A Very Short Intro to Visual Analysis

Or

"How is this picture doing what it does?"

CONSIDERING . . .

Elements common to all images

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

Elements specific to film

Narrative

- Plot & Story
- Diegetic elements
- Nondiegetic elements
- Causality
- Time
  - Order
  - Duration
  - Frequency

Style

- Mise-en-scène
  - Setting
  - Props
  - Costumes/Makeup
  - Lighting
  - Acting
  - Blocking

COMPOSITION

Graphic arts like film and photography have specific tools and language they use for analysis in their fields. Most of the examples of these elements will be from still images, because they're easier to display in this format.

Mise-en-scène

At its most basic, this is the arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play. In French it means "setting the stage," but in film analysis, it refers to everything in front of the camera, including the set design, lighting, and actors. Elements of *mis-en-scène* in films include:

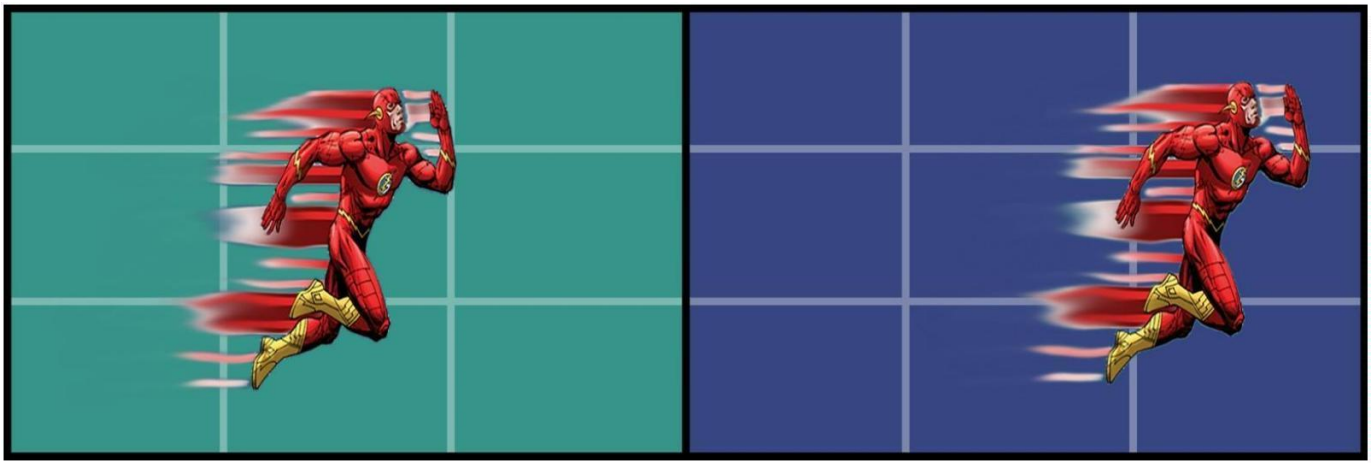
Sets	Lighting	Actor blocking
Props	Costumes	Shot composition

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 the image classically balanced, where the subject is centered? Or is it asymmetrically balanced, using the rule of thirds?



