Sensory Fluidity: Dialogues of Imagination in Art

Kathleen Coessens

*Vrije Universiteit Brussel & Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent*

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Sensory Fluidity: Dialogues of Imagination in Art

Kathleen Coessens

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Abstract

How do artists share, translate, reveal their imagination by using different semiotic systems; how can the audience partake in this imagination receiving only images, words, notation, sounds? Starting from artwork of the novelist Italo Calvino and the composers Helmut Lachenmann and Gyorgy Kurtag, this article addresses the relation among imagination, perception, remembrance and expression. The ‘images’ used, be they visual, verbal, auditory or haptic, are much more than images. They concentrate in themselves layers of subjective and intersubjective perceptual, cognitive and emotive experiences. I will argue that imagination relies upon sensory fluidity. This allows us (1) to integrate sensorial experiences from different perceptual origins — synaesthesia, (2) to link past, present and future by way of sensorial and embodied patterns of remembrance — embodied sedimentation, and (3) to share intersubjective patterns of affect and effect, bridging idiosyncratic and universal human experiences.

1. Introduction

“Music only has meaning when it points beyond its own structure to other structures and relationships - that is, to realities and possibilities around us and within us.”
(Lachenmann 1996)

Which role does the body, and more specifically experiential embodied thoughts, feelings and patterns, play in our constructions and distortions, in our understanding and fantasies in and about the world and our interaction with it? How do the brain and the body integrate and translate in multi-sensory ways unidimensional information? How do we find ways to imagine imagination, to express the fantasies, elucidate the exuberations of what we usually think is the territory of understanding and concepts, and as such linked to the mind? How can we transfer and share our imagination with others?

Corresponding Author: Kathleen Coessens
Vrije Universiteit Brussel & Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent
The wealth and richness of the world seem to be challenged by the wealth of our perceptual and embodied apprehension, our understanding, interpretation and imagination. The world exceeds our possibilities of comprehension and creation, but at the same time, our imaginative creations extend that world and seem to surpass it. While the last two decades, more and more research concerning the role and interaction of the body, the senses and imagination has been done in different fields like philosophy, cognitive science, psychology and interdisciplinary fields (e.g. Johnson 2007; Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991; Kosslyn 1994; Gallese & Goldman 1998), we will here reflect upon these starting from creations of artists of different disciplines — literature and music— that illuminate these interactions in very interesting ways. The works of Italo Calvino, Helmut Lachenmann and Gyorgy Kurtag offer powerful examples of imagination based on our senses.

*Invisible Cities* of Italo Calvino is a wonderful book in which Marco Polo describes all the cities he visited upon his wonderful adventures to the emperor Kublai Khan. The narrative relies on embodied, perceptual imagination emerging out of the conflation of — and interaction between — two permeable worlds, the human being and the environment. Calvino describes the cities in a fragmented way from different human perspectives: memory, signs, exchanges, visibility, eyes, names, the dead, the sky. Eventually, Kublai Khan figures out that all the descriptions of these cities rely on one fundamental experience of Marco Polo: the experience of his city of origin, Venice, and his deep embodied relation with it.

Helmut Lachenmann, in his music composition for orchestra, *Kontrakadenz*, uses two water-filled washtubs which produce a gentle, metallic splashing sound, reminding us of the warmth and security of the child being washed by the mother. Gyorgy Kurtag, in his composition *Jatekok*, explores the embodied approach of the child, encountering for the first time a music machine, the piano. These compositions of Kurtag and Lachenmann offer improvisational, enigmatic and suggestive (an)notations relying upon a sedimentation of embodied elements within the musical material and invite the performer to experiment with embodied vocabulary and (hidden or unexplored) fragments of embodied schemata and perceptual awareness.

