

Chapter Four

Intimacy and Emotion

INTIMACY AND EMOTION

INTRODUCTION

This text began with a discussion of perspective and its compositional uses, but also its role in creating an illusionistic sense of depth in a picture. This chapter continues the exploration of depth creation through a focus on the three basic ‘layers’ of an image: *Foreground*, *Midground*, and *Background*. We will also examine how the structure of a picture (discussed in *Chapter 2*) relates to these different ‘layers’.

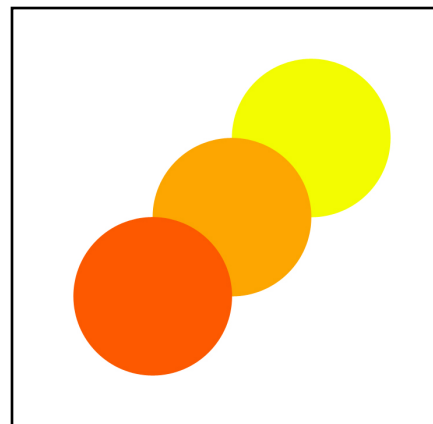
Ultimately, this chapter is devoted to the psychological and emotional effects that the proximity of a picture has on its audience, and the function that each ‘layer’ serves in creating the overall emotional impact of a picture. Below is a short overview of what the reader can be expected to be familiar with by the end of this chapter:

1. The definition of *Foreground*, *Midground* and *Background*;
 - a. What is a *Foreground Entrance*?
 - b. What is meant by *Midground Focus*?
 - c. What is meant by *Background Environment*?
2. How *Foreground* is used in creating *Levels of Intimacy*;
 - a. The difference between *1st-Person* and *3rd-Person POV*;
3. The definition of, and difference between *Narrative*, *Descriptive* and *Emotional Foreground Entrance*;
4. How line direction creates *Dramatic*, *Alert*, and *Sedate visual dynamics*;
 - a. The relationship between *POV* and *visual dynamics*;
 - b. The relationship between *object design* and *visual dynamics*;
5. *Narrative*, *Structural* and *Emotional Progression* in sequential media;
 - a. *Set-up*, *Conflict*, and *Resolution* story structure.

FOREGROUND - MIDGROUND - BACKGROUND

A picture can be divided into three equally important layers: *Foreground*, *Midground* and *Background* (*Fg*, *Mg*, *Bg*). *Fg* is the area of an image that appears to be closest to a viewer and *Bg* is that which appears to be further away. The *Mg* is the area that lies between them. The *Mg* is in front of the *Bg*, and the *Fg* is in front of the *Mg*. Thus, the *Mg* is *ground* for the *Fg* figure, and the *Bg* is *ground* for the *Mg* figure. There is always this oscillating relationship between layers of any picture.

The occlusion of each layer by the other is what helps create a sense of realistic depth in a picture. It is also the easiest way to create this effect. *Occlusion* is the imposition of one object's silhouette in front of another. Pictures generally include many instances of *occlusion*, and this accentuates the realistic recession of space. This is how depth is created in 2-dimensional imagery such as the simple graphic design of *Ill.1*, and in imagery with equally simple 2D graphic design that cannot rely on dimensional or illusionistic depth for a sense of realism (*Southpark* for example). Even though there is no recessive perspective, any recessive detail, or an indication of 3-dimensional space at all in *Ill.1*, the fact that the red object occludes the orange object behind it which in turn occludes the yellow, gives a sense of recessive depth. Some elements are obviously closer than others. The red object could be considered *Fg*, the orange *Mg*, and the yellow object *Bg*. It is this alternating *figure/ground* relationship of *Bg*, *Mg*, *Fg* that creates depth.



Ill.1: Some elements are obviously closer than others. Occlusion creates depth.

The *Fg* and *Bg* are linked together by a hypothetically seamless gradient of *Mg*. As mentioned in *Chapter 1*, recessive depth is created by perceptual gradients. In the case of perspective, this is made obvious through the linear recession of objects, space and size towards vanishing points. But, *all* perceptual categories recede. The *details* in the *Fg* of *Ill.2* will be easy to see, but those in the *Mg* and *Bg* will not. The *colours* in the *Fg* will be more saturated than those in the *Mg* and *Bg* which look as though a thin blue veil has been draped over them. All perceptual categories will experience this effect. This is because of *atmospheric perspective*: the amount



Ill.2: Atmospheric perspective reduces the clarity of all perceptual categories as they recede. Glint (Expo Dome), 2015, James Nizam.

of atmosphere that is physically between a viewer and the object in view. The atmosphere in between us and object gives that object a blue tinge, and the more

atmosphere between us and that object, the greater the tinge. This is the *blue haze* of *atmospheric perspective*: the more atmosphere there is between us and an object, the more blue that object will appear (see Chapter 6). This effect can be accentuated by adjusting depth of field in photography and film (III.3) so that objects in the *Mg* and *Bg* become increasingly blurry and indistinct. By reducing detail, contrast and saturation in a painting or drawing, objects appear as if they are further away (III.4).



