Gestalt and Graphic Design: An Exploration of the Humanistic and Therapeutic Effects of Visual Organization
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> Posters on the streets … could disseminate socially useful messages, and they could train the eye, and thus the mind, with the necessary discipline of seeing beyond the surface of visible things, to recognize values necessary for *an integrated life…*[1]

Writers and historians in the field of graphic design have long acknowledged a connection between Gestalt psychology and the origins of this field.[2] In "Writing Lessons: Modern Design Theory" (1988), Ellen Lupton describes an emergent relation between Gestalt psychology and the practice of design in and around the Bauhaus in the 1920s. She states that: "Gyorgy Kepes recognized the usefulness of the new psychology, and he directly incorporated it in his *Language of Vision*."[3] Lupton argues that around this period, Gestalt psychology established itself as a dominant approach to visual communication in Europe and America, gaining importance as a significant form-giving methodology, both in Berlin and at the New Bauhaus, Chicago (where Kepes was employed as a tutor in 1937). Indeed, a close inspection of the *Language of Vision* reveals a dedication to the three pioneers of Gestalt psychology: Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Kohler, and Max Wertheimer (on the inner sleeve). Furthermore, an edited collection of essays by Gyorgy Kepes, titled *Sign, Image, Symbol* (1966), includes a contribution from Rudolf Arnheim, a renowned art critic who studied with Kohler and Wertheimer at Berlin University between 1923 and 1928.[4]

While this intellectual connection between Gestalt and Graphic Design is irrefutable, the overall assessment of Gestalt's effect on the discipline is more open to question. Many of the Gestalt applications to graphic design from the 1930s onward are viewed (by those in design practice and education) as outmoded, and in this respect Lupton's interpretation is typical. Indeed, the fundamental principles of Gestalt are widely characterized in negative terms, especially once postmodernism had been widely accepted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In an edition of *Design* from 1968, for example, Corin Hughes-Stanton exalts the rise of postmodern design at the expense of "old" design thinking. He argues that "The essential

1 Gyorgy Kepes, *The Language of Vision,* 1944, (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 221 [emphasis added].

2 See Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller. "Visual Dictionary," in *The ABCs of [triangle, square, circle] the Bauhaus and Design Theory* (London: Princeton University Press, 1993); Roy Behrens, "Art, Design and Gestalt Theory," *Leonardo* 31:4 (1998): 299–303; or Hal Foster, "The Bauhaus Idea in America," in *Albers and Moholy Nagy: from the Bauhaus to the New World,* ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2006).

3 Ellen Lupton, "Writing Lessons: Modern Design Theory" (paper presented at the graduate seminar taught by Rosemary Bletter, City University of New York Graduate Center, 1988), http://www. designwritingresearch.org/index. php?id=47 (accessed May 15, 2010): 1.

4 Kepes's reliance on Gestalt methods is also revealed through his use of Gestalt diagrams throughout *The Language of Vision* (1944), which demonstrate his interest in the early optical experiments of Gestalt psychologists.

point is that the new design thinking is free-wheeling, and, unlike the philosophy which gave coherence to the Bauhaus or Modern school of design, it has not had, nor does it show signs of having, any dogmatism towards actual design forms."[5]

This paper argues that such a rejection of Gestalt, however, is based on a binaristic, reductive view of the early discipline. Gestalt is critiqued for its abstract and universalistic terms and for its implicit support of the idea of autonomy, whereby human perception and visual forms are accorded relative independence from the vagaries of socio-historical concerns.[6] Lupton, for example, proposes that a Gestalt approach to visual communication is predicated on "the isolated study of abstract form."[7] This paper pursues a different line of critical analysis, offering a historical relation of works that are now generally neglected, returning to the pioneers of the discipline as part of a timely reorientation of Gestalt thinking. The paper counters the negative impressions of Gestalt theory with detailed historical work, revisiting the primary texts of its early proponents and highlighting its development into a recognized therapy. At a time when graphic design is engaging actively with notions of interactivity and audience participation, Gestalt theory offers productive ways of thinking about possible structures for orchestrating positive human experiences.[8]

In particular, the paper draws conclusions about the therapeutic aspirations of the discipline; for if Gestalt has been deployed largely as a dispassionate theory or methodology within the field of graphic design, this deployment has been at the expense of its original aspirations toward making people, in society *feel* better. As I demonstrate in this paper, Gestalt theory is interested in the *quality* of human experience even at the very moment when it tries to *quantify* that experience. Consequently, this paper challenges the oversimplified caricature of Gestalt as a "scientific," "objective," and "abstract" theory, encouraging heightened awareness of significant distinctions between its psychological-scientific and philosophical-theoretical aspects. In the process, the paper offers a wider range of conclusions about Gestalt's contribution to design methodology, ultimately arguing that the therapeutic values of Gestalt approaches have been overlooked in favor of its formalist critique.

