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Hidden Heritage: A Gestalt Theoretical Approach to the Aesthetics of Management and Organisation

Introduction

Gestalt psychologists have traditionally emphasised the sensual perception and the aesthetic dimension of organisations. Today, however, they only take small steps to apply their specific knowledge to processes of organisational change and management development that are largely influenced by these complex and psychological factors. The heritage of Gestalt theory also remains largely ignored in contemporary management research that is increasingly interested in aesthetics, so both sides miss opportunities to bring together their potential in research and practice (Braun & Zeichhardt 2011). Challenging much of the positivist tradition in management and organisational research, the emerging interdisciplinary field of “organisational aesthetics” (Taylor & Hansen 2005; Strati 1999), or “Wirtschaftsästhetik” in German (Biehl-Missal 2011b), suggests a strong qualitative and interpretative approach to organisations, focusing on aesthetics in the sense of sensual perception. Responding to calls for new creative, innovative and sustainable approaches to management in the 21st century (Adler 2006), scholars have argued for an aesthetic sensibility towards manifold material forms (Gagliardi 2006) and interpersonal aesthetic relations in organisations.

While these approaches have certainly caused a stir in positivist mainstream management studies and still are subject to scrutiny, Gestalt theory is very close to this field of research, having influenced many of its tenets from the very beginning. One of the prominent examples is Kurt Lewin who, in his early Berlin time in the 1920s, analysed the psychological field structures and tensions in organisations (Lück 2011). Although this European stream of research was suddenly interrupted in 1933 when the Nazis came to power, Lewin broadened this perspective during his life in the multi-dimensional culture of the USA. Lewin linked Gestalt theoretical thinking to the psychology of small and large groups, formal and informal organisations and the cultural and social climate as a whole. Lewin’s students and successors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology developed the Gestalt heritage, conceptualizing social and economic structures as more or less holistic organizations: a systemic whole, with a dynamic

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and generative field structure. It was an early challenge to the prevailing concept of the rational “economic man” in Frederick W. Taylor’s “Scientific Management” that assumed a more passive and financially motivated worker, disregarding dynamic processes of sense-making and complex psychological influences related to work. Gestalt theory preceded management concepts that later acknowledged that people attempt to make sense of organizations (Weick 1969), valuing the multifaceted and subjective motivations of the “social man”, the “self-actualizing man” and “complex man”.

What belonged closely together almost a century ago is now very much disconnected and ignorant of its shared tradition and heritage. We argue that organisation studies, in particular through the increasing influence of the aesthetic approach which strongly focuses on sensual perceptions, are concerned with a plethora of questions that reflect much of the tradition of Gestalt psychology. The strong Gestalt pedigree is overlooked in this context and researchers miss out on insights that can be relevant for what they are doing – with regard to theory building as well as to their practical involvement in organisations when practical research interactions and interventions take place with organisational members.

In this article, we shall outline the aesthetic turn in organisation and management studies, discussing its background, achievements and potential for future research. Our contribution is to point to a number of sections which are, we argue, strongly influenced by Gestalt theory. Illuminating the hidden heritage of Gestalt theory, our aim is not to look back, but forward, emphasising the potential of Gestalt theory in management and organisational research. We aim to inspire management scholars to further explore interdisciplinary Gestalt approaches in order to benefit from their aesthetic methodology and theoretical insights. We also hope to encourage Gestalt scholars to (re-)consider more detailed analyses of the world of management and organisation – a tradition that seems to be largely forgotten in this area.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we will present the development of an aesthetic approach in organisation and management studies, outlining its main tenets and epistemological perspective. Then we discuss its hidden heritage by drawing on Gestalt theory. What follows is a reflection on the most promising development in the management field, i.e. the use of an appropriate, arts-based research methodology and the actual use of arts in organisations in the context of organisational development and change. This touches on a major area of Gestalt psychology with an immensely rich body of knowledge and experience that remains to be shared and also to be applied practically in organisations. We build our argument by discussing the theory U (Scharmer 2009) as a link *par excellence* between management theory and practice and Gestalt theory. In the conclusion, we develop further implications for future research in both fields.

