GESTALT AND PHOTOGRAPHY[*]

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My first introduction to Gestalt Theory was in a graduate course on learning theories that was part of a Ph.D. program in Educational Psychology. We were introduced to a number of interesting theories, most of which were more theoretical than practical. One, however, did attract my attention and I immediately saw applications of it to my teaching.

"The whole is different and greater than the sum of the parts." Surreal photograph of Arnheim (at the right) and Zakia (at the left) taken in 1988 during a visit of Arnheim at the R.I.T. by an assistant of Zakia accidentally putting a roll of film in the camera that she had exposed at a zoo.

This initial interest in Gestalt applied to learning theory set me on a search for more information. I soon discovered the prolific writings of Professor Dr. Rudolf ARNHEIM who was teaching at Harvard University at the time. His books provided me with insight into the application of Gestalt principles and into understanding some of the compositional features in works of art and in art education. I began to see an opportunity to relate these same principles to photography and to photographic education.

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[*] The photographs mentioned in this article can be seen on www.google.com. Click on images after you enter the photographer's name.

I had been teaching a course in photographic composition and decided to introduce Gestalt by showing how figure/ground, proximity, similarity, continuation, and closure can be found in many photographs. To show this, I used photographs considered classic, photographs that have been published in many books and have stood the test of time – photographs now considered works of art. I was not sure how the students would react to this new material for there was no precedence for it in any photographic book with which I was familiar. To my delight, the students were not only accepting, but were also enthusiastic about it. They began applying the principles to their photographs and even to talking about and critiquing photographs.

The ability to articulate the compositional features of their photographs peaked their interest into learning more about Gestalt. To accommodate their interest, I began using ARNHEIMs book, *Art and Visual Perception*, as a text and some of his other books as references. This worked out very well and we had a successful first year. Students in other programs in the school began to find out about this new course material and before long I found students from related disciplines of graphic design, printing, media studies, advertising and communications electing to take the course.

Gestalt

To introduce the students to the overall idea of gestalt, the idea that the whole is different than the sum of its parts, I would project a picture of an early mosaic of the face of a religious prophet on the screen. Then I would point out the obvious – that out first perception was that of the face of a man in the mosaic, not the individual tiles that made up the face. The face was different from, and more than the sum of all the individual tiles. Further, I would call attention to how carefully each tile was arranged so that they

Fig. 1 Section of *L'Urne Mysterieuse*, 1774 by Pierre CRUSSAIRE
(Metropolitian Museum of Art, NYC)

would easily group and be seen as a mosaic of a man. I would then show a few more mosaics followed by some collages by PICASSO and others. To connect it directly to photography, I would show them some photographic montages by Man RAY, Barbara MORGAN and others. To reinforce the learning, I gave the students an assignment in which they had to gather up some of their scrap photographs to cut and paste into a montage that would provide a good gestalt. (If I were teaching in this digital age, I would still give the same assignment and I am sure the students would have a much easier time creating their photomontage.)

Figure-Ground

The 1915 illustration of two profile faces and a goblet by the Danish psychologist, Edgar RUBIN, is used to introduce the concept of figure-ground. (It probably has its roots in pictures such as the 1774 line etching by the French artist Pierre CRUSSAIRE titled, "L'Urne Mysterieuse"; Fig. 1. It shows a woman in thought, sitting aside a large urn. On either side of the urn are two imbedded profile faces.)

In the RUBIN illustration, I point out the importance of the contour line and how it can shift back and forth, depending on what is seen as figure. Often we are unaware of the ground until it is called to our attention. RUBIN's illustration also provides the opportunity to introduce the idea of common contour or shared contour. One can find clever and creative use of shared contours in the etchings of M.C. ESCHER. ARNHEIM referred to such competing contours as contour rivalry.

The importance of common contour can be seen in Pete TURNER's photograph, "Push" (Fig. 2). The photograph is taken from a position that aligns the top of a trashcan on a sandy beach with the horizon line at a far distance. The horizon line and the top of the trashcan share the same contour. Since they share the same contour, they appear to share the same spatial plane. The visual effect is one of ambiguity. The top of the trash can appears to be at the distant horizon while the lower part of the can is seen as being close and on the beach – visually correct but physically impossible. To further underscore the importance of common contour, and to add a little humor, I show RUBIN's 1921 double profile outline of a face of man and woman trying to kiss but not able to because the lips share the same con-

Fig. 2 *Push* by Pete TURNER (Original in color)

tour and are unstable, flipping back and forth (Fig. 3).

