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The Picturesque Movement-Effect: Motion and Architectural Affects in Wölfflin and Benjamin

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Movement is a term widely used in describing architectural affects and it answers to two closely entwined concepts. The first is the motion of the body of the observer through the building. The second is the semblance of movement in the building itself, the feeling that the inescapable stillness of the building contains the potential for, or the trace of, actual motion. In this presentation, I will distinguish between the two as motion and movement, motion being the movement of the subject, and movement being the perception of motion in the form of objects. This might seem an overly subtle and obtuse distinction but it is necessary to my aim of understand the concept of movement in architecture as a relation of conceptual and visual experiences of buildings.

My main interest in this topic is in the theory and practice of the picturesque, but the issues in the concept of movement can be best examined in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin, a theorist and historian who takes up aspects of the picturesque problematic. By reading Wölfflin through and against Walter Benjamin and earlier theories of the picturesque, I aim to show the logic and the importance of Wölfflin’s paradoxical concept of a movement without motion.

Le Corbusier most famously describes motion, in the sense of the successive experience of the spaces of a building, in his idea of an architectural promenade, and it has many parallels with cinema. All spaces can be thought to be affecting through the intersection of visual experience with a bodily sensation of space. Motion through the spaces of a building opens this in the temporal dimension by giving an apprehension of form to the duration and succession of spatio-visual experiences. Sigfried Giedion called this “space-time” and in his description of Le Corbusier’s architectural promenade in the Villa Savoye, suggests that it is a modern extrapolation of the quality of movement that his teacher Heinrich Wölfflin had identified in Baroque architecture. What Giedion does in reconciling the earlier formalist movement with actual motion is now generally assumed in current usage of the word movement. In describing a building as possessing aspects of motion in its form (a usage that is in fact increasing rare), we are actually lending the building aspects of our own movement, our passage through space and the successive attention of our senses. In the discourse on empathy theory in Wölfflin’s time this would have been called “subject-objectification” a kind of projection of subjectivity onto the object.

However, there is very little basis in Wölfflin’s text for Giedion’s extension of the concept, or to think that Wölfflin considered movement as subject-objectification. What is remarkable about Wölfflin’s text is that he describes movement entirely as an aspect of the visual form of the object. It is not that he inadequately relates this movement to locomotion but that he does not consider the position or motion of the subject at all. Wölfflin’s use of the concept of empathy is almost the reverse; movement is an architectural affect that seems to objectify the subject. My aim in this paper is to examine the conceptual structure that leads Wölfflin to apparently ignore the positioned and moving subject.

There are two aspects of this apparent lacuna in Wölfflin, which should give us cause not to simply dismiss his ideas of movement as merely arcane. The first is a detail of historical context; the second an issue of authority. The historical issue is that the locomotion of the subject was already much considered in Wölfflin's time and it is reasonable to think that he considered it uninteresting as an account of movement. In particular he shows some familiarity with English picturesque theory and practice. The picturesque had in the 18th Century, opened the question of whether movement was an aspect of form or of subjective experience. Picturesque practice can be understood as an investigation into the programming of the subject's movement and perceptual experience, an investigation which continued into modern times. The second aspect to consider, one of authority, is that despite Wölfflin having been considered unreliable in art and architecture theory in the past four or five decades, there are strong parallels between his work and that of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin is now considered by many to be the most significant contemporary thinker on early 20th Century modernism; and some of his more difficult ideas such as “aura”, “tactile apperception”, and “non-sensuous mimesis” can be usefully related to the problem of motionless movement in Wölfflin.