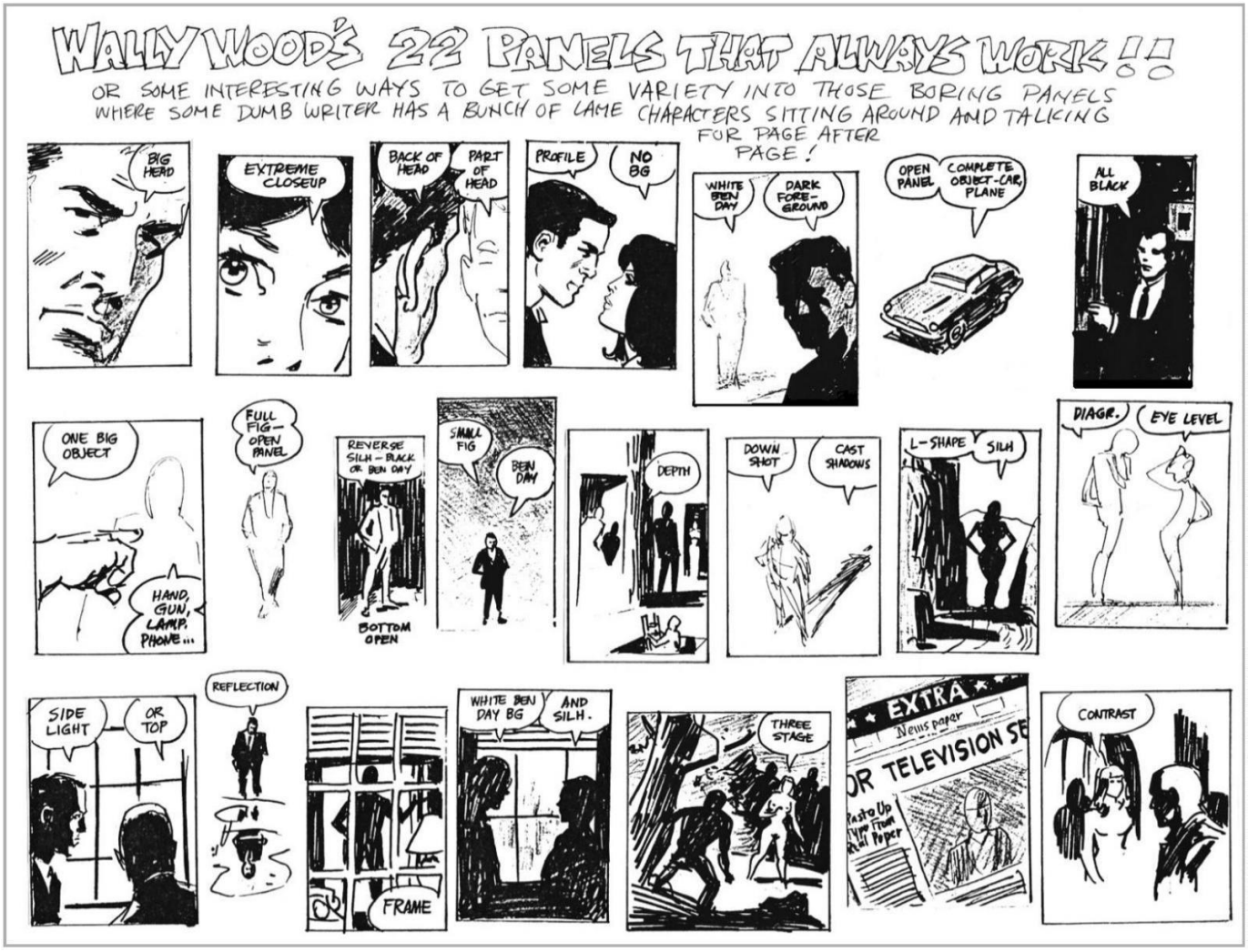
Classical use of the rule of thirds *Asymmetrical use of the rule of thirds*

FRAMING

Shot

The idea of a shot differs between still images and films. In still images, panels or frames present a single static image.

Wallace Wood's ideas for framing panels have been influential for generations. This is a one-sheet of his advice for illustrators.

