

VISUAL THEMES^{23E}

Lyopold

*fab*pics.



Ratatouille, Pixar 2007.
Conceptual character design by Carter Goodrich.

CHARACTER AS THEME

What is it to be human, full of criticism, judgement, even self-doubt? "Anyone can cook, even a rat." is one of *Ratatouille's* stated themes. Here a Character-as-Theme works on their dream. Can anyone cook?

Does this resonate with you? Can you relate maybe empathize with them and their *Being*, beyond just understanding it intellectually?

An example of the story as Character.

Through proactive verbs, thinking, and feeling something about what they are thinking and doing.

ABSTRACT

THEMATIC VISUALITY

How can we show an idea, a theme?

Visual themes is about creating visual motifs inspired by a script's theme. Visual themes – motifs – can create a heightened experience as well as connotations and subtext through association, repetition and composition. Like pattern language in architecture, (Gassner, D) and visual branding in graphic design.

Like E.T.'s lit finger touching Elliot's as he learns empathy through E.T. The light being that which will evolve us as humanity: Empathy for The Other, who literally is an Extra-Terrestrial.

reSEARCH

In this practise-based philosophical reflexion I revisit, research my Creative Act, recording my thematic method. It sets up an empirical experiment, the Arts and Culture, even pop culture, being a potential lab for what it is to be Human – be it on screen, stage, in print or interactively (digital as well as performance).

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

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First published by Leopold 2013A.

Refined 16B, 19C, 21D, 22E, 23F.

Funded by Uppsala Univeristy 2010 – 2020

and FabPics. 2010 – Present

Leopold's artistic site: www.fabpics.com

REFERENCING

Sources are *Oxford standard* credited.

To avoid false credit some sources are intentionally left unaccredited because many ideas are best practises and wisdom, taught and shared through history. So proper credit is untraceable. Like color theory.

DESIGN DEFINITION

A METHOD, A PLAN.

Not an output, nor a result.

Noun: A plan, intentionality. How something works, a schema. A strategic design analysis.

I.e. Not arbitrary. *Example: Production design* having a plan for the production.

Same with character design, industrial design, set design, graphic design etc. I.e. How are we going to do this? (Gassner, D). What are we basing our assessment criteria on? (Perkins, P). This means that Design is not the result itself.

I.e. it is not *the design* (sets, a car, a font or whatever). Design, in the way the word is used here, is a process. My artistic, production design method is *Thematic Visuality*.

Design connotation: Aesthetics. "Oh, cool design!"

SHOW THE THEME!

THEMATIC REPRESENTATION

If Culture and human expression – from Art as Activism to pop-culture like TV and Gaming – is an experimental lab for what it is to be Human then the theme can be a philosophical dilemma. This dilemma, this theme, is then staged, dramatized and personified through the characters. *The characters are the theme* by their different takes on the dilemma, personified through their code of conduct, actions and flaws (Storr, W). Find the theme, identify the dramatic question, the philosophical dilemma and translate that theme to a core visual idea, a key word (Gassner, D). Then document your design analysis, inspired by:

Literal Point blank, an apple is an apple; A flower, a flower. No thematic, visual clues intended. The characters and their world do not visually represent anything. It "just is" your take on, and experience of, it.



The Mitchells vs. The Machines, Sony Pictures Animation 2021.

Thematic visuality: The Elements of Art arranged by Design Principles to show the theme of autonomy (chaotic free will) versus authority (collective AI and mass control) in the medium of a CG animated feature film.

The production design can simply be based on Tone, Period, Location, Season, and the Visual DNA of the characters' World and the Range of Expression within the parameters of the story: Realistic, naturalistic, cartoony, sublime, grotesque, edgy etc. (Perkins, B). Also with regard to acting or animation range.

Figurative A visual figure of speech, a shape repeated as a motif through sets and props, the shape a visual cue for the Character's shape. Like a figurative corporate logo. ✓

Symbolism The motif represents an idea. Like 🍏 represents knowledge, passion, our corruption, or Sin like the poisoned apple in Disney's *Snow White*. (Chevalier, J, Gheerbrant, A.)

Metaphor The motif represents a visual riddle, like The Pope as a donkey in *The Name of the Rose* 1986.