Wölfflin’s ideas on movement begin in his doctoral thesis of 1886, which was largely incorporated in Renaissance and Baroque of 1888. The book is an attempt to defend the reputation of architectural works in Rome from Michelangelo to Borromini against the charge that they are a degeneration of Renaissance forms and ideals. Wölfflin’s claim is to describe the aesthetical qualities particular to Baroque architecture and then to discuss the meaning of style, and the historiography of changes of style. Yet we could also say that description of the Baroque becomes an example of the psychological analysis of style formulated in the dissertation, which was titled “Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture”. The psychology referred to is the theory of Einfühlung or empathy, which dominated German aesthetics in the late-19th century. Wölfflin supposed that there was an affective relation between artworks, the persons who perceived them, and art as a whole in an historical period. Wölfflin did not believe that art could express ideas or that the unity of art historical periods could be understood by their context in society or the development of the sciences. Artworks and the unity which art possessed in a period like the baroque could only be understood as the expression of feelings. Movement was the crucial affect of the Baroque. Styles and their formal aspects such as movement had, Wölfflin thought, a double root. First, in the expression of the native demeanor of a people and an age, and then in fundamental psychological processes of perception. The movement of baroque architecture is then both inherent in the spirit and the whole cultural orientation of the artists and people of 17th century Rome; and movement also speaks to the perceptual mechanisms in all people at all times, which allow us today to perceive and find the Baroque affecting.

The movement of which Wölfflin writes is apparent in compositional motifs such as; the layering and superimposition of elements, the rhythm of facades and their weighting from centre to edge, the irregular distribution of ornament such that it seems sometimes superfluous and sometimes lacking, and, perhaps, the most obvious baroque stylistic invention of curvilinear facades planned on ovals, and other geometrically indeterminate forms. It is perhaps obvious to describe such motifs as “moving” if one means by this an analogy, a thought that it is “as if” the building were in motion. But Wölfflin’s meaning is

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5 See Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Konomou, Empathy. Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893 (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1994).

stronger than this. In Wölflinian movement the armature of perception—the eyes, head and body move literally, in a visual inspection, which is given its agenda by building. These psychomotor events affect the emotions directly. We are excited because our eyes move quickly, our mood is expansive as we look up and our chest and lungs actually expand, and so on. In this postural account of movement Wölflin is subsuming the anthropomorphism, which dominates architectural theory since the Renaissance to the new psychology. For instance, he pointedly maintains the traditional claim that the proportion of buildings is affecting through its likeness to the body, but this is not the geometrical body of the Renaissance. Rather he says proportion relates to the rate of respiration.

What is surprising for a modern reader is that Wölflin did not also consider and include the obvious facts of human locomotion and how this relates to field of view. The principles of force, direction and of the body itself are all attributed to the building. Now it is possible, and I think necessary, to suppose that the empirical existence and motion of the subject are assumed throughout Wölflin’s text. The stairs that spill outward do so as the crowds are gathered upon them; the rhythm of a façade or colonnade is the rhythm of our passing along its face; the elements which succeed one another in space; seem to do so because we see them in succession; and so on. Not to assume this would make the books very strange. The issue to understand is why, and what merit there is in approaching the concept of movement as something still, arrested, and imagistic.

Wölflin’s movement is one of comportment and gesture; micro movements, which are interruptions of, or signs for more extensive movement. What interests Wölflin is not the human body’s capacity for spatial extension, that one might turn left and move three paces before turning left and climbing a ladder. Movement is not an open series of moves, but rather contains the time of its trajectory, as in the flight of a ball where each moment contains the whole arc of its passage. However, the human body has a capacity of movement beyond that of a simple missile. This is the capacity to signify the fuller sense of movement in gesture, and to thus provide an image of movement. An act of perceiving the body is a curious kind of doubling, because we already possess an image of our body, which is anterior to perception. Among a barrage of images one does not arrive, it is always already there, the place where images arrive, our body, our image of ourselves as perceiving. Thus the “frozen movement” of the building distinguishes it from the body of actions, but makes it amenable to the particularity of human movement, its gestic and self-representing aspects.