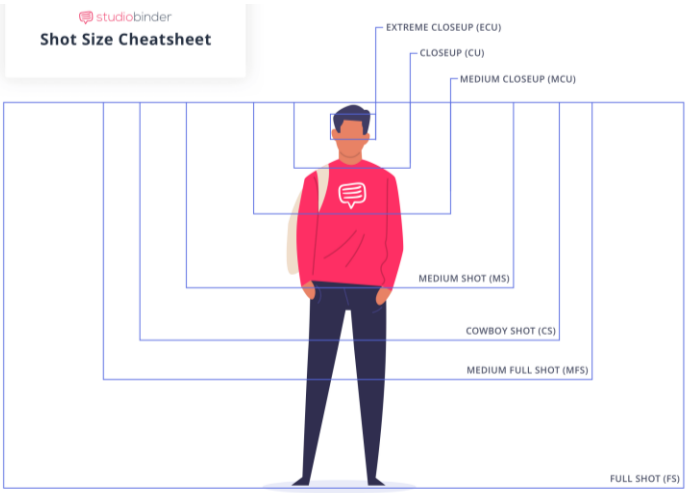


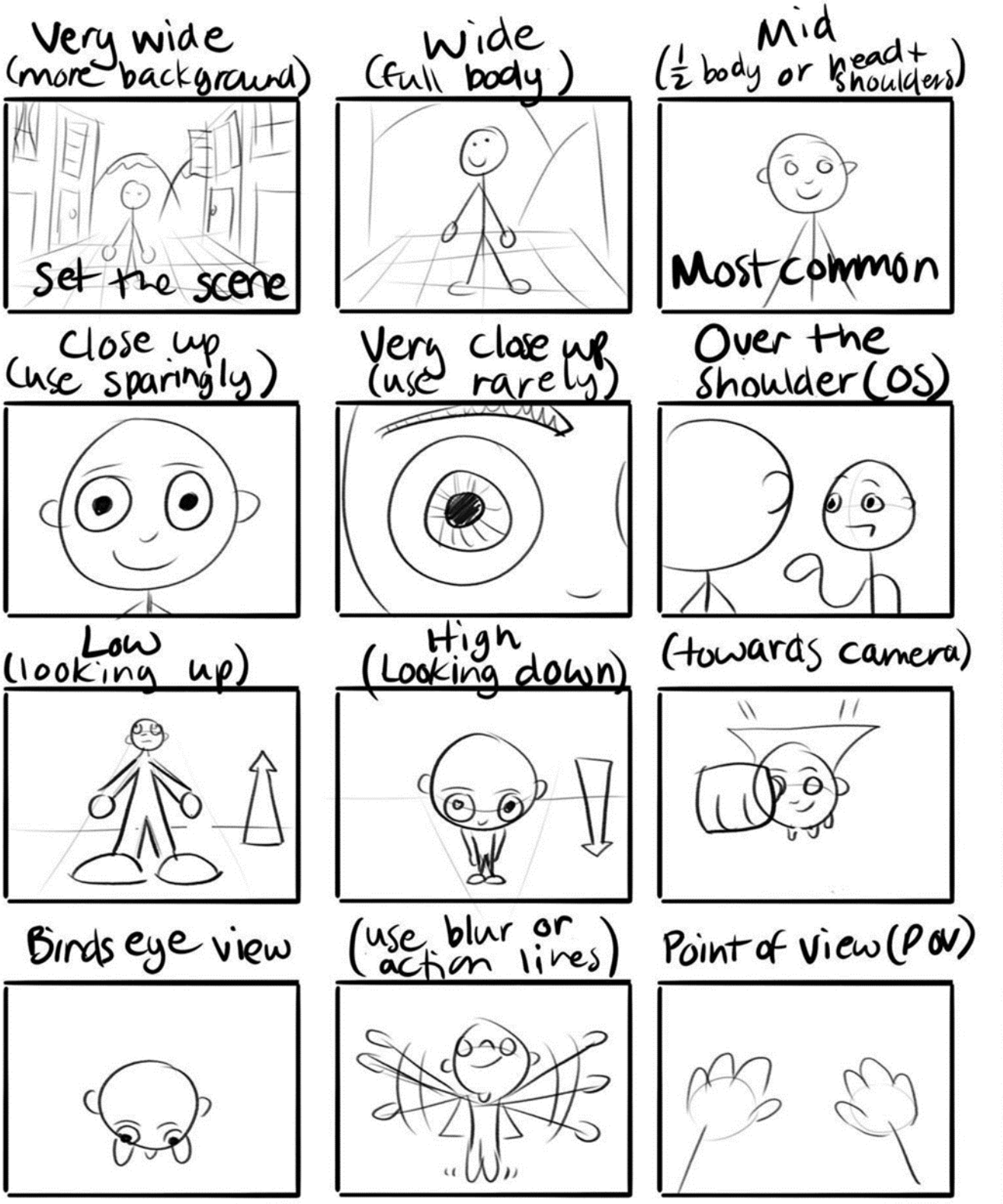
Each shot has a distinct **Point of View (POV)** and a specific **Viewing Angle.**

In films, shots are considered the most basic building blocks, because filmmakers work by creating a film shot by shot, and then, during editing, they join these shots in sequence to compose the overall film. They can vary from an extreme wide shot (from *Mad Max: Fury Road*)

To an extreme close-up (from *Little Miss Sunshine*).

Between these two there are long shots, wide shots, medium wide or medium long shots, full shots, cowboy shots, medium shots, medium close-ups, and close-ups.





