Culture in the Seminar Room of Poetry: Poetic Insights for Cultural Psychology

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Abstract
Some relations between poetry and Cultural Psychology have been investigated in the past. Yet, the very nature of poetry and its fundamental links to Cultural Psychology remain uninvestigated. By outlining the essence of poetry – its rhythmic-melodic, linguistically pictorial character – I show how poetry is in deep accordance with Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics. Poetry is all about experiences and emotions; these emotive experiences explain the basic relatedness of a person towards an object and shed light onto the complex processes of sign construction. It is only while taking into account the genetic Gestalt, previous and subsequent elements within a specific rhythmic and pictorial form that we are able to unravel this specific relatedness. Different poetic texts might then treat the same object but the relatedness towards it might diverge drastically. Based on these poetic elements, I define culture as a poetic field. Referring to a fictitious example, I explain that researchers and practitioners need to take into account a person’s complex rhythmic actions, that are divided genetically into different forms to understand his/her complex experiences of the environment. Then this illuminative power of relatedness sheds light onto the dynamically complex structuring and re-structuring of culture.

Keywords
poetry, culture, cultural psychology, action fields, semiotic dynamics, culture as poetic field

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Poetry and culture an approximation

Poetry is an important cultural phenomenon. While symbols, allegories, metaphors – among some other rhetorical devices – have been studied from a cultural psychological viewpoint (e.g. Guenther, 2020), the general nature of poetry and its connection to Cultural Psychology have been ignored. In the present article, I would like to describe the essence of poetry while showing its practical significance for the domain of cultural psychology. Here, I’d like to show how we as researchers as well as practitioners can make use of poetic knowledge in order to increase the understanding of our own culture as well as those of others. Culture is defined in Boeschian tradition as an action field that is structured by overreaching goals and needs (Boesch, 1991, 1998). The person structures in this regards space and time in a dynamic way. Yet, the action field also provides the person with certain valences that s/he was not aware of – which is the appeal character of our environment (Lewin, 1926). So, person and environment are in a bi-directional relationship as the person structures his cultural environment based on needs and goals but also actualizes or re-structures needs and goals based on the information provided by the material or social environment. We only understand culture within this symbiotic perspective between person and environment that form ecological units (Lang, 1992, 1993).1

How does poetry relate to culture? In a first instance, I’d like to say that poetry expresses important elements of a person’s action field, positive and negative valences of a goal or need, barriers of goal attenuation, the trajectory/journey towards the goal attainment and so forth. Important aspects of the person’s very own situation – which could be a tragedy, comedy, a tale – are here realized in a material way and get externalized (Valsiner, 2014) for other persons to be internalized, processed, interpreted and which could lead into a further poetic expression by that person. But before we elaborate further on the relation between culture and poetry, we need to clarify first of all our concept of poetry.

The essence of poetry

What is then poetry? Poetry is art by language as music is art by sounds, and equal to all fine arts, people want to get stimulated by accessing poetry either to get innovation (ideas) or to get relief for some sort of suffering (Pfeiffer, 1946, p. 9). The basic mechanism making poetry personal and over-personal is the fact that we as human beings are feeling into the lyrical subject, so that we understand the basic emotions displayed by the protagonists within the poem and conceive his/her reaction towards the outer world. If a lyrical subject mourns the loss of a beloved one, we can feel it as the text triggers our very own experience of losing a loved one. Poetry is only possible by feeling. And feeling is only possible by understanding the social other’s emotion based on our very own experience (von Fircks, 2021a). This is the reason why a child – not having yet made the experience of losing someone important in his/her life – is not able to understand a poem describing complex emotions such as sadness due to loss of a beloved figure. And furthermore, this is the reason why adolescents still – in our modern times – turn to poetry
when they fall in love as they hope to seek some understanding and insights by persons who have felt similar.

Rhythm and melody

Pfeiffer (1946) reports^2 that poetic and intellectual texts (such as philosophical or psychological texts) share the common ground of communicating something (in German *mitteilen*) into the wider cultural environment of other persons. However, in contrast to intellectual texts that require thinking, poetic texts require feeling and experiencing or more radical sinking deeply into the inner state of the lyrical subject and experiencing his emotions directed towards a situation. Intellectual texts are based on understanding while poetry – and this makes it so special – is based on resonating (Pfeiffer, 1946). But how is this achieved? Rhythm und melody are important tools for the poet. Let us see what Pfeiffer says to that.

