

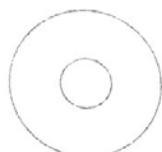
Language of Vision

"Design history" should be understood not as a catalogue of styles or a canon of formal rules, but as a complex enterprise that engages political, economic, and intellectual culture. The renewed interest in history has provoked an emerging interest in theory, a concern for identifying general principles that inform the practice of design. The body of theory established within the modernist pedagogical tradition is intrinsically hostile to an historical approach to graphic design. In our profession, as in architecture and the fine arts, the move toward greater historical awareness is linked to a revision of modernism.

The institution of graphic design emerged out of the modern art movement in the early twentieth century and was consolidated into a profession over the last fifty years. Its theoretical base comes out of avant-garde movements and organizations such as Constructivism, de Stijl, and the Bauhaus. Elements of these critical, reform-minded practices were codified by art schools after World War II. Many design textbooks, produced across the history of the profession, reproduce a core of theoretical principles based on abstract painting and gestalt psychology. Gyorgy Kepes's *Language of Vision* (1944), Rudolph Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* (1954), and Donis Dondis's *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (1973) contain recurring themes in modern design theory.

Pervading these works is a focus on *perception* at the expense of *interpretation*. "Perception" refers to the subjective experience of the individual as framed by the body and brain. Aesthetic theories based on perception favor sensation over intellect, seeing over reading, universality over cultural difference, physical immediacy over social mediation. Modern design pedagogy, an approach to form-making validated by theories of perception, suggests a universal faculty of vision common to all humans of all times, capable of overriding cultural and historical barriers. A study of design oriented around interpretation, on the other hand, would suggest that the reception of a particular image shifts from one time or place to the next, drawing meaning from conventions of format, style, and symbolism, and from its association with other images and with words. While modern design theory focuses on perception, an historically and culturally self-conscious approach would center on interpretation.

Kepes, Dondis, and Arnheim each employed "gestalt psychology," a theory developed by German scientists during the 1920s. For all three of these writers, as for numerous others working in this tradition, design is, at bottom, an abstract, formal activity; text is secondary, added only after the mastery of form. A theory of design that isolates visual perception from linguistic interpretation encourages indifference to cultural meaning. Although the study of abstract composition is unobjectionable in itself, design's linguistic and social aspects are trivialized or ignored when abstraction is made the primary focus of design thinking.

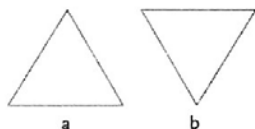


Mexican wearing a
sombrero

In *Art and Visual Perception*, Arnheim defined his term “visual concept” as a mental image of an object that is built out of purely visual experiences of it from many angles. In a humorous tone, he explained that this picture of a Mexican is not a valid representation, because it does not refer to the true “visual concept” of a Mexican. In other words, it requires textual information—

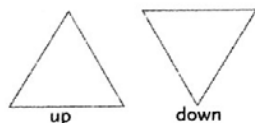
a caption—in order to be understood.¹ But what indeed would qualify as the “visual concept” of a Mexican? The sombrero is already a cultural sign, a tourist’s cliché. The “visual concept” of a Mexican would consist of more stereotypes, gathered not only from one’s experience of real Mexicans, but from movies, television, and books; a big moustache, a bright poncho, leather boots.

Arnheim’s example was intended to be funny. He aimed to extend the premise of his joke, however, to experience at large, suggesting that one’s understanding of the world is assembled out of purely “visual” perceptions, with language playing the role of a subservient filing system for sense data. In the practice of daily life, however, perception is filtered by culture. A concept of an object is both visual (spatial, sensual, pictorial) and linguistic (conventional, determined by social agreement). The concept of a thing is built up from conventional views and attributes, learned from education, art, and the mass media.



Arnheim explained that although these two triangles are geometrically identical, they are perceived as different shapes due to the shift in orientation; one is stable, the other unstable. The change is owed to the psychology and physiology of the brain. Triangle B is “unstable,” however,

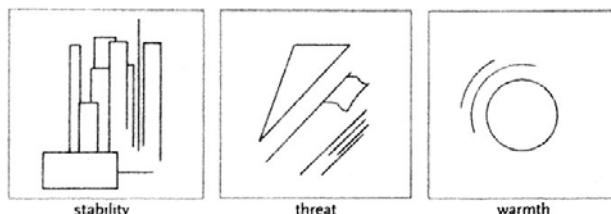
only if it is removed from any situation of use and judged as purely abstract form, as in the contextual vacuum of a psychological test or a basic design class, where one is asked to look at the shape “for itself.” If the triangle appeared in a geometry book, its rotation would be described mathematically. If the triangle were used as an arrow, its pointing function would make its “instability” irrelevant.



