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Formalism, as a term in the criticism of visual art, might be defined thus: as the conviction that forms contain their own syntax which acts on the spectator more or less directly. Further, the formalist maintains that experience of form is aesthetic experience; its effect is something called aesthetic emotion. And its opposite is not so much content, which form always needs, but the idea or association that the content conjures up. A mountain prompts thoughts of coal or geology in the minds of a merchant and scientist respectively. But only those travelers who forget it is a mountain, the better to focus on color, mass, and contour – only they are having an aesthetic experience. They feel the mountain rising and rising, and so feel themselves to be rising and rising. They are open to form, which acts on them directly. Anyone with eyes to see can have the same experience.[1]

Some version of this discourse has persisted since Kant and Burke. The critic Roger Fry knew it in 1904 when he spoke of form's 'universal' language, which signifies nothing but 'its own proper ideas and feelings'.[2] The rhythm of line recalls our own rhythms; the mass of an object points up our bouts with gravity; light and shade are perceived by us vitally because light 'is so necessary a condition of our own existence'.[3] The eye moved around a picture and, in so doing, triggered feelings in the body. Their relative weakness was offset by their harmony, by the organisation of form that could organise feeling. They were universal, said Fry, in all ways but one: most people did not feel them. This admission is strange, but Fry did not have the benefit of a philosopher's remove. As critic and curator he wrestled daily with a public. And what he found in Cézanne, the 'man in the street' rejected. What he admired in Giotto was eclipsed by religious content. The love of Old Masters he shared with wealthy buyers was really not the same love, since they went

in for oldness and he for plastic form. Hence the formalist puzzle – still unresolved – that form acts directly while most are insensible; and hence the need for Roger Fry to whet for the masses a dulled sense of form they did not know they had.

Such concerns were shared elsewhere, in Germany for instance. They were shared by painters, sculptors, poets, architects, and notably by filmmakers of the historical avant-gardes. At least one strand of 'pure cinema' would have been impossible in another climate. Basic laws of perception, and of the perception of movement, were eagerly sought for this so-called seventh art. And again one had to counter the claims of popular taste, debased or made 'flabby' by the popular stage: thus could Hans Richter, dean of the avant-garde film in Europe, speak of a 'badly trained soul' [Seele] in 1924. The rediscovery of form via principles of contrast, similarity, stillness, movement – principles ultimately of hereditary feeling – was meant to remove the crust of mere sentiment. 'Not knowing how our faculties function,' he said, 'film does not realise that this is where its job really lies.'[4]

Zeynep Çelik Alexander's *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) has nothing to do with film. Yet it offers the first multimedia history of the intellectual matrix from which those like Richter came. Having Germany as its focus, it opens on a Leipzig schoolyard in 1905. Here Rudolf Schulze assembled a group of schoolgirls aged 11-12 to show them some pictures, a dozen in total, 'from illustrations from children's books to depictions of Christ on the Cross and from pastoral landscapes to scenes from medieval mythology' (p. 1). The girls closed their eyes during the brief change of stimulus. They then flashed them open to scan the new picture. Shortly after, a photographer took their photo – took a series of photos, rather, to show response over time. Thus we see girls in tiered rows with expressions of awe, amusement, pleasure, and displeasure. In some the hands are visible in poses of clasping, wringing, interlacing, hanging. Schulze asked adult subjects to match up these photos with the pictures that prompted them; and they did so, he reported, with 95% accuracy. That a twelve-year-old girl showed correct response to pictures – correct in accord with the judgments of experts – was proof of her innate formal acumen. What he called her intelligence was not measurable in school. In all seriousness he felt a pious posture struck before the Cross had all to do with eye motions and nothing with faith. It was kinaesthetic knowing.