Subtext Hidden meaning, Sod (Judism). A worm-eaten apple, like in Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*, next page.

eMotional

Emotional, visceral thematic triggers (Sylvester, D.) What does the theme mean for the character, changing them over their character arc, in the story's arc? Why? Not only *what a character is*, and *is doing*, but *how do they feel about what they are doing*? How does relate to your experience of it? (Abramović, M). How can I move you visually as the character discovers the full impact of the theme through their drama? Can we use sight to evoke emotions? To move, arouse, excite, provoke? If emotions are created in the brain (Feldman, L.) like a thought, neurons and synapse patterns as emotional intelligence, how can we trigger these in the visual cortex? Can what we see raise your pulse, stimulate the brain? *Can we move you, by design, narrative* holistically, creating a deeper, more intense, genuine experience?

Interactive cues. Motif as function, evoking the function's tone and setting (Wendt, T).



Motif as subtext and metaphor: *Basket of Fruit* by Caravaggio.

Decaying fig leaves, worm-eaten apples, bottom-heavy composition parallel to the frame. Flat on viewpoint. Flat, harsh lighting. What is Caravaggio on about with this painting, in his cultural, Catholic, Italian 1571–1610 context? How does this come across today, in your cultural context? Do we still pick up on these visual clues? If Adam and Eve wore fig leaves, what is Caravaggio implying?

At the same time, one could lean into that...

"Art is not about something. It is something."
Susan Sontag

or

"For me, the subject is of secondary importance:
I want to convey what is between me and the subject."
Claude Monet

"The third is the energy between the actor and the audience."
Stephen Rappaport

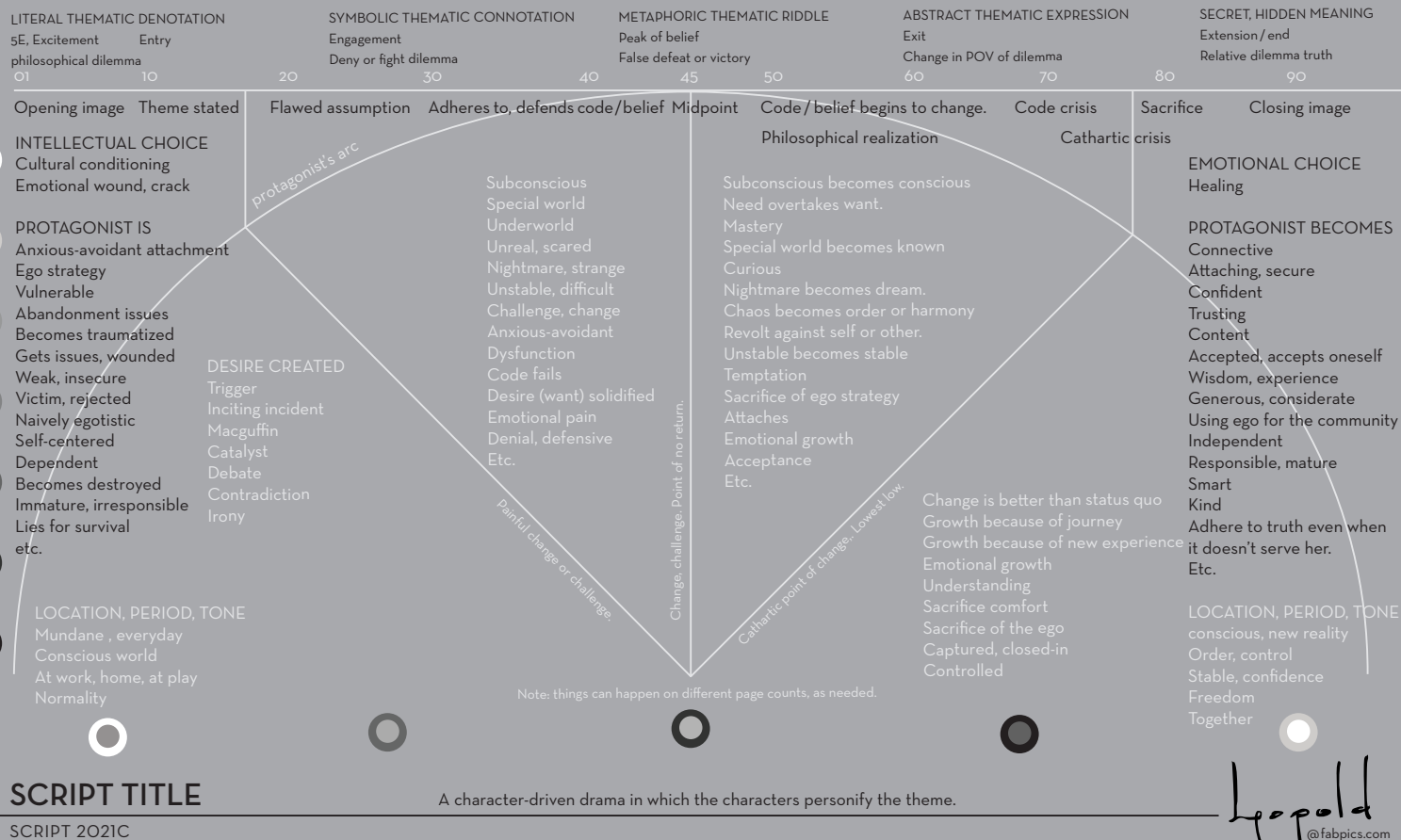
What intent was Caravaggio using as an artistic method with *Basket of Fruits*? What can we learn from art history about visual themes?

