

READING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

READING COMICS? HOW HARD CAN IT BE?

IT'S NOT THAT IT'S DIFFICULT, BUT THERE'S ANOTHER LEVEL OF LITERACY THAT YOU USE, VISUAL LITERACY, WITH ITS OWN VOCABULARY AND ANALYTIC PROCESSES.

VISUAL LITERACY

VISUAL LITERACY IS THE ABILITY TO DECODE, INTERPRET, CREATE, QUESTION, CHALLENGE, AND EVALUATE TEXTS THAT COMMUNICATE WITH VISUAL IMAGES AS WELL AS, OR INSTEAD OF, WORDS.

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 IN THE FIRST STAGES OF EXAMINING AN IMAGE OR VISUAL TEXT. IT IS IMPORTANT TO BEGIN BY EXAMINING THE IMAGE AS A WHOLE.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS OFFER A WAY TO BEGIN THIS DISCUSSION. FOR EACH QUESTION, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO USE EVIDENCE FROM THE IMAGE TO JUSTIFY YOUR RESPONSES, USING THE LANGUAGE OF VISUAL DESIGN. THROUGH THESE DISCUSSIONS, DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE IMAGE MAY EMERGE WHICH FORM THE BASIS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND EXPLORATION.

1. WHERE DOES THIS IMAGE COME FROM? IS IT PART OF A SEQUENCE (PAGE FROM A BOOK OR WEBSITE; 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 HAS THE IMAGE-MAKER CHOSEN TO SHOW THIS IMAGE THIS WAY? HOW ELSE MIGHT THIS BE SHOWN? WHAT DIFFERENCE MIGHT THIS MAKE?

L. I. E.

THE THREE LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING AN IMAGE

IN ORDER TO DEVELOP YOUR ANALYTICAL THINKING AND SEMIOTICALLY-INFORMED OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS, YOU NEED TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH A FOCUSED, CAREFULLY-SEQUENCED PROCESS THAT WILL RESULT IN VISUAL COMPREHENSION. THIS PROCESS MOVES THROUGH THREE GRADUATED LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING: THE LITERAL, THE INFERENTIAL, AND THE EVALUATIVE.

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 DEEPER THINKING ABOUT THIS.)

3: EVALUATIVE/APPLIED:

EVALUATE, GENERALIZE, HYPOTHESIZE, SYNTHESIZE, THINK CRITICALLY, THINK CREATIVELY, APPLY TO OTHER CONTEXTS.

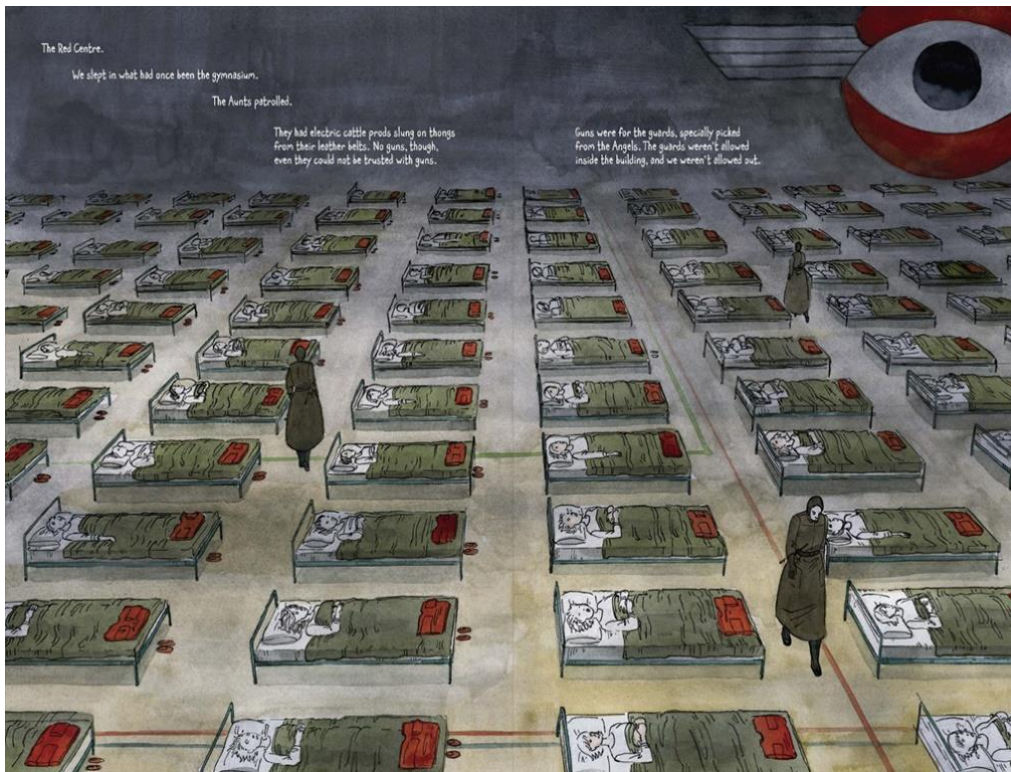
WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THIS? (COMBINE THE LITERAL AND INFERENTIAL INFORMATION FROM THE TEXT WITH OTHER IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE TO EXTEND THINKING BEYOND THE TEXT.)

