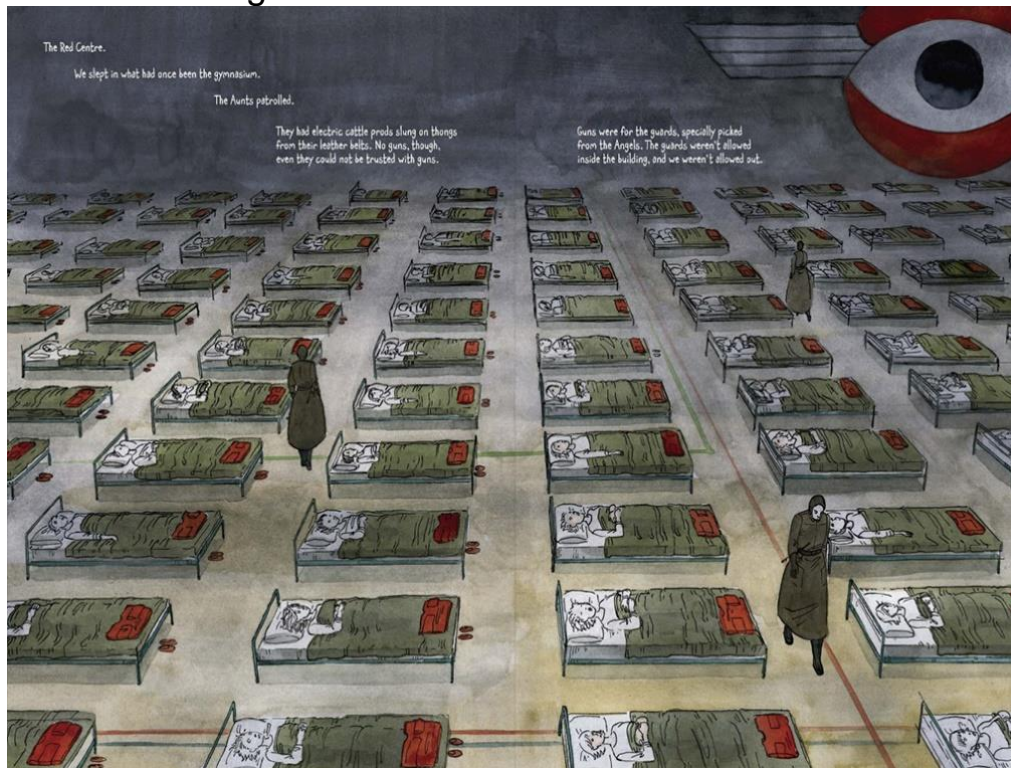


AERIAL

The Structural Frame Salience

Salience is how well an object stands out from the background. Our eyes are always first drawn to salient features in an image; they are what's initially important in understanding the composition and structure of an image.

An image or element within an image can be made salient through placement, color, size, focus, distance, or any combination of these. For example, what do you notice first in the image below from *The Handmaid's Tale*?



See the strong lines drawing your eye from the bottom of the image to the top? These lines are all vertical, and very precise. There's a firm sense of regimentation coming from the lines, and they draw your eye back into the darkness. Fully $\frac{1}{4}$ of this image is the back wall of this large room, but the point at which the floor becomes the wall is pretty fuzzy, and the shading of the back wall makes it seem like we're looking through a huge window out onto a darkened landscape where this regimentation goes on forever.

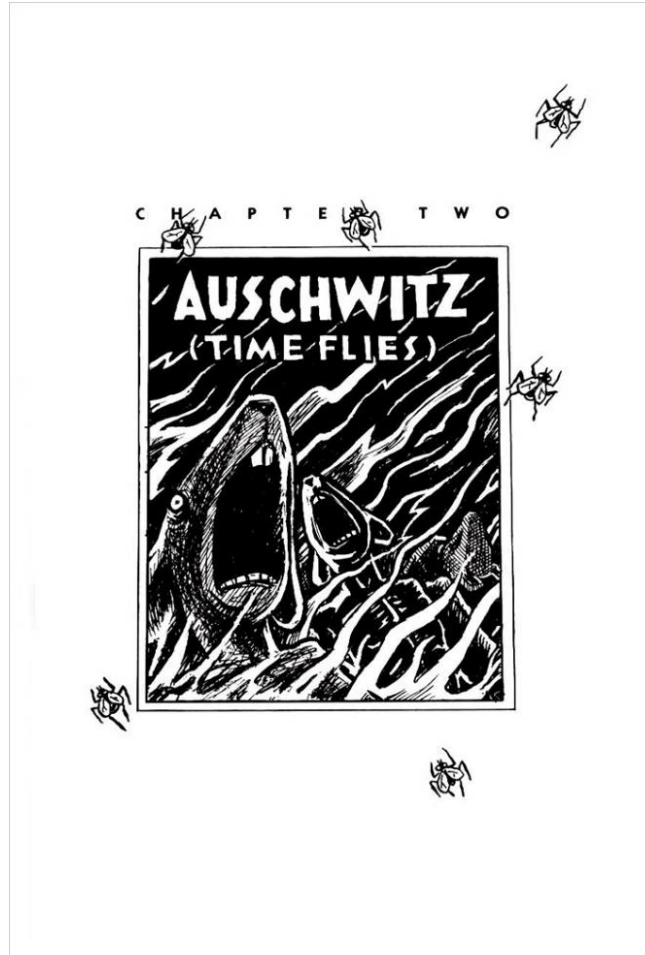
The all-seeing eye is also a part of that back wall, and it too has linear features — its wings — but those are horizontal, so they distinguish themselves from the primary vertical lines in this image. And since the definition of the wall itself is blurred, the eye can appear to be just hanging in space, a large, imposing threat.

To me the most salient feature here is the flying eyeball. It's the only thing that's not essentially a rectangle or bound to a grid; it breaks the rigid linearity. It is disproportionately large, and hovers over the grid occupied by the Handmaids.

The Structural Frame Vectors / Lines

Vectors are imaginary lines that direct the viewer's eyes in a particular way. They are used to connect different parts of the image and to create a reading path from one part to another.

Here's a page from *Maus* that shows what an author can do with vectors.



Notice how the image is placed on the page with a lot of white space around it. So your eye is drawn to the black rectangle in the center of the white page. But the diagonals of the flames draw your eyes up and right, while the burning bodies create a path that is still vertical but a little straighter. This leads you first to the chapter title within the image, and then outside the black rectangle itself. There you see the houseflies, always attracted to rotting meat, that look as if they've landed on the page you're looking at.

The ironic pun in the subtitle becomes obvious, as time flying leads to people dying. The soon-to-be-dead bodies in the flames will feed the flies. But the flies don't exist on that plane of the image; they look as if they exist outside the black rectangle. They exist at the same level as you, the viewer. As you move in and out of the black rectangle, the flies remind you of your own mortality, and of the common fate to be faced by you as well as those in the flames.

The Structural Frame Foreground / background

This one is pretty simple: the parts of the picture that are closest to you (the viewer) are in the foreground; the parts that are furthest away from you are in the background.

Take a look at this single frame from *Watchmen*, and notice what elements go where.



It's one of the first panels presenting Adrian Veidt, known as Ozymandias when he was a "masked adventurer." In this image, the man himself is relegated to the background, while the foreground is populated with action figures, a newspaper, computer, and desk set. The placement of these is no accident, as they all tell us important things about Veidt.

The Structural Frame Gaze

Gaze refers to the way that people in an image are looking at the viewer. It's a type of interaction that breaks the fourth wall.

The Demand

When a person in an image looks directly at the viewer, this is a demand. A demand asks for our attention in a confrontational way. The image and the viewer create a direct connection as the image looks directly at the viewer. The viewer becomes an active participant in a relationship between the image and the interpreter.

The Offer

When a person in an image looks away from the viewer, this is an offer. An offer is a less confrontational way of engaging the viewer and usually shows that the person in the image is involved in some action. The viewer is not an active participant, but the visual equivalent of an eavesdropper.



This detail from a cover image for Brian K. Vaughan's *Saga* series illustrates both versions of the gaze. Alana, the female in the background, demands engagement with you, because you could be a threat to her child, or to husband, or to herself. But her husband, Marko, in the foreground, offers you the potential for a different kind of engagement, because he's paying attention to something else.

The Structural Frame Body Language

Body language in the graphic arts conveys meaning in four ways:

Kinesics

encompasses body positioning, facial expressions, gestures, etc.

Proxemics

pertains to distances between bodies, or bodies in space (territorial borders).

Prosodics

covers the non-language aspects of voice and tone, and deals with articulation, accent, mumbling, sighing, grumbling, etc.

Accessories

all the artifacts that a body uses: dress, ornaments, haircut, shoes, etc.



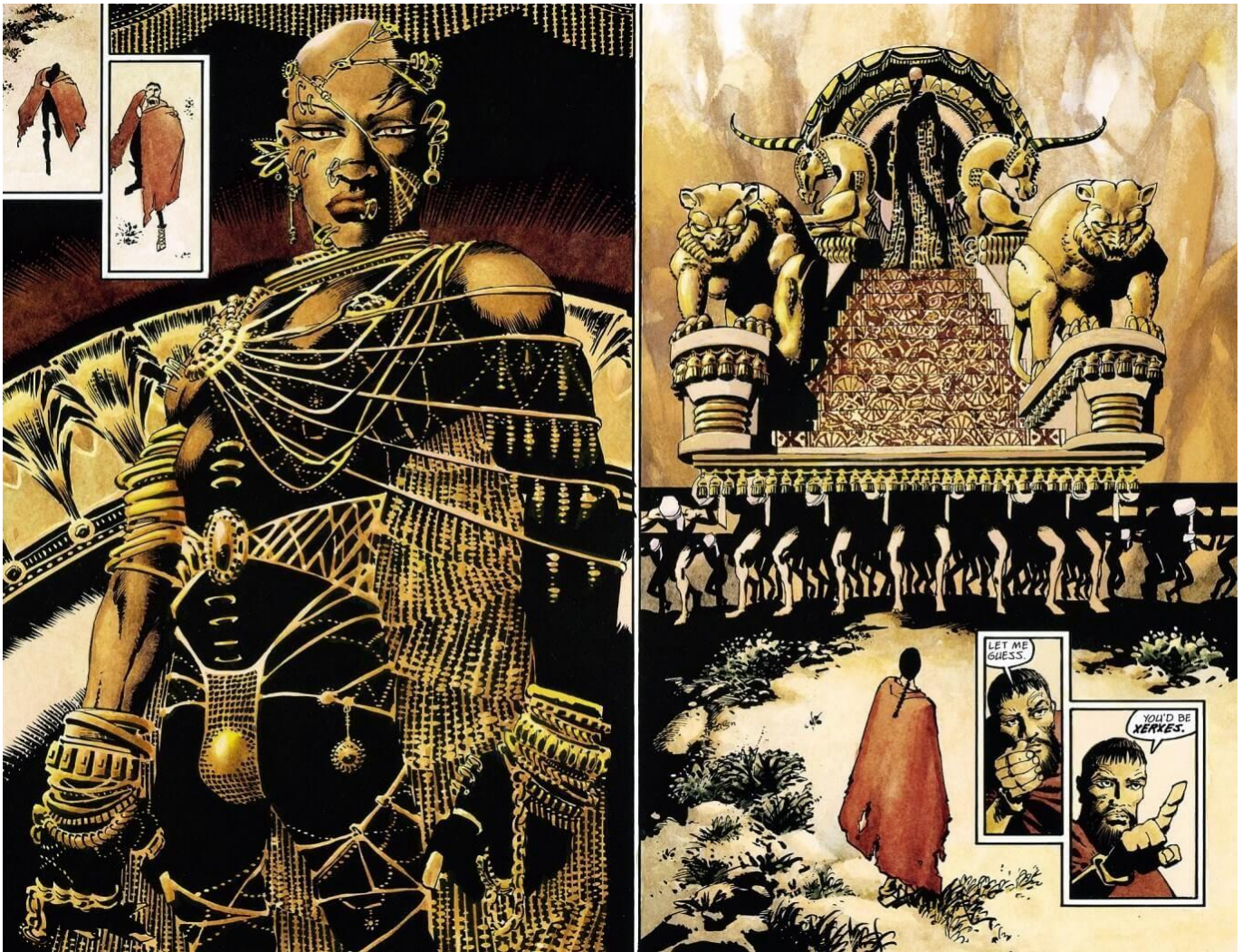
What do the kinesics of this picture from Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* tell us?