III.3: Adjusting focal length in photography changes the depth of field and brings some objects into focus, while forcing others out of focus. This mimics our experience of atmospheric perspective



III.4: Atmospheric perspective imitated in painting by reducing detail, saturation and value for Bg objects. Whiskey Jack, 2005, Michael Abraham.

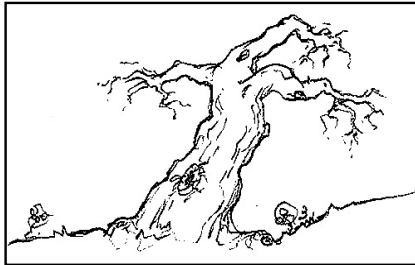
In a realistic depiction, detail recedes just as does value, colour and texture. Objects that appear to have less detail will appear further away from the viewer and objects that have more will appear to be closer; objects with more texture are closer, those with less are further away; darker objects feel closer, lighter further away. The chart in III.5 gives a summary of the levels of an image and the appropriate level of development of basic perceptual categories.

Level of Image	Detail	Texture	Value	Colour
Foreground	High Detail	High Detail	Black - Grey	Full Saturation & Shades
Midground	Implied Detail	Implied Detail	Dark - Light Grey	Saturation & Tones
Background	Low Detail Icon & Silhouette	Low Detail	Light Grey - White	Low Saturation & Tints

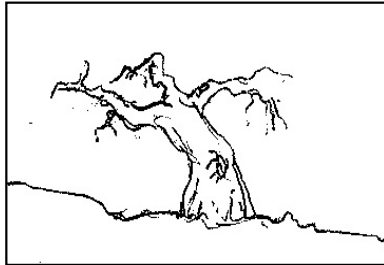
III.5: Perceptual categories and their level of development for realistic depth.

Fg objects will appear to be much darker and have greater detail and texture than either *Mg* or *Bg* objects. *Bg* objects will have the lightest values and little or no texture and detail and typically rely on their silhouette shape for recognition. *Mg* objects typically have *implied* detail – these are the details of the object that are *essential* for its recognition by the viewer, but are abbreviations of the detail that could be seen in a *Fg*

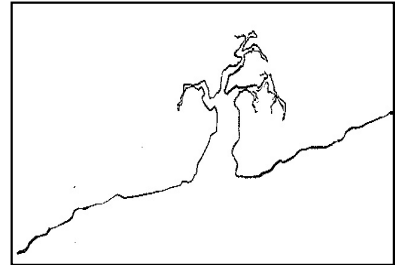
object. For instance, all of the detail of bark and leaves would be seen in a *Fg* tree (Ill.6), only mass shapes of the canopy and major details (hole in trunk) would be seen in a *Mg* tree (Ill.7). A *Bg* tree might be indicated in silhouette only (Ill.8). These levels of description for different levels of an image help accentuate the perception of recessive depth in a picture (Ill.9).



Ill.6: Foreground - High Detail and Dark Value.



Ill.7: Midground - Implied Detail and Mid-Tone.



Ill.8: Background - Silhouette and Light Value.

Beyond its role in the creation of recessive depth, each 'layer' contributes differently to both the structural and emotional design of an image. In general, the *Fg* provides a *structural entrance* into a picture; the *Mg* provides a staging ground for its *focal point*; and the *Bg* establishes its *environment*. The *Background* of an image will provide the setting and context for the story that is being told and how that setting feels. It contributes the *where* of an image: *where* are things happening? The *Midground* of an image is typically where the *focal point* of an image will be located. It provides the *what* of a picture: *what* are we (the audience) supposed to be looking at specifically? The *Foreground* in an image helps the *Bg* provide emotional and situational context of a picture by providing an emotional *entrance* into the image, but also provides a *structural push* towards an image's *focal point* in the *Mg*. *Fg*, *Mg* and *Bg* work together to establish the *how*, *what* and *where* of an image: *how* do we (the audience) *feel* when looking at a picture, *what* are we looking at, and *where* is it?



Ill.9: Differing levels of development for the separate 'layers' of a picture help accentuate a sense of realistic depth.

