



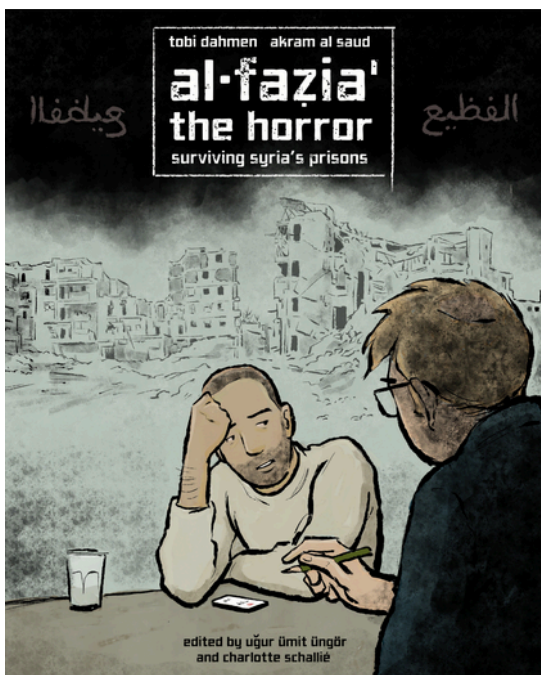
SURVIVOR-CENTRED
VISUAL NARRATIVES

2026

AL-FAZIA': THE HORROR
BY TOBI DAHMEN & AKRAM AL SAUD

LIFE IN MOMENTS

Educational Materials for the Secondary Classroom: Visual Literacy & Cross-Curricular Teaching Suggestions (English Edition)



TEACHING NOTES

LESSON #1 RESIST

LESSON #2 SURVIVE

LESSON #3 TELL

LESSON #4 SHOW

KEY TERMS & REFERENCES

by Tatia Gruenbaum

Introduction

Welcome to the teaching notes for the educational materials which accompany the graphic novel *Al-Fazīa': the horror* by Tobi Dahmen & Akram Al Saud, edited by Uğur Ümit Üngör and Charlotte Schallié, published by Carlsen Verlag (2026).

This concise teaching resource has been designed for learners at upper-secondary level, aged 15+ studying in a national or international school context. It supports subject teachers from across the curriculum who choose this graphic novel and seek materials to challenge their classes to think critically about violent authoritarian rule, survival, and resistance through the lens of Akram Al Saud's experiences. The educational materials comprise four lessons with key terms and a reference list. The key terms offer definitions to provide learners and teachers with a shared understanding of primarily visual literacy related terms.

We hope these four lessons offer a meaningful experience and engage learners beyond the last page of Akram's story and into the world outside the classroom.

The Lessons

The four lessons are titled: RESIST, SURVIVE, TELL and SHOW to capture Akram's journey. Each lesson spans two pages, includes selected illustrations and shares an identical layout built around a 4-step structure forming the acronym **NORD**, which translates as 'North' in German, representing the direction Akram took when fleeing.

Step 1: Notice

- Step 1 offers an entry point to reading images and the skill of noticing to establish what stands out at first glance. Here one single illustration or a double spread with two illustrations has been selected. This step concludes with a poem or quote to bridge disciplines and support critical thinking, interpretative and discussion skills.

Step 2: Observe

- Step 2 continues with the skill of reading images, but the focus is now on looking more closely. Learners are encouraged to explore and discuss aspects such as the narrative, composition, and symbolism. The questions include prompts and allow for multiple interpretations.

Step 3: Reflect

- Step 3 consists of guiding questions that support a moment of response for learners to reflect, evaluate, and personalise. This step also aims to inspire learners to move beyond the classroom and engage more critically with the world around them.

Step 4: Deepen

- Step 4 offers various cross-curricular teaching ideas, creating links to subjects such as art, philosophy, language and literature, history and geography. Here teachers or learners can choose and adapt tasks to suit their learning needs and objectives.