The question remains as to why Wölflin does not consider the actual position of the peripatetic subject as well. There are two linked answers to this question, which are both concerned to separate movement as an image from the experience of motion. The first is that Wölflin’s ideas of movement and its relation to the body and the image are largely compatible with, and can be lent the authority of his contemporary Henri Bergson. Bergson’s philosophy has recently been reformulated and elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in an inquiry into the “moment image” in cinema, from which I have taken much of my direction in my analysis

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1 Scholars including Rykwert have argued that anthropomorphism in the sense of a relation to the exterior form of the body ends in the 18th century. Equally it is possible to argue that this issue continues in a general question of the body, whether that is conceived as biological functions, or psychical form. Joseph Rykwert, The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1980).

2 Wölflin does not discuss human motion, nor actual subject position at all in Renaissance and Baroque. He does so very occasionally in Principles of Art History published in 1915. 27 years later. The contrasting closed-ness and open-ness of forms described in Renaissance and Baroque is extended by Wölflin’s claim that Renaissance architecture was indifferent to view point, while Baroque architecture “restricts the space at the spectator’s disposal so that it may the more certainly achieve the effects it has at its heart”, p 64. This very small concession to specificity might well be related to an increased understanding the picturesque, which is also marked by the introduction of the term “picturesque movement-effect” which I discuss later in this paper.

3 Henri Bergson, 1859–1941
of Wölflin. Here I have only time to state baldly some of Bergson and Deleuze’s arguments as to why movement is an image, and to that extent an issue of form.

Bergson distinguishes movement from the space covered in the action of moving. This is to say that movement is in the present and it is whole and indivisible, while the space one has traversed is in the past and it is a section or sections of homogenous space. Bergson shows that sections of space and a temporal structure of succession cannot constitute movement. In our present inquiry this means that the experience of moving through “this room”, followed by “that room” and so on is not movement, no matter what relation between the spatial qualities of the rooms. Movement requires that the rooms are not merely a set, but a whole, present at each moment of the movement. For reasons too complex to explain here Bergson proposes that all matter is images, and images circulate independently of the presence of subjects who perceive them. The body, too, is an image according to Bergson; a special image that we have already without sensory inputs, and which constitutes a surface of objective reality on which sense data arrives. The body is the thing that in relation to its world, perceives, acts and is affected. Bergson defines affect as “a motor tendency on a sensible nerve”. What happens when we are affected is that we attempt to move those parts of the body of which we have a present image as the place where sensations arrive. The tears and erratic breathing of the person who grieves are actions which show the futility of actions, because the locomotive body is still or at least directionless, while the body of sensations enters a self-affecting process where instead of perceiving it extends outward tears, cries and hot breath. Wölflin’s movement, if it is a theory of affect, would then follow this logic: movement is some whole of which we have an image and which directed to the image of our body. The motion or motionlessness of the subject in the experience of architecture has nothing (necessarily) to do with movement. Movement is when the building becomes present to a body, which has an image of itself as affectable, which causes in the body a kind of movement between sensation and action.

The second reason that we might expect movement to be an image is an issue of historical context. This is the picturesque, which provides a background and a starting point for Wölflin. The issues here are fundamentally the same as in Bergson but rather more tangible as they are issues of cultural practice rather than philosophy. The picturesque proposed to apply the lessons learned from paintings to the art of landscape and architecture. Chief among these lessons is movement, discussed as indefiniteness of outline, openness of form and other terms entirely compatible with Wölflin. Similarly, “picture” in picturesque implies that movement is not the experience of being moved, but of the image of motion. The term picturesque did not imply some fundamental phenomenology of lived experience underlying both painting and the spatial arts. Rather the picturesque proposed to apply images of experiences onto durational experience, or, in the terms of our present problem, the image of movement would be reapplied to motion giving it form. Passages of Renaissance and Baroque are in close parallel to the text of Uvedale Price’s “Essay on Picturesque Architecture”, which takes the Baroque architecture of John Vanburgh as a chief example and describes this as “massiness” and “movement”, the exact terms of Renaissance and Baroque.