An easy explanation for that abstract quote is a sarcastic sentence such as *Today, you are very funny with your jokes.* The sentence incorporates denotative meaning, a relational attitude towards an object (here the jokes) but it only makes sense (connotative meaning) within a specific tone, tempo and accentuation that is prior to sarcasm. Rhythm and melody of our linguistic system are henceforth important to unravel a deeper meaning of our texts. Without such rhythm and melodic structure of our texts, the sentence would not be understood in a sarcastic way. Thus, this specific meaning would be externalized but it would not be conceived by others. *The relation between denotative and connotative meaning only becomes obvious within rhythm and melody of a poem.* Rhythm is here animated resonating (‘Rythmus als beseelte Schwingung’, Pfeiffer, 1946, p. 16). And only while assessing the denotative meaning dimension of the sentence as well as its animated resonating (rhythm), are we able to unravel its connotative meaning. Rhythm is here the inner formal tension of a poem (Pfeiffer, 1946). Melody in contrast reveals itself within sounds of different timbre. Every word reveals a specific atmospheric value (Stimmungswert after Pfeiffer, 1946) by timbre and pitch. Let us look at an example. I will present some verses of Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken* (2011a).
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth. (p. 66)

The ABAB rhymes in the first four verses are important to mirror the rhythmic Gestalt of the forest. The recurring elements of a forest become here expressed within the rhymes. The animated resonating could be described as floating which is an element of meditative walks in the forests. The rhythm is thus characterized by floating and recurring elements that are both in thematic accordance with the essence of a forest. Now, let us look at the melodic composition of these verses. The first four verses share a major amount of o vowels. And this accumulation of low/deep and dark o vowels re-creates the wood-like atmosphere within the poem. These low and dark o vowels announce a thinking process (a difficult choice) by the lyrical subject who needs to decide which way to go. This is unimaginable if we changed the first verse in the poem. Let us give it a try.

Two Paths Diverged in a Yellow Forest

All of a sudden, the dark/deep floating – thus the combination of rhythm and melody – fades away and we are confronted with a different rhythmic and melodic setting. By the accumulation of clear-sounding a and e vowels, the sound of the poem would be better described as rising and cheerful. And of course, this cheerful and rising sound pattern is in stark contrast to the situation of the lyrical subject who reverently thinks about the next move to make. Again, let us look at Pfeiffer (1946).

Es wird nun langsam einsichtig, warum und in welchem Sinne ein dichterisches Sprachgebilde unübersetzbar ist: wie jedem einzelnen Klang und jeder einzelnen Spannungswoge, so ist der Ganzheit der rhythmisch-schwingenden und melodisch-klingenden Gestalt untrennbar eingeschmolzen ein Innen, ein Inhalt, eine Stimmung; die Form verändert denken, und sei es auch nur in der unscheinbarsten Kleinigkeit, heißt unweigerlich den Inhalt mitverändert denken. (p. 17)

Finally, it becomes obvious why and to which extent a lyrical form becomes untranslatable: Like every single tone and every single tension wave, the totality of the rhythmic-resonating and melodic-sounding Gestalt incorporates inseparably an inner core, a theme, an atmosphere; the form modifies thinking, and be it only within an unassumingly little detail this means inevitably to look at the theme from a different perspective. (author’s translation)

The linguistic picture

But sound and melody are not the only tools of a poet. There are more. Let us look at another important asset the poet needs to consider while working. I want to speak here of the linguistic picture. This linguistic picture is especially important for the poet when we confront ourselves with the opposite, a language that does not make great use of that device. Pfeiffer (1946) explains that this is the language of the average everyday
occurrence, the language of consensus and utility. It is this language that tends to ignore pictorial/figurative devices. In order to function within our everyday occurrence, we rely on a fixed conceptual nucleus which enables us to communicate fast; here, words become coins (p. 19). Intellectual texts that we read nowadays show prove of purifying language from these pictorial devices. Science tries to fixe concepts in order to enable researchers to communicate rapidly and reproduce its science. It is the battle for concepts. Yet, Pfeiffer (1946) reminds us that poetry shows another purpose. Here, texts are experienced, and experiencing is favoured over clear and concise understanding. The picture is prioritized and not the concepts (p. 20). And this picture is always atmospheric. Let us look again at Frost’s *The Road Not Taken* (2011a):

