



THE CLEVER BODY

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ISBN 978-1-55238-594-4

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4 | IMITATION

THE MIMETIC BODY | We make use of our body's mimetic aptitude at a very early age and continue to rely on it throughout our whole life: we acquire skills and habits, learn a great variety of movements and re-enact, consciously or unconsciously, various gestures, in the most diverse situations. We all have found great pleasure in producing a caricature of our parents or teachers or employers. Prompted by the mixed feelings of affection and defiance, we enjoyed exaggerating their stiff habits and having the impression of exercising some control over these authoritarian figures. We were eager to indulge a deep-seated desire to make our

body look like another's. We liked to reproduce the accent, manners, and gestures of those we admired. How often we yearned to look older and act like adults by simply lowering the pitch of our voice or changing our facial features. We also liked hiding behind masks that we had carefully created.

Helmuth Plessner related "the delight of self-concealment, make-believe and disguise" to the fundamental human urge to imitate.¹ Play is manifestly one of the human activities that offer the earliest occasion to satisfy this urge. Our playful activity does not necessarily have to be tied to a purpose or a motive; we play for the sheer joy we find in impersonating something or someone.² Buytendijk observes that, at a certain age, children tend to develop a "mimetic culture" and even approach their surroundings with a "mimetic mania."³ Both the accomplishment of movement itself and the possibility of becoming, momentarily, a train, an aeroplane, a soldier, or a doctor give rise to a feeling of satisfaction. While imitating, children adapt their own postures and movements to the salient features of the motor situation. They also change roles with ease and rapidity and, by doing this, they are spontaneously forming their body. The reproduction of a figure is done not only with their hands and arms, but also with their legs, torso, head, and voice; their whole body becomes an "organ of mimetic expression" (Horkheimer).⁴

While in front of an audience, and knowing that a good performance on stage always requires an embodied presence, actors skilfully move their bodies to impersonate various characters. They can hardly achieve success without the able movements of their face and hands, the constant change of their body's positions and tensions, or of their manners of walking and speaking.⁵

The mimetic element is also central to dance. In his studies on the anthropological function of imitation, Walter Benjamin has pointed out that, together with speech, dance is rooted in the basic human ability to perceive and reproduce similarities. The “oldest function” of dance was to recognize and imitate animals, natural events, or mythical stories. Drawing on this unique potential, the ancients were able to establish cognitive and expressive correspondences: by adapting their own behaviour to some external realities, they were able to gain a sympathetic understanding of the observable and non-observable world. Consequently, in former times, children’s “mimetic genius” – their “life-determining” ability – had to be awakened and consciously nurtured.⁶

Acting, dancing, and playing are all-important parts of rituals. Through ritual practices, children express their individuality and, at the same time, gradually incorporate the modes of moving and being of a particular community. Both the individual and social aspects of an identity develop through ritual practices. The imitation of the movements executed by the older members of the community shapes the children’s body: modes of speaking and expressing feelings mould the muscles of their face. Ceremonial walking, sitting, and kneeling also leave a lasting mark. If the previous generation transmits particular values and experiences to younger ones, and their bodies incorporate these, the process of memorization is enacted by mimetic appropriation. It is through ceremonial songs and dances that rituals transmit the embodied memory of the community.⁷

How does the body imitate a person or an object? In most instances, children do not seek to faithfully reproduce a perceived form. They focus on the salient aspects of an activity and repeat them with vari-

ous rhythms and intensities. If they imitate an aeroplane, they will walk forward, lean their trunk sideways and extend their arms. Ernst Cassirer emphasized that the act of reproduction presupposes an inner production of a model, composed from the constitutive traits of an object. Imitation "never consists in retracing, line for line, a specific content of reality, but in selecting a pregnant motif in that content and so producing a characteristic 'outline' of its form."⁸ Its central feature is not the repetition of "sensuous characteristics," but the formative grasping of an object "in its structural relations."⁹

It would be erroneous, however, to ignore the occasional interest in minute details. In some play, children prefer to represent the object's specific peculiarities rather than its quintessential traits. The reproduction of details presupposes the ability to analyze and reconstitute a given reality, and a fine sense of motor precision and control.

