

## Is there a second chance for Gestalt-theory in psychopathology?

### Abstract:

It is about 100 years ago, when Gestalt theory took centre stage, promising to explain the concept of consciousness and proactive human creativity, thereby using a model of interactively related manifoldness, and: to gain a fresh look at mental illness and its underlying causes. The emerging discourse was immediately taken up by neurologists, psychiatrists, psychologists and philosophers – hoping to find a way out of a fruitless debate amongst association-psychology, biological psychiatry and psychoanalysis which had ended in a stalemate. The early success of interdisciplinary Gestalt research came to an untimely end by rising fascism, forced exile of researchers and World War II. But beyond these dismal conditions there were serious weaknesses in the concept of 'Gestalt' itself to make up for the fact that the Gestalt approach never made it back to the mainstream of the psychopathology debate after the war. This presentation highlights the contradictions and discontinuities which contributed to this unfortunate development and it investigates how the full potential of the Gestalt idea can be brought back to life. Assessing its true philosophical roots and acknowledging its intertwined connection to semiotics and symbol-formation could prove as a second chance for 'Gestalt' in seriously influencing and reviving an overdue debate on psychopathology – thus building a mature case against the hegemony of superficial and stigmatising catalogue-and diagnosis systems (ICD / DSM).

Many of today's debates about psychopathology still pursue a two component model of pathogenesis, comparable to the scheme published by Gruhle in his 'Theory of Schizophrenia' in 1932: focusing on either its biological or on its psychosocial causes, or on a mixture of both, which – sad as it is – Gruhle was unable to define.

Yet, his concept was far from being simplistic. Examining the disorder from different angles he meticulously considered all its possible sources in the natural or social fundamentals of mankind and his model was kept open for new information from all sides of the debate.

While strongly concentrating on possible causes and origins of the illness, however, he lost focus on two major aspects which remain sidelined until today: on the importance of the true character of interaction between the contributing biological and social correspondents and on the architecture of the symbol based interference of basic patterns of emerging invariants on both contributing sides.

Thus, the Gordian knot of explaining the marriage between biological structures and its corresponding social field remained unsolved; despite the fact that in our daily life the link is in full swing as can easily be proved by everyone as long as (s) he is not asleep. This riddle of philosophy does equally not appear to be too much of a problem to the average citizen, as our inner autonomist worlds of thought and imagination are obviously facilitated by the same neurons which organize our social enterprises. This means a third element simply has to exist, a force of connection, a relational order which – whether we are aware of it or not - mediates between the extremes of what in reality seems to be some sort of continuum.

### A new phenomenon

In fact, there is a mediator. A third force. A framework which sets the rules – how, and under what laws of construction – contributing brains and their social environment can enter into a creative relationship. At this very point – 100 years ago - a new psychological school unfolded their powerful arguments; blowing new life into a debate which seemed stuck in a stalemate: ‘Gestalt theory’?

Up to this moment there had only been guesses and speculations about what could be the missing link between the contributing stakeholders of creativity and ‘world making’. Now, suddenly there was: ‘Gestalt’, a name which made sense; an expression of harmony, totality, creativity and reassurance.

Suddenly it was hard to believe, that something so obvious, so clearly presenting itself as an own entity, had escaped from our eyes for so long. ‘Gestalt’ constituted an entirely own quality, something very different from just being the adding up of its contributing parts’ and now it seemed obvious that human beings in their quest for recognition (Erkenntnis) facilitate this process via the emergence of ‘Gestalt’ (sinnvolle Ganzheiten).

Fascinated by the phenomenon was philosopher Theodor Litt (1926): *“It is most obvious, that the expression ‘Gestalt’ meets its cause as is demanded by the term itself: an appearance to our senses, which, to the experiencing ego is more than a simple aggregate of elements, but a wholeness, emerging in its organized inner connectivity, meeting the inner eye like a substantial obvious structure.....*

*It cannot escape our attention that it is a symbolic movement which allows expressing this specific form of being itself (jene ‘Selbigkeit’), which remains integral to the ‘Gestalt’, opposed to the variant forms of its phenomenal appearances.....*