ESSENTIAL TECHNIQUES

SALIENCE

SALIENCE IS HOW WELL AN OBJECT STANDS OUT FROM THE BACKGROUND. OUR EYES ARE ALWAYS INITIALLY 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*?



NOTICE 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 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, 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.

SO I'D SAY THAT THE MOST SALIENT FEATURE HERE, TO ME, IS THE FLYING EYEBALL. IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT'S NOT ESSENTIALLY A RECTANGLE OR BOUND TO A GRID IN THIS SPREAD; IT BREAKS THE RIGID LINEARITY OF THE ROWS. IT IS DISPROPORTIONALLY LARGE, AND HOVERS OVER THE GRID OCCUPIED BY THE HANDMAIDS.

FOREROUND/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.

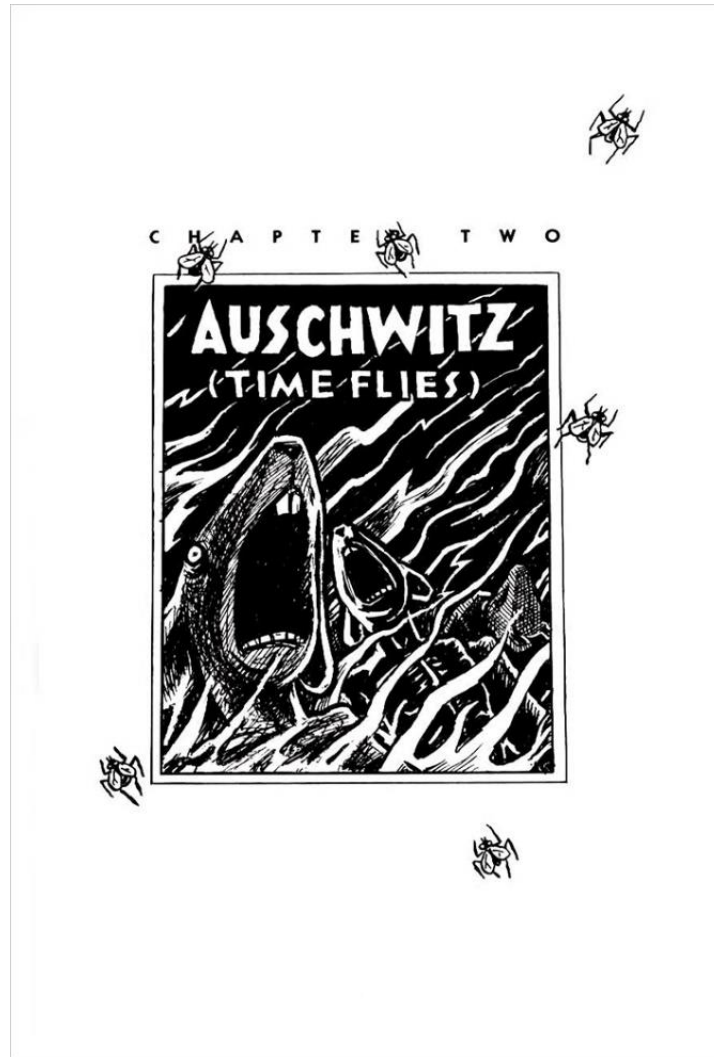


IT'S ONE OF THE FIRST PANELS PRESENTING ADRIAN VEIGHT, OR OZYMANDIAS. THE MAN HIMSELF IS RELEGATED TO THE BACKGROUND, WHILE THE FOREGROUND IS POPULATED WITH ACTION FIGURES, A NEWSPAPER, COMPUTER, AND DESK SET. THE PLACEMENT OF THESE IS NO ACCIDENT, AS THEY ALL TELL US IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT VEIGHT.

VECTORS

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 ITSELF 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. IT'S OBVIOUS THAT THE SOON-TO-BE-DEAD BODIES IN THE FLAMES WILL FEED THEM. BUT THE FLIES DON'T EXIST ON THAT PLANE OF THE IMAGE; THEY LOOK AS IF THEY EXIST AT THE SAME LEVEL AS YOU, THE READER/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.

