Pictorial balance is a bottom-up aesthetic property mediated by eye movements

David Corwin MD

Abstract

Pictures evoke both a top down and a bottom-up visual percept of balance. Through its effect on eye movements balance is a bottom-up conveyor of aesthetic feeling. Eye movements are predominantly influenced by saliency and top-down priorities that are large effects so that it is difficult to separate out the much smaller effect of balance. A perfectly balanced picture, a picture where balance has no effect on eye movements, might show how its absence affects movements. Given that balance is associated with a picture being unified and harmonious and that there is an effect known to painters and historically documented that does just that, it was thought that such pictures should be perfectly balanced. Computer models of these pictures were created by the author. These pictures were found to have bilateral luminance symmetry with the lower half lighter by a factor of ~1.07 +/- ~0.03.

Two studies were done using the observation that an image and with a white frame against a black ground can be seen as balanced so that changing slightly the frame permits comparing identical images with respects to balance only. Results indicated that there was a high but non-significant ability to distinguish pictures within balanced pairs as appearing different from those in unbalanced pairs, and that observers, mostly painters, could distinguish low average pair imbalanced from high average pair imbalance indicating that observers at a minimum could distinguish degrees of pictorial imbalance. A conventional study of preference could not be done because of the necessity of using LED pictures with white frames that increase overall salience. This decreased the aesthetic effect while retaining the effects on eye movements. It is proposed that imbalance be calculated as a weighted center of quadrant luminance. This can be used in computer models of salience to calculate predicted eye movements more accurately.

With painters who can disregard salience and with the absence of imbalance, there are no forces drawing attention to any part of the image. All parts of the picture including that in peripheral vision receive attention, and the eye seems to slide through rather than go from objet to object. The name given by the author to this effect is pictorial coherency. Large tonally contrasting forms with straight lines or many different forms that cannot be visually combined into a few forms prevent the effect from being seen. The percept is not seen in monochromatic red pictures where the magnocellular data stream is suppressed. That pictures can evoke such a low level effect would seem to indicate that it belongs to much earlier evolutionary development of the visual stream where it might have been used to detect object movement and distance.

Introduction

A picture, a bounded flat image, corresponds to nothing found in nature or mental imagery. This includes the borderless images in European prehistoric caves (1). It differs from an image

without borders in that it evokes the percept of balance: the parts relate to both the center and the borders (2). Balance is both a bottom-up percept and a top-down aesthetic concept taught in schools. But balance of what and how? Color, form, tonal areas, and lines have been proposed. These somewhat immeasurable qualities have been said to be balanced around a geometric center or the principal pictorial axes defined by a center-of-gravity type of equation that is said to explain the perception of balance (2,3,4). Any attempt to show that low level balance is determined by some sort of equation might be associated with this erroneous concept. It is either impossible or would require too much calculation for the visual system to do this. However, in the same way that elements of salience such as color, contrast, and orientation are used to calculate the salient properties of a particular image, one might be able to calculate balance as a function of pictorial properties (5).

Eye movements are predominantly influenced by saliency and top-down priorities (5,6,7). These determinants of eye movements are large so that it is difficult to separate out the much smaller effect of balance. Locher and Nodine tried to do this by comparing eye movements in pictures that were thought to be balanced with variations of these pictures. Using trained and untrained observers, they found that the trained observers had more diverse and fewer specific exploratory movements in the more balanced compositions (8,9,10). These effects are characteristic of balance in that they indicate that the eye is less constrained to specific salient areas but do not quantify the effect of imbalance.

Because there has been no way to create a picture with a specific degree of imbalance, one would have to create a perfectly balanced picture in which balance could have no effect on eye movements as a base from which measurements might be made. In such a picture if the viewer can disregard top-down goal direction and bottom-up saliency, the eye is unrestrained. Comparing eye movements in the perfectly balanced picture with an identical picture framed differently to make it unbalanced (and thereby avoiding the effect of a difference in saliency when one modifies a picture) should show the effect of balance. However, determining how the visual system determines pictorial balance can only be done empirically.

