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Doctrine of the Similar (1933)

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# *Doctrine of the Similar (1933)\**

by Walter Benjamin

Insight into the areas of the “similar” has a fundamental importance for the illumination of large areas of occult knowledge. Such insight, however, is to be gained less by demonstrating found similarities than by reproducing processes which produce such similarities. **Nature produces similarities— one need only think of mimicry.** Human beings, however, possess the very highest capability to produce similarities. Indeed, there may not be a single one of the higher human functions which is not decisively co-determined by the **mimetic faculty.** This faculty, however, has a history, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. With respect to the latter, it is in many ways formed by play. To begin with, children’s games are everywhere interlaced with mimetic modes of behavior, and their range is not limited at all to what one human being imitates from another. A child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train. The question which matters, however, is the following: **what does a human being actually gain by this training in mimetic attitudes?**

The answer presupposes a clear reflection on the **phylogenetic importance of mimetic behavior.** To determine this, it does not suffice to think, for example, merely of what the concept of similarity means for us today. As we know, the **sphere of life** which once seemed to be **ruled by the law of similarity used to be much larger.** It was the **microcosm and the macrocosm,** to give but one version of the many found by the experience of similarity over the course of history. It can still be maintained today that the cases in which people consciously perceive similarities in everyday life are a minute segment of those countless cases unconsciously determined by similarity. The similarities which one perceives consciously, for instance in faces, are, when compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip which one sees projecting above the waves.

These **natural correspondences,** however, **assume their decisive importance only in light of the consideration that they all stimulate and awaken that mimetic faculty which responds to them in human beings.** Here one must recall that neither the mimetic forces nor their objects, i.e., the mimetic objects, have remained the same, unchanged over the course of time. In the course of the centuries **the mimetic force,** and then with it the

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mimetic faculty of perception, has disappeared from certain areas, perhaps in order to pour forth into others. It might not be too bold to presume that on the whole a uniform direction can be perceived in the historical development of this mimetic faculty.

At first glance, the direction might seem to lie in the increasing disappearance of this mimetic faculty. The perceived world (*Merkwelt*) of modern human beings seems to contain infinitely fewer of those magical correspondences than the world of the ancient people or even of primitive peoples. Yet this is the question: is it the case that the mimetic faculty is dying out, or has perhaps a transformation taken place? Some aspects of astrology may indicate, even if indirectly, the direction in which such a transformation might lie. For as inquirers into the old traditions we must take into account the possibility that human beings might have perceived manifest formations, that is, that objects had a mimetic character, where nowadays we would not even be capable of suspecting it. For example, in the constellations of the stars.

To grasp this, the horoscope must be understood as an original totality which astrological interpretation merely analyzed. (The stars formed a characteristic unity, and the character of the individual planets was only recognized by the way they function in relation to the stars.) We must always take account of the fact that celestial processes could be imitated by those who lived earlier, both collectively and individually. Indeed, the possibility of imitation contained the instruction to make use of an already present similarity. This possibility of human imitation, that is, this mimetic faculty which human beings possess, may have to be regarded, for the time being, as the sole basis for astrology's experiential character. If, however, mimetic genius was truly a life-determining force among the ancients, then it is scarcely possible not to attribute complete possession of this gift to the newborn—especially when it is regarded as complete mimetic adaptation to the form of cosmic being.

The moment of birth, which here decides everything, is but an instant. This directs our attention to another peculiarity in the area of similarity. The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities thus seems to be bound to a time-moment (*Zeitmoment*). It is like the addition of a third element, namely the astrologer, to the conjunction of two stars which must be grasped in an instant. Here the astronomer is cheated out of his reward, despite the sharpness of his observational tools.

The reference to astrology may already suffice to make comprehensible the concept of a non-sensuous similarity. The concept is obviously a relative one: it indicates that in our perception we no longer possess what once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human being. Nonetheless, we too possess a canon on the basis

of which we can bring towards clarification the obscurity attached to a concept of non-sensuous similarity. And that canon is language. 