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

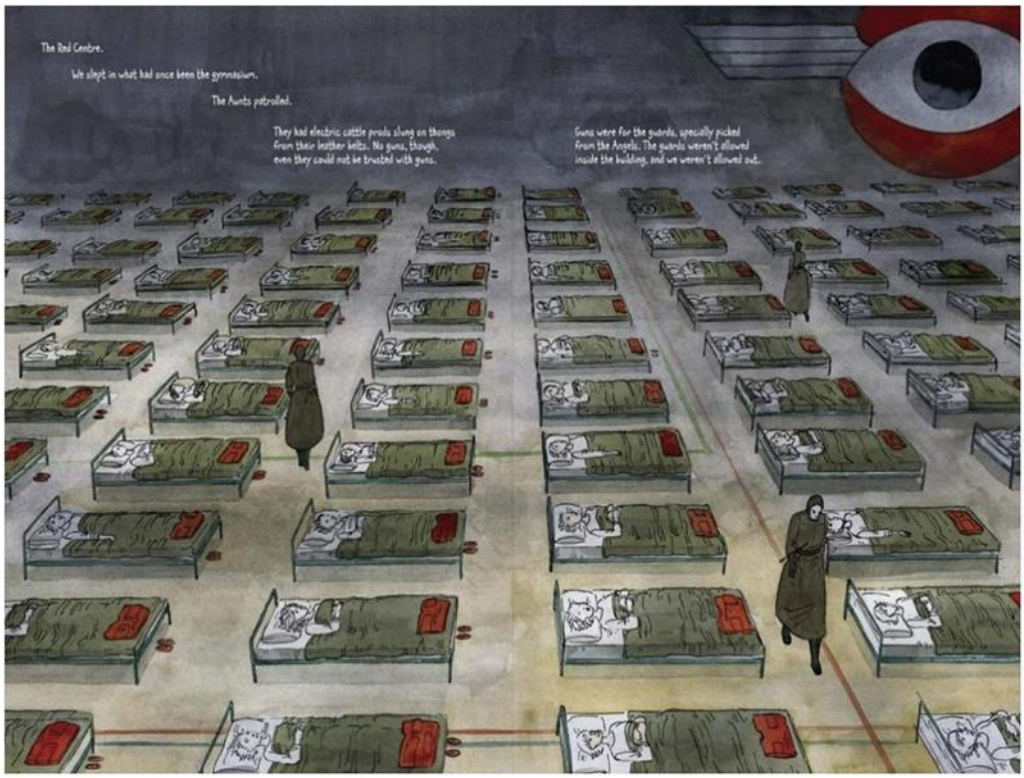
OVERHEAD

AERIAL

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 element within an image can be made salient through placement, color, size, focus, distance, or any combination of these. Here's an image from *The Handmaid's Tale*:



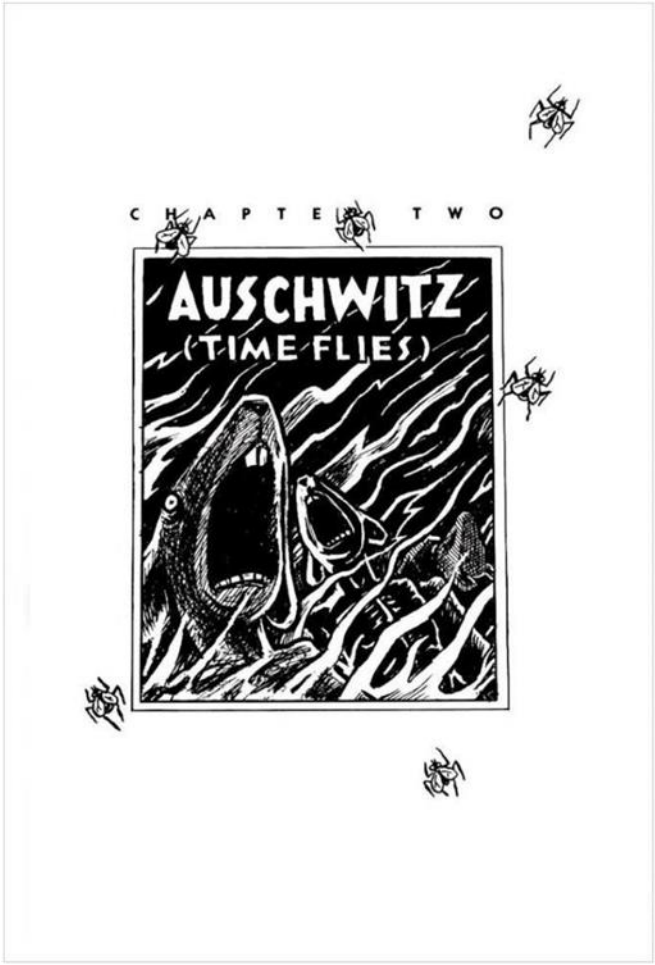
Those strong vertical lines draw your eye from the bottom of the image to the top. They create a firm sense of regimentation, and take you back into the darkness. Fully ¼ of this image is the back wall of this large room, but the point at which the floor becomes the wall is pretty fuzzy. The shading of the back wall makes it seem like we're looking through a huge window onto a darkened landscape where these lines go 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 that "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 disproportionally large, and hovers over the grid occupied by the Handmaids.

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. The rows of cots in the previous image form a set of vectors. 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.That draws your eye 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, they look as if they've landed on the page.

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.

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 Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, and where each element is located.

It's one of the first shots we get of Adrian Veidt, known as Ozymandias when he was a "masked adventurer." In this image, the man himself is relegated to the background, and is turned away from us. But the foreground is populated with action figures, which are at least turned in our direction. Then there's a newspaper, computer, and desk set. The placement of these is no accident, as they all tell us important things about Veidt.

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.

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.

