THE ARCHIVE OF EXPERIENCE
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“We must assume,” writes Walter Benjamin, “that in the remote past the processes considered imitable included those in the sky.” People danced a storm. Benjamin is quick to add that the similarity that made it possible for the human body to imitate cloud and rain is different from what we normally think of today as a resemblance. It could only have been a “nonsensuous” similarity because nothing actually given to our senses corresponds to what our bodies and the heavens have imitarily in common. Benjamin goes on to suggest that this nonsensuous similarity can not only be acted out but that it can be archived, “most completely” in language. But it is not just in language. For it is what “establishes the ties” between the written word and the spoken word, and between them both and what is “meant” -- meaning what is sensible. It is in the ins-and-outs of language. “Ultimately it may be shown to be everywhere.” Tied to the senses but lacking sense content, it can nevertheless be “directly perceived” - but only “in feeling.” Direct and senseless in feeling, in and out of speech and writing, it ubiquitously evades both “intuition and reason.” What is this paradoxical “semblance in which nothing appears”? Simply: “relationship.” 1

Whatever is he talking about?
A good place to begin to find an answer is movement. The perception of the simplest movement responds in many ways to Benjamin’s criteria for nonsensuous similarity. Movement has the uncanny ability, in the words of experimental phenomenologist Albert Michotte, “to survive the removal of its object.” For example, Michotte could show you a screen with a dot and a circle. The dot would start moving toward the circle. Then just before it was about to hit the circle, it disappears. That is what, objectively speaking, you would see. But that is not necessarily what you would feel you saw. In certain circumstances, you would report “that the dot disappears while its movement continues right up to the circle, and then is lost ‘behind’ it” (Michotte, 138). There would be no sensory input corresponding to that movement. Yet you would effectively perceive it. It wouldn’t be a hallucination. A hallucination is seeing something that isn’t there. This is not seeing something that isn’t there - yet directly experiencing it nevertheless. It is in a category all its own: a felt extension of vision beyond where it stops and ‘behind’ where it stays; a perceptual feeling, without the actual perception. Movement, Michotte sums up, is “phenomenon sui generis” which may “detach itself from [the] objects” of sight (137).

This kind of effect is not limited to special controlled conditions. Whenever movement is perceived, we are presented with a “double existence”: an objective registering of sensory input and a perceptual feeling of continuing movement (222). Think of a case as ordinary as one billiard ball hitting another and launching it forward. The sensory input reaching the eyes
register two forms, each with its own trajectory. One moves toward the other and stops. The other then starts and moves away. That is what we see. But what we perceive is the movement of the first ball continuing with the second. We perceptually feel the link (14-15) between the two visible trajectories, as the movement “detaches” itself from one object and transfers to another. We are directly experiencing momentum, to which nothing visible corresponds as such.

It would be more precise to say that we are presented with a double existence whenever we perceive a movement involving a change of state. With the dot, the change was a disappearance. With the balls, it was causal, an impact effecting a launch. It could be any number of other things as well: for example, a “tunnelling” (one object ‘seen’ to pass behind another and come out the other side); an “entraining” (one object approaching another and dragging or carrying it off); an “ampliation” (a relay or spread of movement); an attraction, repulsion or resistance; or, suggestively, an “animation” (a self-propulsion). The variations are endless. But what they all have in common is that accompanying a plurality of forms or a combination of sensory inputs there is a felt-perception of something unitary: a continuing across that seamlessly links the separate elements or inputs as belonging to the same change. A continuing-across is by nature a nonlocal linkage, since all of the separate elements participate in it simultaneously from their individual positions. It is a “well-known fact” that these seamless linkages “do not show any observable resemblance” to the objective combinations involved (225). How could they?
The linkage is what the objects share through their combination: implication in the same event. The felt perception of continuing movement is qualitative because it directly grasps the changing nature of the shared event ‘behind,’ ‘across,’ or ‘through’ its objective ingredients and their observable combinations. It is, simply: relationship, directly and “nonsensuously” perceived.

