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A Closer Look at Bridging Inferences: Onlookers and Framing in Visual Narratives

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Abstract

Like verbal discourse, visual narratives use various techniques to motivate readers to infer unstated events. One technique of sponsoring bridging inferences in visual sequences is to replace climactic events with an “onlooker”, a bystander viewing the off-panel climax reacting with textual and/or bodily cues to varying degrees. In two self-paced reading experiments, we explored how onlookers sponsored inferencing. Experiment 1 compared five types of onlookers ranging from a passive face with no cues to explicit facial or textual cues, and Experiment 2 investigated the effect of zooming in on onlookers’ bodily cues. Less explicit onlookers are processed faster, but at the next panel all onlookers required equal updating costs and zooms elicited further costs. Moreover, textual cues facilitated understanding. Overall, these findings show that complexity and explicitness of information in visual narratives affect subsequent event inferencing.

Keywords: backward inferences, explicitness, event cognition