

THEMATIC VISUALITY

2022Q1

Lepold

*f*abpics.

ABSTRACT THEMATIC VISUALITY

How can we *show an idea, a theme*?

Thematic visuality is about creating visual motifs inspired by a script's theme. Visual themes – motifs – can create a heightened experience as well as connotations and subtext through association, repetition and composition.

Like pattern language in architecture, *Gassner, D.*, and visual branding in graphic design.

Like E.T.'s lit finger touching Elliot's as he learns empathy through E.T. The light being that which will evolve us as humanity: empathy for *the Other*, who literally is an Extra-Terrestrial.

reSEARCH

This is a practise-based philosophical reflexion where I revisit, *re-searching* my creative act, documenting a thematic method. It sets up an empirical experiment, the Arts and culture (even pop culture) being a potential lab for what it is to be human – be it on screen, stage, in print or interactively (digital as well as performance).

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

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Leopold's artistic site: www.fabpics.com

REFERENCING

Sources are *Oxford standard* credited.

To avoid false credit some sources are left un-accredited intentionally because many ideas are best practises and wisdom, taught and shared through history. So proper credit is untraceable. Like color theory.

DESIGN DEFINITION A METHOD, NOT THE RESULT.

Noun: A plan, intentionality. How something works, a schema. A strategic design analysis. *I.e. Not arbitrary.* The word Design is also used (incorrectly according to me) to describe how something looks aesthetically. **Production design method means having a plan for the production itself.** Same with character design, industrial design, set design, graphic design etc. *I.e. How are we going to do this?* *Gassner, D.* What are we basing our assessment criteria on? *Perkins, P.* This means that Design is not the result itself. *I.e. it is not the design* (sets, a car, a font or whatever). Design, in the way the word is used here, is a process. **My artistic, production design method, is thematic visuality.**

PROCESS WRITING AND ANALYZING SCRIPTS

If culture and human expression – from Art as Activism to pop-culture like TV and gaming – is **an experimental lab for what it is to be human** then **the theme can be a philosophical dilemma.**

This dilemma, your theme, is then staged, dramatized and personified through the characters. **The characters are the theme** by their different takes on the dilemma, personified through their code of conduct, actions and flaws. *Storr, W.*
Find the theme, identify the dramatic question, the philosophical dilemma *Storr, W.* and translate that **theme to a core visual idea, a key word.** *Gassner, D., Baranowska, L.*

Then document your **design analysis**, inspired by:

SHOW THE THEME THEMATIC REPRESENTATION



• **Literal representation.** Point blank, an apple is an apple, a flower, a flower. No thematic connotation intended visually. The characters and their world do not visually represent the theme.



The Mitchells vs. The Machines, Sony Pictures Animation 2021.

Thematic visuality: The Elements of Art arranged by Design principles to show the theme of autonomy (chaotic free will) versus authority (collective AI and mass control) in the medium of feature CG animation.

The production design is based on the story's stylistic influences like tone, period, location, season, and the visual DNA of the characters' world and the range of expression within the parameters of the story *Perkins, B.* Like realistic, cartoony, sublime, grotesque, edgy etc. The range of expression concerns character acting or animation. *Arcane* (Netflix) I consider Edgy 2021. Just like *Aeon Flux* (MTV) was back in the day.

- **Figurative representation.** A visual figure of speech. A character's shape is a repeated motif in their sets and props, the shape becoming a visual, figurative cue for them. Like a figurative logo representing a company. 
- **Symbolic representation.** The thing, *the motif*, represents an idea. Like  might represent knowledge or passion. Or sin like the poisoned Apple in Disney's *Snow White*. *Chevalier, J, Gheerbrant, A.*

- **Metaphor representation.** The design motif represents something else, like a visual riddle. The Pope as a donkey in *The Name of the Rose*.
- **Subtext**, hidden meaning. A worm-eaten apple, like in Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* (next page).
- **EmoLogical**
Emotional, visceral thematic triggers Sylvester, D.
What does the theme mean for the character, changing them as they pivot into the third act?
What does the theme mean for the audience?
Abramović, M. How can I move you visually, *by design*, as the character discovers the full impact of the theme through the drama?