Organisational Aesthetics Research

For more than 80 years now, Gestalt theory has accounted for the sensual perception in organisations. For a couple of decades or so, organisation and management studies have exhibited an increasing interest in the sensually perceivable and “aesthetic” dimension of people’s existence in organisations. Previously, management studies had for a long time almost exclusively focused on the instrumental sphere of work, emphasising concepts of scientific management and rational organisation. Shortcomings of positivist management studies soon became apparent, as outlined in Karl E. Weick’s *Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969) that introduced into conventional management theory the consideration of subjective aspects of organisational life. This was further developed in many popular and academic works that emphasised creative and socially inter-related processes, for example in the concept of the “art” of leadership (Degot 1987).

On a broader level, this change in perspective has been influenced by the publication of works in philosophy, including for example those by Wolfgang Iser (1996) and Gernot Böhme (2003) who have written at some length about the “sensual” constitution of the economic, social and interpersonal dimensions of contemporary Western capitalism, the “aesthetic economy”. Today’s aesthetic approaches to management studies also answer very recent calls for new social and creative skills following scandals in banking, the media and the public sector, which have exposed limitations of current management practice that often is exclusively focused on the bottom line, leaving out of the equation many interpersonal, embodied and emotional dimensions of leadership and management. It can be asserted that organisational life largely depends on sensual perception and aesthetics, implicit and tacit elements that hold together what participants and stakeholders perceive as organisational reality (Biehl-Missal 2011b, 20).

The general surge of aesthetics in organizational studies is driven by the search for alternate methods of knowledge creation following constructivist views and the postmodern ‘crisis of representation’ in organizational research (Taylor & Hansen 2005, 1212). Foregoing the positivist mind-body separation and its logico-deductive thinking, this stream of management research draws on interpretive and critical perspectives, claiming that knowledge is strongly influenced by feelings and sensual, embodied perception. Organisations are not judged in terms of “beauty” but with reference to all aesthetic categories including the comic, the tragic and the ugly. This continues Michael Polanyi’s (1958, reprinted in 1978) idea of tacit knowledge that roughly corresponds to sensory/aesthetic knowing that often is contrasted with intellectual/explicit knowing. This reflects philosophical conceptions of aesthetics that go beyond artistic judgment in a Kantian sense, focusing on a fundamental access to the sensuous nature of human experience (like Herder, Schelling, later Straus 1936). Applied

to organisations this means analysing how people sensually perceive spaces, relations, imagery, atmospheres and interactions and exploring how they use their five classic senses of vision (sight), audition (hearing), tactile stimulation (touch), olfaction (smell), and gustation (taste), and their general response to situations. This also introduced into organisation studies question about “how it feels to work” (Warren 2008) and previously ignored subjective and negative reactions such as “disgust” (Pelzer 2002) that may be evoked by leadership interactions or the atmosphere in the office. Explicitly critical is organisational aesthetics research when problematizing manifold attempts of contemporary control in organisations that go beyond the surface and operate on the subconscious level by sensual and implicit manipulation via architectures, atmospheres, narratives and manifold pressures to perform (Warren & Rehn 2006).

A range of publications has formed the basis of an ever-growing field of organisational aesthetics research (Strati 1999; Linstead & Höpfl 2000; Carr & Hancock 2003; Taylor & Hansen 2005), as have conference series (The Art of Management and Organisation conference AoMO; The Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism SCOS) and special issues in management journals. Meanwhile, we have seen the emergence of specialised journals such as the *Organizational Aesthetics* journal. The aesthetic approach assembles works that draw on philosophy, cultural studies, theatre, film and media studies, architecture, aesthetics, psychology and many more, and also includes a range of radical traditions within the social sciences, including critical theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism. It has recently been recognised in management handbooks as well, for example the *Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization* (King 2008). In Germany, research in this area is quite young and largely inhibited and misunderstood by a positivist mainstream business studies tradition (Biehl-Missal 2011b) that is less open to interdisciplinary research than, for example, international business schools. Research in the US and the UK in particular benefits from the diversity of business school lecturers educated in sociology, the humanities, the arts and psychology (Rowlinson & Hassard 2011).