The phrase, of Alexander's own invention, is meant to capture 'the ratiocination associated with kinesis' (p. 11): what in German is Anschauung. Her book offers a genealogy of this trust in muscle sense and so shows the Schulze experiments to be less curious than they seem. They stand midway in a study that spans the Reich's creation to the foundation of a New Bauhaus in 1937. They are also much like experiments by Sturm and Grewe-Partsch, published in 1980, where children watched films as their vitals were recorded. Since the latter are a source for Massumi's affect theory, and for his followers by extension, *Kinaesthetic Knowing* should be read as both art history and as history of the present. In the 'anti-intentionalist paradigm' of affect the world is evacuated of meaning and symbols; political ideologies are products of feeling; wit and electrode produce the same laughter, while thinking is always too late to the party.[5] For 20 years now we have been embracing 'the body' and lapsing into language hardly different from behaviorism.

Alexander offers much needed correctives, showing from where the idea comes and what problems it aims to solve. Chapter one is essentially an intellectual history, stunning in range, of kinaesthetic knowing. It begins with a distinction between Wissen and Kennen, propositional and intuitive

knowledge, that grounds the whole book. The distinction was first suggested by the physiologist Helmholtz in 1853 to capture the difference of Newton from Goethe. For despite all Newton's diligence the wholly intuitive Goethe yet served the cause of science. He did so, said Helmholtz, through experience of form; he discerned forms in nature with his senses alone. Thus the conjunction of Kennen with 'form' was established early on, and indeed is unsurprising, insofar as Kennen is immediate and aesthetic. And muscular: in Helmholtz it is muscles that orient selves to worlds. Kennen itself belongs to longer histories, to theories of reflex and muscular action. But Alexander is more interested in the role it played in German schooling. Already Pestalozzi had called for form instruction at the turn of the nineteenth century; and his call was renewed by the philosopher Dilthey at the turn of the twentieth. In the meantime aesthetics became an object of experiment, in particular by Gustav Fechner. In contrast to the writings of metaphysicians – 'aesthetics from above' – he claimed only one principle, the pleasure-unpleasure or 'eudominstic' principle. And so began his practice of 'aesthetics from below', better known as psychophysics: the flashing of shapes, the measure of response, comparison of measurements and then back to shapes. Results of this psychology would serve to ground all knowledge.

Yet we have already left ideas for the history of technique. The remainder of the book is devoted to the latter: to specific ways in which an episteme of kinaesthetic knowing was implanted in Germany after Unification. Chapter two explores the history of the slide lecture as developed by Heinrich Wölfflin; chapter three, the 'mathematics of feeling' of the architect August Endell; chapter four, the Debschitz School, among the first independent design schools in Germany; chapter five, its successor the Bauhaus. Each claimed a relation, more or less immediate, between form and feeling; and each sought principles of instruction to exploit this relation. Mediate or learned response could hardly ground form-instruction. It had to be a knowledge hardwired, built-in.

But immediacy of feeling tends to obviate training. Sense becomes its own pedagogue; the hierarchy of taste collapses. And indeed, says Alexander, the ideal subjects of Kennen were not men of culture but society's others – namely women, children, occultists, and Catholics. They seemed open to form and generally impressionable. The question for educators was how best to treat them. Some, like Endell, embraced their immediacy; others, like Wölfflin, were ambivalent and even fearful. The Bauhaus sought a compro-

mise in its prefatory coursework, which channeled sensation into proper out-lets. It did this precisely through the handling of forms. 'Consider this device that Kandinsky used in the classroom: a grid and an envelope full of various cutout shapes that were meant to be arranged upon it.... like the grids that schoolteachers drew on blackboards in Prussian schools so that students could easily repeat the same exercise' (pp. 182-183). Thus the subject of design imposes a form as much as she receives. She both has her cake and eats it as she works up her elements in a controlled space, stands back for a moment to receive an impression, then manipulates some more. Today's practice has hardly changed, 'design thinking' notwithstanding. 'Juxtaposing, rotating, re-versing, superimposing' and so on and so forth until the body knows (p. 201).

