Chapter Three

Space and Silhouette

SPACE AND SILHOUETTE

INTRODUCTION

Space is what is contained within the frame of a picture. How that space *feels* is affected by objects within the frame and by the frame itself. This feeling depends upon how space is *activated* by those objects and the frame. When cropping an image, or deciding how to position objects within a frame, you are making decisions about how to *activate* the space within the frame.

This chapter is devoted to the effective control of space, the design of the objects within that space, and how those objects will attain varying levels of importance psychologically for an audience depending upon their design and relationship to the space surrounding them. Below is a short overview of topics and what the reader can be expected to be familiar with by the end of this chapter:

1. The definition of *space activation*;

2. The *figure-ground relationship*;

   a. The difference between *positive* and *negative space;*

3. The importance of *silhouette design* for viewer recognition;

   a. *Icon recognition* and its relationship to object interpretation;

      i. The *principle of simplicity*;

      ii. The *principle of essentiality*;

   b. Problems with *icon recognition*;

4. How *silhouette design* and *space* contribute to *the image hierarchy*;

   a. How *position* within the frame and *breathing space* relate to object importance;

5. How *placement* and *space* relate to *storytelling*.

SPACE ACTIVATION

Space activation means that areas of the frame can be made to feel either *positive* or *negative* depending on how objects have been positioned within the frame. The frame is a boundary that forces, or pushes, against objects placed near it and affects the amount of perceived tension they experience. As a result, objects placed in the middle of the frame will feel different than those that are placed closer to its edge because of the amount of space available to them. But, at the same time, these objects also contribute to the activation of space. So, both frame and objects must be considered when determining how the *space* of a picture is *activated* (*Ill.1*).
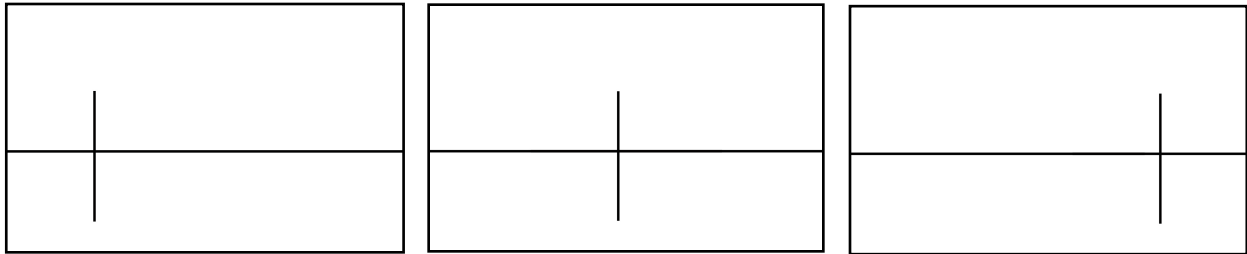
Ill.1: The position of an object on the left, right or in the centre of the frame activates space inside the frame differently. Proximity to the frame increases tension, greater distance from the frame edge decreases tension.

Space activation is caused by the creation of *visual weight*. *Visual weight* is the amount of space occupied by any perceptual category within a picture. Depending on how that *visual weight* has been positioned and oriented, space will be activated differently. A figure on a sheet of paper, for instance, will create visual weight in the area in which they are placed. However, the eye-line of that figure also creates *visual weight* in the direction of its gaze. The eye-line of a character on the left of the frame towards the right of the frame *activates* the space on the right of the frame. The same is true for a character on the right looking towards the left. Both activate the space towards which they look in a *positive* manner because

Ill.2: Space is activated positively to the right and left of the frame by the eye-line of the character. The visual weight of the figure and their eye-line balance the picture. Untitled, Jay Senetchko, 2006.

they have space available in front of them that they project towards. Available space in front of a character in this manner is interpreted by an audience as *positive* because it is associated with *forward progression*. As a result, *positive space activation* takes on a feeling of 'openness', 'possibility', or 'optimism'. The *asymmetrical* portraits of *Ill.2* feel balanced because the *visual weight* of the figure is *balanced* by the *visual weight* of the gaze that *positively activates* the right and left sides of the frame respectively. Because we (and other predators) have our eyes on the fronts of our heads rather than to the side, and because we're used to standing on firm ground, we tend to register the naturalness

and generally positive emotional associations of having more space in front of a character than behind, and more space above than below.

