

## Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Gerhard Stemmerger

## Wertheimer on Gestalt laws of Seeing and of Mental Health<sup>1</sup>

I invite you to take a comparative look with me at two early works by Max Wertheimer, one of the founders of the Berlin School's Gestalt theory:

The first one is very well known, at least in terms of its results – I am referring to “Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt, II” (Wertheimer 1923), in English: “Investigations on Gestalt Principles. II” (Wertheimer 2012a). In this seminal work, Wertheimer derives what is now widely referred to as “Gestalt laws.” However, Wertheimer himself mostly preferred to speak of *factors* rather than *laws* in the specific individual cases he investigated.

The second work is less well known: It is an investigation into the genesis and healing of certain mental disorders: “Versuch einer Theorie der paranoischen Eigenbeziehung und Wahnbildung” (Schulte 1924), translated in English: “An Approach to a Gestalt Theory of Paranoic Phenomena” (Schulte 1938; Levy 1986). This work was not published under Wertheimer's name, but rather under the name of the German psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte. However, credible sources have attributed it to Max Wertheimer since early on (the plausibility of this attribution will be discussed in more detail), and Max Wertheimer himself later repeatedly returned to the fundamental theses of this work (in publications and in his seminars at the New School of Social Research). In Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy<sup>2</sup>, we see this work as the fundamental pioneering work for our understanding of psychopathology.

The question must be asked: why should one compare two works from such different areas? One is concerned with fundamental principles, primarily based on the observation of simple two-dimensional patterns of dots, the other is concerned with specific questions of psychopathology. However, it is precisely the fact that Wertheimer worked on these themes simultaneously, despite their apparent disparity, that lends itself to a comparison between the two works. Is it not

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the corresponding lecture at the 23rd GTA conference in Milan, “Mind, Perception, Reality”, September 25–27, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy should not be confused with the Gestalt therapy developed by F. Perls and colleagues. As numerous well-known Gestalt psychologists, from Köhler to Arnheim, have repeatedly stated, although the term “Gestalt” is part of the name of Perls' therapy, it differs from Gestalt psychology in almost all essential conceptual aspects. For a description of a psychotherapy method actually developed on the basis of Gestalt psychology, see the anthology “Essentials of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy” (Stemmerger, ed., 2023).

reasonable to assume that he was guided by a common interest, a common idea in both works, despite the different subject areas? A potential avenue for exploration would be a comparative analysis of these two works from disparate subject areas, with the aim of elucidating the common idea underpinning their themes.

As for this common idea, we also find another work by Max Wertheimer from this period that sheds light on it and builds a bridge between the two works selected for our comparison. The work in question is Wertheimer's programmatic lecture to the Kant Society in Berlin on December 17, 1924, in which he made the first fundamental statement on Gestalt theory. (Wertheimer 1924/25, 1938, 1944) I will come back to this later.

### **“Dot Study” and “Paranoia Study” – fruit from the same tree**

The fact that the second work was not published under Wertheimer's name may suggest that a more detailed justification is needed for why it is being used for this comparison on the subject of Gestalt laws. So, as a first step, let's take a look at what underlies my conviction – and the conviction of so many people familiar with the matter before me – that this second work (on mental health and psychopathology) is indeed by Max Wertheimer. This conviction is based not only on the fact that Wertheimer's longtime assistant and collaborator, the German-American psychiatrist Erwin Levy, reported that Wertheimer himself told him that he dictated this article to Heinrich Schulte during a conference in Leipzig:

„The author of record was Heinrich Schulte, M.D., who at the time was on the staff of the Psychiatric University Clinic in Berlin. The author in fact was Max Wertheimer, who years later told me that he outlined the theory to Dr. Schulte, who was to work it out in final form. Some time later, during a psychology congress in the city of Leipzig, Schulte had appeared in Wertheimer's hotel room and said that he had run into difficulties; whereupon Wertheimer dictated the essay then and there.” (Levy 1986, 230)<sup>3</sup>

This anecdotal account by Levy is consistent with the fact that, as early as the 1930s, people familiar with Gestalt theory apparently took it for granted that this study, at least in its basic features and most important statements, should be attributed to Max Wertheimer himself. For example, Martin Scheerer in his book “Die Lehre von der Gestalt” (1931) refers to this study “as a theory of paranoia inspired by Wertheimer” (296). And Karl Duncker, in his work “Zur Kritik der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung” of the early 1930s, naturally spoke of the “beautiful work of Wertheimer and Schulte” when referring to the “Paranoia

<sup>3</sup> Levy is probably referring to the 8th Congress for Experimental Psychology held in Leipzig, Germany, April 18-21, 1923.