Aaron SISKIND's photograph, "Chicago" (1949), is a wonderful example of the symbiotic relationship between figure-ground (positive-negative space as artists call it). The areas and shapes in the cropped photograph of a large letter R tipped on its side, are echoed in the white areas of the ground (Fig. 4).

The graphic symbol of Taoism, representing the yin/yang shows common contour and figure-ground in perfect harmony. Color examples are used to further demonstrate the interdepend-

Fig. 3 *Kiss* by Edgar RUBIN I921

ence of figure-ground. A red area surrounded by a similar background color will look desaturated compared to the same red color against a green background. This demonstrates that color can be controlled to some extent by the color of the background or adjacent color. Color does not exist alone, it needs a context, and it needs a background color. This is one reason why color, as a visual experience, is so difficult to specify. It is also the reason that painters, e.g. TURNER and MATISSE, were such great colorists.

Fig. 4 Contour tracing of Aaron SISKIND's *Chicago*, 1949
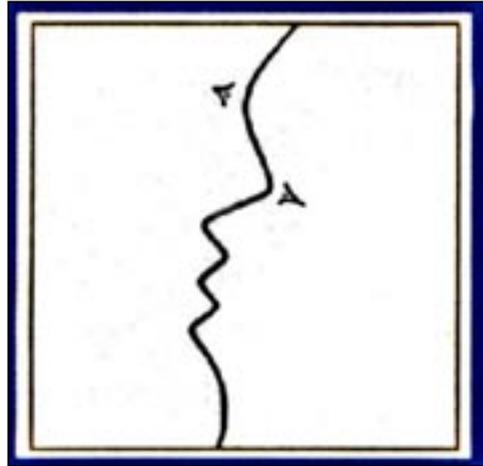
They knew how to arrange color pigments to produce the visual colors they wanted. They knew how to juxtapose one color against another to create the color gestalt they envisioned. Color is a chameleon and artists can take advantage of this by producing colors beyond he physical restraints of their pigments. In a somewhat exaggerated proclamation, DELACROIX once remarked, "Give me mud and I will make the skin of Venus out of it, if you will allow me to surround it as I please." (ZAKIA 2002, 4)

Gestalt Principles

Two important gestalt principles are similarity and proximity. Visual elements that are near each other will be seen as belonging and grouped; those that are similar will also be seen as belonging together. The elements can be similar in size, shape, color, texture, position, direction, movement or meaning. A striking example of this is the 1914 photograph of three young farmers by the German photographer, August SANDER (Fig. 5).

The two men at the right of the photograph are seen as a pair because of their nearness to each other. The man at the left seems separated from them until similarity comes into play. All three men have similar postures and expressions, which brings them together as a group. To add further interest to the photograph, some dissimilarity is included. The two men at the right have their canes held vertically and their hats tipped in a similar fashion. The man at the left holds his cane at an angle and tips his hat in the opposite direction and dangles a cigarette from his mouth.

Photographs having a similar arrangement of three subjects can be found in the "Sea Urchins" by the American photographer Anne BRIG-MAN, "Eroded Sandstones, Colorado" by William H. JACKSON and in the French photographer Henri Cartier BRESSON's "Three Nuns".

Fig. 5 Contour tracing of *Jungbauern Westerwald*, 1914 (Young Farmers) by August SANDER

Continuation

Visual elements that require the fewest number of interruptions will be grouped to form continuous straight or curved lines. Edward WESTON's "Nude 1936" is an excellent example of the continuation of curved lines. According to his son Cole, "Nude 1936" was his dad's favorite photograph. The model for the photograph was his wife, Charis, who sits with one leg tucked under her body and the other upright with her tilted head resting on it. Both arms embrace the legs in an oval shape with hands joined together at one knee. Charis' face is not visible, just the top of her tilted head, with the hairline where the hair is parted. A line tracing of the contours of the figure shows a lovely and rhythmic continuation of line (Fig. 6). That the hairline coincides nicely with the continuation of the contour of the left arm was not planned. According to Charis, she ducked her head to avoid looking into the bright sun and when

Fig. 6 Contour tracing of *Nude 1936*, by Edward WESTON

she did WESTON told her to hold the pose. WESTON in a fraction of a second must have experienced what turned out to be a beautiful composition, a perfect gestalt.