Because of this, customarily in film more space is left on the side of the screen that the subject is looking towards, and more at the top of the frame than bottom. As a result these *positive* types of *space activation* tend to feel both more natural and more comfortable to an audience. Open space behind us feels threatening, and not enough space above feels crushing. No one wants to feel like a tiger is going to jump out of conspicuously empty space onto the back of a character on the opposite side of the screen, or that the sky will fall on them; but that is exactly what we are implying by positioning a character in certain ways.

The same figures from *Ill.2* are now placed on the opposite sides of the frame with the majority of open space to their back (*Ill.3*). This activates space in a *negative* manner. The *negative* space now takes on 'threatening', 'heavy', or 'dangerous' characteristics. The open space becomes alive with possibility; but it is a negative possibility because of its position relative to the figure. It is the possibility of danger rather than hope. The smaller space in front of the characters in both examples in *Ill.3* is still activated positively, but there is so little of it that the character feels compressed and restricted by it. This further accentuates the 'threat' from the space behind: the character *feels* trapped and pursued by an unseen force, and the obstacle of the frame leaves nowhere to run.

Ill.3:The combined visual weight of the figure and their eye-line also make the right (left example) and left (right example) side of the picture 'heavy' and in each space is activated negatively. Both pictures feel unbalanced and threatening as a result. Untitled, Jay Senetchko, 2006.

Both positively and negatively activated spaces develop a sense of anticipation in a viewer. *Expectation* is attached to open space. The audience is naturally attracted to it and waits for it to be filled. Open spaces are potential *focal areas,* whether negatively or positively activated, and the viewer will expect that they be filled with focal points. If they are not filled, then the expectation lingers, negatively in the form of *threat* in *Ill.3,* positively in the form of *possibility* in *Ill.2.* The same is the case for *Ills.4&5.* The space behind the figure in *Ill.5* acts as a negative, threatening force behind the figure, pressuring her against the boundary of the painting's frame to the right; whereas the increased space in front of the figure in *Ill.4* gives the picture a more overall positive feeling.

Ill.4 Space is activated positively on the left of the painting. Goodbye Sunshine, Jay Senetchko, 2013.

Ill.5: Space is activated negatively on the left of the painting. I Remember that Yellow Chair, Jay Senetchko, 2012.

This is how the *foreground entrance*, or *focusing agent,* of *asymmetrical* compositions create the focal area to either side of the frame in *FFR* and *FFL* focal designs. In the instance of an *OTS* shot the *forcing agent* character would be faced in the direction of the speaking character and activating the space they occupy. This increases attention on, and the importance of, the character in the activated space of the asymmetrical frame. In *Ill.6*, two characters act as *framing devices* for each other in Chad Costen's 2008 *The Coming*. Each positively activates the space of the *focal area* with their eye-line. Each accentuates the other as *focal point*.

Ill.6: Each character serves to push the eye of the audience towards the other and activate the space they inhabit positively. The Coming, Chad Costen, 2008

Even an object placed in the centre of the frame that has equal space to either side will *activate* the two sides of the frame differently because of the *visual weight* created by their eye-line. The frame becomes '*heavy*' on the side towards which the eye-line is directed, and feels as if it 'tips' in that direction. The space behind the character feels empty and threatening as it 'slides into' the central figure while the space in front of them feels somewhat smaller as a result (*Ill.7*). The same would be true of the opposite side of the frame if the composition were reversed (*Ill.8*). However, because we tend to '*read*' pictures from left to right, the 'weight' of the audience's visual movement pushes against the eye-line of the figure in *Ill.8.* This creates tension on the left side of the painting which in turn creates visual weight and causes it to feel more unbalanced than that of *Ill.7*, where the additional visual weight of the character's eye-line on the right of the painting is balanced by the increased mass on the left of the picture.

Ill.7: An equal amount of space on either side of the profile portrait feels larger on the left and smaller on the right because of the added visual weight of the eye-line. The weight of mass on the left is balanced by the weight of eye-line on the right. I Remember the Floor Used to Bounce, Jay Senetchko, 2012.

Ill.8: The reverse of Ill.7. An equal amount of space on either side of the profile portrait feels larger on the right and smaller on the left because of the added visual weight created by our left-to-right viewing conflicting with the eye-line of the figure. The whole composition feels 'heavy' on the left and unbalanced as a result.