Study” (Duncker 2008, 133). Thus, what Levy reported in 1986 from his conversation with Wertheimer was already a common understanding among German-speaking colleagues in the 1930s.

This attribution of the “Paranoia Study” to Wertheimer was later repeated again and again, independently of Levy’s statement: To cite one example, Wolfgang Metzger wrote in 1963 of the “Paranoia Study” as “a very remarkable fundamental contribution to social psychology, which, although signed by H. Schulte, is unmistakably of Wertheimer’s intellectual origin in its entire diction” (Metzger 1963, 33).

In their review paper, “Gestalt Theory and Psychopathology: Some early applications of Gestalt theory to clinical psychology and psychopathology,” Kevin Crochetière, Nealy Vicker, James Parker, D. Brett King and Michael Wertheimer pointed out the well-known fact that “during his career, Wertheimer never did explicitly publish on problems in clinical psychology. But he encouraged the clinical work of several students, including Heinrich Schulte” (2001, 144). The authors refer to Levy’s account of Wertheimer dictating the paper to Schulte and continue: “According to Levy such episodes were not unusual: ‘much of the work out of the Berlin and Frankfurt psychological institutes was inspired and closely supervised by [Wertheimer] but published under his students’ names. As long as the work was done, recorded authorship was of secondary importance.’ Levy suggests, consequently, that the main idea in the work be referred to as the Wertheimer-Schulte Hypothesis.” (146)

All of this is also in line with Mitchell G. Ash, who in his historical study on “Gestalt Psychology in German Culture” refers to the “Paranoia Study” (without citing any further sources) as “ostensibly authored by psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte but actually dictated to him by Wertheimer” (Ash 1998, 259).

What makes this claim so plausible, beyond this statement by Levy and the other sources mentioned, is the fact that this is not the first time that Wertheimer has presented pioneering work on the Gestalt psychology of perception and psychopathology at virtually the same time: we can see such a coincidence as early as 1912. (This also shows that the two papers we are using for comparison had been in the works for about ten years by the time they were published).

In 1912, Wertheimer’s seminal paper on the phi phenomenon, „Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung“ appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* (Wertheimer 1912; in English “Experimental Studies on Seeing Motion”, Wertheimer 2012a). On April 18 of the same year, 1912, at the 5th Congress of Experimental Psychology in Berlin, he presented “Über experimentell-psychologische Analyse einiger hirnpathologischer Erscheinungen,” based on his research on aphasia (Wertheimer 1912a). The following year, a more detailed

congress report on the subject was published in the *Münchener Medizinische Wochenschrift* under the title “Über hirnpathologische Erscheinungen und ihre psychologische Analyse” (“On cerebral pathological phenomena and their psychological analysis”; Wertheimer 1913).

These little-known early works by Wertheimer on psychopathology are worth mentioning here because they allow us to conclude that Wertheimer, in his collaboration with the Austrian psychiatrist Otto Pötzl at the Second Psychiatric Clinic in Vienna, almost certainly encountered the problems in aphasia research that were later addressed in the Schulte-Wertheimer theses of 1924. At the same time – between 1911 and 1914 – Wertheimer had, according to Metzger (1966, 699), already “carried out the investigations for his famous “Punktarbeit” (“Dot-Study”) in essential parts, although it was not published until 1923.

In any case, in the 1910s in Vienna, Wertheimer himself had to deal with psychiatric patients who had to struggle with the problems described in the “Schulte article”. So when Wertheimer later dictated the main theses of the treatise on the origin and cure of paranoia to the psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte, he did so not only on the basis of theoretical considerations, but also on the basis of his own clinical experience.

