

Renzo Canestrari

Gestalt Psychology in my Scientific Training and at the Start of the School of Bologna

My dear ex-pupils Anna Arfelli and Giuseppe Galli have asked me to talk about the moment in history when my scientific training met Gestalt psychology.

The First Congress of Italian Psychologists after the War

We can start in the year 1951, when, after graduating in Medicine, I met the Italian psychologists who had gathered in Rome for the first congress after the War. For me, this congress was extremely important since the research disciplines which had survived the war and indeed grown in the immediate post-war period, were all well represented: psychomotility (Ponzo, Canestrelli, Valentini); the psychology of disadvantaged groups (Banisconi); work psychology (Marzi, Metelli); animal psychology (Zunini); genetic child psychology (Dalla Volta); clinical psychology (Gozzano, Canziani); perception (Musatti, Kanizsa, Metelli, Gemelli, Masucco-Costa).

I, myself, was particularly attracted to this last topic: for several years I had been working at the Institute of Physiology, under the supervision of Prof. Pupilli, on questions linked to sense organs (i.e., thresholds, the law of Weber, optic-geometrical illusions, etc.), so I listened with great interest to the talk given by Musatti on chromatic perception and to Gemelli's talk on the influence of personal factors on perceptive organization.

The Meeting with Kanizsa

The encounter with Kanizsa that took place in 1953 at the first Italian congress of Clinical Psychology was a decisive factor in my choice of the Gestalt approach. I and my colleague Bosinelli presented observations on the modality of function of the figure-background process in epileptic subjects and observations of specific perceptive deformations in schizophrenic individuals gathered by means of the «test des deux barrage». The suggestions for interpretation that Kanizsa gave me were different from those made to me by Rene Zazzo in Paris. In particular, Kanizsa suggested that the test performance (a changed Toulouse-Pieron) be interpreted not as attention performance in an analytic sense, but as a specific

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index of perceptive organization according to the Gestalt approach. This interpretation provided me with an extremely profitable intellectual stimulus, but also generated disturbing conflicts. Indeed, at the time, I was involved in a detailed examination of the contributions of «New look in perception) with the intention of writing a paper on “Motivation and perception in personality psychology” with Prof. Marzi. In this paper I had adopted Bruner and Postman’s functionalist, personality explanations of perception. According to this explanation, past experience has enormous influence on present perceptive organization. I had been particularly convinced by studies which demonstrated the influence of personal factors (i.e., motivational forces, frequency of past confirmation, cognitive set, social consent), according to the schema of F.H. Allport. Furthermore, we considered the macroscopic perceptive effects of Ames situations (the rotating trapezium and the distorted room) that we had set up in the laboratory, as decisive evidence of experiential effect on perceptive organization. Our experimental observations of Ames’s demonstrations were examined by Musatti and Kanizsa with great interest. Musatti was particularly pleased as he was able to return to his studies of stereokinetic effects. We enjoyed working closely with the scholar and the discussions of the interpretation of phenomena during which Musatti (a very temperate Gestaltist) and Kanizsa (a very orthodox Gestaltist) took opposing positions. I told Kanizsa about the experimental variations we made to the rotating trapezium in Bologna. The findings demonstrated that it is possible to obtain an apparent oscillation even when the trapezium is stripped of all the empirical points of reference that made it appear to be a window. These results challenged Ames empirical hypothesis, but I did not have another specific theoretical experimental framework for my observations. Kanizsa helped me, and encouraged by his intellectual stimulation I met the great work of W. Metzger. Thus, at the beginning of 1956 I was able to publish my observations of the rotating trapezium which challenged the interpretation given by Ames, Cantril and by the transactionists, by presenting data in favor of a Gestalt interpretation. Indeed, I argued that the effects of illusion are the result of organizational structural factors (such as the pictorial clues of the perception of distance), rather than of detailed references to past experiences.

This research was immensely satisfying (it is one of the few Italian contributions, together with those of Kanizsa, Metelli and Musatti, quoted in the treatise *Experimental Psychology* of Woodworth and Schlossberg, 1971): As a result, I was invited to present my experiments to the Psychology Laboratory of the Catholic University of Milan. I presented my observations to Gemelli, Musatti and the «Gotha» of Italian psychologists, neurologists and psychiatrists. I gave an irrefutable reply to an aggressive attack by Gemelli, who had not appreciated my Gestaltist interpretation of my experiments since it indirectly challenged his

theory of “meaning assumption” as the synthesis of the various phases in which, according to him, the act of perception happened. At that moment, I realized that there was a significant component of ideology in any evaluation of experiments.

Academic Career

At that time, the academic future of a young researcher was in the hands of Gemelli, Musatti, Metelli and Kanizsa. I had won their esteem and, shortly afterwards, Musatti awarded me first place in the qualifying examinations for university teaching. Then, at the end of 1957, I was one of the winners of a public exam and I was called to work at the Faculty of Education of Salerno, where I remained for three years. In 1960 the Faculty of Medicine of Bologna created the first chair of Psychology and, thus, I was able to return to my home town where my colleagues and collaborators were.

The School of Bologna

The creation of an Institute of Psychology could no longer be postponed: the disciplines of psychology were taught in various Faculties. Battacchi, Minguzzi, Bosinelli, Montanini (all of them first generation psychologists) had become university lecturers and they taught in the Faculties of Education, Philosophy, Political Sciences. Many young people became involved in research: Anna Arfelli, Giuseppe Galli, Mario Fame, Paolo Bonaiuto, Alberto Ranzi, Pietro Tampieri, Giuliana Giovanelli, Giancarlo Trombini, Vincenzo Faenza, Augusto Palmonari, Gabriella Bartoli. I introduced all these pupils to experimental research on the psychology of perception, in which I was still involved.

