

# Symmetry of STRUCTURE

an interdisciplinary Symposium

Abstracts

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**SYMMETRIES  
IN ART HISTORY —**

**'ACTUAL GENESIS' AND  
THE 'AESTHETICS OF RECEPTION'.**

**An introductory abstract**

In my lecture I shall focus upon an abandoned if not forgotten aspect of perception and artistic creativity and try to put it into a new frame of reference. I am speaking of the findings on *Aktualgenese*, which were initially presented by members of the new Leipzig School of psychology in the second quarter of our century. The new framework proposed is the grand and supposedly unifying theory of reception, which has been recently adopted by art historians. My task will be a threefold one:

- 1) to summarize briefly the main characteristics of these two seemingly incompatible concepts in order to mark promising fields of interchange connecting psychology and art history;
- 2) to point out where interdisciplinary reasoning, running for decades on almost parallel tracks, was derailed and aborted — and where it might be taken up again using further evidence from the abundant fields of art history; and
- 3) last but not least to consider the role of symmetries as some sort of catalyst or fallout of likely feedbacks between 'actual genesis' and 'reception'.

**'Actual Genesis'**

The term *Aktualgenese* was first used by Friedrich Sander (1928), one of the junior stars of the 'new' Leipzig school of psychology. Due to ambition and/or conviction Sander turned into an open supporter of fascism. Thus, research into the phenomena of 'actual genesis' appears to be akin to and stained with his later political orientation. It is debatable, however, whether Sander himself was actually the first to notice the peculiar effects of *Aktualgenese*; perhaps the credit should go to his pupil Wohlfahrt (1925-1932) instead. Anyway, Sander was a clever and quickwitted science manager, who instantly grasped the importance, put a catching label to it and instigated, supervised and edited a highly remarkable series of his pupils' studies during the thirties.

At that time in Germany, at least two major schools of psychology had been competing for dominance (A. Wellek, 1960). There was a young and vigorous band of Berliners, Köhler, Koffka and Wertheimer; they were to become the world-famous protagonists of *gestalt* psychology. The even 'newer'

Leipzig school was headed by the less well known Felix Krueger. The latter had been called a successor to the late pope of experimental psychology, Wilhelm Wundt. Against the bold but simple "theory" released from Berlin the Leipzig school set a much more complex and flexible *Ganzheitspsychologie* which never made it into the public vocabulary of science by slogans even though it had some stunning discoveries to offer.

The progenitors and adepts of *gestalt* psychology were and still are convinced to have reached the unalterable foundations of human perception and understanding. Their belief rests on a twofold set of well defined, terse, shapes (*prägnante Formen*) coexisting inside and outside the head, one governed by physical topology of the brain, the other by analog neural representation. Every time a match is attained between one of the preconceived pairs, the person experiencing this falling into place receives a cognitive kick ranging from simple satisfaction to higher revelation. Even though this notorious theory was based on experimentally justified fundamentals, its authors and followers advanced farflung consequences. These - often criticized - conjectures related certain outstanding properties of perception with invariants of visual thinking aloof to historicity.

*Komplex-* and *Ganzheitspsychologie*, as conceived by the Leipzig school (F. Sander / H. Volkelt, 1962), didn't place persons and their experiences - even under reduced experimental conditions - outside history. The sharp precision of geometric shapes said to be pushing along *gestalt* perception was, according to Leipzig scholars, only a minor subset of rather undefined complexes carrying in addition moods and feelings like affluent colour-tinting. Cognition and emotion were seen as inseparable states of overall attitudes which made elementary mechanisms of perception highly susceptible to the momentary environment, i.e. historical conditions. Fear or happy expectation can easily trigger, as we all know, quite different apparitions from identical sets of sensory data. This kind of commonsense wisdom was preserved and put into no uncertain scientific terms by members of the Leipzig school. Especially the 'actual genesis' of shapes and objects taking place on the doubled-sided projection screen of the eye bore testimony to the highly diversified strategies persons apply to handle and match incoming data to already preconceived or quickly contrived scenarios.

### 'Reception'

The 'aesthetics of reception' resemble a more or less coherent bunch of concepts specifically concerning the reader's part in literature. Rooted in and derived from ideas propounded by Prague structuralism, reception theory is frequently considered a domain if not invention of the school of Konstanz (H.R. Jauss 1970; Wolfgang Iser 1972). Beside structuralism proper and the pure dogma of semiotics the receptionist theory has clearly become the most pragmatic and promising of the systematic ventures to overcome modern solipsism, which had put the creators and receivers of artificial communications into separate 'black holes'. While literary receptionism has been debated

extensively for more than two decades (R. Warning ed., 1975), translation into the fields of art history has only recently been advocated (W. Kemp ed., 1985).

The crucial postulate of receptionist aesthetics bestows upon any addressee of messages a vital part; it is comparable, though by no means similar, to the labour of the sender. The receiver has to fill in, to complete, to reenact the script or picture from his own point of view. The corollary of such distributed effort obviously can be stated as a question: To what degree can and will intention determine the empty elements reserved for possible participants in these artificially delayed - alas: asymmetric - communications? Some theoreticians (W. Kemp, 1985, p. 205) blandly state that all art is deliberately designed to accommodate or even to impersonate the receiver! On the other hand apparently the proverbial creativity of misunderstanding would aptly provide a third cornerstone for receptionistic concretion of artful subjectmatter. And from there we should turn all the way around and consider the possibilities of actual-genetic imagination within the framework of aesthetic production and reception.

### Symmetry

Since one of the characteristics of actual-genetic evolution is the regularization of features, meaning in most cases an application of symmetries, it stands to reason to take symmetry as a standard of reference when the effects of fading memories or changing interests do their subconscious modelling of ideas and shapes. On the other hand perhaps the historical evidence preserved in the works of art may shed additional light upon shifts and mutations in the emergent or waning symmetries.

### Evidence

Some of the most intriguing staging areas of actual-genetic processes seem to be accessible in mediaeval miniature-paintings. Evidence ranges from obvious scientific representations recycled through repeated copying - for instance *Mappae Mundi* (Clausberg, 1988) - to the very realms of visionary enlightenment as preserved in some outstanding works by Hildegard from Bingen (Clausberg 1980). It can hardly surprise that science and hallucination not only coexisted, but depended upon each other where almost no external first hand observation was possible and methods of verification were quite different from our modern standards. Imaginations of the inner eye resembled and initiated recurrent loops of perception, memorizing and reproduction to be eventually put down on parchment and explained by written commentary. Looking backwards through art history we may perceive these visions materialized and stretched into iconographic chains of pictorial proliferation. Another, more recent case of selfcentered 'actual-genetic reception' may be found in the work of William Turner, who is famous for his regress to almost abstract patterns of light.

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