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Constructing Emotional Atmosphere through Colour, Composition and Figure in Contemporary Illustration

Introduction

In contemporary visual culture, illustration is not only a form of image-making but has increasingly become an important medium for conveying emotion and psychological states. Compared to traditional imagery that is primarily driven by narrative, contemporary illustration places greater emphasis on the creation of atmosphere and the expression of emotion, allowing viewers to develop a sense of resonance and personal interpretation during the viewing process. Through the combination of visual elements such as colour, composition, and figure, viewers can perceive rich emotional layers without relying on a specific storyline. In this way, emotion is no longer simply part of the content but is constructed through the visual structure itself.

Therefore, this proposal will explore how emotional atmosphere is constructed in contemporary illustration through three keywords: colour, composition, and figure. Colour will be discussed as a direct tool for shaping emotional tone through saturation, contrast, brightness, and temperature. Composition will focus on the arrangement of visual elements, the use of space, and the creation of tension, stillness, or pressure within an image. Figure will examine how facial expression, body language, posture, and the presence or absence of the human body contribute to emotional communication. By analysing these three keywords, this research will also inform the development of my own final-year illustration practice, in which I aim to create a series of emotionally focused illustrations that connect visual atmosphere with my personal style.

Colour and Emotional Atmosphere

Colour is the first key visual element in this proposal, as it is one of the most immediate ways of constructing emotional atmosphere in illustration.

In visual art, emotion is not conveyed directly through image content alone; rather, it is gradually constructed through the viewer's perceptual process. The visual elements presented within an image influence the viewer's psychological response, thereby evoking different emotional experiences. As Rudolf Arnheim argues in his theory of visual perception, visual form itself possesses psychological force, and elements such as structure, balance, and tension within an image can significantly shape human feeling (Arnheim, 1974). In other words, viewers do not passively

receive information when looking at an image; instead, they generate emotional responses guided by visual organisation.

Furthermore, John Berger suggests that seeing is not a neutral act, as viewers interpret images based on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds (Berger, 1972). This implies that the same image may produce different emotional responses among different viewers. Therefore, emotion in illustration is not something fixed or inherent, but rather emerges through an interactive relationship between the visual language constructed by the artist and the subjective perception of the viewer.

Among the three key visual elements discussed in this proposal, colour is one of the most immediate and effective ways of constructing emotional atmosphere. Variations in tone, contrast, brightness, and saturation can all significantly influence the viewer's emotional response. As Johannes Itten argues in *The Art of Color*, the contrast and combination of colours can evoke distinct emotional effects, while the purity and intensity of colour shape the way emotions are expressed (Itten, 1961). Psychological research also supports this idea. Valdez and Mehrabian's study on colour and emotion suggests that saturation and brightness have strong effects on emotional responses, especially in relation to pleasure, arousal, and dominance (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994). Therefore, highly saturated colours are more likely to communicate intensity and stimulation, whereas desaturated colours can produce a more restrained, quiet, or oppressive atmosphere.

At the same time, Wassily Kandinsky proposes in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that colour possesses spiritual and emotional qualities, with different hues affecting psychological perception (Kandinsky, 1911). For instance, cooler tones are often associated with feelings of isolation and detachment, while warmer tones tend to

convey energy, warmth, or tension. In illustrative practice, artists can guide the viewer into a particular emotional state through the deliberate selection and control of colour, even before the image is fully interpreted.

From an art historical perspective, the use of colour across different movements also reflects distinct emotional tendencies. For example, Fauvism is characterised by the use of highly saturated and contrasting colours to express intense and direct emotion. In contrast, some visual works produced during World War II, particularly within Russian contexts, often employ muted and subdued palettes to evoke a sense of heaviness, danger, and emotional suppression (Figures 1–3). Such choices are not merely stylistic differences but reveal how artists conceptualise and communicate emotion through colour.