Margaret Mead observed the behaviour of the Balinese watching with interest the play of two children or a cockfight.¹⁰ The spectator's two hands, executing two independent forms of mimetic movement, become "separate symbols" of the two moving beings. The re-enactment is so accurate and thorough that the sheer observation of the hands' "dramatic counterpoint" makes one able to follow the fight.

Watching creative artists at work, Mead tells us, we are able to witness such a contrapuntal behaviour. "So when a painter was working with one hand and the other lay on the table unused, it was sometimes found that that second hand provided the more interesting series of postures, as if the neglected hand were playing out a little counterpoint of its own."¹¹ Similarly, the conductor of an orchestra may indicate a specific rhythmic pattern with the right hand and mime the music's emotional content with the left. Orchestra members are disconcerted when the conductor

unintentionally communicates conflicting or ambiguous cues with his technical and expressive gestures.

CONVERSATION | Because of their remarkable flexibility and mobility, the hands exhibit a natural propensity for mimetic behaviour. During a lively conversation, the hands' movements naturally supplement the production and flow of the spoken words. The gestures have sometimes no other purpose than to fill the periods of silence that inevitably occur; they are, as David Abercrombie aptly called them, "silence fillers."¹² If we are inspired or seized by a strong emotion, we tend to introduce, between two words or at the end of a sentence, various unpremeditated "dramatic" gestures. These may serve to elucidate or give more emphasis to the meaning of words, or to reinforce the content of our communication effectively. Ludwig Wittgenstein did not fail to notice this remarkable correlation between our bodily movements and verbal expressions: "How curious: we should like to explain our understanding of a gesture by means of a translation into words, and the understanding of words by translating them into a gesture. (Thus we are tossed to and fro when we try to find out where understanding properly resides.)"¹³ In some verbal exchanges, these demonstrative movements prove to be indispensable; it is only through the observation of the partner's hand or face that the meaning of sentences can be correctly understood.

A genuine spontaneous conversation, as Abercrombie says, "is sometimes unintelligible, and it is always illogical, disorganized, repetitious, and ungrammatical."¹⁴ If we were able to read the written transcription of our own conversations, we would find them "horrifying" and "illiterate." Compared to the written prose, conversational sentences lack completeness and fluency. It is no wonder that, consciously or unconsciously, we

tend to correct these shortcomings and, through phonetic and bodily activities, spare no effort in making our speech more intelligible; we introduce variations in our voice intonation and tempo, we repeat words and pause between sentences, we make an implicit reference to a material context. We also come to the rescue of our non-fluent spoken language with demonstrative movements; the hand's elaborate mimetic gesticulations contribute to the clarification of linguistic meanings.¹⁵ Thus, while describing to someone a recent event, we accomplish imitative movements, and these are prompted more by the words we utter or the images we conserve than by some external realities we see or hear. Our mimetic gestures depict meanings and ideas in their sensuous concreteness.

Clearly, an informal conversation involves much more than just the exchange of information. We find ourselves facing another living body: we are sensitive to the distance between ourselves and our partners, we see the stiffness or casualness of their posture, watch the motion of their eyes and mouth and perhaps even smell the odour of their hair or clothes. There are other muscular changes and postural tensions that we hardly remark at all. Nevertheless, we are bodily present in a face-to-face communication, and our various sensory impressions constitute an indispensable complement of what we hear and say.

Beyond the hand's versatile dance, the facial mimetic movements play a conspicuous role in a conversation. As the participants speak, their lips and eyes are constantly moving, their skin and underlying muscles change in tension. The complex and intricate motions of the muscles provide them with the feedback necessary for the proper progress of verbal exchange. José Ortega y Gasset compared the body of each interlocutor to "an unstinting semaphore" that is constantly sending various indications or suggestions.¹⁶ Jeremy Campbell studied such a "conversational

waltz," during which the speaker and listener, by sending out bodily signals, guided each other: "By means of nods of the head, gestures of the body, smiles or frowns, the listener keeps the speaker informed on how his message is being received, whether it is time he stopped talking, or whether he should continue."¹⁷ Conversely, it is the relative immobility of the listener's face, the absent look, and not so much the lack of desire to communicate, that stifles a conversation, as it happens in situations governed by fear and suspicion.

