

Morphology as a Language for Aesthetics. From J.W. von Goethe to Olaf Breidbach

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to understand whether morphology can be framed as a language for aesthetics. In particular, whether Olaf Breidbach's contribution can determine its fundamental terms. These are related to the notion of forms and images. Hence, the paper is structured into three parts: i) framing of research on morphology in Germany; ii) analysis of Goethe's method and vocabulary from an aesthetic standpoint; iii) presentation of Breidbach's proposal in relation to Goethe.

KEYWORDS

Morphology, Image, Form, Science, Aesthetics

1. Morphology as a Language. From Goethe to Current Research on Morphology (in Germany)

1.1 The Origins of Morphological Thought: Goethe's Hefte zur Morphologie

The origins of morphological thought date back to Goethe's scientific work. The primary reference is his *Hefte zur Morphologie*, published in 1817 (1st edition). Goethe devoted himself to the field of natural sciences, namely to disciplines such as anatomy, zoology, physiology, mineralogy, and botany. From animals to plants and backwards, the scientific interest of Goethe was to understand the dynamics of living beings, as for what the eye could see. This is through their *morphé* (from which indeed morphology takes its name): the complexity of the functional and formal relation that constitutes the organism and which lets it be recognised and identified on the level of its appearance and compared to other organisms. Goethe did not consider morphology a new discipline with a new object of interest. It had to be an auxiliary perspective alongside physiology, which had to consider other disciplines' results while

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innovating the method and the view to conceive of the living being.

However, with Goethe's deception, all of this had no success nor scientific acknowledgement (Goethe 2013). The *Hefte zur Morphologie* Prove this deception and his commitment to morphology. Indeed, these are a retrospective journal: the morphological project is, from the beginning, a (self-)reflection on its history, its critique and reception, its condition of possibility as discourse, and on the subject producing it (Giacomoni 1993). This is of most importance since it is indeed such a self-reflection that characterises the research on the effects and the influence of Goethe's morphological proposal. Indeed, such research is simultaneously a reflection on the possibility of its development as a *language* that can offer a renewal of one's own (scientific) perspective.

1.2 *Paradigm or Language? The Research on the Effects of Morphology*

Not considering the field of sciences in which morphology was born, its concepts, its method, and its intentions had, however, an important history of effects. This history consists of misunderstandings, re-interpretations, and direct and indirect references to Goethe's project. In any case, it had a profound influence on a vast number of disciplines, and this is still alive within them. Moreover, this influence is prompted by current cross-problems that require an interdisciplinary approach and an understanding of complexity.

Because of this, research on the effects of morphology has been spreading. Their general aim is not philological but theoretical and methodological instead. It is to obtain a common language within different perspectives and problem settings, addressing couples of concepts (e.g., *nature-culture*, *subject-object*, *activity-passivity*) capable of setting new reflections on such complexity. Hence, this research does not lead to any assertion of a defined set of concepts, a unique and precise method, or the preminent position of authors, disciplines, and solutions to problems. Alternatively, it does not lead to a standard and institutionalised way to conduct morphological inquiries, with its fundamental theories, values, and assumptions to be fixed as requested for a paradigm (Kuhn, 1970).

Morphology is not such a paradigm. It is instead a web of open cross-problems and a family-resemblance (Wittgenstein, 20094) relation of problem-settings, which pose common threads and multi-directional perspectives to constitute a *glossary* for philosophical thinking – and not only philosophical (Vercellone, Tedesco, 2020). For this reason, such research on the effects of morphology can

already be considered of theoretical interest. For our purpose, the focus will be here on the German context of research (Müller et al., 2022; Axer et al., 2021; Maatsch, 2014). This allows us to support the central assumptions that morphology can be regarded as a language and that this language can be a valuable option in terms of an aesthetic proposal. Then, what is regarded as a noteworthy example can be introduced. Namely, that of Olaf Breidbach. To present his contribution and its implication for aesthetics, relating it to Goethe's morphology, is indeed our purpose. Moreover, this relation further develops our assumptions too: in fact, the morphological language is appropriated for aesthetics since it is aesthetically defined. This can indeed be seen in approaching Goethe's morphological method.