Changing the orientation of the frame will also alter how space is activated. In *Ill.9* the space on the upper right is activated by the direction of the man at the chalkboard. This makes the chalkboard feel heavier because of its added *visual weight*. It is as though the

weight of the problem on the board keeps weighing upon the professor with its difficulty. By contrast, when the same image is rotated 180 degrees in *Ill.10* the image feels *bottom heavy* because of the added *visual weight* of the space activated towards the bottom left corner of the frame.   Now the professor feels as though he is being dragged down and out of the frame by the weight of the problem he faces.   The position of the professor feels more stable in *Ill.9* than it does in *Ill.10* because he is supported against the pressure from the upper right by the *groundplane* he stands upon. The *groundplane* pushes him up against the force of the *visual weight* above him.   The *visual weight* on the bottom left in *Ill.10* feels as though it pulls him off the *groundplane*: there is nothing holding him in place against this force and makes him feel in a more unstable position.

Ill.9:Space is activated towards the upper right by the direction of the professor. This makes that space feel heavy and pushes him down. Untitled, Jay Senetchko, 2008.

Ill.10:Space is activated towards the bottom left by the direction of the professor. This makes that space feel heavy and pulls him down.

Changing the size of the frame with respective to its subject will also change the way space activates a focal point, as the frame widens and more space is provided for characters/objects to roam around. Because the frame may be used to create a sense of tension between it and the objects within, as the frame widens and space opens up, tension decreases. Space is still activated in positive and negative ways, there's just more space to activate. As a result, if all other elements were held constant, but the frame widened, *space itself* becomes more important to the audience. Whether that space felt more negative or positive would depend on whether or not it were negative or positive to begin.   In *Ill.11* the *symmetrical* image provides less space to be activated by the crouching figure. This makes the figure more important in relation to the space surrounding them. Whereas in the *symmetrical* image of *Ill.12* the figure becomes less

important, in the sense of less dominant with respect to the surrounding space, because the amount of surrounding space has increased.

Ill.11:Focal points appear more important in smaller frames. They dominate the limited space. Crop of St. Vitus Dance, Jonathan Sutton, 2015.


Ill.12:A wider frame makes space more important and the focal point more subdued. They do not command as much of the frame. St. Vitus Dance, Jonathan Sutton, 2015.

The figures in the above examples are *activated* by the space that is provided for them in the environment they inhabit. In most instances it is not abstract non-contextual space that is being activated by the position of a character or object, but a physical and recognizable environment. A character in an environment is often referred to as a *figure* on a *ground*, and are involved in the classically symbiotic *figure-ground relationship*. Both *figure* and *ground* have roles to play in imagery, be it abstract or representational. If that story is to be intelligible they must be able to be distinguished from each other so that each can be recognized as it plays its respective role.

THE FIGURE-GROUND RELATIONSHIP

Figure and *ground* should be considered as two separate volumes. *Figure* tends to be seen as bounded by an edge, while *ground* appears to be unbounded. Psychological testing has suggested that *bounded* areas have a greater perceived density than *unbounded* areas, and as a result, *figure* tends to be perceived as resting in front of *ground*. It is also shown in these experiments that this interpretive perception does not seem to be related to past experience, so it seems to be fair to say that this is something which we *intuitively* recognize in images
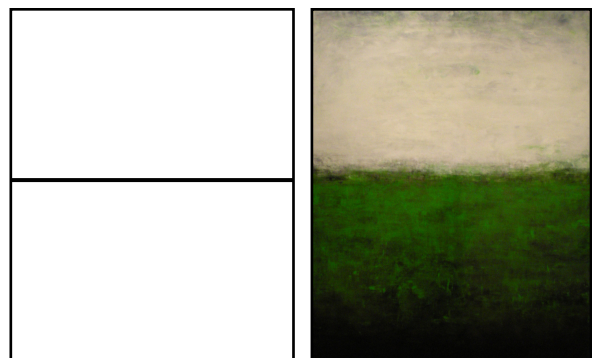
Ill.13:The top is ground and the bottom figure in both of these examples. The white section obviously sits behind the green section, just as the bottom sits in front of the top.

(perhaps on an evolutionary level as a method of more effectively separating objects in our environment from each other). We generally perceive the *figure* to be lying in *front* of the *ground*. Even in the very simple example of dividing a frame into two horizontal bands, the lower section tends to be interpreted as figure and the higher ground. The 'sky' acts as a *ground* for the *figure* of 'land'. The *figure* is interpreted as being *bounded* by the *horizon line,* and thus carries more weight and is 'pushed' forward. An abstract division of a surface into two equal halves and an abstract painting of the same division are shown in *Ill.13,* and it is clear in this example that the white 'sky' appears *behind* the green *ground* in this painting. The *figure* is 'pushed' forward. Top is *ground*, bottom is *figure*; the white is *ground* and the green is *figure*. *Figure* sits in front of *ground*. This can be confusing because *ground* does not refer to 'earth', but to a backdrop on which the *figure* sits atop.