How do the proxemics in this page from *American Born Chinese* by Gene Lueng Yang define the relationships between these characters?



What do the prosodics of this spread from John Lewis' *March* tell us about the occasion and the speaker?



How do Xerxes' accessories (from Frank Miller's 300) help to characterize him?

The Structural Frame Color and Lighting

Color can set a tone for a single image or for an entire work. It influences how we read the image, and how we respond to it emotionally.

Monochromatic images

are done in black and white, sometimes with shades of gray.

Chiaroscuro

The use of strong contrasts between light and dark, this is a way to convey tone and evoke emotions in a monochromatic image.



Frank Miller's *Sin City* is full of chiaroscuro. When color is used in this text, it's designed to shock you.



Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* was originally published in black and white



But he went back and re-inked it to add color.
How does this change your perception of this page?

Colors can have symbolic meanings.

Color Meanings

RED

Power, strength, energy, heat, love, passion, danger, warning, anger

PINK

Happiness, compassion, sweet, playful, immaturity, hope, inspiration, feminine

ORANGE

Excitement, confidence, encouragement, health, vitality, extroversion

PURPLE

Royalty, nobility, spirituality, luxury, ambition, mystery, fantasy, moodiness

YELLOW

Bright, vibrant, youthful, energetic, sunshine, hope, intellect, happiness

BROWN

Earth, outdoors, longevity, conservative, honest, natural, reliable

GREEN

Earth, growth, freshness, nature, balance, harmony, money, jealousy, envy, guilt

BLACK

Formal, classic, elegance, power, luxury, protection, death, mystery, evil

BLUE

Peace, tranquility, loyalty, security, trust, intelligence, cold, fear, masculine

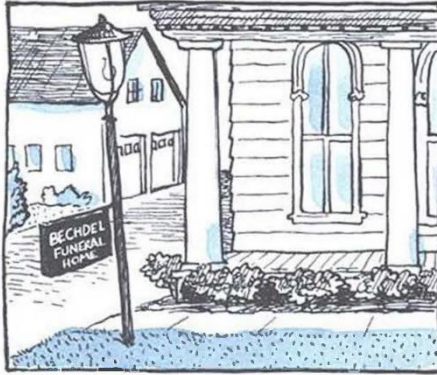
WHITE

Purity, innocence, goodness, fresh, clean, easy, simplicity



The subtle compositional changes in this page from Alan Moore's *Lost Girls* are nothing compared to the changes in the color washes.

THE "FUN HOME," AS WE CALLED IT, WAS UP ON MAIN STREET.



MY GRANDMOTHER LIVED IN THE FRONT. THE BUSINESS WAS IN THE BACK.



I REMEMBER SEEING MY GRANDFATHER LAID OUT THERE WHEN I WAS THREE. PEOPLE WERE AMUSED BY WHAT SEEMED TO ME A REASONABLE ENOUGH REQUEST.



MY FATHER HAD BEEN GIVEN A FREE HAND WITH THE INTERIOR DECORATION OF THE VIEWING AREA, AND THE ROOMS WERE HUNG WITH DARK VELVET DRAPERY. THIS ENSURED A SOMBER MOOD ON THE SUNNIEST OF DAYS.



THERE WAS A MINIMUM OF FURNITURE, AND A VAST EXPANSE OF TEXTURED OLIVE WALL-TO-WALL CARPETING.

How does the blue wash in this page from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* influence your response to it?

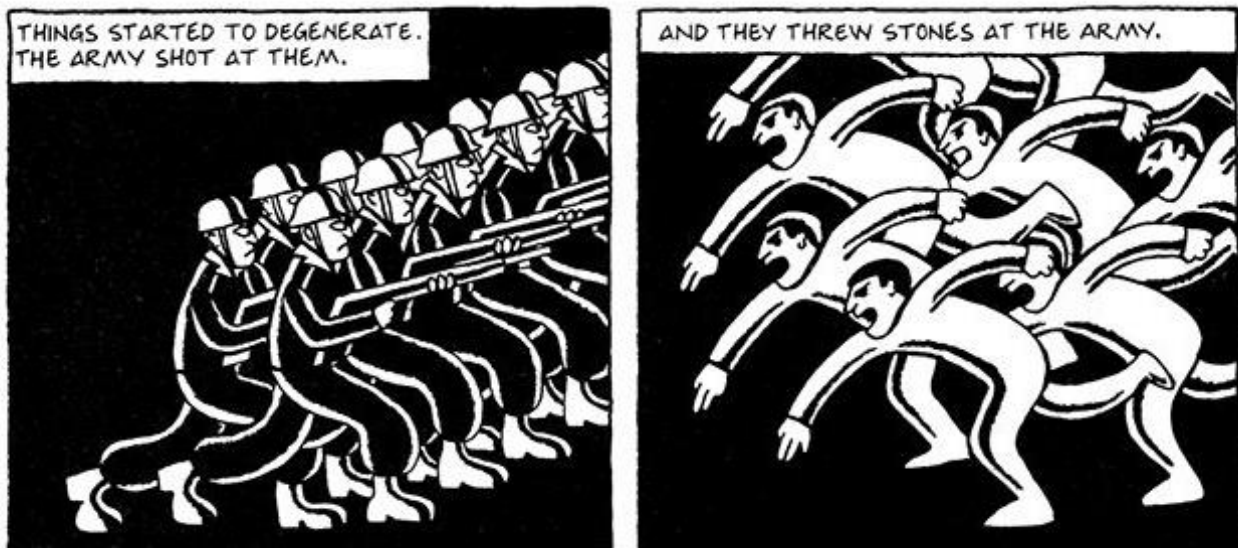


David Wojnarowicz's *7 Miles a Second* uses oversaturated and unnatural colors to create a feeling of excess and disorientation.

The Structural Frame Contrast

The use of light and dark shades, dark-toned images, or high-contrast images draws and directs the eye more than light or low-contrast images do.

Arranging clashing or juxtaposing opposing elements isn't just for color and shading. You can have contrasting panels, contrasting textures, vectors, sizes, emotions, perspectives, and points of view, to name just a few.



This tier from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* has contrasting colors, vectors, movement, and action.

The Structural Frame Symbolism / Icons

THE SORTS OF IMAGES WE USUALLY CALL SYMBOLS ARE ONE CATEGORY OF ICON, HOWEVER.

THESE ARE THE IMAGES WE USE TO REPRESENT CONCEPTS, IDEAS AND PHILOSOPHIES.

THEN THERE ARE THE ICONS OF LANGUAGE, SCIENCE AND COMMUNICATION.

A	B	C	D
1	2	3	4
?	:	!	*
田	森	雨	石
+	=	×	÷
\$	%	©	¢
♩	♫	♪	🎵
☞	▲	≡	∞
Ω	Φ	↔	ℝ
☐	☁	☑	☒

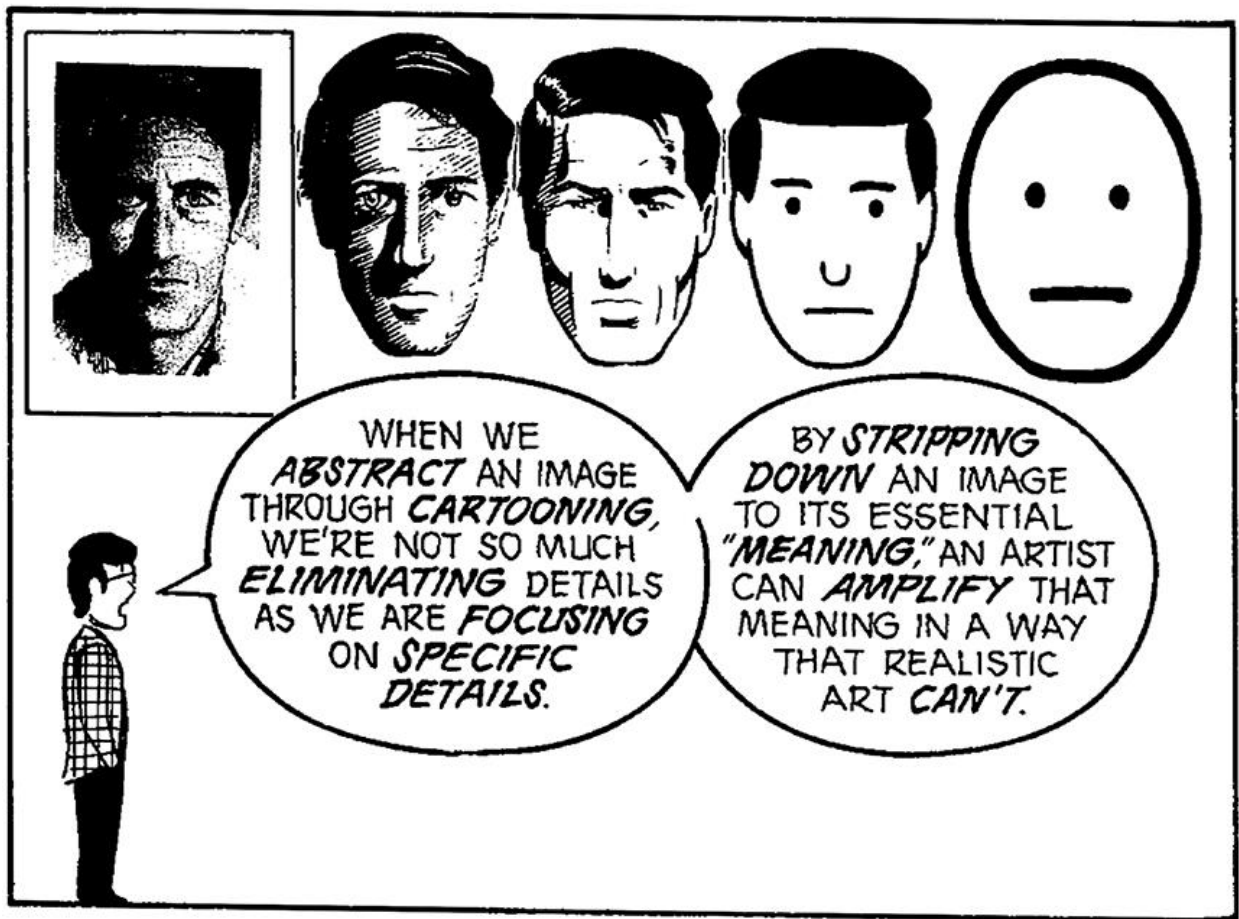
ICONS OF THE PRACTICAL REALM.

