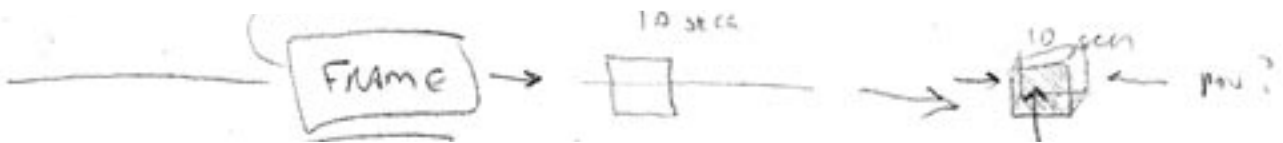


frame reveal/conceal



“There are things you didn’t tell me.”

-Scottie to Elster, ‘Vertigo’

Suspense can be generated through this method in graphic design, much as it is in films and novels. In the literary narrative, using the frame to obscure involves playing with the voice of the narrator – essentially by questioning and sometimes subverting the narrator’s ‘frame of reference’ or point of view. In adapting this notion to graphic design – I interpret ‘frame to obscure’ as the way one handles the audience’s access to visual information. The nature of the obstruction is key to how this strategy was applied to different projects. ‘Frame to obscure’ in simplest terms could be seen as the designer’s withholding or stalling of information/action – which is a sure method for creating suspense. The conventional notion of the visual frame working to focus audience attention and thereby ‘reveal’ what is being framed is subverted. The frame starts to function as a barrier between the viewer and the narrative – it is from this function that tension/suspense can be derived.

But obscuring information is not simply about hiding or covering – this would actually result in ambiguity and confusion. True suspense is born from a careful balance between the frame revealing and concealing within the one narrative. This then becomes a study in controlling the pace and rhythm of this obstruction. The intent is to use this strategy to intrigue the viewer, without shutting them out from the narrative or reducing the coherence of the narrative system. Application of this strategy brought up the important question regarding how a designer might create visual equivalents for ‘concealing’ information that function in written narrative. Each project is in a sense a different mode of ‘concealment’ - and requiring a different visual method to translate this mode.

Exposing the frame; Hitchcock's framing

Drawing attention to the frame created by the camera was a device Hitchcock used masterfully. It is almost impossible to separate plot from Hitchcock's own presence as author, or his instrument- being the camera. There is inherent gesture – the gesture of the author – in every camera move. The nature of the camera and its ability to visually frame is closely affects our actual viewing of the film – the act of viewing. To align this methodology with my own terminology – Hitchcock toyed with exposing the frame. The frame is always 'exposed' – in that its existence determines a visible viewing plane for the audience. What Hitchcock made visible was the potential of framing (via camera) to make the audience aware of film's relationship with reality.

The character's (and ultimately the audience's) ability to 'see' is a major concern in many Hitchcock films. He creates an almost electric relationship between framing and camera moves. 'Vertigo' (1958) is built around the ability of the film's protagonist (James Stewart) to 'see' the truth behind the events he finds himself ensnared within. Hitchcock ensures the audience is aware of this in a key scene in the film – having Kim Novak's character say "*Can't you see?*". At that moment Hitchcock makes us experience what James Stewart finally sees; "*...a slow dissolve that marks the man looking at himself framed, even as the woman he is viewing frames a woman in her view, a woman who is already framed in a portrait, a woman who is and is not the woman who is looking.*"⁷⁹ Hitchcock breaches the movie-screen barrier to disconcert the viewer. When we see Norman Bates wrapped in a blanket in his jail cell at the end of the film, the bottom of the frame is masked, in line with the point of view of the guard peering through the peep hole. The scene cuts to a fly on Norman's hand, and then back to the previous scene, except the mask at bottom of the screen is gone. The effect of this subtle change is the viewer has now physically entered the cell with Norman.



Vertigo

frame ‘mistaken identities’



[See DVD: ‘Mistaken Identities’]

A perfect source to explore how the frame of narration can be made visible to the audience was Italo Calvino’s “*If On A Winter’s Night, A Traveller*”. The book’s uniqueness and appeal to me relates to its brilliant merging of a poetic language and story – with a self-referential, self-parodying, and almost self-destructive structure. Calvino seems to deliberately put these two aspects head to head at times – having the book’s structure intentionally strangle the other voice, and then at times breathe life into it. There is an exquisite back and forth motion between the story and its form – between Calvino himself and the reader. It was with motion that led to my decision to design a motion sequence adaptation of this book. This medium would allow me to create a sense movement that Calvino creates with his language. It also lent itself perfectly to creating a powerful tension; the relationship between the frame of screen and the frame of the book (within it) could work to metaphorically represent the tension in the book between story and plot.

Deconstruction; how the frame is exposed...

I began by analyzing the novel in order to determine how its narrative components could be translated to a visual medium. This allowed me to begin to consider the two aspects of the narrative I was creating; the structural and the tonal. The aspect of the book I focused on was how Calvino has blended a sort of naïve, creative and imaginative voice, with a simultaneous skepticism of this very voice. While we are being romanced by his writing style and ideas, we are being warned (albeit humourously) about the mechanics of this communication. Here is the story – but how am I (Calvino, as author) allowing you to read this? How am I revealing this to you? Calvino seems always to be aware of his hand controlling the piece – pulling the strings to make this marionette dance. Yet the final piece is not an instruction manual of the mechanics of writing, reading, and imagining. It reads like a poem, its story and characters resonate in the reader's mind. This seems to me to be exactly what a designer can do when their work is at its best. Design is an act of supreme orchestration – impelled by an implicit understanding of what we are saying and how we are saying it. A designer must constantly know when to appear and when to disappear into the shadows.

