# analysing page layout and design

If you're analysing print media – magazines, newspaper and particularly advertising – you'll need to be reading far more than just the words. **Lucy Scott-Galloway** analyses the principles of design and layout which guide our reading and create meaning.

Watching an episode of *Hollyoaks*, I just saw one character leave his friend on a shoot telling her, 'You don't need my help, you just point and shoot', or something like that. She stamped her foot and looked suitably exasperated, giving him a 'you know nothing' glare obviously enough for him to look ashamed. He scarpered and she went back to her terribly professional work of shooting an interview with no tripod.

I smiled, thinking about the hours of rushes and reams of prints I've seen, and discarded, when someone has just pointed-and-shot. Quite aside from rookie mistakes like potted plants coming out of subjects' heads, light reflectors left in frame, or subjects positioned in front of bright sunlight, the composition of the shot, and later the composition of visual elements in a film or on a page, is all too often forgotten under the pressure of the shoot and studio. I don't watch ***Hollyoaks*** with enough commitment to know whether this was a student or professional shoot, but really the principles should be the same. **Understanding how meaning is made in visual language** is essential to producing effective image-based work, and the combination of, and relationship between, elements of design shouldn't be underestimated.

## Visual literacy: 'reading' design

Discussing how images make meaning means stepping away from our role as audience, and deconstructing the decisions that have been made in constructing the work. To use an analogy, it's a skill like being able to taste a soup and recognise all of the ingredients that have gone into it. This is something we generally have to train ourselves to do, because we have spent most of our lives tasting just the combination of flavours. This is our **visual literacy**. We must begin to recognise distinct shapes, whether they have **a hard edge or soft, ranges and tones of colour, whether they are complementary or in conflict.** We should identify **textures** giving the page an illusion of tactility, and **perspective**, creating depth through an impression of foreground and background. And when these elements are recognised, we should consider the **size and positioning** of these visual elements in relationship to each other to create a dominant reading path around the page.

Much print advertising strives to be aesthetically pleasing. The aim of the game is **to represent a desirable lifestyle** that welcomes the consumer, inviting them to become part of the narrative world, invariably by buying the subject of the advertisement. **Conventions** are sought that the consumer will recognise, **the composition** will be designed to be familiar, pleasing and safe. We don't like to take risks with our money, and so adverts have to tell us just what to expect. The car will be photographed speeding up into the winding mountainside road. The woman will be photographed looking euphoric whilst washing her hair, the steam from the shower strategically placed to cover her modesty (and pass the standards of the ASA!). The happy but grubby child will be photographed in a clean middle-class kitchen, mud splattered football in the foreground, contented mother armed with washing powder looking lovingly at her son in the background. We, as the audience for these hypothetical ads, can picture ourselves driving that car. We can picture ourselves washing our hair. We can picture ourselves looking at our cheeky children when they have splattered mud all over our clean kitchens and feeling a sense of relief that we put CleanyBright™ in our shopping trolleys this week. This is an important step in the process of advertising: **feeling part of the world being represented**, and picturing whatever product it is being sold in our lives.

## Composition, lighting, framing

But it is not any old picture of a car. It is not any old picture of a woman in a shower or kid in the kitchen. The photographer didn't just point-and-shoot. Those images have been **thought about, sketched, discussed, changed, sketched again**. They have been shot a hundred times then reviewed by many people. The **lighting levels** may have been changed or **imperfections touched up** in Photoshop. They almost invariably will have been **cropped**. Because it is these elements – **composition, lighting, framing** – that make as much meaning for an audience as the subject itself. And that is *before* the image gets put together with copy, slogans, logos and pack shots.