In the German context of research, what is most important for our purpose is its particular attention to both *art history* and *philosophy*. The attention to art history is due to its profound effort to elaborate the central notion of morphology, and to the fact that this happened in relation to the *visual appearance*, which was the same field where morphology had to be developed in Goethe's intentions. This effort to elaborate the notion of form is significant since it was worth the keyword to question art's language and meaning (Riegl, 1893; Focillon, 1934). Most of all, it led art history to question its subjects, methods, and concepts so as to aim at its acknowledgement as a scientific discourse. That is, the notion of form led to its attempt to define *art* and, from this, to the attempt of the foundation of its research as a *scientific discourse*.

This possibility of the foundation of scientific discourse drives the interest of German research on morphology in the history of philosophy. Indeed, the reference to morphology is here most effective in the implications of W. Dilthey and E. Cassirer's thought on the condition of possibilities of scientific perspectives: for Dilthey, to distinguish and to establish the *Geisteswissenschaft* as opposed to the *Naturwissenschaft* (Lichtenstern, 1990); for Cassirer, to arrange the field to develop the *Kulturwissenschaft* (Müller et al., 2022).

The attention to both art history and philosophy is thus not accidental and unrelated. From art history to philosophy (and in their continuity), research on morphology accounts for one of its most important effects, which elucidates how morphology should be intended as language: the reflection on the notion of form along with a new definition of the main concepts of a discipline, and in such a way to lead to a reflection on its methods and its foundation as scientific discourse. After all, this relates again to the essential self-reflectivity of Goethe's *Hefte zur Morphologie*. Most important-

ly, this is also why the research on the history of the effects of morphology has a theoretical interest: morphology as a language is produced when reflecting on its effects.

However, Goethe's proposal has determined the contents of the reflection on form as well. The research on the effects of morphology between art history and philosophy also accounts for these contents and its main related notions. Or else, it poses them as the *keywords* to be developed: alongside the *form*, these are *visual appearance*, *art*, *image*, and *representation* as proper domains of knowledge. This is of most interest to our purpose. Indeed, it is evident how the language of morphology relates to aesthetics, for these terms essentially refer to its tradition.

Hence, if the relation of morphology to aesthetics is established while following the research on the history of its effects, and with this, it is established as well the possibility of morphology to count as a language, it is necessary to understand what it entails for aesthetics to assume this language. That is, it is necessary to understand what morphological aesthetic is. The results that research on the effect of morphology has accounted for must be included and orient its definition. On the other hand, a morphological aesthetics has to fulfil the needs that have solicited its spreading and hold firm the relation between art history and philosophy.

This is indeed what Breidbach's proposal responds to. To frame this, however, we must return to Goethe and see what elements are fundamental from the aesthetic standpoint. These are the same elements on which Breidbach bases his contribution to a morphological aesthetics.

2. Goethe and his Premises for a Morphological Aesthetics

2.1 What does Goethe's Morphology have to do with Aesthetics?

The history and the concepts of aesthetics help us understand the value of Goethe's morphology. Its development and its risks of miscomprehension pertain to aesthetics, as demonstrated by E. Haeckel's reprising of morphology and its reception (Maggiore 2020). The confusion of science and aesthetics is here at stake. Indeed, the *aestheticisation* of science was both the critique that morphology had received when declined by its contemporaries and a cultural (and artistic) effect of Goethe's morphology. This is what made it difficult to assess its philosophical and scientific credit.

Goethe's morphology is then related to aesthetics, for it was

born within a historical phenomenon which belongs to its tradition – namely, that of *aesthetic consciousness* (Gadamer 2000). Thoughtfully engaging with the field of natural sciences, Goethe was settling himself against such aesthetic consciousness. To do this, he went against its parallel phenomenon, the *scientification* of thought, whereby only quantitative and invisible knowledge was considered valid. Goethe argued instead that the domain of *perception* and *image* was the domain of proper knowledge. This must be *on the stage*, not *behind the scenes* of reality. This is the first methodological and theoretical assumption for a morphological aesthetics.