Rather than sketching in greater detail the development of the field (see Taylor & Hansen 2005; Biehl-Missal 2011b), we shall focus on areas that could most likely benefit from Gestalt theory, namely methodology and arts-based practice that have developed greatly during the past years. We are witnessing an increasing emphasis on actual aesthetic practice in organisational research. For example, metaphorical analyses of organisations as theatre (Mangham & Overington 1987), where actors play their roles according to a script in front of audiences, came to focus on the intricate aesthetic situation that is co-created and negotiated by people’s presence, materiality and sensing (Biehl-Missal 2011a). This particular link between postmodern theatre and organisational practice for example has been analysed from a Gestalt psychology perspective (Saner 1999). Metaphorical

studies on dance in organisations (Chandler 2012) have also become more performative (Kolo 2012), and require new research methods and practical interventions. Although there is clear evidence on the aesthetic implications of Gestalt theory – especially by the highly esteemed works of Rudolf Arnheim (1969) – detailed account of how aesthetic practice organises economic and work processes has not been given until now. In what comes next, we will discuss Gestalt theory as an epistemological perspective for creating aesthetic methods that can be applied in organizational theory and practice.

Gestalt Theory and Aesthetics

Gestalt theory is mostly understood as a concept for optical relations and even optical illusions that draws on the form-generating capability of our senses, particularly with respect to the visual recognition of figures and whole forms. This view is limited, being restricted to the popular aspects of the theory, and it falls short of the broader theoretical perspective of Gestalt theory's founders. Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka emphasised the visual nature of human (and even animal) experience by demonstrating the effects of Gestalt in phenomena like learning, thinking, and acting under the conditions of everyday life. They found that psychological processes in general are regulated by a range of Gestalt laws ("Gestaltgesetze") which structure the field according to a most consistent and homogeneous order ("gute Gestalt").

Even before the 1933 rupture, Gestalt psychology was developing a cultural perspective that acknowledges complex social and also organisational phenomena. In the US of the 1940s its macroscopic view on over-individual (non-personal) entities founded a new conception of understanding experience and action in small groups and organisations or even national characters in terms of imaginative ("field") patterns. By identifying the aesthetic implications of Gestalt or field theory in interpersonal relationships as in organisational spaces, Lewin now theoretically considered and practically explored holistic streaks of group experience – like "styles" or "climates" (Lewin, Lippitt & White 1939). Only three decades later, the Gestalt view re-emerged in research on "organisational culture", first in the US, and soon thereafter in Germany (Schein 1969; 1992). Researchers and practitioners in the area continue to emphasise these sensually perceivable aspects of organisational phenomena, including their aesthetic expression in visuals, rituals and "artefacts" (Schein) and the more general effort in organisations to create a consistent appearance inwards and outwards into the market place ("corporate identity", "corporate culture"). Foregrounding concepts of sensual and visual perception, this area in organisational psychology challenges cognitivist and rationalistic mainstream research. It is open to a transdisciplinary exchange with management studies, sociology and ethnology and also uses creative research methods to approach work in organisations.

Research as Action Research

The aesthetic nature and constitution of organisations and social interactions calls for appropriate research methodologies that were developed in Gestalt theory by Wertheimer and his research group. Psychology has traditionally been dominated by positivist research methods that focus on quantitative, objective and conventional scientific approaches. One of the early advances that developed the field is Köhler's anthropoid research at Tenerife where, between 1913 and 1917, he studied chimpanzees and their abilities to solve problems through visual overview ("Einsicht"; Köhler 1921/63), using qualitative approaches in a field-oriented context. Qualitative experiments since then were continuously undertaken in research settings of Gestalt psychologists, especially in Lewin's series on the saturation, interruption, repetition and recuperation of actions ("Handlungsganzheiten").

The ground-breaking aspect of this approach was the role of the researcher who acted as an active participant and co-creator of the Gestalt process. The researcher acted as a participant who constructed the experimental situation and observed its course, thereby influencing and determining the psychological situation and all processes of Gestalt formation and construction. This understanding of "action research" made it possible to conceive of psychological work in organisations in new ways. Valuing a researcher's subjectivity as the basis for the impact on organisational members, this approach enabled psychological work in organisations that previously had been denied legitimacy for lacking scientific objectivity and not being sufficiently "rigorous". Organisational research benefits from insights generated by an "active" researcher who includes her or his perception and impact, behaviour in the organisation and resulting artefacts that are analysed in the process.