These artistic examples address the relation between imagination and embodied sedimentation: how imagination relies upon sensory fluidity encompassing synaesthetic dynamics, childhood experiences and shareable patterns of embodiment. Embodied sedimentation is a kind of background, a bottom or pool of remembrances and patterns which we acquire in often tacit ways throughout life: the own experiential knowledge and memory, based upon personal idiosyncratic as well as universally human shared ways of coping with the body, childhood experiences, culturally adopted schemata of posture and
gait, embodied and perceptual understandings, connotations, connections and recognition. The word ‘sedimentation,’ used here as a metaphor, refers to the act or process of deposing sediment. Sediment is materials or particles in suspension that settle, that remain, and form a layer — at the bottom of the river for example — often not immediately visible. The notion of ‘embodiment’ means that the kind of sedimentation here happens through embodied and perceptual experiences in life.

After this introduction, the next part of this text will draw upon dialogues of imagination: how these artists share, translate, reveal their imagination by using different semiotic systems; how they put imagination into images, notation, sounds, represent them, semiotise them. Rendering imagination happens not only by choosing a system of symbols — letters, chords, images — and a medium — language, music, an instrument, but also by drawing upon a wealth of perceptual effects and affects, embodied memory and corporeal experiences. The ‘images’ used, be they visual, verbal, auditory or haptic, are much more than images. They concentrate in themselves layers of subjective and intersubjective perceptual, cognitive and emotive experiences.

To say this is already to anticipate the third part of this text, called ‘sensory fluidity, bridging experience, language and imagination.’ Here I will argue that sharing imagination and sensory experience cannot be explained without reflection on the origins and causes of the imagination and our intersubjective understanding of it. This understanding is made possible by an exchange or a fluidity between the different sensorial domains and related to shared embodied patterns of experiential sedimentation. Three interrelated sub-domains will be discussed: the faculties of synaesthesia and multi-modal integration, autobiographical embodied experience and the transitional relation to the object, and imagination as an exploratory activity relying upon intersubjectively shared embodied patterns of remembrance and simulation.

2. Dialogues of Imagination

Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and Lachenmann and Kurtag’s compositions all realize a deeply aesthetic artistic concern: how can you represent or ‘imagine’ imagination to others, to make it clear to an audience? There are two enigmatic aspects of the concept of imagination: the first concerns how imagination is imagined inside a human being, be it the artist or the audience. Is it in words, in images, in feelings, or in a mix of these, in multi-modal perceptual and reflective ways? Do we use certain patterns by which we imagine, create fantasies? The second concern is: how can we translate imagination in understandable, shareable ways, communicate it? Do we need language, signs, semiotic

2.1 About Venice and Images of Memory

Invisible Cities is Calvino’s imaginative world of cities, represented by dialogue between the characters of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. This imaginative world is rendered in a poetic story, in written language. It is the story of spaces, or rather cities in the world as experienced by a human being. The words and rhythm of the phrases are chosen in different ways, not only to bring a verbal account, but to offer lived and lively perceptual, emotive and reflective experiences to the reader. The reader can travel with the narrative, enjoy the spaces, feel the crowds, see the panoramas; consider the doubts and ambiguities. He or she feels moved and engaged in multiple ways by the descriptions of visual images which trigger perceptual, aesthetic and even motoric or haptic responses, expressions and considerations. The reader ‘lives’ Marco Polo’s — or Calvino’s — experiences and can identify these, or at least ‘imagine’ them, in the deep sense of understanding, feeling, or embodying the ‘experience’ described.

This commitment to the narrative relies upon different aspects of human experience.

A first aspect is to overcome the fact that all human beings have difficulty in communicating or rendering their experiences to others. Calvino describes the difficulty of rendering the experience of travel in words:

Newly arrived and quite ignorant of the languages of the Levant, Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage — drums, salt fish, necklaces of art hogs’ teeth — and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl. The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor; the object could have various meanings … But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off. (Calvino 1974, 32)

Marco Polo, again and again, shows how difficult it is to explain what he felt, lived, experienced, which different perspectives haunted his imagination and the possible imagination of others:

there are two ways of describing the city of Dorothea (Calvino 1974, 12)
In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. (ibid, p13)

No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet, between the one and the other there is a connection. (id, 51)

Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving over land and a different one to him who arrives by sea. ... the cameldriver sees the city in the form of a ship even if he knows it is a city, while the sailor discerns the form of a camel (ibid, 17)

This last example refers to the lived experience and the desires which arise on the basis of previous experiences. This is an important aspect which nourishes Polo’s imagination: memory. Past experiences continuously are conflated with current events and create a world that shifts following the different memories and experiential knowledge we have. The experience of the world is always disturbed — or at least influenced — by our experiences of the past, which in itself can become imagined, once we have experienced them.