The patients that Max Wertheimer worked with at the Vienna Psychiatric Hospital in the 1910s, together with the psychiatrist Otto Pötzl, came from a variety of diagnostic groups, but mainly from the aphasia spectrum (Sarris & Wertheimer 2001). Simply put, aphasia refers to speech disorders that occur over the course of a person’s life, usually quite suddenly, in many cases as a result of a stroke. These speech disorders can vary greatly: for example, speech itself, speech comprehension, or the ability to speak in coherent sentences may be impaired. A connection between these speech disorders (and other disabilities) and the occurrence of paranoid ideas and behavior was already discussed in Wertheimer’s time (Allers 1920, Herschmann 1921; both cited in the Schulte paper) and is still often suspected.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is not necessary to discuss this problem in detail at this point. What is important in the context of our topic is the following: Aphasia is a specific one of a whole range of impairments that can prevent a person from participating fully in community life. As we know, such impairments can take many different forms: One can have poor hearing, one can have poor vision, one can have

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fuchs 1993, 260 (transl.): “The paranoid developments in patients with chronic aphasia show even clearer parallels to the delusions of the deaf. They occur primarily in patients with Wernicke’s aphasia, who, like the deaf or linguistically isolated, understand only single words and are therefore unable to comprehend linguistic contexts. Because they are often unaware of their deficits, they react irritably or suspiciously to their surroundings and may develop delusions about supposed innuendos, special codes that people use to communicate about them, or other hostile intentions of fellow human beings.”

difficulty expressing oneself or understanding others, one can also *be* or *become* or *be made* into a “marginal personality”<sup>5</sup> in other ways – in short, it is about problems experiencing oneself as part of a relevant human community or, as it is put in a number of Gestalt psychological works, being part of a “We”.

Under certain conditions, however, these difficulties can lead people to experience and behave in ways that are described in psychiatric terms as “paranoid” or otherwise “delusional”. During his time at the Vienna Psychiatric Clinic, where he worked with aphasic patients, Wertheimer certainly had to deal with enough cases where such diagnoses were made. This is the clinical background against which he later proposed and finally dictated his special “theory of paranoia” to the psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte. And it should come as no surprise that – since he was already working on his “Dot Study” at the same time (and had just completed his “Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung” (1912) – both works were guided by the same basic ideas. This can also be seen in his lecture to the Kant Society in 1924.

So these are the facts behind the genesis of the two papers. They convince me (in addition to a number of other indications, in particular the basic line of argumentation and the typical language used in the paper) that the paranoia study does indeed originate from Wertheimer in all essential ideas and theses.<sup>6</sup>

For the sake of brevity, I will henceforth refer to Wertheimer’s work “Investigations on Gestalt Principles” as the “Dot Study” and to the Wertheimer/Schulte study as the “Paranoia Study” – both acronyms are of course simplifications, since the “Dot Study” deals not only with visual “dot groups” at rest, but also with dynamic events (e.g., motion perception and auditory perception), and the “Paranoia Study” deals not only with paranoia.

I will now take this simplification to the extreme by reducing the similarities and differences between the two papers to the statement: The “Dot Study” deals with the laws of *grouping dots in vision*, the “Paranoia Study” deals with the laws of *grouping people in real-life situations*.

To avoid misunderstandings: Of course, seeing is also real and is fundamentally part of real life situations, but what the “Dot Study” deals with is a very specific,

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Lewin adopts the term “marginal man” from sociology and uses it to develop a concept for understanding the experience and behavior of people and groups who are on the borderline between two groups and do not belong to either, or at least are not sure where they belong. (Lewin 1939, 881ff; Lewin 1948, 178–185).

<sup>6</sup> Objections to this conclusion regarding Wertheimer’s primary authorship were raised by Paul Tholey in 1995 in a discussion of Schulte’s theses and their relevance to Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy. His objection was primarily to the “we surrogate” construct contained in Schulte’s theses. In the case of paranoia, he saw this as incompatible with Gestalt psychological views (e.g., Koffka’s). This also made Wertheimer’s co-authorship seem implausible to him (see Tholey 1995a, b in Stemberger 2002).

selected part of the reality of human life, while the “Paranoia Study” considers this reality of life in a much broader sense.

### **A Necessary Differentiation of the Total Phenomenal Field**

At this point, let me briefly introduce a differentiation and terminology that may be useful for our comparison. This is the differentiation of the total phenomenal field, the field of experience, as proposed by the German Gestalt psychologist Edwin Rausch:

“Ego and environment together form the total field<sup>7</sup>. This can lead a) to an experience that is approximately coordinative in relation to ego and environment, b) to ego-accentuated, c) to environment-accentuated experience.” (Rausch 1966, 873; transl).

