Sidebar – In Practice

**Color and Contrast**

You were previously introduced to gestalt design theories, explaining that how we group visual elements leads to determining their meanings. Examining the roles of color and contrast provides additional insight into the ways design elements can be harnessed to improve the effectiveness of visual communications.

Consider the gestalt principle of “good figure” (also called the law of Pragnanz) meaning that when a figure is closed, appearing whole, it is easier to perceive. When confronted with complex images, we tend to seek paths for easier and swifter comprehension. This coincides with the gestalt law of simplicity: people will prefer things that are simple, clear, and ordered, taking less time to process.

This advertising poster for the film Trance uses a visually engaging image that’s aesthetically appropriate to its target audience. It communicates clearly with its relative consistency of color choices, helping the viewer to perceive the face as a whole despite the intervening abstracted shapes (O’Connor, 2013, p. 88).



**Caption:** Color choice helps simplify this complex image for the viewer.

Illustrating the law of similarity, the use of contrast, along with color, can help the eye group together shapes that share some level of meaning. In the figure below, color and contrast act as catalysts in redefining perceived groupings. Inspired by the popular song “She’s Broken,” stylized quotes appeared on Pinterest and on tee shirts, mugs, wall art and other products. The example shown carries letters spelling “SHE’S BROKEN” reversed out on a black background, with the letters “HE’s OK” amplified in red.



**Caption:** The gestalt principle of similarity is illustrated in this image where color guides the groupings of letters.

In a visually-congested world, the effectiveness of visual communications requires both engaging desired viewers and meeting the communication objectives. The strategic use of color and contrast, along with gestalt principles, can support both aesthetics *and* function.