Pedagogy

Each lesson can function as a stand-alone and has been designed to work in a communicative classroom setting with learners working in pairs or small groups. The four lessons can be completed post-reading of the graphic novel or alongside the corresponding pages during reading. They can be completed in the sequence suggested, or different groups (pairs) can work through different lessons simultaneously and share their findings with the class. It is advisable, however, to complete the questions in each step in the given sequence.

The required teaching time per lesson will ultimately depend on factors such as class size and subject engagement. Generally, 90 minutes are recommended to complete the first three steps of any of the four lessons and to allow time for an initial class discussion. Teachers might want to offer learners the option to complete their reflection in Step 3 independently, in their own time.

The lesson structure (NORD) presented on the previous page is adapted from Ellis and Gruenbaum's (2023) five-step cycle, embedded in a children's rights perspective for working with picture books that address global social issues. Central to this perspective is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which classifies children's rights into three categories: protection, provision, and participation - referred to as the '3Ps'. Ellis and Gruenbaum (2023) apply this framework as follows:

- Protection: Teachers set up a safe and secure space in a positive, inclusive classroom climate where all learners are respected and learn with and from each other.
- Provision: The teaching ideas provide a structured plan and clear guidelines for learners to engage with an authentic piece of children's literature, in which both the words and pictures create meaning.
- Participation: The teaching ideas facilitate pupils' agency and active participation. The activities offer opportunities for decision-making and respect pupils' right to an opinion.

This approach enables teachers to create a relationship of shared control with their learners and allows learners to exercise their agency and participate fully in their own learning.

As with trauma-informed pedagogy, the focus of the NORD structure lies with the well-being of the learner. For this reason, the suggested teaching ideas do not include drama or role-play or ask learners to imagine how they would feel in Akram's position. Throughout Steps 1-4, selected action verbs from all six levels of Bloom's taxonomy of verbs make learning intentions explicit and visible (Ellis and Gruenbaum, 2022) and encourage the reading of both text and image.

Many questions are intentionally open, welcoming a range of responses to reflect the diverse personal visual and cultural literacies and experiences learners bring to the classroom. The included references to poets, artists, and human-right activists throughout Steps 1-4 offer an additional layer which teachers can choose to explore with their classes. The philosophical nature of certain questions invites critical thinking and thus reflects UNESCO's (n.d.) position that philosophy invites an open debate, contributing to a more tolerant and respectful society.



LESSON #1: RESIST



NOTICE

STEP 1

Look at this double-spread illustration and answer the questions below:

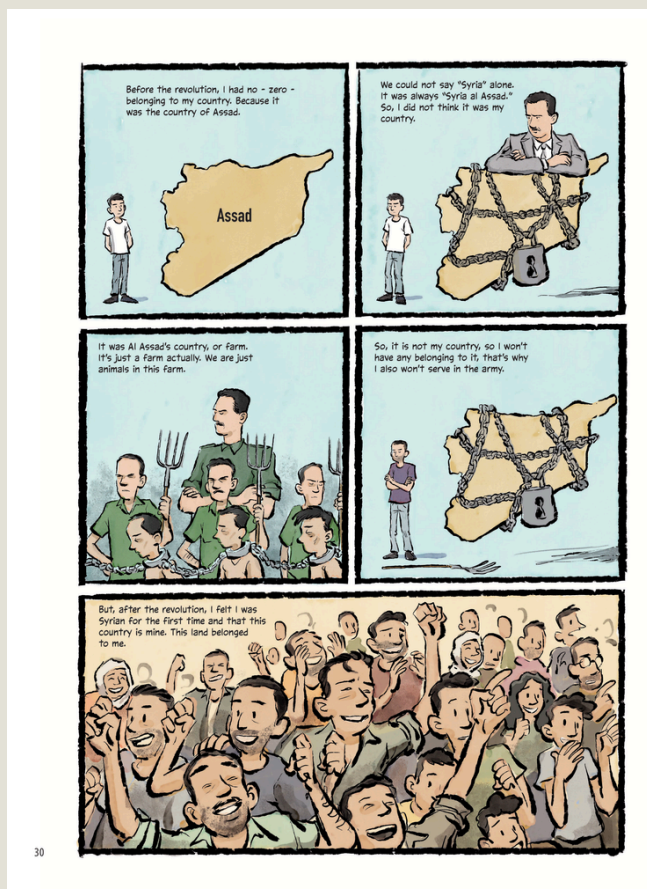
1. What do you see at first glance?
2. Many protesters are raising a clenched fist. What does this gesture symbolise? Explore its cultural and historical origins across different movements and moments in history.
3. Discuss this quote by human rights activist Elie Wiesel (1986): 'There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.' How does this quote apply to Akram and the scene depicted in the illustration? Why do you think Akram describes these days as 'the happiest [days] ever'? How do his words connect to the mood (atmosphere) of the protest?