In his study of the human face, Harvey B. Sarles also called to our attention this aspect of human communication: "From a dynamic point of view, language is a set of muscular movements, whose complexity and beauty match that of the fine dancers and athletes. Like a study of the hand movements of a skilled dentist or musician, the more one studies these processes, the more one is impressed by the capabilities of the human form."¹⁸ The face is a dialectical mimetic surface: it can translate both the content of, and the response to, a message. Similarly to the hand, facial features – grimaces, frowns, mouth motions, glances, and breathing frequencies – can offer concrete demonstrations of feelings, images, and ideas; they have an "illustrative value."¹⁹ For example, slight changes of facial muscles can tell a great deal about the progress and outcome of a sporting event that we verbally describe, and about the reactions – question, doubt, acquiescence, or astonishment – that our description elicits.

Another remarkable aspect of conversation is the imitation of the interlocutor's facial expressions and the particular mode of utterance. When two people are intensely involved in a discussion, they tend to reproduce not only the use of certain terms, concepts, and even speech dialects, but also facial habits, tensions, and movements. We are all aware

of the considerable diversity of faces. Georg Simmel correctly remarked that a face strikes us as the symbol of an “unmistakable personality.”²⁰ Yet, not only children’s faces resemble those of their parents, but husbands and wives, after living together for many years, also tend to look alike. Members of the same linguistic community share a certain number of facial features. The common propensity to develop the same or similar muscular habits shapes a distinct “facial dialect.”²¹ If these facial surfaces, each expressing a “definite spiritual individuality” (Simmel), are brought into a unity, this has to do not only with the form of the skull, but also with the similar ways of using speech muscles. Remarkably malleable, the face is a bodily part on which emotions and memories, as well as specific verbal activities, leave lasting traces.

Verbal communication, consisting of the production and imitation of an almost infinite variety of sounds, is deeply rooted in some bodily functions. The linguist Iván Fónagy considers sound expiration as a “specific bodily behaviour,” one of the most important motor activities.²² Our “vocal gesture” reflects the rhythm of respiration, muscular tension, and the position of our body. The laborious process of learning a language already illustrates this correlation. Children grasp and reproduce the prosodic features of a voice – its intonation, intensity, rhythm, and expressive articulation – before understanding the precise meaning of the words.²³ They take pleasure from repeating sounds that have no significance whatsoever, provided that they are “interesting.” Their sole aim is to make the captivating activity last.²⁴ At a later stage of their life, they are no less delighted to reproduce the vocal utterances made by adults. During a conversation, adults also repeat certain words in order to emphasize selected ideas or signal their attentiveness. They might do this only for the pleasure that the flavour of a curious combination of syllables gives them.

While the vocal imitation of children has been repeatedly studied, less attention has been paid to the imitative sounds produced by adults when they communicate with a child. Melodic speech is one of the first discoveries of children. The flow of words they utter is more melodic than that of adults. It consists of a higher degree of intrasyllabic tonal movement. When adults speak to children, they tend, through an effort of identification, to spontaneously mimic the melodicity of the child's speech.²⁵ Such a "regression" in the way of speaking and acting is very beneficial for the children's growth since it creates a bridge, through which they are also able to identify themselves with the adults.²⁶

The same adaptation may occur during an ordinary conversation. If the participants are willing to empathize with each other and follow, with attention, the conveyance of thoughts and desires, the tonal movement of their voice naturally adapts itself to the quality of their partner's speech. Because of the reciprocal sharing of the other's emotional attitude and communicative intentions, the produced sounds switch from a low to high degree of melodicity and vice versa. Conversely, the purposeful imitation of speech patterns could lead to a more empathetic approach and communication. A variation in speech melodicity is less significant when the speakers relate to each other with some tension. In such cases, their voice intonation becomes even, as happens, for example, when a verbal exchange turns into a scolding or an order, or the prevalent aggressive atmosphere suppresses the possibility of mutual understanding.