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12 According to Rodowick, Deleuze takes the general frame of his inquiry into cinema from Wölflin’s idea of that art history was a history of “imaginative beholding”. Ibid, p.5. Heinrich Wölflin, Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, trans M D Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1958), p vi. It is also the case that Deleuze’s understanding of Baroque architecture in Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, trans forward and trans Tom Conley (Minneapolis: U Minnesota p. 1993) is largely from Wölflin.
13 According to Deleuze, Cinema 1, p 66.
14 The picturesque as I am obliged to simplify it here, is largely based on my readings of Uvedale Price, Essays on the Picturesque: As Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful and, on the Use of Studying Pictures for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape, three volumes, (London: J Mawman, 1810). Price, although he is not the most original nor philosophically adept theorist of the picturesque, is its central figure, setting terms of the later debate which always returns to this book.
15 Ibid volume two. There is much in common between Wölflin and John Ruskin’s attempts to define a higher from a lower picturesque. “The Higher picturesque” might be an alternative translation of malerische while being less etymologically accurate, it better shows the intellectual history. See John Macarthur, “The Heartlessness of the Picturesque: Sympathy and Disgust in Ruskin’s Aesthetics”, Assemblage: a Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture, no 32, (1997).
The word picturesque appears endemically in Wölflin's books, but is discussed explicitly in Principles in relation to the term for which he is famous—"the painterly". The painterly was proposed in the earlier Renaissance and Baroque as a general form of inter-medial visuality, its principle characteristic being the different modalities of movement that a painterly eye lends to the particular arts. By the time of Principles Wölflin's dialectic of Renaissance and Baroque had solidified into five pairs of opposing concepts, which were transhistorical attributes, which could be used to fix the historical place of particular styles. These are: linear and painterly, plane and recession, closed and open forms, multiplicity and unity, clarity and uncleanness. In Renaissance and Baroque the "painterly", had been a kind of perceptual experience expressed differently in painting, sculpture and architecture. In Principles, the postural and kinesthetic aspects of movement in the earlier book have been left behind, and "the painterly" elevated to a major category of artist form. The painterly and its dialectical pair "the linear" still assume a "subject-objectivisation" or projection of human-like qualities in the making and perception of form, but the bodily mechanism of this relation is no longer discussed. There is, however, an addition to the explanation of movement and its relation to the painterly, which is that Wölflin introduces a simplistic version of this relation, something to be rejected (but in that rejection an understanding reached). This is called "the picturesque movement effect" and I think the distinction between this and the painterly lies at the heart of Wölflin's theory of movement.

However, in order to understand "the picturesque movement effect" there is an issue of translation, one with consequences for our interpretation both of Wölflin's books and his role in history. Wölflin's text and the German language in general does not make a lexical distinction between picturesque and painterly, nor for that matter from "pictorial" (another important category in the text); in German all are malerisch as adjectives, malerische as nouns, and derived from the word malar or painter. Although German has the naturalised word das pittoreske, the regular translation of "the picturesque" is das malerische or das malerische schönheit. Wölflin reflects the word malerische so that it is used positively or pejoratively, in exactly the same way that picturesque can have or not have a pejorative meaning of simplistic or sentimental taste in English. The translator has taken this nuanced play with the one word and formalised it with the difference that is available in English between picture and painter. This approach to the translation is not incorrect; it is exactly Wölflin's point to specify a concept, which is more definite and more broadly applicable than "picturesque". But it is significant to recall that Wölflin is modifying the pre-existing concept.

In the crucial passage on movement, which follows, I have maintained the translator's distinction between picturesque and painterly, but another aspect of the German text needs to be considered. In the English edition this section bears the title "The Picturesque and its Opposite", as a translation of "Das Objektiv-Malerische und sein Gegensatz". The fault of the pejorative picturesque is its objectivity, not in the sense of unbiased opinion, but of finding aesthetic qualities in the physical existence of the object. Wölflin explains:

"...the 'painterly' is treated essentially as a matter of perception in the sense that it does not matter about the object, but that the eye... can perceive everything in one way or the other, painterly or not painterly. But it cannot be denied that there are in nature certain things and situations which we denote as "picturesque". The character of the picturesque seems to be inherent in them apart from perception by a painterly eye. Naturally there is no absolute 'picturesque'... but for all that we can still isolate as something special those themes whose picturesque character consists in actual..."