I thought that the solution to this problem was in the analysis of a very obscure effect observed by painters that creates a remarkable feeling of unity and harmony. There is no name or metaphorical description for the percept evoked by these pictures so it is discussed only when before such a picture in art schools, particularly ones devoted to abstract painting. This unexpected change in a painting from being remarkably unified and harmonious to something less so or the reverse is quite striking. Peripheral vision becomes more salient, creating the feeling of the whole picture being seen at one time without a need to focus on any pictorial element. I call this percept pictorial coherence.

Pictorial coherence was first noted by Roger de Piles, a French critic and painter around 1700. He described an assemblage of "lights and darks" in paintings creating an effect that was spontaneous and intense giving the impression that the viewer could gaze at the entire painting without focusing on any particular form (11,12). Cézanne apparently noted this. Indeed, the inability to describe a percept that had no name gives his conversations a cryptic quality. Both Delacroix and Kandinsky give vivid descriptions of seeing such an effect in paintings (13,14).

I created computer images that evoke it through experience acquired from many years of painting. Image analysis indicated that the percept resulted when an LED picture, centered at eye level and parallel to the plane of vision has bilateral equal luminance with the lower half being slightly lighter than the upper half by a factor of ~1.07 ± ~0.03 (where luminance is measured from 1 to 255 with black equal to 1 as measured by Photoshop CR2©).

While the aesthetic effect is very strong with a picture seen by reflected light, the percept is diminished in LED pictures so that there is a diminished feeling of unity while the effect on eye movements is retained. Because this is more subtle, a study of subject preference could not be done. Bertamini et al. noted that observers preferred a print reproduction to seeing the same picture in a mirror or on a monitor, and they preferred the mirror view of the actual image to the image on an LED screen (15). Locher et al made similar observations (16). LED images interfere with perception of the effect but had to be used to permit precise luminance determination and reproducibility.

With respect to the effect a white framed image against a black ground is seen as one visual object. This permits the comparison of a balanced framed picture with the identical picture in a slightly different frame rendering the combination unbalanced. This avoids the confounding variable of salience that occurs when an image is compared with even a small variant. The white borders also increase the saliency of the picture. Under these conditions, if an observer is told to compare the two images and to disregard the frame, any perceived difference would be ascribed to the effect. A study was done to show that this percept is observable. Most people, who observed the two identical pictures in succession, saw no difference. Only a group of painters and a few people very interested in looking at pictures were found likely to see it. A painting exhibiting coherence is perfectly balanced; everything else will be called unbalanced.

Materials and Methods

Each study consisted of ten pairs of images: Five in which one of the images was coherent and the other unbalanced (balanced or coherent pairs) and five in which both were unbalanced (unbalanced pairs). Images were prepared using Photoshop©. Quadrant image luminance characteristics were changed in an unobtrusive manner and precise manner through the use of the level command on an irregular form in which the luminance is changed by no more than ±0.05 percent. The form is moved around until the desired quadrant value is reached. The two studies

differed only in using different sets of white borders. The three possible image and border combinations are in fig. 1. Study I compared figure 1a with either 1b or 1c. Study 2 compared figure 1b with 1c (only the white borders are seen when an picture is seen against a black ground.). Observers see sequentially a picture with one frame followed by the other on a calibrated iPad using the ColorTrue™ app and a Colorite™ device. The iPad image was verified to have the stated luminance balance through measurement of screen shots. The images on the iPad are approximately 5x6.75 inches and subtend visual angles of 19º and 23º respectively. The observers viewed the iPad parallel to the plane of vision at arm's length and were asked whether the two central images appeared to be the same or different. The pictures used for the studies are in Fig. 2. Images 1,3,5,7, 8 were the balanced pairs (all images are in the supplementary files).