The Laws of Visual Organization

There is little doubt that Gestalt theory has been used to devise laws of visual perception within the fields of Fine Art and Graphic Design, and that the Bauhaus— and its associates—provide a focal point for its development as a critical methodology within these disciplines.[9] In *The ABCs of [triangle, square, circle] the Bauhaus and Design Theory* (1993), Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller describe how Gestalt theories became central to design education after World War II and discuss how Gestalt psychology was actively used by Gyorgy Kepes, a designer who taught at the New Bauhaus in Chicago between 1937 and 1943. According to Lupton and Miller, Kepes used Gestalt

5   Corin Hughes-Stanton, "What Comes After Carnaby Street?" *Design* 230 (February 1968), 123–5

6   See Dempsey Chang et al., "Gestalt Theory in Visual Screen Design: A New Look at an Old Subject." *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series* 26 (2002), 5–12; Alex White, *The Elements of Graphic Design* (London: Allworth Press, 2002), and Lois Knight, "The Rules of Gestalt Theory and How to Apply it to Your Graphic Design Layouts." *All Graphic Design.* http://www.allgraphicdesign.com/graphicsblog/2008/03/04/the-rules-of-the-Gestalt-theory-and-how-to-apply-it-to-your-graphic-design-layouts/ (accessed May 16, 2010).

7   Ellen Lupton, (1988), Op. Cit., 1.

8   This view is in keeping with contemporary developments in neuroscience, where critics have argued for the continuation of the Gestalt experiment as a basis for studying human perception and behavior. See Walter H. Ehrenstein, Lothar Spillmann, and Viktor Sarris, "Gestalt Issues in Modern Neuroscience," *Axiomathes* 13:3–4: 433–58.

9   See Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* 1926 Reprint (New York: Dover Publications, 1979); Gyorgy Kepes, *The Language of Vision* 1944 Reprint (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), Josef Albers. *Interaction of Color* 1963 Reprint (New York: Yale University Press, 2006).

principles to establish a systematic approach to visual organization, preferring visual forms to have a timeless "function" rather than a specific social "meaning."[10]

Lupton and Miller say little more about the full range of individual laws themselves, as their analysis is focused on Gestalt's interest in figure-ground relationships. They describe how Gestalt psychology identifies "active positive figures" (e.g., typographic forms or words) and the way in which they emerge only on "passive negative grounds" (e.g., white space or a blank page). Lupton and Miller state that: "Gestalt psychology offered design *a grammar of frames*, demonstrating the way a figure emerges against a neutral ground, which itself recedes as the necessary but invisible conditions of perception" [emphasis added].[11]

The description of Gestalt figure-ground principles soon gives way to an interpretation of their consequences for the history of Graphic Design. As the quotation reveals, a forceful argument develops about the "grammar" and "language" of post-war design, and how the laws of Gestalt provide a scientific basis for the development of its trans-historical formal and objective preoccupations (or rules). Lupton and Miller insist on the universal(-izing) tendencies of Gestalt psychology, which are perceived as producing common laws of visual perception and, hence, as establishing repeatable, ahistorical methods for making things "to be seen."[12] The two describe how Kepes drew "heavily" on this universal, acultural aspect of Gestalt psychology, foregrounding the use of transcendent visual percepts over and above timely and culturally sensitive visual motifs.