What is more, in this domain, it is to hold together the knowledge of art and nature. This is a further connection with the tradition of aesthetics: Goethe's morphology goes here in a similar direction to Kant's *Third Critique*. From this, the aesthetic standpoint leads us to two crucial points for comprehending Goethe's morphology. First, its interpretation should go more with those that consider it (*epistemologically*) in relation to German Idealism (Giacomoni 1993; Moiso 2001) than with those that refer it (*ontologically*) to ancient philosophy (Berning 2018). Second, it is possible to hold together Goethe's experience as an artist *and* scientist without reducing the latter to the former, instead understanding how the former has influenced the latter (Frigo *et al.*, 2005; Powik 1999; Stelzer 2013). Most significantly, this influence was worth stressing the importance of *practices* of form and vision (in general). Both points count as further methodological and theoretical assumptions for a morphological aesthetics.

Then, aesthetics can help us understand Goethe's morphology, and this proves its relation to it. From this, critical assumptions for morphological aesthetics can be inferred. However, its fundamental terms are still to be gained. These will be related to Breidbach's proposal, but first, they have to be obtained through a closer reading of Goethe's method and vocabulary.

2.2 Goethe's Method and Vocabulary for a Morphological Aesthetics

The value of Goethe's method relates to the first assumption for a morphological aesthetics. That is, perception and image are the domain of valid knowledge. Thus, his method implies that science must focus on what is on the stage of nature, learning how to look at it and how to know it. With this, to understand the value of Goethe's method, one needs to follow him in his scientific writings (2020) and in all those writings where vision, production of forms, and personal experience are at stake. Then, one must at least refer

to his *Maximen und Reflexionen* (2013), his *Schriften zur Kunst* (Goethe 1954), and his *Italian Journey* (Goethe 1991). From this, this value can be translated to the claim that *aesthetics is at the very basis of the possibility of science*. The aesthetic standpoint meets here the epistemological reflection. Hence, Goethe's epistemological considerations can be considered the main objectives for a morphological aesthetics.

These considerations are based on two main assumptions. First, the crucial role of everyday *experience* in science. Second, the *co-active* relation between *subjects* and *objects* in its production. These two points are essentially together and have their primary reference in Goethe's short text *Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt* (1792). What is more, they are the main objectives that the research on morphology aims to achieve while constructing a morphological language. Most importantly, they are the critical points on which Breidbach's morphological aesthetics insists.

As for the first assumption, Goethe claims that the whole experience of a subject falls under the practice of science. With this, personal interests and perspectives as well. The science requires, however, a shift from the focus on personal interest and perspective to that on the objects themselves. With this, the experience turns into the *experiment*. Here, phenomena appear related to one another in series of similarities and differences based on their continuity and nearness. They account for the comprehension of a complex phenomenon in that, with their disposition, they let *visualise* and understand it. This disposition itself calls for the proper method that subjects (scientists) have to follow, which tends to describe this complex phenomenon and never to deduce it from one of his hypotheses. Then, the experiment solicits such a continuous series of similarities and differences that a phenomenon produces when questioned according to its being. A phenomenon can never be used as an explication for other phenomena. The subject cannot use his hypothesis and thought in substitution of the order of visualisation generated by the phenomena themselves. Yet, this order includes the subject. This leads to the reciprocal activity of subject and object.

On the one hand, the subject is active because science is a *production* of knowledge and not a simple mirror image of reality. If the knowledge of reality is the ordered disposition and visualisation of phenomena that is the experiment, then the point of view of the scientist is essentially included, or even more, it is its necessary condition. Therefore, the order of phenomena is always related to the perspective of the scientist. This perspective stands for the sense of

the phenomena, which realise themselves in their objectivity as long as they are disposed in the *perspective* of subjects. This objectivity is not substantially out of there and only to be disclosed. It is a task to which the scientist must be committed and carry out in his practices of knowledge production (Geulen 2019).