THEMATIC, CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORIES

- Characters are the theme.
- Protagonist's has a flawed code of conduct *Storr, Will*.
- Other characters represent other views on the philosophical dilemma.

- For an authentic story chose a theme, that concerns you.
- A Character-driven has a pro-active protagonist driven by desire or madness, not only by what happens to them or who they happen to meet. For what of a better word, they are driven by desire (want).

- Subtext aka the third, the hidden meaning, the unspoken. Created between the characters, through their relationships. Then through pictorial composition, creating context and subtext.



How can we (de)construct a story to find the theme?
Character-driven story arcs often reflect the theme.

THEMATIC DESIGN ANALYSIS

Theme What the story is about: A philosophical or psychological dilemma, a dramatic question. *Storr, W.* Design for theme in the macro and the micro.

Plot What happens in the story. Juxtapose story and design ideas for dramatic effect (contrast).

Structure How the story plays out: linear, non-linear, three acts, five acts, *Save the Cat*, etc. The dramatic structure can inform the visual structure *Block, B.* With colour scripts, beat boards etc.

Subtext What a scene really is about. What is said between the lines. The insider secret. Also visually.

Be sure to listen to Dariusz Wolski and James and Roger Deakins discuss these things on the *Team Deakins* podcast. It is a very informative episode!

Character A core concept to visual themes is that the **characters are the theme**. Themes can then inform the designs as visual motifs, like in *Aladdin* (1992) or *Amadeus* (1984). What to look for in the writing, in the idea? In the writing, characters can represent different sides, point-of-views, of the dilemma. Character-driven stories, as opposed to event-driven stories, often evolve because of what the characters desire. And how they go about getting that in their own flawed, dysfunctional code of conduct, chasing dreams (*Storr, W.*). Like *Salieri* in *Amadeus* (84), *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky, F.) or *McMurphy* in *One Who Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (Kesey, K. 1965).



Self-Portrait Francis Bacon. 1971, oil on canvas.

Character and technique as an emotional theme?
Psychological dysfunction as visual expression?
What is Mr Bacon expressing about being a Human?



The Artist is Present Marina Abramović, Performance.

eMotional

Spacial composition = context, subtext and proactive verbs.

That is: people doing things and feeling something about what they are doing, driving *change*, *emotional exchange*, through desire.

Here, the participants *want* to experience something unique: to *feel*.

We are participating in Culture to be moved, to experience and *feel* something.

Not learn something, or "get it". It is beyond the material exchange, it is emotional (re)connection of *Being Human*.



Ida Pawel Pawlikowski and team 2013

About to give her vows, the Catholic nun Ida finds out that she is Jewish. Going on a journey about identity and faith, this genius composition directly addresses the audience and

the theme, framing her claustrophobically within the reflection of her own identity, addressing the age old existential dilemma of "who am I, who shall I be?", looking back as she is moving forward.

