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Contrast and Affinity in Visual Storytelling

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> This is a guest post by my brother Ilia Bagaev

Any good story has a structure. Whether it's a feature film, TV show, ad or video game. The most well-known approach is the Three-act structure. In the beginning, the authors let the audience get to know the characters and begin with the exposition. They show where a story takes place and set the pace and conflict premises. As a plot progresses, conflict emerges and grows to reach the most intense point - a climax. Heroes get to the most difficult and challenging situation and after it, a intensity fades. The conflict is resolved and characters accomplish their goals or lose. At the ending, a plot needs some time to close all secondary storylines and give the audience an opportunity to absorb the information and think about conflict's resolution.

Conflict's development could be explained through the story intensity. Exposition often doesn't have any intensity. Then it grows during the conflict, spikes at the moment of climax, and fades after resolution.

The same happens with a movie's visual structure. Using contrast we can create the greatest intensity during the climax and reach necessary affinity among the characters and the audience at the end of a film. Such

visual solution adds up to a story and increases its effect on a viewer. However, you can keep a visual style uniform throughout the course of a movie. It also can help to make a fantastic visual structure if it contributes to the plot.

What is contrast?

Contrast is directly related to intensity. It is a difference, opposition - greater visual intensity. On the other hand - affinity, or similarity - lesser visual intensity. The contrast makes an expression and increases the dynamic. Affinity helps to reach the opposite - tranquillity, calmness and absence of dynamic.

And the visual structure is based on the proper understanding of these two terms and their usage for different visual components.

Basic components are - space, line, shape, tone, colour, movement and rhythm. It's necessary to understand how to use each of them to build a visual structure. It is, however, beyond the topic of this essay, so we will focus only on building contrast inside a frame, between frames and between scenes.

Space

Contrast between deep and flat space.

Space is what appears on the screen. We can picture our three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional screen in the way it feels like a 3D image. A space like that is called deep. Then a contrast to it would be an absence of depth with an emphasis on two-dimensional properties of the screen.

Orson Welles's films "Citizen Kane" (1941) and "Touch of Evil" (1958) can be surely called encyclopedias of methods for creating the deep space.



Wes Anderson gave his movies a unique visual style combining different kinds of space. It's often can be described as flat or limited.



Contrast between recognisable and ambiguous space

The actual size relationship between objects can be purposefully manipulated to trick the viewer. Size relationships between unfamiliar objects can create confusion. This kind of space raises anxiety intensity and confusion and often used in mystical stories or thrillers. Space becomes defined as soon as an object with known size appears at the screen. A change between recognisable and ambiguous space inside a frame, between frames or between a sequence of frames increases general intensity.

"Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" (1998) is full of frames with ambiguous space - objects with unknown size, mirrors or unusual

camera angles which disorient a viewer. The best application of it is in the moments of narcotic delusions or hallucinations. Ambiguous spaces changes to recognisable space and vice versa.



Contrast between open and closed space

Almost all the pictures we see have closed composition. Visible screen borders close a picture inside a frame and horizontal and vertical lines highlight it.

Open space raises a feeling that image exists outside of a frame. To achieve that you can remove all horizontal and vertical lines and make the camera's movement dynamic and disturbing like with hand-held shooting. It makes everything inside a frame moving as opposed to static frame borders.

Lightspeed travelling in Star Wars is the example of opened space. Smoothed movement of stars is stronger than the picture's borders. The bigger the screen, the easier is to create opened space. That's why many filmmakers recommend to watch their movies in theatres and not on smartphones.





Contrast caused by the split of frame surface

Horizon divides Earth from the sky. Windows and doors separate characters or focus our attention on them. Matching frames or scenes with dividers or without them creates contrast and increases intensity. A similar effect happens when we watch simultaneous action happening on a split-screen. However, split-screen is often used for style but not to create contrast or reflect the story structure. Although it can increase a dynamic inside the scene which contrasts with normal shots, it doesn't necessarily support the store in the way it could.

A great example of contrast created by splits is "500 Days of Summer"

(2009).



Note that the second frame shows characters at the different sides of the black line created by surface in background emphasizing that they have become distant from each other. Looking at this picture, the viewer at least subconsciously understands that.

