HIERARCHY

Hierarchy is the arrangement of elements according to importance. Designers use contrast to establish the order in which we read or process units of information. Elements need not be arranged sequentially; readers can determine their relative importance by other attributes, such as size, color, or position.

Hierarchies organize all kinds of knowledge, experience, and actions in everyday life. For example, the officer ranking system in the military is a hierarchy. A general ranks above a colonel in authority, a colonel above a captain, a captain above a sergeant, and so forth. We study members of the animal kingdom through the hierarchical classifications of phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species. Restaurant menus organize information hierarchically, typically treating the name of the entrée with greater emphasis than the description of its lesser ingredients and isolating prices for comparison at some distance from the dining options. These hierarchies orient and direct our interpretive behavior. We have yet to

determine the meaning of particular elements, but we understand relative importance in their ordered arrangements.

It is easy to understand the expected order of interpretation when things are arranged sequentially or in a list. But the visual world would not be very interesting if everything looked like a set of instructions or a shopping inventory. Pages in books and screens on the web order the release of information across time and space, but the simultaneous viewing of information in formats such as posters and diagrams relies solely on the contrasting visual characteristics of elements—size, weight, color, complexity, direction, position—in achieving varying levels of emphasis.

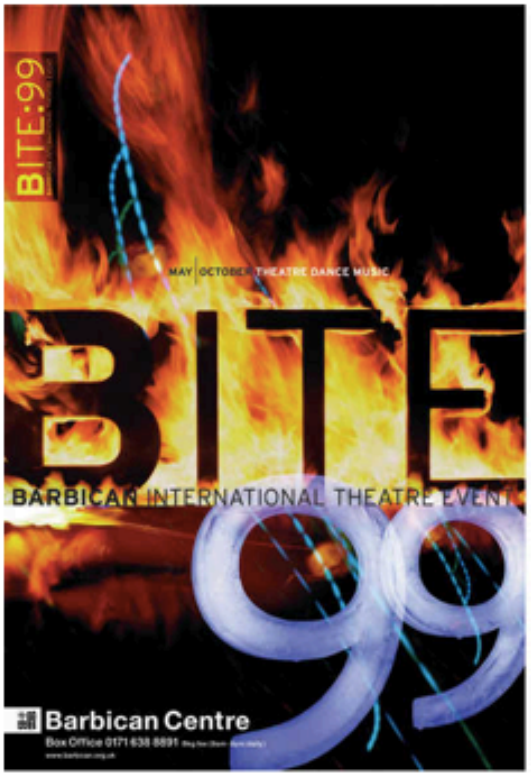
While we typically assign importance on the basis of visual contrast, too much contrast reduces our perception of any hierarchy. Think about a busy city street in which every shop controls its own signage and storefront design or the visual landscape of magazines at the newsstand. When everything is entirely unique in its characteristics, nothing stands

out. Our detection of hierarchy among elements in a visual field depends on a controlled gradient of difference. Similarly, if the design applies too many contrasting variables among elements, some characteristics can undermine those intended to determine emphasis. For example, if the designer signals importance between two elements by contrast in size, then applying a striking color to the less dominant element shifts the subordinate role in an otherwise black-and-white composition (Figure 4.21).

Control of visual hierarchy was particularly important to the work of mid-twentieth-century designers, for whom clarity and accurate representation of the author's informational intention were paramount. Modernist work typically established obvious levels of importance among elements, using only one type family and a limited color palette to maintain continuity among contrasting units of text. We presume that elements of the same size and/or color relate in significance, as well as content.

Figure 4.21
Berthold type series Erik Spiekermann
Spiekermann's design for a series of type specimen booklets carefully controls hierarchy. In some examples, elements dominate by size, in others by color, direction, or position