HOLISTIC CONTEXT: THE THIRD STORY, DESIGN, CONTINUITY

Beyond being a still reproduced here, the image above becomes more than a still knowing what the character is going through (see image text). Like knowing what emotive intent you have with the scene. **Know your story and its emotional beat.** This makes me think (as opposed to feel) that by thoroughly knowing the story first, **we can create a more emotive image using Design Principles applied to the Elements of Art.** And because the images and (film) edits are **designed in the Character's being as Feeling**, it can **create a more captivating experience for the audience.** The story, its visual theme(s), compositions, and the subject matter contextualized by and with the audience. That is where the emotion is created: In experiencing it, in The Third (Rappaport, S.)

What do you want that Third to be? Why? Through lighting, editing, acting, animation (etc.) the experience is sealed between the Performance and the audience and their *Being* (5E), then their experience of it.

Staying in the Creative Act and Being in the Art creates an experience as well, perhaps more honest (Bacon, F.). One could, for example be completely honest to the world and characters in the creative act as well, not taking the emotions of the audience into account while still staying true to the story.

INTENT

I don't just want my work to be smart, or cool. I want to connect with you, through it. To connect and share, human to human, empathic.

SUBTEXT

Add subtext through exposition, association and repetition through the relationships between the characters (Miller, A.) and relative visual motifs. If composition is used to create context and syntax then graphically establish the visual cue and repeat them, connecting the motif to the audience subconsciously through repetitive association. Make this visual cue between the characters, props and their milieu, adding details to add another level of resonance, planting them. Just like the lighting (values) and film editing tempo puts us in a certain mood and colours (hues and saturation) stimulate and activate the mind (colour cues), so can visual subtext add depth.

Example: A lonely lead character has a one night stand, longing for affection. The following day they can not bring themselves to wash the wine glass. They become a fetish cue for attachment, hopeful. The glasses remind Them and Us of that longing for attachment, that hope. What they drank can also become something more than literally what they drank.

Thematic subtext can be created anywhere – by design – for a deeper experience. The choices we make are not arbitrary. Perhaps this truth, this theme, this detail, is something someone will relate to and *feel* something about.



Hamlet Chicago Shakespeare Theatre 2019

Contemplating life and the will to live or die.
A classic theme and motif of mortality and desire:
the will to live.

DASEIN DRIVEN DESIGN

Audiences emotions With the intent to create a visceral experience for someone else, this leads to qualitative human-centred design methods like cogitative patterns, *How emotions are made* (Feldman Barrett, L.) *Design for Dasein* (Wendt, T.) and phenomenology.

HOW TO MOVE US THROUGH ART, BY DESIGN?

How do you want the audience to feel at any time, and how do you move them there, visually, with the Elements of Art and Design Principles and your medium (film editing, continuity, game tech etc.)?

Clue? Creating an emotional, visceral experience is perhaps a step in why Marina Abramović chose to remove herself from the performance of *The Cleaner*, which followed the *Artist is Present*. *The Cleaner of Empathy*.



Creation of Adam Michelangelo. Fresco 1512.

Did Michelangelo intend hidden messages? We will never know for sure but once I was shown a few clues I could not unsee them. You decide, the privilege of interpretation being yours according to semiotic theory. *Fiske, J.* One suggestion is revealed on the next page. There are more.



Creation of Adam Michelangelo, Fresco 1512.

What is Michelangelo implying if this hidden message is true to his intent? Is the brain's graphic shape just a coincidence? You decide. If this is God's act of creating Adam, why is God reaching for Adam and not vice versa? Why are they not touching? Why does Adam have a navel? Etc, etc.



Childhood for sale Leopold 2020. Alphoszo.

CLOSING WORDS

My work is my re-search.

These are ideas I am currently exploring.
I will continue to explore with them, test my theories practically, staying open-minded to try new things. Make new discoveries, new methods and meet like-minded people, ever learning, developing, discovering.

I hope you enjoyed these reflections on *Visual themes* and put them to the test developing your artistic methods for the world to enjoy through *your Art, by Design*.

REFERENCES

Reverse chronological order of my discovery of each source, documenting my interdisciplinary reading, learning and viewing.

Team Deakins podcast 2021.

Deakins, James. All throughout the podcast.

Deakins, Roger. All throughout the podcast.