This approach goes beyond participant observation and includes "participant construction". Action research points to auto-ethnographic elements when the researcher plays a central role in the generation and analysis of data. We see a strong contribution of Gestalt psychology to arts-based research approaches in management studies that are described as most promising because they offer a "medium that can capture and communicate the felt experience, the affect, and something of the tacit knowledge of the day-to-day, moment-to-moment reality of organizations" (Taylor & Hansen 2005, 1224).

Gestalt psychology's tradition values subjective reflection on the research setting that was created and influenced, rather than assuming "neutrality" as a prerequisite for inquiry. Creative approaches and interventions, disruptions, and changes of perspective are required and desired when they affect participants and evoke further actions and reactions. This suggests that researchers should assume and develop an active role when they go into organisations. In the next section,

we will draw on the theory U to argue for a form of action research that combines academic inquiry and consulting processes.

From Research To Organisational Consulting: Theory U

While mainstream psychological research, being delimited by positivist research conventions, has developed as a diagnostic discipline, Gestalt psychology has always been a qualitative research approach for use in complex systems where people interact. From the 1940s, action research started to generate an impact on the scientific approach to social and organisational settings. Despite its pragmatic value, Lewin's idea does not seem to be widely accepted in its methodological rigour. Moreover research and consultancy were considered as separate and distinct areas. The interest in assessing and consulting organizations, which developed subsequently, made use of Lewin's flexible access to social and private institutions – almost omitting the conceptual psychological background of action research.

It was the concept of “organisational cultures” which drew back the view on a process model of scientific actions and developed an active discourse with the field structures in the context of organisations. Since then management theories have (re-)discovered the conceptual and methodological positions of Gestalt theory. Ed Schein's analysis of organisational cultures explicitly utilizes Gestalt thinking for the description and discussion of organisations in terms of “culture diagnosis” and “process consultation” (categorising their Gestalt character by means of “artefacts”, “values” and “basic assumptions”; Schein 1969; Fitzek 2009).

To outline the close relationship between research and consulting, we draw on Claus Otto Scharmer's (2007) theory U, which explicitly builds on the ideas of Kurt Lewin. The theory U is a widely used and broadly accepted model, stressing the relationship between continuous observation in an organisational context and improved management practice. The U-process has attracted attention in business strategy and organisational development practice (Scharmer & Kaeufer 2010), emphasising efforts to connect to an emerging future through a creative, aesthetically sensitive process that allows established patterns to be left behind. The U-process is named after the shape of an immersive movement of continuous observation that finds its turnaround in a central moment of retreat and reflection before an inner knowing emerges that leads to action. The theory U emphasises that managers need to “tune in” and “sense the emerging future” in today's business world that is full of complexities that are defined as dynamic, social, and emerging. Emerging complexity means that the problem's solution is unknown and stakeholder expectations are unclear (Scharmer & Kaeufer 2010, 21). Relying on past experience is difficult in this situation and leaders, as well as researchers, need to find a way to make sense of this emerging new reality.

The U-shaped approach described in contemporary management literature strongly resembles Gestalt psychology's modelling of problem solving – but it does not refer to its hidden theoretical heritage. What Scharmer tries to exhibit – the sense of actual and sensuous awareness of what determines the field at present (“presencing”) – points back to an early and fundamental knowledge of Gestalt theory. As a matter of fact the U-shaped process echoes the idea of inversion (“Umstülpung”) as a mechanism of problem solving in complex task fields that was explored by Gestalt psychologists Wolfgang Köhler (1921/63) and Karl Duncker (1935), whereby Köhler defined the sudden turn of attention in the theory U as “learning through insight”.

The creative acts of problem solving are defined by Gestalt psychology not as linear and rational processes of foresight that work towards pre-defined goals with established tools and patterns. Rather they are seen as emergent from the suspension of habitual patterns, the letting-go and opening-up of new understandings by presencing that goes from seeing to sensing towards a new quality of perception and that is not only an intellectual, but bodily-based, empathetic and aesthetic connection to the context, to the space, the atmosphere. This “Gestalt switch”, through a turn of perspective, allows the achievement of results through new practices.