within the visual field.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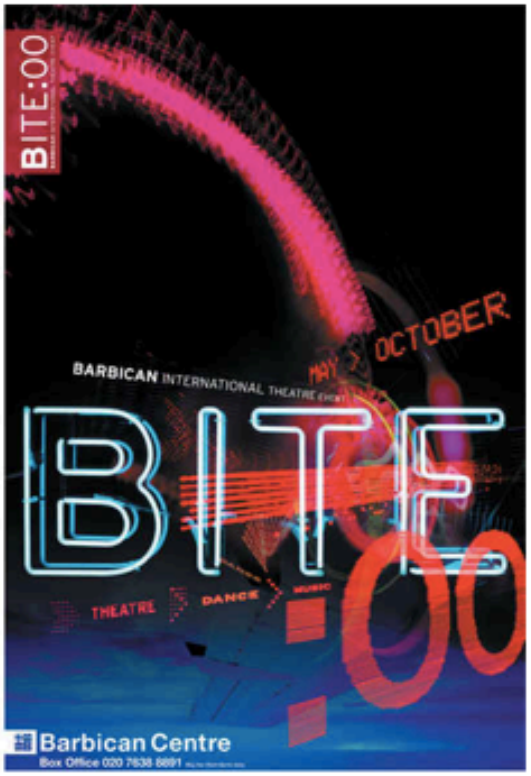
Barbican Centre
Box Office 0171 638 8891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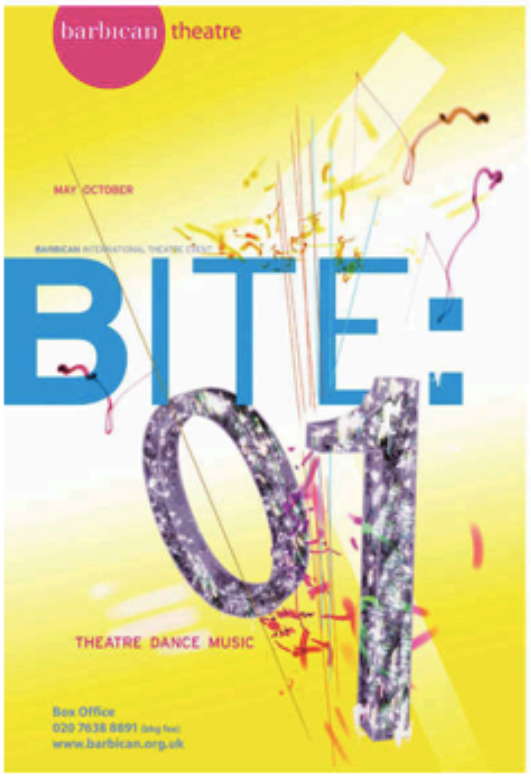
barbican theatre
MAY OCTOBER
BARBICAN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE EVENT
BITE:
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THEATRE DANCE MUSIC
Box Office
020 7638 8891
www.barbican.org.uk

Figure 4.22
Barbican International Theatre posters, Why Not Associates
Why Not Associate's Theatre posters establish a clear hierarchy among the elements through the size and visual eccentricities of type and the diffused imagery in the background.

British design firm Why Not Associates' posters for the *Barbican International Theatre Event* include text and imagery (Figure 4.22). The most important element for reading at a distance (BITE) is both large and shows the greatest contrast with its background—it clearly rises to the top of the information hierarchy. The imagery, in this case, is somewhat atmospheric so its diffused form does not compete with the more important text. As discussed earlier in this book, the lack of sharp contours in the imagery reduces the level of attention it commands. Detailed information (date, location, etc.) is smaller and requires a closer reading. In other words, despite the minimal number and diversity of elements in the compositions of these posters, the reading order is clear. Like the earlier modernist work, the hierarchy is apparent, but it does not rely on the rigid application of a grid or limited palette of

typefaces.

There are recurring diagrammatic structures that imply a hierarchy among elements. Branching diagrams, for instance, place the most general concepts at the top or left of the diagram and lead to increasing detail in successive layers of the diagram. Others nest concepts like Russian dolls, with detailed or original concepts in the center and more general concepts in the outer rings. In other instances, we read the position of elements in deep space as an indication of their importance. An interactive map, for example, not only describes the hierarchical organization of content but also tells us where we are in the information system—what we will encounter first, second, and third in our movement through the site.

Designer Herbert Bayer's 1953 diagram of the *Succession of Life* orders complex information using several of these strategies simultaneously, but also allows readers to enter content systematically (Figure 4.23). Color separates information about animals (red) from plants (green) and environment (black). A hierarchy among typographic elements corresponds to

the content hierarchy; changes in weight, color, direction, and uppercase versus lowercase letters distinguish information at different levels of detail. Divisions of space demarcate zones of time and categories of content. Bayer cleverly "rolls up" the first half of a timeline when no significant life likely existed on Earth, thus conserving space and directing the reader to relevant information. And changes in the world population of various species, labeled by images, appear as changes in the width of a line. This is an ordered visual coding of an enormous amount of data that orients readers to its interpretation. Unlike the posters by Why Not Associates, this example doesn't direct the reader to one thing first, another second, and so forth. Instead, it zones information and makes apparent the significant relationships among different kinds of data.