Now say that you walk out of the pool hall and instead of billiard balls you see a car approaching another stopped at a traffic light and then collide into it, launching it a few feet forward. The objective ingredients are obviously different. But so is the nature of the event. The perceptual feeling of the continuing-across of movement, however, would be unmistakeably similar. The two continuings would share what Daniel Stern, working in a different field (experimental psychology) calls an “activation contour”: a continuous rhythm of seamlessly linked accelerations and decelerations, increases and decreases in intensity, starts and stops. The linkage that is the perceptually felt movement has “detached itself” not only from the objects in the first combination, but from that combination altogether. It has migrated from one objective combination to another, neither of which it resembles in any observable way. What it resembles in migration is only itself: its repeated rhythm. Internal to each of the objective combinations, the unitary, perceptually-felt movement qualifies the nature of the event as a launching. Jumping across the gap from one event to the next, it echoes itself in repetition. Behind, across, or through its repetition, it qualifies itself as a
species of movement-feeling. It is now a quality of movement beholden to neither car nor ball, as indifferent to the cue-stick as to the traffic light, inhabiting its own qualitative environment, in migratory independence from any given context. Pure self-qualifying movement: an autonomy of launching.

The ability of movement to achieve qualitative autonomy through repetition means that the double existence perceived in every change of state extends into a double ordering of the world. It is possible to follow the life-paths of objects as they move visibly from one combination to another, and from one event to another. This serial, objective ordering, hinged on the visible form of the object, is what Michotte calls a “world-line” (16-17). But it is also possible to jump over the intermediate steps in the sensuous-objective series and “yoke extremely diverse events” through the direct experience of the activation contour they repeat (Stern, 58). This linking can operate nonlocally across great distances in objective time and space bringing, through its resemblance to itself, an extreme diversity of situations into qualitative proximity with each other. Its nonsensuous similarity brings differences together. By contrast, world-lines bring identity to difference, in the visual form the object conserves across the series of events determining its history. If nonlocal linkages were to be “archived,” they would weave together into a qualitative ordering of the world doubling its objectively determined historical orderings, and freed of their contraints. That it would be free of objective contraints does not mean that it would be free from all constraint. The
qualitative order of experience has at least one major constraint all its own: its spontaneity.

Michotte insists that the felt-perceptions of movement-quality are not learned, but arise spontaneously. Normally, however, they are “unrecognized.” Even unrecognized, they are still operative in all circumstances. If they weren’t, there would be no continuing-across of movement. Continuity of movement would go unfelt, fragmented into the discrete forms of the plurality of objects in combination. This would mean, among other things, that there would be no direct causal perception (only indirect logical association; Michotte, 19-20). Stern also emphasizes that the activation contour is ubiquitous but normally operates “outside of awareness” (Stern, 52). Fundamentally, it is a nonconscious, operative “trace” (Michotte, 19).

The example Stern gives is instructive because it also illustrates the essential point that activation contours are amodal: being nonsensuous, they can jump not just between situations but also between sense modes. They are in no way restricted to vision, but also link vision to other senses, including touch and hearing - through which all the senses connect to language. The linkage itself is in no particular mode. “For instance, in trying to soothe an infant, the parent could say, ‘There, there ....,’ giving more stress and amplitude on the first part of the word and trailing off towards the end of the word. Alternatively, the parent could silently stroke the baby’s back or head with a stroke analogous to the ‘There, there’ sequence, applying more pressure at the onset of the stroke and lightening or trailing off toward the end. If the
duration of the contoured stroke and the pauses between strokes were of the same absolute and relative durations as the vocalization-pause pattern, the infant would experience similar activation contours no matter which soothing technique was performed. The two soothings would feel the same (beyond their sensory specificity)” (58). This would be the onset of a spontaneous self-organization of experience. Instead of experiencing a spoken-word mother and a separate stroking-touch mother, the two mothering events would yoke together, across their sensory, spatial, and temporal disparities, by virtue of the nonsensuous similarity of their activation contour. There would be one seamless soothing-mother. A new entity, the amodal mother-form, emerges as a function of the activation contour, whose “quality” is affective (a soothing). The affective nature of the new form of life that emerges prompts Stern to rename activation contours vitality affects. The world is not reducible to the recognized ability of objective form to conserve its sensuous identity in each of its serial locations. That ability is the product of another power: that of unrecognized, nonsensuous, affective linkages to bring “extremely diverse” nonlocal differences together qualitatively. Affect brings form qualitatively to life.