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same, (p. 66)

Here, we do not read these lines, but we experience them. *We do not focus upon concepts within the text, but we are attracted to the manifold of different pictures. We do not want to grasp the text intellectually, but we are feeling it. But we should not commit the mistake of trying to look for the picture as if we were forced to understand it in intellectual terms. Let us look how Pfeiffer (1946) describes that:*

[W]ir werden nicht im Ernst Ausschau halten wollen nach einer Wirklichkeit, die dem dargestellten Sachverhalt entspräche. Nein, ein solch ein Bild sagt gleichsam zu uns: ihr sollt in mich eintauchen, ohne zu fragen nach wirklich oder unwirklich; ihr dürft gar nicht hinausfragen wollen über mein Da-Sein von Gnaden der Sprache; ich will nicht Abbild sein, sondern Zeichen für einen inneren Zustand; gewiß, ich gebe einen Erscheinungsablauf wieder, wie wenn er sich darbörte in tatsächlicher Erfahrung; aber ihr Maß trägt diese Wiedergabe in sich selbst; sie kann und darf nicht gemessen werden an einem Außerhalb, dem zu entsprechen sie verpflichtet wäre; entscheidend ist vielmehr nur und nur ihre Stimmungshaltigkeit und ihre stimmungsmäßige Überzeugungskraft. (Pfeiffer, 1946, p. 21, p. 21)

We do not want to look at a reality that is in accordance with the matter. No, such a picture tells us; dive deeply into me without asking whether real or unreal; you are not supposed to ask me about my linguistic objectivity. I do not want to be a depiction, but a sign for an inner state; for sure I reflect a sequence of phenomena as if these were to be presented as real experiences, yet I [the poetic text] should not be judged from the world of concepts, the outside that would engage me to mean something specific. More importantly is the felt atmosphere of the poetic text and thus the atmospheric meaning. (author’s translation)

When we come back to Frost’s lines (1–10), we now understand them better than before. It is not only about being confronted with a bifurcation point when wandering around. No, it is more than that. It is about the state of inner fragmentation (*Zerrissenheit*...
in German); it is about the feeling of not knowing where to go, which path to choose, which way might confront us with more barriers and obstacles, and which might enable us to experience more beauty. And then it is about being courageous, about breaking out of our routines and going into the open. So, the lyrical picture emerges from the factual picture and opens up new layers of meaning that are central to our own culture.

Pfeiffer’s lines are illustrative and show that poetry is deeply into accordance with semiotic ideas of cultural psychologists. Poetry is a function of the lyrical I experiencing the world and transforming it within these experiences (von Fircks, 2021a). And reading poetry is experiencing this experience within the very uniqueness of every Self. So, poetry is never about the object but about the transformation of an objectual world based on needs and goals. Poetry is culture. And culture is poetry. Our felt world – in contrast to our factual world – is interspersed by meaningful pictures that are difficult to name, label (Valsiner, 2014) but that shake our entire being and attracts us to specific places and persons. It is especially poetry that paths us the way to such an understanding of our own being and that of others. But all of this is not enough to understand the very essence of poetry. Pfeiffer (1946) does not get tired of showing us further elements to consider when he compares poetry to the arts of drawing:

[D]as gemalte Bild ist gegenwärtig im raumhaften Nebeneinander und sozusagen mit einem Griff zu umgreifen; das dichterische Bild baut sich auf im zeitlichen Nacheinander und ist gegenwärtig nur kraft eines stetigen Vorgreifens und Zurückgreifens. Dort das Aufeinmal-Gegebensein sinnlich-sichtbarer Anschaulichkeit, hier das schrittweise Gewecktwerden unsinnlich-unsichtbarer Anschaulichkeit. Die Folge ist: daß es in der Dichtung geht nicht um das ruhende, sondern um das werdende Bild, nicht eigentlich um den Anschauungswert, sondern um den Bewegungswert. (Pfeiffer, 1946, p. 21, p. 21)