AND FINALLY, THE ICONS WE CALL PICTURES: IMAGES DESIGNED TO ACTUALLY RESEMBLE THEIR SUBJECTS.

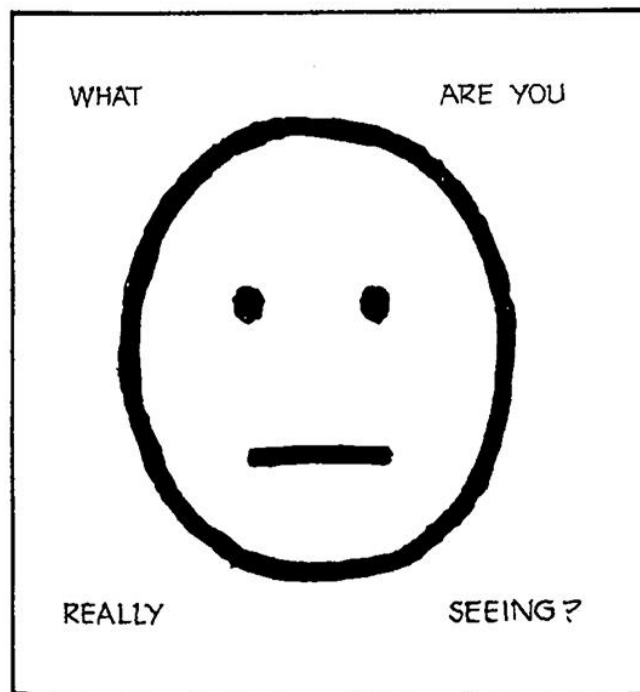
BUT AS RESEMBLANCE VARIES, SO DOES THE LEVEL OF ICONIC CONTENT.

OR TO PUT IT SOMEWHAT CLUMSILY, SOME PICTURES ARE JUST MORE ICONIC THAN OTHERS.

Eventually I was going to have to appeal to the best explainer out there, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.



As images become less specific, they become more universal, and more relatable. We can see more of ourselves in them as they become less individual.



<h1>The Cultural Frame</h1>	<h2>What are its contexts?</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical • Social • Political • Viewer's contexts
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In general, these contexts help us to give meaning to the details in an image or a text.

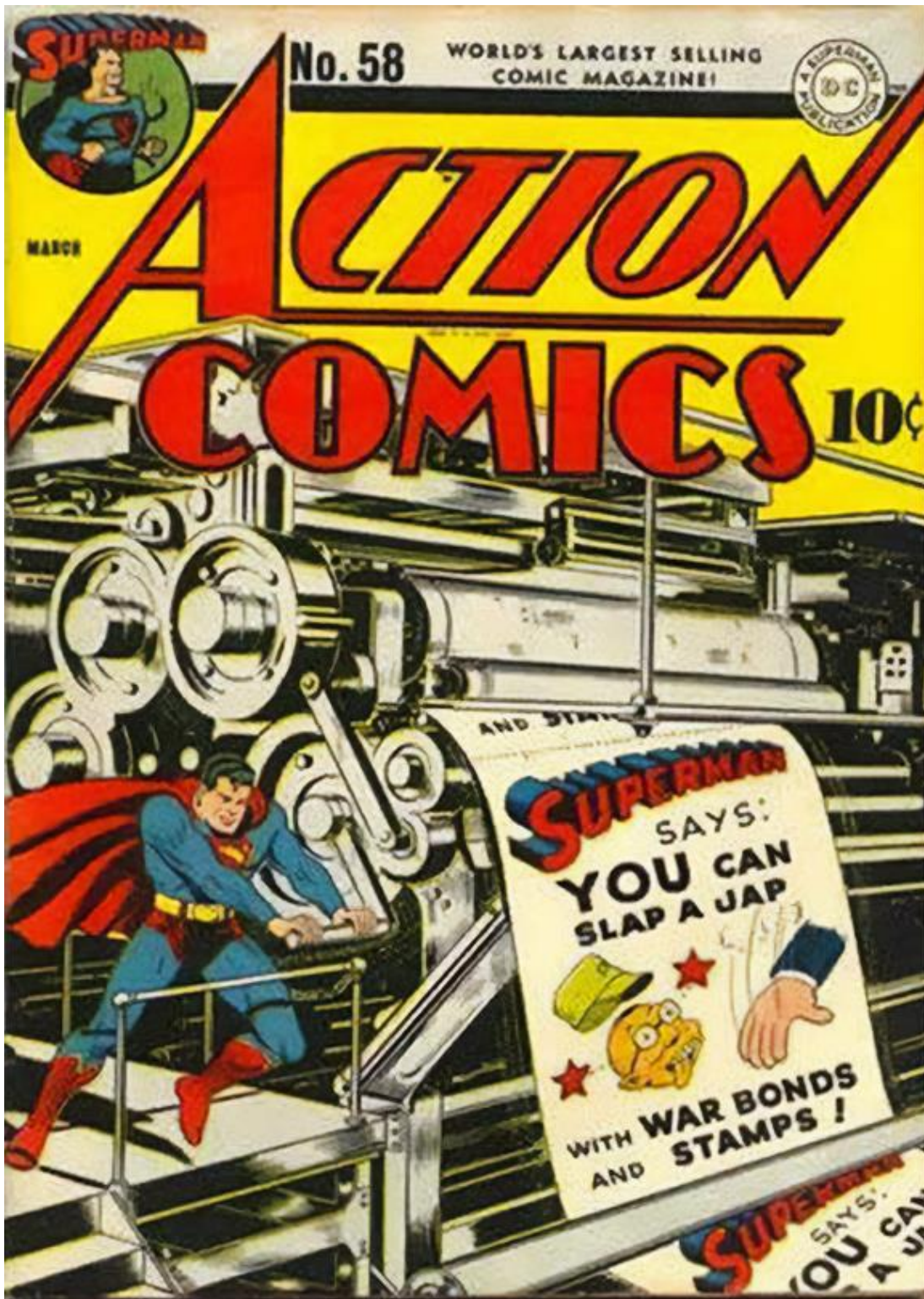
The Cultural Frame	Historical Context
---------------------------	---------------------------

This addresses the time or period in which the specific image was created, and attempts to understand and interpret it within that context (as opposed to our own).

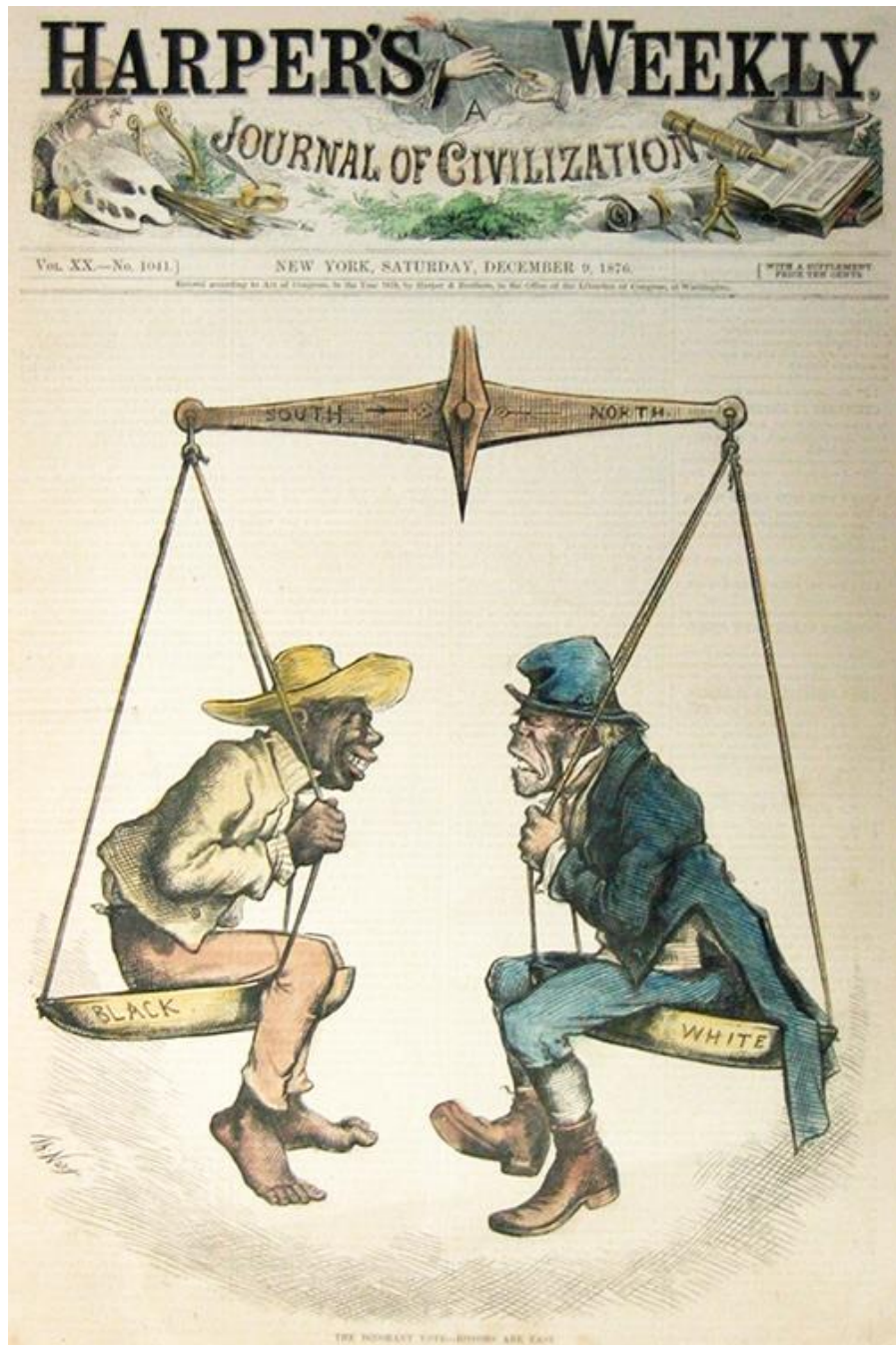
It's difficult to separate the historical from the political from the social, so we'll consider them all under the umbrella term of "cultural."