AN OBSCURE HISTORY OF MODERN ART AND MEDIA

Noam M. Elcott

ARTIFICIAL DARKNESS
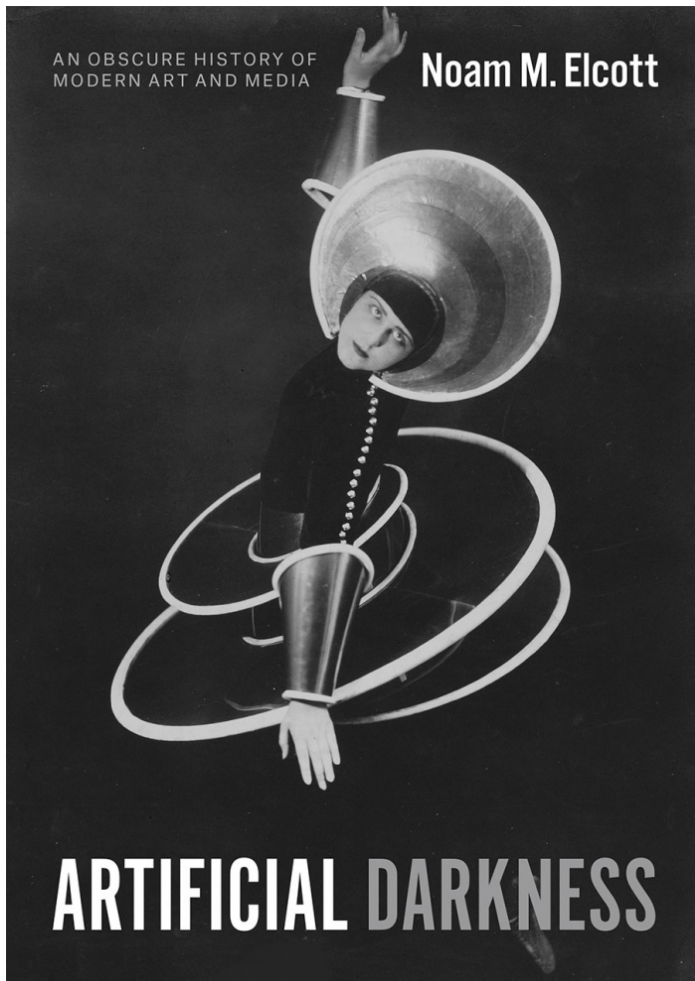
The Bauhaus appears also in Noam M. Elcott's *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Like Alexander's book it is a multimedia history in which the human senses are remade for modernity.[6] Its final chapter is devoted to the Bauhäusler Oskar Schlemmer, in particular his masterwork *The Triadic Ballet*. Performed in several versions from 1922-1932 it turned Bauhaus principles to quite different ends: 'a body modulating and modulated in spaceless darkness' (p. 226). Not for nothing did Schlemmer's peers call him a magician. He combined a belief in age-old principles of form with their modern renewal by technologised darkness. This is Elcott's term for a range of technologies that, over the long nineteenth century, refashioned darkness. The dark of an evening is a natural phenomenon; the dark of a theater is a product of architecture, of curtains and screens and adjustable lighting. The latter kind of darkness was the setting for Schlemmer's stagecraft, which also clothed performers in matching black unitards. Against a black background, they could not be seen at all; they lost their figure status; so one could drape them with shapes that now twirled autonomously. Theater opened up to that drama of form which the plastic arts had long discovered. Spiral, Disc, Gold Sphere, Wire Hoop, and others were its dramatis personae. Yet the human figure did not vanish wholly, for the forms it now carried had distinctly human movements. One could still sense a dancer in the pitch like the Invisible Man beneath his hundred bandages.

For Elcott, the ballet's achievement was threefold. It fulfilled Benjamin's call for a new and nonfatal 'innervation' by technology: in place of artillery, the play of body-and-image-space. And it treated darkness as a technology, bereft of metaphorical or funerary referents. Last, it broke with most avantgarde theories of theater, where light was held up against cinematic darkness.