The memory the old man has, having been young and in the same space; the memory of perceptions and affects; the memory present in the city, in its walls. (Calvino 1974, 13)

the traveller’s past changes according to the route he has followed ... Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had ... (ibid, 25)

Indeed, with memory come feelings and emotions, and desire as we shall see, which can distort reality and influence the ways we imagine:

It is the mood of the beholder which gives the city of Zemrude its form

I had realized I had to free myself from the images which in the past had announced to me the things I sought ... (id, 40)

Memory and lived experience nourish desire and dream, and both often get conflated:

Desires are already memories (id, 12)
With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. (ibid, 36)

Another important aspect of the difficulty of communicating human experience and imagination is the limited capacity of signs and language to access these experiences. Signs and perceptions need memory, but also need to be freed from habitude, deceit, unequivocal interpretation:

signs form a language, but not the one you think you know. (ibid, 40)

However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it (ibid, 16)

For Calvino, the visual is present everywhere, but the visual is corrupted, influenced or altered by signs and foci of attention:

The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things ... your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, ... (ibid, 15)

It is also by way of visual images that other perceptions like taste and smell or sound are rendered:

The boat ... with a cargo of ginger and cotton ..., its hold filled with pistachio nuts and poppy seeds, ... sacks of nutmegs and raisins. (ibid, 31)

Even when lovers twist their naked bodies, skin against skin, seeking the position that will give one the most pleasure in the other, even when murderers plunge the knife into the black veins of the neck ... it is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror. (ibid, 44)

In Calvino’s narrative the conflation of visual perception and the memory of images and experiences are the powerful media that nourish imagination, which is rendered in verbal written language. All the imagination and all present and future experiences draw back upon the original lived experience which nourishes all Polo’s stories: his embodied, felt, lived experience of his own city Venice.
‘Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know.’
‘There is still one of which you never speak.’
Marco Polo bowed his head?
‘Venice,’ the Khan said.
Marco smiled. ‘What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?’ (ibid, 69)

2.2 About Washtubs and the Urge for Life

We are used to the ‘imagination’ and ‘connotation’ force of images and text. However, music being the least ‘descriptive’ or ‘representative’ medium of all arts, can it reveal similar experiences? Performing and listening to some of Lachenmann’s and Kurtag’s works bring indeed other media to the fore than those highlighted by Calvino: sounds and interaction with materials. Imagination is rendered by the music, as well as by the performer’s interaction with the instrument and, for the musician, by the score. The works I consider in this text all have the peculiarity of engaging body and instrument in experiential processes of discovery that, like Calvino’s narrative, rely upon embodied sedimentation — memory of perceptual experience.

The piece *temA* of Lachenmann for flute, voice and cello (1968) explores in a very direct way the physical act and effort of breathing, a life affirming experience and constraint. Breathing is normally a tacit process, part of human physicality. But breathing at the same time is an acoustically mediated energetic process at the basis of the human voice and of all wind instruments. Breathing and its complementary component, heartbeat, are hidden sources upon which energy and stasis, movement and rest, can be constructed. Breathing is a universal human performative fact of life — as Bill Viola demonstrates in his art video *The Passing* (1991), torn between the death of his mother and the birth of his son. Life starts by breathing, but even more, emotions, sentences, narratives, expressions are not only sustained but also carried by it. In contrast to this immediacy, the semiotization of the breathing process in music functions also as a recollection, a revival, an aestheticised act of an authentic embodied experience. Breathing in the music is a reminder of the urge for life which at the same time partakes in imagination and in life experience itself, blurring the boundaries between both.