Gestalt psychology is thus presented as a discipline that encouraged post-war designers to believe in the spontaneous emergence of good form (within the viewing subject, at least, because designers do have to work toward its formation). It is suggested that Gestalt psychology promotes an understanding of the visual domain that operates as a consequence of spontaneous brain functions; indeed, the capacity to view images is not a skill acquired through the accumulation of lived experience, enculturation, and learning (as a semiotic approach would argue). The viewer no longer needs to know something; she simply needs to *see*, and then the "good" Gestalten (or design) will emerge. Lupton and Miller conclude that "Gestalt theory challenged this belief [that an ability to make sense of visual data] … is a learned skill, asserting instead that the brain spontaneously organizes sense data into simple patterns: Seeing is a process of ordering."[13]

This notion of the "spontaneity" of vision seems to pose a problem for Lupton and Miller, who interpret such a belief as a type of ahistorical transcendence. Indeed, in an earlier account, Lupton characterizes Gestalt psychology as working with an independent and universal version of perception—one that is free from the vagaries of time, person, or place.[14] Within these terms, Gestalt is

10 Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, (1993). Op. Cit., 30.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ellen Lupton, (1988). Op. Cit., 1.

problematic because it does not admit a more complex view of how people engage with images; it does not embrace a conception of *meaning* or *reading* and is only interested in the *seeing* of forms. Lupton states that: "According to Gestalt theory, the brain spontaneously orders and simplifies sense data into structured, wholistic patterns [sic] … Like the 'grammar' of design, Gestalt psychology characterizes vision insofar as it can be quarantined from the context of everyday experience."[15]

At this point, distinguishing between different approaches to Gestalt thinking would be useful. While it is widely recognized as a form of Experimental psychology within the field of Graphic Design, it is also acknowledged—by those practicing in the field of Psychology—as an experiential mode of therapeutic relations that is organized around the interactive and real-time engagement of the client-counsellor situation. As Rudolf Arnheim explains in his seminal text, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954), there is a need to distinguish between Gestalt theory, Gestalt psychology, and Gestalt therapy.[16]

In *Art and Visual Perception*, Arnheim adopts a dismissive attitude toward therapeutic developments in the Gestalt discipline, arguing that: "The principles of my psychological thinking and many of the experiments I shall cite below derive from Gestalt theory—a psychological discipline, I should probably add, which has no relation to the various forms of psychotherapy that have adopted the name."[17] Even so, the distinction between theory and therapy is helpful, indicating alternative readings for the role of Gestalt in Graphic Design. In addition to an experimental science and psychology, for example, Gestalt can also be seen as a humanistic methodology that is actively engaged in studying the therapeutic effects of formal relations that transcend the two-dimensional plane. According to this proposition, the notion of integration is not simply about presenting coherently designed forms in the visual domain; it is also about the effect of the world of objects on the subjective disposition of human beings (or the audience-object/designer-client relation).

This line of enquiry is pursued by the psychologist, Fritz Perls, who is largely responsible for taking Gestalt toward a therapeutic direction. In 1922, Perls was living and working in Berlin. Looking back on this experience in the 1960s, Perls notes that "Starting afresh. Most Exciting. We We! I enlarge the non-family world. We: bohemians, off the beaten path. Actors, painters, writers. Creating a new world. Bauhaus, Brücke, Dadaism…"[18] Although he did not become fully established as a Gestalt psychotherapist until he moved to the Esalen Institute in 1964, Perls had clearly started exploring the therapeutic potential of Gestalt techniques in America in the 1930s and 1940s. These techniques came to be formalized in publications such as *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy* (1973), and involved a determined focus on the here-and-now, an encouragement toward self-awareness through physical and

15 Ibid.
16 This is a view amplified by Mitchell G. Ash, who argues that the philosophical and conceptual development of Gestalt came before the experimental psychology methods of 1910 and after. It was based on the principles of Husserl's phenomenology before it was based in the discipline of psychology. See *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture 1890–1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity* (1995) Reprint (Cambridge: Open University Press 1998): 108.
17 Rudolph Arnheim *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* 1954 Second Edition (London: University of California Press, 1997)
18 Fritz Perls, "A Life Chronology." In *The Gestalt Therapy Page,* http://www.Gestalt.org/fritz.htm (accessed November 4, 2010).

sensational aspects of the body, and an enhanced appreciation of one's relation (as a part) to the whole. All of which is a far cry from the monolithic accusations of abstraction, cultural indifference, and a refusal to produce meaning within design discourse.

Initially, this link between Perls and a therapeutic turn within Gestalt thinking might seem tenuous and arbitrary. However, a closer reading of the *Language of Vision* reveals how this alternative view of Gestalt techniques amplifies the overlooked aspects of Kepes's "grammatology." In particular, the work of Perls echoes the humanistic tendencies of the latter's design methodology, in that his approach demonstrates an interest in a stable social subjectivity alongside a formal visual grammar. In his primer on design, Kepes argues that the organization of the visual field corresponds to the organization of the socio-economic plane. Kepes argues for the experiential as well as the experimental dimensions of design; integration and synthesis are conceived in terms of living, thinking processes that aspire to introduce a sense of wholeness within the human subject, as well as on the typographic page.[19] Writing during World War II, he identifies "the urgent need of an equilibrium" in a way that applies to the human spirit as much as to visual forms.