Vitality affects give rise to forms of life that are fundamentally shared. The soothing, like a launching, is a unitary continuing-across: from voice to ear, hand to back, hearing to touching. It is all and only in the linkage, which is the separate province of neither infant nor mother. The emergent “mother-form” is in fact an amodal coming to life of the relation between mother and
child, through difference-yoking repetition. The word “form” in this connection is premature: it is only much later that what lies objectively on either side of the continuing-across will take on a separate formal existence. The constraint of life’s qualitative self-organization is that the autonomy of movement upon which it is predicated counterindicates the independence of the forms that originate from it. It is the separation of forms that is learned - not their dynamic relations. The child will eventually learn to separate out what s/he actually hears, touches, and sees from what s/he perceptually feels amodally. The aural, tactile, visual (not to mention proprioceptive) sense-inputs on either side will be yoked together, this time by proximity. The local linkages will be recognized in different times and places, solidifying into an identity. Objective organization comes, and with it the child’s sense of its own independence as a separate, locally self-moving object. The constraint of shared differentiation in nonlocal linkage is slowly overcome. The stronger that the awareness of this objective organization of the world becomes, the more deeply will the vitality affect that made possible the emergence of its forms recede into the state of a trace. Its operations will continue unaware behind, across, and through the world of objective forms.

It is in fact the objective order of the world that “detaches” itself from the qualitative order, to which it owes its emergence. The discrete forms that recognizably populate the world with their identities are themselves traces of a sort. They are objective traces of their own detachment from the affective order that gave rise to them - and in which they continue, to the degree that
they change. Objects may owe their identity to their sensuous forms, but the events they participate in are still qualified by nonlocal activation contours, or by vitality affect. Without it, their world would be one of fragments. Without nonlocal linkage, nothing could be directly experienced as happening: the world would present itself as an eventless collection. Objects may hang together formally on their own, but the events composing their form’s life history are woven by vitality affect. When we see a form undergo change, when we are cognizant of an event objectively having happened, we are perceptually feeling the world’s qualitative organization, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. If forms are the sensuous traces of amodal linkage, then objects are a self-archiving of the world of felt relation. Separate forms are a tacit archive of shared experience.

Language makes it possible to share felt relations at any distance from the sensuous forms they yoke. Words are by nature nonlocally linked to their formal meaning, since they can be repeated anywhere and anytime. Words yoke to words, in a “chain of derivations ... whereby the local relations” and their sense-perceived meanings may in the end be “entirely lost.” At the limit, language can “suppress intermediate links” and operate only with nonlocal linkages. The continuing of nonlocal linkage into language returns it to itself, at an extreme of its dynamic detachment from objects. Through the activity of language, the directly felt qualities of experience that are presented in objects in trace-form can cross over into each other with greatest of ease, incomparably increasing their powers of self-organization. The activity of
language is a becoming-active of nonlocal perceptual linkages in their own nonsensuous right. The more active they are in their own right, the greater the number of directly felt-connections they can entertain among themselves. This expansion of their relational reach brings more and more distant events repeatably into their orbit. Their ever-varied repetitions *produce* nonsensuous similarities - purely verbal “associations” - to a degree that no sensuous forms could ever achieve among themselves. This associative power is what makes language the “most complete archive” of “semblances in which nothing appears.” Writing carries language to an even higher relational power than speech, by detaching it from the originating human body-object. But the gain may not be as absolute as it seems, since it comes at the price of falling back into trace-form on paper. Reaccess by another human body is required for it to come back to life. Language gains autonomy from the particular human body at the price of becoming parasitic upon paper (or increasingly, silicon chips) as vector of its spread.

Although language may be the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity, it is quite possible to activate and disseminate relation nonverbally. If sensuous forms are the objective traces of qualitative experience, then any conscious construction or modification of form is a way of reaccessing vitality affect. Sensuous forms can be consciously used as an archive for the expression of qualitative experience. Susanne Langer treats perspective in painting in just this way. In a painting, “everything which is given at all is given to vision.” But we perceive more than we see. We see surface but perceive depth. There must
therefore be in the painting “visible substitutes for non-visible ingredients in space experience”: “things that are normally known by touch or [the proprioceptive sense of] movement.” This couching of the non-visible in visible form can only be achieved if the artist “departs” from “direct imitation.” The artist must falsify vision in just the right way to produce a viable connection to what cannot be seen. In other words, s/he must paint not the visible resemblances her eyes see, but rather the nonsensuous similarity between the different sense inputs that yoke together amodally in the experience of movement. If painted with enough artifice, their linkage will be activated even in their actual absence. The painting archives an amodal, nonlocal linkage that operates through vision but is not contained in it.