What may seem strange or nonsensical to us today might actually have meant something completely different in the era in which it was constructed.

The most obvious examples of this are images that originally reflected their own historical contexts, but that we now consider offensive.



Superman himself advertising war bonds during WWII. The casual racism here was par for its time, but we're now appalled by it.



This cartoon was published after the disputed election of 1876. Southern state governments, supported primarily by African American voters, were charged with massive corruption, just like the Tammany Hall machine in the North, which was supported by Irish Catholics.

The caricatures were designed to be insulting because of their equal support for political corruption, but they also played on racial and ethnic prejudices.



In 100 years, how will this image be interpreted? We have lived through this historical context, so we “get it,” whether we agree with it or not. But how much awareness of this historical context will be necessary for a future understanding of this image?

The Cultural Frame Social Context

The same historical moment can contain a number of differing social contexts.

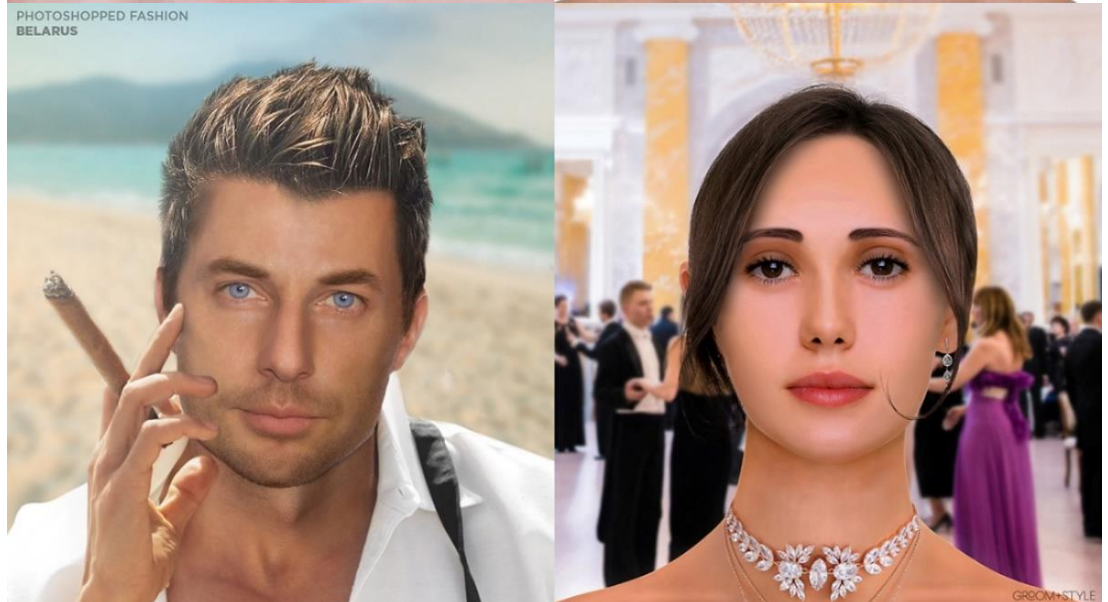
Here's an example from *Groom + Style*. In 2020, they sent head shots of a man and woman to fashion photographers and designers in 27 different countries, and asked them to manipulate the photos into what was currently fashionable and beautiful in their country.

PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION

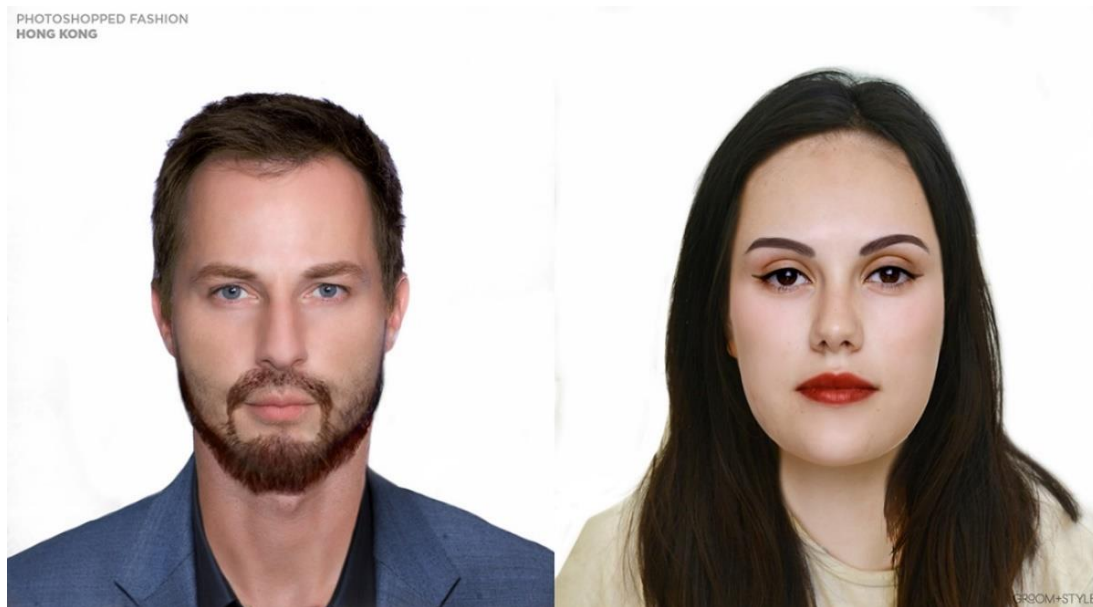
The original
images



Belarus



Hong Kong



India



Lithuania



PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION MEXICO

Mexico



PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION NAMIBIA

Namibia



PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION RUSSIA

Russia



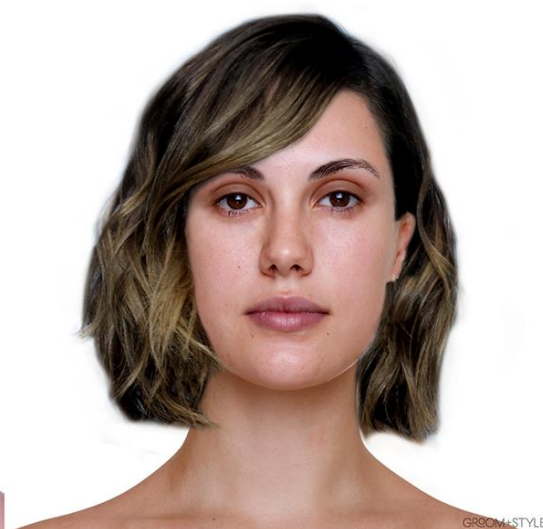
PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION
SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa



PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION
UK

United Kingdom



PHOTOSHOPPED FASHION
UKRAINE

Ukraine



United
States



Did you find any or all of these attractive? Were any of them off-putting? Did you wonder why the original images were only of white people?

This project illustrates that there's no such thing as a global social context.

The Cultural Frame Political Context

The political context of an image considers how power and influence are distributed and wielded in a community or organization, as well as the preferences of the individuals and groups who lay claim to power.

Since institutions with political power can control the very existence of an image, this context is especially deep.

The following set of pictures shows women in Iran before, during, and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The significant shift in political context needs to be taken into account when you try to make sense of them.



Before the Revolution



Before the Revolution



During the Revolution



After the Revolution



After the Revolution

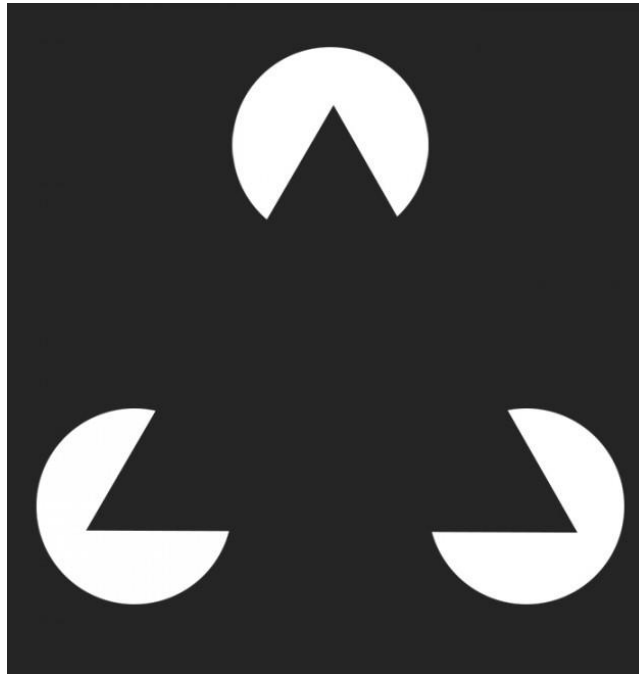
The Cultural Frame Viewer's contexts

Our own histories, experiences, and prior knowledge influence how we interpret an image. But there are also unconscious processes that happen. Gestalt psychology unpacks these. The examples below illustrate many of its concepts and laws.

When we view an image, we perceive it in organized or configurational terms. Patterns take precedence over individual elements, and they have properties that are not inherent in the elements themselves.

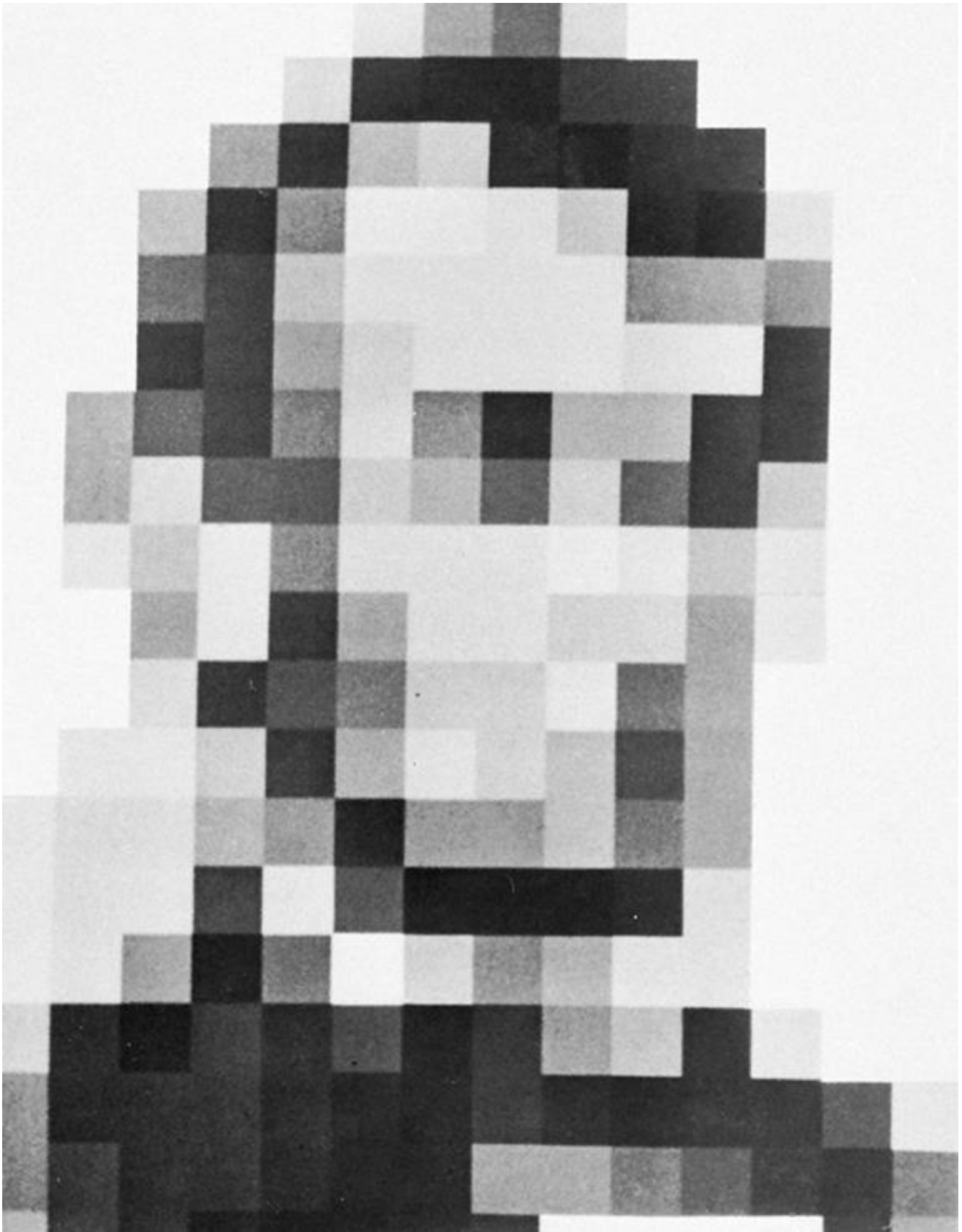
We infer information, and immediately create larger structures out of smaller ones, so we end up with a perception of the image where the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