The Pioneers of Visual Perception

Roy Behrens is one of the few critics who has challenged this dominant interpretation of Gestalt as ahistorical and blind to the socio-cultural aspects of design. He defends Gestalt from Lupton's accusation of "indifference to cultural meaning" and challenges the argument that its problematic character resides in the way in which it "isolates visual perception from linguistic interpretation."[20] However, he does not engage in direct intellectual exchange with established accounts (e.g., the key text by Lupton and Miller); instead, he brings an entirely different set of concerns into play. Behrens depicts the Gestalt discipline in terms of its pioneers and disciples, arguing for the significance of its theory in terms of an historically situated community. For Behrens, Gestalt is a set of living relations, a community populated by individuals actively engaged in psychology, intellectual criticism, and science.[21] He focuses, for example, on the relationship between the main protagonists of early Gestalt psychology—Koffka, Kohler, and Wertheimer—and traces their connections with other scientists, artists, and writers in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Arnheim and Kepes. In the process, he overlooks the philosophical constitutions and methodological dispositions of this broadening Gestalt community.

However, revisiting the writings of those who first inspired Kepes's interest in visual perception reveals a highly nuanced and shifting view of Gestalt principles.[22] In an overview of his contribution to the discipline, for example, Max Wertheimer describes how Gestalt psychology is interested in studying "thought-processes," particularly those that lead to "new solutions."[23] Although it looks

19 Gyorgy Kepes (1995), Op. Cit.,126.

20 Roy Behrens (1998), Op. Cit., 2.

21 Ibid., 1–2.

22 Both Ellen Lupton and Roy Behrens draw on Hans Wingler's account of Gestalt's influence on the Bauhaus, although Lupton also consults Willis D. Ellis's collection of edited original texts titled *A Sourcebook of Gestalt Psychology* 1938 Reprint (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999): 71–88.

23 Max Wertheimer *Productive Thinking* 1945 Reprint ed. Michael Wertheimer (London: Tavistock Publications 1961), 237.

24 Ibid.

for *laws* of problem solving, Gestalt pioneers believe that thinking is ultimately a messy business, influenced by "human emotions" and "attitudes."[24] Indeed, problem solving is not exclusively an orderly and rational exercise, but one characterized by "living thinking processes."[25] A purely logical approach to problem solving, Wertheimer argues, strips these living, thinking processes "of all that is alive in them."[26] Rather than quarantined from everyday life, Wertheimer identifies human subjects who are completely bound up in "the context of everyday experience."[27] Against this drama of emotional turmoil, Wertheimer develops an argument for the productive value of finding oneself in a position to anticipate outcomes within the moments one inhabits; the therapeutic effect of an emerging "Gestalten" is viewed against a backdrop of individual confusion and disorientation.

In *Productive Thinking* (1945), Max Wertheimer describes how people's everyday relations are unsteady and argues that people are driven by a desire for order and clarity in an object-world full of strains, stresses, disturbances, and ambiguities. He then proposes a model of idealized practices, formulating a problem-solving methodology for those seeking a stronger sense of decisiveness (such as psychologists, educators, artists, and laymen). Wertheimer wants to help people overcome this tendency toward chaos and temporary associations; he wants to organize their world and experiences in ways that will support them. Indeed, the book is characterized by an overriding awareness of the uneasy contingency of situations and people's individual struggle to stay on top of things; it offers a narrative of social and personal uncertainty. The aim of the book is to show the reader how to see things more clearly, how she or he might start to introduce structure into the world and make purposeful connections between things. He states that: "For real understanding, one has to re-create the steps, the structural inner relatedness, the requiredness."[28] In essence, he offers a model for strategic thinking; the book proposes learning from our (immediate) experiences. Furthermore, the indication is that some of these observations are made in retrospect; only by looking back on "confusion" can we stand a chance of recreating a movement toward internal order. Is it any wonder, then, that a social communicator such as Kepes wanted to implement some of these ideals? It is a treatise on thinking clearly oneself and helping others to develop such clarity.