Moreover, these practices are all those that can help subjects with such realisation of objectivity. Not only observation and description but also *collection* (Schellenberg 2013) – where an order is sorted out in a conversation between subject and object, and between aesthetic contemplation and scientific knowledge (Wurst 2019) – and *drawing*. These practices are included since they teach subjects how to look and, thus, how to give sense to the phenomena.

What is more, the fact that objectivity is realised in the subject's perspectives does not lead to any form of *relativism*, nor the impossibility of truth, but to a *perspectivism* (Alloa 2020) in which truth requires that perspectives are related in a series of similarities and differences as with the phenomena in the experiment. This is what Goethe himself does in his *Hefte zur Morphologie* when reflecting on other scientific theories. Furthermore, this supports the possibility of that common dialogue which the construction of the language of morphology tends to.

On the other hand, the object is active since it determines the order and sense of phenomena that perspective has to realise. Thus, objects are not essences standing out of there, but first and foremost, activity on subjects. Alternatively, they are the beginning of the experiment and the establishment of its conditions. The objects start the experiment, and the subjects continue and accomplish it. Thus, this activity of objects is the determination of subjects' receptiveness that is not passive but active. The subject activity is the realisation of the possibility of objects as a production of sense. A sense which ends with the activity of subjects but starts from the activity of objects. According to Goethe, these objects are *malleable, visible, and movable (Bildsam und Beweglich)*. It is a most significant characterisation: indeed, the reciprocally active relation between subjects and objects constituting knowledge is fundamentally dynamic and based on perception. Here, it is the essential aesthetic character of morphology.

With all of this, Goethe's method leads to a vocabulary. In other words, his method lets us obtain a language as intended in the research on morphology. That is to say, his method can be developed with theoretical purposes. Since it is essentially in relation to aesthetics, this is particularly appropriate for developing a morphological aesthetics, whose assumptions are indeed implied by Goethe's

method. This is, after all, what Breidbach himself does, and thus, the critical passage to our purpose.

The terms of Goethe's vocabulary cannot be presented as single and concise definitions. They are more elements of a semantic web that are to be presented together. This is again what suggests the research on morphology. These are:

a) *Form / Transformation / Deformation*: dynamic formula and sequence of differences that refer to and let understand each other within a unity. Rule and threshold-boundary of recognizability.

b) *Intuition / Idea / Vision*: hypothesis and not hypostasis, an overall image that holds individuals together as a unity within which differences are given sense. This is produced in the vision as an action of sense-giving.

c) *Symbol*: horizontal and universal connection from an individual to other individuals and then from these to an idea, which holds together with experience. Here, the individual is exemplary, and the idea is concrete.

d) *Image / Representation*: the level at which the unity and recognizability of forms become significant, and intuitions are corresponded or produced

Most importantly, these notions aim to define the emergence of a complex unity and significance as the living being's dynamics, *from the form to the image*. Here, alongside that of form, it is the notion of *image* that is crucial. This is the crucial point for our theoretical purpose, too: images are the dynamic, whose realisation is at the same time the realisation of form in the sense of its recognition, whereas form is the complexity of relations that generate (the living being, but also) the meaning in itself. It is in this sense that images are, first and foremost, the fundamental stage of the genesis of significance. Here, the first assumption of Goethe's method – that valid knowledge is *on the stage*, not *behind the scenes* of reality – and which was worth the first methodological and theoretical assumption for a morphological aesthetics is also encountered.

This can be further developed: the *vitality* of living beings – which is the main subject of Goethe's morphology – turns into the *performativity* of images: that is, into the *ambiguity* and *surplus* of images, which are produced and still cannot be reduced to the intention of their producer. This point is most significant to Goethe himself. The image as a living being is indeed implied in the fundamental problems that he related to the peculiar ontological status of images. These problems are the *substitution of image and*

living being (an issue to which his *Elective affinities* is devoted), and the possibility of acknowledging the image as such not to lose one's own identity (Breithaupt 2000).