An implication of this that holds true in most instances is that smaller areas tend to be viewed as figure in comparison to larger areas of *ground* (*Ills.11&12* for example: the crouching form is *figure* and the dark backdrop is *ground*). Other common factors that produce the *figure-ground relationship* are based on our attraction to motion. A *figure* moves while *ground* is stationary; variability – changes in size or position imply motion and thus *figure*; relative size and brightness imply movement – smaller objects appear to 'move' next to a larger ones, as do dimmer ones next to brighter: both would be perceived as *figure*. In all of these perceptual experiments, the *figure* becomes the thing that viewers fixate upon, while the *ground* provides context. In other words: *focal points* are *figures*, environments are *grounds*.

In any composition, there is a relationship between *figure* and *ground*, or synonymously for our purposes, *subject* and *environment*. As described in *Chapter 1*, the *figure* (*subject*) of an image is typically a specific thing (character or object) or group of things that an image seems to be about (it's *focal point*). The *ground* (*environment*) of a picture is comprised of everything else. The *environment* provides the *context* within which the *subject* (*focal point*) exists. The *figure* and *ground* are part if an image's *subject matter*. *Subject matter* is *what is happening in the scene, where it is happening* and *who's involved*. *Subject matter* is a *description* of what is happening in an image and it is the *vehicle* through which its *content* is delivered. *Content* delivers the message of the image. *Content* is the moral of the story, so to speak. So, the interaction between *figure* and *ground* in their contribution to *subject matter* help create *content*.

To return to a previous example, the *subject matter* of the painting in *Ill.14* is: old woman in a dress sitting at a table. That is the description of the painting. The *focal point* is the old woman; she is also the *subject* and *figure*. Table and chair are also *figure*, and an extension of the *subject*. The *ground* of the painting is the wall of the room in which she sits, this is the *environment*. The interaction between the *figure*, and how it is placed in the *ground* creates the *content* of this *subject matter*. The *content* is how the *subject matter* feels. Because of the way the woman is positioned, she *positively activates* space in front of her which is smaller that the available space behind her. This space is *activated negatively*. This space feels threatening. It is a force of its own that pushes against the back of the woman towards the immovable edge of the frame. There is limited room for her to move in this threatening environment, and she feels alone and trapped within it. This is the *content* of the picture. How the picture is composed, through the interaction of *figure* and *ground* creates the *content* of the *subject matter*.

Ill.14: The subject matter of this image is 'an old woman sitting alone at a table'. The content of this picture is 'this old woman feels alone and threatened by her environment'. The relationship between figure and ground helps create this content.

When the *subject* of an image is set in non-contextual space (an environment comprised of no-environment), or the *subject matter* itself is of an abstract nature, the *figure-ground relationship* exists and is still responsible for the *content* of an image. A non-contextual *ground* (*environment*) communicates something just as specific about the *figure* (*subject*) placed within it as would a *figure* being placed in a contextual *ground*. They tell different stories, but the relationship is still integral to the telling of that story. An *environment* of recognizable imagery would place a *subject* within a *particular* context with *particular* emotional and psychological consequences; whereas a non-contextual *environment* would rob the object of *any* association to any *particular* context, thereby ripping the object out of time and space and *universalizing* the statement the object is designed to make. The police officer in *Ill.15* occupies a non-contextual space. This no-place *ground* universalizes the person into a symbol of authority.
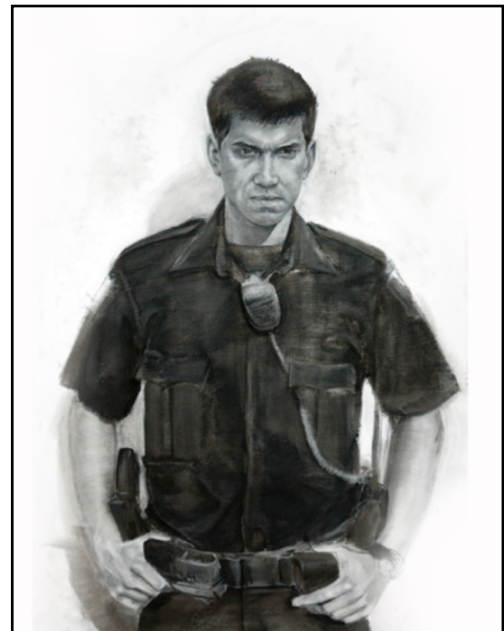
Ill.15: The non-contextual ground universalizes the figure as a symbol of authority. Badge Number, Jeremiah Birnbaum, 2006.