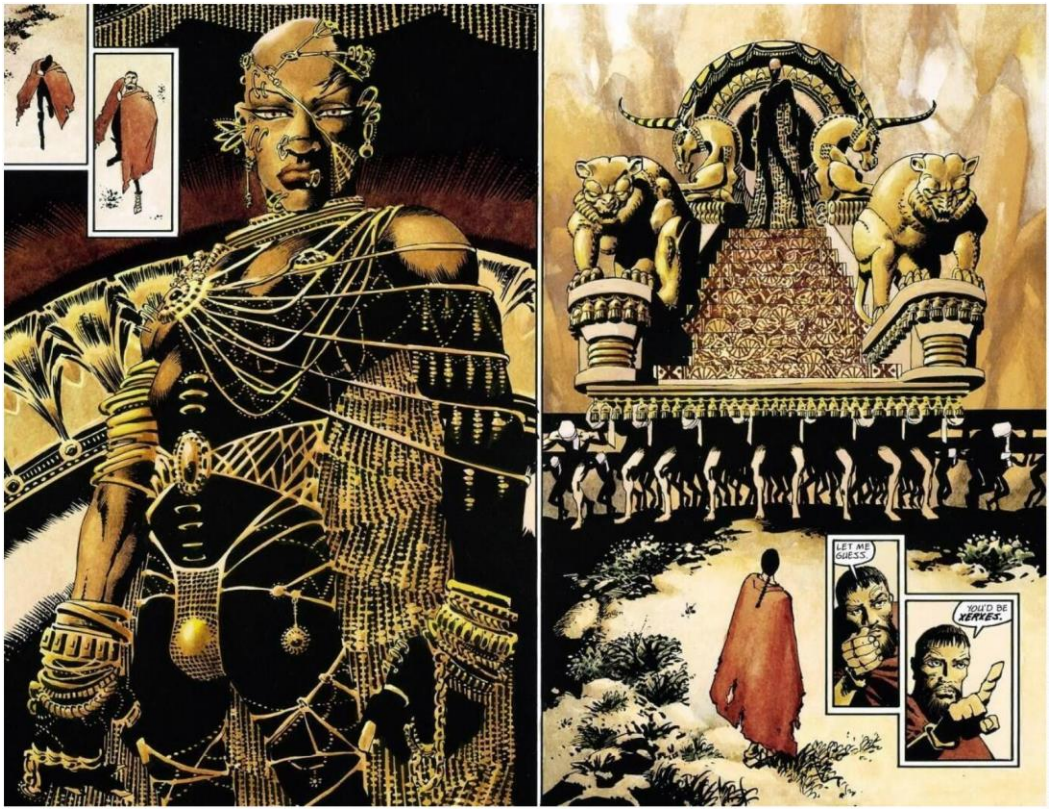
Accessories

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?

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.

This shot from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* uses chiaroscuro lighting to achieve a sense of depth.

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?

Color meanings can be culturally conditioned. In the West, white is often linked to weddings and new beginnings. In China, however, it carries the opposite meaning: death and mourning. White is the traditional color of funerals and grief. Family members of the deceased often wear white or off-white clothing. Red, on the other hand, symbolizes joy, fertility, and good fortune, so it's appropriate for weddings. Brides traditionally wear red, and red decorations are everywhere.

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

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.

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.

Contrast can also help us define characters. The differences between Chihiro and No-Face in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* highlight their different states of being.

SYMBOLISM

Symbols in film communicate ideas, emotions, and themes beyond dialogue and action. Through visual motifs, color, props, sound, and camera work, filmmakers embed layers of meaning that resonate subconsciously with audiences.

The most common symbols are visual, with objects or props like mirrors, clocks, or masks often representing time, identity, and perception. Settings and scenery can also symbolize freedom, confinement, or other emotional states.

The totem in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* symbolizes the fight between reality and illusion.

The girl in the red coat in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* symbolizes innocence in the midst of great tragedy.

ELEMENTS SPECIFIC TO FILM

NARRATIVE

Films that tell stories can be considered in two parts: narrative and style.

A narrative is pretty simple; it's a set of events unfolding in time and space, linked by cause and effect. This definition considers three things: causality, time, and space.

There are *non-narrative films*, that don't follow a traditional storyline or plot structure and instead focus on visual and thematic elements rather than a linear narrative. Types of non-narrative film include experimental films, abstract animations, montage films, and documentaries. One of the most compelling is Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqats*i, an essay in images and sound on the state of American civilization" made up of a montage of visuals accompanied by minimal music, without narration or dialogue.

Stills can't really capture the experience of a film like *Koyaanisqats*i

These shouldn't be confused with *non-linear films*, which still tell a story, but present the events their events out of sequence. Films like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* or *Memento* are still narratives, but jumble their timelines.

Film style is the sum of all the techniques that concretely make up a film, a collection of all the choices made by a director, or cinematographer, producer, or actor, or production designer, or special effects supervisor, or (this list can go on for a while).

Let's slice that idea of a narrative a little finer, with another word pair.

PLOT AND STORY

A film's **story** includes everything that happens in the narrative, both events that are shown and those a viewer can only infer. If you saw a scene filmed at my house, for instance, you might notice a table saw in my workshop. So you might infer that, in that story, I'm a woodworker, even though it might not ever be mentioned in the film.

We can infer quite a bit about the character of Michael Corleone from the final scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. Nothing has been presented explicitly to us, but we know that he has become everything his father did not want him to be. As the door closes, shutting us out from his world, we know he will be consumed by both righteous anger and unlimited power. The film's story has given us all the information we need to know that he lives in a world we can no longer enter.