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14 Linear and painterly is the master opposition, which had developed in Renaissance and Baroque and Classic Art and is developed in Principles. In the intervening period Wölflin had become much more idealist, successful, and less reliant on giving his psychology of art the authority of science. In any case, empathy theory had by then lost all currency in the new science of psychology, and began its second life as the purely cultural concept of aesthetic experientialism. Mark Jarzombek, The Psychologising of Modernity: Art, Architecture, and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

15 Although I am examining here the relation of the painterly to the earlier picturesque it is also related to an earlier opposition between Poussinistes (line) and the Rubenistes (colour). Shearer West, Bloomsbury Guide to Art, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1996)


17 Here I have referred to the German edition with the assistance and advice of Mark Jarzombek. Heinrich Wölflin, Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem Der Stilentwicklung in Der Neueren Kunst, (München: Bruckmann, c 1915).

18 Ibid pp 39-42.
conditions which can be demonstrated. These are themes in which the single form is so entwined in a great context that an impression of all-pervading movement arises. If real movement is present, so much the better, but... there will always play the stimulus of a movement which does not reside in the object, and that also means that the whole only exists as a picture [Bild] for the eye, and that it can never, even in the imaginary sense, be grasped with the hands."

Picturesque is then the empirical existence of the painterly, and its inferiority as a term is the space that it allows for a confusion between aesthetic interest and an interest in the actual existence of the object. It might seem that here Wölflin is simply following Kant and denying that aesthetic qualities reside in the object and seeking these instead in the subject's protocols of judgement. But for Wölflin the aesthetic quality lies not, as with Kant, in the subject's relation to the object, rather with the object's relation with the subject. Movement resides neither in the formal qualities of the object nor in the subject's motion in relation to the object, but in the "movement" between the object's material tactile existence and its becoming a image for the subject."

In explaining the picturesque movement-effect Wölflin's example is architectural.

"Everyone knows that, of the possible aspects of a building, the front view is the least picturesque: here the thing and its appearance fully coincide. But as soon as foreshortening comes in, the appearance separates from the thing, the picture-form [Bild-form] becomes different to the object-form, and we speak of a picturesque movement effect. Certainly, in such a picturesque movement-effect, recession plays an essential part in the impression—the building moves away from us. The visual fact, however, is that in this case objective distinctness retreats behind an appearance in which outline and surfaces have separated from the pure form of the thing."

Here Wölflin is extending the kinesthetic theory of movement on which he relied in the earlier works. In Renaissance and Baroque movement is an affect on the body in the posture, of perceiving the building. Now movement is not only an agent of affect, it is in itself an affect. The building produces the affect of movement in a person so that they feel the appearance and the object nature of the building to be moving apart. This is something like the experience of aura.

In Berlin in 1915 Walter Benjamin (aged 23) heard Wölflin read the final form of the text of Principles, which was then in press. Before attending the lectures Benjamin had expressed admiration for Wölflin, and hoped that the great professor might supervise his studies but he was bitterly disappointed, calling the lectures "the most disastrous activity I have ever encountered in a German university."

What offended Benjamin in Wölflin's performance was the use of rhetoric to obligate the audience to perceive the artworks under discussion. "He does not see the artwork, he feels obliged to see it, demands that one see it, considers his theory a moral act; he becomes pedantic... and thereby destroys any natural talents his audience might have."

