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Gestalt, Perception and Literature

Gestalt theory has been around for almost one century now and its applications in art and art reception have focused mainly on the perception of visual art forms. This development is natural, since the first studies of gestalt principles of perceptual organization centered on visual perception of objects in space. However, gestalt rules equally apply to other forms of art, such as music, dance and also literature, and this is so because these fields of expressive exchange make use of principles that are pervasive and fundamental in cognition and thus are involved not only in diverse forms of art but are in fact present in other tasks of conceptualization, in the process of making sense of reality and experience, and, not least, in the way language mirrors this process.

In the last decades, a significant amount of work has been developed in cognitive science, which has contributed to describe the processes of the human mind and their neural underpinnings. Since the broad investment in multiple forms of art is a uniqueness of the human mind, studying the production and reception of art forms from a cognitive perspective can shed light on how art and human thought might have co-evolved, and moreover how much of the human mind owes its uniqueness to the universal, pervasive engagement in artistic representations. Studying art forms in this perspective implies relating them to overall cognitive processes and systems, such as categorization, imagination, attention or memory. Furthermore, the cognitive interest in art can also develop in a different direction: the study of art production and reception is at the core of the emergent field of neuroaesthetics, which again mainly focuses on visual forms of art.

Within the cognitive scientific enterprise, cognitive linguistics emerged as a new paradigm in the study of language that understands language not as an autonomous module of the mind, but rather as emerging from more general systems of the human mind. Again here, the study of expression is inseparable from the study of the mind, as language is viewed as being deeply related to other cognitive processes, i. e. as the expression of conceptual organization, anchored in the experiential interaction with the environment. Studying language is therefore a path for understanding the mind. In this perspective, linguistic forms of art cannot be dismissed; they provide insights into meaningful creations of the imagination that the mind is able to produce, making use of the same cognitive apparatus that is engaged in much less creative endeavours.

The proximity between research agendas of early twentieth century gestalt psychologists and contemporary cognitive science thus extends beyond the study of immediate sensorial (visual) perception, encompassing the expressive domain of human language. As a consequence, the study of how the mind perceives the world and how this mode of perception is conveyed through language is also relevant for literary scholars: studying different mental representations and meaning effects prompted by language is a central issue in the study of literature.

Knowing how the mind makes sense of sensorial and imaginative experience can contribute to a better understanding of the literary texts themselves. This is the ultimate goal for cognitive poetics, a field of study that has unfolded in the intersection of literary studies, cognitive science and cognitive linguistics, and that is concerned with the meaning of literary texts and the processes by which the human mind arrives at this meaning. It goes beyond empirical psychology of text processing, to encompass intersubjective strategies of sense making which are at work in the reception and understanding of literary forms of art. From this cognitive perspective, the study of perception in literature goes beyond the awareness about the written words on a page. The analysis is necessarily more elaborate and unfolds on multiple levels: the level of the characters and their experiences, the level of enunciation of representation of subjectivity and finally the level of the actual reader of the text.

Important questions arise as to the viability and legitimacy of the use of scientific concepts related to visual perception in the study of linguistic and literary meaning in a way that is not purely metaphorical. In other words, what do we mean when we refer to gestalt, figure, ground and related concepts in literature? Can such concepts be descriptive, even explanatory, or are they restricted to being mere illustrative metaphors for phenomena that pertain to the text, and hence to a different domain from that of sensorial experience? In fact, the contemporary use of concepts from early gestalt theory in the context of cognitive science involves a semantic extension that derives from the explanatory propagation of gestalt theory to other fields of study, from visual art to other forms of art, from cognitive science to linguistics and not least to literature. The value of ideas from gestalt theory is reflected in the large use of concepts like gestalt, figure or ground, from vision to performance, from perception to conception.

In this paper, we shall consider the emergence and significance of gestalt theory in the research of perception (both pragmatic and aesthetic), and moreover the importance this theory has recently acquired in the study of language, the medium of literary art, and in the cognitive oriented research of literature. We will conclude with the consideration of a particular text, Peter Weiss' *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers*, in which the gestalt notions of figure and ground are manipulated to generate ambiguity and to delay aesthetic perception on multiple layers: On the level of the semantic content, the text tells about an inverted or abnormal way of perceiving the world and interacting with it; on the level of formal composition, this inversion persists, conveyed by linguistic strategies that create ambiguity be-

tween figure and ground in expression; and on the level of reception, as the reader progressively shifts attention from the content to the form, in the quest for the meaning of the text. It is our claim that this continuity in the experience of this text is not just illustrated by gestalt concepts: it is revealed in their use.

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