

Chapter Two

Framing the Subject and The Image Hierarchy

FRAMING THE SUBJECT AND THE IMAGE HIERARCHY

INTRODUCTION

The frame is the boundary of an image. By bounding an image in a frame the image-maker in part determines both the structural and emotional valence of that image. How a composition is framed is as much of a part of an image as its subject matter. You could go so far as to say that without a frame there is no such thing as composition. Composition implies the arrangement of objects in relation to each other in a restricted space; whether that space be screen, canvas or paper. With no restrictions of space there can be arrangements of objects in relation to each other, but little relation to surrounding space. Composition is all about the relation between things and their surrounding space. The frame determines that space.

This chapter is devoted to the psychological and emotional effects that the frame can have on an audience as a compositional tool. 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, and difference between, different *frame orientations*;
2. Natural areas of *tension* within the frame;
3. The relationship of the frame to the *balance* and *visual weight* of an image;
4. How to determine a *hierarchy of importance* amongst objects within the frame;
 - a. The creation of *Primary, Secondary, Tertiary* and *Peripheral* levels of importance;
5. The creation of *single* and *multi-focal* images in *symmetrical* or *asymmetrical directional patterns*;
6. The relationship between the frame and perspective;
7. Using the frame as a *cropping device* to achieve:
 - a. Different emotional effects on an audience;
 - b. Structural *story progression*.

THE FRAME

The Rococo painter Fragonard (1780-1850) once remarked: “Nature is too badly lit, and too green.” By this he meant that our experience of everyday reality does not appear in an aesthetically composed manner and that it is the business of the image-maker to make reality look the way they *want*. The pictures we want to create do not come ‘pre-framed.’ We decide *how* the frame will bound an image depending on what we want the image to *feel like* and what we want the audience to *look at*. Sketches or doodles are typically not considered compositions because they were not created with the restrictive boundaries of the frame in mind (disregarding for the moment that the size of any surface acts as a framing device by default). It is the imposition of the frame upon imagery that turns doodle and reality alike into compositions. The frame acts as a cropping device that eliminates what we do not want to include in an image and accentuates that which we do.

Illustrations 1&2 show how much an image may change with the imposition of a bounding edge. The preparatory Fragonard sketch in *Ill.1* does not separate the subject from the surrounding white space. This non-contextual space becomes part of the image and gives it a free-floating look and feel, removing it from any particular place or time. By contrast, the bounding frame of *Ill.2* crops this space, removing its unwanted influence on the painting. The painting is now *contained* within the frame. As any painter knows, the kind of frame that surrounds a picture forces viewer concentration to what is inside its boundaries but also affects how that picture looks and feels (i.e. the gold colouring and decoration in *Ill.2* influences the interpretation of the picture as much as the contents of the picture). In this way the frame of a picture is just as much a part of the picture as the picture itself.



Ill.1: Preparatory sketch for Fragonard's Les Feu aux Poudres (1778). The composition is not complete because it does not interact with a bounding frame.



Ill.2: Les Feu aux Poudres, 1778. The finished composition is determined by the frame. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Borders that surround an image as lines or ornamental bands first appeared towards the end of the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean (*Ill.3*), but it is only with the representation of perspectival spaces in Roman art and more convincingly in the Italian Renaissance (*Ill.4*) that the frame acquires the more modern function of intervening between the viewer and image by not only aiding in a picture's spatial clarification, but also creating illusionistic relativity. The frame in both *Ill.3&4* separates the

image from the external environment, but the frame in *Ill.4* has the additional function of bounding an illusionistic reality. It creates a world in which an audience can become absorbed with, enter into, and become lost within. By contrast, the objects in *Ill.3* float in a non-contextual space bounded by a frame, but does not create an illusionistic space. In this sense, *Ills.1&3* are identical to each other, their ‘frames’ merely separate one decorative element on a surface from another, and do define another space separate from ours, but it does not contribute to the creation of a reality into which the viewer may enter. So while the examples of frames from both eras have similarities, and very useful applications depending on the context, it is the more modern usage that it is of interest to us. That means that the frame as we will be discussing it has only been around since the beginning of our modern era (about 600 years).



Ill.3: The Toreador Fresco from the Palace of Minos on Krete (1600-1400 BC) shows a decorative bounding edge. Heraklion Archeological Museum, Heraklion, Crete.