Can we use sight to evoke emotions? To move, arouse, excite, provoke? Like Pixar's *Inside Out* or the brutality of Francis Bacon's work? *Wendt, T.*

emoLogical, cont.

If emotions are created in the brain (*Feldman, L.*) like a thought, through neurons and synapse patterns as emotional intelligence, how can we trigger these visually in the visual cortex? Can film editing raise your pulse? Can saturation stimulate the brain? *Can we move you, by design*, holistically, creating a deeper, more intense experience?

• **Interactive representation.** Motif as function, evoking the function's tone and setting. Like gameplay and the universe of *Destiny 2* Bungie, or the interior of a luxurious car where the industrial design and materials evoke a feeling through how functions work and their aesthetics, the design key word being *Luxoury Wendt, T.*



Character as theme

Ratatouille, Pixar 2007.

Conceptual character design
by Carter Goodrich.

What is going on here? A perfect portrait of the theme?
Even the shadow side. Brilliant. Self-doubt in shadow.

The story's theme? Anyone can cook, even a rat.
And here is a character working on their dream.

Are you moved? Does this picture resonate with you?



Motif as subtext and metaphor: *Basket of Fruit* by Caravaggio.

Decaying fig leaves, worm-eaten apples, bottom-heavy composition parallel to the frame. Flat on viewpoint. Flat, harsh lighting. What is Caravaggio on about with this painting, in his cultural, Catholic, Italian 1571-1610 context? How does this come across today, in your cultural context? Do we still pick up on these visual clues? If Adam and Eve wore fig leaves, what is Caravaggio implying?

At the same time, one could lean into that...

"Art is not about something. It is something."

Susan Sontag

or

"For me, the subject is of secondary importance:
I want to convey what is between me and the subject."

Claude Monet

"The third is the energy between the actor and the audience."

Stephen Rappaport

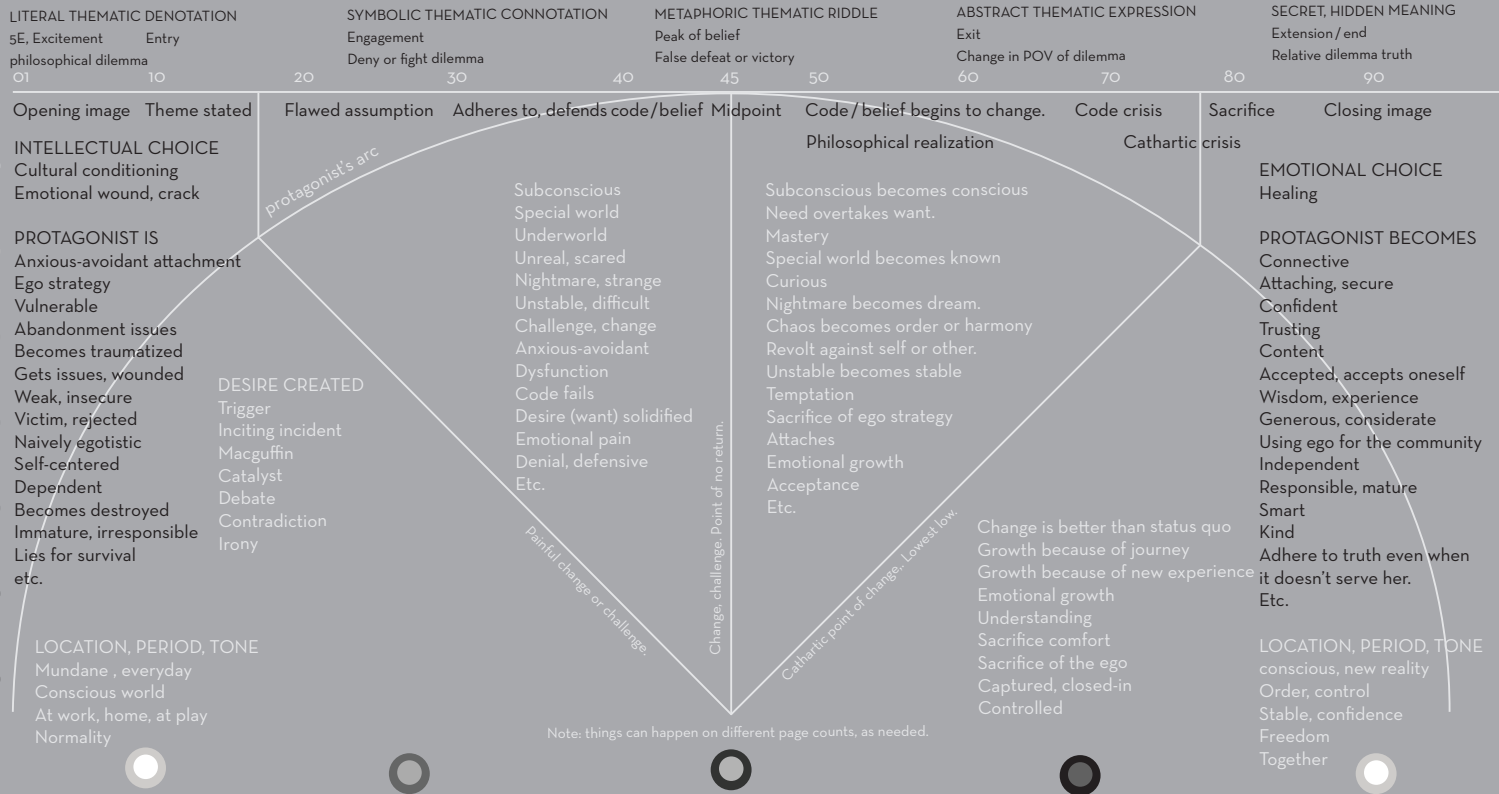
What intent was Caravaggio using as an artistic method with *Basket of Fruits*? What can we learn from art history about visual themes?