*The ‘Gestalt’ of sensual appearance (i.e. in the (Gebaerde) of greeting rituals) not only stands out as a sensual configuration, but adds to the complex of expressive bodily activity (Leibgeschehen) an innate power of coincidental “sense” relatedness – ‘making sense’ thus is not meant as being non-sensual, but via its connectivity to the sensual (quality of) “Gestalt” it succeeds in distancing itself from the factual (concrete) movement.*

*Left to its own devices neither a bodily activity nor a mental process would be able to cope with the demand of creating a new pattern of inner relatedness....And the said specific form of being in itself (“Selbigkeit”), bridging the variant forms of possible appearances, is not the same ‘being itself’ as that of an existing factual gestalt, but the ‘inbred itself’, comparable to the sense-making of a Symbolic gestalt and its inert easefulness (alternative: inner architecture).  
(all cursive translations by N. Andersch)*

During the 1920s Neurology and Psychiatry emerged as important centers of an exciting ‘Gestalt’ discourse. Binswanger (1924), Lewin (1926), Goldstein and Foulkes (1944) were the best known professionals fostering a ‘Gestalt’ approach in clinical practice. Binswanger's attempt to integrate results of Gestalt- and Symbol research into clinical practice of psychiatry was stopped in its tracks by the rise of Fascism.

Gestalt ideas had a major impact on Kurt Lewin, his field-theory and action-research. Gestalt ideas had a major influence on Moreno's Psychodrama, on Leuner's ‘Symbol drama’ and Foulkes theories on group-dynamics (Nitzgen 2009/10). Goldstein's famous publication from his Dutch exile, ‘The Organism’ (Den Haag 1934) contained the very first design of a system and network theory based on ‘Gestalt’

principles, where the brain is regarded as working on different categorical levels; finding its concrete or abstract equilibriums dependent on varying grades of complexity. It draws its potential from a make up of parallel levels of suspension ('Grundspannung und Erregungsbereitschaft'). All neuronal functions are guided by their relatedness to the whole organism, even during the breakdown of main cerebral activities. Learned functions are not strictly organized in local patterns, but their activities can be substituted by neighboring or different parts of the organism – or by changing to a different functional exchange level as such. The brain, seen from a system approach, never switches to a mode of inactivity but endlessly moves between 'equilibriums of change' ('Verharren in Veraenderung').

'Gestalt'-theory's strong influence reached to neurological (Luria) and psychological theories in the Soviet Union (Leontjew, Wigotskij) and to French psychiatrists and phenomenologists and thus survived war and exile of most researchers but never again entered the mainstream psychiatric or psychopathological debate.

## Gestalt in psychopathology – not fit for purpose?

Following its remarkable start, Gestalt theory could not deliver what it had promised. Gestalt theoretical research was unable to develop a theory of consciousness and has only recently resumed to presenting its own contributions to the discourse on theoretical psychopathology.

There is no doubt that its beginnings in the 1920s had been brutally stopped by Fascism and war. Most of its theoreticians and researchers i.e. Koehler, Goldstein, Lewin, Fuchs, Pearls, Buehler, Cassirer and many others were driven into exile, had their scientific work interrupted and destroyed or were even murdered, as Kurt Grelling\* in 1942.

It would be wrong, however, to deny its own theoretical weaknesses, its own conception errors and self isolating discourses which caused it to vanish from the psychopathological debate after the end of the war.

This at least is the outcome of a critical analysis by Karl Buehler (1960), a prominent promoter of 'Gestalt' ideas in pre-war Germany and strongly influenced by Cassirer and Goldstein, who later retrained and practiced as a psychiatrist in his US-American exile. Only a few years ago it was Philosopher and 'Gestalt' researcher Barry Smith (1994) who – in a lengthy essay – took a similar approach. He accused Gestalt Theory of having failed to take up its deserved role in the psychopathological discourse during recent post-war decades. He encouraged Gestalt-researchers to eagerly pursue the route of "connectionism", working more closely with linguists and neuroscientists. From his point of view there is no way out of the present theoretical crisis unless Gestalt-theory comes up with some "substantial ontological clarification".