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19 Here and on next page where he clearly means people moving in the scene and not the moving observer.
21 If we see this through the position of Bergson then Wölflin’s apparent prevarication on this point shows the limits of the dualism of the subject and object. If we see this issue through the cultural practices of the picturesque we could say that the triumph of philosophical aesthetic subjectivism leaves a problem of what the art object actually is a problem, which reverberates in modernism. See John Macarthur, "The Look of the Object"; *Assemblage: a Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no 41, (2001).
27 Ibid p 79.
This difference about rhetoric and the role of affecting prose or oration in scholarly argument is also a difference about the role of affect in art. Benjamin opposes what he calls the aura of art works, which is something very like the picturesque movement-effect. Benjamin describes aura thus—"If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch." And later as "the appearance of a distance, however close it may be." As in Wölflin what is at stake in "aura" is a relation of image, and a concept of looking which is to do with touching, tracing and grasping. When Benjamin takes the concept of aura to cultural objects he does so with the aim of smashing the distance surrounding artworks so as to make them tangible, and thus championing use over contemplation. Thus although to see Alois Riegl as Benjamin’s source for his concepts of historicised perception, I claim that this can also be understood as a reaction to, and correction of Wölflin.

There are further similarities in the uses Benjamin and Wölflin have for architecture in understanding the visual arts. For Wölflin we can separate the painterly from painting as such because we can experience a building visually, and separate this from our use of it, and even from its material existence. When Benjamin explains how cinema could be non-auratic and "tactile" yet still be recognised as art, he also uses the example of architecture. Architecture, says Benjamin, has always been accepted as high art and always been understood through tactile perception. He instances this superiority in the common prejudice that a tourist’s rapt contemplation of a famous building is a lesser thing than its apprehension by a local person whose visual perception is founded on a day to day habitual or tactile experience of the building in its context.

Benjamin’s reasoning takes up the terms of Wölflin’s opposition of the tactile and visual and reverses them. Wölflin opposes the tactile to visual perception to explain the historical and conceptual succession of the painterly over the linear, of Titian over Botticelli, of Michelangelo over Bramante. The linear is not wrong, nor is earlier art less to be less valued, but it is less sophisticated, its tactility places it in the childhood of art. As Wölflin writes:

“The tracing out of a figure with an evenly clear line has still an element of physical grasping. The operation, which the eye performs, resembles the operation of the hand which feels along the body... just as the child ceases to take hold of things in order to "grasp" them, so mankind has ceased to test the picture for its tactile values. A more developed art has learned to surrender itself to mere appearance.”

For Benjamin the childhood of art is in the cultic aspects of aura, the belief that the artwork has an autonomous life. Where Wölflin sees the history of visuality as a movement from tactile to the conceptual, Benjamin sees a gradual liberation from magic and religion, until art can parallel life and be touched. Despite different values and prognoses for the art of their times, Benjamin and Wölflin share the supposition of an underlying history of perception and a common interest in how aspects of that past persists in modernity.

Wölflin values the linear as it is in dialectic with the painterly and continues to provide a correction. Similarly Benjamin is fascinated by aura, because for him it is a part of an unresolved problem in the concept of art. This is the concept of non-sensuous resemblance, and in this the childhood of art is instructive. Benjamin reminds us that: "The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or a teacher but also a windmill and a train." There is a difference in degree between the adequacy of the representation that a child might make of an adult person and a machine or building. But in another light each is an equivalent act of imitation. In Benjamin’s interest in non-sensuous resemblance he attempts to understand

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28 223.
29 John McCole suggests that the opposition of the optical and tactile was broadly understood and used and that Benjamin probably had several sources for it. McCole, Walter Benjamin.
an archaic aspect of mimesis, which is other to representation. The goal of this imitation is not to represent the visual form of the object, but to approach the object. When the child takes a pose in imitation of a windmill, all the meaning is in the appearance that the child makes, but none of it in the adequacy of the image to the thing. Semblance is a movement towards the object, or of the object onto the subject, not the deceit by which the appearance might be taken for the thing.