A film's **plot**, however, is much more specific than its story. It's all the events that are presented to viewers, in the order in which they are presented.

DIEGETIC AND NONDIEGETIC ELEMENTS

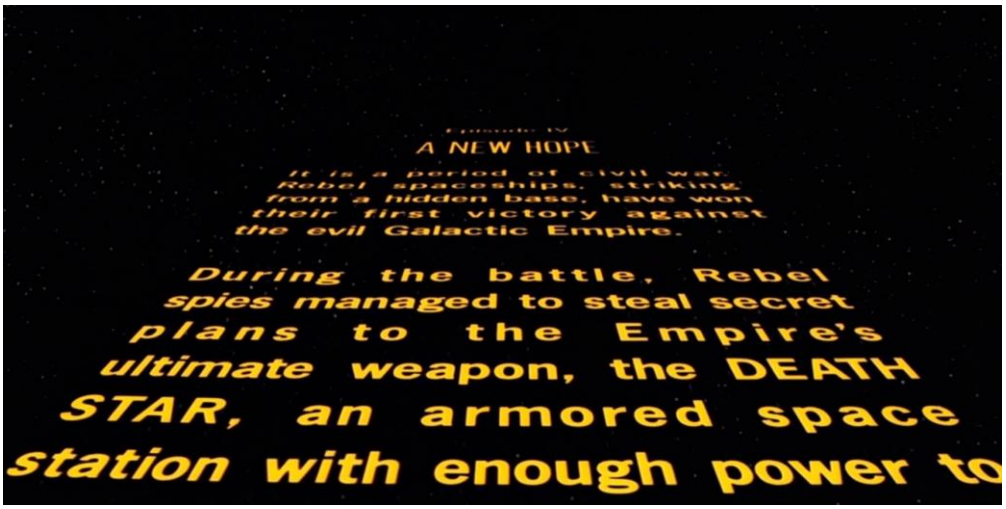
The world in which a film's story unfolds is called the **diegesis**. Elements within the film can either be a part of that world, or be added to it.

Elements that exist in the world of the story are **diegetic.**

The musicians in *Sinners* play music, and people in the scene can hear that music, because it exists in the world of the film. Costumes, props, and characters can all be diegetic.

But there are elements in a film that can be **nondiegetic**, where they're not really a part of the world of the story, and the characters within the world of the story don't interact with these elements.

So, for instance, the Imperial Star Destroyers that come into frame at the beginning of *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* don't have to try to avoid the upward crawl of yellow text that opens the film, because, even though this text looks like it stretches back into the reaches of space, it is not in this space. The text is nondiegetic.



Some common nondiegetic elements in film include:

- **Background music** or a **film score** that sets the tone or enhances the mood of a scene.
- **Voice-overs** that provide insight into a character's thoughts or feelings.
- **Text on screen** that provides context or information.
- **Sound effects** that are added for dramatic effect.
- **Montages** or **flashbacks** that provide additional information or backstory.

CAUSALITY

Causality is just what you think it is. In most story films, every effect has a cause, and vice-versa. We can recognize that every action has consequences. If a scene is set in a poolroom, when we see the pool cue strike a ball, we know that the ball will move in a predictable direction. Filmmakers bank on our innate understanding of this, and either lean into it or deliberately mess with it.

The “causes” in films tend to be characters. We watch them to see what they do, and to see what happens to them and the other characters as a result of their actions.

In a film with strict causality, Event A triggers Event B, which triggers Event C, and so on. For many films, that’s the order in which the events are presented to us.

However, there are entire genres that deliberately reveal effects before their causes. Mystery films rely on this. And it becomes the task of the audience to deduce the causes from the effects.

In *Clue*, audiences know there’s been a murder, and spend the rest of the movie trying to figure out who committed it.

Three different possible solutions to the mystery were filmed, so audiences would see a different one depending on the cinema they saw the movie in.

Since all three options had to remain viable in order for the endings to make sense, viewers couldn't deduce the murderer from the clues presented.

The film had three different endings, and the one you saw was based multiple endings (a fine example of nondiegetic material) meant that it was almost impossible for audiences to deduce who the murderer was.

TIME — ORDER

Most story films manipulate time, compressing it, expanding or, or skipping over it. The three most important elements about time in film are the order in which the events are presented, their duration, and their frequency.

A plot may show events in an order that differs from the chronological order of the story. Quentin Tarentino's *Pulp Fiction*, for example, deliberately presents events in a non-linear way, which is exciting and off-putting:

Audiences see four segments, in this order:

1. Prologue – Diner robbery
2. "Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife"
3. "The Gold Watch"
4. "The Bonnie Situation"
5. Epilogue – Same diner robbery, different outcome

But this is the real chronological, or cause-and-effect order:

1. "The Bonnie Situation" & Diner Robbery (Day 1 morning)
2. "Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife" (Day 1 evening)
3. "The Gold Watch" (Day 2 morning — Vincent dies)

Although the plot of the film ends with Vincent and Jules leaving the diner, the story ends here.