OBSERVE

STEP 2

Look closely at each of the 5 panels and answer the questions below:

1. **Narrative:** Analyse each panel to establish the narrative of who is doing what to whom.
2. **Perspective & Composition:** Focus on Akram's size, posture and positioning in relation to his country, Assad and its people. Establish the relationship of power and strength. Examine who is in control. How do you know?
3. **Symbolism:** What symbols can you identify across the panels that connect, for example, to themes of home, belonging, and identity. Are there any other themes you recognise?
4. **The Undepicted:** Look at the gap between panels, known as the gutter. Discuss what is not depicted in words and illustrations. Think global and consider, for example, events, people, and how protest starts.



REFLECT

STEP 3

1. Ponder the illustrations (panels) from Page 1. Which one will you remember? Why? Which one would you share with your friends? Why?
2. Personalise the action of protest. Have you or your friends / family members ever protested? What do you think marks the turning point from caring to actively protesting?
3. Return to your answers for Question 4 on what remains undepicted. What would you like to ask Akram?
4. Choose one word and one colour to express what you have learnt so far about Akram and his life.

DEEPEN

STEP 4

HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY

TIMELINE

Create a timeline to complement the set of five panels using historical & geographical archival information. Go to the start of the graphic novel to find dates (years) which can help you create a starting and end point for your timeline.

ART & MUSIC

BELONGING

Akram mentions the sense of zero-belonging and belonging. What sounds and images do you associate with belonging or lack of? Create a visual and/or musical piece of work which expresses Akram's shift from 'zero-belonging' to 'belonging'.

LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Select words from the panels on Page 1 to help create a 3-verse poem which reflect Akram and his life around the time of the protests. If you need inspiration, read the poem 'Why You Don't Riot' by Benjamin Zephaniah written in response to UK riots in 2011. Consider the importance of words, their meaning (e.g. resist and protest versus riot) and the message you want to convey. Spoken Word poetry is meant to be heard, so read aloud to gauge (feel) the flow and impact of your words.

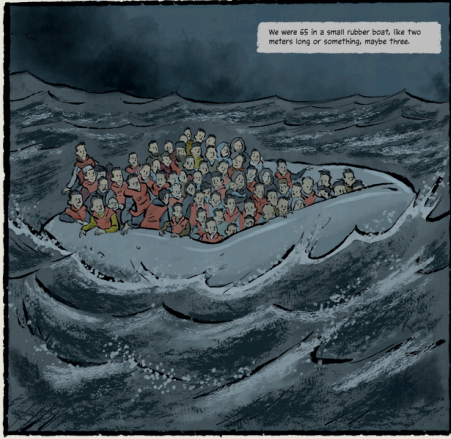
ART & SOCIETY

ART OF PROTEST

Find some sample pages from the book 'Art of Protest: What a Revolution Looks Like' by De Nichols (2021). Then, create a symbol or banner to represent (visualise) Akram's protest. If you need a starting point, read the definition of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.



LESSON #2: SURVIVE



NOTICE

STEP 1

Look at this illustration and answer the questions below:

1. What do you see at first glance?
2. The life-vest Akram is wearing is red-orange. What contrast does this colour offer to the act of fleeing? What cultural meaning does the colour red or orange hold in the context of human resistance?
3. Discuss this quote by artist Wassily Kandinsky (1912) [translated from German]: Blue is the typical heavenly [celestial] colour. The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest. When it sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human." How does this quote apply to the illustration? How does the concept of grief and its different types connect?