THE INVOLUNTARY IN IMITATION | Imitative movements may either accompany or follow the perceived motor event. The term *echo-kinesis* refers to an imitative behaviour that follows, with some delay, the perception of sound patterns or visual forms.²⁷ There is a deliberate intention to produce similarities. Both actors and children perform

echokinetic types of imitation when they copy previously perceived or represented movement structures. Although, as mentioned above, the movement is carried out with identical means, they make no attempt to faithfully reproduce a given action.

Synkinetic movements arise in synchrony with perceived or imagined events such as the rhythmic movement of a dancer, the melodic pattern of music, or the sudden and dangerous acceleration of a vehicle. A common feature of these examples is the suggestive power of an object: it elicits concomitant movements. Many of us have assisted at an exciting sporting event and found ourselves unable to sit still. We recall how easily our hands or legs followed and anticipated movements; we felt as if we were compelled to help the moving player to reach the intended objective.

An important element of synkinetic imitations is the interest with which spectators follow a perceived event. If the sensitive fingers of the Balinese watching a fight move nervously and independently, it is due to the characteristics of the motor experience itself; the fight, with its dramatic twists, exerts on the spectator a fascination, and provokes his active participation. As long as it remains a captivating experience, the Balinese can hardly prevent his hands from trembling, twisting, and twitching with animation.

Synkinetic movements occur regularly when we approach a conversation with sincere curiosity and intensity. Beyond the voice, which adapts itself to the pitch and melody of sounds, the different parts of our body execute concomitant movements: we bow our head, lift up our arms, and move forward or backward in synchrony with our partner. As we accomplish hardly perceptible small gestures, we indicate to our partners, most often without thinking, that we are, if not in complete agreement, at least in tune with them.

How strong is the involuntary need to reproduce a perceived movement?²⁸ Doubtless, in some situations, the powerful compulsion to imitate is so strong that the synchronized movement of crossing our arms or yawning occurs almost automatically. However, momentary feelings, disposition states, or preoccupations may minimize this primary motor influence and hinder or delay imitative reactions. As Kurt Kofka pointed out, we are less inclined to surrender to the immediate experience and respond to someone's laughter when we are tired and overtaken by a gloomy mood.²⁹ He argued, therefore, that the incapacity to resist a suggestive power is less conducive to imitation than is the conscious and controlled readiness to make ourselves similar to someone or something.³⁰

Notwithstanding the insistence on the primacy of voluntary control, the vivid and stirring quality of dynamic appearances does affect us on many occasions and prompts a great number of mimetic responses. We seem to spontaneously imitate a rhythmic movement if we perceive it to be visually attractive. While dancing, we are keen to surrender to the invitation of a visual or auditory perception and translate it into movements. Motor responses, released under voluntary control, do not necessarily diminish the observable fact that we tend to satisfy the powerful need to recreate what we perceive. Once, during a job interview, I found myself reproducing, involuntarily and without any delay, the movements made by the director of personnel: I was compelled to mime his crossed legs and interlaced fingers, and thus expressed my interest in the position and eventual willingness to co-operate.

The reason for this is that we perceive both the uttered sounds and the speaker's bodily gestures "in muscular terms."³¹ The form and quality of an appearance elicits in us a strong impulse to move. We all know from experience that when we perceive a ball moving towards us, we

feel a barely resistible urge to catch it or kick it back, as well as pleasure in doing so.³² Similar experiences occur in museums: the sign “please don’t touch,” or the restraining ropes, would not be installed if people were able to easily suppress their strong urge to make contact with the objects on display. Antique furniture, machinery, and weapons arouse in the visitor the strong desire to follow their shape with gentle caresses. If our smiling colleague moves towards us with an extended right hand, we respond without any hesitation with the same motion. How can we do otherwise? We find it so much easier to yield to the impulse to shake the hand and reciprocate the smile than to keep our hand immobile and stand motionless with a stern face.