TIME — DURATION

Filmmakers also work with temporal duration. It's rare for a film to structure its narrative in "real time," meaning that the time it takes for the story to transpire for the characters matches exactly how long it takes for it to unfold on the screen.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, two characters commit a murder then, immediately after, host a dinner party that might or might not culminate with the discovery of their crime.

Much more common are films that manipulate duration in various ways.

We can consider duration in terms of the story, plot, and screen.

Story duration is the timespan across which a story unfolds, whether or not all the events are explicitly depicted in the film. In the example above with my table saw, the time I spent learning how to make heirloom furniture would be part of the story duration, even though the audience would never see me do that.

Plot duration is just the time that is represented within the diegetic world.

Screen duration is the run time of a film. A ninety-three-minute film has a screen duration of ninety-three minutes.

TIME — FREQUENCY

How many times an event is represented is its **frequency.**

In most films the frequency of each event equals one. That is, each event is represented one time.

But there are exceptions. Early in *Pulp Fiction*, two people eat in a diner. One shouts, “Garçon, coffee!” Moments later, the couple decides to rob the diner. The shout for the server doesn’t mean much to the audience the first time they hear it. But later in the film, the audience hears it again, and it carries much greater weight, because it brings the audience back to a precise moment and place in the story and tells the audience what’s going to happen next, when they are watching two different characters whom we have come to care about greatly.

““Garçon means ‘boy.’”

STYLE

In film, **style** is the sum of all the techniques that concretely make up a film.

Mise-en-scène

While we've seen this term before, here it refers to everything in front of the camera, which means it will focus on these elements:

PLACE	PEOPLE	STAGING
Setting	Costumes / Makeup	Acting
Props	Lighting	Blocking

Each of these elements falls somewhere on a spectrum, with realism on one end, and stylization on the other:

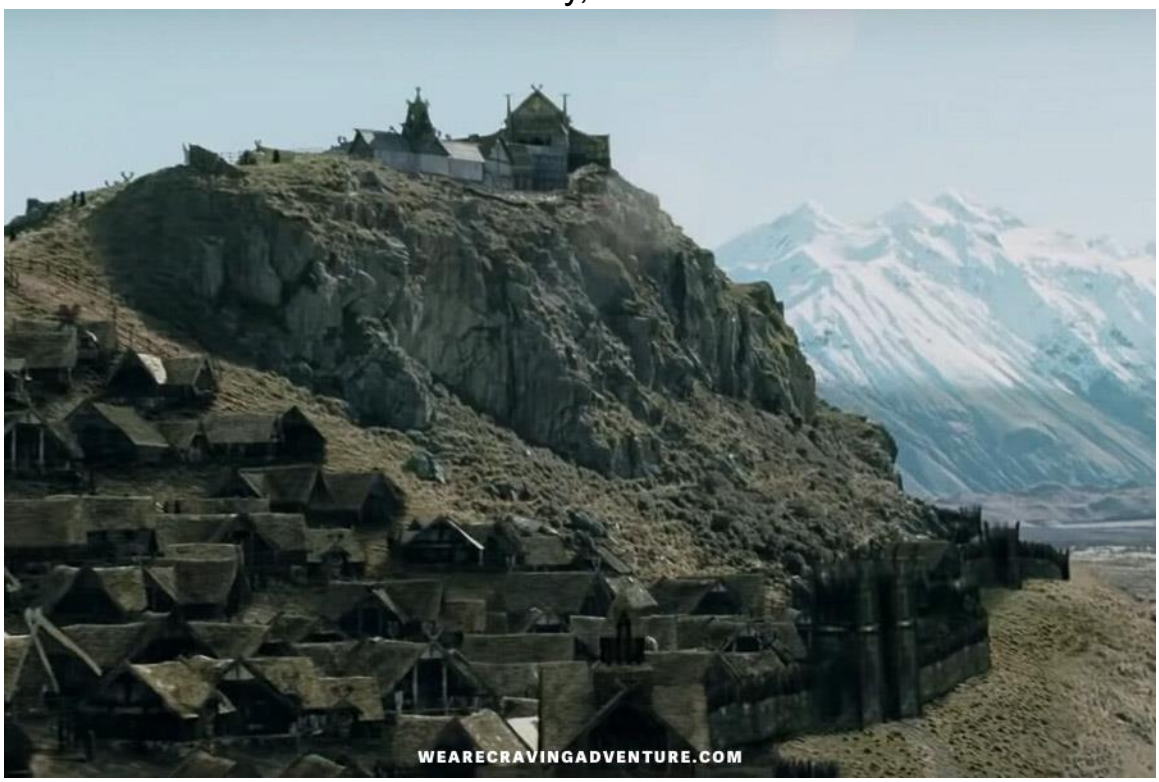
Stylization pushes an element in a film outside the bounds that we would expect to see if we encountered that element in our daily experience (or perhaps in another film).