Indeed, this reading of Gestalt offers up a humanistic and purposefully situated theory, one that is much less mechanistic and universalizing than the interpretation of Lupton et al. Wertheimer says that: "the function of thinking is not just solving an actual problem, but discovery, envisaging, going into deeper questions."[29] Although Gestalt is bound up with the idea of *experiments* and finding out, of generating knowledge and even explicit laws, rarely is it suggested that these laws operate in exclusion of other types of thoughtful practice. Indeed, Wertheimer is critical of "logic,"

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 238.
29 Ibid., 141.

for example, and the way in which it places the world into causal relations. He challenges the practice of making connections (a priori) before the world of object-relations has demonstrated a fuller potential toward other kinds of structural relations and interconnections (a posteriori). He is all for grasping a situation as it happens and making sense of it afterwards, concluding that: "Central to the theory is the transition from piecemeal aggregation, superficial structure, to the objectively better or adequate structure."[30]

Revisiting Wertheimer's work, we can start to appreciate the way in which the laws of Gestalt are intended to offer summaries of human tendencies. They are offered tentatively at first, based on observations of subjects within the controlled conditions of a laboratory; they are not simply abstract rules to be followed or imposed. One of the major laws for Gestalt, for example, is the Pragnanz principle. According to Wertheimer's son, this term refers to a tendency whereby "the organization of the field tends to be as simple and clear as the conditions allow."[31] This organization, he argues, is undertaken by a human subject — specifically in relation to the object-world that he or she encounters. This world is not constituted as always already autonomous and self-organizing, merely operating in relation to the viewer. In "Laws of Organization in Perceptual Form," (1923), Max Wertheimer is very much present in the text, describing himself standing by a window. He clearly indicates that he cannot order the world exactly as he pleases but that he is subject to a tendency in human perception (and the arrangements of his everyday situation) to seek out wholes rather than fragments. "When we are presented with a number of stimuli, we do not as a rule experience 'a number' of individual things, this one and that and that," he notes. "Instead, larger wholes, separated from and related to one another, are given in experience; their arrangement and division are concrete and definite."[32]

In *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935), Kurt Koffka continues this theme of the shifting relations of perception, describing how both the viewing subject and the object-world are characterized by "shifts towards a minimum of energy."[33] Building on a fundamental belief in the Pragnanz principle, Koffka then introduces another law of Gestalt—one that Lupton et al. describe in terms of figure-ground relationships. He describes how human perception tends not only toward simplicity, but also toward three dimensions; indeed, we see space filled before we see surfaces and empty planes.[34] However, the emergence of a space filled is ultimately predicated on other conditions in the object-world. Another law of perception states that people see the whole before the part; for example, the page overrides the dot.[35] Koffka describes how "the point is not sufficient to break the homogeneity of the well-defined unit in the visual environment."[36] This suggests that the forces of uniformity and similarity overcome the other forces at work on the human subject, who is able to resist—for a while at least—the

30   Ibid., 243.

31   Ibid., 239.

32   Max Wertheimer, "Laws of Organization in Perceptual Form." In *A Sourcebook of Gestalt Psychology* (1938) 71–88. Reprint Ellis, W., ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999), 87.

33   Kurt Koffka *The Principles of Gestalt Psychology* 1935 Reprint (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 250.

34   Ibid., 115.

35   Ibid., 149–50.

36   Ibid., 149.

37   Ibid., 154.

force of non-homogenous elements. Equally, proximity produces the same kind of forces as homogeneity; things that are brought closer together (or closer to the viewer) "overwhelm" the "discontinuous" and "non-unified" forces.[37] Finally, closure has a strong effect on the viewer. Closure, states Koffka, leads to a consideration of the foreground over the background, which tends to bleed away from view. Indeed, circles are an idealized form—they have "good shape"—because they contain the world and thus hold the viewer in place.[38]

Clearly Koffka presents an argument for the control and management of such forces (of closure and homogeneity), although there is a strong indication in Koffka's and Wertheimer's writing that the same elements can lead to an experience of dislocation and interruption. While these teachings of Gestalt might advocate the production of an integrated worldview and promote a holistic attitude toward visual perception, in the process of discovering the rules, the teachers are forced to acknowledge the possibility of a different world order. In this respect, the theory is simultaneously dogmatic and problematizing. Gestalt operates with a preference toward completion and closure in the visual field, but in the process of mapping its isometric relations, there is an acknowledgement of shifting states of awareness and organization (a "before" and "after" mapping). Implicitly, there is a place for non-relations, for the non-emergence of forms, and for other kinds of forces to come into play. Indeed, Koffka discusses how Gestalt is interested in "the discovery of the forces which organize our environmental field into separate objects."[39] This is the focus of his research, yet this does not preclude a wider range of forces—cultural and historical—from entering the picture. These early Gestalt psychologists see themselves as operating within a specific discursive arena, countering one type of understanding with another. Koffka et al. have a strong sense of locating an underbelly of experience that has been overlooked by prior modes of understanding the world; they are advocating the "psychophysical."

