

Herbert Fitzek

Artcoaching Gestalt Theory in Arts and Culture

To Start with Goethe...

In the history of science, Gestalt has proved to be an irritating term – in scientific psychology, therefore, an unbiased use of Gestalt is far from being self-evident. As a consequence, “a hundred years of Gestalt Theory” call for a careful approach to what Gestalt means in scientific psychology. I will therefore step back further to exhibit the origin and core of Gestalt thinking and refer to its undoubted founder, the scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Käfer 1982; Fitzek 1994; Breidbach 2006; as an introduction in English Wahl 2005).

Although he concentrated on biological subjects like plants and bones, Goethe, as a scientist, was in care of a general Gestalt theory, implying mental and cultural items in the conception of a scientific “morphology”: a concept of formation and of transformation. With his morphology Goethe turned against contemporary models of nature which treated life as an inanimate mechanism (“Naturforschung”) or an irrational sanctuary (“Naturphilosophie”). He did this in his poetical work as well as in science: “Formation, Transformation, eternal minds in eternal recreation [Gestaltung Umgestaltung. Des ewigen Sinnes ewige Unterhaltung]”(Faust II; Akt I; Szene IV, 6287-88).

As an introduction to his uncompleted outlines of a general morphology (Goethe 1988), Goethe defined Gestalt as a complex meaningful and powerful principle with certain intentions and certain effects, as an agent of natural and mental reality: “The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt...*” (Goethe 1988, 63).

Goethe’s definition determined the use of Gestalt in psychology, starting with Ehrenfels’ premature paper on “Gestalt qualities” (Ehrenfels 1890) in which he described psychological experience as organized by non-summative (“übersummative”) and transferable (“transponierbare”) qualities like those of an image or of a melody. From Ehrenfels the Gestalt concept made its way through the avant-garde of German speaking psychology at the beginning of the 20th century and impressed leading circles of academic research in Graz (“Grazer Schule der Gestalttheorie”), Leipzig (“Leipziger Schule der genetischen

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Ganzheits- und Strukturpsychologie”) and (especially) in Berlin (“Berliner Schule der Gestalttheorie”) (Fitzek & Salber 1996; Ash 2007).

Although mainly working on sensual phenomena, the first Gestalt theorists referred to Gestalt – following Goethe – as a holistic concept of psychological reality. They stressed more strongly than Ehrenfels the figurative and dynamic character of Gestalten to which again Goethe had pointed in his path-breaking definition, emphasizing the dynamic aspects of the Gestalt term:

“The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt*. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined and fixed in character. But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that *nothing in them is permanent*, nothing is at rest or defined - everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why the Germans frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* to describe the end product *and* what is in process of production as well” (Goethe 1988, 63).

Kurt Lewin and the Transformation of Gestalt Theory into a Psychology of Cultural Manifestations

According to Goethe, Gestalt psychology took Gestalten as directories of a dynamic psychology. Gestalten are everything other than static unities; on the contrary they are labile systems or fields in space and time oriented towards reducing psychic tension by means of the well-known (Gestalt) tendencies of density, closure, continuation, merging without rest, which have been summed up by Wertheimer under the Gestalt law of pregnancy or good figuration (*gute Gestalt*). As actual agents of psychological experience they utilize mental and spatial conditions (the position of human and natural beings, objects, tracks and ranges in space) as tools of stabilizing the field – and do so in the artificial arrangements of perceptual experiments as well as under the more complex conditions of memory, thinking and problem solving.

For Kurt Lewin – the predominant figure of the second generation of the Berlin school – Gestalt proved to be a key concept in understanding and reconstructing actions as dynamic wholes/totalities. In a first paper (Lewin 1926) he summarized the dynamics of actions under the new term of action wholes or acting wholes (“*Handlungsganzheiten*”). More and more Lewin realized that Gestalt laws do not only thrive in the realm of laboratories, but serve as an organizing principle in the complex units of everyday life, e.g. in group dynamics, mass communications and organizational cultures. Lewin’s contribution to social psychology in America consists of the spontaneous constitution of informal groups and the artificially created working units of organizational cultures. They underlie the same merging processes of Gestalten. In all social and cultural configurations

Lewin found the same (Gestalt) tendencies of distinct, good Gestalt – which as a matter of fact doesn't necessarily prove to be productive or effective in any case. Although partly devoting his terminology to mathematical "topology", Lewin went on to understand everyday life as an extended experiment in shaping and working out Gestalten. What happens to work, works according to the formation of Gestalten; what happens to fail, fails because of the formation of Gestalten which do not fit what the situation demands. The widespread issues of Lewin's interest converge under the closing tendencies of systems in tension.