Ill.4: Titian's Rape of Europa (1560-62) creates an illusionistic world inside the bounding edge of the frame. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Since the 15th century the frame has been designated many things by those trying to communicate its importance. Leon Battista Alberti, a 15th century artist and theorist described the frame as *a window onto a world*; a 20th century art historian described it as ‘*focusing device*’ that only really came to be used in the Italian Renaissance; the modern painter Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*, described the frame as something that “*protects the play of forces in the picture from the fettering influence of the environment*”; Clement Greenberg (1909-94) in his role as premier mid-20th century art critic defined it as “*horizontal and vertical coordinates directing and centralizing vision*”; Rudolph Arnheim (1904-2007) in his writings on art and perception thought of the frame as a place within which one had “*greater freedom from surrounding space*”; and still others have referred to it as a ‘self-contained space’ excluding the viewers presence from its environment. All of these comments have aspects of truth about them, and even though they serve very different agendas in each case, they are also *all* witness to an understanding of the influence that the frame has upon a picture and the viewer’s relationship with that picture.

It is the practical rather than ideological functions of the frame that are of interest to us. How does the frame help emotionally and visually orient an audience towards the subject matter within its bounds? In the words of Clement Greenberg:

“The frame encloses the painting and separates it from the world of the spectator. More importantly, it prescribes the kinds of composition available...(it) constitutes itself as the fundamental principle of compositional order...As a regular form, usually rectangular, the frame determines the centre of the picture and gives every part or figure a clearly defined space and visual value in relation both to the centre and to the horizontals and verticals of the frame.”¹

This means that just by virtue of putting a particular kind of boundary around an image the image itself becomes a certain *kind* of image, with different areas of importance and emotional energy. Therefore for our purposes, the orientation of the frame is one of the *first* decisions to make when deciding what kind of picture you want to make.

The orientation of a frame is not only its shape, but also its angle of presentation relative to the viewer. Where objects are within the frame will help determine what kind of picture you create; but so will the orientation of the frame. Is it square? Rectangular? If rectangular is it vertical or horizontal? Etc. The decision of frame orientation will affect how your audience reacts to the image it contains. Just as was the case with *POV* choice, different choices of frame orientation create different pictures, and different pictures tell different stories. Picking the best orientation, or arrangement within a pre-determined orientation, allows you to tell the best story possible.

ORIENTATIONS

Although the frame may assume any orientation desired given a situation of complete creative freedom, oftentimes the medium itself restricts available orientations and formats. In film, television, photography, web-page layout, and more traditional easel painting (and drawing by extension) there are restrictive ratios that dictate a typically rectilinear frame. The convention of the easel picture and its composition is determined, according to Greenberg, by the frame or the border typical of European painting. In contemporary art that situation has changed, as the nature and the value of the frame and any bounding surface has been increasingly questioned theoretically since at least the 1950's (III.5); however, and irrespective of this theoretical development, the frame that once enclosed the painting and separated it from the world of the spectator, has had a large influence on



III.5: Challenging the traditional frame. Andrea Hooge, *Treasures*, scratchboard - multilayered cutout, 2016.

¹ *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, 6

the kinds of frames we currently enjoy in film and photography. These bequeathed orientations prescribe the kinds of compositions available as it constitutes the fundamental principle of compositional order. When the restrictive aspect of the boundary ratio is removed, more compositional possibilities become available as the ratio of the frame can be designed specifically to accentuate a picture. This is an ideal situation: the ability to specifically cater every aspect of an image, including its frame dimensions, to accentuate the work in question. However, as is so often case creativity thrives in the face of restrictions, and even though the frame may seem a hinderance to creative freedom some of the most successful solutions are those found in the face of just such a constraint.

Television, film and photography frame orientations are all restricted by their respective *aspect ratios*. The *aspect ratio* of an image is the proportional relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the frame. This ratio varies with the medium in question. For example, TV format is typically 1.33:1, while portrait photography would be

| | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| TV FORMAT 1.33:1 | PORTRAIT FORMAT 1:1.33 | WIDESCREEN FORMAT 1.66:1 | WIDESCREEN FORMAT 2.35:1 |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|

Ill.6: The most common frame aspect ratios.