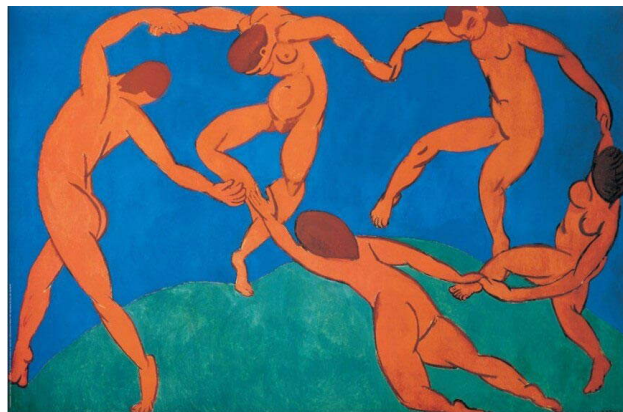


Figure 1 Painted by Henri Matisse



Figure 2. A. Deineka. *On the Moscow outskirts*. (1941)



Figure 3 F. Usipenko. *Guards fighting back*.

Therefore, colour is not simply a decorative element but a crucial tool for emotional construction. Through the manipulation of tone, saturation, brightness, and contrast, illustrators can convey specific emotional experiences effectively, even in the absence of complex narrative structures.

Composition and Space

Composition is the second key visual element in this proposal, as the organisation of space can directly shape the viewer's psychological and emotional response.

In addition to colour, composition and spatial organisation play a crucial role in shaping emotional atmosphere. The arrangement of elements, the positioning of visual focus, and the openness or confinement of space all contribute to the viewer's psychological response. Arnheim's discussion of visual balance suggests that the relationship between elements within a frame can create a sense of stability or tension (Arnheim, 1974). For instance, a stable and symmetrical composition often conveys calmness and order, whereas tilted, imbalanced, or off-centre compositions are more likely to evoke unease, tension, or oppression.

In illustration, the use of space is equally significant in constructing emotion. Large areas of negative space can create an atmosphere of isolation, emptiness, or stillness, allowing the viewer to experience distance and detachment. This can be seen in the work of contemporary illustrator Avogado6, whose images often place a simplified figure within a large empty space or isolate the subject from its surroundings (figure 4-7). Through this use of spatial emptiness, the viewer is encouraged to sense loneliness, silence, or psychological distance without the need for direct explanation. In contrast, when visual elements are compressed into a confined area, the image may produce sensations of crowding, pressure, or anxiety. Avogado6 also uses this approach in some works by placing figures or symbolic objects within restricted visual spaces, creating a sense of emotional pressure and inner conflict. These emotional differences, generated through variations in spatial density, demonstrate that composition is not merely a formal arrangement but an essential method of emotional construction.

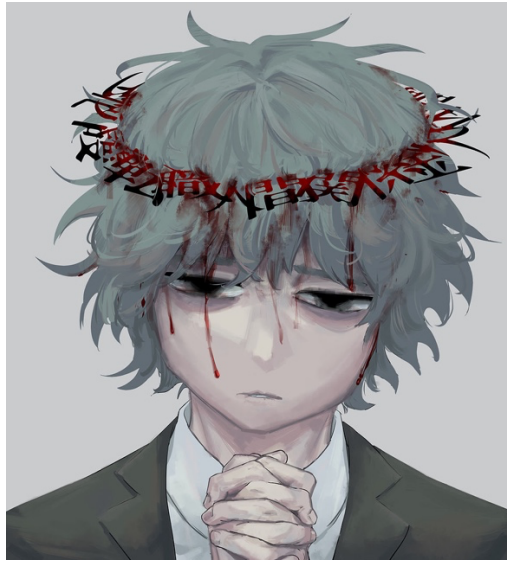


Figure 4 Painted by Avogado6 (2026)



Figure 5 Painted by Avogado6 (2026)



Figure 6 Painted by Avogado6 (2026)



Figure 7 Painted by Avogado6 (2026)

This can also be supported by research on spatial composition and visual preference. Leyssen et al. examine how the arrangement of multiple objects within an image affects aesthetic and perceptual response, showing that spatial organisation influences how viewers experience visual stability and balance (Leyssen et al., 2012). Although this research focuses on aesthetic preference rather than illustration specifically, it is still useful for understanding how composition can

shape the viewer's emotional perception. In the context of illustration, the emotional effect of an image often depends not only on what is represented, but also on where visual elements are placed and how much space is left around them.

