

This is the text of a lecture prepared by Dianne Dickenson in 2004 for the CDM unit “Writing & Document Design”. Here she discusses Kress and Van Leeuwin’s semiotic account of theories of layout and composition which are outlined in this week’s reading.

In this lecture, Dianne gives a good range of visual examples that illustrate Kress and Van Leeuwin’s theories. While strictly speaking the focus on aspects of layout and visual composition are not wholly central to this course, they are important perspectives which I believe students of professional writing need to be aware of.

## **WEEK 6 – APPROACHES TO LAYOUT**

This week’s lecture

In this week’s lecture we will move into the ‘text analysis’ component of the course. Over the next four or five weeks we will shift our focus to the document itself. We will examine various components of a document including images, written text, typography and layout.

We will consider how you—as document design experts—can:

- evaluate these components of an existing document and,
- use this knowledge in the design of your own documents.

This week we will look at layout, and, in particular, the semiotic account of layout (or ‘composition’) of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1990, 1996). Copies of the relevant chapter will be distributed next week in class.

We will consider the usefulness of their approach both as an analytical tool (a way of analysing and talking about the meanings of different layouts) and for the practise of document design.

### **What is layout?**

Way back in weeks 1 and 2 we discussed different accounts or approaches to understanding, teaching about or studying ‘design’.

Similarly, layout can be understood from different perspectives. In the theory of art, for example, layout or composition is often talked about in aesthetic or formal terms (balance, harmony, emphasis etc). In newspaper and magazine layout it is more often discussed in pragmatic terms (‘does it grab the reader’s attention?’). For example, compare the approaches below.

- Layout—the spatial arrangement of the text that can reinforce or mute the message of a text.
- Layout—a particular problem solving process that takes one part of the content and makes it fit a given space within the design of a document (Bivins & Ryan 1993)
- Layout—‘is really a piece of abstract art. You’re fiddling with basic shapes in different tones and trying to get them to sit comfortably, logically and

interestingly together in order to tell a story and impart information clearly ... a good designer relates pieces of the puzzle to one another until the connections are visually communicated as well as being textually discussed.' (Whitbread 2001: 120)

- Layout—the code of spatial composition; its function is to integrate the different semiotic codes at work (e.g. images and written text) in a text by relating the meanings (representational and interpersonal/interactive) of a text to each other (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue that all considerations of layout/composition—including the pragmatic and aesthetic—are intertwined with the semiotic function of layout/composition, i.e. with a consideration of meaning.

### **The grammar of visual design—Kress & van Leeuwen (1990, 1996)**

Kress and Van Leeuwen state that their project is: to develop a grammar of visual design (up until recently there has only been a grammar of language); a visual semiotics; a grammar which focuses on the way in which depicted people, places and things are combined into a meaningful whole.

Kress and Van Leeuwen draw a parallel with the grammar of written language saying that: 'Just as grammars of language describe how words combine in clauses, sentences and texts, so our visual 'grammar' will describe the way in which depicted people, places and things combine in visual statements ...' (1996: 1)

They say that they aim to develop a descriptive framework that can be used as a tool for visual analysis. The authors have both critical and practical goals i.e. to be able to critique ('read') visual designs and to create new visual designs.

The authors have a number of key assumptions:

- The grammar of visual design plays a vital role in the production of meaning.
- The visual means of communication are rational expressions of cultural meanings.
- Visual language is culturally specific (no 'universal' grammar).
- Visual communication is amenable to rational accounts and analysis.

For those of you who have studied some of the Language and Discourse units, you might recall that all language fulfils three primary functions, which Halliday calls metafunctions.

These are:

- The ideational metafunction—language represents the world
- The interpersonal metafunction—language constructs social relations
- The textual metafunction—language forms texts

Kress and van Leeuwen extend this to all semiotic systems including the visual so that, visual communication, like language, represents the world and constructs

social relations and different compositional arrangements allow the realisation of different textual meanings.

It is this latter function, the textual that we will focus on.