According to Rausch, however, this tripartite division is to be regarded as a coarsening of a corresponding continuum. As an example of an overall field that leads to a more or less coordinative experience of self and environment, Rausch offers: “By the way, properties can also be asserted of the entire phenomenal environment – i.e. not only of its individual objects – when, for example, in pronounced states of depression or euphoria, everything that is perceived looks accordingly, i.e. reflects the respective mood. Such cases may be examples of how the ego and the environment can be experienced more or less coordinative (form a of the total field).” (ibid; transl).

In a compilation by Metzger, which Vicario once described as the best presentation of the “Gestalt laws of grouping” in visual perception, ten Gestalt factors discovered by Wertheimer in his “Dot Study” are listed – I have tentatively organized them in Table 1 according to the aspects suggested by Rausch. I’m following the use of English terms in Wertheimer’s 2012 translation, even though I’m not happy with all of them (I’ve also included the original German versions):

What we see here at first glance is above all a strong prevalence of factors that refer to an environment-accentuated perceptual situation. Only two of the factors mentioned by Wertheimer can be described as factors arising from a subject-accentuation or an approximately coordinative subject-object relationship. These are the factors of familiarity or past experience and of observer’s behavior.

What you may also notice in comparison to conventional accounts is that we are not dealing with *five to seven* “Gestalt laws of grouping”, as we usually read, but with *ten*. In the most common descriptions, we usually find only what can be

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<sup>7</sup> “Total field” is used here for the German term “Gesamtfeld”. Unfortunately, there are virtually no English translations of Edwin Rausch’s major works. The only exception is Neal Hermse’s master’s thesis, which contains a few partial translations. Hermse uses the term “complete field” for the term “Gesamtfeld” (Hermse 2012, 53).

**Table 1.** Gestalt Factors of Grouping in Wertheimer 1923. English terms as translated in Wertheimer 2012. German terms and order according to the systematic presentation in Wolfgang Metzger 1966, 693–744. Differentiation of experience in the total field according to Rausch 1966, 873.

FACTOR	Experience:		
	a) approximately coordinative in relation to ego / environment	b) ego-accentuated	c) environment-accentuated
<b>1) a) of similarity; b) of minimal inhomogeneity</b> Faktor a) der Gleichartigkeit, d.h. der Gleichheit und Ähnlichkeit; b) der geringsten Inhomogenität			
<b>2) of proximity</b> Faktor a) der Nähe, b) der größten Dichte			
<b>3) of common fate</b> Faktor des „gemeinsamen Schicksals“ (des übereinstimmenden Verhaltens)			
<b>4) of objective set</b> Faktor der (objektiven) Einstellung			
<b>5) of leftover</b> Faktor des Aufgehens ohne Rest			
<b>6) of the “good curve”</b> Faktor der durchgehenden Kurve (des glatten Verlaufs)			
<b>7) of closure</b> Faktor der Geschlossenheit			
<b>8) of Prägnanz</b> Verallgemeinerung zum Gesetz der guten Gestalt (zum Prägnanzsatz)			
<b>9) of familiarity or of past experience</b> Faktor der Erfahrung bzw. der weiteren Vorgeschichte des Wahrnehmungsvorgangs			
<b>10) of observer’s behavior: distribution of attention, fixation, and the like</b> Faktor des Verhaltens des Beobachters: Blickrichtung, Aufmerksamkeitsverteilung, Auffassungsabsicht			

easily illustrated, such as “Proximity; Similarity; Continuity; Closure; Connectedness” (the latter was added not by Wertheimer, but by Stephen E. Palmer and Irvin Rock: Palmer & Rock 1994).