OBSERVE

STEP 2

Look closely at each of the 6 panels and answer the questions below:



1. **Perspective & Composition:** Analyse the panels set in the water. Focus on where the sky meets the sea and the positioning of the (rubber) boat. How far or how close are you as the reader? Use your eye-level to assess the perspective of where you are. Do you ever cross into Akram's story? If so, when?
2. **Composition (Shapes & Lines):** Examine the lines and shapes in the first two panels. What contrast do diagonal lines and rounder shapes create for you as the reader?
3. **Symbolism:** Focus on the green wall and green plant in the fourth panel. What themes might they represent? Now, look at Akram, what conflict do you observe?
4. **The Undepicted:** Look at the gap between panels, known as the gutter. Discuss what is not depicted in words and illustrations. Consider news images of people fleeing, surviving and arriving on (European) shores in (rubber) boats. What journey lies ahead?



REFLECT

STEP 3

1. Ponder the illustrations (panels) from Page 1. Which one will you remember? Why? Which one would you share with your friends? Why?
2. Personalise the action of taking a huge risk in life. What do you think marks such a moment?
3. Return to your answers for Question 4 and what remains undepicted. What would you like to ask Akram?
4. Choose one (more) word and one (more) colour to express what you have learnt so far about Akram and his life.

DEEPEN

STEP 4

GEOGRAPHY

THE JOURNEY

Map Akram's journey to Athens using either pen and paper or a digital mapping tool such as Padlet. Research the geographical features of Castellorizo and add your findings to the map. Then, look beyond Akram's path: what other routes (by sea or land) have people fleeing from Syria to Athens followed. Review the routes and discuss what drives the choice of one route over another?

PHILOSOPHY

TWO SEASONS

'In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.' This quote about human suffering and strength is by French philosopher Albert Camus (1954). How do you think this quote relates to Akram? Does the 'invincible summer' lie in all humans? What role do you think agency plays?

ART & GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

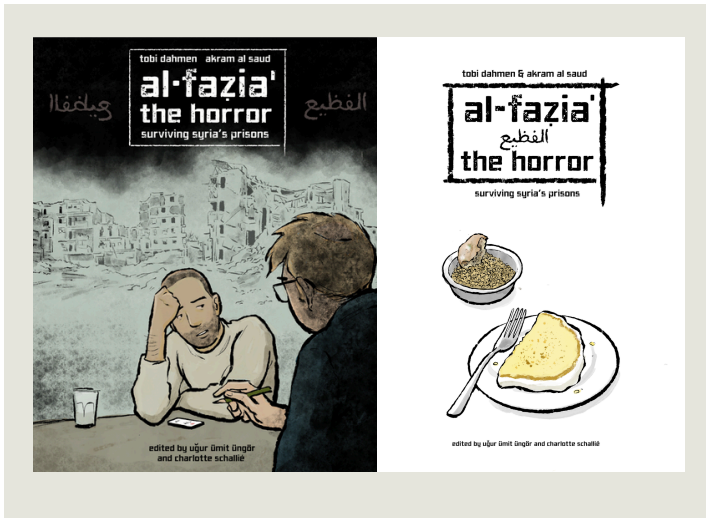
COLOUR BLOCKS

A line from the poem 'Home' by Warsan Shire (2011) reads: 'No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land'. This line reverses the idea that land is safer than water, removes the notion that the parent or carer had a choice and reminds us of the human side of those who flee.

Drawing on Mark Rothko's colour field compositions (rectangular blocks of colour), create a piece of art that expresses Akram's journey by sea in search for safety. Your work, like the line by Warsan Shire, should contribute to fostering inclusion, greater understanding, and humanity towards those seeking refuge.



