

PSYCHOLOGY OF ART AND MUSIC

(extract from D. Brett King and Michael Wertheimer: [Max Wertheimer & Gestalt Theory](#), New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, pp. 370-371))

Wertheimer's fascination with the Gestalt structure of music and art was shared by several prominent artists. During the 1920s and 1930s, artists Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, and Josef Albers explicitly drew upon Gestalt theory for inspiration in their writings, paintings, and lectures at the German Bauhaus school. [fn 9] The Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher was also demonstrably influenced by some of the work on figure-ground relationships in the Gestalt literature on perception. [fn 10] Wertheimer's interest in this area continued after he immigrated to America, as shown by his course on "The Psychology of Music and Art" at the New School. Koffka too was interested in the area and devoted several publications to the contributions of Gestalt theory to the analysis of art. [fn 11]

It was Rudolf Arnheim (who took over the New School course on the psychology of art when Wertheimer died) who developed in greatest detail the implications of Gestalt theory for the understanding of architecture, music, painting, poetry, sculpture, radio, cinema, and theater. His books have been used extensively in courses on art history, art appreciation, the performance arts, and communication. [fn 12] A successful artist organizes sensory facts according to such fundamental Gestalt principles as unity, balance, Prägnanz, and segregation. Like Wertheimer, Arnheim saw the principles of Gestalt theory as ubiquitously evident in the natural world and the domain of the arts, not only in the rigorous constraints of the laboratory. [fn 13]. Mandler and Mandler have expressed the widely-shared judgment that Arnheim's work "has been central and seminal and is certainly one of the milestones in the contribution of Gestalt psychology to American culture." [fn 14]

Although not as systematic, exhaustive, or visible as Arnheim, other scholars too have examined the psychology of art and music from a Gestalt perspective. Gestalt theory was used by critic Max Kobbert to interpret and analyze modern informal art, in particular the work of Jackson Pollock. [fn 15] One scholar analyzed Gestalt patterns in classical art as well as in wallpaper in trying to understand the "unconscious appeal" of much modern art. [fn 16] A book by H. E. Rees employed the Gestalt principles of Prägnanz, integration, adjustment, and purposive differentiation in describing the creative processes various artists have used in architecture, dance, literature, music, painting, and sculpture. [fn 17] Others such as Adelbert Ames at Dartmouth College and Hoyt Sherman at Ohio State University argued that the Gestalt principles of perceptual organization can be used constructively for art education, [fn 18] and Gestalt theory has been advocated as an effective tool in music instruction as well. [fn 19] Raymond Holder Wheeler at the University of Kansas and a colleague even analyzed the epochs in the history of music by contrasting what they called cold, atomistic periods (for example, program music and lyrics) with warm, Gestalt periods in music (for example, serious operas, tragedies, and institutionalized music). [fn 20] Gestalt principles have also been used in the literary analysis of poetry, and specifically in efforts to understand how people comprehend metaphors. [fn 21]

Footnotes

9. Marianne L. Teuber (1973). New aspects of Paul Klee's Bauhaus style. In *Paul Klee: Paintings and watercolors from the Bauhaus years, 1921-1931*. Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center; Marianne L. Teuber (1976). *Blue Night by Paul Klee*. In Mary Henle, ed., *Vision and artifact: Essays in honor of Rudolf Arnheim*. New York: Springer, pp. 131-151.
10. Marianne L. Teuber (1974). Sources of ambiguity in the prints of Maurits C. Escher. *Scientific American*, 231, 90-104.
11. Kurt Koffka (1940). Problems in the psychology of art. *Bryn Mawr Notes and Monographs*, 9, 179-273; Kurt Koffka (1942). The art of the actor as a psychological problem. *American Scholar*, 11, 315-326.
12. e.g., Rudolf Arnheim (1966). *Toward a psychology of art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Rudolf Arnheim (1974). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Rudolf Arnheim (1986). *New essays on the psychology of art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
13. Rudolf Arnheim (1943). Gestalt and art. *Journal of Aesthetics*, 2, 71-75.
14. J. M. Mandler and G. Mandler (1969). The diaspora of experimental psychology: The Gestaltists and others. In D. Fleming and B. Bailyn, eds., *The intellectual migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 394.
15. Max Kobbert (1989). Annäherung an 'informelle Kunst' mit Mitteln der Gestaltpsychologie: Aufgezeigt an Jackson Pollock's Nr. 32 von 1950 [Approach to 'informal art' with Gestalt psychology methods: Demonstrated with Jackson Pollock's Nr. 32 from 1950], *Gestalt Theory*, 11, 205-218.
16. Anton Ehrenzweig (1948). Unconscious form-creation in art. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 21, 185-214.
17. H. E. Rees (1942). *A psychology of artistic creation as evidenced in autobiographical statements of artists*. New York: Teacher's College.
18. Harold J. McWhinnie (1992). Gestalt psychology and art education: Adelbert Ames and Hoyt Sherman. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 75, 1233-1234.
19. H. Steinitz (1953/1954). Hapsihologia Hatavnitit v'-horaat Hamusika [Gestalt psychology and teaching of music]. *Hahinuh*, 26, 45-53.
20. R. H. Wheeler and T. Gaston (1941). The history of music in relation to climatic and cultural fluctuations. *Proceedings of the Music Teachers' National Association*, 432-438.
21. Reuven Tsur, Joseph Glicksohn, and Chanita Goodblatt (1991). Gestalt qualities in poetry and the reader's absorption style. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 16, 487-500. Goodblatt and Glicksohn developed a "Gestalt-Interaction Theory of Metaphor" based upon Richards's "Interaction Theory of Metaphor." See, e.g., Joseph Glicksohn (1994). Putting interaction theory to the empirical test: Some promising results. *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 2, 223-235; Glicksohn, J., and Chanita Goodblatt (1993). Metaphor and Gestalt: Interaction theory revisited. *Poetics Today*, 14, 83-97; Goodblatt, C. (1991). Semantic fields and metaphor: A case study. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 20, 173-187; Goodblatt, C. (1996). Semantic fields and metaphor: Going beyond theory. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 14, 65-78; Goodblatt, C. (2001). Adding an empirical dimension to the study of poetic metaphor. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 30, 167-180; Goodblatt, C. and Glicksohn, J. (2002). Metaphor comprehension as problem solving: An online study of the reading process. *Style*, 36, 428-445; Goodblatt, C., and Glicksohn, J. (2003). From Practical Criticism to the practice of literary criticism. *Poetics Today*, 24, 207-236; I. A. Richards (1923/24). Psychology in the reading of poetry. *Psyche*, 4, 6-23; Richards, I. A. (1926). *Principles of literary criticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Richards, I. A. (1929). *Practical criticism: A study of literary judgment*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; Richards, I. A. (1936). *The philosophy of rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press.