THEMATIC, CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORIES

- Characters are the theme.
- Protagonist's has a flawed code of conduct *Storr, Will*.
- Other characters represent other views on the philosophical dilemma.

- For an authentic story chose a theme, that concerns you.
- A Character-driven has a pro-active protagonist driven by desire or madness, not only by what happens to them or who they happen to meet. For what of a better word, they are driven by desire (want).

- Subtext aka the third, the hidden meaning, the unspoken. Created between the characters, through their relationships. Then through pictorial composition, creating context and subtext.



How can we (de)construct a story to find the theme?
Character-driven story arcs often reflect the theme.

THEMATIC DESIGN ANALYSIS

Theme - What the story is about. A philosophical dilemma, a dramatic question. *Storr, W.*

Design for theme in the macro and the micro.

Plot - What happens in the story. Juxtapose story and design ideas for dramatic effect (contrast).

Structure - How the story plays out: linear, non-linear, three acts, five acts, *Save the Cat*, etc. The dramatic structure can inform the visual structure *Block, B.* With colour scripts, beat boards etc.

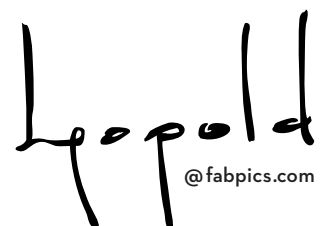
Subtext - What a scene really is about.

Be sure to listen to *Dariusz Wolski* and *James and Roger Deakins* discuss these things on the *Team Deakins* podcast. It is a very informative episode!

Character - A core concept to visual themes is that the *characters are the theme*. Themes can then inform the designs as visual motifs, like in *Aladdin* (1992) or *Amadeus* (1984).

What to look for in the writing, in the idea?

In the writing, characters can represent different sides, point-of-views, of the philosophical dilemma. Character-driven stories, as opposed to event-driven stories, often evolve because of what the characters desire. And how they go about getting that in their own flawed, dysfunctional code of conduct, chasing dreams *Storr, W.* Like *Salieri* in *Amadeus* (1984), *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky, *F.* or *McMurphy* in *One Who Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975).





Self-Portrait, Francis Bacon. 1971, oil on canvas.

Character and technique as an emotional theme?
Psychological dysfunction as visual expression?
What is Mr Bacon expressing about being a human?



The Artist is Present Marina Abramović, Performance.

emoLogical

Spacial composition = context, subtext and proactive verbs,
That is: people doing things and feeling something about what they are doing,
driving *change* (*emotional change*), through desire.
Here, the participants want to experience something unique: to *feel*.
We are participating in culture to be moved, to experience and *feel* something.