The painted picture is present with its element in parallel existence and therefore graspable within one grip; the poetic picture builds up in temporal succession and is present while grasping the before and the after. There, the sudden being-given of visual vividness, here the stepwise awokeness of invisible vividness. The consequence is: Poetry is not about the static but about the emerging picture, not about simple conception but about moving experience. (author’s translation)

Let us apply that to Frost’s lines (1–10) that we have seen above. These lines do carry emerging pictures, the lyrical subject that stands in front of a bifurcation point, looks down the two paths, is indecisive which way to go, decides, experiences his decision (it was grassy and wanted wear) and justifies it. Within this sequence, the inner fragmentation of the lyrical subject emerges, and we are able to feel it and are remembered of similar experiences (because we immerse ourselves in the lines and while reading we transform the lines in regards to our micro-culture), the reason why we feel with the lyrical subject. Pfeiffer concludes the following (1946): In poetry it is not about the pictorial per se but about the eventful, vibe-like and oscillating picture; not about the simple conception but about the power of transformation (p. 23) by experiencing. Let us conclude the following for the moment and refer to Pfeiffer:
Insofar as poetry is composed by sound mass, its rhythmic-melodic formation power is decisive; insofar as poetry is composed by meaning mass, its transformational power is decisive; by being rhythmic-swinging and melodic-sounding, poetic language has the power to announce a prevailing mood; by being syntactic-structured and objectual-representational poetic language has the power to invoke an atmospheric picture that is perfused by motion. (author’s translation)

**Poetry and the illuminative power of relatedness**

And yet, we are not finished with the particularities of poetry. We have now understood clearly that poetry cannot be dissected by thematic analysis. **Pfeiffer (1946)** explains that poetry is not about the content but about the prevailing mood, the atmosphere that transforms the content or the object. *Pfeiffer’s* examples are in German when he refers to different poems that describe a situation where the lyrical subject observes the moon. He reports that four different poems that all have the same object (observing the moon) are prone to different interpretation processes by the lyrical subject ranging from sensitivity and devotion and enjoyment. This is especially visible for poems that treat nature as topic. In one poem, the forest is perceived as threatening, in the other as sublime and in some others as charming/magical. Yet, if we were only to analyze the content or the object, we would not get a glimpse of the complex sign construction or symbolism. In The Road Not Taken the lyrical subject observes nature, and nature becomes a symbolism for the inner fragmentation of the lyrical subject which way to choose, for example, in life. But in one of Frost’s other poems *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening (2011b)* nature or the woods become another symbol.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (p. 108)

Here, the lyrical subject stops and makes a break. We get the impression that he is forced to make a break as he is amazed by the beautiful visual and auditive stimuli of a snowy evening. He is enchanted by this natural scene and does want to enjoy it as long as possible. And yet, this is not possible. He can enjoy it now, here in the present, but this enjoyment is temporary as he still has some duties to fulfill. This poem is so powerful as it symbolizes an inherent feature of human beings. Even if we have duties to fulfill, responsibilities that we need to take care of we can make a halt and enjoy our surroundings and we can appreciate the aesthetics that unfold right in front of us. Our duties and responsibilities in life do not hinder us to feel and to appreciate nature, art and so forth. And it is okay to enjoy it in the present and then to let it go and go your way that we need to go because of various reasons. This is something especially ignored in our modern capitalistic days as we try to ignore this enjoyment and invest time that we have in our work that pays off. Frost’s poem reminds us of that. And again, both times nature is a topic within the two poems. And yet, it becomes something different each time. Another atmospheric value, another relatedness emerges while reading the two poems. This is the power of poetry. But what do we mean by prevailing mood or atmospheric value (Stimmung in German). Let us look at Pfeiffer (1946).