In this way, the Gestalt pioneers ask the reader to pay attention to the *quality* of objects and their interrelations, proposing that changes to "in and to" object-worlds lead to changes in human experience. States Koffka, "Functionally, space is never purely visual."[40] This point is significant because it highlights the way in which the laws of Gestalt have been misappropriated and/or misunderstood in the history of graphic design. If Kepes uses them as a way of explaining "the laws of visual organization," this is not to say that Gestalt offers itself to be appropriated only in this way; this use is merely one interpretation by the designer. While Kepes uses the basic laws of Gestalt to structure his own designs, there is no evidence to suggest that the psychologists themselves affirmed this particular appropriation of their ideas. As the text reveals, Koffka is clear that you can play around with the forces of visual

38   Ibid.
39   Ibid., 153.
40   Ibid., 122.

perception and that life experiences are never simply *visual*. (At the very least, they are also thoughtful and behavioral.) He argues that Gestalt psychology sees mind, matter, and life as interconnected, offering particular solutions for those who would attempt a fuller integration of their moment-to-moment experience. There is no evidence to suggest that this integration is permanent and unconditional; indeed, it is usually described in terms of contingent and shifting relations. "Before a fact can become a fundamental fact, a setting must have been prepared for which all facts take their more or less prominent places," says Koffka.[41] This statement suggests that Gestalt is open to a wide range of contexts, even while it asserts the specific context of the subject-object bond of formal relations.

Koffka's discussion acknowledges, for instance, how a familiarity with forms has a bearing on how they are seen. Although Gestalt theories say that simplicity is more easily read than familiarity, acquired learning—or cultural familiarity—nevertheless has a part to play in our engagement with objects. While *looking* at things is bound up in a complex set of relations, some aspects offer themselves up for easy viewing—as though they adopt formations, can be self-consciously structured, and encouraged to work with the dynamic organizational tendencies of human perception. According to Koffka, "Figures less simple…, however familiar by previous acquaintance and however much practiced in special experiments, were never completed in the slightest."[42] Thus, we are reminded that Gestalt is not simply a discipline characterized by a set of laws, but a series of observations located in experiments with human subjects. It is a "living thinking" discipline that aims to counter metaphysical abstractions and draw conclusions about the power of shape, color, contrast, and repetitions on the viewing experience.

Strongly conveyed in all these writings is that figure is constantly being lost because the ground is changing; in fact, the only consistent aspect of visual organization made apparent is people's requirement for order and stability within their unsettled field of relations.[43] Gestalt is offered as a set of observations that have the potential to provide techniques for stability. It presents a range of possible anchorage points to help the human subject, who may be lost in something, to find himself or herself again: simplicity, 3D (or "visual depth"), homogeneity, familiarity, similarity, and proximity. It is a method of solving the problem of a potentially chaotic world and life experience—one that encourages us to look back and assess the "requiredness" of our journey and to identify a point of departure and arrival. Gestalt invites the human subject to develop some kind of awareness of the original conditions and their structural relation to the outcome. And the forces at work are not only formal; these are merely the forces that early Gestalt psychologists tend to focus on.

Gestalt as Therapy

In *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture* (1995), Mitchell G. Ash

41 Ibid., 125.

42 Ibid., 147.

43 A good example of this concession to lost ground and an individual's inability to remain in control of what is perceived is Max Wertheimer's discovery of the phi phenomenon in 1912. This phenomenon knows no object; it is merely an illusion of movement created at the interstices between a viewing subject and an unstable, uncertain, and partially occluded outer world. For a fuller discussion, see Robert M. Steinman, Zygmunt Pizlo, and Filip Pizlo, "Phi is not beta and why Wertheimer's discovery launched the Gestalt Revolution" *Vision Research* 40 (2000): 2257–64.