Framing was the means by which a story this story could be retold. Calvino uses framing ingeniously – and in different ways. He begins the book by alerting the reader to his role as the ultimate framer; we are aware he is not ready to begin telling the story. The frame here constricts the story; it is highly visible. Later framing is used more subtly; characters frame the action through their own point of view. We as readers are accustomed to framing used in this way and barely notice it. But Calvino continuously reminds us of the frame in all its forms, such the chapter as frame, character point of voice as frame, the literal frame of the page. Some of the ways framing is used include;

The notion of the book as a frame within a larger framework of books- *"...each individual book must be transformed, enter into a relationship with the books I have read previously..."*

The notion of the page as a literal frame of the larger story; we are constantly limited as to how much we can read by this simple structure of the book; *"Reading is a discontinuous and fragmentary operation."*

The notion of Calvino as the first framer of story and meaning, and then me as reader as the second framer of meaning. How do these frames relate to one another?

Language as a frame (and a highly unreliable one); *"...I do not believe totality can be contained in language; my problem is what remains outside, the unwritten, the unwritable."* How can I represent this notion in my narrative?

frame 'mistaken identities'

The frame; appearance and behaviour...

The segmentation of the screen affects the pace, logic, and meaning of the story being told. The script/action of the piece was Calvino's book and story – though deviated from his book due to my own framing, which shifted focus, and created new points of focus. I set up different frames on the screen that initially work to separate the content they are framing. The function of the frame is to create a point of focus – its position is fixed. I wanted the sequence to begin by creating a visual system the viewer can understand; that the book page represents the fictional novel – and black and white imagery represents the story being told, the actual events of the book. Hence the sequence begins with a train, drawn directly from the first chapter of the novel. The book appears within a frame on top of the train. By placing emphasis on the actual book – I draw the viewer's attention to the frame of book as a physical object.

At this early point I was creating a deliberate physical distance between these two languages- and not attempting to merge them. The first switch in framing occurs when what lies inside the frame and what lies outside suddenly reverse. The train is now an image within what appears to be the frame of the book. This first use of framing ultimately questions the relationship between what lies inside and outside the frame. It questions the reality of the novel – what is fictional and what is not? What lies inside the book and what is outside?



e beyond their blurred halo, all of this is a snow by heart, with the odor of train that after all the trains have left, the station is empty. After the last train has passed, the sentences you are dissolving more than from a veil of darkness tonight for the first time this bar, moving from the odor of wet sawdust in which is that of winter when all you can do is a lumber called has shown a man who comes and sits in a phone booth. Or, rather, nothing else about him, just as this station is a "station" and beyond it there exists nothing but the unremembered signal of a telephone ringing in a



frame within a frame

'The Turn of the Screw'; a story within a story

James' use of the prologue in "The Turn of The Screw" turns the novella into a story within a story - a frame within a frame. The impact of this device on the way we therefore perceive the plot is immense. The prologue begins with the character Douglas and his Christmas guests setting up the stage for the story, which is then narrated by Douglas. Critic Shoshana Feldman identifies the source of the story's ambiguity as the three-narrator frame. *"Such a frame provides no basis for deciding between the conflicting perspectives of various characters within the story. We expect the narrator to provide such a touchstone, she suggests, but our expectations are undercut by the plurality of narrators"* The reader experiences, therefore, a constant questioning of the authority of the storyteller. The prologue in "Turn of the Screw" furthers this effect, instead of relating the story to its narrator (the governess), as one would expect, the prologue actually disconnects the story from its narrator, by introducing three narrators, that of Douglas and James himself. *"The story's origin is therefore not assigned to any one voice which would assume responsibility for the tale, but to the deferred action of a sort of echoing effect, produced--after the fact--by voices which themselves re-produce previous voices."*⁸⁰

The prologue destabilises the frame of narrator utterly; *"Because no narrator serves as a veridical touchstone for evaluating incomplete evidence, contradictory clues, and varying perspectives, there are no "innocent readers" of this story. This is precisely the "trap" which James intended to create by this narrative structure."*⁸¹ The other effect of the prologue is to establish an illusion of reality to the ghost-story tale itself. If this were absent and the novella began with the supernatural story, it would be easier to pick a version to believe immediately, and therefore disregard the governess' belief in the supernatural version of events. This 'frame' outside the story almost functions as the 'document', it maintains a level of unsureness in the reader as to which version of events is more believable.

'If On A Winter's Night'; a frame within a frame

Using a literal frame within a frame on the screen surface was the most apt visual representation of the disjunction in Calvino's novel, which is in itself entirely a questioning of different frames. The reader's, author's, and character's points of view are made to deliberately and sometimes violently intersect. My own mode of framing needed to be an almost dysfunctional and disruptive. I chose to make the physical object of the book a consistent frame on the viewing screen - therefore a literal frame within a frame. This created two planes of reality through which I could communicate with the audience. I realized in doing so a wonderful tension can be derived simply from playing with transitions between two spaces/frames of reality in a narrative (see The Black Dahlia).



The disjunctive behaviour of the frame reaches its climax in the final section of the sequence; where the pacing between switches speeds up and the various characters and spaces of the sequence start to overlap and intrude upon each other.