Fig. 1 The three possible image and border combinations

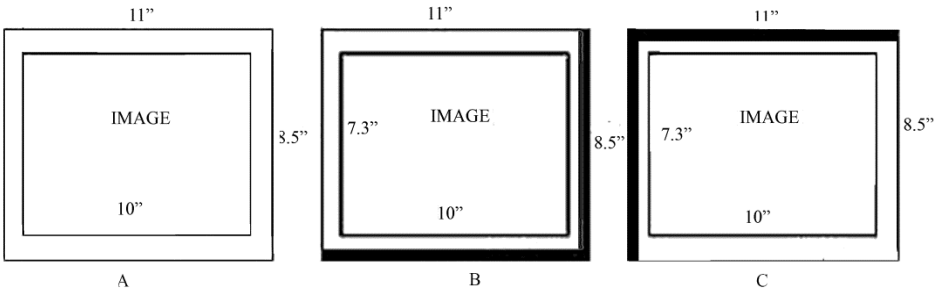


Fig. 2 Pictures used in the study pairs

The observers were predominantly artists of any age who gave their consent orally to participate in an anonymous study of how people look at pictures. No identifying information or medical history was obtained; there was no attempt to eliminate observers who were color deficient, had cataracts or impaired binocular vision. The research study was done in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration (WHO). There were no requirements other than a willingness to follow the directions to carefully view the pictures and to answer questions as to whether picture pairs appeared different or the same. 45 observers were included in the first study and 39 observers in the second study. Observers were excluded if they rapidly said they could see no difference without careful examination or if they insisted that the frame change was the only difference. There were only four of the latter. For pairs in which both pictures are unbalanced, it was presumed that observers would find the pictures to be identical so that the response of “same”

was considered correct. With the balanced pairs a response of “different” would be labeled correct.

Observers were shown a picture of a pair on the iPad one at a time in sequence with the examiner seated slightly behind them. They were permitted, indeed encouraged, to hold the iPad themselves as long as it was held correctly. They were told that it was thought that some pairs would be seen as the same and others as different. There were no restrictions on the length of observation, and observers could return to a previous image as much as they wanted. However, subjects were told that the difference if any was more in the way of a feeling than a distinct difference and were discouraged from making point by point comparisons. It was described as analogous to the difference between of monophonic and stereophonic music: same music but seems different.

Results and discussion

Four observers could identify all the balanced pairs correct, and 5 observers made one mistake. (Table 1) Although it could not be statistically proven, it is very suggestive that the effect is being seen. Some subjects thought they saw differences in color, one thought the depth of field was greater, and many saw differences but could not describe them.

Table 1 The number of observers for each number of correct responses

1st study		2nd study	
Correct Responses	Observers	Correct Responses	Observers
10	3	10	1
9	2	9	3
8	2	8	1
7	4	7	6
6	13	6	9
5	12	5	11
4	7	4	5
3	1	3	1
2	1	2	2
Total	45		39

Among observers who perceived differences in any pair, many saw differences in both balanced and unbalanced picture pairs. Initially this was thought to be due to guessing. However, there is a strong correlation between the percent of pairs observed to be seen as different and the pair average distance (average imbalance). To understand this, I propose a formula which defines the observed state of perfect balance and explains observations implying a center-of-mass-like

effect. If a picture with bilateral quadrant symmetry and a darker upper half can be said to be perfectly balanced i.e. some property is mathematically centered, and its center of luminance is located at the geometric center of the picture, then the standard formula for the center of mass of four connected objects can be used. In this formula average quadrant luminance L replaces the mass of each object and x,y are coordinates with the picture centered at (0,0):

$$X = (X_{ULQ}L_{ULQ} + X_{URQ}L_{URQ} + X_{LLQ}L_{LLQ} + X_{LRQ}L_{LRQ})/L_{TOTAL}$$
$$Y = (1.07)Y_{ULQ}L_{ULQ} + (1.07)Y_{URQ}L_{URQ} + Y_{LLQ}L_{LLQ} + Y_{LRQ}L_{LRQ})/L_{TOTAL}$$
$$L_{TOTAL} = (L_{ULQ} + L_{URQ} + L_{LLQ} + L_{LRQ})/4,$$
$$\text{Balance} = \sqrt{X^2 + Y^2} \text{ or a vector } \vec{L} = X, Y$$

Luminance L is measured on a scale from 1 to 255 with 1 being black. The y values of the upper quadrants are modified by 1.07 to account for the increased visual weight of the upper half. X_{ABQ} and Y_{ABQ} are the coordinates of the center of their respective quadrants, and L_{ABQ} is a quadrant's average luminance.