Lewin died before he could collect his observations in an overview of social and cultural psychology (cp. Fitzek 2008b). It was in Germany again that the system of organizing action wholes was transformed into a general theory of cultural life. Wilhelm Salber expanded Lewin's psychology of acting wholes into a theory of acting units in everyday life (Salber 1956; cp. in English Salber 2001). Salber named his Gestalt psychological concept as a morphology of psychic life to stress the figurative and transitional character of psychological experience. Clearer than Lewin, Salber pointed to the developmental traits of Gestalten, once more referring to Goethe's plan of a general morphology: "Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt*, or if we use the term we should at least do so only in reference to the idea, the concept, or to an empirical element held fast for a mere moment of time." (Goethe 1988, 63)

Art as the Via Regia to a Cultural Psychology of Gestalten

In Salber's morphology, psychological experience at its core works in terms of the transitional logic of Gestalten. Following Goethe, Salber characterizes figurative processes in motivation and behavior as transitional processes in terms of *Bildung* and *Umbildung*, formation and transformation. According to Salber the complex figurations of cultural life are organized by ambiguous Gestalt tendencies of closure and metamorphosis, of pregnancy and diversification.

The transitional character of Gestalten is not as easily visible and reconstructable as the definite Gestalt tendencies of perception. Transitions do not obey the laws of distinct configuration. They show an inconsistent and even contradictory character. A psychological morphology therefore has to reshape the traditional Gestalt theory in a depth psychology of Gestalt. Due to Sigmund Freud's inclination towards Goethe's (Gestalt) concept (cp. Hemeker 1991), it is not difficult to discover Gestalt traits like anticipation, inversion, division, undoing and isolation in psychoanalysis. According to Freud their appearance is not limited to abnormal processes; they are constitutive attributes of mental functions – like dreaming, humour and the efforts and blunders of everyday life (Freud 1908).

The Gestalt theory of arts and culture can thus profit from the broader scope of depth psychology on cultural life (cp. Salber 2001). Although the depth logic

of Gestalten is not as manifest as Gestalt perception, culture has developed its own medium of self-presentation: Gestalt logic exhibits itself in the complex and paradox manifestations of art. Psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Gestalt psychologists like Rudolf Arnheim have stressed this vital point of psychoanalytic aesthetics. Not incidentally an almost forgotten, but absolutely inventive, border crosser of Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis, Arnold Ehrenzweig, was the first to expose the depth structure of artistic experience in detail.

In the 40s and 50s of the last century, Ehrenzweig pointed to the ambiguity of figurative structures in art and identified them as a playground of corresponding moments in conscious and unconscious processes. According to Ehrenzweig art shows the dynamics of Gestalten under the burning glass of visualization. The ambiguity of aesthetic forms is an effect of the transitions of conscious and unconscious productivity. And the range of perception gradually shifts from the attachment to distinct configuration to the intercourse with hidden serial or paradoxical figurations:

“While surface vision is disjunctive, low level vision is conjunctive and serial. What appears ambiguous, multi-evocative or open-ended on a conscious level becomes a single serial structure with quite firm boundaries on an unconscious level” (Ehrenzweig 1969, 32).

As a connoisseur of art Ehrenzweig demonstrates the interplay of conscious and unconscious tendencies, of formation and transformation in the manifestations of art in a range of well-detailed observations in paintings, collages and sculptures. A painting like Georges Braque’s “Verre et Pichet” shows the multiphenomenology of perception and the multidimensionality of meaning, comprised in one dense artifact:

“The work has the artist’s characteristic simplicity; it represents just a jug and a glass. If we relax, the handle may suddenly be transformed into a classical profile, the ground behind the profile becomes another head or even two heads above one another, enclosed by a white bulging shape that overflows the rim of the jug. It could be a figure holding a palette and brushes. Is it a self-portrait? Was Braque aware of these complexities?” (Ehrenzweig 1967, Plate 19).



Fig. 1 Georges Braque: Verre et Pichet

According to Ehrenzweig art in general can be seen as a prototypical instrument of structuring and restructuring the organization of reality. Instead of distinct reasoning (what is the case?) the process of art is ruled by the transitional logic of an in-between (what can be worked out?). As an experimental field of Gestalt production, art enriches reality by exploiting the resources of over-determinate meaning.