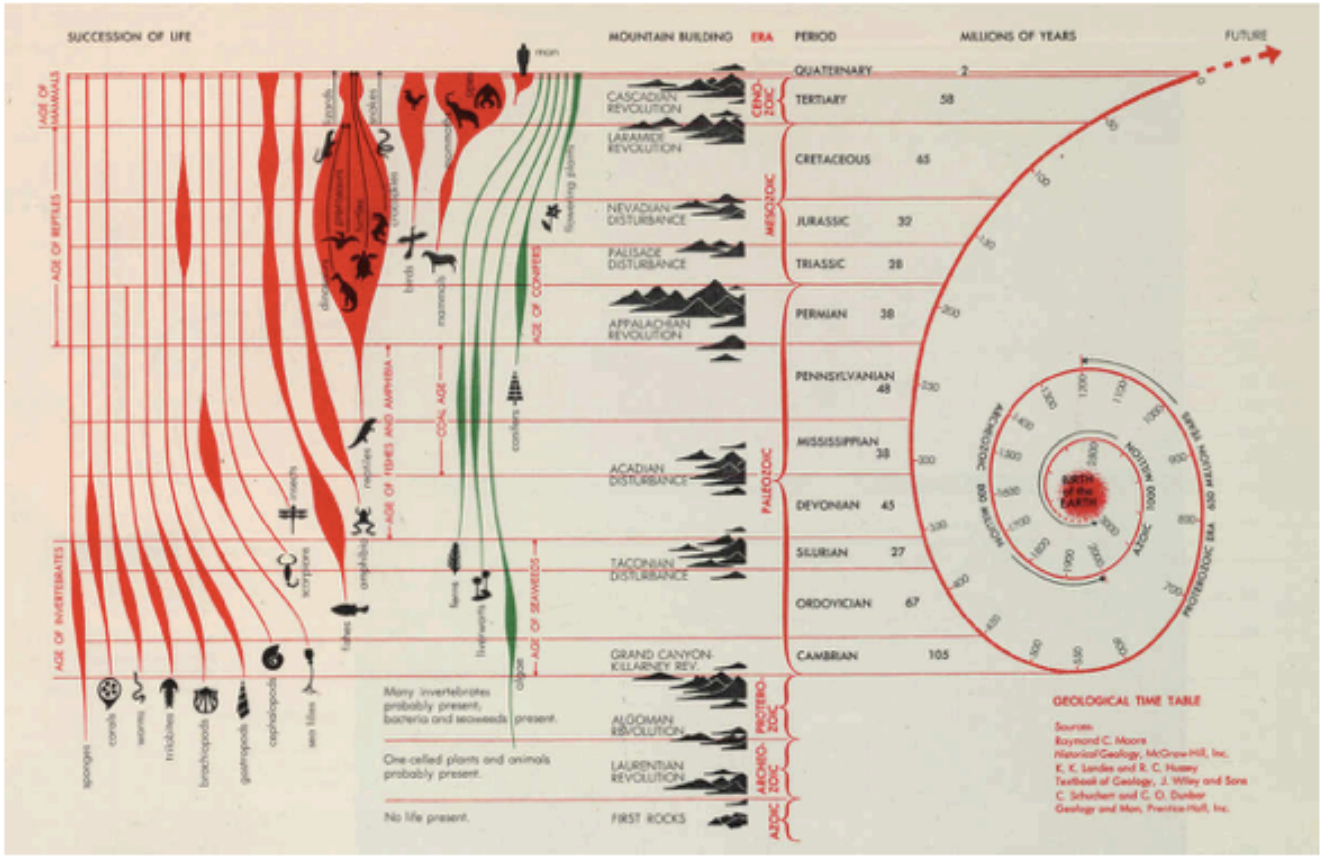

Figure 4.23

Succession of Life and Geological Time Table, from *The World Geographic Atlas*, 1953 Herbert Bayer (1900–1985) © DACS 2016

Bayer used visual characteristics to orient readers to this complex diagram. Line thickness indicates the relative population of species across time on Earth; color separates plants from animals; and typographic orientation distinguishes individual entries on mountain building from general divisions of time. This restrained use of different visual variables for each type of information creates a clear hierarchy in what would otherwise be a confusing diagram.

The order in which we read something determines what we think it means. Hierarchy is critical in orienting us to the importance of certain content in the interpretive process.