Basic design courses routinely turn culturally meaningful images into abstract shapes. Type, photographs, and simplified object drawings are cropped, angled, colored, and textured into pleasing arrangements. Abstraction is the first lesson for many design students. It remains a primary

assumption behind later work, a staple design “idea.” A design theory oriented toward cultural interpretation rather than universal perception would consciously address the conventional, historically changing aspect of words and images in design problems.

The term *visual language* is a common metaphor in modern design textbooks: a “vocabulary” of design elements (dots, lines, shapes, textures, colors) is organized by a “grammar” of contrasts (instability/balance, asymmetry/symmetry, soft/hard, heavy/light). This theory was elaborated in Johannes Itten’s Basic Course at the Bauhaus, initiated in Weimar in 1919. A similar program was continued by Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy at Dessau. Books like *Language of Vision* by Gyorgy Kepes, a teacher at the New Bauhaus in Chicago in the 1940s, further developed the theory of design as a “language” founded in abstraction. Kepes wrote, “Just as the letters of the alphabet can be put together in innumerable ways to form words to convey meanings, so the optical measures and qualities can be brought together...and each particular relationship generates a different sensation of space.”² Kepes’s visual language has a purely sensual meaning.



In her *Primer of Visual Literacy*, Donis Dondis explained that each of the abstract compositions at left has a universal “meaning” that appeals directly to human perception.³ Yet the brain of a medieval villager would interpret these pictures differently

from the brain of a contemporary New Yorker, who might see lower Manhattan in the design for “stability.” Dondis replaced concrete, culturally relative meaning with a vague, universalizing mood.

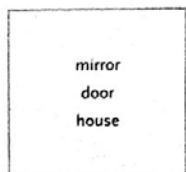


square

Perhaps Dondis’s ideal of “visual literacy,” the capacity to perceive and produce abstract compositions, depends on a prior foundation in *verbal* literacy. In a study by the anthropologist A.R. Luria, inhabitants of a remote Russian village were asked to identify drawings of abstract shapes. Some of these villagers knew how to read or write while others did not.

Those who were literate interpreted the images as abstract geometric shapes, and they identified them by name: circle, square, triangle. The nonliterate villagers, on the other hand, associated the drawings with objects from their everyday environments: a circle might be a plate, bucket, watch, or moon; a square could be a mirror, door, or house. Luria’s research suggests that the ability to see visual forms as “abstract,” i.e. disengaged from a context of social use and

figurative communication, is a sophisticated skill rather than a universal faculty of perception. It requires the rational, analytical thought processes which characterize literate cultures.⁴



mirror
door
house

The term “visual language” is a metaphor. It compares the structure of the picture plane to the grammar or syntax of language. The effect of this comparison is to segregate “vision” from “language.” The two terms are set up as analogous but irreconcilable opposites, parallel realms that will never converge. Theories of visual language and the educational practices based on them close off the study of social and linguistic meaning by isolating visual expression from other modes of communication.

In the interest of interpretation over perception, “language” can be understood inclusively rather than exclusively. Words, images, objects, and customs, insofar as they enter into the process of communication, do not occupy separate classes, but participate in the culturally and historically determined meaning that characterizes verbal language. One of the most influential theorists of this model is Roland Barthes, whose writings in the 1950s and 60s have had a continuing impact on literature, architecture, and film. In graphic design, Herb Lubalin is famous for using words as pictures and pictures as words, and for juxtaposing images and texts to produce new content. He saw no strict barrier between visual and verbal communication.

If Lubalin and other protagonists of the “big idea” approach to design worked intuitively, why, then, does theory matter? Many educators and designers avoid explicit principles in favor of intuitive, pragmatic “common sense.”⁵ But this anti-theoretical approach is still theoretical. Any position is conditioned by intellectual structures, however vaguely they are defined. By refusing to analyze its own prejudice, pragmatism reinforces the main bias of modernist theory: it suppresses the conscious analysis of design’s place in history and culture. Common sense pedagogy limits discussion to the immediate formal and practical success of a project, making the broader social context of design seem irrelevant and secondary.

Theory can function both constructively, as a tool for generating design ideas, and analytically, as an evaluation method. Hanno Ehses, director of the visual communications program at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, has formed an educational method based on classical rhetoric, the vocabulary used by the ancient Greeks to produce persuasive language. Ehses has applied terms that normally describe writing, like “pun” or “metaphor,” to graphic design, giving students a way to recognize and then produce visual/verbal “arguments” and figures of speech. Victor Burgin and other artists have used semiotics and psychoanalysis to study images from painting, film, and advertising. By employing theory to connect rather than disengage visual and verbal expression, we can intensify and direct the cultural meaning of our work.

1 Rudolph Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

2 Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944), 23.

3 Donis Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 106.

4 Luria’s study is discussed in Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982), 49-52.

5 Paula Scher, “Back to Show and Tell,” *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, 4, 1 (1986).