The performativity of images is then a crucial point from which it is possible to address a morphological aesthetics. Indeed, this can answer those main points that have solicited the research on the effects of morphology from Goethe onwards and link them with their main results: the need to understand complexity through couples of concepts that can tackle it and through those keywords that go with form, and the opportunity, from this notion of form, to critically address the possibility of scientific discourses while reflecting on its concepts and methods. All of this can be achieved starting from the notion of image. But what is more, this refers to most recent debates: the question of the performativity of the image – with the same problems that Goethe noticed in its ontological status – is the problem at the basis of the *idea of a universal science of images* (Bredenkamp 2017; Mitchell 2005), that in the German tradition comes out from the same art history, doubting on the concept of art as its domain. Most significantly, this means that the reflection on this idea, from the standpoint of a morphological aesthetics as principally focused on the question of image, is consistent with the same research on the effects of morphology. Therefore, this can lead to thinking that one of the main implications of the morphological language for aesthetics is the proposal of an *image theory*. Indeed, this is precisely what happens with Breidbach's contribution to the definition of a morphological aesthetics. His path toward such an implication outlines the particular merit of his proposal within the consideration of morphology as language and in relation to the value of Goethe's vocabulary for aesthetics.

3. *Olaf Breidbach's Contribution to a Morphological Aesthetics*

3.1 *Morphological Aesthetics as Critique of Science*

Breidbach's first step towards such implication of the morphological language is the possibility of a critical approach to science and its foundation on aesthetics (2005). Most significantly, the premises of this critique relate to the value of Goethe's method from the aesthetic standpoint. The main point is the relation between *experiment* and *observation*. According to Breidbach, the experiment is a modality of observation, not the reverse, and the critique of science must be found in its analysis. As in Goethe's method, for Brei-

dbach, this point implies the relation between subject and object in the production of scientific knowledge. However, in Breidbach, this translates into the problem of the construction of *objectivity* in science and the fact that this is not to be solved in logic-linguistic analysis. It is instead to be solved in the subject's *experience* and *observations*, where the *experiment* is grounded. These can be examined through the history of the techniques and the instruments with which science has developed.

In this history, the crucial question is that the criterion for the objectivity of instruments (and their scientific validity) is never based on the efficacy of an *immediate* and *direct* measurement of the world but on its adequacy and adaption to the subjects' observation *norms*. The instrument does not refer to the world but to the observation itself. It is about how the observation functions. For this to function, the intention of subjects, the theories or the narration that frame and guide this, and its possibility to be communicated are necessary. Thus, it is about the *culture* in which they are embedded, and this is the establishment of norms that regulate such intentions, theories and communication, constituting a tradition if these norms are shared and accepted. In Breidbach's view, therefore, this is the level where instruments – and science with them – can achieve their objectivity.

However, objectivity is a result of experiment, and this is a particular modality of observation. If observation depends on culture, and culture is where norms are established, then experiment is more precisely where the norms of culture are negotiated so that science is possible. This is, for Breidbach, the function of objectivity that experiments realise through their instruments. However, this means that experiments depend on the possibility of *seeing* and *representing* the norms of culture. That is to say, the experiments rely on the *history of images* where cultures *manifest* themselves. The history of scientific instruments is indeed a part of this history. Hence, according to Breidbach, *objectivity* has to be regarded as a particular arrangement of forms that can be recognised as the legitimate image that scientific instruments must produce to comprehend a phenomenon. Such a legitimate image is precisely the norm that set-ups of experiments have negotiated, and these are the tasks that the active productions of forms by the subjects have to accomplish.

Here, the relation to Goethe's method is evident. Most significantly, here it is also the relation of experiment and observation, and the question of objectivity, on which Breidbach grounds his critical approach to science. The fact that he aims at grounding it on aesthetics helps understand in what sense the main implications

of the morphological language for aesthetics is the proposal of an *image theory*. Indeed, according to Breidbach, aesthetics as a critical approach to science must correspond to the study of the *genesis of its images*, which manifests the history of how it achieved its validity through its experiments. From the relation of experiments to observation, and from the relation of observation to culture, such a study can be broadened. More generally, the image manifests indeed the development of all the norms in which culture realises itself.