What exactly, to be more precise, are these failures and conception weaknesses? The urgent necessity to understand the crucial connection between Gestalt- and Symbol theory was never taken up. Cassirer's appeal to strengthen this approach and develop its theoretical perspective beyond the sensual realm of everyday (geometrical) experience - towards more virtual, abstract ideas of interconnectivity - was neglected by Goldstein as soon as their joint pre-war cooperation in Germany came to an end. It was only Aaron Gurwitsch (1949) who, referring to the works of Merleau-Ponty and Cassirer,

followed this route, researching and exploring the missing link between Gelb and Goldstein's concept of the 'concrete and abstract attitude' and Husserl's phenomenology.

Goldstein's more clinically orientated lectures were grossly misinterpreted by his new American audience. He received a negative reception and in an anti-theoretical and over-pragmatic US environment his philosophical approach was sidelined.

The same happened to his sophisticated clinical observations: Goldstein had stressed the point that self isolation among psychotic patients is not a genuine sign of illness but only a secondary attempt of protection; the breakdown of the gestalt-like symbolic membrane between the patient's outside world and his inner universe, connecting and keeping apart both realms in a sane mood, is the first casualty – and this (often undetected) gap in symbolic capacity is the real onset of illness.

Goldstein's figure-background concept which, - much in comparison to Kurt Lewin - perceives 'background' as an abstract framework or matrix which is not represented on a pure phenomenological level remained likewise misunderstood.

More important, the full confirmation of Goldstein's early research on brain injured patients from the First World War, this time by Luria, observing psychiatric patients in the Soviet Union, fell on deaf ears as a result of the 'cold war'.

Goldstein's own appeasement policy of eradicating most of Cassirer's complex and philosophical quotations from his publications did not improve his standing. Moreover, it robbed Goldstein's recipients off the important underlying theoretical framework on which it once was erected.

The American audience was much more thrilled by Fritz Pearl's simplistic and fashionable examples of how to perceive the Gestalt idea in a random mixture with psychoanalytical elements. Gregory Bateson successfully mixed gestalt aspects with cybernetics and a theory of learning (Lerntheorie).

## Contradictions and discontinuities

The gestalt debate took very much the same route as other scientific discourses had gone down earlier. It kept glued and addicted to sensual perception, to the fascination with visual phenomena and to a level of imagination that never went beyond the realms of Euclidian geometry. 'Gestalt' became reduced to a romantic understanding of universal totality and wholeness without considering its contributing changeable pattern, its parallel levels of 'world making' (Lewin's Genesereihen) in consciousness, its relatedness to instincts and symbols, its metamorphosis on the different levels of individual and group complexity.

Few attempts were made in picking up (or unifying) the more advanced theoretical concepts of Lewin, Gurwitsch, Cassirer and Goldstein.

In German psychiatry it was Klaus Conrad who resumed his wartime research on Gestalt in a number of well received publications on the loss of 'Gestalt' in psychosis. Yet his fascinating clinical descriptions were undermined by a weak theoretical concept, unable to explain a different form of continuous gestalt building in subconscious conditions and very much glued to the concept of psychosis as a mere brain illness. His untimely death brought an end to the 'Gestalt' discourse as a main element of debate in

psychiatry, though fragments of its concept maintained an underlying influence on quite a few researchers in psychopathology.

W.Koehler's 'Isomorphie-thesis' in its vague definition on possible connections between mental and social existence only added to an already existing confusion. It gave room to a series of ongoing misinterpretations with the majority of researchers still today siding with the interpretation of a parallel activity, recently refueled by a publication hype on mirror-neurons. A more comprehensive discussion of Koehler's - at times contradictory - remarks will reveal that similarities in the structure (on both sides of the gap) only refer to the character of their relational make-up, while gestalt-building as such remains in need of complementary components to achieve the creative symbolic form as the combining figure.

Gestalt theory's much used 'figure – background' metaphor equally exposes an urgent need for clarification. Goldstein had pointed out early, that (via our perception) both these correspondents remain artificially separated as aspects of something, which – in reality - never ceased living on as a unity. His 'simple' statement is in fact aiming at a general abstract understanding of the variability in the emergence of contributing patterns.

It has little to do with the much overused metaphor of the actor vs. the stage-scenery. Much more though with the potential of creativity and openness growing out of an underlying matrix of protection. The final decision as to which one of the contributing correspondents emerges as the intentional agent and which is meant to figure as the 'room of resonance' (Resonanzraum) entirely depends on the covering framework and the wider meaning.