## **Textual metafunction – composition/layout**

Many texts consist of a number of different semiotic codes (for example, written language plus images—as in magazines; or written language, images and music/sound—as in film). Kress and van Leeuwen refer to these as composite texts. Kress and van Leeuwen say that the meaning(s) of these texts should be considered as a whole rather than as the sum of the meanings of the parts. In other words, what a text means is the result of the impact of a number of different semiotic systems interacting with each other.

Kress and van Leeuwen believe that the integration of these different semiotic systems is the work of an overarching code. They describe two such integration codes:

- layout the code of spatial composition, and
- rhythm the code of temporal composition. The former (layout) operates in texts in which all elements are spatially co-present (e.g. paintings, magazine pages) and the latter in texts which unfold over time (e.g. film, TV, websites).

## **PRINCIPLES OF LAYOUT**

Kress and van Leeuwen identify three principles of layout/composition:

- 1) Information value
- 2) Saliency
- 3) Framing

Below is a brief summary of Kress and van Leeuwen's work on layout. You'll find more information in the chapter that will be distributed in class.

### **1) Information value**

**Given' and 'New': Information value of left and right.** When layouts make significant use of the horizontal axis, positioning some of their elements to the left and others on the right of centre, the elements placed on the left are presented as Given, the elements placed on the right as New.

The right side of a layout tends to be the side of the key information – what the reader must pay particular attention to – the New. It is presented as something which is not yet known or, perhaps, not yet agreed upon, hence something to which the viewer must pay particular attention.

The left side of a layout is usually the side of the already given something the reader is assumed to know already as part of the culture.

The Given-New structure also gives a sense of ongoing movement (before/after).

In many double-page magazine layouts the space of the 'given' is filled by verbal text and the space of the 'new' with images.

The Given-New structures can also be found in film and TV. For example, media interviews, where the interviewer is most commonly placed on the left and interviewee on the right. Thus the interviewers are presented as people whose views and assumptions viewers will identify and be familiar with. Interviewees present new information and are on the right.

Similarly, in weight loss advertisements the 'before' image is usually on the left (the given) and the 'after' image (the new) is on the right.

It is possible that these meanings are linked to the Western habit of reading from left to right.