I soon realized that such a variety of pupils could and would produce a different type of psychologist from one whom I could if not train, at least to guide personally. Albeit with difficulty, I quickly established a degree of emotional distance from the research groups that were being set-up. I did not favour one field respect over another one, but proved to be a careful observer of all and, when the findings justified it (judged not by me, but by the scientific community), also a systematic reader. I believe I have been successful in an enterprise that, in retrospect, seems to me to be fundamental to the understanding of the nature of the group of pupils (these and those successive, of the quarter and the fifth generation) who honour me by recognizing my teaching, in the sense that I have just described. The enterprise that I have striven to realize has been that of encouraging interest in new fields of research that I am not personally involved in and to establish the requirement of external appraisal of the quality of the scientific work carried out by single students or small groups.

The Group of Gestaltists

A research group, as well as the human resources of its participants, is based on three main principles: theoretical study, empiric-experimental research and the discussion and supervision of results. The small group of young researchers, almost all medical graduates who, at the beginning of the 1960s, were interested in Gestalt psychology had the benefit of these three conditions. They began with the study of the classic literature of the school of Berlin published in the *Psychologische Forschung*. With the funding from the University the entire collection of the review was acquired; symbolically n° 1 in the inventory of new library. Anna Arfelli and Giuseppe Galli spoke German, therefore with them, the group began to read systematically of the contributions of Wertheimer, Arnheim, Metzger, Lewin, etc. Metzger's presence was a fundamental element. Twice a year he held seminars in Trieste, Padova and then in Bologna. In the seminars, experimental research being carried out was presented and Metzger listened with great good will, whistling in his characteristic way. In the *Rivista di Psicologia* (Journal of Psychology) in the early 1960s numerous articles appeared: on the expressive qualities of the face, on the centring of elementary figures, on the development of perception in pre-schoolers, etc. After Metzger, other Gestalt scholars have held seminars in Bologna: Rausch, Witte, Arnheim. Metzger however must be remembered as a fundamental figure both for the depth of his theoretical conceptions and for his breadth of interests which led him to extend Gestalt principles beyond the field of perception. Something I am in complete agreement with.

Today, in the program of the conference, we see clearly how the first group of researchers, although they are engaged in concerns which are different from the original ones, has maintained the imprint of Gestalt and has transmitted it to new students.

Summary

In his article, Renzo Canestrari writes about the moment when his scientific training met Gestalt psychology. To Canestrari the first congress of Italian psychologists after the War was extremely important. He was particularly fascinated by the topic of perception. His encounter with Gaetano Kanizsa 1953 at the first Italian Congress of Clinical Psychology was a decisive factor in his choice to use a Gestalt approach. He also writes about his further work on perception.

Keywords: School of Bologna, Gestalt approach, perception.

Zusammenfassung

In seinem Beitrag beschreibt Renzo Canestrari seine erste Begegnung mit der Gestaltpsychologie. Äußerst wichtig für ihn wurde der erste Kongress der Italienischen Psychologen nach dem Krieg, ganz besonders faszinierte Canestrari die Thematik der Wahrnehmungsforschung. Seine Begegnung mit Gaetano Kanizsa beim ersten Italienischen Kongress der Klinischen Psychologen 1953 war ausschlaggebend für

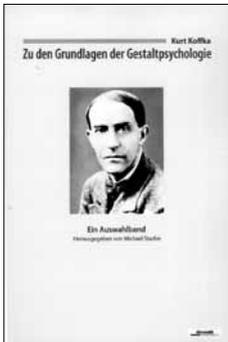
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seine Entscheidung, den Gestaltansatz in seine wissenschaftliche Arbeit zu integrieren. Weiters beschreibt er in diesem Beitrag seine weitere wissenschaftliche Arbeit zu Fragen der Wahrnehmung.

Schlüsselwörter: Schule von Bologna, Gestaltansatz, Wahrnehmung.

Renzo Canestrari, born 1924, professor emeritus at the medical department of the University of Bologna, studied education and medicine. In 1957 he became professor of general psychology in Salerno, then moved to the Faculty of Medicine in Bologna where he became the founder and chair of the Institute of Psychology and the School of Bologna. One of his main interests is perception under the Gestalt theoretical point of view. He has an extensive list of publications during his scientific career.

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Kurt Koffka

Zu den Grundlagen der Gestaltpsychologie

Ein Auswahlband

Herausgegeben von Michael Stadler

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Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) zählt mit Max Wertheimer und Wolfgang Köhler zu den Gründervätern der Gestalttheorie der Berliner Schule. 1935 erschien sein Hauptwerk „Principles of Gestalt Psychology“, in dem die Gestaltpsychologie erstmalig systematisch dargestellt wurde, in englischer Sprache. Fragt man in den USA nach der Gestaltpsychologie, so werden die „Principles“ auch heute noch fast immer einzig und allein genannt. Im deutschsprachigen Raum hingegen erlangte Koffkas Hauptwerk, da die „Principles“ bis heute nie in deutscher Sprache veröffentlicht wurden, nie die Bekanntheit und Geltung, die ihm zustünde. Im nun vorliegenden Auswahlband erscheinen die ersten drei Kapitel dieses Klassikers der Gestaltpsychologie in deutscher Übersetzung. Abgerundet wird diese Einführung in die Grundlagen der Gestaltlehre durch einen Überblicksbeitrag Kurt Koffkas aus dem Jahr 1925 über die Psychologie und ihre Kernthemen aus der Sicht der Gestalttheorie – eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit bis heute einflussreichen Grundannahmen in der Psychologie, die an Aktualität nichts eingebüßt hat. Leben und Werk Kurt Koffkas werden in ergänzenden Beiträgen des Herausgebers, Univ.-Prof. Michael Stadler (Universität Bremen), beleuchtet.