From time immemorial, a mimetic faculty has been conceded some influence on language. That occurred, however, without foundation and without giving any serious consideration to the meaning, or even the history, of a mimetic faculty. In the main, such considerations remained closely bound to the commonplace, sensuous area of similarity. Mimetic behavior was at least granted a place in the origin of language as the onomatopoeic element. But if, as is obvious to perceptive people, language is not an agreed-upon system of signs, then the attempt to approach language will always have to reach back to a consideration of how these signs are given in their crudest and most primitive form in the onomatopoeic mode of explication. The question is: how can this onomatopoeic mode of explication be elaborated, and how can it be adapted to clearer insights?

In other words: can one establish an underlying meaning for Rudolf Leonhard's assertion in his instructive work, *The Word*: "Every word—and the whole language—is onomatopoeic." The key which in fact finally makes this thesis completely transparent lies concealed in the concept of a non-sensuous similarity. If, from the different languages, one were to arrange words meaning the same thing around what they mean as their center, then it would be necessary to examine how these words, which often have not the slightest similarity to each other, are similar to that meaning in their center. Such an understanding is of course closely linked to mystical and theological theories of language without, however, being alien to empirical philology. But it is common knowledge that mystical theories of language do not content themselves with drawing the spoken word into their considerations. They certainly also deal with the written language in the same way. And here it is worth noting that the written word, perhaps even more than certain combinations of sounds in language, clarifies, in the relationship of the graphic image (*Schriftbild*) of words or letters to that which is meant or which gives the name, the nature of non-sensuous similarity. Thus, for instance, the letter "beth" has the name of a house. It is therefore non-sensuous similarity which not only creates the connection between the spoken word and what is meant; but also the connection between what is written and what is meant, as well as that between the spoken and the written word. And each time in a completely new, original and underivable way.

The most important of these connections may well be the one mentioned last, between the written and the spoken word. For the similarity which reigns here is the comparatively most non-sensuous. At the same time this similarity is the one which takes the longest to reach. An attempt at representing the actual essence of this similarity can scarcely be undertaken without casting a glance into the history of its formation, however impenetrable is the darkness which covers it still today. Recent graphology has taught us to recognize images, or more precisely picture puzzles, in

handwriting, pictures which conceal the writer's unconscious. It can be assumed that the mimetic faculty expressing itself in the activity of the writer was of greatest importance for writing in the ancient times of its origin. Along with language, writing has thus become an archive of non-sensuous similarities or non-sensuous correspondences.

This, if you will, magical side of both language and writing does not, however, merely run parallel, without relation to the others, namely the semiotic side. Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention with an established basis which can only appear at all in connection with something alien, the semiotic or communicative element of language. Thus the literal text of writing is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself. Thus the nexus of meaning implicit in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent instantaneously, in a flash. Since this non-sensuous similarity, however, reaches into all areas of reading, this deep level reveals a peculiar ambiguity of the word "reading" in both its profane and magical senses. The pupil reads his ABC book, and the astrologer reads the future in the stars. In the first clause, reading is not separated into its two components. But the second clarifies both levels of the process: the astrologer reads off the position of the stars in the heavens; simultaneously he reads the future and fate from it.

If, in the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, and coincidences represented reading *per se*, and further, if there were mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by the runes, then one might well assume that the mimetic faculty, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, quite gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity. Language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium into which the earlier perceptive capabilities for recognizing the similar had entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationship with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata. In other words: it is to writing and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.

So speed, that swiftness in reading or writing which can scarcely be separated from this process, would then become, as it were, the effort or gift of letting the mind participate in that measure of time in which similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to become immediately engulfed again. Thus even profane reading, if it is not to forsake understanding altogether, shares this with magical reading: that it is subject to a necessary speed, or rather a critical moment, which the reader must not forget at any cost unless he wishes to go away empty-handed.

Addendum

The gift which we possess of seeing similarity is nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically. And the forgotten faculty of becoming similar extended far beyond the narrow confines of the perceived world in which we are still capable of seeing similarities. What the stars effected millennia ago in the moment of being born into human existence wove itself into human existence on the basis of similarity.

*Translated by Knut Tarnowski*

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