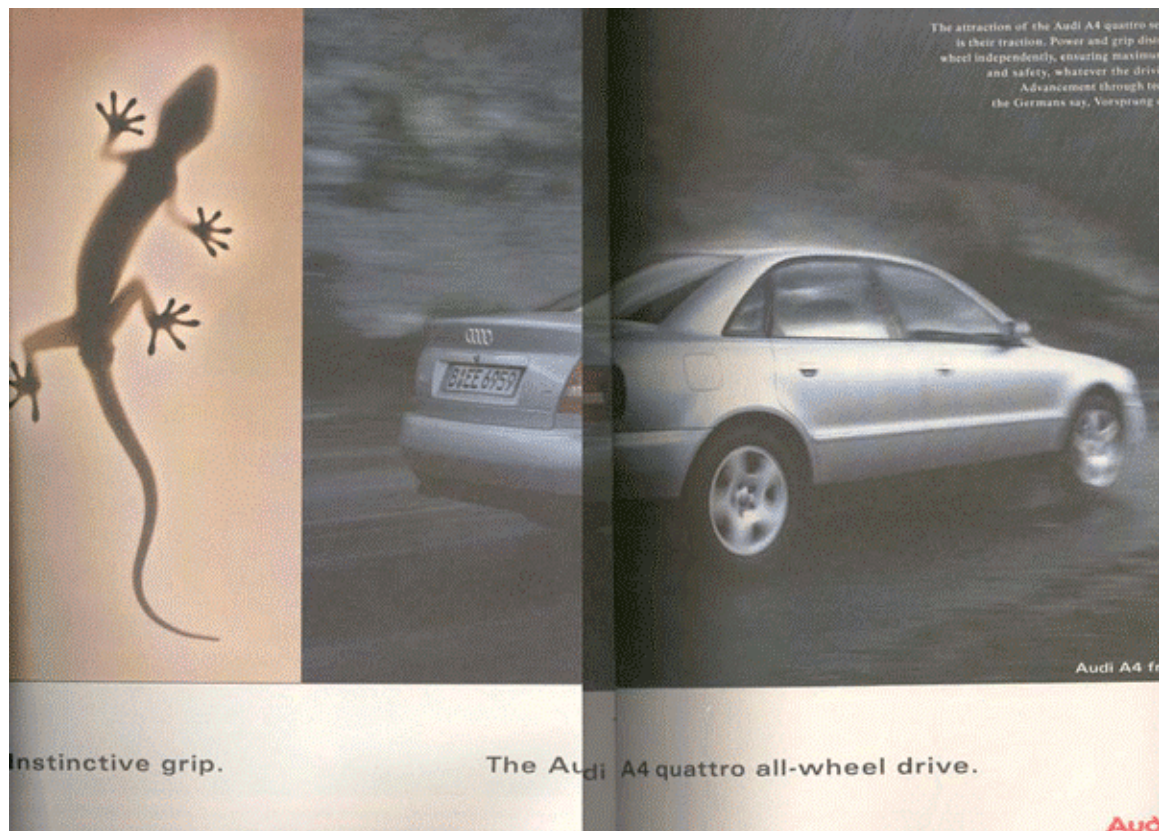
## EXAMPLES

Example of Given-New layout structure in an advertisement



Note: the sense of before and after, ongoing progress, existing cultural knowledge on the left and the new (product) information provided on the right.

\*Example of Given-New layout structure



Note: the existing cultural knowledge on the left (nature--instinctive) and the new (product) information on the right, sense of progress (culture) and improvement of nature

'Ideal' and 'Real': Information value of top and bottom If a layout is structured along the vertical axis, then what is placed on the top of the layout is presented as the **Ideal**, what has been placed at the bottom as the **Real**.

For something to be 'ideal' means that it is presented as the idealised or generalised essence of the information and hence is also its most salient part. The 'real' is then opposed to this in that it presents more specific information, more down-to-earth information or more practical information. It is the elaboration or extension of the promise of the 'ideal'.

In advertising with a top/bottom layout, the upper section visualises the promise of the product, the glamour it can bestow on its users, or the sensory fulfilment it will bring. The lower section visualises the product itself, providing more or less factual information about the product, telling readers where it can be obtained or how they can request more information.

Compared to the Given-New structure, the Ideal-Real structure in layout has less sense of movement and a greater sense of opposition or contrast.

It is likely that the meaning of this layout structure has its roots in religious paintings, which always represented god and heaven—the 'Ideal'—at the top and earthly pleasures at the bottom.