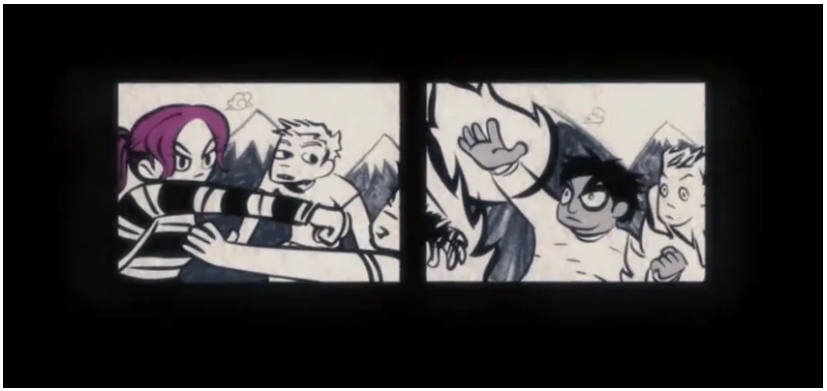
And the amazing example of perfect usage of split-screen like this:

In "Parasite" (2019) Bong Joon-ho created plenty of visual dividers with the interior, furniture and other objects.



Edgar Wright diversifies a narrative in “Scott Pilgrim vs. the World” (2010) with animated comic pictures.





Line

Many lines appear in a frame - horizon, surface intersection and object's edges. We can create contrast using various types of lines. Simultaneous or consecutive usage of straight and curved lines creates a contrast. Same works for lines' direction and quantity. We can change their direction and limit or increase their number on the screen to achieve a necessary level of contrast.

You can build your visual style combining curved, straight, vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines like "TRON: Legacy" (2010).



Shape

Any object, illuminated area or shadow can be pictured with three simple shapes: circle, triangle and square. Circle and triangle or sphere and pyramid create the maximum contrast to each other. You can increase intensity change the 3D-shape to 2D-shape.

Very often we can classify cartoon characters by their shape. For example, look at the contrast during the conflict situation in "Shrek" (2001) - rectangular objects surround the roundish gingerbread man.



[“Ralph Breaks the Internet” (2018)]



[“Shrek” (2001)]

Colour

Colour is the most difficult visual components. It has three main

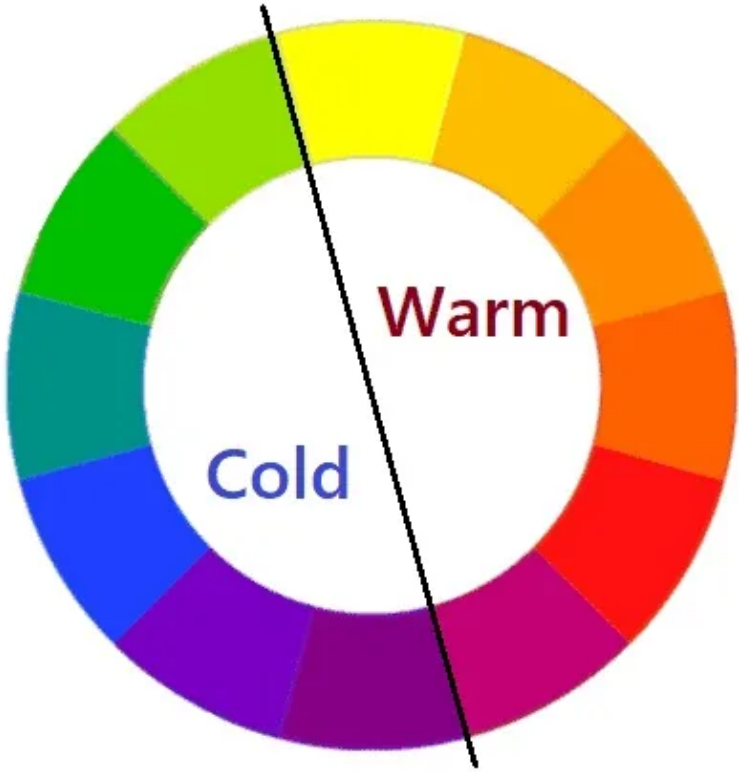
characteristics - hue, brightness and saturation.

Hue is the position of a colour on the colour wheel. A contrast appears if there is a difference in hues. And affinity appears when all objects inside the frame have the same hue.

Brightness is a quantity of black and white in a hue. Affinity - using colours with similar brightness, contrast - using colours of different brightness.

Saturation is a purity of a hue. High saturated colours are very vibrant and bright, while low saturated colours are kinda dull. Affinity happens with colours of similar saturation, contrast - different saturation.

Warm and cold hues increase the visual intensity of a frame. Rotation of them in frames or scenes create contrast. This rules also work for complementary colours - colours which are opposite to each other on the colour wheel.



This colour wheel image is kindly taken from smartartmaterials.com

"Traffic" (2000) is a great example of usage of contrast in between scenes.





In full-length anime “Akira” (1988) the conflict is pictured using change from the cold colour palette to warm.





In “Howl’s Moving Castle” (2004) in one of the scenes warm red and orange hues start to dominate the picture as the intensity grows. Eventually, all cold colours disappear from the palette.





Another good example of colour contrast is flashbacks made in a different saturation or even in black-and-white. When you see the sequence of the present timeline mixed with flashbacks, contrast serves as a tool to make them either better distinguishable or express a specific mood.

