

CRAFTING VISUAL IMAGES:

Seven Key Tools to Help Writers Convey Deeper Levels of Meaning in Story

By Zena Dell Lowe (with gratitude to Barbara Nicolosi)

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- A. Film & Television are Visual Mediums, but so are Novels
 - a. Most people only understand this on one level – they watch a movie or a television show, or they “picture” a novel in their head. But when it comes to communicating meaning, they rely on literal words, rather than visual images.
 - b. Most writers don’t know how to portray deeper levels of meaning in story through the use visual images.
 - c. To help writers learn this skill, we’re focusing on 7 “types” of images:
 - 1. IMAGES
 - 2. COMPOSITION OF IMAGES
 - 3. JUXTAPOSITION OF IMAGES
 - 4. AURAL OR AUDITORY “IMAGES” IN THE FORM OF DIALOGUE
 - 5. AURAL OR AUDITORY “IMAGES” IN THE FORM OF MUSIC
 - 6. AURAL OR AUDITORY “IMAGES” IN THE FORM OF AMBIENT SOUND
 - 7. Other key types of visual images: PROPS; RITUALS; TRADITIONS; AND CHARACTER CHOICES, ACTIONS, BEHAVIORS (HAUNTING MOMENTS)

- B. IMAGES
 - a. An image is something that stands for something else
 - 1. (Poetic images represent something with a deeper meaning)
 - b. A picture that speaks a thousand words
 - c. A woman kissing a frog – saves you from having to write ten pages
 - d. **THE COLOR PURPLE** opening images – we’re going to look at two purple flowers, but there are millions of them out there. Suffering, Royalty, bruises.

- C. COMPOSITION OF IMAGES
 - a. Not just the stuff you show, but how you show it.
 - b. A CANDLE CLOSE UP vs. A SINGLE CANDLE ON A TABLE IN A BIG ROOM.
In image 1, flames burn hot. In image 2, they risk being extinguished.
 - c. **SAVING PRIVATE RYAN – The aftermath of Normandy** – No faces of the men on the beach. No “gore” – (i.e., limbs). Black and white except the blood red ocean (how much blood must be spilled to turn the ocean red?). Dead fish arranged around the body. All compositional choices. **But what does it mean?**
 - d. These images communicate the high cost of war. It’s not just men who pay, but nature itself. NOT an anti-war movie. This film doesn’t denigrate these men. The evil had to be confronted, the war was just, but the writer wants to remind us of the high price these men paid to ensure freedom and righteousness.
 - e. **The writer has control over composition of images when it’s part of the story telling and not just arbitrary.**

D. JUXTAPOSITION OF IMAGES

- a. The pairing of images. i.e., connecting two images together via film editing, or how you end one scene/chapter, and how you start the next in novels.
- b. The Soviet Union propaganda ads
 1. Rich men eating at a table
 2. Cut to pigs eating out of a trough
 3. The rich men are pigs (Bourgeois Pig)
- c. Human beings can bridge the first two images and arrive at a third conclusion. Our brains make a connection. Animals can't do this.
- d. Famous film studies experiment proved that the audience will project a new meaning depending on what you follow a first image with.
 1. A picture of an old man gazing at a newborn = a sweet old man.
 2. Same image, followed by a teenage girl = a dirty old man.
 3. Same image, followed by money = a greedy old man.
- e. We don't decide what it means until AFTER the second image. **This gives the writer a tremendous amount of power.**

E. AURAL – WHAT WE HEAR – MUSIC

- a. Writers don't have much control over this, but sometimes you can write it in if it's central to the story
- b. **GONE WITH THE WIND** – Dixie slowed down. Swanee River turns into taps as Scarlett searches for the doctor. With the music, the image means more.
- c. **FULL METAL JACKET** – Stanley Kubrick – funky high-strung Jazz music playing during a brutal killing spree. Says how absurd is this game of war.
- d. **THE KEY** is that the music doesn't tell the same story, but adds a new dimension. **Ironic counterpoint brings new meaning.**

F. AURAL – PART 2 - AMBIENT SOUND

- a. Only describe the ambient sound when it plays into the narrative.
- b. **THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS** – Orson Wells – The old man is opposed to progress, but we hear carriage wheels grinding (ironically) as he speaks.
- c. **SAVING PRIVATE RYAN** – The typing in the Clerk's office matches the machine gun fire at Normandy. This says, "War is killing the girls, not just the boys."
- d. As before, ironic counterpoint is necessary to add a deeper level of meaning.

G. AURAL – PART 3 – DIALOGUE

- a. Two parts of dialogue = Literal and Subtextual. Sometimes you need literal dialogue, but for any real meaning, you need subtext.
- b. **FARGO** – Last scene – talking about the 3-cent stamp. Talking around the terror. Too horrible to talk about. The scene feels so humane – but the lights on the TV flash. The news is talking about the tragedy, but they can't. It's a creepy ending.

There are (at least) 7 kinds of communication coming at the audience. Most writers only write one – and that's usually literal dialogue. Like painters only using blue on a pallet of 7 colors