To look behind the surface of rational information in organisations and to understand their sensual, aesthetic, deeper structure, is a concrete achievement of the Gestalt theory of management processes. Psychoanalytic writers who realized Gestalt theoretical insights deepened the psychological knowledge of the process of art creation and/or reception. Boundary-crossing scholars like Ernst Kris, Arthur Koestler and Anton Ehrenzweig found that creation is organised by Gestalt principles like ambivalence, metamorphosis and inversion (Kris 1952; Koestler 1964; Ehrenzweig 1969).

Only nowadays have management concepts discovered that processes and products of the arts are useful in helping leaders assess current challenges and in making visible the emerging future in creative ways. As going down the left side of the U requires crossing thresholds of suspension, redirecting, and letting go, moving up the right side of the U requires further steps of giving form and shape to the vision and intention, and then performing (Scharmer & Kaeufer 2010, 26). In the following section, we take a closer look at how arts-based methods in research and consultancy are applied in organisational research.

Aesthetic Inquiry and Consulting

Form a Gestalt psychological point of view the use of art-based interventions in organizations makes sense because of the Gestalt characteristics of creative experience and actions. Gestalt psychology has provided theoretical discussion

and experimental proof for the Gestalt profile as a crucial condition for creativity and insight. To our disappointment, however, only to a limited extent have these ideas been applied practically, for example to work in organisations. One exception of how arts-based methods and creative processes are being used is art therapy that employs painting which, however, in most cases is restricted to clinic and diagnostic use with individual patients. Only recently, art has been applied in a management studies context, not as part of a therapeutic process, but as a research process designed to produce new knowledge (Rippin 2013), and also art therapy has received more attention in interdisciplinary research methodology (McNiff 2008).

Gestalt psychology however has not discussed the increasing use of aesthetic research methods and aesthetic tools in organisations to an appropriate extent. As discussed above, the Gestalt switch is seen as a promising start to engage in process modulation in organisations but requires further studies because its success depends on whether the process is an on-going one that creates further autopoietic impact. We suggest that the use of arts-based methods should become an indispensable part of the aesthetic change process. Change management processes in an organisation can be started with and accompanied by arts-based processes that have similar phases and points of transition. For example arts-based methods such as movement and dance (Biehl-Missal et al. 2011) involve processes of becoming aware of rhythm, spatial relations and interpersonal dynamics that would not become visible otherwise as they cannot easily be expressed via language. A group exercise with movement involves co-presencing and finally the creation and performance of new movements to negotiate “leading” and “following” in an organisation. The same potential lies in painting, music and other forms of aesthetic impression and expression. Creative and aesthetic elements are used to redesign the situation: “‘Prototyping’ does not mean developing the final form of an idea, but capturing what is emerging, making it visible, and presenting it to the audience that will work with it or be affected by it ... and then iterate, iterate, iterate” (Scharmer & Kaeufer 2010, 27). This calls for the psychological theory of the switch to be linked to theory on change management and the actual use of arts-based methods in this context. Gestalt psychology links to both sensitive research methods that have emerged in management studies (Warren 2008) and also continues arts-based practical methods, which can be employed as arts-based consulting practice.

A number of management scholars have already used theatre (Taylor 2003), painting (Adler 2010), poetry (Darmer 2006) and other aesthetic methods for organisational inquiry. Arts-based methods have become part of social science (Knowles & Cole 2007) and were tentatively included in the organisational canon (Buchanan & Bryman 2009). It can be assumed that these practices will remain difficult to absorb by mainstream management practice because of

their open and interpretive nature. The use of interpretive arts-based research methods has been an anathema for positivist management studies, and Ann Rippin (2006) described how her subjective explorations with fabrics and quilts were referred to derogatively and as ‘self-indulgent’ by particular members of the academic management community. Arts-based approaches also have struggled in traditional psychology. While methods have been used for example in art therapy to express what cannot be conveyed by conventional language, for a long time they were not applied to research because of the marginal self-image of the discipline and adoption of dominant quantitative modes (McNiff 2008).