What they all have in common is not only that they are easy to illustrate, but also that the state, intentions, and behavior of the observer can be left out of the analysis (this also applies to the grouping principles that have been added since then, such as Palmer’s “common region”, “connectedness”, and “synchrony”; Palmer 1999). The perceptual situations investigated are designed in such a way that subject-accentuated or approximately subject-environment-coordinative experiences can be excluded or at least seem to be excludable.<sup>8</sup>

One can, of course, question the wisdom of such a limited approach. I believe, however, that this approach is justified under the circumstances Wertheimer chose it for his “Dot Study”, and more than that: it is of great heuristic importance. It explores and attempts to prove whether there are fundamental, situation-independent ordering tendencies inherent in human nature that are also largely independent of the person’s current state of mind and body. And Wertheimer, Köhler and their colleagues have indeed been able to prove this. This does not mean, however, that a purely object-accentuated approach is justified in other cases. I will have to content myself with this remark here, although this question and the problems associated with it would certainly deserve a more thorough treatment.

### **The “Case of the Tartar” – Gestalt Factors of Grouping in Social Life in a Subject-Environment Coordinative Accentuated Field**

This brings me to the “Paranoia Study”, where we are in a completely different situation. In order to make this clear in a nutshell, I will choose the “case of the tartar” from this study, which seems to be suitable to illustrate Wertheimer’s basic idea in a few strokes:

I quote from the study (Levy’s 1986 translation) and hope you will see it adequately illustrated in my drawings, which I show below:

“[During World War I] a wounded tartar who happened to have been taken prisoner alone, arrived in an Austrian military hospital where he could not

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<sup>8</sup> For example, a well-known Gestalt psychologist in the field of perceptual research also shows his reluctance to deal with factors that do not belong to an environment-accentuated field: „... past experience is a very sensible tool of explanation, but there is a major difference between it and the other principles: while we can see the source of ‘action’ for every other principle (we can put our finger on the elements that are supposed to share proximity, similarity and so on), in the case of past experience the influence seems to come out from nowhere. (In other words: where the elements that share proximity are both observable, the memory trace that exerts its influence on other observable elements is not observable). The same thing can be said for subjective setting.” (Vicario 1998, 261).

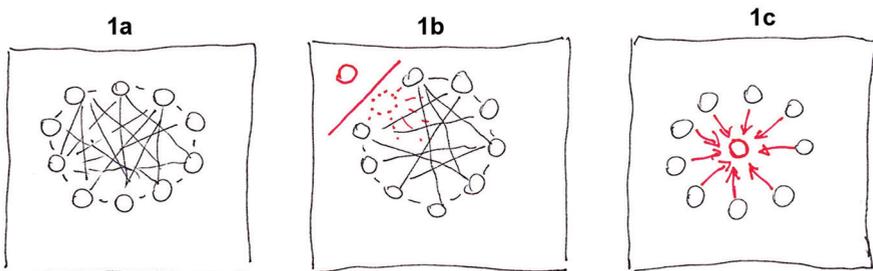
communicate in his language with anyone. With increasing anxious excitement he developed, within a few days, delusions of persecution; he believed that his hospital companions persecuted him, that his life was threatened, .... Occasionally the anxious mood intensified to the point of violent reactions, aggressions and suicidal attempts. – Once a language contact with his surroundings had been established with the help of someone who had command of the tartar idiom, and once the tormenting situation had been relieved, the psychotic symptoms receded rapidly....” (Levy 1986, 237).

I give you a sketch of how Wertheimer–Schulte analyzed what has happened to the tartar, formalizing the process in several steps:

- The tartar finds himself in a situation with a “we”-requirement that is of existential importance to him because of the circumstances.
- A lack of language skills prevents him from fulfilling this requirement and becoming part of this “we”.
- At the same time, external barriers prevent him from escaping the situation.
- Being an isolated self alongside the others is not something he can live with.
- He restructures the situation by creating a clear (delusional) We-connection: instead of “everyone *and* me”, the new structure is “everyone *against* me”.
- This restructuring restores a livable surrogate equilibrium – an unbearable one, but a livable one nonetheless.
- Later development: Removing the language barrier by enlisting the help of a person who speaks the tartar language allows for a renewed restructuring and genuine we-participation.

What can we say about our topic of Gestalt factors of grouping based on the “Paranoia Study”?

Wertheimer articulates in this study some specific Gestalt factors of grouping which in this case are decisive for the fact *that* and *how* the “human dots” form groups – in the world of experience of a person in a very difficult situation.