The experience of space we feel when we view a painting, Langer emphasizes, is a real experience of space. It’s just that the space is virtual. Visible form has been used as a local sign of nonlocal linkage activating a virtual form. The painting brings visibly to expression the amodal virtual form, or experiential quality, of the space. It should be noted that objective forms are already local signs, making the painting a second-order local sign (which makes these printed words about the painting third-order local signs -- except that the intermediate link of the painting has been “lost,” since as a fictional example, like the cars and billiard balls earlier on, it never existed outside the virtual space of this description).

Langer considers dance to be another amodal expression of virtual form. Instead of activating kinesthetic qualities of experience through vision, dance
may activate visual and other qualities through kinesthesia. It must falsify
gesture in just the right way to make an connection between the experience of
bodily movement and what cannot be experienced in that mode. There is no
reason why this nonlocal linkage cannot reach into the sky. Langer agrees with
Benjamin: a ritual dancer may produce through gesture a nonsensuous
similarity amodally linking his or her movements to the visible form of celestial
bodies. The amodal activation can even produce a visual experience of
essentially invisible cosmic realms: spaces only visible virtually. “He sees the
world in which his body dances” (Langer, 197). In dance, everything that is
given is given to gesture. Through gesture, dance can under certain
circumstances produce a vision in and of a virtual space that was never actually
experienced and never can be: that can only ever be gesturally invoked. This
seeing of what isn’t actually there might be considered a hallucination -- were
it not for the years of hard training, the practiced technique, and collectively
prepared context necessary for the event of its ritual invocation. If it this a
hallucination, it is a shared hallucination that it might be better off called a
fictive relational reality. In modern dance, there is often no such attempt to
activate a virtual visible form. Gesture is used to produce only a direct
experience of rhythm. Rhythm, it was said earlier, is the nonsensuous form of
similarity. It is the experiential mode proper to amodal connection. By
manipulating rhythm, dance can in its own way directly activate amodal
connection as such. This gives it powers of nonlocal linkage beyond most other
nonverbal art forms, placing it among the closest to language (music, freed entirely of visible form, would be the closest of all).  

In general, art, verbal or nonverbal, may be considered the conscious archival manipulation of local signs toward the creative activation of virtual form. It must be borne in mind that access to the amodal archive of experience is only possible analogically. What else is nonsensuous similarity, if not a lived analogy that brings relational differences together in the similarity of an event to its own repetition? Virtual form is the direct, analogical, differential, eventful experience of a “semblance which does not appear” but is really felt. Being of the nature of an event, it cannot be coded. It can only be activated through codings -- whether we are talking about the visual code of perspective painting, the “language” of dance, or the digital code enabling electronic art. In whatever medium, art is a technique of nonlocal linkage. Its expression takes the form of a directly felt perceptual event that is relational in and of itself, whether it is explicitly “interactive” or not. All art brings virtual forms of relation to expression. Relations are not made of zeroes and ones. They are qualities of experience. They are archivable, but only in reactivatable trace-form. It is important not to mistake the inert form of the trace for the archive of experience that it really isn’t but that it can rebecome, in the analog repetition of its event. It is also important to remember the duplicity of form: that it has a double existence, participating spontaneously and simultaneously in two orders of reality, one local and learned or intentional, the other and nonlocal and at basis self-organizing. If you cleave too closely to the sensuous
side, you will err locally by imitation. If you falsify what is given to the senses with sufficient art, the sky’s not the limit to the relational truths you may fictively invoke.

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NOTES

1 The quotations from Walter Benjamin are culled from three short texts in volume 1 of the Selected Writings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996): “On the Mimetic Faculty,” “Analogy and Relationship,” and “On Semblance.”


6 On the concept of local signs, see William James, Principles of Psychology, vol.2 (New York: Dover, 1898), pp.157-188.