Wolski, Dariuz. **Cinematography**

Kuchler, Alwin. **Cinematography**

Seale, John. **Cinematography**

Gassner, Dennis. **Production design**

Hendrix Dyas, Guy. **Production design**

By scrutinizing these (and more) I triangulated common denominators and patterns about thematics and artistic interpretations. There are more great talks on Team Deakins but these will give you insights and inspiration. Pure gold!

Donis A. Dondis. **A Primer of Visual Literacy.**

MIT Press Ltd, USA 1974

Miller, Arthur: Writer. HBO Documentary 2017

Graves, Maitland. **Art of Color and Design**

McGraw-Hill, 1951

Perkins, Bill. **Composition for Visual Artists**

NMA.ART USA 2018

Masterclasses Uppsala University, Sweden 2018

Masterclasses FabPics. Sweden 2018

Bill referred me to Graves and Dondis.

Feldman Barrett, Lisa.

How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain

Mariner Book 2017

Albert, Greg. **The Secret to Better Painting**

Kindle, 2003

Wendt, Thomas. **Design for Dasein**, 1st ed. 2015

Create Space Independent Publishing Platform

My research into experience design lead to

Design Thinking, Phenomenology and emotions.

Morris, Hargreaves and MacIntyre

Cultural segments mhminsight.com

As referred to by RiksTeatern, Sweden

Itten, Johannes. **The art of color**

The subjective experience and

objective rationale of color.

Reinhold Pub. Corp; 1st ed 5th Print 690101

Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrant, Alain. **Symbols**

Penguin Books, 1996

Tapia, Alvaro In conversations. Stockholm '18

Secret meaning and hidden symbols.

Alvaro pointed me in the direction of hidden meanings. It also lead me to read up on symbolism (see above, **Symbols**).

Sylvester, David

Interviews with Francis Bacon:

The Brutality of Fact

Thames & Hudson LTD, England 2016

Winnberg, Gabriel. In conversations.

On philosophy and Art.

Sweden, Italy and France 2014 – 2019

Gabriel referred me to the interviews with Francis Bacon.

Nietzsche, Friedrich

On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral sense

New York: Harper 2010 (1873)

This helped me sort truisms in Art, which is impossible for me as it is all subjective phenomenology (bias, taste, experience) which is the whole point in art and design (taste). I.e. your experience of my work is more important than my experience in creating it.

Marina Abramović Writings 1960-2014

Marina Abramović removed herself for the performance in The Cleaner, making the observer the performer, observing and observed.

Tashiro, C.S. **Pretty Pictures.**

University of Texas Press, USA, 1997

Fruergaard, Sofie. In conversations. Paris '14
Production Design for film.
Sofie referred me to Pretty Pictures by
Tashiro.

Tsutsumi, Dice and Kondo, Robert
Painting with Light and Color.
Schoolism.com 2016
For their thoughts on narrative color which
inspired my thoughts.

Fiske, John
Introduction to Communication Studies
Routledge, England 2010
My introduction to semiotics from
Steven Bachelder.

Uppsala University guide to referencing
<https://libguides-en.ub.uu.se/citationguide>

Plutchik, Robert. **Color as emotions**
Sourcing Plutchik's ideas has been difficult.
He has been given research credit but I have
yet to find the source. I also believe colors
are objective and not subjective, leaning into
the ideas from Johannes Itten instead. Ie
any color can be anything to anyone. I have
also found that values (lighting) affect our
mood more than color affects our emotions.
I.e. our brain reads movement first, then light
(value contrast), then color.
It was interesting to see Plutchik's ideas
applied in Pixar's *Inside Out*.

Scruton, Roger. **Why Beauty Matters**
watchdocumentaries.com/why-beauty-matters

Block, Bruce. **The Visual Story** 2007
His ideas of Story and Visual structure (ch.9)
are invaluable in my work, connecting
contrast to narrative.

Leopold, **Imagine**. FabPics. 2009
I wrote *Imagine* to celebrate my Artistic
20th anniversary. A manual to my methods
at the time, Imagine lead me to tenure at
Uppsala University. Which in turn lead to my
research, like writing this paper and develop-
ing Visual Themes.

Sam Nielson **Design with Thematic Power**
Lightbox (2021)
youtube.com/watch?v=XSfxFAITiBs&t=26s231001

ELEMENTS OF ART DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Here are a few sources through recent art history.

The Art of Color and Design Maitland Graves '41
Visual Elements: Line, value, shape, proportion, color, Direction, Texture.