‘Stimmung’: darunter ist nichts Stimmungsvolles im üblichen Sinne zu verstehen, nichts Festliches oder Sentimentales. Gemeint ist einfach ein So-oder-so Gestimm-sein des gesamten Menschen, und zwar gestimmt in einer Weise, die der Willkür und dem Belieben entzogen bleibt: Stimmung wird nicht gemacht oder gerufen, sondern Stimmung steigt auf in uns und überkommt uns. Das fahle Nichtgestimmte der durchschnittlichen Alltäglichkeit ist nicht weniger Stimmung als etwa eine bange Sehnsucht oder eine weltüberlegene Heiterkeit (...). Heidegger spricht von der erschließenden Kraft der Stimmung, Jaspers von der Erhellungskraft: in der Gestimmtheit und durch die Gestimmtheit wird offenbar, woran es mit uns ist, wie es zuinnerst um uns steht; die Stimmung bringt uns vor uns selbst; die Stimmung verrät etwas von der geheimen Tiefe unseres wahren Zustandes. (p. 39-40)

Atmospheric value: this is not to be understood in a common-sense way, nothing festive and nothing sentimental. In fact, it means a relatedness of the whole human being and in particular it is not random or arbitrary. This emotive relatedness is not made nor called, but it emerges deeply within us and shakes our entire being. The pale non-relatedness of our average everyday occurrence is not less an emotive relatedness than for example an anxious longing or sheer joy (...). Heidegger speaks of the opening force of this relatedness. Jaspers of the illuminative power; within our relatedness and by that relatedness we become aware of our deepest inner states; it unravels something of the most private and intimate depth of our being (author’s translation).
The essence of culture and its task

Before we elaborate of how poetry benefits Cultural Psychology, we need to clarify more in-depth what Cultural Psychology means as well as its task for science. Culture in Lewin (1926) and Boesch (1991) tradition is an action field that is structured by underlying needs and goals. Let us take a simple example to illustrate the complexity of this seemingly easy definition (see also Boesch, 1998). I build a house for me and my family. Here, I build a kitchen in order to eat with my family, I build bedrooms enabling me to find sleep, I build a living room in order to spend time with my loved ones and friends, I build a study room to find a calm atmosphere where I can work. Bases on these needs and goals, I structure my environment dynamically.

Culture is dynamic as our needs and goals are not fixed in time but are processes that are re-structured, abandoned, re-arranged and further developed. As the person changes in time in regard to overreaching goals and needs, so does culture change. And yet, this is only half of the truth. Our environment is not a solely individual. No, it is inherently social, and our action fields are overlapped with those of others – for example, persons that share the same house, flat. And therefore, the environment is co-constructed by these people, and foreign elements of foreign action fields emerge at the border of our very own action field.

Here, we become aware of goals and needs that have not yet been central to us. These persons as well as their personal culture might open us the eyes, and we realize within such processes that we want to adopt similar goals for our own dynamic field. Let us apply that again to an easy example. While I am in my study room, my colleague or my wife might have left a book or some documents in my room – either voluntarily or involuntarily – and while having a break from my work I get a look at that book and read some pages. If it is a novel, I might realize that I have not read any of those in ages. However, I remember that novels were important for me and that I learned a lot about life while reading. And now I decide for myself to go back to reading instead of watching television in the evening. This cultural product of another person’s action field – here the book – was the central impulse for me to realize how my action field was and is structured (no books anymore but television), and that I actually want to change that. Based on that decision, I might go to a book shop on the same afternoon and buy some books and bring them home. And based on the re-structuring of my action field (more books, less television), I change my being in time and space.

Culture is internalized and externalized – not simultaneously but in a dialectical way by way of living with other human beings (Toomela, 2021). What I want to underline with that simple example is that our environment often makes us aware of goals and needs that we might have ignored or dismissed for a long time or that we have never thought of in our lifespan. And yet, we become aware of that as we live with other human beings that structure their space and time (culture) differently than we do. And by that awareness we might begin to re-structure or re-arrange our action fields. So, the open development of culture is bi-directional. We as human beings change and by that we might change our culture. And yet these changes were triggered by the environment, by another person’s action field that made us aware of something that has been unknown or dismissed before.
This is the beauty of discovering a new culture – a new neighborhood, a new country, a new football club – as in this process we raise awareness of the differences between our action fields and those of the others. And within this awareness we might ask ourselves which elements might be adoptable for our very own action field and which elements could enrich it.