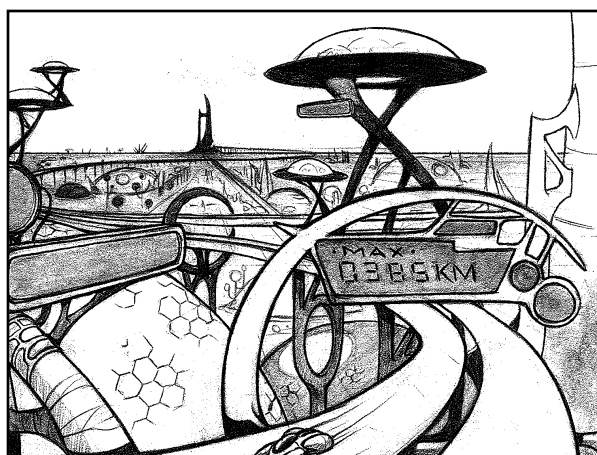
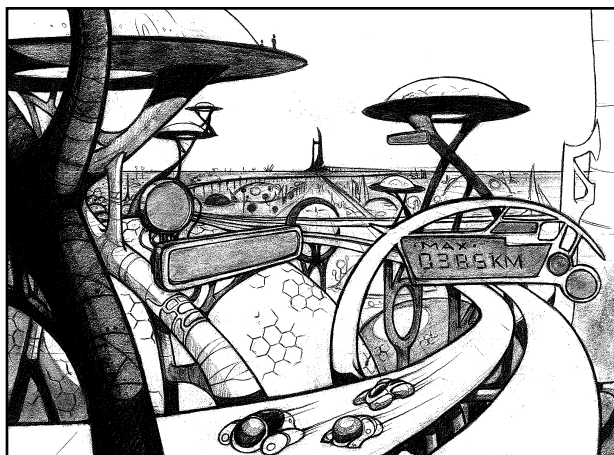
FOREGROUND ENTRANCE

In one sense, *Foreground* objects are those closest to the viewer; however, for our purposes *Fg* objects are those that appear to be *extremely* close to the viewer. They appear to be so close that large sections of the entire object are cropped by the frame. It is as if the viewer were standing directly behind the object in question and peeking around it to get a glimpse of the scene beyond. For example, in Ill.10 it feels as though the audience is positioned right behind the deer in the foreground. It feels as though we peek around the deer to look at the rest of the scene. They are our *structural entrance* to the picture, and they are where we are meant to start looking at (visually enter) the picture, and in what *direction* we are to look. This is *structural* function of a *Fg Entrance*.



Ill.10: The deer in the Fg act as a visual entrance into the picture. They are the first point of contact for an audience and lead them into the rest of the picture. This is a Foreground Entrance. Nadia Boldbaatar drawing, 2019.

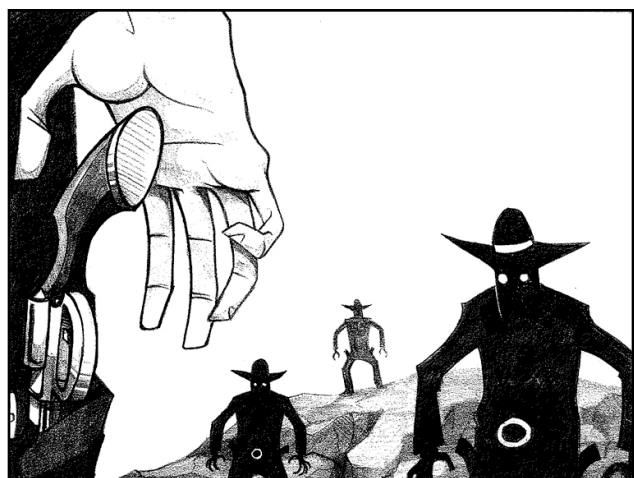
A *Fg Entrance* 'leads' the viewer into the scene by making the image feel closer to them. It is as if the audience were able to reach out and touch those elements in the frame that were closest to them. At the same time, this increases the sense of depth in the frame by making the distance between the *Fg* and *Mg* layers of the image more apparent. Even though the *Mg* in *Ill.10* appears more obviously distant from the viewer, the image as a



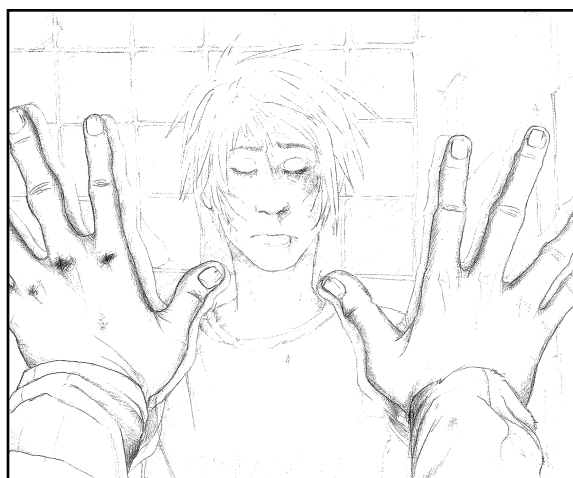
Ill.11: The image on the left appears closer because of the Fg Entrance provided by the building on the left. With the Fg Entrance cropped out the 'distance' between the audience and the city increases. Student Work.

whole feels closer. This lessens the visual impact of the image and its focal point by decreasing the perceptual distance that the image has to ‘travel’ to get to the viewer. It is as if the image has less time to develop momentum as it moves towards our eye. In an image comprised solely of *Mg* and *Bg* the viewer is ‘hit’ with an image as they are forced to visually ‘jump’ into a scene and go out and meet the objects in the picture. In contrast, in an image with *Fg* the audience feels as though it can stretch out its hand and touch the object closest to it (*Ill.11*).