In the psychological morphology, art serves as a king's path, a "via regia" to Gestalt production, to the developmental qualities of ambiguous Gestalten in the visual field. Art exhibits the production of Gestalten in their structure and

variety at the best and therefore is scientifically investigated in a vast number of morphological studies. To guarantee this effort it is most important to deliver best conditions for the exposure and documentation of Gestalt production.

Doing Research in the Gestalt Theory of Arts and Culture

Not everybody is courageous/enduring enough to take up an artistic education. Fortunately the pioneers of art psychology found out that the psychology of art production and art reception is analogous to some extent (Freud 1908; Kris 1952; Ehrenzweig 1969). Helping people discover the unconscious Gestalt logic of mental structures can therefore be based on reception processes.

Apart from inhibitions in dealing with brush and easel there is another obstacle for an adequate approach to the ambiguous Gestalt structure of art reception. Usual art experience is prefigured by cultural conventions (of doing it the way people are used to doing it: 11 seconds is the average watching time of a single picture in a museum). What has to be managed in the sense of psychological experience is to dismantle the reception process of common sense and to get enough time and space for an adequate and sufficient approach to art.

As a matter of fact museums more and more share the psychological point of view: Andreas Blühm, director of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne, openly adopted the psychological point of view and initiated a unique experiment, presenting one work of art in one exhibition room, and moreover taking the psychological responsibility for research on the reception process. The work chosen as the subject of the one-work exhibition was Vincent van Gogh's famous painting of "Une Paire des Chaussures" ("A Pair of Shoes"; 1885) which had inspired Martin Heidegger's well-known phenomenological analysis in his treatise on "The Origin of the Work of Art":



Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh: Une Paire des Chaussures

“From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself” (Heidegger 1976, 664).

Referring to Heidegger’s reflections on the deep-rooted effect of a simple pair of worn-out shoes on the spectator, Hans-Christian Heiling started to research visitors’ involvement when being confronted and left alone with the painting in the show room of the museum. In his doctoral thesis Heiling collected 40 single and group depth-interviews with recipients on the basis of an intense experience process of 20 minutes of personal reception and about 2 hours of a psychological depth-interview and analyzed them by the method of a careful phenomenological description (Heiling 2011).

Before getting an answer he nevertheless had to face a serious question of scientific methodology: How should scientific research operate in the field of aesthetical production? The Gestalt psychology of art can hardly draw upon the classical scientific methods of experimental psychology. Again Goethe's early definition of Gestalt thinking points to a methodological alternative:

“When something has acquired a form it metamorphoses immediately to a new one. If we wish to arrive to some living perception of nature we ourselves must remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives.” (Goethe 1988, 63)

Like Goethe envisioned two centuries ago, a psychological method of analyzing the effects of art must be flexible enough to follow the example of nature which demands “a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory” (Goethe 1988, 307; cp. Wahl 2005). Data collection has to supply enough time and space for the emergence and the perception of unconscious Gestalt production. Data analysis has to supply an appropriate (“thick”) description of the reception processes in several methodical versions (cp. Geertz 1973; Fitzek 2008a).

Dedicating itself to a “delicate empiricism”, morphological research is conceptualized as a methodical metamorphosis of several steps following the above mentioned aspects of Gestalt logic in any matter of psychological interest. All subjects of culture and arts are described on four levels or “versions of morphological description”:

- firstly looking for basic Gestalt qualities
- then showing the field dynamics of Gestalt
- finding the psychological core of the figuration and finally
- identifying typical solutions to handle the problem core.

The qualitative approach of these four methodical versions of data collection marks the character of all morphological analyses.

Morphological Art Psychology: A Reception Analysis of Vincent van Gogh's “Une paire des Chaussures” (1885)

In the closing part of my paper I will summarize Heiling's analysis of van Gogh's “shoes”, going through the versions of morphological research. To begin with, I give a short sketch of the basic qualities collected in the depth-interviews: The interview partners start talking about shoes, ordinary shoes, nothing more than shoes; then they discover old and used or even abused shoes; often followed by worn-out shoes, shoes of no further use to the owner; shoes representing hard work and long duration, permanence, endurance, readiness for fight; and at the end shoes as icons of personal coping, of having passed through something hard, having overcome pain, suffering, separation.