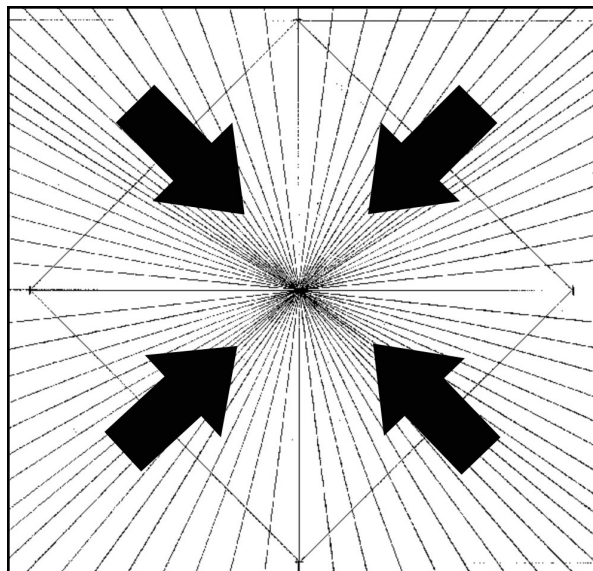
Regardless of the *aspect ratio*, whenever an image is subjected to any bounding frame a relationship between the subject matter within the frame and the frame itself has been created. This relationship has an active role in determining how that image *feels* to an audience. This is because the frame is not a passive agent with respect to the image it surrounds; its bounding edge perceptually affects an audience and influences its interpretation. In part this is due to areas of the frame itself that feel more important to a viewer. This is where our discussion begins.

NATURAL AREAS OF TENSION AND ATTRACTION

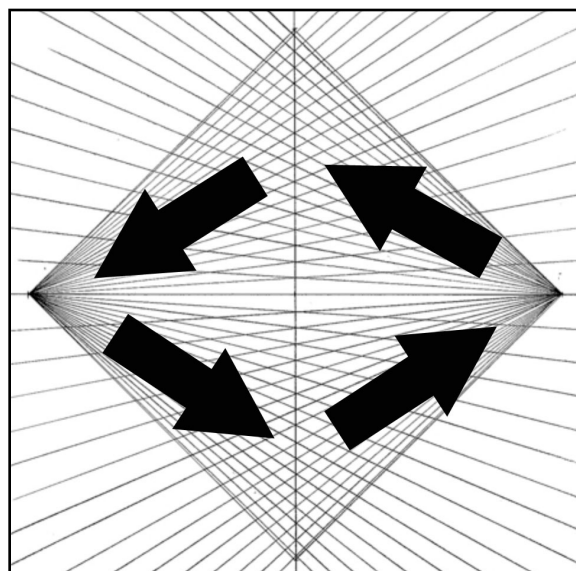
The bounding edge of the frame is not passive, it is an active and participating force in a viewers perceptual engagement with an image. When we look at an image we do not mechanically record the information presented to us, we apprehend the picture as *meaning* something and *feeling* a certain way. Part of how a picture comes to mean something to us and feel a particular way is our perception of the *structural patterns* underlying that image.

We are pattern-seeking creatures and will impose order and patterns wherever they may perceptually be found. This search for pattern and order is responsible for our 'activation' of certain perceptually dynamic areas, or tension-carrying sections, that naturally occur within any frame. These *natural areas of tension* within the frame and are defined by a frame's *structural skeleton*. All shapes have a structural skeleton, and equally divisible shapes (i.e. rectangles, squares, etc.) have easily recognizable ones. The *structural skeleton* of a shape are invisible lines that we perceive as dividing that shape

into vertical, horizontal and diagonal halves. This creates an *axes framework* that *perceptual forces* are generated along. *Perceptual forces* are invisible directions that an audience will subconsciously identify and follow along whatever pattern they create. The *directional paths* of both *parallel* and *oblique* perspective from *Chapter 1* are a good example of *perceptual forces* (Ills.7&8).

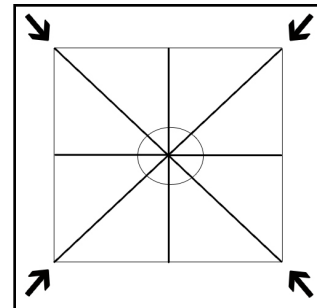


Ill.7: The perceptual forces of the visual rays in parallel perspective direct the eye towards the central vp