Ida Pawel Pawlikowski 2013
About to give her vows, the Catholic nun Ida finds out that she is Jewish. Going on a journey about identity and faith, this genius composition directly addresses the audience and

HOLISTIC CONTEXT STORY+DESIGN+CONTINUITY

Beyond being a still reproduced here, the image above becomes more than a still knowing what the character is going through (see image text above) and knowing what emotive intent you have with the story beat.

KNOW THY STORY + EMOTION

This leads me to the idea that by thoroughly knowing the story first, we can then create a more relevant picture *by design*. And because the design is grounded in the story, it will create a more relevant experience for the audience too. The story, its thematic visuality through composition and the subject matter are contextualized by and with the audience.

the theme, framing her claustrophobically within the reflection of her own identity, addressing the age old existential dilemma of "who am I, who shall I be?", looking back as she is moving forward.

That is where the emotive power of the piece is created: In the act of experiencing it. What will that experience be? What is your intent?

In context with the lighting, editing, the actors etc. the experience is heightened, created *with the audience*.

Not doing this will generate an experience as well, but perhaps one that is not as connected as it could be. One could, for example be completely honest to the world and characters in the creative act as well, not taking the emotions of the audience into account while still staying true to the tone, period and setting of the story.

SUBTEXT

Subtext - an unspoken meaning grounded in the theme - can be designed into anything with exposition, association and repetition through the relationships between the characters. *Miller, A.* Visually and subtextually. If composition is used with the intent to create context and syntax then one could graphically establish the visual cue and repeat it, connecting the motif to the audience memory through continuity (association). Design this relationship between the characters (the main motif), props and their milieu, adding details to add another level of resonance. Just like the lighting (values) and film editing tempo puts us in a certain mood and colours (hues and saturation) stimulate and activate the mind (colour cues).



Hamlet Chicago Shakespeare Theatre 2019

Contemplating life and the will to live or die.
A classic theme and motif of mortality and desire:
the will to live.

Example: A lonely lead character has a one night stand, longing for affection. The following day they can not bring themselves to wash the lipstick-stained, fingered wine glass. It becomes a fetish for them as they long for attachment, hopeful. The glass reminds them of the Other, symbolizing them. This becomes an important design detail in the glass prop: that hope, that longing for love. What they drank can also become something more than literally what they drank. Thematic subtext can be created anywhere - by design - for a more meaningful experience. The choices we make are not arbitrary. Perhaps this truth, this theme, this detail, is something someone can relate to and therefore *feel* something about.

DASEIN DRIVEN DESIGN

Audiences emotions - With the intent to create a visceral experience for someone else, this leads to qualitative human-centred design methods like cognitive patterns, *How emotions are made*, Feldman Barrett, L, *Design for Dasein* Wendt, T. and phenomenology.

How to move someone through art, by design?

How do you want the audience to feel at any time, and how do you move them there, visually, with the elements of Art and Design principles and the medium at hand (film editing, continuity, game tech etc.)?

This idea of creating an emotional, visceral experience is perhaps a step in why Marina Abramović chose to remove herself from the performance of *The Cleaner*, which followed the *Artist is Present*. *The Cleaner of Empathy*.

Composition: image clarity and image message. Context can create syntax, subtext, denotation and connotation. But besides semiotics what of the emotional impact of the theme, the performance and production design, holistically? How to move us, thematically, visually?



Hidden message *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo. Fresco 1512.

Did Michelangelo intend hidden messages? We will never know for sure but once I was shown a few clues I could not unsee them. You decide, the privilege of interpretation being yours according to semiotic theory. *Fiske, J.* One suggestion is revealed on the next page. There are more.



Creation of Adam by Michelangelo Fresco 1512.

What is Michelangelo implying if this hidden message is true to his intent? Is the brain's graphic shape just a coincidence? You decide. If this is God's act of creating Adam, why is God reaching for Adam and not vice versa? Why are they not touching? Why does Adam have a navel? Etc, etc.

ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

QUICK REFERENCE

Art elements and Design principles are well established through art history and documented. Here are a few.