And what we construct will be our attempt to maximize the simplicity, stability, regularity, symmetry, continuity, and unity of what we're seeing.



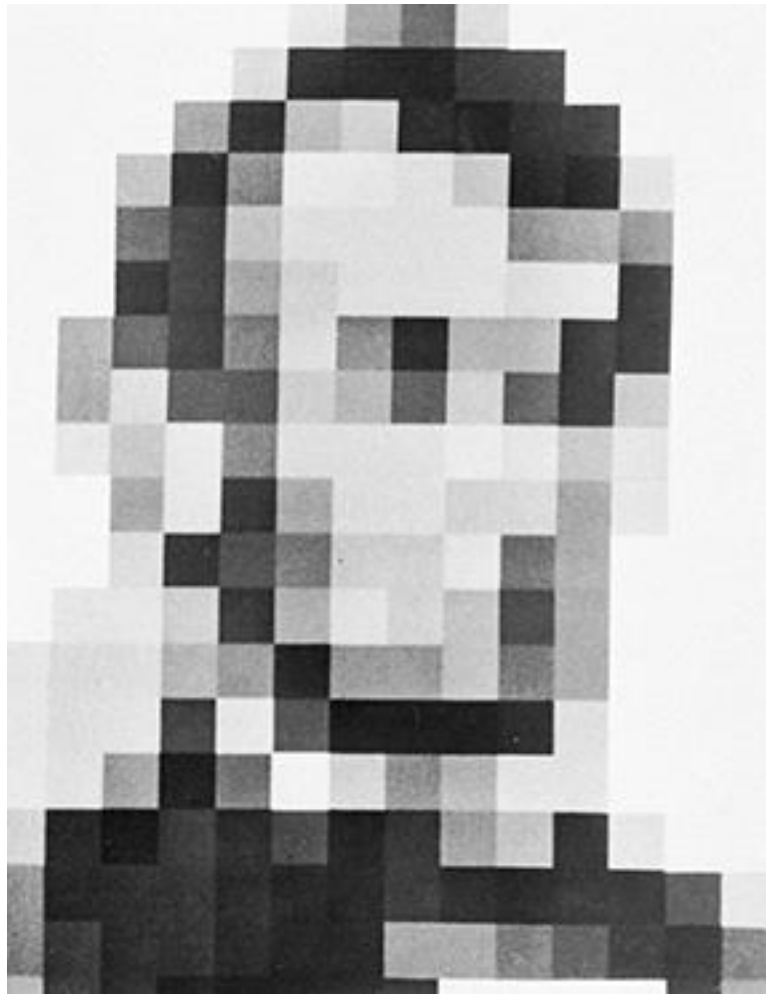
CLOSURE

We all “see” the triangle, but it’s not really there. Our brains impose a structure on a collection of single elements.



DISTANCE

What's pictured above?



The size of this image is smaller, which we interpret as giving us more distance from the subject. This distance gets us closer to seeing what it is.

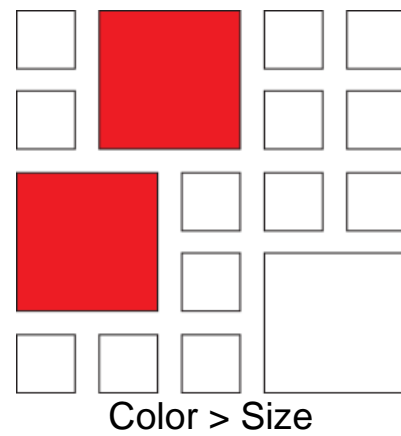
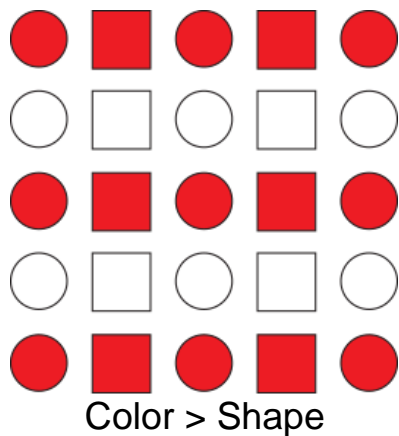
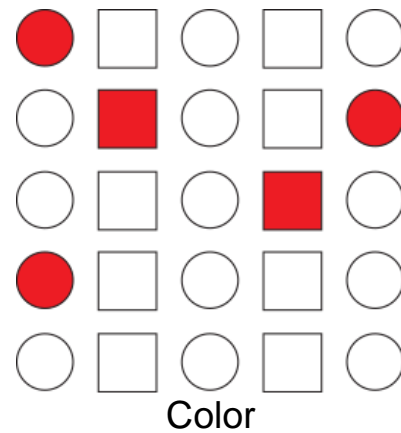
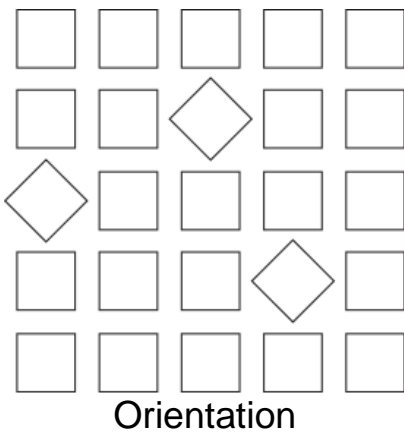
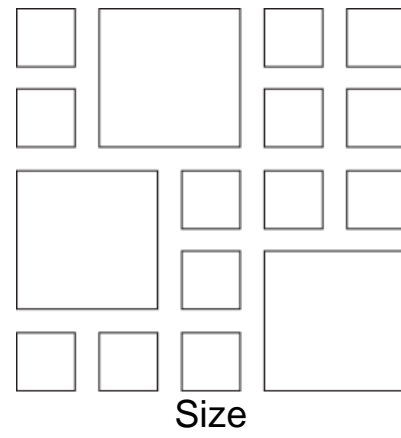
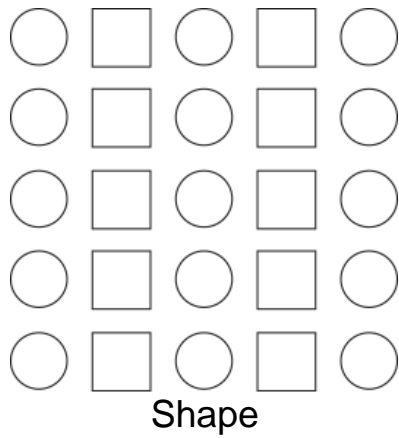


And this size gives us enough distance to have our brains make sense of the pixels.



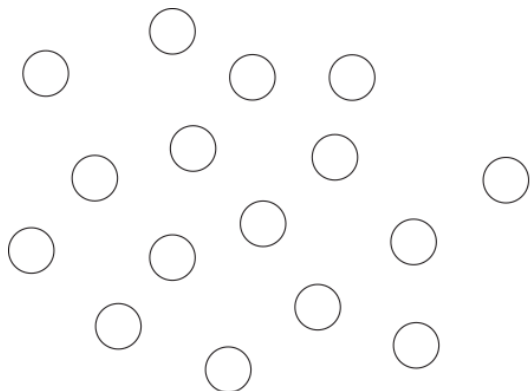
FIGURE—GROUND

Are these vases and candlesticks or two pairs of humans? We usually simplify a scene into the main object (the figure) and everything else, the background (or ground).

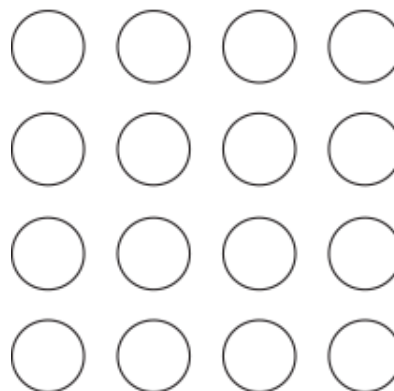


SIMILARITY

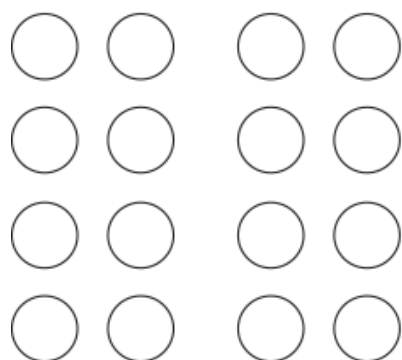
We see elements that are similar as more related than elements that are dissimilar. We organize objects by their relatedness to other objects within a group, but this can be affected by matters like shape, size, orientation, and, most importantly, color.