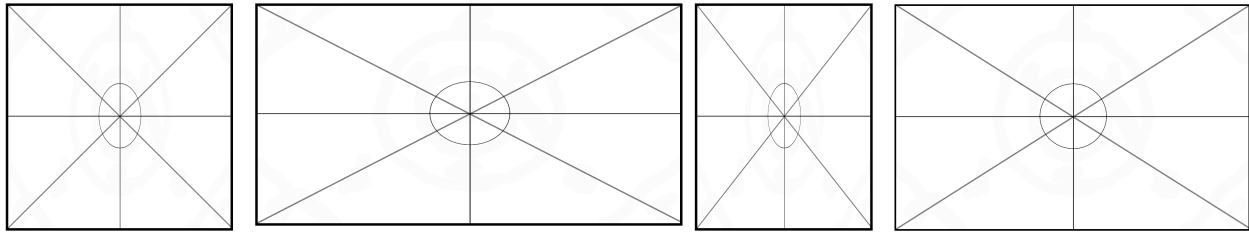
Ill.8: The perceptual forces of the visual rays in oblique perspective directs the eye along a circular pattern

These perceptual forces create natural areas of tension at points of convergence. As we know from *Chapter 1* all tension and convergence creates focus. As a result, the centre of an image becomes an area of tension and focus because the diagonal, vertical and horizontal skeletal axis all converge in this area. The corners of the frame become areas of tension and focus for the same reason, as do the centres of the horizontal and vertical edges of the frame. Because more of these perceptual tension lines converge in the centre of the frame this area tends to carry more importance than those areas at the frames periphery (Ill.9).



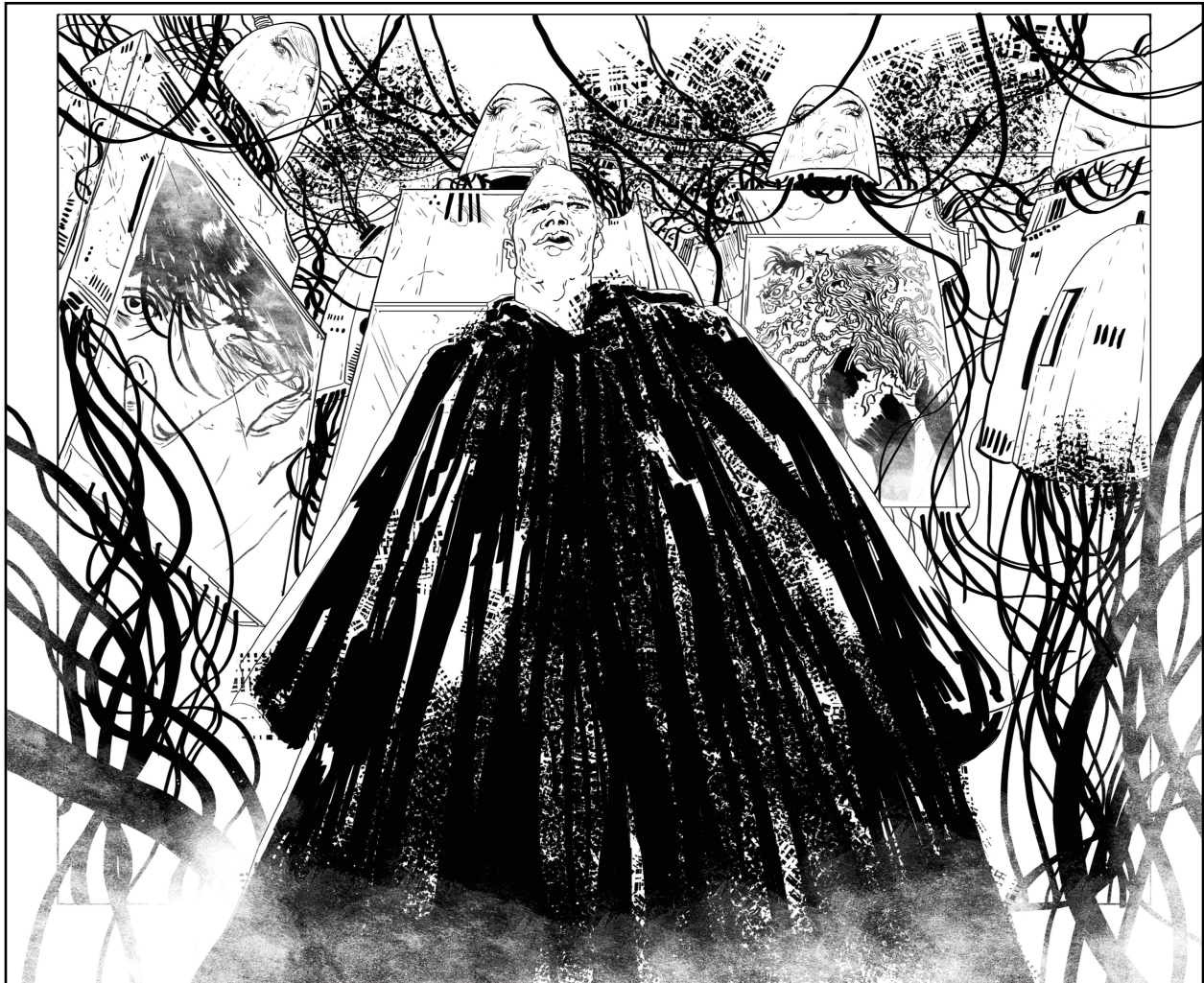
Ill.9: Natural areas of tension in the frame.