LESSON #3: TELL



NOTICE

STEP 1

Look at these illustrations (cover & title page) and answer the questions below:

1. What do you see at first glance?
2. What contrast does the bowl of bread with bulgur and the piece of cake express? Think about the type of food, time and location.
3. Discuss this poem by Mascha Kaléko (1977), translated by Andreas Nolte (2010): 'My best poem ever? I wrote it never. From deepest depth uprushed it. I hushed it.' How does it relate to Akram on the cover? Consider the background, his posture and eyes. What role do courage, fear, and guilt play in choosing to tell or stay silent (hush)?

OBSERVE

STEP 2

Look closely at each of the 5 panels and answer the questions below:



1. **Narrative:** Analyse the two wordless panels. What is happening in these two moments? Why is Akram silent? What or who has silenced him? Does the absence of words hinder you in reading the scene? If not, how are you able to read these two wordless panels?
2. **Composition:** Analyse the second and third panel. Focus on Akram to establish the relationship between him and Tobi. Consider size, posture and positioning in relation to Tobi. Observe Akram's hands and arms.
3. **Symbolism:** In the fifth panel, Akram's eyes are closed. What might this signify? Look back at what Tobi says in the fourth panel - how might this connect?
4. **The Undepicted:** Look at the scene in the first panel. How would you describe it? Consider the colour choices, the mood, and the characters. Then, research Ter Apel, the Central Reception Centre for asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Compare your findings with the depicted scene and discuss what is not shown.

REFLECT

STEP 3

1. Ponder the illustrations (panels) from Page 1. Which one will you remember? Why? Which one would you share with your friends? Why?
2. Personalise the action of telling. Has there been a moment in your life when staying silent or telling changed something for you? Has there been a moment when you listening made a difference?
3. Return to your answers for Question 4 and what remains undepicted. What would you like to ask Akram?
4. Choose one (more) word and one (more) colour to express what you have learnt so far about Akram and his life.

DEEPEN

STEP 4

LITERATURE, SOCIETY & ART

STORYTELLING

Paran and Watts (2003:4) describe stories and storytelling as an 'essential part of being human', arguing that people need to tell stories, to share thoughts and experiences, and to hear them, thus joining different worlds to help make sense of the present. Do you think this is true? Do you think it applies to Akram? What icon could you design to encapsulate this human need for story-telling?

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

UNESCO (2013) proclaims that 'Young women and men must be empowered and literate in the issues and concepts of freedom of expression in order to become a discerning citizen in a democracy.' Establish the link between freedom of speech, empowerment, literacy, and democracy. Discuss the role freedom of expression plays in Akram telling his story for you to hear. What conditions ensure freedom of expression and which ones put it at risk? Who is the gatekeeper of freedom of expression? Is it you?

ART

ON MY TERMS

In a recent interview, Akram highlights the importance of being given agency and autonomy to share his story on his terms. He describes sharing his story as 'heavy', adding that 'sometimes, I had to remember things that I didn't want to'. Drawing on this reflection, design a mural that captures Akram's agency, autonomy, and courage to remember and tell. Your mural should encourage passers-by to pause and act with humanity. For inspiration explore the work of Banksy, Tammam Azzam, and Diego Rivera.



LESSON #4: SHOW

NOTICE

STEP 1

Look at this double-spread illustration and answer the questions below:

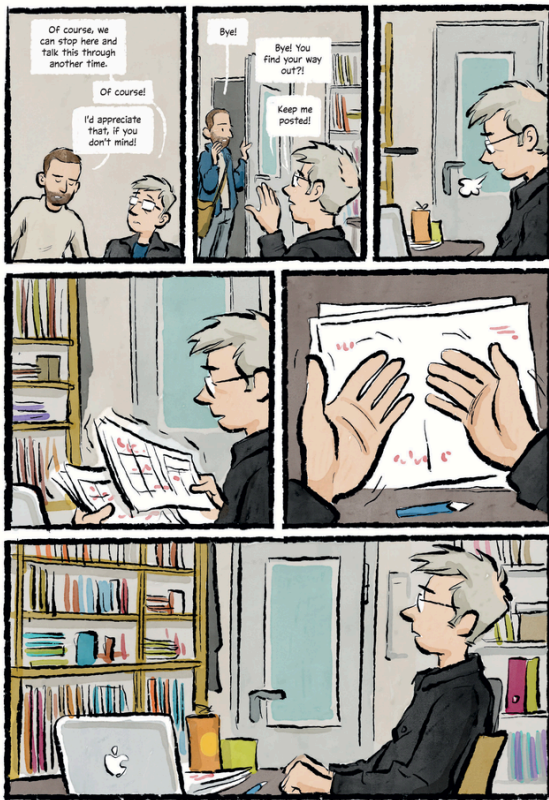
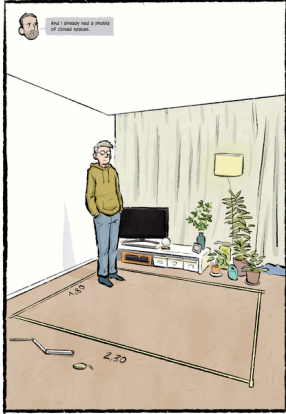
1. What do you see at first glance?
2. What does Tobi offer the reader by mapping out Akram's cell and placing himself within it? What conditions, or lack thereof, does he visualise? What could the grey cloud surrounding Tobi represent?
3. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) describes books as mirrors that reflect our own lives, windows that reveal different ones, and sliding glass doors that draw us into worlds that are not our own. Discuss how this quote could apply to the illustrations. Use your eye-level to assess the perspective of where you are and to shape your answer.

OBSERVE

STEP 2

Look closely at each of the 6 panels and answer the questions below:

1. **Narrative:** Why do you think Tobi placed himself inside the narrative? Consider how his presence affects your distance or closeness to Akram. Does it draw you in as an active participant or keep you as a passive observer? How does his presence contribute to solidarity and prevent prejudice?
2. **Composition & Perspective:** Examine Tobi's size, position and posture in all panels. What do you observe?
3. **Symbolism:** Look at Tobi's hands in the last two panels. Which hand movements (gestures) do you observe? What might they signify? Do you think his hands are shaking?
4. **The Undepicted:** Look at the gap between panels, known as the gutter. What might Tobi have chosen not to show or say from the moment Akram leaves the room? Consider Tobi's journey of listening, witnessing, and showing.



REFLECT

STEP 3

1. Ponder the illustrations (panels) from Page 1. Which one will you remember? Why? which one would you share with your friends? Why?
2. Personalise the action of being part of a story. Has your presence ever made a positive difference to somebody in need? Why was that?
3. Return to your answers for Question 4 and what remains undepicted. What would you like to ask Tobi and Akram?
4. Choose two words and two colours to express what you have learned about the relation between Tobi and Akram.

DEEPEN

STEP 4

PHILOSOPHY

RISK

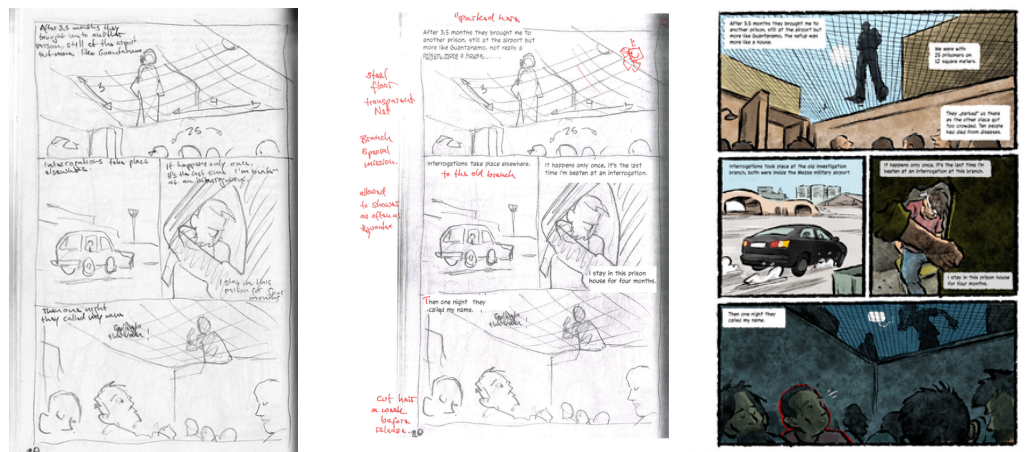
Syrian cartoonist Ali Ferzat said that 'If I am not prepared to take risks I have no right to call myself an artist.' Written in the first person, this is a personal statement with Ferzat speaking about himself and his own life. Discuss the possible risks he is referring to. Do risks really only apply to the risk-taker? What ethical, societal or emotional issues are related to risk? Did Tobi take any risks? If so, which ones?