This can be further illustrated through storyboard design in film. For example, storyboards from *Jurassic Park* often depict action or confrontation scenes using crowded and diagonally tilted compositions. The compression of space and dynamic angles create a strong sense of instability and urgency, reinforcing feelings of tension and chaos. In contrast, storyboards from *Forrest Gump* frequently employ parallel perspective and balanced framing (Figures 8-9). Combined with softer lighting and more stable visual organisation, these compositions produce a calm and steady atmosphere.

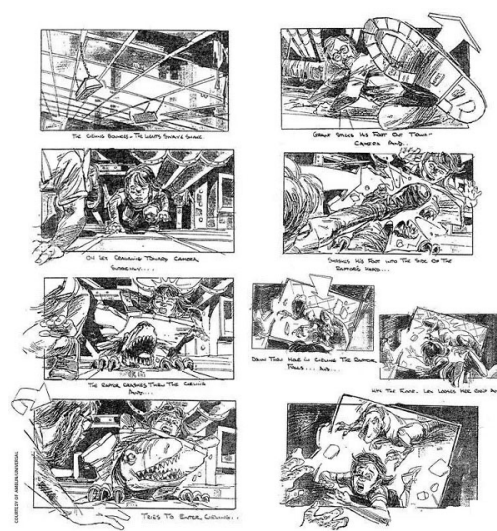


Figure 8 *Jurassic Park*, Artwork by Lucasfilm Ltd.

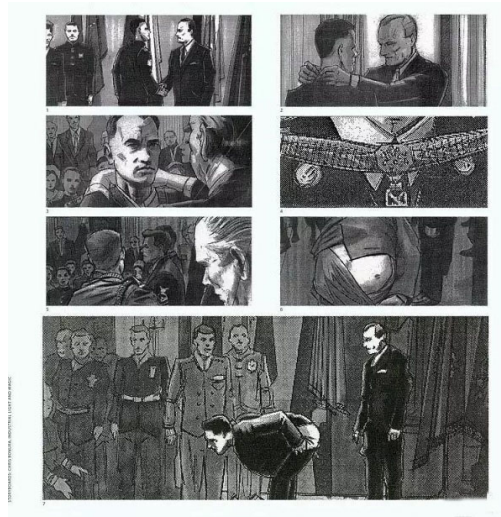


Figure 9 Forrest Gump, Artwork by Ed Natividad

By comparing these two approaches, it becomes clear that compositional strategies alone, independent of narrative detail, can significantly shape the emotional tone of an image. Composition therefore functions as the second key element in this proposal, working together with colour to construct atmosphere before the viewer even identifies a specific story.

Figure and Visual Expression

The third keyword in the construction of emotional atmosphere is the figure. In illustration, the human figure is one of the most direct carriers of emotion. When viewers observe a character, they instinctively interpret emotional states through facial expressions, body language, and gesture, which reflects the way emotions are perceived in real-life social interactions. Paul Ekman's research on facial expression argues that certain emotional expressions can be recognised across different

cultures, which explains why emotional cues in characters can be quickly and widely understood (Ekman, 1992). Therefore, the design of facial expression, posture, and movement allows emotional information to be communicated clearly and efficiently.

From the perspective of facial expression, even subtle variations can influence the overall emotional tone. For example, the direction of the gaze, the curvature of the mouth, and the tension of facial muscles all contribute to conveying different emotional signals. These small changes can significantly alter how a character's emotional state is perceived. A lowered gaze may suggest sadness, shame, or introspection, while a direct gaze may create confrontation, intimacy, or emotional pressure.