### EXAMPLES



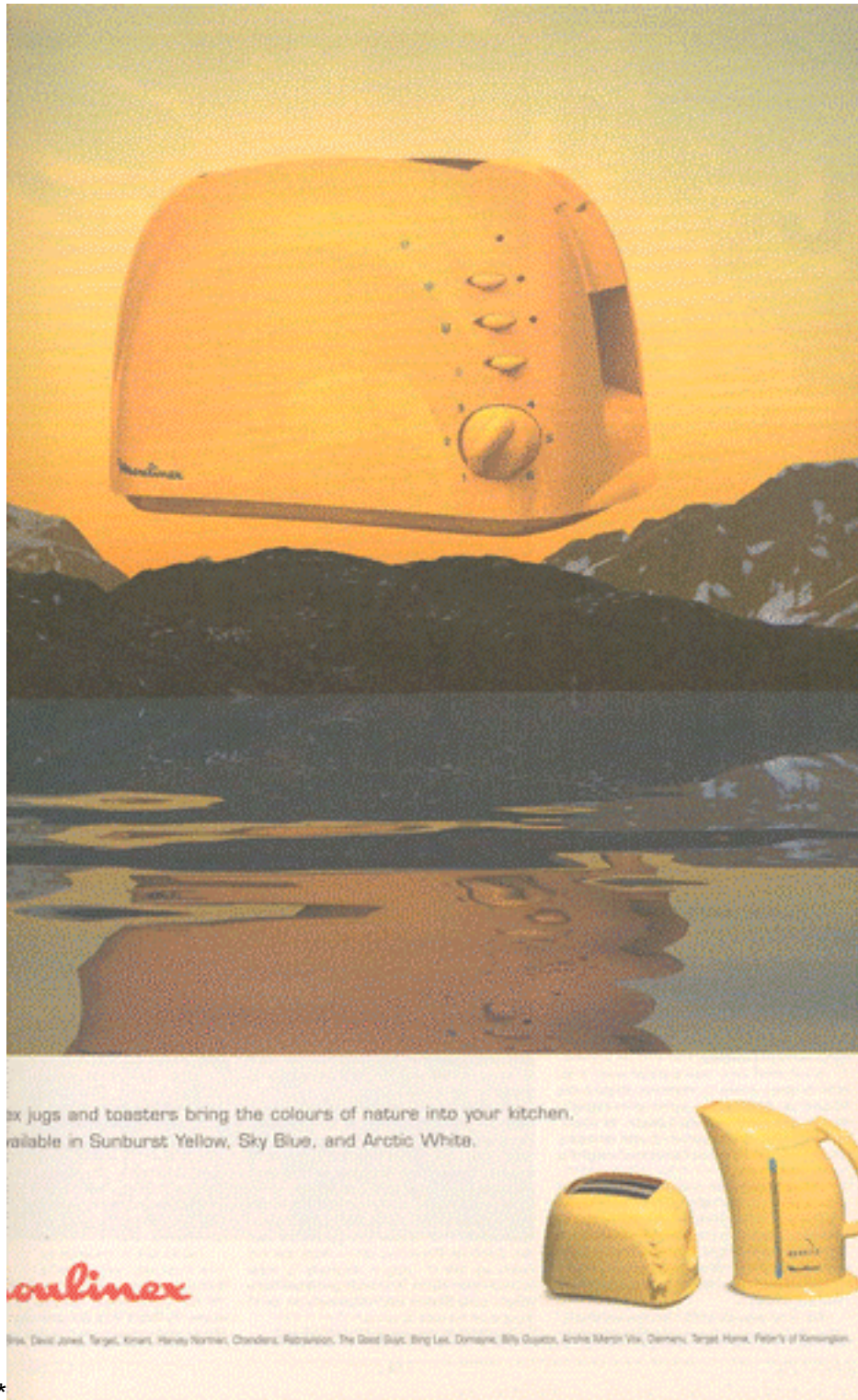
Joachim Patenir, *The Baptism of Christ*, Museum of Art History, Vienna.

#### Example of Ideal-Real layout structure in early religious painting

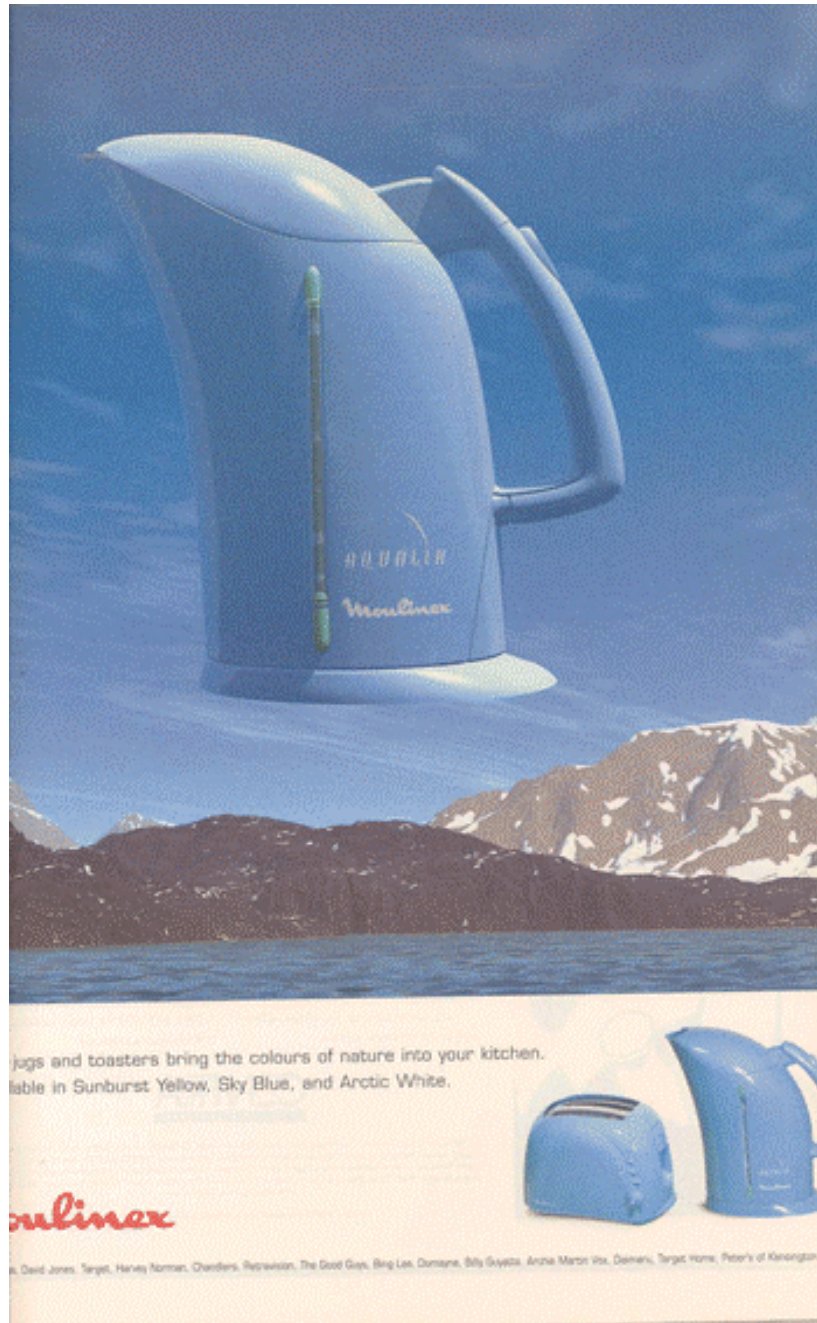
The promise of heaven and eternal life (the 'ideal') is at the top and the reality of earthly life at the bottom of the layout.