Continuity can be seen in a number of other important photographs as well as in a series of still photographs taken by Eadweard MUYBRIDGE titled, "Women Jumping Over Chairs – 20 Lateral Views."

Closure

Nearly complete familiar lines and shapes are more readily seen as complete (closed) than incomplete. Not being able to complete such lines and shapes can cause tension; forming closure provides completion and reduces tension. In MICHELANGELO's painting of "The Creation of Man" (Fig. 7), the distance between the finger of God the Creator and the finger of man is critical. Each time we view the painting, we are invited to form closure by completing the action. Increasing the distance between the fingers would lessen the probability of closure. The word "interval" can be used to describe the distance between the fingers. In doing so, students can relate the importance of this visual interval to that in music – the interval between two notes. MOZART said at one point, that he wasn't so much interested in notes as the space between them. (ZAKIA 1980, 99).

Fig. 7 *The Creation of Adam*, by MICHELANGELO

The importance of the interval is evident in Henri CARTIER-BRESSON's famous photograph, "Place de l' Europe, 1932" (Fig. 8). It shows a man leaping over a large puddle of water in a flooded street and his reflection in the water. In the photograph, the man is suspended in space until the viewer visually completes the action and forms closure. BRESSON's decisive moment is dependent on the interval or what we might refer to, in this photograph, as the decisive distance.

We take for granted the interval between the letters in a printed word, not giving
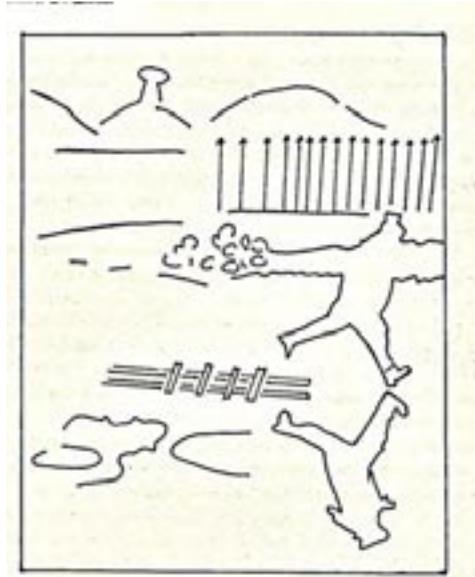
Fig. 8 Contour tracing of *Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1932 by Henri CARTIER-BRESSON

much thought to the spacing, which is a must for a person designing the letters. Several years ago a friend from Queensland Australia interested in photography and gestalt sent me a relevant humorous cartoon. It showed a person standing in front of a psychotherapist's office, about to enter but pausing with a puzzled look. The name plate on the office door read,

PSYCHO THE RAPIST.

Summary

The concepts of gestalt and gestalt principles are used in teaching students the design and composition of photographs; figure-ground, common contour, proximity, similarity, continuation, closure. Important photographs by Henri CARTIER-BRESSON, August SANDER, Aaron SISKIND, Pete TURNER and Edward WESTON are used as examples. These are the same principles Rudolf ARNHEIM showed operating in important paintings and sculptures and that Gyorgy KEPES and Roy BEHRENS found operating in graphic design.

Zusammenfassung

Für das Studium von Design und Komposition in der Photographie hat die Vermittlung von gestalttheoretischen Konzepten und Erkenntnissen Bedeutung, etwa des Figur-Grund-Prinzips, der Gestaltgesetze der Nähe, Ähnlichkeit, der Fortsetzung, des Schließens. Wichtige Photographien von Henri CARTIER-BRESSON, August SANDER, Aaron SISKIND, Pete TURNER

und Edward WESTON werden in diesem Beitrag als Beispiele dafür angeführt. Es handelt sich hier um die gleichen Prinzipien, deren Wirken Rudolf ARNHEIM bereits an wichtigen Gemälden und Skulpturen demonstriert hat und deren Bedeutung für das graphische Design Gyorgy KEPES und Roy BEHRENS aufgezeigt haben.

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