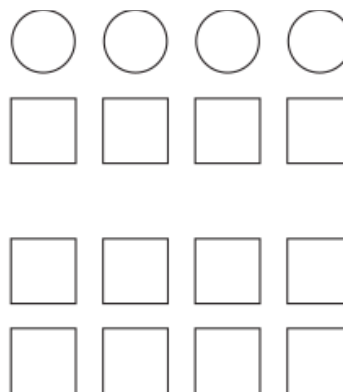
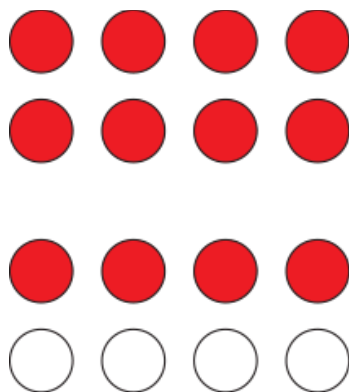
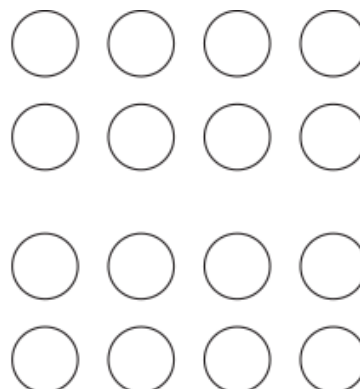
These circles have no relationship to one another.



But in proximity to one another they become a group.



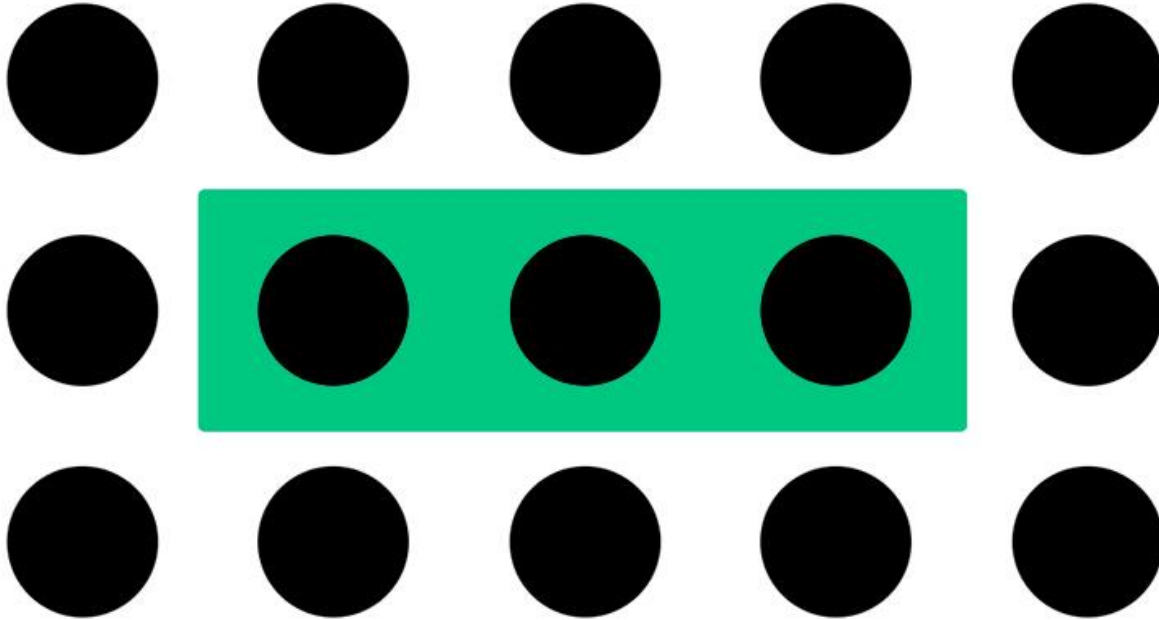
Changing the white space changes the relationships between elements in a group.



Proximity > Color

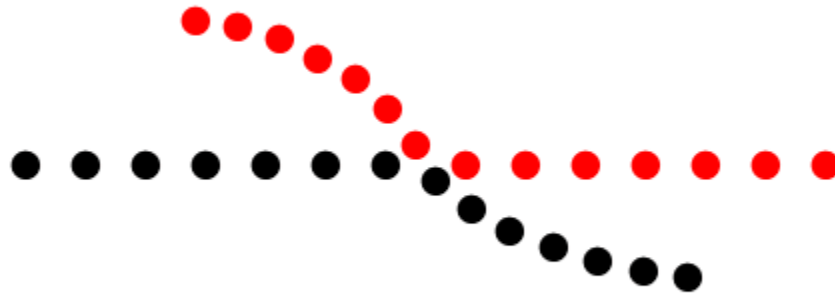
PROXIMITY

We see elements that are closer together to be more related than elements that are farther apart. Even greater than color, proximity is the strongest principle for indicating the relatedness of objects.



COMMON REGION

We see elements within a boundary as a group, and assume that they share some common characteristic or function. The green boundary around the three middle circles causes them to appear as one group and separates them from the other, less-related surrounding circles.

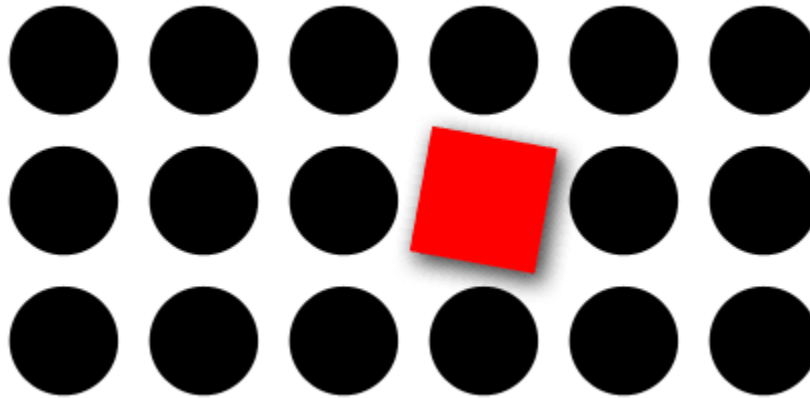


CONTINUITY

We automatically follow the shape of a line or curve. In the image above, we see a line and curve crossing, despite the fact that the colors indicate that this image contains four distinct line and curve segments that meet at a single point.

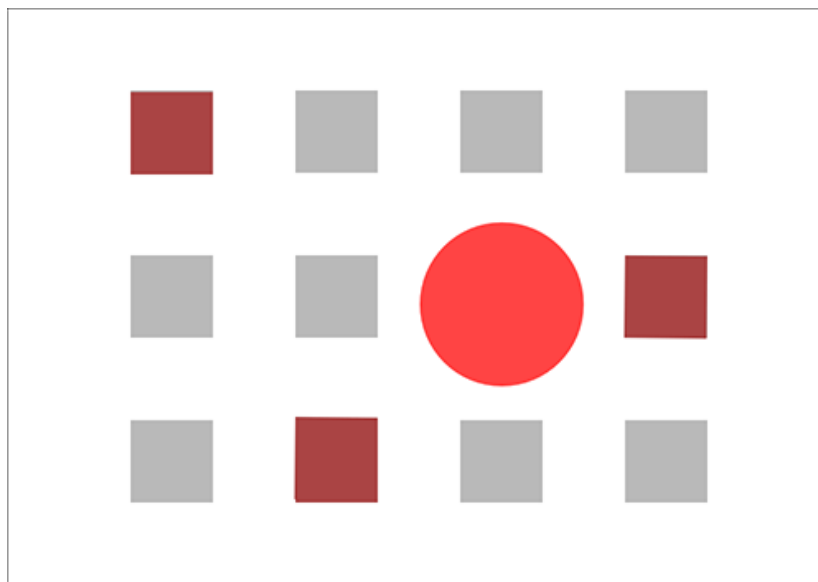


Lombard Street in San Francisco. Even though we can't see it completely, we can infer it through continuity.



FOCAL POINT

Focal points are areas of interest, emphasis, or difference within a composition. They are what first captures our attention in an image.



The circle and the three reddish squares are all focal points because they stand out from the other elements here. They contrast with the mass of gray squares. But the circle stands out the most (due to its color, size, and difference). So it's the dominant focal point.

The Critical Frame

How can we read this?

- Gaps and silences
- Manipulation of the image
- Positioning of the viewer

The Critical Frame

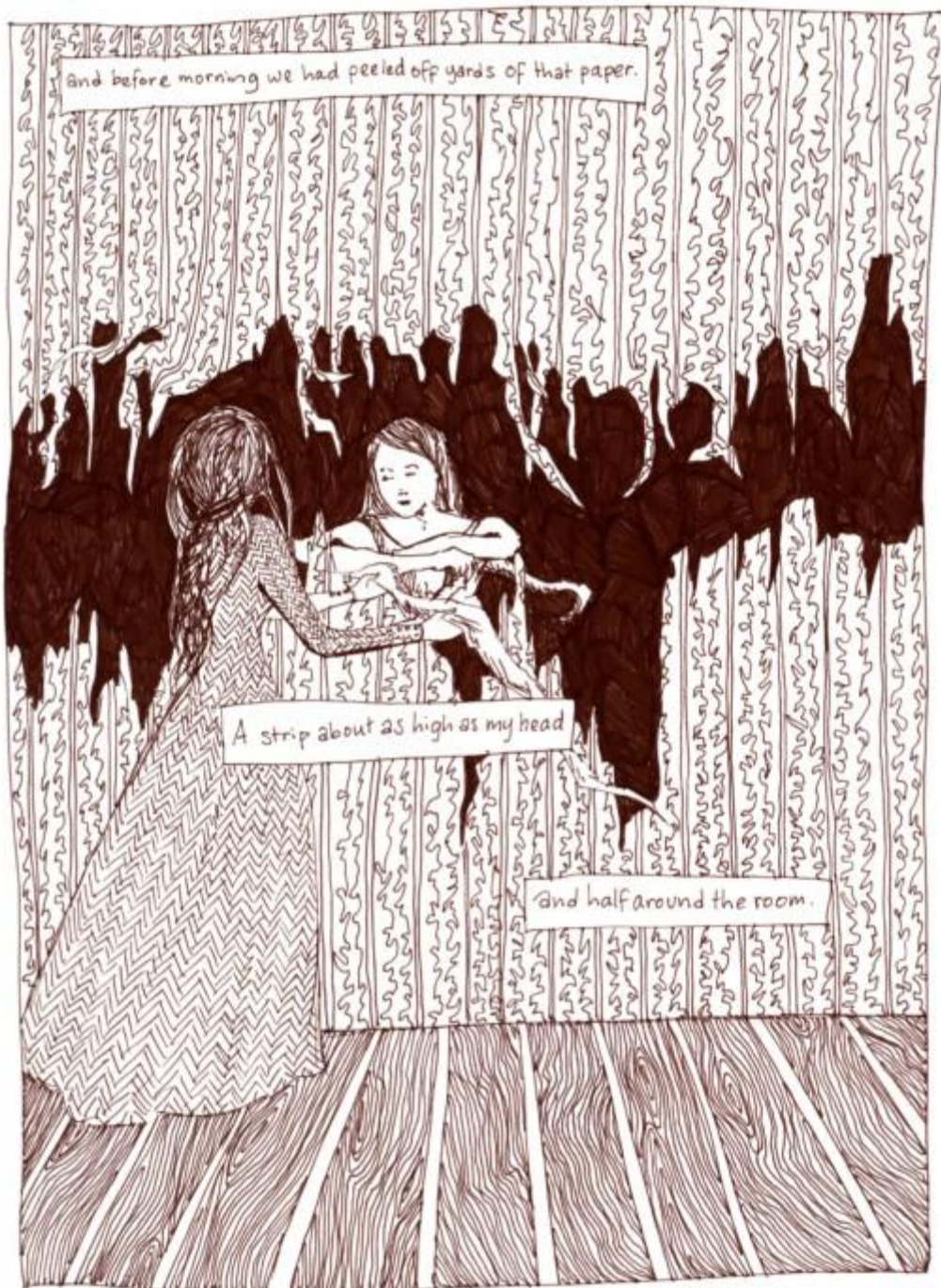
Gaps and silences

There is no such thing as a complete text or image; something is always missing. Artists choose which elements to include, which to emphasize, and which to omit. These choices create gaps, where information, examples, or details have been excluded. Our analysis should address the reasons for and the results of those decisions.