At the level of organisational interventions, management studies and practice have developed a firm interest in a practise of arts-based approaches that can benefit from the tradition of Gestalt psychology. The arts increasingly are seen as an inspiration and a useful tool (Darsø 2004; Seifter & Buswick 2010; Biehl-Missal 2011b) and have infused management education (Taylor & Ladkin 2009). We are witnessing a growing use of theatre, sculpture, music and dance for organisational change and employee and leadership development (Berthoin Antal & Strauß 2013; Barry & Meisiek 2010). There is an emerging body of research that accounts for the challenging potential of art, and emphasises possible changes in consciousness of managers (Adler 2006, 2010). A Gestalt psychology approach can be applied here that focuses on processes of sensing, presencing and performing along the U-process and the “switch”. In the next section, we will provide some examples relating to the use of visuals and movement in organisational space and time.

Visual Approaches and Art Coaching

The visual recognition of figures and whole forms instead of just a mere assortment of unordered lines and curves is a basic principle of Gestalt theory that emphasises the form-generating capability of human senses. Gestalt theory and its consideration of complex sensual perception provides a methodological development and adds to visual approaches that are used in organisational practice and research.

Visual arts-based methods in organisations may include training with pictures and artwork, for example about “learning how to look” to further abstract cognition and interpretation skills (Mitra, Hsieh & Buswick 2010). Drawings and sculpture are increasingly used by organisational researchers to get hold of and to express holistic forms rather than verbal units, accounting for intricate and multi-layered forms of experience (Gaya Wicks & Rippin 2010).

Art coaching (Fitzek 2013) is similar and based on Gestalt psychology and has for a long time now been employed in leadership and entrepreneurial training, and also in management education, for example in Gestalt-oriented business

psychology degree schemes, involving museum visits, art history education and aesthetic analytical reflection. Participants use interpretive methods to explore these visuals, emphasising their aesthetic experience and atmosphere that goes beyond semiotic analysis (Biehl-Missal 2013). Gestalt theory has a long history of visual interpretation that is participant-led and thereby links to approaches in organisations that involve joint interpretation (Vince & Warren 2012) and photo elicitation (Warren 2008). These methods require the aesthetic competence that Gestalt psychologists acquire in their training, also by drawing on art history (Fitzek 2013), and this also promises to be useful for leadership development.

Dance and Qualitative Interviews

We suggest a general potential of Gestalt theory with regard to aesthetically sensitive qualitative interview methods. According to its form-giving principle, this approach accounts for complex aesthetic perception that goes beyond the stable visual to include the dynamic. It also addresses the experience in situ, the actual aesthetic or liminal experience in organisational situations, that are considered the pivotal elements for many encounters including the impact of arts-based interventions, but are still under-researched (Berthoin Antal 2009, 16).

For example, we have argued that Gestalt psychology may contribute to the analysis of processes of “leading” and “following” in organisations (Biehl-Missal, Fitzek & Schoppe 2013), which has been exemplified by the metaphor of dance and organisation (Chandler 2012). This is continued practically in contemporary approaches to leadership development that use dance as an arts-based method in choreography workshops to enhance a corporeal understanding of how it feels to “lead” and “follow” at work (Ludevig 2012). Movement is particularly challenging due to its ephemeral nature and complex kinaesthetic rather than verbal and intellectual nature, involving emotion, visual and aural cues, movement, spatial and dynamic elements (Starkes et al. 1990). An approach that relates to Gestalt and morphological psychology (Salber 1977, 2001) accounts for our kinaesthetic, spatial, temporal, affective and dynamic understanding of movement in organizations as well as for individual expressions and negotiations of organizational behaviour, including “leading” and “following”. This can be analysed by conducting narrative in-depth interviews to identify recurring structures in accounts (Fitzek 2010). Morphological interpretations aim to organize and reorganize data to identify psychologically consistent forms (or “Gestalten”). Complementary and conforming relations in experience are identified in individual interviews and then are made transferable through unifying description (Fitzek 2010). This method promises to develop findings regarding the universal perception and aesthetic experience of dynamic interactions in organisations.

