Visual Theories
Sensory and Perceptual

• Sensory (Gestalt and Constructivism)

• Direct or mediated images are composed of light objects that attract or repel us.

• The brain sees – the visual cues of color, form, depth, and movement – but not how the mind considers them.

• Perceptual (Semiotics and Cognitive)

• Concerned with the meaning that humans attach or associate with the images they see.
Sensual Theories of Visual Communication

- Gestalt & Constructivism
Gestalt= form or shape

• Max Wertheimer (1910)

• Perception is a result of a combination of sensations and not of individual sensory elements – visual perception is a result of organizing sensory elements or forms into various groups.

• “the whole is different from the sum of its parts”

• The eye merely takes in all the visual stimuli and the brain arranges the sensations into a coherent image
4 Fundamental Groupings or Laws

- Discrete elements within a scene are combined and understood by the brain through a series of four fundamental principles or groupings.

- Similarity
- Proximity
- Continuation
- Common Fate
Similarity

- states that, given a choice by the brain, you will select the simplest and most stable form to concentrate

  - Squares, circles and triangles
Similarity

- *Similarity* occurs when objects look similar to one another. People often perceive them as a group or pattern.

- The example (containing 11 distinct objects) appears as single unit because all of the shapes have similarity.
  - Unity occurs because the triangular shapes at the bottom of the eagle symbol look similar to the shapes that form the sunburst.
• When similarity occurs, an object can be emphasized if it is dissimilar to the others. This is called abnormaly.
Proximity

- States that the brain more closely associates objects close to each other than it does two objects that are far apart
• *Proximity* occurs when elements are placed close together. They tend to be perceived as a group.
• The fifteen figures on the right form a *unified whole* (the shape of a tree) because of their proximity.
Continuation

- The brain does not prefer sudden or unusual changes in movement of a line – it seeks as much as possible a smooth continuation of a line.

- Continuation occurs when the eye is compelled to move through one object and continue to another object.
• Continuation occurs in the example, because the viewer's eye will naturally follow a line or curve. The smooth flowing crossbar of the "H" leads the eye directly to the maple leaf.

• We tend to assign objects to an entity that is defined by smooth lines or curves
Common Fate or Closure

• The brain will mentally group items all pointing in the same direction – items pointing in a different direction than most of the whole create tension

• *Closure* occurs when an object is *incomplete* or a space is not *completely enclosed*. If enough of the shape is indicated, people perceive the whole by filling in the missing information
Although the panda is not complete, enough is present for the eye to complete the shape. When the viewer's perception completes a shape, closure occurs.

Law of Closure:
Objects grouped together are seen as a whole. We tend to ignore gaps and complete contour lines. In the image above, there are no triangles or circles, but our minds fill in the missing information to create familiar shapes and images.
• The brain classifies visual material in discrete groups.

• What we see when looking at a picture is modified by what we have seen in the past and what we want to see
Constructivism

- The viewer constructs the scene with short-lived eye fixations that the mind combines into a whole picture

  - Researchers found that the content, size, and placement of photos on a newspaper page are more important than whether the image is printed in color
In order to conduct research on graphic design attributes for print and online publications, subjects were asked to wear headsets that recorded eye movements and time spent viewing various elements. A typical eye path shows the starting point with a dot and the sweeping right, left, up, and down movements as the subject was attracted by graphic elements presented on a computer monitor.
Perceptual Theories of Visual Communication

- Semiotics & Cognitive
Semiotics=study or science of signs

• A sign is simply anything that stands for something else

• What is not a sign?
  ▫ Almost any action, object, or image will mean something to someone somewhere
  ▫ For something to be sign, the viewer must understand its meaning
3 Types of Signs

- Iconic
- Indexical
- Symbolic
Iconic Signs

- To be like or to seem as something
- Iconic signs most closely resemble the thing they represent

- The most common examples are found in photographs and motion pictures – meant to be true representations of what they depict
Indexical Signs

• Have a logical, commonsense connection to the thing or idea they represent rather than a direct resemblance to the object
Symbolic Signs (most abstract)

- Symbols that have not logical of representational connection between them and the things they represent –
  - symbols more than the other types of signs, have to be taught
Roland Barthe’s - Chain of Association - 4 codes

• Metonymic
• Analogical
• Displaced
• Condensed
Metonymic

• Is a collection of signs that cause the viewer to make associations or assumptions
Analogical

- A group of signs that cause the viewer to make mental comparisons
Displaced

- Those that transfer meaning from one set of signs to another
Condensed

- Several signs that combine to form a new, composite sign

  - Within the culture the message is intended for, the condensed code has relevant meaning. But for those outside that culture, the images often are confusing, random and without purpose
Cognitive Theory

- A viewer does not simply witness a light-structure object – but actively arrives at a conclusion about the perception through a mental process
Mental Activities that affect visual perception - Carolyn Bloomer

- Memory
- Projection
- Expectation
- Selectivity
- Habituation
- Salience
- Dissonance
Memory

- Is basically our personal link with all the images we have ever seen
  - mnemonics
Projection

- A person’s mental state of mind is thus “projected” onto an inanimate object – projecting personal interpretation and meaning
Expectation

• Having preconceived expectations about how a scene should appear – often leading to false or missed visual perceptions
Selectivity

• Unconscious, automatic act by which large numbers of images enter and leave the mind without being processed – the mind focuses only on significant details within a scene
Habituation

• To protect itself from over stimulation and unnecessary pictures, the mind tends to ignore visual stimuli that are a part of a person’s everyday, habitual activities
Salience

- A stimulus will be noticed more if it has meaning for the individual.
Dissonance

- Conflicting imagery – television programs that combine written and spoken words, multiple images, and music run the risk of creating visual messages that the viewer cannot understand because of all the competing formats
Culture

- Images which span ethnicity, economic situation, place of work, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical disability, geographic location, and the entire composite of a person’s life