describes how Gestalt psychology has more than one aspect to its development. In addition to its character as a natural science (previously outlined), Gestalt psychology harbours a philosophical side as well. Ash outlines Wertheimer's interest in Philosophy, how he was "inspired" by the work of Christian von Ehrenfels and Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*.[44] He describes how Koffka studied Philosophy at the University of Berlin and how his interest in daily life and detailed observations of the everyday world led him to pursue the emergent discipline of Psychology. Turning away from the abstract formulations of the metaphysicists (who were all mind and no body), Koffka states that: "I was too realistically minded to be satisfied with pure abstractions."[45] Indeed, it is only Kohler who trained exclusively as a scientist, studying Mathematics and Science before moving to Berlin in 1907 and pursuing a career in Experimental psychology.[46]

Ash describes how Wertheimer, Koffka, and Kohler worked on laboratory-based experiments together in Berlin in 1910 and 1911.[47] While these experiments related to physical perception and human behavior, they were informed by concepts that drew on a range of philosophical dispositions.[48] States Ash, "Theirs was a dispute about how to construct a science of sensation, based on deeply conflicting philosophical commitments, styles of theorizing, and investigative strategies."[49] They were united, however, by a belief that there is more to seeing than passive internal responses to external stimuli. They agreed that "structured wholes" are presented to consciousness via a complex viewing relationship; it was never a matter of action and response. (Their argument was for humans as mediators, for humans being *in* the world). The viewer is seen to be an active component in the process of visual perception, constructing figures out of a total perceptual field. As Ash highlights, for these Gestalt pioneers, "the entity that results from the knowledge process depends in many respects not only on the object, but also on the observer."[50]

Ultimately, as Ash demonstrates, the early psychologists took Gestalt in different directions—a clear indicator that there is more to Gestalt than scientific objectivism and cultural indifference. Wertheimer, for example, moved toward cultural anthropology and ended up writing a treatise on "creative thinking." Indeed Kepes himself could also be understood as taking Gestalt in particular directions. At turns, he works with Gestalt as a natural science, reproducing Kohler's diagrams and Koffka's pronouncements on the visual impact of proximity and similarity on the viewing subject.[51] At such times, he is consciously building toward a methodology for design—one predicated on visual organization and plastic grammar. At other moments, Kepes works with the philosophical undercurrents of Wertheimer's approach, focusing on the effect of the contemporary social world on the human subject and asking: Is there more to life than this?[52] Kepes displays great attentiveness, concern, and care for the plight of humans, noting that:

44 Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture 1890–1967*, 108.
45 Koffka, 108.
46 Ibid., 108–9.
47 Ibid., 120–1.
48 The Gestalt psychologists undertook motion and light studies, for example.
49 Mitchell G. Ash, (1988) Op. Cit., 102.
50 Ibid., 124.
51 Gyorgy Kepes, (1995), Op Cit., 44–54.
52 Ibid., 12–4.

One cannot bear chaos in one's psychological space any more than one can bear chaos of the optical impacts of geographical space. Man organizes the optical chaos by forming meaningful spatial wholes. So does he organize the chaos of his psychological space, by forming visual images of his desires, temporary equilibriums in the perpetual conflicts of pleasure and reality.[53]

Kepes advises artists and designers about the need to generate therapeutic social effects, helping people overcome cultural chaos and disorder via the production of appropriate visual forms.[54] He makes specific references to the living situations of his time, including the rise of commodity culture,[55] the prevalence of "inhuman conditions,"[56] the ubiquity of "social contradictions,"[57] and contemporary beliefs about war and economic crises.[58] Indeed, *The Language of Vision* is actually an argument about design as therapy; it is a manifesto for social change through positive visualization. In this regard, Gestalt is being practiced as a therapeutic philosophy and not simply as a natural science predisposed toward structure and order.[59] Kepes states that:

Today, the dynamics of social events ... have compelled us to exchange a static iconography for a dynamic one. Visual language must thus absorb the dynamic idioms of the visual imagery to mobilize the creative imagination for positive social action, and direct it toward positive social goals.[60]

In "Writing Lessons: Modern Design Theory" (1988), Lupton admits that: "Kepes's book thus begins with the isolation of visual form from its linguistic and cultural contexts, and culminates with a hopeful reintegration [sic]."[61] Yet, she ultimately settles for an established teleology, arguing for the progressive evolution of a visual language and grammar in graphic design. She says that, "Despite this final synthesis, however, abstraction remains the guiding force of Kepes's theory [sic]."[62]

Such a reading ultimately underplays Kepes's humanistic approach and, in particular, the degree to which it was informed by the same principles of Gestalt. Historians and critics in the field of Graphic Design are advised to question this automatic dependence on a reading of Gestalt as always-already a science and as an ahistorical and acultural approach to visual communication. This interpretation overlooks the experiential concerns of Gestalt—specifically its interest in human subjectivity and the production of positive and helpful visual effects.