## Example of Ideal-real layout structure



Example of Ideal-Real layout structure from same series of products as the previous example.



*Note: division between promise or essence of the product (ideal) and details such as brand name and locations for purchase (real).*

### **CENTRE AND MARGIN—INFORMATION VALUE OF CENTRE AND MARGIN**

This layout structure is relatively uncommon in contemporary western layouts, which more commonly polarise the elements of a layout (i.e. the ideal/real and given/new structures). But central composition is important in Asian design (perhaps, related to Confucian notion of harmony and continuity).

If a visual composition makes a significant use of the centre, placing one element in the middle and the other elements around it as margins—the centre is seen as the nucleus of the information on which all the other elements are in some way subservient. In many cases the margins are identical or at least very similar to each other. The centre may be a symbolic which unifies the information surrounding it around a central meaning.

Note:

Given-New and Ideal-Real can combine with Centre and Margin. Dividing visual space according to these dimensions results in the figure of the cross—a fundamental spatial symbol in Western culture.



Example of Centre-Margin layout structure in a newspaper feature story.

Note: the centre contains a symbolic image which unifies the information surrounding it. Note also that the image itself is further divided into both Given-New and Ideal-Real layout structures, with the ideal realm of the mind at the top and the reality of evil (the devil and Hitler) at the bottom. The Given-New structure shows the mind as 'given' and the application of the mind through philosophy (image of Greek philosopher is top-right) as 'new'. At the bottom we

have evil (the devil) on the left (given) and Hitler on the right (the 'new' or application of evil).



Another complex layout with centre-margin, given-new and ideal-real layout structures. Have a go at interpreting this one.

## TRIPTYCH LAYOUTS

In art, especially Medieval art, a triptych refers to a three-panel painting, generally with a religious theme.

Kress and van Leeuwen also discuss the triptych arrangement in contemporary layouts. This may be a helpful way of thinking about your brochures since they will open up to a 3-panel internal arrangement.

The structure of the triptych can be a simple symmetrical margin-centre-margin structure (i.e. think of the centre-margin arrangement with the top and bottom sliced off), or a polarised structure in which the centre acts as mediator between ideal-real (in vertical triptychs) or given-new (in horizontal layouts such as brochures). In the latter case, the left is given, the right is new and centre bridges the two and is a mediator. Vertical triptychs are less common than horizontal triptychs.

