Attention is allocated to figural cues (not figures) under conditions of uncertainty
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Question: Is attention automatically drawn to figures?

Nelson and Palmer (2007)
Figural cue: Familiar shape (Peterson & Gibson, 1991)
Size: LARGE! (~ 18° W x 20° H)
Target Discrimination/Detection
80ms Target Exposure
Display Target SOA: 0, 150, 250, 500ms
12 Target Locations

Background

Difference: Smaller displays & Low spatial uncertainty
Results: No advantage for targets on figure/figural cue
With target certainty, subjects strategically attend to area that includes figure and ground?

What draws attention: Figure or Figural Cue?

If perceived figure:
RTs faster for targets on regions perceived as figures vs. grounds (regardless of convex or concave)

If convex regions perceived as figures
RTs faster for targets on convex regions perceived as figures vs. concave regions perceived as grounds

If the figural cue of convexity:
RTs faster for targets on convex regions vs. concave regions (regardless of whether convex = figure)

Conclusions
Attention is NOT automatically allocated toward the figure.
Attention is allocated toward the figural cue only with target uncertainty and large displays
Perhaps driven by statistical regularity
Small effect; can be overcome by strategic attention with target certainty

Figures are important. They are the objects in the visual field, but they don't automatically draw attention.