Herbert Read and Rudolf Arnheim have advocated that to appreciate sculptures, both visual and tactile contacts are required. Sculptures are not only made by the touch but also for the touch. Unlike the detached and distant images hanging on walls, sculptures belong to our own life space and, as such, create “a spontaneous intimacy” with our body.³³ Once again, we not merely enjoy, but are induced, to respond to the invitation of their massive presence, especially if they are placed on our own level. We feel a curious desire to follow, through the gentle movements of our hand, the contours of the three-dimensional human figures.³⁴ We might feel a similar urge to accomplish movements while glancing at a distinctive architectural structure. “Looking at the Eiffel Tower,” writes Jacques Lecoq, “each of us can sense a dynamic emotion and put this emotion into movement. It will be a dynamic combining rootedness with an upward surge, having nothing to do with the temptation to give a picture of the monument (a figurative mime). It’s more than a translation: it’s an emotion.... In fact we constantly mime the world around us without realising it.”³⁵

All these miming movements unfold in the presence of objects and events that somehow speak to us; their properties emit subtle messages and “invitations.” Following the insights of Kurt Lewin and James J. Gibson, Rudolf Arnheim speaks of the “demand quality” or “affordance” of both works of art and the objects we use in our everyday life. We experience their shape, size, and colours as attractive or repulsive, inviting or forbidding. We become attentive to their expressive qualities, a life that stirs our feelings.³⁶ As long as we approach them with due respect and interest and remain receptive to their “motivating quality,” we will feel the urge to respond to them with bodily movements. If we see a very old book, we find it almost impossible not to open it and gently put our hand on one of its pages; we know that the perception of the object remains incomplete as long as we do not establish a tactile contact with the faded papers and recreate with our fingers its configuration.

Children, sensitive to the physiognomic qualities of forms, are prone to spontaneously repeat words or imitate the movement of animals (snake, bird, or ape). They are attracted to the motor-affective meaning that they discover in a living being. Jean Piaget believes that this interest in a form depends on the sheer possibility of reproduction. All living forms become significant for a child as long as they are susceptible to repetition. It is the already existing “sensory-motor schema” (an inner structure constructed out of perception and movement), that inspires children and evokes in them the need for imitation.³⁷ Repeated for its own sake, pleasurable in itself, imitation tends to occur in a relaxed and serene atmosphere. The absence of restriction helps children to focus. Older children, for example, more willingly imitate a person than they do an object. The latter is usually apprehended in a practical and utilitarian context and gives rise to goal-oriented movements. Perceived

without practical concern, the former – human figure – tends to elicit imitative gestures.³⁸

AWARENENESS OF THE BODY | The non-reflective understanding, the ability to immediately apprehend the meaning of movements and forms, is another important element of imitation. We not only take part in a particular intention and “affordance,” but, thanks to our body’s comprehending power, recognize it as our own possibility: we are able to produce a similar intention or dynamic force.

*The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it. The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them.*³⁹

Merleau-Ponty holds that an expressive gesture finds its “equivalent” or “confirmation” in our own body. The “equivalence” implies that the body itself has a “primitive self-representation” (Meltzoff and Moore), a basic awareness of its own abilities and impulses. Doubtless, such a bodily self-awareness is the starting point for all subsequent self-objectivation, but the body must first make possible the apprehension of the meaning of an expressive reality and its instantaneous imitation. Merleau-Ponty’s example of the baby reacting to an emotional expression well illustrates the immediate understanding of others and the rudimentary grasp of one’s own possible movements. Without previous experience, a

fifteen-month-old baby will open his mouth if we playfully take one of its fingers between our teeth and pretend to bite it. A spontaneous bodily response occurs because the baby feels its own mouth and teeth from inside as “powers” of envisaging similar intentions and producing similar effects. “It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body.”⁴⁰ Thus, the baby perceives correlative intentions and, simultaneously, senses its own motor abilities. Both the experience of the expressive gesture and the nonreflective recognition of the ability to accomplish similar movements make possible the imitative behaviour. The imitation of expressive acts requires an internal relation to bodily abilities. In his lectures dealing with the roots of language, Merleau-Ponty stresses this cardinal aspect. Imitation “presupposes that he (the child) experiences his own body as a permanent and global power capable of realizing gestures that are endowed with a certain meaning. This means that imitation presupposes the apprehension of a behavior in other people and, on the side of the self, a noncontemplative, but motor, subject, an ‘I can’ (Husserl).”⁴¹