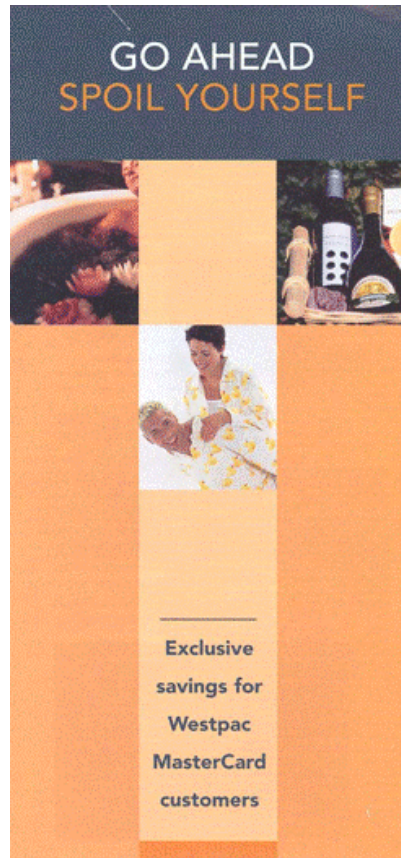
Note: The inside spread of your 6-panel brochure will have a triptych arrangement.

### Examples

Example of horizontal triptych layout structure in a brochure.



Note: The middle panel mediates between the left and right panels (the unknown pain and the suffering self).



An example of a vertical triptych layout structure from the front panel of a brochure. The layout has the 'self' at the centre, the ideal (spoiling yourself at the top) and the real (Westpac MasterCard) at the bottom.

## SALIENCE

Salience is the second principle of layout discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen. It refers to the degree to which an element of a composition or layout draws attention to itself.

Salience creates a hierarchy of importance in layout by making certain elements of a composition more important.

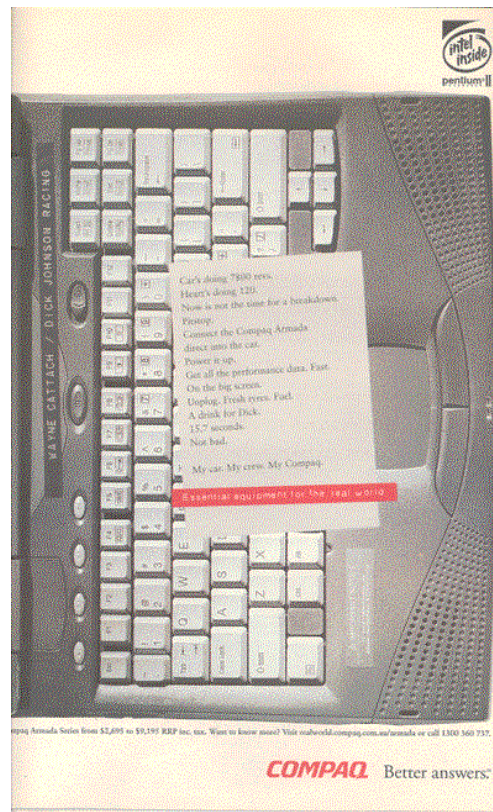
The greater the visual 'weight' of an element of a composition the greater its salience. Greater salience of an element of a composition can be achieved through:

- Size
- Sharpness of focus
- Tonal contrast
- Colour contrasts (esp. use of red)