**Fig. 1a.** We-situation. **1b,** and **1c.** Situation of the tartar before and after restructuring the situation.

Wertheimer–Schulte do not explicitly speak of “Gestalt factors of grouping” in this work, but two such factors can easily be identified from their investigation as follows: The factor of **we-ability/we-disability** and the factor of **we-demand**.

The first of the two is initially evident in a *subject-accentuated* view of the situation but then proves to be effective on the basis of a *subject-environment-coordinative* constellation. The same is true of the “we-demand” factor: although this factor can initially be seen as *environment-accentuated* (in this specific case the prison situation), a closer look reveals the necessity of a *subject-environment-coordinative* accentuation. Both factors can be rooted in the person of the “human dots” or in the factual circumstances of the situation, but in each case in their reciprocal relationship. A person can be more or less we-dependent or we-needy and a situation can be more or less we-demanding. And a person can be more we-capable or more we-disabled, whereby this can also be largely determined by the general disposition of the person in their given life circumstances or purely situational.

Now it is clear that we are talking here about processes **in the world of experience of a specific person with specific characteristics and dispositions and in a specific situation**, and that the world of experience of other people, for example the tartar’s fellow prisoners, looks quite different, although they are all in the same physical environment. This is not a case like the “Dot Study,” where different observers in different subjective states apparently perceive largely the same configurations. (Because of this broad correspondence, some people forget that even in this case these groupings are still based on the experiential world of individual subjects).

Since in our case this difference between the processes in the experiential worlds of the people involved does not remain confined to their consciousness, but also affects the transphenomenal physical world they share with the others through their communication and behavior, all kinds of problems now arise, as one can easily imagine.

But does this difference mean that the world of the tartar and the world of his fellow prisoners are governed by different laws? Contrary to the assumptions of prominent psychiatrists of their time, Wertheimer-Schulte argued that this was not the case. The same laws of grouping apply to everyone, but the results they produce in each individual case depends on the respective characteristics of the ego-world relationship of the people involved and their physical environment.

And one last question: Does this mean that the Gestalt factors of grouping known from the “Dot Study” are not relevant for these questions? This is not the case at all. Even if the laws of grouping discovered in the special case of visual

perception cannot simply be transferred 1:1 to other areas<sup>9</sup>, we can assume that for example the factor of proximity and, above all, the factor of common fate play an important role in the formation of the groups in our example case: The prisoners in the camp live in forced proximity to one another, and they all share a common fate.

In addition, the “Paranoia Study” makes something clear that should at least be mentioned here. Although the Gestalt factors of grouping are essential within the whole of the overall Gestalt laws, they should not be regarded as THE Gestalt laws. Gestalt formation and functioning is not only a matter of segregation and grouping, but also of other factors. Wertheimer speaks of “entirely different Gestalt factors”, such as the function or role of a part in its whole, orientation to the main layout, level, and centering. In his “Psychologie”, Wolfgang Metzger speaks not only of the Gestalt laws of grouping, but also of the Gestalt laws of the reference system and of centering, Gestalt laws of measure and of the zero point in “areas”, Gestalt laws of the bifurcation of effects, etc. (Metzger 1941/2001).

To discuss these other Gestalt laws in more detail would go beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I would like to end by quoting Max Wertheimer himself. In his famous lecture to the Kant Society in 1924, he not only gave his well-known brief definition of Gestalt theory, but also formulated the basic idea underlying the entire “Paranoia Study” and unmistakably pointing to the lead author of that study:

“Man is not only part of a field, but a part and member of his group. When people are together, as when they are at work, then the most unnatural behavior, which only appears in late stages or abnormal cases, would be to behave as separate Egos. Under normal circumstances they work in common, each a meaningfully functioning part of the whole. [...]

An Ego standing *visa vis* or in contrast to the others usually develops only under very special circumstances. If for any outward or inner reasons a harmonious balance is not attainable between a person and the people with whom he lives, then definite disturbances of the equilibrium must appear and in extreme instances lead to precarious substitutes for the natural equilibrium which will transform the psychological structure of that person.