The results permitted the pairs to be divided into two groups: one in which the average state of imbalance within the pair was low (the balanced pairs), and the other where the average imbalance was large. The balanced pairs were identified correctly by 40% of observers, and the unbalanced pairs were identified correctly by 75% of the observers. The correlation between average pair distance and correct identification was: $r(18) = 0.57$, $p = 0.013$ (Table 2). This indicates that observers distinguished the coherent pictures in the balanced pairs from unbalanced pairs. If the responses of "different" for both coherent and unbalanced pairs are compared with the inter-pair distances, the correlation is $r = 0.959$. There is no clear reason why the eye should relate the same-difference observation to inter-pair distance.

Table 2 Pair average distance and percent of observers that correctly identified the pairs (according to the author) or identified the percent of pairs seen as different.

	image pair	average pair distance	% correct	image pair	average pair distance	% correct	% same
1st Study	1	0.462	0.489	2	0.723	0.644	0.356
	3	0.318	0.356	4	1.894	0.711	0.289
	5	0.427	0.444	6	1.679	0.667	0.333
	7	0.509	0.378	9	0.944	0.822	0.178
	8	0.522	0.444	10	2.197	0.889	0.111
2nd Study	1	0.608	0.410	2	0.942	0.718	0.282
	3	0.652	0.359	4	2.153	0.846	0.154

	5	0.473	0.436	6	1.934	0.615	0.385
	7	0.658	0.282	9	1.389	0.744	0.256
	8	1.026	0.436	10	2.455	0.872	0.128
Mean		0.565	0.403		1.631	0.753	
StDev		0.193	0.060		0.602	0.098	

The use of an iPad in different lighting environments was necessary to bring the study to the observers as no laboratory was available. Reflection from the iPad screen increased the number of false negatives, i.e. coherent pictures being seen as unbalanced. The possibility of examiner influence cannot be excluded although an attempt was made to diminish this by being seated behind the subjects as they looked at the images. The results of the unbalanced pairs were contrary to the expectation that no one would see the unbalanced pairs as different as table 2. After all they are identical pictures. A MacNemar test of data validity was p. <001.

Pictorial balance is extremely sensitive to small differences of quadrant luminance which explains its fugacity without precise viewing conditions (table 3). Changing the lighting spectrum or height at which the painting is hung destroys the effect. With pictures in a studio even the drying of paint in the following twelve hours creates a tonal change that is sufficiently to make it disappear. Given that not everyone can see the effect which is normally arrived at through chance and even then is usually fleeting, and that there is no name for it, one can understand why it is not discussed in 20th century literature.

Table 3 shows the right/left and top/down ratios for the 2nd study. The unbalanced pairs are in bold.

pair	lateral balance	top/down	pair	lateral balance	top/down
1	1.05	0.97	**6**	**1.04**	**1.37**
	1.00	1.06		**0.97**	**1.23**
2	**1.03**	**0.95**	7	0.94	0.97
	0.99	**1.01**		1.00	1.07
3	1.00	1.06	8	1.00	1.08
	0.93	1.16		1.10	1.26
4	**0.98**	**0.90**	**9**	**1.05**	**0.87**
	1.06	**0.83**		**0.98**	**1.01**
5	0.95	1.00	**10**	**0.80**	**0.96**
	1.00	1.07		**0.86**	**1.06**

With respect to eye movements I find that it is possible for the eye to seem to glide smoothly through a coherent painting instead of jumping from place to place. The saccades themselves seem to be easier than with an unbalanced version of the same picture. By this I mean the intangible effort it takes to lift up one's eyes from one part to another. It is simply less tiring to look at a more balanced picture, or conversely it is much more tiring to look at a very unbalanced picture. A study of how long subjects look at paintings of similar subjects differing to large degree by their degree of imbalance might show this. Painters often learn to follow their eye as it moves through a picture to see where it is impeded as a means of evaluating balance to remove "visual obstructions." During the study an observer who was clearly familiar with the effect in his painting but who did not identify the balanced pairs particularly well, was taught to slide his eyes around. He then identified every pair correctly. It was not that he perceived the effect but was sensitive to how it affected eye movements.