GAZE

GAZE REFERS TO THE WAY THAT PEOPLE IN AN IMAGE ARE LOOKING AT THE VIEWER. IT'S A TYPE OF INTERACTION THAT ADDRESSES BREAKING 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.

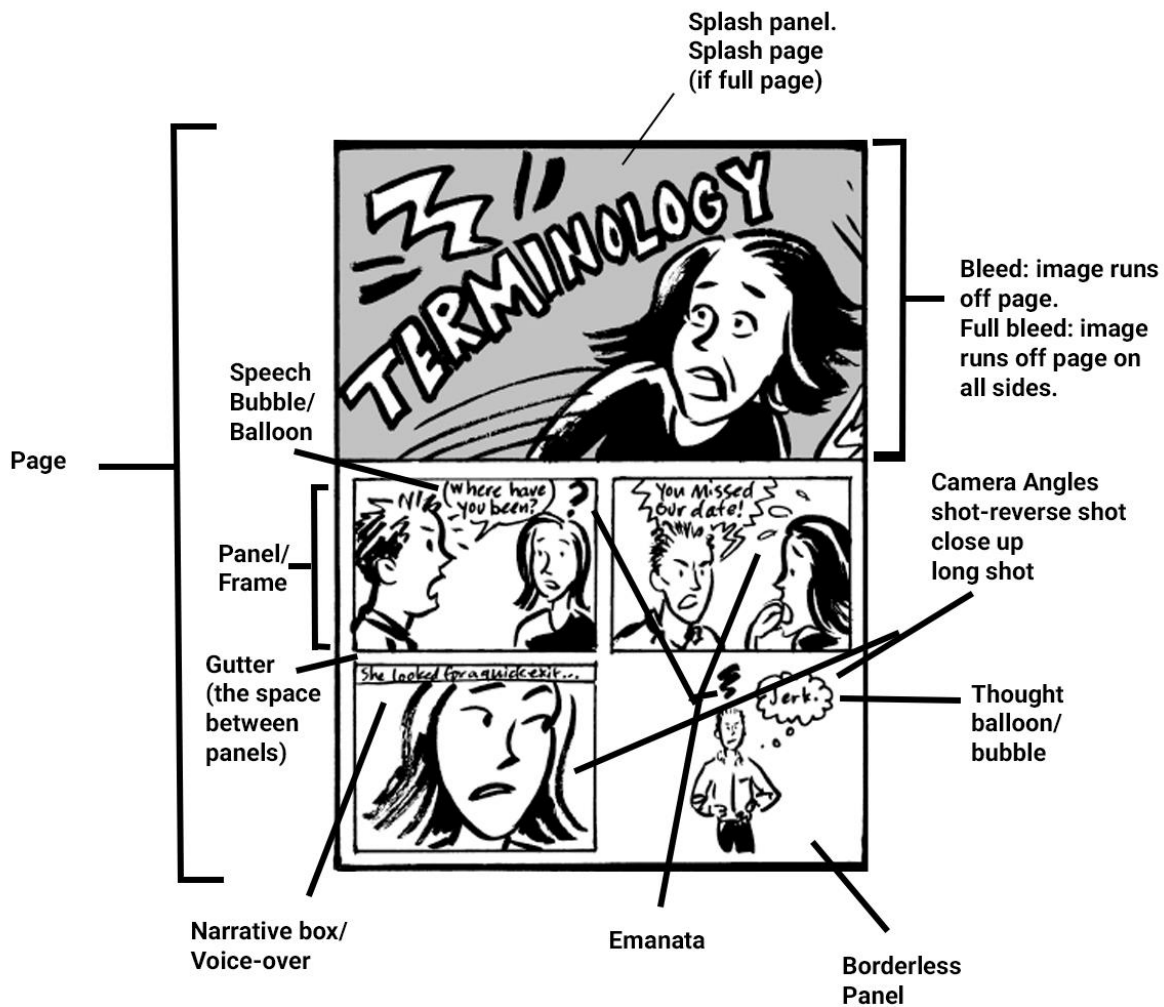
THE OFFER: WHEN A PERSON IN AN IMAGE LOOKS AWAY FROM THE VIEWER, THIS IS AN OFFER. AN OFFER IS A LESS CONFRONTATIONAL WAY OF ENGAGING THE VIEWER AND USUALLY SHOWS THAT THE PERSON IN THE IMAGE IS INVOLVED IN SOME ACTION.



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 ENGAGEMENT, BECAUSE HE'S PAYING ATTENTION TO SOMETHING ELSE.

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.

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