So, culture is an action field (Boesch, 1991, 2002) that is based on personal needs and goals. Yet non-personal needs and goals are discovered by way of living with other human beings and are appropriated. Within that appropriation, we might change our overreaching needs and goals, we might re-structure or re-arrange them which will in turn modify our personal culture. The task of Cultural Psychology is to shed light onto this dynamic dialectical (personal < non-personal (social)) process.

Valsiner’s extended that Lewinian and Boeschian definition by way of his cultural theory of semiotic dynamics (Valsiner, 2014). By turning to language and by investigating, for example, closely the symbolic value of an object, we turn our gaze to a sign construction that is only to be understood against the background of a person’s culture. The book in our above-mentioned example is not a simple object (book) but it carries personal meaning that needs to be understood. The book becomes a sign, here a symbol for what is missing in my action field in comparison to my action fields of the past. It makes me realize how my action field is now structured and what might bother me within that structure. So, the book opens up the world of my past (me reading a lot in the past) as well as the world of the now (I now watch television every evening) and of my future (I want to read more and watch less television). By investigating the complex meaning of the book, its symbolism between past and future we thus get a glimpse into the cultural space of the person. The signs, here symbols, are the door opener to understand culture (Lang, 1992, 1993). The task of Cultural Psychology within that extension is thus to shed light onto these dynamic sign constructions and re-constructions.

**Culture in the seminary room of poetry**

But what does poetry might teach Cultural Psychology? The answer will surprise some of the readers. *Culture is a poetic field.*

In the beginning paragraphs we have seen that poetry cannot be understood intellectually. No, poetry needs to be felt. Poetry needs to be experienced. Within culture we are confronted with similar processes. We can philosophize about culture; we can discuss its political dimensions as well as its psychological consequences. Yet, by discussing about it we make it an intellectual matter. And by intellectualizing it, we find ourselves in the non-personal world and we might use terms, definitions and concepts that are not central to those who live in that culture or who find in these terms another symbolic meaning than we do. We would thus discuss the object at stake but not the actual signs for our participants.

And if we leave out the sign dimension, the transformation of the object, we are not getting a glimpse into the actual culture of the persons we might observe. *Culture similarly needs to be felt. Culture needs to be experienced.* And in order to experience culture, we need to enter the action field of our target group and live close with them (von
Fircks, 2021b). If we immerse in one action field, for example, those of academics, I might pray in the evening before having dinner as religion is important to me. Looking at the faces of our target group (academics) we might perceive anger and confusion which might result in the academics leaving the table (and thus leaving my action field). Here, we are experiencing their culture, the structuring of their action field based on needs, goals and preferences. And by display of their emotions and actions (leaving the table) we become aware of the negative valence and symbol that religion plays in their life. This opens up the possibility to talk with the academics about their reactions and emotions and to investigate the interpretation processes that gave rise to that complex experience. So, then we can talk about these dynamic elements of culture. Yet this is only fertile if we have experiences in the first place.

However, in another action field, we might get similar emotions and reactions by our target group for our prayer, here anger and confusion. But this time our prayers have not been sufficient for the persons being at the dinner table, for example, monks, and they might look at me full of expectations, for example, that I continue my prayers. If I don’t do so, they might escort me from their action field or leave the dinner table too. Both times religion is the object by way of my evening prayers, yet both times me praying is experienced and interpreted differently giving rise to different emotions and reactions. I could not understand the differences between my religion and their religion without experiencing my culture meeting their culture. All of this is similar to children not feeling poetry that thematizes a loss of a beloved one as they have not yet lost someone in their life. Or this is similar to adolescents who fall in love and thus turn to poetry in order to seek relief for their suffering or to confirm their experiences.