Furthermore, there has to be a rule which determines the structure of all pattern/gestalt relationships and - comparable to transformation group theory in mathematics - there has to be an understanding of how these different paradigms of cultural creations interrelate with each other.

In summary, 'Gestalt' never ends up being a real unity, totality, wholeness. Its whole magic and function depends on coming very close to it, but comparable to a brilliantly performed tango, both dancers will never be the same, never unite, and never mingle. It is only the creativity, the abstract form they jointly invent which allows them to both turn their ongoing contradictory movements into a figure of new unity – which goes beyond what a physical merger could ever achieve.

Therapeutic interaction brings an additional, irreplaceable value to the fore: the moment of creation in meeting the other (Moreno's: Begegnung) in the wake of a joint creation (Gelingen) wakes up in ourselves what has been lost, been sleeping, been hidden, been separated from our damaged self long ago – and opens up the route to inner unity, reconciliation and healing.

## Gestalt experts still to detect: Hanscarl Leuner and Ernst Cassirer

HC Leuner, for some years Klaus Conrad's assistant in Goettingen did not approve of Conrad's biological 'Gestalt' concept. Leuner kept a much stronger affiliation to the theories of Kurt Lewin and Kurt Goldstein. Referring to Levin's 'parallel dynamic systems of suspension' as a preemptive state of consciousness and Goldstein's idea of mental equilibriums allowed him to focus on varying levels of mental functioning; not just on disorder, dysfunction and pathology. Thus he was able to identify the chaos following

mental breakdown in psychosis (or emerging from LSD consumption) as a mixture of damaged symbolic levels, prefabricated mental patterns and restarting attempts of Gestalt building: all of which can be seen as potential building stones of a new reality.

Results of his comprehensive hallucinogenic research were to him proof and confirmation of his theoretical approach. He fostered a discourse on a new 'conditional-genetic Psychopathology', strongly opposed to the 'Freudian misinterpretation of symbolism' and courageously challenging Carl Jaspers widely adopted paradigms on mental illness as an "erroneous identification of appearance and phenomenon", rejecting Jasper's scientific approach as "rigid and fixated on substance".

Attacking both godfathers of psychopathological discourse at the same time did not make him too many friends, and his theoretical papers – albeit strongly evidence based in hallucinogenic research – proved to be too complicated to gain entry to mainstream discussion. His meticulously formulated 'transphenomenal dynamic mental steering system (tdyst)' remains a still undetected goldmine of structuralism research. Leuner was fully aware of a partial parallelism of gestalt- and symbol process. Thus he decided to replace the term 'Gestalt' with the term 'structure' in most of his scientific writings, "to better grasp its coincidence with complex symbolic qualities". This unfortunate decision did not pay out but led to him being cut off from the 'Gestalt' debate. This is more deplorable as Leuner emerged as the most successful innovator in implementing 'Gestalt' and Symbol theory in clinical practice. He invented 'symbol-therapy' (Katathymes Bilderleben) an extremely successful method of treatment, using imaginative 'Gestalten' which has been integrated internationally in many hospitals, dealing with severe forms of mental illness.

Ernst Cassirer never considered himself being a Gestalt theorist. Yet, his philosophical writings and even more his psychopathological research and his publications have been strongly influenced by 'Gestalt' ideas and have mutually influenced many researchers coming from a 'Gestalt' background.

Referring to the American Neurologist Jackson, he agrees with his view that the loss of Speech (Aphasia) cannot be seen as the mere inability of word building, but as a disorder in the construction of predicative sentences, "in general those determining the being, the kind or relatedness of objects" (p132)

In Cassirer's opinion it is not (!) the presence of Gestalt as a directly given phenomenon of nature which allows a full understanding of its formation. On the contrary, it is the escape from those concrete visual spheres into a virtual realm of relations and structures which allows what the Greek word "symbolein" actually means: the creation of wholeness, a symbolic form, deriving from complementary correspondents - like the human brain and its socially constructed milieu.

Regarding underlying patterns of the contributing correspondents that facilitate this process, it is this abstract phenomenon of 'praegnanz' that makes Gestalt possible - not just the concrete superficial characteristics of both actors, even though it is their fascinating uniqueness which catches the observers' eye at the first glance.