What is more – referring to another fundamental term of morphology as a language – this is why art is most important for Breidbach. Art reveals that subjects produce their *representation* of reality, and thus their *knowledge*, from varying *perspectives*. This awareness must be transferred to the history of science, and precisely through that history of instruments in relation to observers: the subject does not disappear behind the instruments of science but remains even when it seems to be hidden by specific operations to construct pure objectivity. His perspective is to be recognised.

Significantly, Breidbach's intentions collide here with those of one of the principal authors in the debate on the possibility of a universal science of image. Namely, Horst Bredekamp. With him, it is possible to understand the history of science from the *perspective* of the *style* of its images (Bredekamp *et al.*, 2008, 2015) and to understand objectivity as an *operation* within this style (Bredekamp 2011, pp. 206-224). In this sense, the notion of style corresponds here with that of the norm of culture when considered as the proper arrangement of forms that is to be recognised through a legitimate image. Hence, the implication of Breidbach's morphological aesthetics can reflect on the idea of a universal science of image as well. More precisely – and this is consistent with the most important result of the language of morphology – it can be a critical discussion of its possibility as a scientific discourse. This is what his morphological aesthetics as an image theory can account for. Thus, it has to be seen how it answers the central question of an image theory: *what is an image?*

3.2 Morphological Aesthetics as Image Theory

To answer this question, Breidbach first refers to the central role of aesthetics (2013). That is, aesthetics is intended as the fundamental domain of *experience*, for its significance depends on the productive structuring of perception. Here, as seen, a critical approach to science is possible too. But the significance of experience (and science) is indeed achieved through images. Thus, his morpholo-

gical aesthetics stresses the necessity to refer to the whole context and organisation in which these images are to be understood. In other words, images do not come alone. They come with practical and theoretical orientations that let subjects significantly refer to the world (Breidbach & Vercellone 2011). Images do not only display content and refer to objects, showing the world. They make evident the process that has produced them as well, that is subjects' organising and ordering interactions with the world. These are the cultural forms that reflect on images, among which there is science. To know what it means to think through images, it is necessary to consider how this organizing and ordering interaction with the world happens in the image. This cannot be reduced to the structure of verbal language, and it must be referred to the value that the image has on its own. The logic of the image must be determined first. Only then, is it possible to see how the language determines the organisation of the image. Again, all of this is essentially linked to the possibility of a critical approach to science.

The logic of image is that of a communicative structure that is maximally capable of reducing complexity by bringing variation and multiplicity to unity and identity without them being cancelled (Goethe's vocabulary is explicit here). Furthermore, this logic is that of the self-reflexive structure that poses its identity and lets itself be recognisable as a whole, bringing the unknown to what is known and the incomprehensible to what is clear. Here, perception (and observation) is an active process that can recognise itself in the image. The self-reflexive structure of images is thus a self-identification of subjects, and images are cultural instruments that assure a semantic articulation for individuals and communities, which is, first and foremost, based on perception. The subjects' order of interaction with the world, their language, and the organisation of knowledge – with the important role of science, too – make themselves evident as cultural forms and determine these images.

What is proper to image is then that it brings variety to identity and to the recognition of it as a significant unity – and this traces back to Goethe again (2006, 2011) – and that it relates to the unknown and incomprehensible, bringing it to evidence and determination. Or else, through images, the self-identification of subjects and their organisation of knowledge confront themselves with their negative moment and the possibility of an alternative perspective and with the space of possibility of their re-articulation.

This is the performativity of the image altogether with the vitality of living beings, where forms become significant, and their process and genesis are displayed so that they are caught the very

moment before the becoming of its significance turns into a rigid norm. Here, the ambiguity of the image, which characterises its performativity, is more precisely the suspension of the rigid opposition that the morphology as a language aims to address (nature-culture, subject-object, and active-passive). What is more, on this ambiguity, the idea of a universal science of images is, at the same time, a self-reflection on the condition of possibility of all sciences.

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