In terms of body language, both static and dynamic forms of movement generate distinct emotional effects. Desmond Morris's study of human behaviour and gesture suggests that posture and movement play an important role in non-verbal communication (Morris, 1977). Relatively still poses tend to suggest restraint, suppression, or introspection, while dynamic actions with clear direction or physical tension are more likely to express conflict, unease, or heightened emotional intensity. In this sense, the emotional meaning of a figure does not depend only on the face, but also on the whole body's relationship with space.

Shaun Tan's illustrations also demonstrate how the figure can carry emotional meaning through posture, gesture, and visual simplicity. In many of his works, characters do not always express emotion through exaggerated facial expression; instead, their emotional states are often communicated through the position of the body, the direction of the gaze, and their relationship with the surrounding environment. For example, a small figure placed within a large or unfamiliar setting

can suggest vulnerability, displacement, or loneliness, while a still or slightly withdrawn posture may create a sense of silence, uncertainty, or introspection (figure10-12). This restrained use of the figure allows emotion to be communicated indirectly, encouraging viewers to read the character's inner state through visual cues rather than explicit explanation. In this way, Shaun Tan's work shows that the figure in contemporary illustration can function not only as a character, but also as a subtle visual device for constructing emotional atmosphere.



Figure 10 Illustrated by Shaun Tan



Figure 11 Illustrated by Shaun Tan



Figure 12 Illustrated by Shaun Tan

However, not all illustrations rely on human figures to communicate emotion. In the absence of characters, emotional meaning is more often conveyed through environment, colour, and composition. Such works typically avoid presenting a fixed emotional message and instead encourage viewers to project their own interpretations, resulting in a more open-ended and subjective emotional experience. This highlights the active role of the viewer in constructing emotional meaning.

Therefore, figure-based and non-figure-based approaches represent two different pathways of emotional communication. The former depends on clear visual cues such as expression, posture, and gesture, while the latter relies more heavily on

atmosphere and the viewer's subjective engagement. This distinction highlights the diversity and flexibility of emotional expression within illustration.

Practice

Based on this research, I have developed a clearer direction for my third-year practice. I plan to produce a series of illustrations centred on emotional expression, consisting of at least four finished pieces. This series will primarily focus on the human figure, with particular attention to colour, compositional design, environmental setting, and the role of facial expression in conveying emotion.

In terms of colour, I will apply the use of low-saturation palettes discussed earlier, strengthening the overall atmosphere through the control of tone, brightness, and contrast. I am particularly interested in how muted colour can create a sense of quietness, restraint, or emotional pressure. This will allow me to explore emotion in a subtle way rather than relying on overly dramatic visual effects.

In terms of composition, I will experiment with negative space, confined space, and the placement of the figure within the frame. Through these compositional decisions, I aim to create different emotional atmospheres such as isolation, tension, stillness, or psychological distance. I also intend to experiment with at least one piece that does not include a human figure, relying instead on symbols, setting, and composition to communicate emotion. This will allow for a comparison between figure-based and non-figure-based approaches to emotional construction.

In terms of figure, my main focus will remain on character-based representation and the refinement of technical skills. I place a high value on the technical quality of painting, and I will continue to prioritise the level of finish and the precision of visual language throughout the process. In terms of character design, I plan to use the same figure across the series in order to maintain visual consistency and strengthen the continuity of my personal style. Through changes in posture, facial expression, and the relationship between the figure and surrounding space, I will explore how a repeated character can communicate different emotional states.

In terms of narrative, I prefer to create independent single illustrations rather than a continuous storyline. Each piece will function as an individual emotional fragment, exploring different possibilities of emotional expression through varied visual combinations. This approach is closely connected to my interest in emotional atmosphere, as it allows each image to focus on a specific mood rather than a complete narrative sequence.

Overall, this series will serve both as a practical extension of the theoretical research presented in this essay and as an exploration of how to establish a more stable relationship between my personal style and emotional expression. By returning to the three keywords of colour, composition, and figure, my practice will investigate how emotional atmosphere can be constructed visually and how my own illustration style can develop through this process.

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