The Art of Color and Design *Maitland Graves (1941)*

Visual Elements: Line, value, shape, proportion, color, Direction, Texture.

Composition *Arthur Dow (1922)*

The Three Elements: Line, notan, color. Principles of Composition: Opposition, transition, subordination, Repetition, Symmetry.

Composing Pictures *Donald Graham (1970)*

Contents: Subject, graphic elements, point-Area-Line, light and dark, value the graphic accent, the matrix Measuring Depth, graphic movement, directing the Eye, Space, Space in Nature-Graphic Space, scale.

A Primer to Visual Literacy *Donis A. Dondis (1973)*

Visual elements: Dot, Line, Shape, Direction Tone Color Texture Dimension, Scale, Movement

The Visual Story *Bruce Block (1988)*

Visual Components: Line, tone, shape, color, space, rhythm, movement

Drawing Lessons from the Great Masters

Robert Beverly Hale (1989)

Line, mass, light and planes.

The Art of Color *Johannes Itten (2019)*

Color contrast, subjective color, objective color. Color contrasts: Hue, value, temperature, saturation, extension, Color expression and impression.

The Style Spectrum *Bill Perkins (2018)*

Line, Tone, Shape, color, space, rhythm, movement Methods of Measure: Major Key - proportion, minor Key - Range of contrast. Primaries of expression: line, texture, mass- Notan, form - Chiaroscuro. Image clarity and message.

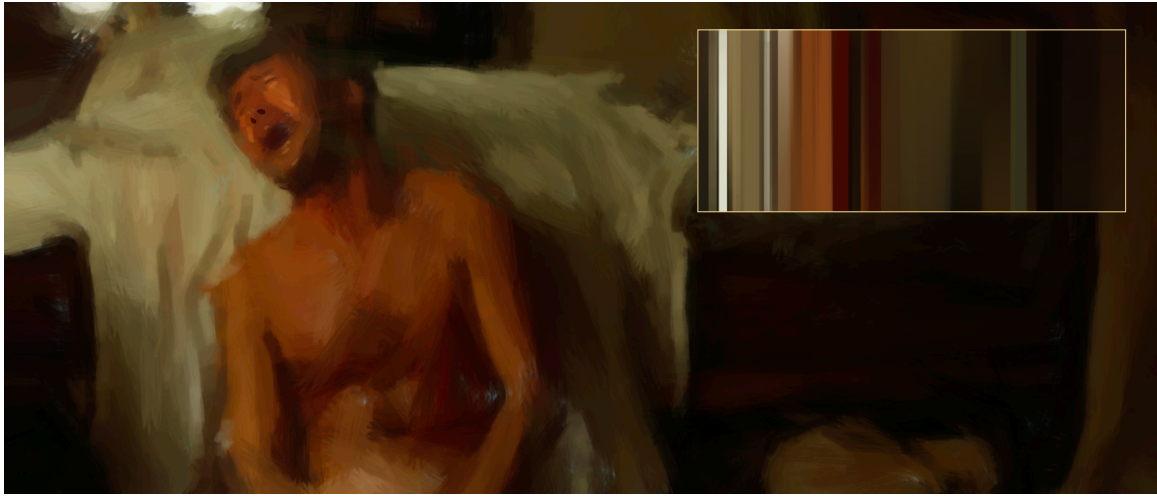
Imagine *Leo Sandberg (2009)*

Elements: Space, line, shape (mass), form (chiaroscuro), value, color (hue, saturation, temperature), texture (including edge quality and brush strokes). Design principles: Contrast, focus, movement, unity, variety, balance, proportions, rhythm, pattern. The 4th wall, the third energy.

Designing with Thematic Power *Sam Nielson*

Lightbox (2021)

Contrast ideas, contextual idea, modifying idea, hierarchy, unifying quality (style), force, clear image message, clear thematic idea.



Apocalypse Now Francis Ford Coppola 1979
Studies Leopold Alphaszo 2021
 Visual structure: Contrast and arrhythmic proportions as sanity and insanity. Purpose versus duty as represented

by Willard versus Kurtz, showing the theme of hypocrisy.
 WILLARD
 We'd cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a Band-Aid. It was a lie.