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<sup>9</sup> Metzger makes this very clear in his remarks on the generalization of the Gestalt factors: “The generalization of the Gestalt laws of visual grouping into other sensory modalities is often quite remarkable. ... Not every Gestalt law can be transferred unmodified to hearing, for instance not the law of closure and even less so the law of symmetry” (Metzger 2009, 27). What he says here about generalization in other sensory modalities is even more true for generalization in other areas of human life. Metzger explicitly states this for our case, the context of human grouping: “Whether all the factors that were identified in the study of perceptual structures can be found among the factors that determine the cohesion and durability of human groupings” needs to be investigated and cannot simply be assumed (cf. Metzger 2001, 128; transl.).

This led to the hypothesis that a wide range of mental disease, for which no actual theory had previously been submitted, might be the consequence of such fundamental processes.” (Wertheimer 1944, 91f).

### Summary

Around 100 years ago, Max Wertheimer’s famous work “Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt II” was published, in which he first presented what has since been widely referred to as the “Gestalt laws” (albeit not always appropriately). What is less well known is that Wertheimer at the same time dictated the fundamental theses on the development and healing of mental disorders to the German psychiatrist Heinrich Schulte for an article that can be regarded as the cornerstone for Gestalt psychological psychopathology. A comparison of the two studies shows that Wertheimer pursued the same far-reaching project in both works, namely, to decipher the “inner structural laws” of Gestalten – in the first work for the area of simple instances of seeing, in the other for the area of community in human life and its role in mental health. This shows that Wertheimer’s project of exploring the “structural laws of Gestalt” had more and something different as its goal than the often-simplified understanding of the “Gestalt laws” in textbooks and on the Internet would suggest.

**Keywords:** Gestalt laws; Gestalt factors; laws of grouping in seeing; laws of grouping in psychopathology; mental health; Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy.

### Zusammenfassung

Vor rund 100 Jahren erschien Max Wertheimers berühmtes Werk „Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt II“, in dem er erstmals das vorstellte, was seither allgemein als „Gestaltgesetze“ bezeichnet wird (wenn auch nicht immer zutreffend). Weniger bekannt ist, dass Wertheimer zur gleichen Zeit dem deutschen Psychiater Heinrich Schulte die grundlegenden Thesen über die Entstehung und Heilung von psychischen Störungen für einen Artikel diktierte, der als Grundstein für die gestaltpsychologische Psychopathologie gelten kann. Ein Vergleich der beiden Studien zeigt, dass Wertheimer in beiden Arbeiten das gleiche weitreichende Projekt verfolgte, nämlich die „inneren Strukturgesetze“ der Gestalten zu entschlüsseln – in der ersten Arbeit für den Bereich einfacher Fälle des Sehens, in der anderen für den Bereich der Zugehörigkeit zu einer Gemeinschaft im menschlichen Leben und seiner Rolle für die psychische Gesundheit. Dies zeigt, dass Wertheimers Projekt der Erforschung der „Strukturgesetze der Gestalt“ mehr und etwas anderes zum Ziel hatte, als es das oft vereinfachte Verständnis der „Gestaltgesetze“ in Lehrbüchern und im Internet vermuten lässt.

**Keywords:** Gestalt-Gesetze; Gestalt-Faktoren; Gesetze des Zusammenhangs im Sehen; Gesetze des Zusammenhangs in der Psychopathologie; psychische Gesundheit; Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie.

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**Gerhard Stemberger**, born in 1947, lives in Vienna and Berlin. He is a psychotherapist and supervisor as well as a teaching therapist for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy. His work focuses on the history and theory of the clinical application of Gestalt theory, in particular the theoretical foundation of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy. He is the former president and now Honorary Member of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), long-time editor of the journal *Gestalt Theory* and co-publisher of *Phänomenal – Zeitschrift für Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie* (Journal for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy). He is also the editor and co-author of the books *Psychische Störungen im Ich-Welt-Verhältnis* (Mental Disorders in the I-World Relationship; 2002), *Giuseppe Galli: Der Mensch als Mit-Mensch* (Man as Fellow-human; 2017), *Paul Tholey: Gestalttheorie von Sport, Klartraum und Bewusstsein* (Gestalt theory of Sports, Lucid Dreaming and Consciousness; 2018), *Essentials of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy* (2022), and *Grundkonzepte der Gestalttheoretischen Psychotherapie* (Basic Concepts of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy; 2024).

**Address:** Wintergasse 75-77/7, 3002 Purkersdorf, Austria.

**E-mail:** gst@gestalttheory.net

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-1049-6578