Helmuth Plessner, in his anthropological analysis, puts forward somewhat similar views.⁴² He claims that imitation is directed by the reciprocity of bodily schemas, which are the concrete internal representations of the structure and ability of different parts of the body, based upon previous experiences and related to a specific motor context. The exchange of looks allows us to become aware of the reciprocity of both the points of view and the possibilities of behaviour. Dancers, painters, sculptors, and playing children are particularly endowed with the gift of “absorbing movement by looking at it” (Merce Cunningham).⁴³ Without detailed instructions, they are able to compare and select motor forms, seeing them as their own.⁴⁴

Let us now consider, more closely, the awareness of a possible intention and ability in one's own body. When we represent another person, we relate to an "inward attitude." This essentially consists of a particular way of being, in the sense of being friendly, orderly, artistic, religious, philosophical, and so forth.⁴⁵ We recall that Ernst Cassirer speaks of a "model," this being the outcome of a "creative and formative activity," an "inner production" (*Vorbilden*), carried out by the human spirit. Here we may evoke the notion of an internalized role or pattern that suggests to us how to act in a particular situation.⁴⁶ Once the attitude, or model, or role is actively formed and strengthened, it becomes the regulating guide for the execution of movements. Without much effort, we imitate the conceited professor's speech or the disciplined soldier's rigid posture. Our verbal utterances and motor behaviour do not necessitate specific representations and commands; we do not have to deliberately evoke a particular way of walking, looking, and shaking someone's hand in order to execute them. Our mimetic gestures spontaneously spring from the already formed inward attitude. "When we adopt an attitude," writes Jürg Zutt, "that corresponds to the idea of an unfamiliar being, we notice in ourselves a psychical fact from which, while our ego can look upon it, our gestures emerge with a perceptible autonomy."⁴⁷ Even the seemingly unimportant movements emerge from this autonomous inward character. Thus, actors are able to respond appropriately to any unexpected events that might occur on stage. Their bodily autonomy allows them to execute movements that, nevertheless, bear the mark of a recognizable style – a style shaped by previous experiences and adapted to the characteristics of the actual circumstances. They do not need to select and guide their movements, just as much as they do not have to have a clear and accurate conception of the inward attitude in place. The latter

is no longer represented but lived as a constitutive element of their whole being: for the time being, they *are* what they play.

There is a reciprocal relationship between an acquired inward attitude and the corresponding motor behaviour. The former gives rise to imitative movements, the latter, in its turn, reinforces and amplifies a way of being. In acting, the careful practice of movements helps to discover and feel the meaning of basic dispositions.⁴⁸ If we keep performing acts of worship, our faith will surely be fortified. Max Scheler has rightly noted that the religious consciousness is not wholly developed independently of bodily expression: "ritual is an essential *vehicle* of its growth."⁴⁹ The same holds for other kinds of disposition or casts of mind: the more we carry out some gestures, the more our inward attitude comes to shape our whole being. "The professor putting on an act that pretends to wisdom, comes to feel wise. The preacher finds himself believing what he preaches. The soldier discovers martial stirring in his breast as he puts on his uniform."⁵⁰ The outward presence and action bolster one's guiding model and result in the embodiment of a social function. "Normally," remarks Peter L. Berger, "one becomes what one plays at."⁵¹ The process of personal appropriation usually does not follow a deliberate plan; through our involvement in an activity, we inevitably grow into a certain way of life and, conversely, by holding on to some beliefs, values, or goals, we effortlessly behave in a certain way.