The (second) version of field dynamics picks up the couple motif directing the recipients' attention to the two shoes sticking together at a first look; side by side they seem to complement and complete each other in perfect harmony of right and left, male and female, open and closed, cowering and erection. On the other hand they seem to resemble each other too much, concurring, trying to stay on their own, parallelizing (or even paralyzing) their character or activities. What originally seems to link them to each other, their closeness and similarity, turns out to set them apart – like two left shoes which don't fit because of their similarity. Much more than presenting shoes only, they reflect a less-liked, but vital aspect of couple reality remembering missteps, rivalry and jealousy.

In a third methodic version, morphological analysis tries to identify an overall principle which characterizes the transitional structure of the figuration. As the most constitutive but hidden aspect of Gestalt logic, morphological description has to advance to unconscious but perceptible figurations which Freud had discovered in the Gestalt character of dream and neurosis. According to morphological psychology all manifestations of culture – especially works of art – embody a complex structure of formation and transformation in a characteristic mode. It is the crucial point of morphological analysis to step back to the psychological core of the figuration and to discover the hidden order of arts and of all manifestations of culture in everyday life by means of a “delicate” empiricism.

To get back to the example, van Gogh's “shoes” arouse an activity of reviewing and reflecting on one's own life. They point to what is achieved or still is to be achieved in life; they lead to paths we once walked but won't walk again, showing what went wrong, got out of sight; they suggest the efforts and troubles of getting through life. The artificially (e.g. methodically) intensified effect of the painting leads into the rollbacks of repetition, the running on and running out of plans and perspectives. More than only recalling appointments (and disappointments) of life, the “shoes” arouse a personal sensibility for the never-ending course of ups and downs as a basic experience of one's own biography.

Once detected and reported, this central topic of the spectators' involvement guides them into the magic circles of repetition. In a closing fourth version, morphological analysis detects typical solutions for this crucial point of figuration. The depth-interviews range between temptation and giving up, accepting or rejecting the impertinence of life, between insight and resistance, the pride of having overcome or the resentment of having suffered a lot in life. Not too many spectators get to this point of view, some of the recipients guess that the painting consists of more than they can express, some even find a formula for their own lives in the way of Pinter's legendary caretaker: “shoes are life and death to me...”

Recent Applications – from Art Psychology to Artcoaching

Morphological analyses of cultural manifestations – in everyday life as well as referring to the culture of groups, institutions and even peoples or nations – generally lead to a Gestalt core which transfers phenomenological appearance into the four levels of Gestalt logic. Entering into the psychology of arts and culture, Gestalt theory is widened and transformed into a depth psychology of complex and ambiguous Gestalten. From the point of view of a cultural psychology the works of art build a *via regia* to unconscious Gestalt production. In morphological research they prove to give the best insight into the basic shifts of Gestalten, the formations and transformations of shape and meaning.

As far as the process of art reception helps to arouse consciousness and to give way to non-directive, dissociative thinking, it already has a stimulating effect in itself. Under the label of “artcoaching”, psychologically guided art experience is developed into a systematic application tool of counseling. In artcoaching, reception processes aid spectators to discover and reflect on their own ways of perceiving and constructing reality. Several carefully analyzed paintings and sculptures created by prominent artists like Dürer, Botticelli, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Rubens, van Gogh and Klee are used for problem-guided reflection processes, thus opening experience for ambiguous and (therefore) appropriate insights. Known in their specific psychological complexity (valence) they help to find accesses to problematic and therefore rarely reflected issues of psychological experience.

As a prototype serves Michelangelo’s Moses sculpture in Rome, which presents the complexity of care and power in leadership, already described in Freud’s path-breaking study on “The Moses of Michelangelo” (Freud 1913). It is remarkable that Freud did not only value the statue as a masterpiece of art, but took profit from its overwhelming impact on himself – so that he visited Moses whenever he came to see Rome. Frequently used means of artcoaching in group settings are also Klee’s “Hauptwege und Nebenwege” in Cologne, dealing with the paradoxical unity of straightforwardness and perspectivity, and Caravaggio’s “Amor Vincit Omnia” in Berlin, representing challenge and temptation in one image (Fitzek 2012).

Once stated empirically, the specific effect of an artifact helps to work out characteristic patterns of individual approaches and apply them to a fairly wide range of issues. Different settings have been developed to use art as a psychological means of self-perception and (even) of self-adjustment. In sensitivity trainings Moses assists young managers to discover their own ambitions in leadership and students to reflect on their family constellations. Klee’s “Haupt- und Nebenwege” are deployed in start-up-counselings or formation processes of companies. Concerning van Gogh’s “shoes” it makes sense to use them in the context of

long-term partnerships, e.g. in corporate governance or in marriage counseling. Far beyond presenting worn-out clothing, the “shoes” support the ambiguous mood of more or less liked partnership.

