CHAPTER

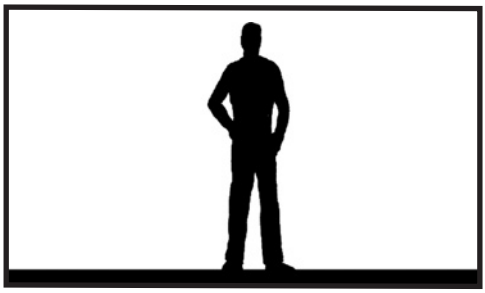
2

Contrast and Affinity

The Key to Visual Structure

Visual structure is based on an understanding of the Principle of Contrast & Affinity. What is contrast? Contrast means difference.

Here's an example of contrast using the visual component of tone. Tone refers to the brightness of objects. Tone can be organized using a gray scale. Contrast of tone means two shades of gray that are as different in terms of brightness as possible. The two gray tones with maximum contrast or difference are the black square and the white square. A picture illustrating maximum contrast of tone would use only black and white tones.



This shot, all black and white, is an example of maximum contrast of tone.

What is affinity? Affinity means similarity.

Any gray tones next to each other on the gray scale have affinity. A picture illustrating maximum affinity of tone would use a limited portion of the gray scale.

These shots are examples of tonal affinity. One uses only black and dark gray, and the other shot uses two light gray tones.

Every visual component (space, line, shape, tone, color, movement, and rhythm) can be described and used in terms of contrast and affinity, which we'll discuss in the chapters that follow.

To put it simply, contrast means difference and affinity means similarity.

The Principle of Contrast & Affinity states:

The greater the contrast in a visual component, the more the visual intensity or dynamic increases. The greater the affinity in a visual component, the more the visual intensity or dynamic decreases.

More simply stated:

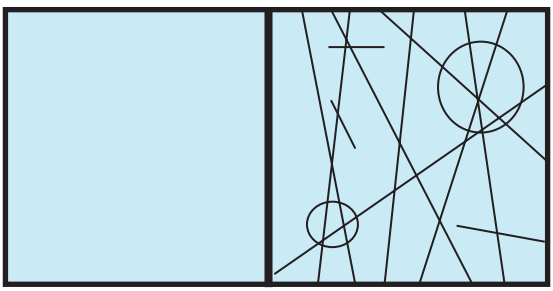
Contrast = Greater Visual Intensity

Affinity = Less Visual Intensity

What does *visual intensity* mean? A state-of-the-art rollercoaster ride is intense; a sleeping puppy is not. A wild action sequence in a great movie is exciting; a picture of a calm ocean shore on an overcast day is not. A computer game can be exciting or dull. A television commercial can be agitating or soothing. A documentary can be alarming or reassuring. These emotional reactions are based on the intensity, or dynamic, of the audience's emotional reaction when they read a book, listen to music, or see a picture. The audience's reaction can be emotional (they cry, laugh, or scream) or physical (their muscles tense up, they cover their eyes, they fall asleep). Usually the more intense the visual stimulus, the more intense the audience reaction.

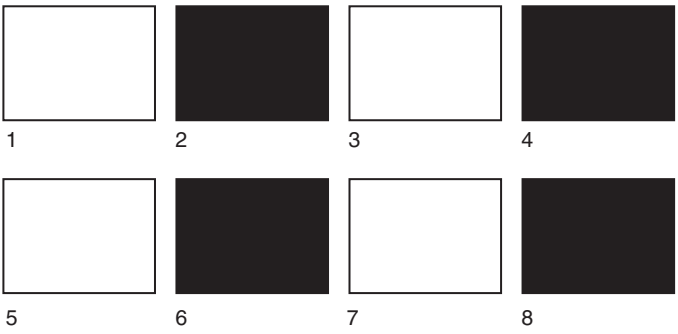
A good writer carefully structures words, sentences, and paragraphs. A good musician carefully structures notes, measures, and bars. A director, cinematographer, production designer, or editor structures visuals by applying the Principle of Contrast & Affinity to the basic visual components.

The effect of the Principle of Contrast & Affinity can be demonstrated with a simple drawing:

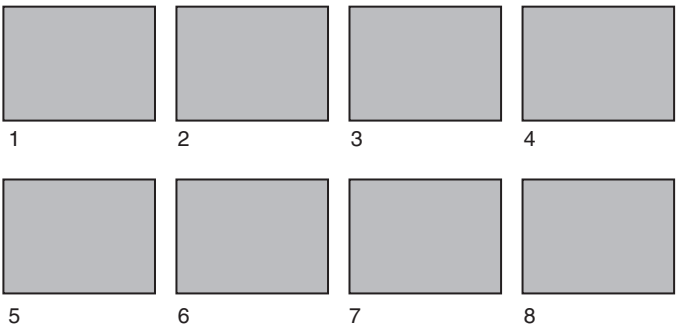


Which half of this frame is more intense? The right half is full of contrasting lines that create visual intensity. The left half lacks intensity due to the visual affinity. Each half of the frame has a different visual personality.

Here's another example using two hypothetical short films:



This is a storyboard for the first film. A storyboard is a set of drawings that illustrate what the final film will look like. Each shot in this film lasts one second. The frame starts white and then goes black, then white, black, etc. This alternation of white and black will continue for several minutes. The audience's response is fairly predictable. The rapid assault of contrasting black and white frames will become too intense and impossible to watch. The film is all contrast; it is too intense.



This is a storyboard for the second film. Every frame is the same gray tone; nothing changes. The audience will watch this movie for several minutes and, of course, find it dull and monotonous. The film is all affinity. It lacks visual dynamic.

The contrast of the white/black movie is too intense, and the affinity of the gray movie has no intensity at all.

Although the Principle of Contrast & Affinity is simple, using it gets complicated. Each of the seven basic visual components can be broken down into various subcomponents, and all of them must be related back to contrast and affinity. But once the basic visual components and the Principle of Contrast & Affinity are understood, controlling visual structure becomes possible.

The next six chapters define the basic visual components. It is critical to know how to see them, control them in practical production, and, most importantly, use them to build a visual structure.