Composition Arthur Dow '22
The Three Elements: Line, notan, color.
Principals of Composition: Opposition, transition, subordination, Repetition, Symmetry.

Composing Pictures Donald Graham '70
Contents: Subject, graphic elements, point-Area-Line, light and dark, value the graphic accent, the matrix Measuring Depth, graphic movement, directing the Eye, Space, Space in Nature-Graphic Space, scale.

A Primer to Visual Literacy Donis A. Dondis '73
Visual elements: Dot, Line, Shape, Direction
Tone Color Texture Dimension, Scale, Movement

The Visual Story Bruce Block '88
Visual Components: Line, tone, shape, color, space, rhythm, movement.

Drawing Lessons from the Great Masters
Robert Beverly Hale '89
Line, mass, light and planes.

The Art of Color Johannes Itten '19
Color contrast, subjective color, objective color.
Color contrasts: Hue, value, temperature, saturation, extension, Color expression and impression.

The Style Spectrum Bill Perkins '18
nma.art 2310 01

Line, Tone, Shape, color, space, rhythm, movement. Methods of Measure: Major Key - proportion, minor Key - Range of contrast. Primaries of expression: line, texture, mass-Notan, form - Chiaroscuro.
Image clarity and message.

Imagine Leopold Baranowska '09
As Leo Sandberg
Art Elements: Space, line, shape (mass), form (chiaroscuro), value, color (hue, saturation, temperature), texture (including edge quality and brush strokes). Design Principles: Contrast, focus, movement, unity, variety, balance, proportions, rhythm, pattern etc.
The 4th wall, the third energy.

Designing with Thematic Power Sam Nielson
Lightbox '21
Contrast ideas, contextual idea, modifying idea, hierarchy, unifying quality (style), force, clear image message, clear thematic idea.

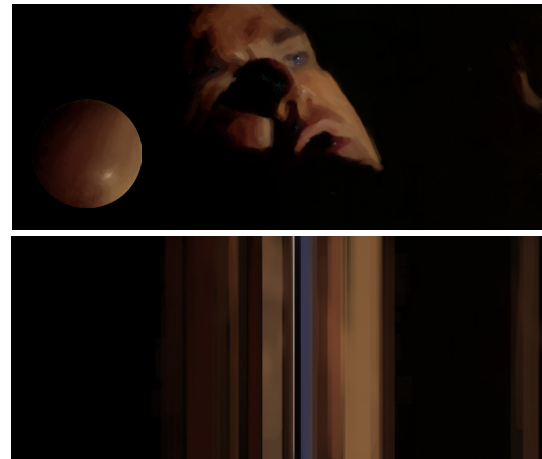
The Power of the Metaphor
Mikehill.design Youtube.com 2310 01

Composition creates context Will Weston '20
Instagram 2310 01
Image clarity and image message.
Context can create syntax, subtext, denotation and connotation.

LB: Besides semiotics what of the emotional impact of the theme, performance and production design holistically?
How to visually move us?



WILLARD
We'd cut them in half with a machine gun
and give them a Band-Aid. It was a lie.



Apocalypse Now Francis Ford Coppola 1979
Visual structure studies Leopold Alphoszo 2021
Contrast and staging as sanity and insanity. Purpose versus
duty represented by Willard versus Kurtz, showing the
theme of hypocrisy.

CONTINUED EXPERIMENTATION

Contrast together with asymmetric staging is key to visual tension. *Never make any two intervals the same* (Albert, G.). They engage or sooth the visual cortex. Static versus dynamic compositions.

Contrast 100% - 0% High to low, hard to soft, lost to found, etc. Contrast exists in every visual element *by design*. Hues, values, lines, kerning, space, editing, lenses, acting, gestures, movement, etc. Watch Svetlana Zakharova's timing and spacing in her movements for contrast in ballet! After movement contrast is the strongest visual component which grabs the eye and activates the visual cortex (Block, B).

Connect this to the visual beat. Why?

Because either the character is in harmony with themselves and their world and the theme at hand, or they are in conflict with it.

And that is where we want the audience to be: along for the ride with the characters.

The picture, the film editing, animation etc., either in tune with the character's state at any given moment or juxtaposed it.

Then my question becomes does this engage you and deepen your experience of it?