Chapter 5. The Sensual and Perceptual Theories of Visual Communication
Sensual Theories of Visual Communication

- Gestalt & Constructivism
Gestalt = form or shape

- Max Wertheimer (1910)
- “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

- 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
Proximity

- States that the brain more closely associates objects close to each other than it does two objects that are far apart
Continuation

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

- 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
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
Perceptual Theories of Visual Com

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 or representational connection between them and the things they represent –

- symbols more than the other types of signs, have to be taught
Images-Collection of Signs

- In verbal language the narrative is linear – verbal language thus considered discursive.

- Pictures are presentational and thus do not follow linear order – necessarily.
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

- 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