In his fundamental research on 'Substance and Function' (1910) he explained: *"What is a given and what is known to us about the realm of consciousness are never isolated fragments, assembling to generate an observable impact. Instead it always is a well constructed, sophisticated manifold, organized by interrelations of all kind which, only due to our power of abstraction, can be separated in its different parts. The question cannot be put as how we can start with the isolated parts to achieve wholeness, but*

*how, starting from wholeness we get to its parts. Elements as such cannot exist without some form of inner relatedness; thus trying to extract their possible ways of relatedness from the sole elements is bound to failure."*

*"Whatever kind or form of the subject, this is why", Cassirer elaborated in 1920, "the point of view of a copying observance has to be replaced by an 'architectonical interconnectedness'."* Cassirer (1999/1937) refers to the example of transformation-groups in mathematics to clarify the way in which levels of world making – based on their underlying invariant structures – can be connected to each other and furthermore can be transformed into each other. Thus certain qualities emerge as finally being compatible which seemed mutually contradictory in the first place.

Transferred into clinical terms this procedure requires – at least for a certain period of time – movement away from the sensual concreteness of symptomatology. A step too far for quite a number of doctors who defy any idea of having their medical approach, or their patient's behavior as such, deconstructed into what looks like lifeless sequences of abstract patterns.

Yet this contradiction vanishes with our growing knowledge that clarifying invariants more rigidly on one side brings up a much more sophisticated picture of the uniqueness of concrete personal elements at the same time – and that it is the merger of both these aspects which finally can create 'Gestalt'.

Research in animal physiology has revealed that their sense-perception is divided up in more variable versus less variable components, thus differentiating type-specific, characteristic patterns from those which are random or related to just a sole situation.

Cassirer mentions Spinoza's praise of the philosophical character of mathematics. It is only due to their trajectories that thoughts can escape from all concrete sensual relatedness; thus enabling mankind to free itself from the dependency of their narrow purposes. This openness to abstract thinking is no reductionism, but widens our focus on others as on ourselves and is a key for understanding the multiple layers and the metamorphosis on which our activities are based.

Similar controversies arose in the debate on Euclidian Geometry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Riemann's idea of proposing a whole Group of different virtual Geometries, dependant on the change of underlying invariants – today accepted as one of the fundamentals of scientific and technical progress - was during those days attacked as 'outright nonsense'.

It is Cassirer (1937 p129) pointing out those variable and abstract thoughts would have been unthinkable in ancient Greece. Introducing virtual spheres might even have led to a breakdown of their culturally agreed 'ways of world making', very much intertwined with and relying on sensual and concrete everyday experience.

Yet there is no reason in considering those problems might still occur today: "albeit we totally let go of the immediate perception, letting their elements vary freely amongst each other." It is this new – and more distant – approach to facilitate the emergence of a new quality, which shows how different objects within different frames of reference can be transformed into each other.

This, translated into clinical terms, might finally lead the way to a better understanding of miraculously changing symptoms in the course of many serious mental illnesses.

## Gestalt theory and Psychiatry: worth a second try?

Gestalt theory - still too heavily intertwined with the very sensual aspects of its object - has only recently come up with a more complex, abstract reinterpretation of its own ideas: doing away with too detailed descriptions of 'making sense' and drawing conclusions towards more wide-ranging trajectories of 'finding closure'.

These include, to mention just a few, proposals to merge the concept of 'Gestalt' with research on system-dynamics, synergetics and chaos theory (Tschacher 2004), taking a focus on stabilizing early mental codes and pattern building (Kriz 2001), observing the loss of 'Gestalt' in psychosis and schizophrenia (Uhlhaas/Silberstein 2003), reviewing the relation of 'Gestalt theory and psychopathology' (Stemberger 2000) and a proposal by Andersch in translating Cassirer's 'Invariants of Experience' into a 'Matrix of mental formation' as a basic structure of consciousness (Andersch 2007).

In reforming itself Gestalt theory still has the potential to substantively contribute to an overdue debate about a 'New Psychopathology' – redetecting philosophical roots which had already been defined by Gurwitsch in the late 1940s: to escape from a corset of narrow clinical understanding, to search for the fulfillment of 'Gestalt' not in every single move but in creating protective nets of security – allowing a free flow of thoughts, levels of abstraction and complexity.