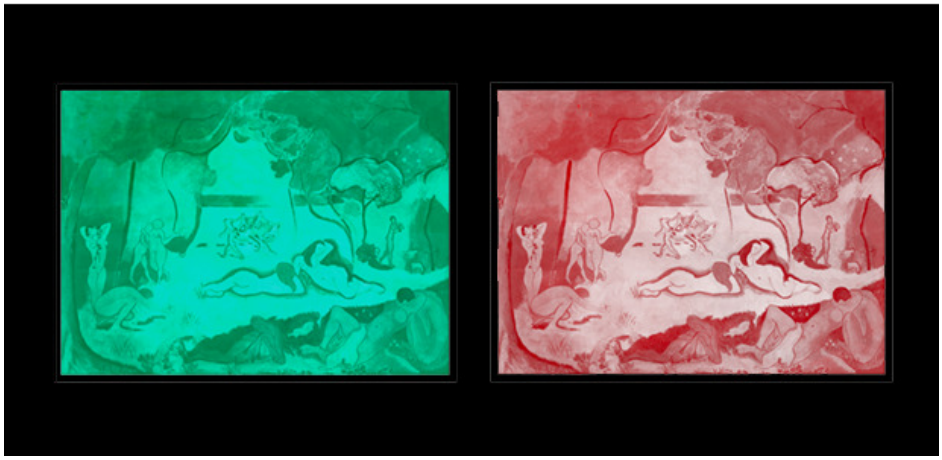
Conclusions

A picture is a controlled viewing experience; contrast, line, forms and color, etc are easily controlled so that saliency is minimized. When an innately capable observer views a picture ignoring saliency, then balance remains to directing the eye. With perfect balance there is no controlling effect on eye movements. Without this one gazes at the whole picture and is able to move smoothly through it instead of the attention going from one form to another. This is what Roger de Piles describes as seeing the whole picture at one time – "le tout ensemble" (11).

Painters view pictures differently than untrained individuals (10,17,18,19,20). Antes et al (18) used fixation patterns to distinguish painters from non-painters, and Koide et al (21) used a prediction model of a saliency map to show that artists are less guided by local saliency than non-artists. Coherence facilitates this in an extraordinary way. With the absence of forces drawing attention to any part of the image, all parts including that in peripheral vision receive attention. The importance of peripheral vision where magnocellular ganglion cells predominate is shown by the percept disappearing in an environment of red light. For example, it is not seen in a balanced monochromatic red image but is seen in a balanced monochromatic green image of the same picture (fig. 3) (22,23,24). Binocular vision is necessary to view the percept.

fig. 3 balanced monochromatic red and green pictures

fig. 3



There are certain types of saliency that cannot be disregarded i.e.markedly tonally contrasting forms with hard edges and angles or many different forms that cannot be combined conceptually into a few larger forms. The eye can learn to ignore a few major forms but cannot ignore many equally salient forms. While pictures with these salient characteristics may meet the luminance balance criteria, they will probably not be seen or are much less likely to be seen as coherent.

Pictures as such are not part of the evolutionary development of humans, and they differ from images without borders because they evoke the percept of balance. Borders (as defined by the eye) change an image into a picture to be viewed as object. Objects require fixation far more than an image – a mere variation in color of sorts in an object. Balance is probably the residual of a much more primitive visual system for evaluating object movement

In summary, it has been historically documented and noted by painters today, a special pictorial effect in which the attention is on the entire picture at one time so that it appears unified and harmonious. These are also attributes of pictures said to be traditionally balanced. A computer model of a picture exhibiting this effect was created by the author and was determined to have bilateral equal luminance with the bottom half being ~1.07±.03 times lighter than the upper half. Based on the observation that the phenomena is observed in white framed pictures on a black ground, a study was done comparing framed pictures with the identical picture framed differently so as to render it unbalanced. A small group of observers, mostly painters judged the identical picture in two different frames different, and the group could statistically distinguish between pairs that had an average high degree of balance from those that had a high average degree of imbalance. Pronounced forms with marked contrasts and hard edges and angles or many small forms demand fixation and prevent experiencing the percept. The effect is not seen in monochromatic red pictures or without binocular vision. Since balance is a low level effect that

has no evolutionary significance, it is probably a residual sense retained from a much more primitive visual system for evaluating object movement.