## The rule of thirds

Proponents of the **rule of thirds** think that the most aesthetic visual composition places the main features of the image along one of four equally spaced intersecting lines, two of which are horizontal, and two of which are vertical. Instead of placing

the subject of the photo in the middle of the frame, positioning it at a third from the left, right, top or bottom makes a more interesting shot, with more visual power. A horizon, therefore, should be a third from the bottom or a third from the top, and a tree a third from the left or a third from the right. However, it should be noted that the rule of thirds is best used as a guideline, than a rule, as much meaning can be made from purposely breaking the 'rule'.

In the first image (see top left on page 43), the subject is in the centre, and the shoreline is below the lower third. In the second image (see page 43, bottom left), the subject is positioned on the right third, and stands at the shore on the bottom third where imaginary lines would intersect. According to the theory, the second image is more visually powerful. I would agree that the second image is more visually pleasing; a more beautiful shot. But the first shot, to me, creates more meaning about the vastness of the sea and the mystery of the weather, and so and the power of the elements. The rule of thirds is aesthetic, but breaking the rule of thirds can create meaning as the photographer (or designer, if the decision is being made whilst cropping) decides how much of the visual space to give to a particular portion of the image. Thus, an image of the city of London's skyline showing little sky can connote an imposing, claustrophobic city, whereas a similar shot taken from the same place but attributing more space to the sky can connote a city dwarfed by the vastness of space.

The designer of our hypothetical ads, therefore, may have been very well aware of the rule of thirds when composing the shots. The car is speeding along the right-hand third, the open sky taking up a little more than the top third to connote freedom. The woman in a mid-shot in the shower has her golden shiny tresses falling down the left third, her exuberant expression on the top third. And our stereotypical mum in the kitchen is smiling at her child and his dirty football on the intersection of the left/bottom thirds, wielding her CleanyBright™ on the top/right thirds' intersection. It all feels very familiar because it is a much-used grid, and so we feel welcomed into the narrative world of the ad and can picture ourselves buying the product.

## Rule breaking

But not all ads are designed to make us buy stuff, or make us feel safe and welcome. Some ads actively try to make us feel uneasy, and a simple way to do this is to **break the 'rules' of composition**. This has been achieved very successfully in the most recent of the children's charity Barnardo's print campaigns, 'Believe in Children' (2007). Charity advertising is rarely about making audiences feel safe, but rather **disrupting equilibrium** and causing a feeling of **discomfort**, and **empathy for others**.

Barnardo's are not famed for being safe with their print ad campaigns. Their 2003 campaign 'Silver Spoon' (see left) attracted 475 complaints to the ASA, mainly on the basis of upsetting imagery. At that time, this was more than any other national press campaign in the ASA's history, and the ads were eventually withdrawn.

This mainly inoffensive ad from the 'Silver Spoon' campaign was the culmination of a series of print ads picturing babies with hypodermic needles, cockroaches and methylated spirit replacing the spoon.

In terms of the composition, the spoon is centred horizontally and crossing the imaginary line of the upper third vertically. The copy is in the bottom half and right third. Unless otherwise directed by visual elements, we tend to read from left to right, top to bottom based on

our experience of reading books. When we read this image the eye naturally falls to the spoon, as a hard metallic object surrounded by softness. Its **vertical positioning** leads the eye down the page and to the eyes of the baby, and then to the slogan and on to the copy. The last thing we look at is the Barnardo's logo. In Western culture, this is generally a **conventional reading path; top left to bottom right.**

Barnardo's followed the highly controversial 'Silver Spoon' campaign with the similarly challenging 'New Life' campaign (see page 46).

This time, the rule of thirds is used more consistently. The slogan draws the eye and creates an **enigma**, encouraging the audience to study the image in more detail. The focus is soft and colours are warm, contributing to the initial sense of cosiness and security. But the image is of a womb, and the adolescent girl inside is clothed. It is an **incongruous image** that draws the audience to **read the copy** to find the solution to the enigma. The **copy is on the intersection** between the top and right-hand thirds, and the **girl's face is on the intersection** between the bottom and right-hand thirds. The umbilical cord, making it clear to the audience that it is a womb (representative of Barnardo's), is **along the imaginary left third line**.