Fg objects provide both an *emotional* and *structural* entrance to an image. The *emotional entrance* controls an audience’s *first impression* of a picture and how *intimate* the audience feels with the image, and to a certain degree provides emotional cues based on the design of the object acting as an entrance. We’ll look more closely at this shortly. The *structural* aspect of a *Fg Entrance* forces the viewer to look at a particular area of the image. A picture’s *structure* is an abstract division of the space inside the frame, and *Fg* objects simply occupy some of that space in order to direct visual traffic. *Fg* objects essentially narrow the focus of the frame by creating a smaller frame within it. They can be used to create the asymmetrical frames of *FFL* and *FFR* described in *Chapter 2* (*Ill.12*), but may also create symmetrical structures by placing a foreground object on either side of the frame in order to funnel the viewer towards the centre of the frame (*Ill.13*).



Ill.12: Asymmetrical Fg Entrance forces a focal area on the right side of the frame. Student Work.



Ill.13: Symmetrical Fg Entrance forces a focal area in the center of the frame. Student Work.

A *Fg Entrance*, be it *symmetrical* or *asymmetrical*, is an entrance because it provides a doorway that opens onto the rest of the picture. Typically it leads the audience towards the *focal point* of the picture which, if there is an entrance, is generally located in the *Mg* of the picture.

MIDGROUND FOCUS

The focus of a picture may occur in either the *Fg*, *Mg* or *Bg* of a picture. However, there is a tendency for a great deal of pictures to have their focal point in the *Mg*. The *Fg* object in these instances typically acts as a structural device to lead the viewer into the picture, and towards the focal point. This is the case in both *Ills.12&13*. The cowboys in the *Mg* and *Bg* of *Ill.12* are the *focal point* (as a group because of the similarity of their

design) for which the hand and gun create a *Fg Entrance*. These are set against the background of the open sky and hilltop. The hands of *Ill.13* create a *Fg Entrance* that funnel the audience towards the *Mg focal point* of the face, in front of a shallow *Bg* wall. *Illustration 14* is the opposite of *Ill.12* structurally, in that it's *asymmetrical focal structure* has it's *Fg Entrance* on the right of the frame rather than the left, but is again typical in the sense that it has its focal point (the door) in the *Mg* of the picture.



Ill.14: Asymmetrical Fg Entrance forces a focal area on the left side of the frame. Greenhouse, Charlene Hsu illustration.

However, at times the *focal point* of a picture may be in the *Fg*, with the *Mg* functioning as supporting information to balance the image (*Ill.15*). This illustration has figures to either side of the frame serving essentially the same function as the hands in *Ill.13*: they funnel the audience towards the *central focal point* by balancing the picture. Both examples are identical in nature to the *pyramidal structures* discussed in *Chapter 2*. The principle point of focus is the central figure who is herself *pyramidal* in structure. The pinnacle of the foremost foot creates a narrative with the face of the figure creating a more complicated *primary focal point* between these two elements along



Ill.15: The Fg Entrance is also the scene's focal point, balanced out by the flanking Mg figures. Skipping, 2000-1, Michael Abraham.

the pyramid's central access. The outstretched arms and supporting figures to either flank complete the *pyramidal* structure, create additional narrative elements, and balance the picture around the *Fg focal point*. Whether the *focal point* be in the *Mg* and led to by a *Fg Entrance*, or is itself the *Fg Entrance* and the pinnacle balanced by *Mg* objects, makes no difference as to *what* the focal point is. The salient difference between the picture with a *Fg* object and the one without, is one of *viewer intimacy*: we feel closer to *Fg* objects, and as a result more intimate with them, so when the *focal point* of a picture is also its focal point we feel more intimate with that focal point.

Whether something is considered *Fg* or *Mg* is relative and a matter of degree. Even if the object does share the same proximity to the viewer as in *Ills.12-15*, it may still be *Fg* in that it is the closest thing to the 'front' of the picture. By the same token, that object can be seen as a *Mg* object if we require a higher degree of proximity in order to be considered *Fg*. The figures on the left and right of *Ill.16* fall into both of these categories, and in this instance can be seen as a *Mg* forcing agent directing visual traffic towards a



Ill.16: Bg focal point with a Mg structural 'push' towards it. The figures on the left and right act as a framing device for the card playing woman on the right. Nothing Ever Happened, 2013, Justin Ogilvie.