ART

DRAWING DARKNESS

During a conversation, Akram tells Tobi that he wondered how art could represent the horror in Syria and 'tell stories about massacres, torture, and horrible prisons'.

In 1918, artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, wrote that 'If suffering can be transformed into creativity . . . I want to try it.' Drawing from his own paralysing pain, Kirchner sought to encourage himself to keep creating. In choosing to illustrate Akram's story, Tobi faced a different yet related challenge - how to visualise suffering. Look at his storyboard. How did Tobi manage to draw the darkness that surrounded Akram? How did he protect the reader and Akram while drawing Al-Fazia': The Horror?



Key Terms

Narrative Processes, Visual Symbolism, Composition, and Perspective

Leaning on Serafini's (2009) four key aspects of image interpretation, here is a broader definition of these terms to help with reading the illustrations from this graphic novel.

- Narrative in a picture shows who is doing what to whom or what object at a specific moment in time
- Symbolism refers to visual signs such as icons, colours, objects, and gestures that carry meaning beyond their literal appearance. These signs may draw on cultural traditions and conventions, or convey broader themes and ideas. For example, literally a suitcase is a container for belongings, but symbolically it might suggest themes of displacement, transition, memory, or homelessness.
- Composition refers to the overall layout and design of a picture, including how emphasis is created through lines, shapes, colour, contrast, and the (central) positioning of characters and objects.
- Perspective refers to how the viewer (reader) is positioned in relation to the picture: looking up at a subject might suggest power, viewing at eye level might suggest equality, and looking down on a subject might suggest vulnerability. Size and distance within the picture also play a role in representing power and strength - larger or closer characters might feel more powerful, while smaller or more distant ones might seem weaker or insignificant.

Panels and the Gutter

In the simplest of words, a panel in a graphic novel can be described as a box-shaped container that captures a moment in time (Eisner, 2008). A panel is often defined by a border and functions alongside other panels on a page to form a sequence, a series of events. However, sometimes a page might comprise only one panel - a full-page illustration. The empty space between panels is called the gutter. According to McCloud (1993), the gutter encourages active engagement and supports meaning-making, as the reader must bridge the gap between what has not been depicted, such as action and time.

Shapes, Lines, and the Page

In 'Picture This: How Pictures Work', Molly Bang (1991) set out to answer one question about how we see things. She uses a fairytale to show how different arrangements of shapes and colours can create emotionally visual statements. Gruenbaum (2021) summarises Bang's (1991) ten principles as follows:

- (1) flat horizontal shapes create stability and calm; (2) vertical shapes suggest excitement and activity; (3) diagonals and triangles influence feelings of stability and movement;
- (4) the upper half of a picture on the page conveys freedom and happiness while (5) the lower half suggests sadness and threat; (6) the centre of the page commands most attention;
- (7) objects close to the edges or corners of the page create tension;
- (8) a light page background adds a sense of safety while a dark one unsettles;
- (9) rounded shapes feel protective and secure while pointed shapes feel threatening;
- and (10) the larger the object, the greater the sense of strength and dominance.

Verse

- In poetry a verse or a stanza represents a unit of lines that are connected by an idea or a message. In spoken word poetry, which is performance-based, you might also add movement and a beat.