SETTING

Location filming vs. Studio Filming

Using an existing locale can be associated with notions of realism; filmmakers can also create depth that can't be equaled in a studio.

Mount Sunday, New Zealand



Edoras, the capital of Rohan, in Peter Jackson's *The Two Towers*.

Filming in a studio allows far more control, but is more stylized, as these stills from Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* illustrate.

PROPS

A prop is an object that serves some function within the narrative. The spinning top at the end of *Inception* is a prop. The ring that Frodo bears in the *Lord of the Rings* movies is a prop.

Props can help define characters, or serve as a repeating visual image for audiences (a **motif)**, so that just seeing the prop recalls the character or the shot.

COSTUME & MAKEUP

Like the other aspects of mise-en-scène, a character's costume or makeup can pick up colors or other details that play into a motif, provide clues to a character's nature or psychology, and contribute in striking or subtle ways to a shot's composition. A costume can also act as a disguise that a viewer might or might not see through.

These can slide around quite a bit on the realism scale, from fantastically stylized, as in Brad Bird's *The Incredibles*:

To the absurdly realistic, as in Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*:

LIGHTING AND SHADOWS

A shot's lighting can come from diegetic sources of illumination (the sun, candles, lamps) within the setting, nondiegetic ones located outside the frame, or a combination of the two. All light creates shadows, and there are two kinds in films.

An **attached shadow** is a shadow cast by something onto itself because it's not fully illuminated. Mrs. Robinson's leg, in Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*, is a good example. The side of a planet that's facing away from the sun it orbits is in darkness; this is an attached shadow. Noses cast attached shadows on faces.

The **cast shadow** from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* may be the most famous silhouette in horror film history. These result from something being placed between an object and a light source such that a shadow of that something—tree branches, a person—falls on the object. A film may use shadows for expressive purposes, suggesting a character's interior state or foreshadowing events.

LIGHT — QUALITY

Lighting quality can be hard and even harsh, such as in sunlight at noon or under an interrogator's lamp. Shadows are sharp-edged under this intense sort of lighting. Or lighting can be more diffuse, softening shadows and decreasing the contrast, or the difference between an image's darkest and lightest tones.

Two stills from Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* can illustrate this difference. First, a hard-lit close-up, which washes out the character's face:

Here's another close-up that is more softly lit:

The quality of the light creates a response in the audience.

LIGHT — DIRECTION

Light can come from any direction in a shot. Top lighting is probably the most flattering, and bottom lighting is deliberately off-putting. Then there's backlighting, which can make figures glow, giving them a halo that that makes them look unrealistic. In black-and-white films, backlighting can make figures easier to pick out from their backgrounds. When backlighting leaves figures entirely or predominantly in shadow, this is silhouette lighting.

Top lighting in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*.

Bottom lighting in James Whale's *Frankenstein*.

In Hitchcock's *Psycho* shower scene, we know that there is a physical being wielding a knife, but the backlighting means that we just don't know who or what it is—which is terrifying.

This backlighting in Martin Scorcese's *Shutter Island* actually separates the character from the background.

ACTING — BLOCKING

Unlike other aspects of film style, acting can be hard to analyze because we don't have the consistent terminology to describe exactly what, say, Robert de Niro is doing in *The Deer Hunter*, as opposed to what Jim Carrey is doing in *Dumb and Dumber*. We can use that stylism spectrum here as well. Carrey does broad physical comedy, which no one expects to look real as long as it's funny. He grimaces, leaps around, makes stupid noises, twists his body into ludicrous positions, and telegraphs his emotions in the most hyperbolic fashion. De Niro, in contrast, keeps his gestures small and grounds everything he does in the psychology of his character.

Although the scene itself might be over the top, de Niro always keeps his acting realistic.

We don't expect realism from films like *Dumb and Dumber* and characters like Lloyd Christmas.

BLOCKING

Performance blocking, or **stage blocking**, or **actor blocking**, refers to how one or more actors move around the space during a production. This can be blocking in a stage play or blocking in a scene for movies or television. Blocking isn't simply where the actors move through a scene, but also how they interact with their environment, including how they manipulate their body language. Blocking as a film term means the same thing as blocking in theater, but stage plays have limited space whereas film blocking might include moving props, vehicles, and multiple locations.

Staging a scene means placing and moving objects in the frame, as well as the camera in relation to performance blocking.

Blocking and staging can involve green screens and CGI, as this still from the Russo brothers' *Avengers: Infinity War* demonstrates.