A frame of any rectilinear orientation will have natural areas of tension of this sort (Ill.10). These areas of the frame are not perceptually activated by objects placed within them, their perceptual importance exists irrespective of whether or not objects occupy those positions. More things are present in our field of vision than strike the retina, and the structural skeleton of the frame and the areas of tension it creates are examples of such. The viewer will have an intuitive response to the invisible forces of these structural skeletons. The invisible skeleton of the diagonal, vertical and horizontal axis of a frame make objects that are placed proximate to them appear to be more important than objects that are not. By placing objects in areas of tension they take on the importance that is inherent to those areas. The objects become important because of *where they are placed within the frame*, not because of *what they are*.



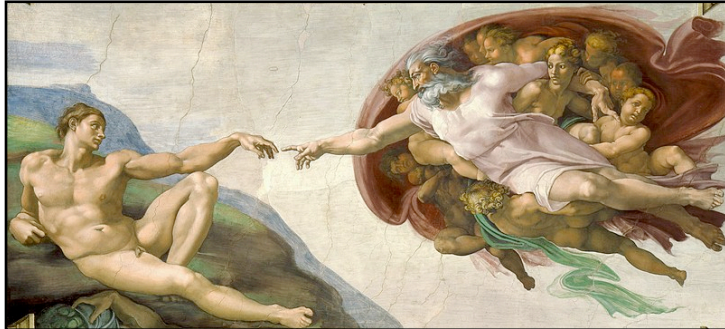
III.10: All rectilinear frames will have tension areas in the same sections of the frame.

For example, the centre of the frame carries a lot of perceptual weight with an audience. It *feels* like an important area of the frame. By placing an object in the middle of the frame that object aligns with the point of convergence of the frame's structural skeleton. As a result the object feels important; but it feels important because of *where* it is, not because of *what* it is. The image from the graphic novel *Change* in III.11 makes the character in black feel important to the viewer because it is positioned in the centre of the frame that, not because of who or what that character is. For added good measure, a *low-angle POV* accentuates this importance.



III.11: The figure in black isn't important in this picture because of what he is, but because he's in the middle of the frame. Morgan Jeske, *Change*, Issue 3, 2013

The *Structural Directional Patterns (SDP)* of natural frame tension and the *visual rays* of perspective are both *directional paths* that compel an audience to look at a particular point in the picture. It is no different than if someone's finger was point at a particular object and telling you to look at it. We know that the point between the outstretched fingers of God and Man in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel masterpiece is an are of importance, because the fingers literally point towards it and identify it for us perceptually (Ill.12). The object may differ, but the *structural skeleton* of the frame contributes to the development of focus in a picture just as surely as do those pointing fingers.



Ill.12: The pointing fingers do the same thing as the structural skeleton of the frame: pay attention to that space! *The Creation of Man (detail), Michelangelo, 1512, Sistine Chapel, Rome.*

The *aspect ratio* of a frame will affect the natural areas of tension in the frame to some degree. As the overall size of the enclosed area increases so does the distance of the centre of the frame from its edge. This greater distance reduces the perceptual influence of the frame on its centre. In Ill.13 the police officer's relationship to the environment changes as the orientation of the frame is altered. The officer remains the focal point of the scene in each instance, but he loses his imposing nature as the format widens and becomes increasingly 'small' with respect to his environment.



Ill.13: The officer in this drawing by Jeremiah Birnbaum is the focus but becomes decreasingly dominant of his surroundings as the frame widens

When choosing the aspect ratio for an image, a decision is made not only in regard to *what* information the viewer is allowed to see, but also *how* we wish the viewer to *feel* when viewing that scene. If we are limited by the medium in which we operate to a predetermined orientation, then we must only decide how to arrange objects within the frame. But *how* we arrange those objects will speak to the audience about their importance relative to each other *and* to the audience.