We might speculate that Benjamin read some of this problematic of mimesis in Renaissance and Baroque, and that it was the lack of this that troubled him in Principles as much as his distaste for Wöflin’s rhetoric with its demands of complicity. Wöflin’s theory of empathy when it was still psychological in Renaissance and Baroque was in equal part imitative: the body takes a posture from the building. Whereas, in Principles, what remains of empathy theory is a mere subject-objectification where the object is a site for projecting onto and recognising ourselves. This is why Wöflin’s equivocation on the “natural” occurrence of the picturesque is so interesting. It puts movement back into the object and the perception of it, rather than movement being with the painterly in the reveries of the cultured subject. Having made these connections we could then elaborate Benjamin’s “tactile” appropriation of architecture so as to include those eye-movements, raised breathing, that arrest of the attention, which Wöflin describes as architectural movement. This would not be a projection of ourselves onto the building in a simple anthropomorphism. Rather it would be a kind of mimesis. Our responses to a building, which limits and governs our motion and field of view, are a kind of imitation of it, an objectification of our body as affected by architecture.

In Joshua Reynolds’ discourse in the 18th century on the picturesque and the concept of mimesis in painting, he describes architecture as forming one limit case of mimesis. That is: the impossibility in architecture of sensuous imitation. The other limit Reynolds gives is the art of the actor who imitates the character sensitively but in doing so builds a difference between the character and its interpretation, and between the script and its performance. Benjamin takes this traditional problematic through a further turn in his essays on Brecht’s theatre. Brecht’s theatre rejects empathy with the characters and the Aristotelian principle of unity of action, and it does this according to Benjamin through interruption. Interrupting the action has the consequence of disallowing empathy and false hope of catharsis. The theatre of interruption works the plot of a play, says Benjamin like a ballet instructor with a pupil, “the first task would be to loosen her joints to the greatest possible extent” and a similar attitude extends to the body of the actors.

“…the epic theatre, being based on interruption is, in a specific sense, a quotable one… ‘Making gestures quotable’ is one of the substantial achievements of the epic theatre. An actor must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type… Epic theatre is by definition a gestic theatre. For the more frequently we interrupt someone in the act of acting, the more gestures result.”

At one level Benjamin is thinking of gesture as the bodily equivalent of montage in cinema and radio. Gesture is the sign of the disruption and suspension of motion, and thus constitutes the circumstance of the character as significant. We see then that for Benjamin and Brecht gesture is not affective, that is, it is not the expression of the passions by the body. Rather it is affecting, the passions are aroused by the action and perceptions of the body. Benjamin says that epic theatre is:

“…less concerned with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives. It may be noted by

33 Imitation is another issue linking Wöflin and the picturesque. Reynolds and following him, Price, explicitly state that the value of architecture to the theory of art is that it limits and complicates the role of imitation in art. The example is Vanburgh’s buildings, which were held to imitate movement despite their lack of sensuous motion.
35 In this section I draw on a seminar on Benjamin’s concept of interruption by Samuel Weber at Queensland University of Technology, in May 1997.
36 Ibid p 145.
37 Ibid p 148.
the way, that there is no better start for thinking than laughter. And in particular, convulsion of the
diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul.34

The rate of breath was Wölflin’s measure of proportion.” I began this exegesis on movement in
architecture by remarking the apparent contradiction of the static nature of Wölflin’s concept of
movement. Movement for Wölflin was postural, gestural, a matter of comportment rather than motion
through space as it was later claimed to be. That the actual motion of the human subject in space is implied
in Wölflin is of course the case. But why is this implied rather than stated? We have speculated by
reading Benjamin against and through Wölflin that movement can only be an image that is an interruption
of durational experience. A concept of architectural movement based on successive spatial positions of
the subject is not movement but motion—the covering of space. If movement were merely this then the body
would be only a motor function, a capacity for extension. If architecture can be affecting at all then
Wölflin was right. The building is affecting because we can have an image of it, which is somehow not a
picture in the sense of a representation, but a “picture-sque”, or a “painterly”, a visual resemblance of it to
itself which is like our first pre-perceptual image of the body in movement.

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34“The Author as Producer”, p 236, Benjamin, Reflections.
35Keith Braidfoot has reminded me of the etymology of aura in the Greek word for breath. A matter that requires further thought on my part.