Choosing colours wisely is not easy. You can get started with the topic

with free e-book by StudioBinder. And "The Art of Color" by Johannes Itten is a great choice if you want to dig deeper. It combines broad experience and research and has become very popular in the world.

Tone

A tone is the brightness of an object expressed in shades of grey. Tone contrast and affinity are not easy to apply because intermediate tones get into contrast shots. As a consequence, to achieve similarity you have to remove all light and dark tones. However, you can rotate shots with thoughtful tonal contrast with normal ones.

Tonal relations allow controlling the viewer's attention. You can reveal an object in the frame (the coincidence of tone) with tonal contrast if the image's shot highlights an object's shape. On the contrary, you can conceal an object (noncoincidence of tone), for example, hiding a character's face in horror or thriller films.

You can tune tonal range colouring objects or creating lighting and exposure. To find out what is contrast ratio, what is high key and low key lighting you can watch the video by Wolfcrow or StudioBinder.

Remember that colour and tone are not the same things. Estimate tonal range ignoring colour at all. Adjust the image applying the black-and-white filter to the frame or video.

These shots from "Seven Samurai" (1954) by Akira Kurosawa are great

example of tonal contrast as in within the frame and between the scenes.



Movement

The biggest contrast to movement is the absence of movement. Horizontal movement is less visually intensive while vertical movement is more intensive. The most intensive is the diagonal movement.

If all objects move with the same speed it creates affinity and low intensity of an image. If speed is different it creates contrast making an image more intense.

For example, In a superhero Amazon show "The Boys" (2019) sudden character's movement shocks both the hero and the audience. The same, or very similar, thing happens with all screamers in horror movies. The image with low-intensity changes to the image with high intensity.





Point-of-attention movement

You can control visual tension and intensity which occurs as a result of the movement of viewers' eyes looking at the screen. Such movement is called the continuum of movement. Bright, moving, saturated objects and actors' eyes attract the most of the audience's attention. And you can control it by moving their focus inside a frame or, which's more important, between frames.

Thus, contrast and affinity depend on the direction of movement of the viewer's eyes and on the distance to a new attention point.

Sam Mendes and Roger Dikeens skillfully manipulate viewer's attention in 1917 (2019) making us over course of almost two hours switch our view on different parts of the screen.



Camera Movement

Like the object's movement, the biggest contrast here is the absence of camera movement. The whole movie can be shot in static or constantly moving camera. Another approach uses camera movement only for one frame when the only motion or stop adds contrast and intensity. Such movement can be limited to 2D (panorama, angle, zoom) or 3D.

In the recent "Extraction" (2020) dynamic hand-held shots in action scenes contrast with calm static shots inside a car.



"Raging Bull" (1980) directed by Martin Scorcese is a great example of contrast in general. The very famous final fight scenes operate in contrast in an impressive way. You can also spot the contrast of static

camera with a hand-held camera. Another thing is the slow-motion effect which often used in moments of conflicts and culmination. Creating contrast with it allows supporting plot intensity with visual intensity. Also, moving back to previous points, at the end of this scene, the camera shows the ring's ropes starting from diagonal (high-intensity) finishing with horizontal (low intensity).

Raging Bull is not the only example of slow motion. You can recall Boromir death in Lord of the Rings or villain's death in Die Hard.

Rhythm

Metronome's ticks in music create rhythm. It consists of three subcomponents - alternation, repetition, tempo. Just like in sound, visuals can also create rhythm.

Tempo can be slow or fast. We can create it with static objects, moving objects or during editing. If tempo stays constant, we consider rhythms as uniform or regular. If the tempo changes, the rhythm becomes nonuniform (irregular). Rotating fast / slow, regular/irregular rhythms creates greater visual intensity and dynamic.

In "Traffic" (2000), which we mentioned earlier, authors created visual rhythms with the continuous and the fragmented techniques of shooting.

To wrap up,

contrast occurs and intensity increases if anything inside a frame, between adjacent frames, or between sequences of frames is different. On the contrary, if all visual elements, adjacent frames or scenes visually similar, affinity occurs and intensity decreases.

Another good example of multiple types of contrast is the final battle in "Kick-Ass" (2010). Try to find as many elements as you can.

Building visual structure

Now you have to choose the most suitable visual components and create a perfect visual structure for your project using contrast and affinity. To achieve that you need a vision, a designing principle. It means how you are going to make your film, which emotions you want a viewer to experience.

For example, filmmakers tell the vampire stories in very different ways. Compare classic "Dracula" (1931) with more contemporary "Blade" (1998), or maybe you want to make a comedy "What We Do in the Shadows" (2014) with a very genuine and unique style. Everything is possible and it depends on your designing principle. Your choice of visual components is your unique vision on how you present your story to the viewer.