References

- Bang, M. (1991). *Picture this: How pictures work*. Little, Brown and Company
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. In *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom* (Vol.6, No.3, pp.ix–xi). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Camus, A. (1954). *Return to Tipasa*. In *Lyrical and critical essays*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Eisner, W. (2008). *Comics and sequential art: Principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ellis, G., & Gruenbaum, T. (2022). Reimagining picturebook pedagogy for online primary English language education. In D. Valente & D. Xerri (Eds.), *Innovative practices in early English language education* (pp. 147–170). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ellis, G., & Gruenbaum, T. (2023). *Picturebook lesson series: Exploring social issues*. British Council.
- Gruenbaum, T. (2021). *Exploring picturebooks as a teaching tool in initial primary English teacher education in the Netherlands* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. UCL (University College London).
- Kaléko, M. (1977). *Mein schönstes Gedicht*. In *In meinen Träumen läutet es Sturm* (nachgelassene Gedichte). dtv.
- Kandinsky, W. (1912). *Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei*. R. Piper & Co. Verlag.
- Kirchner, E. L. (1918, May 25). [Letter to Carl Hagemann]. Max Beckmann Archiv. Published in H. Delfs et al. (Eds.), *Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, Nay... Briefe an den Sammler und Mäzen Carl Hagemann* (No. 147). Hatje Cantz. (Original work published 2004)
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. HarperCollins.
- Nichols, D. (2021). *Art of protest: Creating, discovering, and activating art for your revolution*. Candlewick Press.
- Paran, A., & Watts, E. (2003). *Storytelling in ELT*. TESOL Publications.
- Serafini, F. (2009). Understanding visual images in picturebooks. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Talking beyond the page: Reading and responding to contemporary picturebooks* (pp.10–25). Routledge.
- Shire, W. (2011). *Home*. In *Teaching my mother how to give birth*. Flipped Eye Publishing.
- The Guardian. (2013, August 19). *Ali Ferzat, cartoonist in exile*.
- UNESCO. (2013). *Freedom of expression and public order: Young women and men module*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (n.d.). *World Philosophy Day*. UNESCO.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Wiesel, E. (1986, December 11). *Hope, despair and memory* [Nobel lecture]. Nobel Prize Organization.
- Zephaniah, B. (2011). *Riot* [Poem]. Commissioned for Channel 4 following the 2011 UK riots.

Further Resources

- Boghossian, E. (2025, June 24). 'Visualizing survivors' voices': On the power of graphic novels to share personal narratives of mass violence. *Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives*. <https://visualnarratives.org/blog-syria-spui25-visualizing-survivors-voices-2025/>
- Dahmen, T., & Al Saud, A. (2026). *Al-Fazīa': Das Grauen*. Carlsen Verlag.
- Dahmen, T., & Al Saud, A. (2026). *Al Faziya الفطية – The Horror; Surviving Syria's Prisons*. In Uğur Ümit Üngör, & Charlotte Schallié (Eds.), *Al Faziya الفطية – The Horror*. University of Toronto Press.
- DeCoste, K. (2025, May 7). *Graphic novel shares Syrian survivor's story of imprisonment*. Uvic News. <https://news.uvic.ca/2025/graphic-novel-shares-syrian-survivors-story-of-imprisonment/>
- Zelovic, L. (2026, February). *How to draw darkness? A story from Syria* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FL5jx6dSZk>



SURVIVOR-CENTRED
VISUAL NARRATIVES

2026

AL-FAZIA': THE HORROR
BY TOBI DAHMEN & AKRAM AL SAUD

THE END



AKRAM AL SAUD
TOBI DAHMEN
KEES RIBBENS
JENNIFER SAUTER
CHARLOTTE SCHALLIÉ
UĞUR ÜMIT ÜNGÖR
ANDREA WEBB

We gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful curriculum development contributions of Dr. Tatia Gruenbaum, whose expertise significantly enriched the depth and clarity of this graphic narrative.

Licence

Life in Moments Educational Materials for the Secondary Classroom: Visual Literacy & Cross-Curricular Teaching Suggestions (English Edition) © 2026 by Tatia Gruenbaum for The Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives (SCVN) Project is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All illustrations are copyrighted as stated in the front matter of Al-Fazia': The Horror by Tobi Dahmen and Akram Al Saud (2026).