The second segment of this correlation brings us to the *ideo-motor* phenomenon.⁵² *Ideo-motor* actions are movements that are generated and guided by ideas derived from the perception or expectation of a reality. The movement may immediately follow the idea (*synkinesis*) or occur only after a delay (*echokinesis*). In both cases, it is an idea that elicits in the body an involuntary response. In this connection, we may

refer, once again, to the imitative movements that we execute while listening to a musical piece or watching an exciting sporting event. Since, as we have already observed, a conversation is a bodily event, the ideas that we form following the perception of the sounds and the understanding of their meaning also provide the impetus for movement.

Why does an idea elicit a motor reaction? Why is it a cue to movements? Just like tones easily provoke motor responses, certain ideas exert on us such a powerful influence that we immediately display a motor reaction. We can hardly suppress a movement when we think, for instance, of being hit by an approaching heavy object. The relationship to this thought is just as much a pathic experience as is the encounter with a ball or a strong smell. Because some ideas, as much as an image or a plaything, have an impulse value; they induce both feelings and movements. Alfred North Whitehead was perhaps referring to this kind of induction when he defined thought as a kind of inspiration, which makes us jump up from our desk in rapture: "A thought is a tremendous mode of excitement. Like a stone thrown into a pond it disturbs the whole surface of our being,"⁵³

The impulse seems to be particularly strong in good acting. If the director suggests an idea, a subtle inner movement is provoked in the actor's body. The same response occurs in all of us when, for example, we are asked to imagine the loss of a loved one. It is more manifest in acting since, as Peter Brook observed, "the actor is a more sensitive instrument and in him the tremor is detected."⁵⁴

SYPATHETIC COMMUNICATION | We are able to accomplish very satisfying performances, in all areas of our life, if, in a relaxed manner and by forgetting all our worries and fears, we submit ourselves

to the compelling influence of an idea or a symbol. William James, who discusses the ideo-motor phenomenon in his writings, argues that excessive concerns neutralize the exciting effect an idea can exert on the body. "Stated technically, the law is this, *that strong feeling about one's self tends to arrest the free association of one's objective ideas and motor processes.*"⁵⁵ Therefore, James, preaching the "gospel of relaxation," advises us to silence all "egoistic preoccupation" and surrender ourselves, in a state of absolute unconcern, to the ideas' dynamic influence.⁵⁶

In fact, all imitative movements call for such a "positive approach" (Buytendijk). Performers of modern dance, for example, take a heightened interest not only in the expression of their inner state, but also in the characteristics of a natural or human milieu. There seems to be no hiatus between a dancer's "interiority" and the various aspects of the movement. And the rhythmic succession of movements seems to be guided by the sympathetic perception of a particular space.

Ritual ceremonies also allow us to open ourselves to, and communicate with, something meaningful and greater than ourselves, in both space and time. Although we may focus on past or future events, rituals make us fully aware of the present. Whether we take part in a church ceremony or an athletic contest, we are no longer subject to the constraints usually prevailing while we execute a purposive action. We become fully attentive to the immediate experience and allow ourselves to be moved by it.⁵⁷

In his analysis of Benjamin's theory of mimetic experience, Jürgen Habermas speaks of the "uninterrupted connection of the human organism with the surrounding nature."⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Ulrich Schwartz believes that Benjamin's theory comprises a fundamental anthropological assertion: "The mimetic faculty first makes possible the experience of

the world in an empathic sense.⁵⁹ The various aspects and qualities of the environment are no longer perceived in confrontation, but accepted with a sense of involvement and participation. Thus, the mimetic capacity includes not only the gift of producing similarities, but also the bodily potential on which we draw in order to act in unison with the world and to perceive it with sympathy and care.

The mimetic experience is, after all, a mode of knowledge. It may be considered just as vital for our well-being as the scientific mode of knowing. Objects are perceived in relation to each other and with all their individual, dynamic, and affective qualities. They resonate in us and induce us to recreate their dominant elements. We then sing what we hear and dance what we see. We do not seek to control or extract facts from their context. We approach everything in a relaxed manner, letting them be as they are and entrusting ourselves to their suggestions and demands. Such a deep sense of kinship particularly nurtures an organic outlook that recognizes the interplay of global and dynamic processes in both the human and natural habitats.⁶⁰