Gurwitsch looks at human development as on a variety of different yet irreplaceable levels of 'world-making', levels of perspective, creating the space for possibilities and to finally recognize, that the very complex construct enabling mankind to do all of this has until now been taken for granted, not being researched properly, continuously neglected in its wide-ranging importance.

Gestalt theory can be successful by not chasing every detail, not focusing on every subject, not losing itself in the power of every picture but to contribute to a therapeutic method which creates basic conditions where failures are not damaging, changes are permitted, delays are accepted, fragmentation of our acting can be balanced, rooms of resonance and nets of safety are provided, enabling and even encouraging the artists to practice their risky tasks high up under the tent's ceiling to the limit of their skills with a minimum of anxiety and fear.

This kind of approach would reconnect to Kurt Lewin's early ideas, pointing out that *"amongst adults.. generally a number of specific, separated suspension systems (exist), which only on rare occasions and never to their full extent will reach a level of relaxation. Yet they are the very reservoir of energy for all our actions and without their distinguished separation towards all the others, no organized and purposeful action would be possible". (Lewin 1926)*

This is a description of the very potential, where 'Gestalt' comes close to its core, and close to the make-up of consciousness: in creating a free flowing matrix, a solar system of interrelated connections, which is not yet consciousness in itself, but which provides the conditions to use free action potential in a creative way; providing the dancing floor (and the music) for those who wish to dance if they want to.

## Gestalt- and Symbol-theory: two sides of one coin



Close observation reveals that research in Gestalt- and Symbol theory is dealing with many overlapping issues, and that both could learn and profit from each other much more in the future.

Autoregulative 'Gestalt' (autoregulative Gestalten) is identical with the Freudian symbol in dream and alienation, reconnected to emerging inner correspondents, not allocated to external signs and without memory or recollection. H.C. Leuner would have used his term of 'preformed patterns' (praeformierte Schablonen) and has rightly so stressed the point that the emergence of these complexes is a legitimate attempt of coping with stressful situations and that those formations should be seen (and therapeutically used) as building stones of a future healing process.

In contrast: Symbolic Form (symbolische Formung) is a conscious (not always knowingly formed) mental 'Gestalt' – connected to an external sign, with the potential of being transferred out of its connectedness to the original situation; a form of movement (Bewegungsform) which anticipates various frames of reference, provides formalized rooms of resonance and 'ways of world-making', thus opening up spontaneity, creativity and future.

Erich Wulff has used the term of "mutual receptiveness and interrelatedness of sense and meaning" (Wulff 1995 p172); *"...in this way it constitutes an agreed and possible world...for all subjects..as one which is potentially making sense, just understandable. Or in different terms: this is the only way that transforms individual experience into 'Intersubjectivity', an easeful (sense making?) participation of subjects in a world, providing a universal meaning for all its different entities. Thus participation can only be 'partial' (also in a sense of particularity); I cannot own this world in its entirety – while remaining in an intersubjective state, but I can perceive it – like a horizon - from changing points of view (point of reference?), as a metamorphoses of perspectives."* (Wulff 1995 p173)

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Anmerkungen:

- \*S3 Kurt Grelling: Gestalttheoretician. Arrested following his escape from Germany to Belgium. Deported to France and held in several Intern camps (Vichy Zone) His officially granted immigration to the US was delayed following (wrong) information of Grelling being a communist. Deported to KZ Auschwitz on September 14<sup>th</sup> 1942 and murdered about four days later.
- \*\*S7 Leontjew describes ‚Gestalt-building‘(Gestaltung) by symbolic formation as a ‚mechanism of building mechanisms‘,(Bildungsmechanismen von Mechanismen‘ 1977 S291) He points out that animal behavior never relies on a proper usage of tools, and that typical copying activities in small children (Echo kinesis, -mimie, -lalie) come to a close early into their second year. It is regularly

replaced by copying provided patterns, which are determined by a special form of copying activity (Nachahmungshandlungen). Their process of emergence is not fostered by a rewarding stimulus but by the unification of the child's own activity with its imagined purpose. (Saporoshez 1958). Zit n. Leontjew (1977 S295)

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