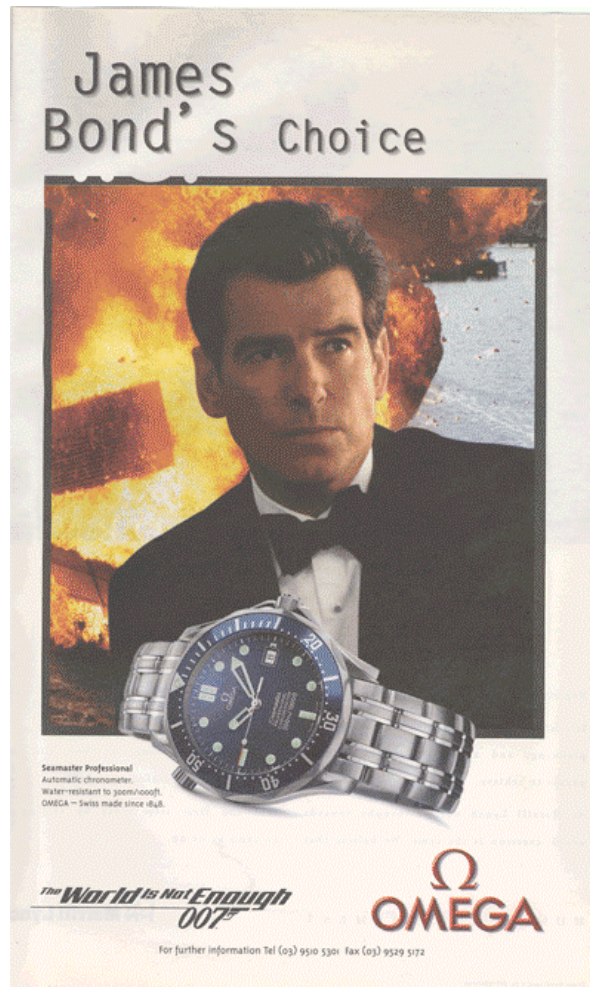
- Placement in the visual field (objects appear heavier towards the top and to the left)
- Perspective (objects in the foreground are more salient)
- Overlap (objects on top are more salient)

## Examples

Red is believed to be the most salient colour and a great many corporate logos are red.



The use of red in this Compaq advertisement not only highlights the company name but links together the name, the product and the text 'Better equipment for the real world'. In so doing the claim becomes synonymous with Compaq products.



The watch in this Omega advertisement is the most salient object in the layout because of its large size, sharp focus, its position on top of a series of overlapping images (Bond, background) and its placement in the foreground. Red is used to make the company name and logo salient.

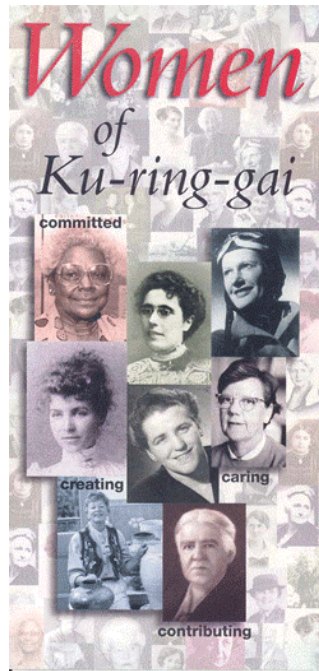
## FRAMING

The third principle of composition/layout discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen is framing. The stronger the framing of an element, the more it is presented as a separate unit of information. The presence of framing signifies individuality and difference.

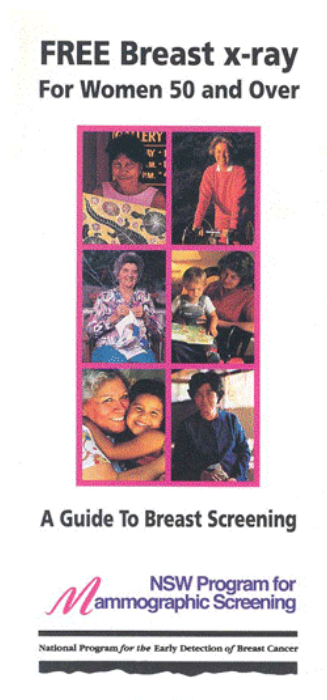
Framing may be by actual frame lines surrounding an element, empty space surrounding an element or through other means. Connectedness can be emphasised by vectors. Vectors can be depicted elements or abstract graphic elements leading the eye from one element to the other, beginning with the most salient element.

Horizontal and circular compositions often have weak framing while vertical compositions often have strong framing.

## Examples



Example of framing in layout. The individually framed images of the women indicates that this brochure will focus on the individuality of these women while the overlapping of the frames collects them together as 'Women of Ku-ring-gai'.



Another use of framing. Compare this to the previous example. Although divided into separate frames, the images in this layout are more strongly collected together (by the outer frame lines and the 'framing' white space) as women 50 years and over.