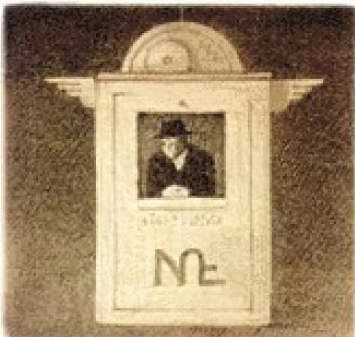
Gaps are often created for **clarity** (by simplifying a text), **emphasis** (by focusing on a specific detail), and **style** (by manipulating the tone and delivery).

Silences within texts exist at multiple levels. At the structural level, we may notice the erasure or marginalization of entire cultures, histories, or groups. And on the opposite end of the scale, sometimes what an author or character *does not say* carries more interpretative weight than what they do.

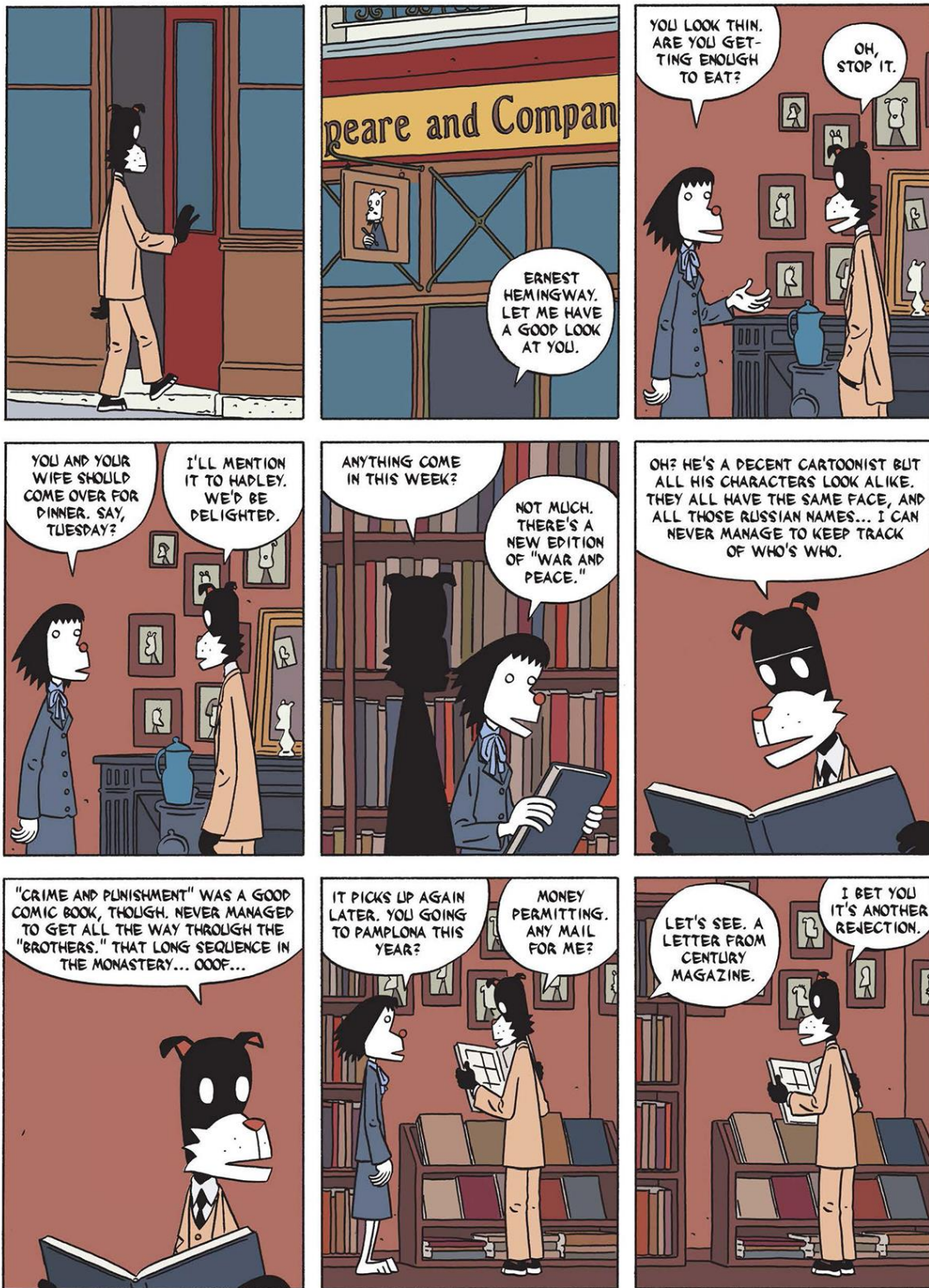
Graphic novels have a genre-specific element here: silent arguments emerging within an entirely visual, extra-linguistic scene, where images alone determine the amount and quality of information given.



This page from Sara Barkat's *The Yellow Wallpaper: A Graphic Novel*, attempts to address the gaps and silences in Gilman's original text.



Sean Tan's *The Arrival* is completely silent.



This page from Jason's *The Left Bank Gang* is full of gaps that seem designed especially for English majors to get the jokes.

The Critical Frame Manipulation of the image

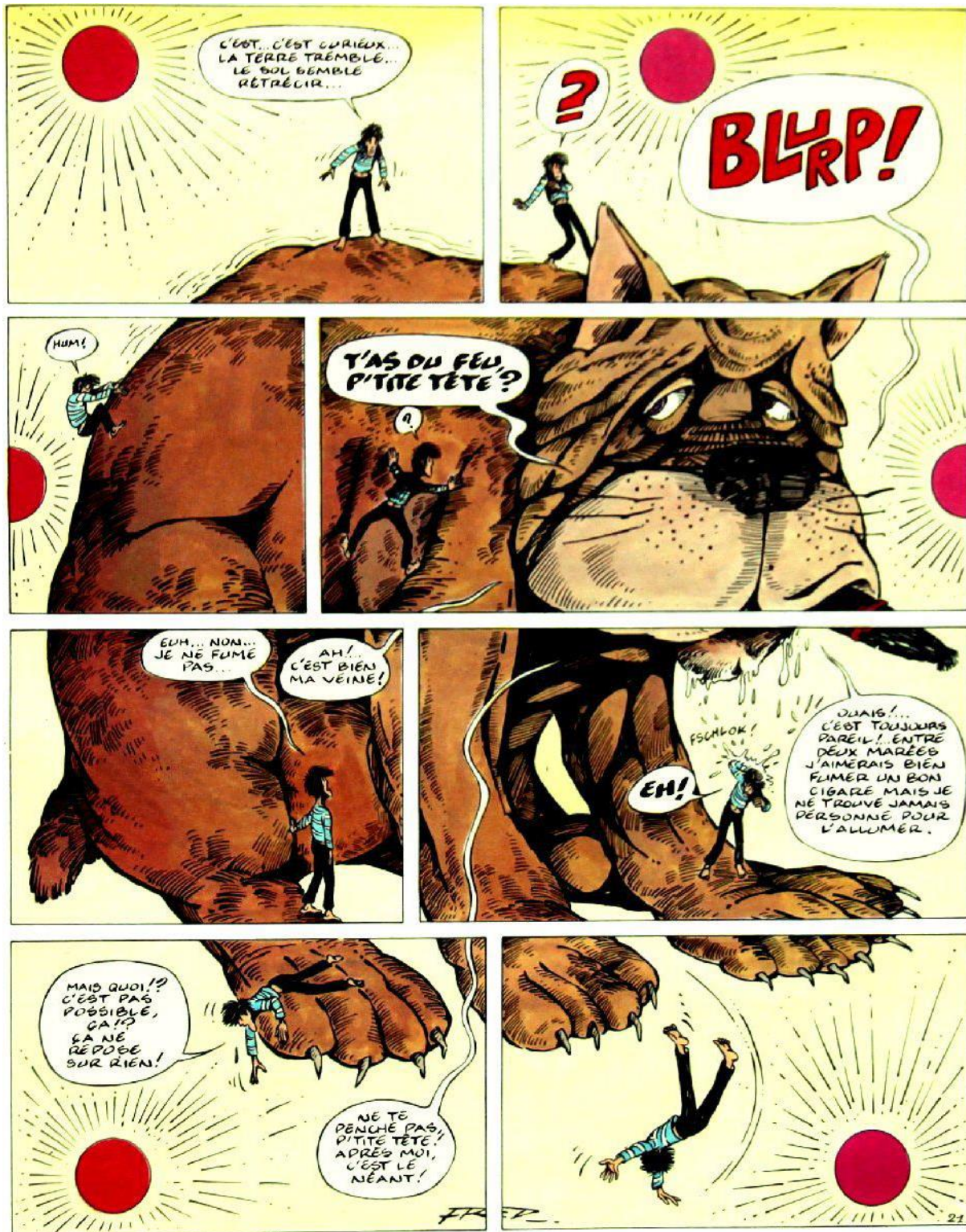
Although we've come to expect manipulations of realistic images in graphic novels, we still need to take note of those changes in order to fully analyze the panel, page, or work.



This partial page from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* adds an expressionistic element to the road in order to create a sense of impending doom.



Another page from *Maus* (in the “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” section) that distorts images with expressionistic techniques.