However, Barnardo's most recent campaign, 'Believe in Children' (see right and above) completely breaks the rule of thirds, and disrupts the natural top left to bottom right reading path. The result is **unsettling**, and this preferred reading is reinforced by the use of **white space**, the **close-up** of the subject, and the **extra-diegetic gaze.**

**Rule of thirds:** The composition of the ad completely rejects the rule of thirds, and purposely sacrifices any sense of familiarity on the part of the audience. The image is split with a hard vertical line down the centre, and a soft horizontal line across

the subject's eyes, through the line where the copy gets smaller, and on to the text on the right-hand side, again centred. At the end of this line is the small text calling the audience to action; asking them to text a number. This rejection of everything we are used to in visual composition is certainly intentional, the designer of the ad wants the audience to feel discomfort and unfamiliar, reinforced by the copy. 'He told his parents to f**k off. He told his foster parents to f**k off...' This isn't any ordinary kid. He's the kind of kid who has problems, and his poor behaviour is often misunderstood by adults, because, after all, he is just a kid. This is the kind of kid that Barnardo's looks out for. The more uneasy we feel by the composition of the image, the more relived we are that Barnardo's is there to look after kids like him.

**Use of White Space** (a.k.a. negative space): white space is not merely empty space, that the designer didn't get round to filling up. Space not used by other visual elements becomes a visual element in itself. Most designs try to use some white space as it stops an image looking overly busy or cluttered. Conversely, leaving a lot of white space creates a particular aesthetic. In this case, used alongside a close up of a child's face, the use of white space draws the eye to the image. It also emphasises the isolation of the subject, making him seem totally alone. But reading left to right, after the expanse of white space, we finish the print narrative at the Barnardo's logo, the charity that is there to help him.

**Use of Close Up**: Again, the use of the close-up challenges what we are used to in print advertising. Most print advertising uses a **less confrontational shot type**, with the exception of some make-up and beauty product advertising. However, **close-ups are generally used to show expression**, and in contrast to make-up advertisements, the child in the Barnardo's 'Believe in Children' campaign is totally **expressionless.** This is unsettling for the audience, and again we are relieved that Barnardo's is there to look out for such children.

Note that in this image of a young girl, the soft horizontal line is again centred, as in the image of the blonde boy. However, this time, the copy changes from bold and the smaller text calling the audience to action is in line with the subject's mouth. In this advertisement from the campaign, the audience's focus is far more on the subject's mouth, than the eyes as was the focus of the previous ad. This reading path foregrounding the importance of the mouth may **emphasise the copy**, which describes the girl as inarticulate.

**Extra-diegetic gaze:** The use of the extra-diegetic gaze, or breaking the 'fourth wall' is not particularly unique in advertising, and refers to **the gaze of the subject on the audience**, recognising the audience's presence and therefore balancing a power relationship with the audience. The subject is not putting on a performance or a spectacle for the audience's pleasure, and instead is gazing on us as the audience as we gaze on him. However, most **extra-diegetic gazes in print advertising are inviting either identification, or admiration**. The subjects of the 'Believe in Children' campaigns are inviting neither of these. In fact, they are **defiant of any contact** at all. This challenges usual stereotypes of children in print advertising as happy, cheeky, conventionally attractive and ultimately lovable kids.

In all probability, the photographer for the 'Believe in Children' campaign set his focus and exposure and did exactly as that character from ***Hollyoaks*** suggested – pointed and shot. But this selection of shot type was just one stage in a series of decisions that included the age, race and gender of the children as subject; the **language and typography** of the copy; the **size, focus, colour and texture** of the images; the **lighting and tone**; the size of white space and ultimately, the composition of all of these elements to **challenge conventional aesthetics of print advertising**. By doing so, Barnardo's reinforce their **core message** – not all children are easy or come from loving backgrounds. But Barnardo's is there to support all children, no matter how difficult they might be.

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