The conception of a psychological Gestalt theory of culture starts with the hypothesis that formation and transformation processes are universal conditions of psychological experience. According to this scientific point of view the figurations of culture and everyday life are organized by Gestalt laws of concentration and divergence, of pregnancy and ambiguity. The antagonist logic of Gestalten becomes transparent in the complex productions of aesthetics, concerning the creativity of the artists and that of the reception processes. Morphological research traces the effects of figurations back to a depth psychology of Gestalt which is adequate for identifying the complex issues of social and cultural exchange and to use reception processes for the analysis of core problems of psychological experience.

Having done research on art reception for many decades, morphological psychologists have proven their technique in the context of different indications requiring self-reflection and self-correction. Recent applications of “artcoaching” – as an actual representative of Gestalt theory of arts and culture – have been developed for individual and team counseling, for burn-out prophylaxis, for sensitivity and leadership trainings.

Summary

With Max Wertheimer’s research on non-physiologically based moving impressions in perceptual space (phi-phenomenon), the Gestalt concept began its rise as one of the leading traditions of German (we may say) international psychology exactly 100 years ago. Wertheimer had not only discovered the importance of aesthetical qualities in perception, but he had also laid open the force of organizing principles in learning, thinking, shaping everyday life experience as a whole. As the early Gestalt theorists – like Wertheimer and Rudolf Arnheim – knew, Gestalt phenomena are to be observed best in the ambiguous and complex field of arts. Border crossers of Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis – like Anton Ehrenzweig – have stressed that the formative processes of music, literature, film and visual arts deliver prototypes of psychological experience as an intercourse of conscious and unconscious production. As a consequence, morphological psychology, developed from Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis in the 50’s and 60’s of the last century, started research programs on the creative potentials of art production and – especially – of reception processes. A recent branch of Gestalt Theory in Arts and Culture is called “art coaching”, coming from the use of art reception as a tool for intensifying individual and group dynamics and dealing with the strengthened efficacy of Gestalt in extended reception processes. In repeating, modeling, working out reception processes with the help of psychological attendance we have detected specific pieces of visual art (drawings and sculptures) as representatives of a-personal core topics or core problems, exhibiting their characteristic profiles (Wertheimer: “Eigenlogik”) in actual and concrete ideas of spectators.

Keywords: Gestalt theory, psychology of arts, art reception, cultural psychology, coaching.

Zusammenfassung

Mit Wertheimers bahnbrechenden Untersuchungen zum Phi-Phänomen begann vor einhundert Jahren der Aufstieg der Gestalttheorie im psychologischen Denken. Wertheimer hatte nicht nur die Bedeutung sinnlicher Qualitäten für die Wahrnehmung entdeckt, sondern generelle ästhetische Organisationsprinzipien des Seelischen. Gerade im komplexen Feld der Kunstpsychologie setzten sich Konzepte – wie das des Grenzgängers zwischen Gestalttheorie und Tiefenpsychologie, Anton Ehrenzweig – durch, die seelische Abläufe im Umgang mit Kunst ganzheitlich und prozessual modellierten und die kreativen Potenziale von Kunstschaffen und Kunstrezeption aus dem Verkehr bewusster und unbewusster Produktionstendenzen rekonstruierten. Auf der Grundlage einer Tiefenpsychologie der Gestalten setzt sich das Forschungsprogramm der morphologischen Psychologie empirisch mit den Erfahrungen von Rezipienten auseinander, die sich unter psychologischer Anleitung mit einzelnen Kunstwerken intensiv auseinandersetzen. Ein neuerer Zweig der Gestalttheorie von Kunst und Kultur ist das „Kunstcoaching“, das für die intensivierten Rezeptionserfahrungen einzelner Kunstwerken spezifische überindividuell wirksame Problemkerne spürbar macht und die „Eigenlogik“ (Wertheimer) der Wirklichkeitsreflexion von einzelnen Betrachtern und Betrachtergruppen in unterschiedlichen Settings (Beratung, Selbsterfahrung, Sensitivity und Management Trainings) nutzbar macht.

Schlüsselwörter: Gestalttheorie, Kunstpsychologie, Kunstrezeption, Kulturpsychologie, Coaching.

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