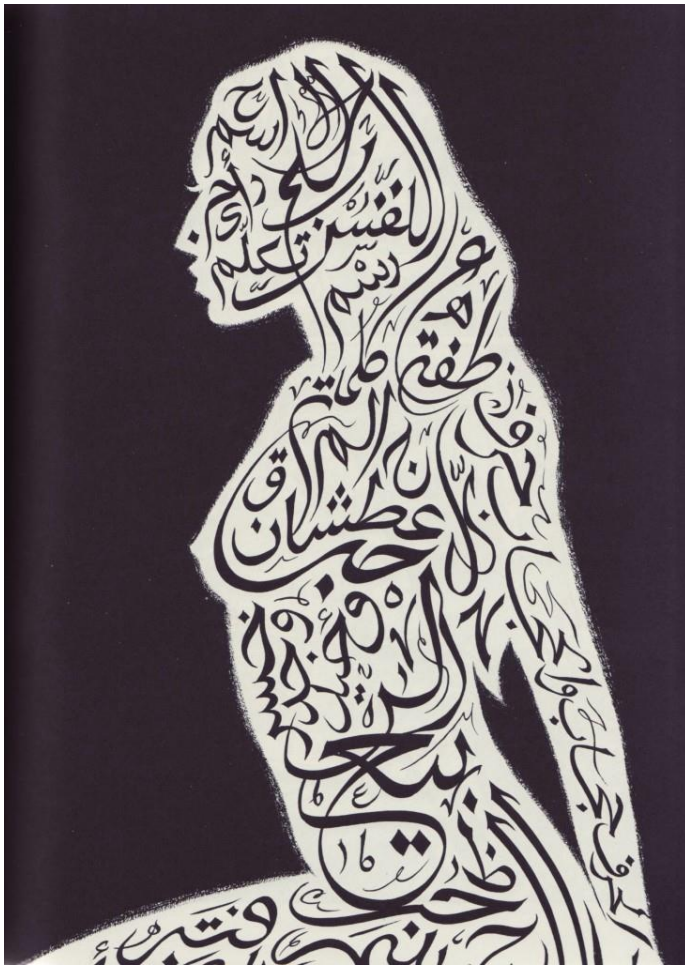
This page from *Philémon* by Fred manipulates a single image through its use of panels, then plays with perspective, motion, and time to achieve its effects.

The Critical Frame Positioning of the viewer

While it's related, in technical terms, to the framing of an image (which includes the shot, the POV, and the viewing angle), the rhetoric of a panel or image also positions viewers or readers in order to either reveal or hide information (dramatic irony) or evoke particular emotional reactions.



From Naoki Urasawa's *Pluto*, this page has just two characters facing one another. Yet the tension rises because of the repeating panels and the shifting distance.



These images from Craig Thomson's *Habibi* imitate the Islamic tradition of illustrating passages from the *Qur'an* through ornate calligraphy.

The silhouette here both covers and exposes the female form.



While here the calligraphy is both soothing and threatening.



This page from John Backderf's *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* uses composition, distance, and perspective to create a sense of melancholy and loss.



This spread from Atwood and Nault's *The Handmaid's Tale* uses color, foregrounding, distance, and perspective to make us identify with the past, not the present.

Framing Your Work

Writing about Graphic Novels

- Ways of writing about graphic novels
- The interplay of text and image

Framing Your Work | Ways of writing about graphic novels

There are a number of methods you can use to analyze and write about Graphic Novels. We'll introduce a few here with some brief overviews, then give you an example of a superior application of one of the most common methods for analysis.

FORMAL ANALYSIS / SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

The name gives it away; this analysis focuses on the form, the visual language of the material at hand. If you're using this method, you'd be paying attention to individual panels, to tiers, to page layout, color, composition, etc. In short, this method employs most of the material in this cheat sheet that might be new to you as a text-only English major.

CULTURAL STUDIES

You don't have to limit yourself to just looking at the formal means of a graphic novel, because these works also lend themselves to a range of what we might call "positional readings." This method looks at how the work visually and textually represents things like race, gender, politics, war, etc. You can probably apply this in your sleep to a text, but there are many more avenues to explore when you include sequential images as well.

Graphic novels often dramatize contemporary ideologies without the creative team behind them even being explicitly conscious of the fact. Whether consciously political or not, graphic novels can be used to engage with the acts of both representation and consumption, and to deepen our understanding of how this resonates with the societies and cultures in which they are read.

NARRATOLOGY

This approach uses techniques from literary and film theory. Obviously, graphic novels have a great deal in common with these disciplines (both tend to be narrative), but there are also significant points of departure through the genre's status as a hybrid form. That is, the words and pictures in a graphic novel are all static, but they present us with the illusion of dynamism.

HISTORICAL / AUTHORIAL PERSPECTIVES

Since this field is so new, there's been a rush to focus on the history of graphic novels and comics as a way to legitimize this discipline. (See Scott McCloud's ability to trace "comics" back to ancient Egypt in his *Understanding Comics*.) There are other veins of this method that look at particular trends or traditions (the memoir, the superhero, the anthropomorphized animal, etc.), or even the manifestations of a single author's voice (see Sacco, or Eisner, for example).

LESS COMMON APPROACHES

Although these methods are employed less frequently than others, they can at times offer some legitimate insights into a work or the culture in which it was created. If you know a bit about the history of Western thought, a philosophical approach might work. If you can get beyond the basics of Freud, Jung, Lacan, or Kristeva, a psychological approach could help. And if you follow fields like neuroscience, or even keep up with biologically-informed educational theory, a cognitive approach might prove fruitful.

IT'S ALL INTERDISCIPLINARY

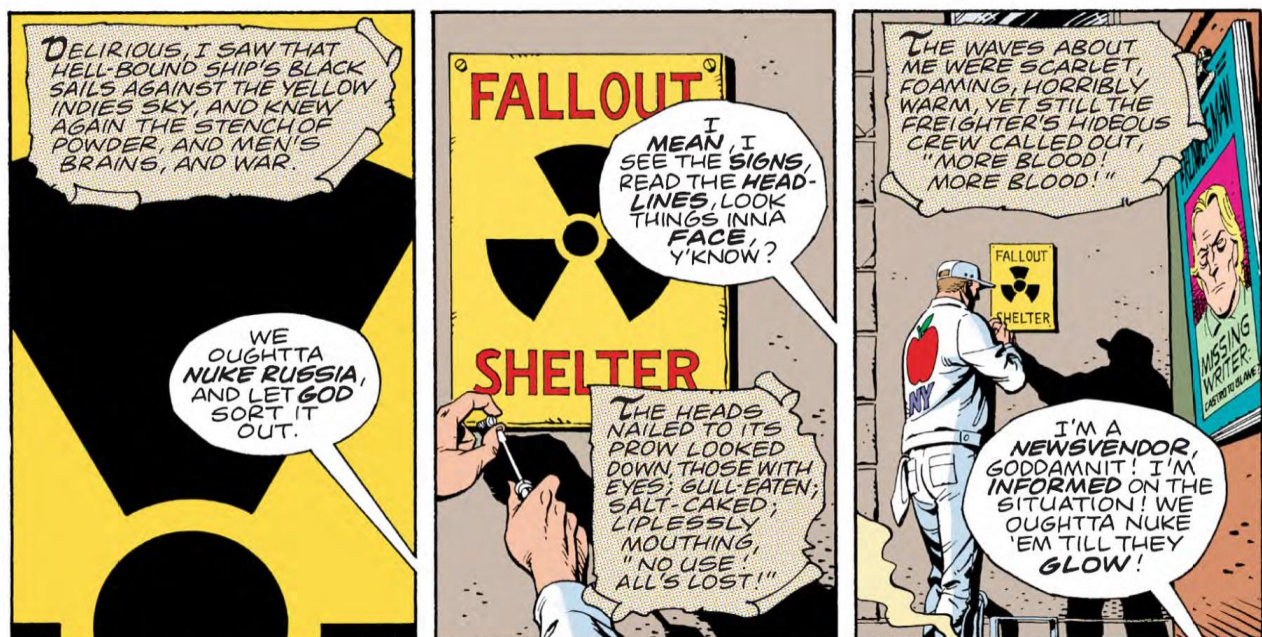
As the approaches above all illustrate, graphic novels, at their core, exist in the interstices between disciplines. So every single approach you can use for analyzing them either implicitly or explicitly relies on knowledge, hierarchies, and schema from other fields of study.

The material above was modified from *How to Study Comics and Graphic Novels*, by Enrique del Rey Cabero, Michael Goodrum, and Josean Morlesin Mellado, The Oxford Comics Network, 2021.

Framing Your Work | Interplay of text and image

Text in comics can serve as dialogue, narration, sound effect, commentary, clarification, image, and more. Once again, context is key, since you often can't tell what a piece of text is doing on a page without determining how it relates to the images it accompanies (and is part of). Reading text is what we do best, so it's no wonder that one of the most popular forms of analysis is one that looks at the way texts react to and reframe the images they accompany.

Here is an example of image and text interacting to create a complex whole:



Alan Moore and David Gibbon. *Watchmen*. DC Comics, 1987. Chapter III, page 1.

These are the first three panels of the third issue [now chapter] of *Watchmen*. Without any text, the panels would simply depict a man hanging a sign, pushing back from the extreme close-up in panel one to a medium shot of the same action in panel three. With the text, however, the panels develop a complicated interplay of different elements. There are three distinct types of text here: the text boxes, the speech balloons, and the sign and clothing text.

- The **TEXT BOXES** contain narration from a pirate comic book, which we discover a panel later is being read by a teenage boy at a newsstand. The language and shape of the text boxes indicate their distance from the principal narration, but the parallel text provides an ironic commentary on the main scene.

- The speaker behind the *SPEECH BALLOONS* is indicated in the third panel: a newsvendor expressing his fear and anger about the cold war. Notice how some words (“nuke Russia,” “God,” “mean,” “signs,” headlines,” “face,” “newsvendor,” “informed,” and “glow”) are bolded, giving a sense of spoken emphasis and volume.
- Finally, the *SIGN TEXT* is an instance of text as image. While the “Fallout Shelter” text simply mirrors the non-verbal icon on that sign, the “Missing Writer” sign in the third panel gestures toward another part of the narrative (the writer turns out to be a character, introduced several issues later). The “NY” under the apple on the workman’s jacket places the scene quickly.

More important than any of these three in isolation, however, is how they all work together. The horrifying imagery of the pirate story gives a mediated image of the potential destruction of nuclear war endorsed by the newsvendor’s dialogue, while the likelihood of such a war is given iconic reference through the fallout shelter sign. Not all comics feature this degree of ironic interplay between different types of text and image, but the example shows some of the ways that text and image can interrelate.

The material above was modified from “Writing About Comics and Graphic Novels.” The Writing Studio, Duke University, twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/comic.original.pdf

YOU GOTTA READ THIS

As with all of these cheat sheets, this one is just a hack, a collection of material that barely scratches the surface of the subject. So if you really want to get good at this, there are some authoritative texts you should know:

BIG GUNS

YOU REALLY CAN'T DO MUCH, OR HAVE MUCH TO SAY, UNLESS YOU KNOW THESE WORKS.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Pantheon, 1994.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Poorhouse Press, 1985.

LESSER LIGHTS

GOOD MATERIAL, BUT IN THE END THESE ALSO GENUFLECT TO EISNER AND MCLOUD.

Cabero, Enrique del Ray, Michael Goodrum, and Josean Morlesín Mellado. *How to Study Comics and Graphic Novels: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies*. Oxford Comics Network, 2021, www.torch.ox.ac.uk/files/howtostudycomicsgraphicnovels-agraphicintroductiontocomicsstudiespdf.

Kukkonen, Karin. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. John Wiley and Sons, 2013.

A DIFFERENT TAKE

NEIL COHN'S WORK TAKES A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO GRAPHICS.

Cohn, Neil. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Cohn, Neil. *Who Understands Comics?: Questioning the Universality of Visual Language Images*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.