So on a broader level, a Gestalt theory method addresses the fundamental aesthetic constitution of knowledge and may infuse a range of research approaches into the topic. It can be applied as an arts-based research and consulting tool in organisations when these behaviours are not only identified but, following the Gestalt switch and its insight, are interactively negotiated and developed, for example when, through dance and movement, different forms of leadership at work are “imagined” that are less “hands-on” and put more emphasis on “giving space”.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have outlined the need for developing Gestalt psychology to re-include the consideration of organisational life. We have indicated some of the ways in which Gestalt psychology can be considered the “lost brother” of organizational aesthetics research that eventually came to theorize the aesthetic constitution of organisations, to which Gestalt theory pointed many decades ago. We have argued that Gestalt theory has contributed to the foundations of this young management research field through Kurt Lewin and colleagues, and may provide much more inspiration for future research in terms of aesthetic methodology and practical use of arts in business.

Today’s management research actively applies arts-based research methods that traditionally are very close to theory and epistemology in Gestalt psychology. The practical application of arts-based methods has been identified as a promising avenue for Gestalt psychology because they allow for a U-shaped process of presencing that leads to a Gestalt switch and consecutive imagination of new ideas in an organisational context. This understanding would combine research and active involvement in organisational processes, as a form of consulting with a Gestalt psychology approach. As a particular methodological contribution, we have identified the practices of visual coaching, narrative in-depth interviews and Gestalt psychological dance and movement exercises that make possible the development of many aesthetic dimensions in work, management and leadership.

On a broader level, we are witnessing an increasing relevance of aesthetic and visual aspects in organisations and in today’s economy (Böhme 2003) that calls for the visual expertise that is very much at the core of Gestalt psychology as a discipline. Gestalt theory also adds to contemporary approaches to work in organisations and leadership that demand the ability to generate innovative insights via an abstract understanding of complex and unpredictable environments.

As regards management practice, the use of arts-based intervention as a growing field in management studies can benefit from previous and parallel insights in Gestalt psychology. Having tentatively pointed out some avenues for future development, we now hope that colleagues will start exploring them further.

We suggest that the interdisciplinary field of organisational aesthetics research embraces the possibility of integrating Gestalt psychology and we hope that we have inspired Gestalt psychologists to reconsider the mundane world of organisations which, now more than ever, needs critical and creative approaches to gauge new opportunities to negotiate, interactively develop and re-imagine organisational and economic reality.

Summary

We explore a relevant but largely disregarded relationship between Gestalt theory and management studies. There is a historic tradition of analysis by Kurt Lewin and other Gestalt scholars that emphasises the “aesthetic” nature of visuals, rituals and artefacts in organisations. This promising strand of organisational inquiry was discontinued and Gestalt psychology and management studies today are largely ignorant of their hidden heritage. In just the last couple of decades, research in the area of management and organisational studies has come to consider the aesthetic sphere of organisations, emphasising people’s sensual experience and broadening the scope of positivist mainstream scholarship. More recent developments in organisational studies consist of arts-based research methods and practical arts-based interventions in organisations that are another traditional element of Gestalt theory, for example in the area of art coaching. We suggest a stronger interdisciplinary exchange and aim to encourage Gestalt scholars to reconsider the mundane world of organisations and to apply practical arts-based research approaches to support change and development processes.

Keywords: Aesthetics, organisation, management, Gestalt theory, arts-based interventions, theory U.

Zusammenfassung

Die Ästhetik von wirtschaftlichen Organisationen wird seit rund zwei Dekaden von der internationalen ästhetischen Management- und Organisationsforschung (Wirtschaftsästhetik) untersucht. Hierbei weitgehend vergessen und nicht hinreichend reflektiert sind die maßgeblichen und tatsächlichen gestaltpsychologischen Ursprünge dieser Forschung, die seit Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler und Kurt Lewin von der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung ausgingen. Neuere Entwicklungen in diesem aufstrebenden Bereich der Managementforschung wie der Einsatz kunstbasierter Methoden in Forschung und Praxis stehen der heutigen Gestaltpsychologie sogar noch näher, beispielsweise das Kunstcoaching, wobei aber das Potenzial für interdisziplinäre Forschung noch weitestgehend brach liegt. Wir erörtern Gestaltpsychologie als Quelle für die Bedeutung sinnlich-anschaulicher Merkmale der Organisation, ihre Bewährung in der Managementforschung und unterstreichen ihr Potenzial für den Einsatz ästhetischer Methoden zur Personal- und Organisationsentwicklung.

Schlüsselwörter: Ästhetik, Organisation, Management, Gestalttheorie, kunstbasierte Interventionen, U-Theorie.

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