Bibliography

1. Schapiro M On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art Semiotica 1969;1:225-242
2. Arnheim R. Art and Visual Perception Berkeley: University of California Press; 1974 p.10
3. Poore H R Pictorial Composition and the Critical Judgment of Pictures. New York:G.P Putnam Sons;1903
4. Ross, D. A Theory of Pure Design. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co.; 1907
5. Itti L Koch C, Niebur E. A Model of Saliency-Based Visual Attention for Rapid Scene Analysis IEEE Trans Pattern Anal Mach Intell. 1998; 20(11);9 doi:10.1109/34.730558
6. Kowler E Review Eye movements: The past 25 years Vision Research. 2011;51(13): 1457-1483 doi.org/10.1016/j.visres.2010.12.014
7. Krasovskaya S, MacInnes WJ. Salience Models: A Computational Cognitive Neuroscience Review. Vision 2019;,3(4). doi: 10.3390/vision3040056.
8. Locher P The Contribution of eye movements to pictorial balance perception, a review of the literature. Empirical Studies of the Arts. 1996;14(2): 143-163
9. Locher P, Gray S, Nodine C The structural framework of pictorial balance Perception. 1996; 25: 1419-1436 doi: 10.1068/i0472aap
10. Nodine CF, Locher P, Krupinski EA The Role of formal Training on Perception and Aesthetic Judgement of Art Composition Leonardo 1993;26(3):219-227 doi: 10.2307/1575815
11. Puttfarken, T. The Discovery of Pictorial Composition, New Haven:Yale University; Press;2000
12. Delacroix E, Œvres Littéraires. Études Esthétiques 4th ed Paris :G. Crés & Cie ;1923 p.67
13. Doran, M (Ed.) Cochran JL (Trans.).Conversations with Cézanne. Berkeley; University of California Press ;2001 p. 88-89
14. Kandinsky "Rückblicke" in Weiss P. Kandinsky in Munich. Princeton: Princeton University Press;1979 p.68
15. Bertamini, M. Blakemore, C. Seeing a work of art indirectly: When a reproduction is better than an indirect view, and a mirror better than a live monitor. Front Psychol, 2019;**10**, Article 2033. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02033
16. Locher P, Smith JK, Smith LF. The influence of presentation format and viewer training in the visual arts on the perception of pictorial and aesthetic qualities of paintings Perception. 2011;**30**:449-465 doi: 10.1068/p3008.
17. Long Z Peng D. Chen K Jin Z Yao L. Neural substrates in color processing: A comparison between painting majors and non-majors. Neurosci Lett, 2011;**487**: 191-195.

18. Antes J R, Kristjanson A F Discriminating Artists from Nonartists by Their Eye-Fixation Patterns. Percept Mot Skills.1991;**73**(3):893-4. doi.org/10.2466/pms.1991.73.3.893
19. Antes JR, Kristjanson AF The impact of level of expertise on the evaluation of original and altered versions of post-impressionistic paintings *Acta Psychologica*. 1996;**94**(2):117-131 doi.org/10.1016/0001-6918(95)00055-0
20. Zangemeister W H Sherman K Stark L. Evidence for a global scanpath strategy in viewing abstract compared with realistic images. Neuropsych 1995;**33**(8):1009-1025 doi: 10.1016/0028-3932(95)00014-t
21. Koide N Kubo T Nishida S Shibata T Ikeda K. Art Expertise Reduces Influence of Visual Salience on Fixation in Viewing Abstract-Paintings. PONE; 2015:**10**(2): e0117696. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0117696
22. Awasthi B, Williams MA, Friedman J. Examining the role of red background in magnocellular contribution to face perception PeerJ , 2016; **4**:e,1617 doi.org/10.7717/peerj.1617
23. Chapman C, Hoag R, Giaschi D. The effect of disrupting the human magnocellular pathway on global motion perception Vision Research, 2004; **44**(2): 2551-2557. doi.org/10.1016/j.visres.2004.06.003
24. Livingstone MS, Hubel DH Anatomy and physiology of a color system in the primate visual cortex. J Neurosci. 1984;**4**(1):309-56 doi: 10.1523/Jneurosci.04-01-00309.1984