CONTRAST + PROPORTION JUXTAPOSITION

Contrast together with arrhythmic proportions is key to visual tension. *Never make any two intervals the same* (Albert, G.). Two vital principles are contrast and proportions. They activate or sooth the mind for engagement.

Contrast 100% - 0% High to low, hard to soft, lost to found, etc. Contrast rests in every visual component through composition and *by design*. Hues, values, lines, kerning, rooms (space), editing, lenses, acting, gestures, movement, etc. Check out *Svetlana Zakharova's* timing and spacing in her movements, for contrast in ballet!

100% contrast is the strongest visual intensity that grabs the eye and activates the brain. *Block, B.* Connect this to the story or gameplay beat. Why? Because either the character is in harmony with themselves and their world and the theme at hand, or they are in conflict with it. And that is where we want the audience to be: along for the ride with the characters.

The picture, the film editing, animation etc., can then either be in tune with the character's state at any given moment or juxtapose it.

Then the question becomes, what visuality do you connect with that? How do we as designers engage the audience and evoke the experience?

CONTRAST

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Childhood for sale. Leopold 2020. Alphaszo.

CLOSING WORDS

These are methods I am currently exploring. I will continue to work with them and test them, staying open-minded to try new things and make new discoveries, new methods and meeting like-minded creators, ever learning, developing.

I hope you enjoyed these thoughts and put them to the test yourself. In turn, developing your artistic methods for the world to enjoy through *your art*, by design.

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Chronological, latest first, order of my discovery of each source, documenting my interdisciplinary journey.

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Deakins, James. All throughout the podcast.

Deakins, Roger. All throughout the podcast.

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Hendrix Dyas, Guy. **Production design**

By scrutinizing these (and many more!) I triangulated common denominators and patterns about thematics and artistic interpretations. There are more great talks on Team Deakins but just triangulating these will give you a solid base to start from. Pure gold!

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Bill referred me to Graves and Dondis.

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Kindle, 2003

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My research into experience design lead to

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Morris, Hargreaves and MacIntyre

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Penguin Books, 1996

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Secret meaning and hidden symbols.

*Alvaro pointed me in the direction of hidden meanings. It also lead me to read up on symbolism (see above, **Symbols**).*

Sylvester, David

Interviews with Francis Bacon:

The Brutality of Fact

Thames & Hudson LTD, England 2016

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On philosophy and Art.

Sweden, Italy and France 2014 - 2019

Gabriel referred me to the interviews with Francis Bacon.

Nietzsche, Friedrich

On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral sense

New York: Harper 2010 [1873]

This helped me sort truisms in Art, which is impossible for me as it is all subjective phenomenology (bias, taste, experience) which is the whole point in art and design (taste). In your experience of my work is more important than my experience in creating it. Like when Marina Abramović removed herself for the performance in The Cleaner, making the observer the performer, observing and being observed.

Marina Abramović Writings 1960-2014, p. 257

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*For their thoughts on narrative color which
inspired my thoughts.*

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*My introduction to semiotic concepts, from
artist / Professor Steven Bachelder, USA / Sweden.*

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*Sourcing Plutchik's ideas has been difficult.
He has been given research credit but I have yet
to find the source (uni?). I also believe that colors
are objective and not subjective, leaning into the
ideas from Johannes Itten instead. **le any color
can be anything to anyone. I have also found
that values (lighting) affect our mood more than
color affects our emotions. le our brain reads
movement first, then light (value contrast), then
color.***
*But it was fun to see how Pixar used Plutchik's
ideas in Inside Out.*

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watchdocumentaries.com/why-beauty-matters

Block, Bruce. **The Visual Story**, Focal Press 2007
*His ideas of Story and Visual structure (ch.9) were
invaluable, **connecting contrast to narrative.***

Leopold, **Imagine**. FabPics. Sweden 2009
*I wrote Imagine to celebrate my 20th anniversary
as an artist and designer. Like a manual to my
methods at the time. Imagine also lead me get
tenure at Uppsala University. Which in turn lead
to my research, like writing this paper and devel-
oping visual themes.*

Designing with Thematic Power Sam Nielson
Lightbox (2021)
youtube.com/watch?v=XSFxFAIT1Bs&t=26s

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