



# FIGURE, GROUND & COMPOSITION

COMD 1100 Jake Wright

# Composition

*Composition* refers to the relative placement, color, and emphasis of an image's visual elements.



Robert Longo  
*Untitled (Eric)*, from the series "Men in the Cities", 1979-83

# Composition

Composition is about visuals, not subject matter. Two totally different images might have very similar compositions...



Franz Kline  
*Light Mechanic*, c. 1950-59



Vincent Van Gogh  
*The Starry Night*, 1889



**Katsushika Hokusai**

*Under the Wave off Kanagawa, 1831*

# Negative Space

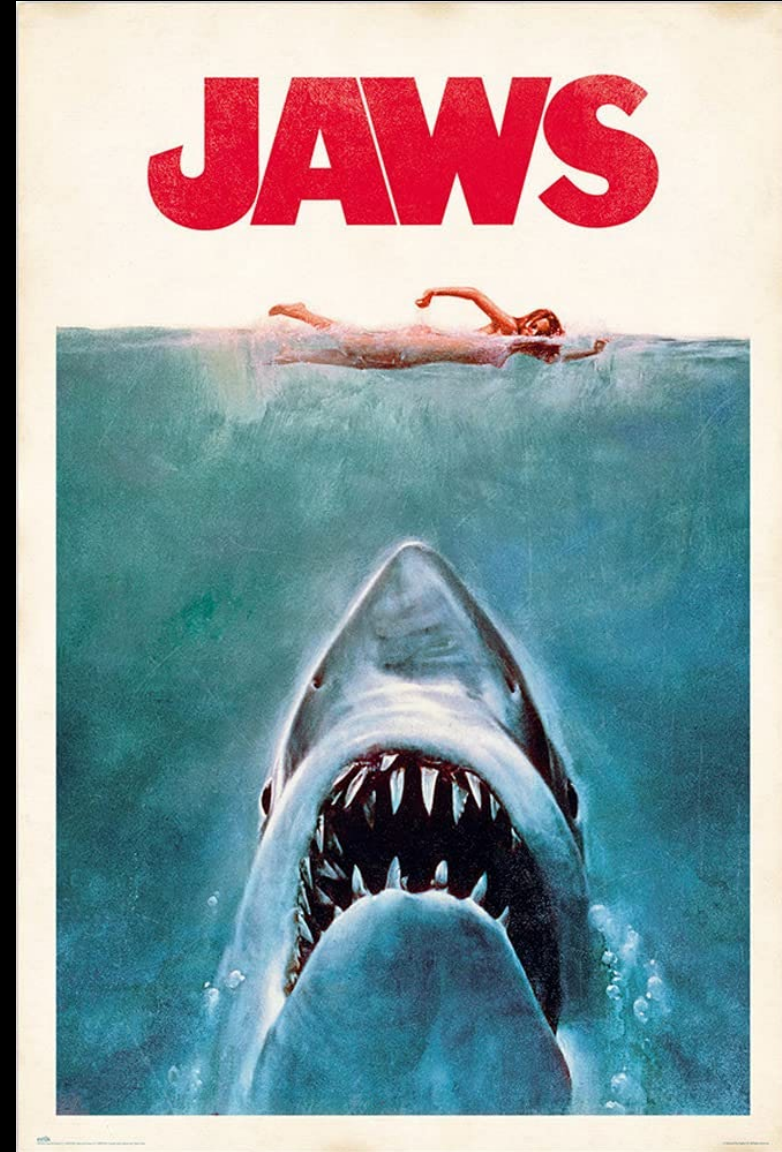
*Negative space* is the “empty” space around and between the subjects and major visual elements of an image.



An-My Lê  
*LC-130 Hercules and "Big Red," Amundsen-Scott  
South Pole Station, Antarctica, 2009*

## Negative Space

Negative space doesn't have to look the same across a composition.



Roger Kastel  
Poster design for *Jaws*, 1975

## Negative Space

“Empty” is relative. This poster has a lot of negative space, so why doesn’t the composition seem empty?



Shepard Fairey  
Obey Face 3 Series 2, 1996



# Figure

*Figure* refers to a visual element (or elements) occupying positive space in a composition.



Robert Beatty  
Album artwork for *Currents*, Tame Impala, 2015

# Figure

*Figures* are visually dominant compared to the ground, no matter how much literal space they occupy.



Andrew Wyeth  
*Christine's World*, 1948

# Ground

Ground refers to the negative space a figure occupies – what it would be standing on/in front of/inside if it existed in physical space.