Of course, we shed light onto these processes by way of interacting. And within these interactions we leave the field of denotative meaning behind (object) and enter the world of connotations (signs and their valences) that make only sense against the background of the person’s culture. And in accordance with poetry, we rely on rhythm and melody. We explained that rhythm is animated resonating (beseelte Schwingung) for poetry. For culture, we need to take into account something similar. The animated resonating is different for our academics observing me to pray than, for example, for the monks. The academics get angry and confused and might leave the dinner table in rage; as emotions synchronize with the body (Toomela, 2021), their movements or the rhythm of their movements will differ from the monks who might leave the table in stoicism – despite their anger – and continue their prayers elsewhere. Their rage might then turn into sympathy for me not yet having discovered the high value of long prayers. Here, both times the initial emotions are the same, yet they translate into different actions (movements) and can be equally transformed by way of finding a new interpretation of the event. Within that new interpretation, emotions and reactions will change, too and by that our interaction. By way of observing the rhythm of their movements or actions, we get a glimpse into potentially rapid sign constructions. One time we see the academics storming from the table and the other time the monks leaving the table slowly and at peace. The rhythm of their actions gives us thus a first hint of them experiencing my culture and them living theirs. To sum that up, I want to present a modified version of Pfeiffer’s quote (1946).
Finally, it becomes obvious why and to which extent a cultural form becomes untranslatable: Like every single tone and every single tension wave, the totality of the rhythmic-resonating and melodic-sounding Gestalt incorporates inseparably an inner core, a theme, an atmosphere; the form modifies experiencing, and be it only within an unassumingly little detail this means inevitably to look at the theme from a different perspective. (author’s translation and adaption)

Moreover, we have elaborated that the linguistic picture is central for poetry. This is an element that is born between the lines, thus inherently genetic. For culture, I want to speak of a symbolic picture that is genetically constructed. Let us look again at Pfeiffer what he has to say about the linguistic picture (1946, p. 21): It is about the stepwise awokeness of invisible vividness. The consequence is: Poetry is not about the static but about the emerging picture, not about simple conception but about moving experience. If we want to understand culture, we need a genetic gaze – or genetic methods – that enable us to identify the different genetic elements/steps that combine into the final gestalt. Concretely, this means that we study the symbolic picture by way of their Vorgestalten (Werner, 1956), previous forms and Nachgestalten, subsequent forms. For our example this means the following: If I am praying for the monks and I realize that they leave the field first in range and then at peace, I need to investigate the forms that gave rise to that phenomenon. In order for me to understand their reactions, I need to realize that my prayers are not enough. For that, I need to know the actual essence of their prayers, for example, longer, different melody, singing, different rituals. And I need to realize that they do not eat without sufficient praying. By following the monks leaving the table, continuing their prayers for another 30 minutes and then returning to the table, I might realize all of these previous and subsequent forms that explain their reaction. Here, I realize, for example, that my prayers were too short. So, I should not stop to investigate their reactions after them leaving the field. It is essential to understand what they do afterwards. It is about the before and the after that makes me understand the symbolic picture. So, by clarifying some of the genetic forms that gave rise to a phenomenon, I decipher the symbolic, genetic picture and by that their complex reaction towards me. Culture consists of these complex, layered and symbolic pictures that we need to assess in order to understand actions, reactions and interactions. Culture not investigating this symbolic picture is prone to failure. And again, the first and second dimension are in a symbiotic relationship. I will not be able to decipher that symbolic picture by not immerging myself into that particular culture. Let us again look at a modified version of Pfeiffer’s quote (1946).

The poetic, symbolic picture builds up in temporal succession and is present while grasping the before and the after. The consequence is: Culture is not about the static but about the emerging symbolic picture, not about simple conception but about moving experience. (author’s translation and adaption)

Finally, this poetic picture expresses a unique relatedness towards the object, a unique sign construction. If we are able to unravel the rhythmic-melodic, genetic forms that combine into the poetic picture – that mirrors culture – we are able to unravel the principal
(emotive) relatedness of a person/group towards an object, thus its semiotic transformation. This relatedness is then the illuminative power to understand core elements of culture, in our example the centrality of prayer for our monks that enables them to eat with a certain peace of mind.

In the other example, the academics leaving the dinner table in rage or escorting me from their house shows the non-centrality of religion, their hate towards the object, thus their personal meaning of religion. Only by analyzing the rhythmic resonating or non-resonating and by composing it from different Vor-and Nachgestalten (previous and subsequent forms) that combine into a symbolic picture, I am able to unravel the deeper meaning of the object for the academics, or in short, their relatedness towards the object. This account equally for more complex examples. But let us sum it up with a modification of Pfeiffer’s quote.