In 1929, one of Wertheimer and Kohler's "brightest students" was invited to lecture at the Bauhaus; among those in attendance was Paul Klee.[63] Between 1930 and 1931, Count Karlfried von Durckheim ran a course on Gestalt at the same institute; this time

53   Ibid., 194.
54   Ibid., 194–6.
55   Ibid., 194.
56   Ibid., 202.
57   Ibid., 204.
58   Ibid., 12.
59   Similarly, Michael Golec argues for the hybrid nature of Gyorgy Kepes's *Language of Vision*, seeing the primer as an amalgamation of Charles Morris's semiotics and positivism, the logic of Rudolf Carnap, and the theoretical writings of Hermann von Helmholtz on vision (to name but a few). Michael Golec, "A Natural History of a Disembodied Eye: The Structure of Gyorgy Kepes's *Language of Vision.*" *Design Issues* 18:2. (Spring 2002): 3–16.
60   Ibid., 14.
61   Ellen Lupton (1988), Op. Cit., 1.
62   Ibid.
63   Brett D. King and Michael Wertheimer. *Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Theory* (2005) Reprint (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 158.
64   Ibid., 158.

65 See Julia Moszkowicz, "Phenomenology and Graphic Design Criticism: A Re-evaluation of Historical Precedents" (PhD dissertation, University West of England, 2009).

66 Frederick Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, acknowledges these hybrid origins of the discipline. He describes the intellectual climate of Berlin in the period in question. See Frederick Perls quoted on, "Frederick Perls: A Life Chronology," *Gestalt Therapy.* http://www.Gestalt.org/fritz.htm (accessed May 23, 2010).

Wassily Kandinsky and Josef Albers were in attendance.[64] In 1954, Gyorgy Kepes designed the cover for Rudolph Arnheim's text, *Art and Visual Perception.* These events are evidence of a strong and undeniable link between Gestalt psychology and the teaching of art and design in the early part of the twentieth century. However, what they fail to disclose is the diversity of ideas and approaches within the discipline. Gestalt is not simply a science of visual organization (with fixed laws) but also a set of concepts with philosophical and therapeutic dispositions toward the state of human subjectivity.[65]

Conclusion

I've argued in this paper that there is a strong and undeniable link between Gestalt psychology and the teaching of art and design in the early part of the twentieth century, specifically in the work of Gyorgy Kepes in the *Language of Vision*. Gestalt is a complex discipline with diverse philosophical, scientific, and social orientations. As indicated, both Wertheimer and Koffka had studied Philosophy and read the work of the phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl. Indeed, Gestalt psychology emerged at an exciting historical moment, when a diverse range of voices, interests, and disciplines collided.[66] The work of Gyorgy Kepes can be usefully re-read in the context of this collision, whereby Gestalt can take many turns: scientific, humanistic, mechanistic, and therapeutic.

The diverse individuals, institutions, and ideas—discussed under the nomenclature of Gestalt—are linked by a shared interest in experimenting with perception and making direct observations from human experience. Despite these connections, however, Gestalt has been consistently characterized—within the field of Graphic Design History and Theory—as a unitary science with abstract and unchanging laws. As this paper has demonstrated, such a reading of Gestalt is grossly oversimplified; it is an interpretation that is predicated on the practice of taking Gestalt theory out of its original (and ongoing) contexts. As Roy Behrens and Mitchell G. Ash have shown, Gestalt is a populated and variegated theory—one that has humanistic as well as experimental aspects. This paper has added to this re-appraisal of Gestalt by revisiting and re-reading the texts of its early pioneers, specifically Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka. Their work demonstrates a strong interest in social, historical, and therapeutic relations, in a way that overturns the dominant reading of Gestalt as an "autonomous" scientific theory. As the work of Gyorgy Kepes further reveals, Gestalt is about people (not just forms) and human tendencies (not just spontaneous brain functions). If only it were reinterpreted in this way...