Kehinde Wiley  
Shantavia Beale II, 2012

# Obvious Figure-Ground Relationship

*Obvious* figure-ground relationships exist when the figure is clearly distinguished from the ground *and* has the greatest visual weight.



Ibra Ake  
Album artwork for *Awaken, My Love!*, Childish Gambino, 2016

# Obvious Figure-Ground Relationship

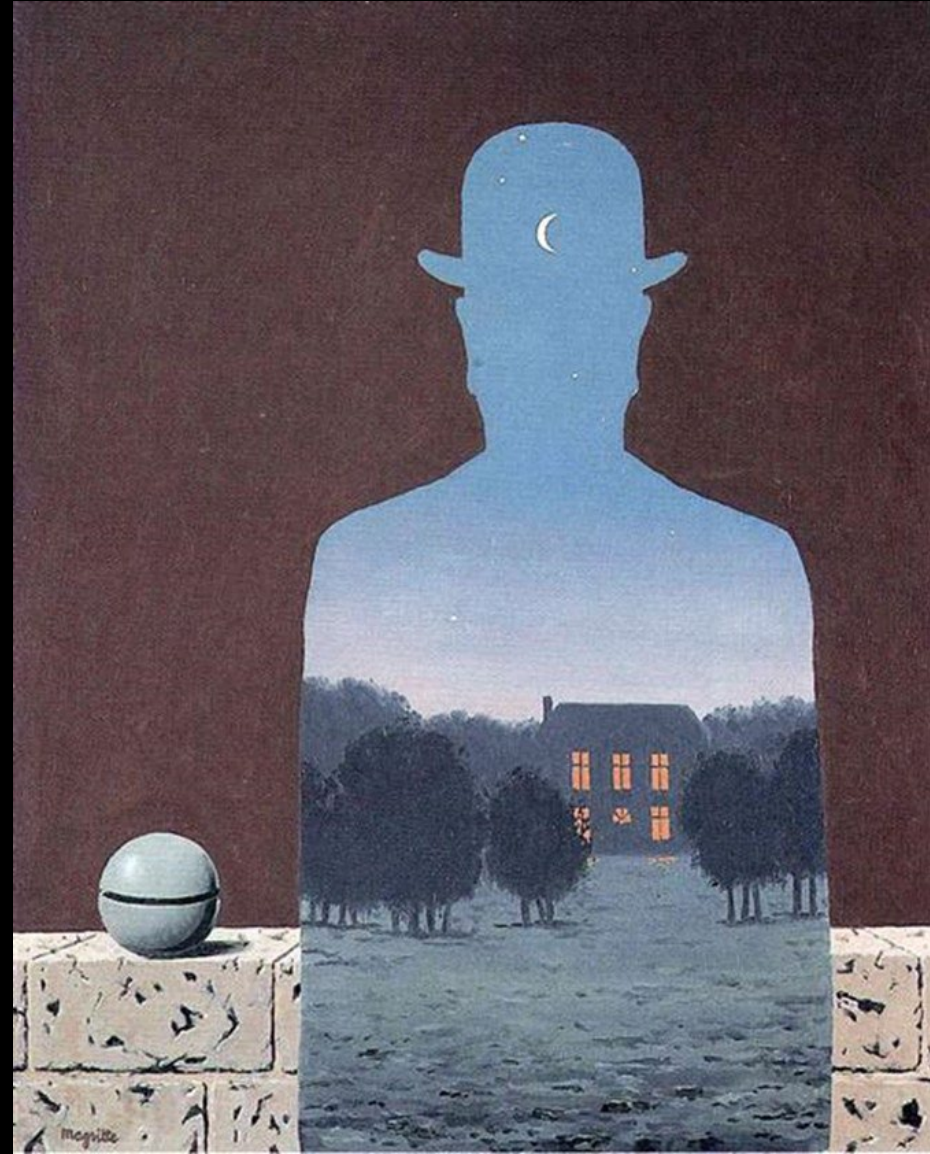
This holds true whether the figure is representational or abstract.



Amy Sillman  
*Shade*, 2010

# Ambiguous Figure-Ground Relationship

*Ambiguous* figure-ground relationships occur when the distinction between positive and negative space is unclear, and both can be perceived as either figure or ground.



Rene Magritte  
*The Happy Donor*, 1966

# Ambiguous Figure-Ground Relationship

A composition can have an ambiguous figure-ground relationship AND an obvious subject.



Saul Bass  
Poster for *The Shining*, 1980