This emotive relatedness is not made nor called, but it emerges deeply within us and shakes our entire being. (...) Within our relatedness and by that relatedness we become aware of our deepest inner states; it unravels something of the most private and intimate depth of our being. It unravels our very own culture and that of others. (authors’ translation and adaption)

**Conclusion: A new dynamic definition of culture**

In the present article we have elaborated the essence of poetry. Poetic texts need to be experienced and felt. Dissolving them by thematic analysis only unravels the object thematized but not the appropriation of the object or its transformation; thus, the actual sign construction with a positive or negative valence would remain hidden. Hence, intellectualization of poetry results ultimately into failure. The very essence of poetry is its rhythmic-swinging and melodic-sounding body that expresses the lyrical subject’s relatedness towards an object, thus the lyrical body transforms the theme/object.

Yet, this is not enough to understand the deeper meaning of poetry. We need to understand that poetic pictures are composed by complex forms that are arranged in succession, thus they manifest previous and subsequent forms that give rise to the actual Gestalt, the poetic picture. Unravelling the poetic picture is only possible by taking into account these genetic elements, the before and the after of the poetic picture.

These two poetic dimensions are continuously feeding into each other and express a certain relatedness of the lyrical subject to a specific object, thus his/her experience of a situation (love, the loss of a loved one). Yet, a similar object or situation – the loss of a loved one – might be experienced differently, here as ultimate freedom which makes the use of other rhythm-melodic means necessary. Lyrical form and its meaning are thus complementary and express together symbiotically a certain relatedness towards a specific situation/object. This emotive relatedness illuminates then the actual sign-construction and thus central elements of a person’s ‘action field, culture.

Culture we have seen in the second part of the manuscript is a poetic field that shares the need to be understood by the same premises as poetry. Culture should not be intellectualized but experienced. Within these experiences, we perceive actions, reactions and interactions as well as their specific emotions. By way of Einfühlung, we are able to
understand the specific relatedness towards an object, thus a specific dynamic sign construction. Rhythmic-melodic elements are different in culture, they do not manifest themselves solely in linguistic patterns but also in complex motion patterns and express henceforth the poetic picture wholly. Unravelling the bodily reactions (facial expressions, movements) is unravelling the symbolic meaning of the poetic picture that is inherent for culture.⁴

And yet these reactions and forms – in their particular rhythm – are build up, are thus in a genetic sequence that needs to be experienced. *Culture not paying attention to that genetic sequence of previous and subsequent forms will not be able to unravel the poetic picture, the poetic Gestalt of our action field.* Rhythmic-melodic and genetic experience of a culture enables the researcher and the practitioner to understand the emotive relatedness of a person or group towards an object/situation. This sheds light onto how persons structure their culture dynamically or might re-arrange certain elements within that culture by relating to their environments. I wonder why we have not yet paid sufficient attention to the essence of poetry that teaches us indispensable lessons of how to define culture and psychology. The present article sets the seeds for that. The fruits have been ripe for a long time already.

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**Notes**

1. I will come back to a more sufficient definition of culture in the second part of the article. The first part treats the essence of poetry, and culture should not be the main focus for now.
2. For defining poetry, I rely on Johannes Pfeiffer’s analysis. He was a famous German post-WW-II literary scholar whose books became not only known in scholarly circles but far beyond for the private understanding of poetry.
3. Ambivalence is a key factor in unravelling major differences between my action fields and those of the monks. By realizing the differences in the rhythmic-melodic character of their culture and my culture, ambivalence is triggered that helps me to realize that our relatedness towards the prayer differs (see also Valsiner, 2019).
4. During the review process, important questions were raised concerning the limits of a poetic understanding of culture. As poetry and culture share some similar premises, they do manifest similar difficulties, too. I want to elaborate on a specific issue. If culture as poetic field is highly
subjective – due to the unique relatedness – how can we analyze a group relating to a specific object? The relatedness will never be the same, yet similarities within that relatedness might facilitate the group’s cohesion. But how can we scientifically determine those similarities? More research is required, here.

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Enno von Fircks is a science, prose and poetry writer. Being currently in the MSc Program of Social and Political Psychology at Keele, he shows manifold interests for uniting Cultural Psychology with different disciplines. Some of his works covered the links between phenomenology and Cultural Psychology as well as between existentialism...
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