Artificial Darkness is a book about cinema. It is not about film or even about projectors. It defines the cinematic as per its title, a dispositif of darkness that allows for transformation.[7] Dispositif in turn is 'judicious coordination' (p. 17); more technically, the arrangement of diverse elements for relations of power. Diversity ensures the dispositif is mutable: thus Schlemmer's work follows from chronophotography (chapter one), Wagnerian opera (two), the phantasmagoria (three), and the trick films of Méliès (four). That the elements function in relations of power – in the creation of human subjects and thus new kinds of power – means a theme of 'discipline' bulks large in Elcott's telling. Artificial darkness is a form of discipline. What it disciplines are bodies: those of actors by black screens and those of viewers

by dimming. The original black screen of Marey was not a screen but a shed, with black velvet lining, 'so impenetrably deep as to appear two-dimensional' (p. 18). It was an integral part of Marey's Physiological Station and it was here, in the 1880s, that he made his famous photographs. The subject of each was partly clad in pure black so some limbs would not register. Soon all were masked with just points and lines visible to articulate the skeleton in its several postures. Conversion of body into figure required self-discipline, for aside from the costume it moved in one plane only; and the knowledge derived therefrom could well discipline others, like workers and soldiers. Meanwhile in Bayreuth Richard Wagner had worked to cleave actors from audience by a 'mystical abyss'. His stage was far and radiant, the amphitheater dark and hushed, while orchestral performers dropped out into a pit – the better for viewers to 'live' upon a stage. Here cinema was invented 20 years before movies.

Typically, writes Elcott, darkness gains in strength from effects of tonal contrast; bright light makes darkness darker and vice versa when adjacent. 'Whereas the cinema screen was a luminous rectangle in an artificially darkened space, the black screen was a perfectly dark rectangle in a naturally luminous spaces.... two halves that attained totality only through separation' (p. 75). Hence it would take some time before the darknesses met, as they did in Georges Méliès and in Oskar Schlemmer. Both used black screen methods to address a darkened audience, and both used those methods to refashion the human figure. Méliès' pre-war films, in which pretty girls vanish and men lose their heads, are familiar to everyone; *The Triadic Ballet* is less so, yet no less an achievement. But Schlemmer was only a magician by courtesy. Méliès was one by trade, and he brought his craft to bear on many hundreds of shorts. Thus the book's middle chapter joins Marey and Wagner to Méliès and Schlemmer via phantasmagoria and other spooky illusions. In each case we see how darkness could instruct and delight. It could dismember, remember, displace and duplicate, even unsex its figures throughout its weird history.

Its history is largely over. The black screen turned blue, then green; darkrooms became Lightroom; cinema vies with streaming. The implications of these changes are not really explored, they are only lightly touched on in the conclusion. Nor is there a polemic to stress the book's relevance.[8] Yet it, too, stakes a claim on form and feeling. The forms with which it deals are primarily forms of media, not the graphic shapes that each medium transmits. Artificial darkness imposes behavior. It has medium effects on those caught up

in it. Any theory that affirms this is by definition formalist, since it posits blunt action of form on sensation. Actually Elcott does not go so far as that, and can chide those who do, since he respects the avant-gardes and their minimal critique.[9] He leaves the a priori out of it; that is, he writes history. Like Alexander he charts a reform of perception by means of a know-how that covertly perdures; and he dissolves the medium concept into dispositif, flexible enough to reconfigure while retaining its form. Above all he shows how art can turn technics to its advantage, by making room for play at the very heart of technics.

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Notes

[1]   The scenario was memorably described in Lee 1913, p. 8ff.

[2]   Fry 1920, p. 143.

[3]   Ibid., p. 23.

[4]   Richter 1987, pp. 22-23.

[5]   Leys 2011.

[6]   Incidentally, both currently edit the journal *Grey Room*.

[7]   In this it differs strongly from the work of Gaudreault, who equates cinema with narrativity, and so must thrust Lumière and Méliès back into pre-cinema – or 'kine-attractography' at best. See Gaudreault 2011.

[8]   For this, one must go to Elcott 2016.

[9]   Friedrich Kittler's work, for example, is 'crass techno-determinism' (p. 148), even as it helps orient the critic to 'physiology and media technology' (p. 17).