You can regulate contrast and affinity with intuition. And you can

make a fantastic choice, or you can do it by chance. Basic visual components, principles of contrast and affinity play a huge role in building a visual structure. Knowledge of them can help to improve your creative intuition and contribute to your luck as well as help you make the right choice and solve problems with visuals.

Authors of "Bladerunner 2049" (2017) carefully built a visual structure using contrast and affinity to achieve the maximum effect. There's a great very shot and informative review on now contrast in this film works.



Visual structure in "Network" (1976) by Sidney Lumet perfectly execute its task and support the story with a rich variety of visual

decisions. We recommend you to watch this movie as soon as you can. Check out these frames from opening scenes. Visual components - tone, colour, movement, lines and shapes - all contrast inside the frame and change between frames and scenes creating very diversified visuals.










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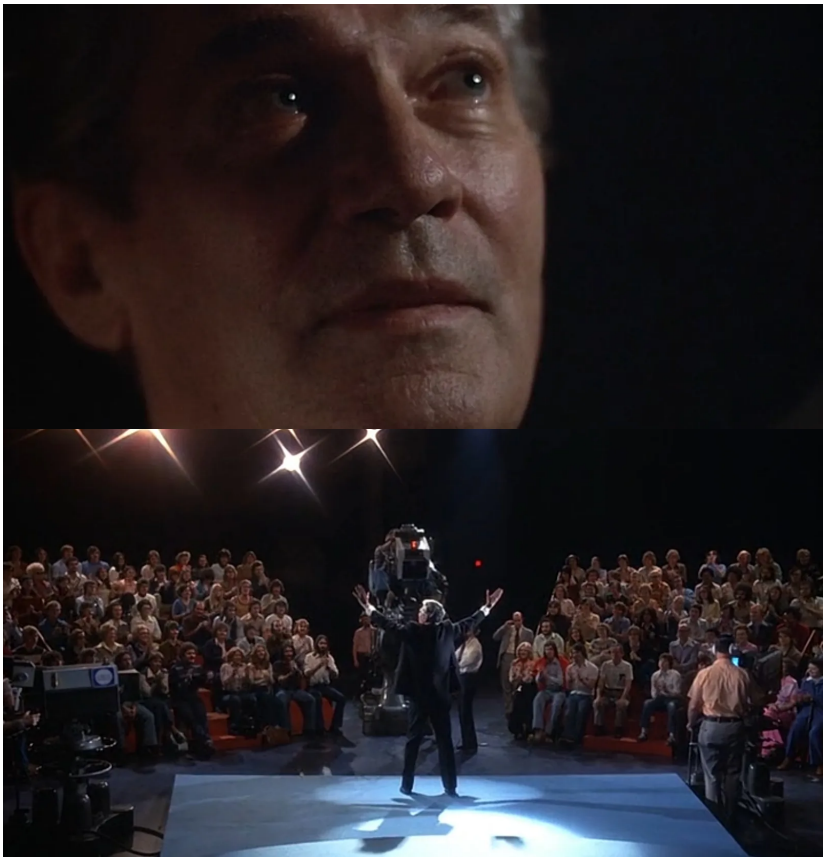
During the conflict, the contrast of visual elements increases the already tense scenes of the film. Pay attention to how colour hues are changing, lines direction, objects' size and other visual components. Throughout the story, monologues become longer. In most emotional one, the camera is static, contrasts are increasing, the character is placed at the centre of perceptive point, and all our attention is focused on him. In the next frames, authors use tonal concealing and revealing which

creates contrasting outlines of the characters. The field size of the shots increasing. Visual intensity achieved here is decreasing in the next scenes.











Deciding on the visual structure is difficult. Don't try to fill everything with the perfect visual components. It can either confuse you or the viewer. You can easily get too far into the woods. Keep it simple. Analyze your script and find suitable visual components which can support the story. Watch more films, or paintings and photography, good ones are thought out very well. You can find very interesting decisions applicable to your project. Share your findings with the team,

rehearse to make your team understand your vision - they also can come up with great ideas. You cad iterate over visuals multiple times but don't get carried away and don't lose the main idea of the story. The visual structure should support the story but not interfere it. Make notes, plan, outline, create storyboards and keep the best ones. Each frame should make sense, choose the field size and angle. Here a great tutorial by StudioBinder which can help you with that. Create a coherent visual style in exposition. It will make all further decisions easier.

It doesn't matter what you shot - documentaries, music video, TV ads, feature film, animated movie or TV show, - in any case you should know the plot, understand its structure and have a vision. Binding together visual structure and story structure helps you motivate your choices on visuals. Increase a visual intensity in conflicts, reach affinity in culmination with contrast principles. It plays a crucial role in a visual structure. Let it make you better pictures so the audience can experience the story with you.

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