Another example is *Kontrakadenz* of Lachenmann (1970-71) for full orchestra, in which the performer, by the use of newly invented instruments or by original and new uses of traditional instruments, opens up a whole range of embodied affective categories of gesture, sense, sound, understanding. The energetic or kinetic preconditions which are offered by
diverse instruments and materials require the performer to engage with embodied experimentation in imaginative ways that exceed usual artistic expertise. An example is the use of tin washtubs (entry at measure 236 of the score) which produce a splashing sound of bathwater, referring to the archetypal image of warmth and security and as such to embodied narratives of emotion and confidence (Nonnenmann 2000, 108). Here the embodied narrative is explored at the conscious level of the composer, and again finds some resonance in the execution by the performer, even finding possible recognition and resonance in the recollection of the audience.

This kind of embodied intensity is not only present in explicit situations of personal or universal human experience, but also in more tacit and hidden affective relations of the body to the world through different media. When we consider Kurtág’s score of perpetuum mobile, or of fog, — in his eight volume music work Jatekok — the imaginative interaction with an embodied narrative and expression starts already from a glance at the score as it mirrors a choreography of the body. In fog, for example, two big vertical black bars cover part of the horizontal music stave, and the pianist has to cover the piano keys with the whole forearms. A strange private experience struck me about this kind of resemblance. At home, I have a copy of a painting of Miro, called ‘blue,’ representing black dots of different size and a red line under the dots on a blue background. I used, to calm down my youngest, a ‘sounding’ interpretation of the dots and lines of that painting. The image just invited me to ‘perform’ and ‘sing’ it. Strangely enough, when I was not home, my youngest asked the older siblings for its music version — which they did in similar but not identical ways. A graphical proposition seems to allow for other synaesthetic interpretations: the visual into the haptic-motoric and into sound. Similarly, in the graphical scores of Lachenmann and Kurtág, the graphic quality, the lines and dots of the music code offer a synaesthetic conflation of different senses: the eye, the ear, and the haptic/kinetic movement.

3. Sensory Fluidity: Bridging Experience, Language, and Imagination

As the foregoing examples have shown, humans — and artists — are capable of complex semiotic and experiential translations. Every encounter with reality, every experience of sound, image, touch, smell, movement, be it from nature or culture, can — and most of the time will — be translated into a meaning, an understanding, an emotion, even if this often remains tacit. Take the example of the newborn searching for the warmest place, which is the nipple of the breast of the mother; in this search she encounters the taste and smell of mother milk. The next time, her experience will be not only motivated by a search of warmth, but also for the milk, its odour and taste, its nourishing aspect. New experiences bring new meanings and translate between senses. Every experience as such implies some
transformation or creation, bound to the human biological constitution, cultural context and affective education: an inner synaesthetic translation which backs up possible outer semiotic translation. However, there is a difficulty in going from these inner and rather tacit translations — between senses and meaning — to outer explicit translation — the communication of these experiences. Which language, which symbolic system can express our feelings and experiences? How can we share these in a faithful way?

Humans have always dreamed of a universal and complete translatability of different perceptions, intuitions or experiences, of the possibility of a ‘perfect’ translation between semiotic systems. In the 18th century, French intellectuals like Court de Gébelin, trying to complete an encyclopedia on world languages, claimed that all the senses can be expressed in verbal language (Nye 2000). A painter only reproduces visual perception, a musician is limited to the auditory, but language, even if it does not represent vision, touch or audition directly, can reflect these by offering different descriptions referring to a multiplicity of sensory feelings. Gébelin wanted to go even further, to find in the language itself the reason of its multiple sensory representations. This was his point of departure for writing a discourse on the origins of language. He broadened the limited phenomenon of onomatopoeia (sound-imitation of form or audition), to analyses of phonomimetism (the sound of the name and the sound of the referent sound alike; ‘onomatopoeia’ in the strictest sense), thus allowing language to find synaesthetic correlations, to reproduce our experience of nature in all its sensory dimensions (Nye 2000, 142). The underlying supposed principle was that our senses can be readily ‘translated’ from one sense to another. Not such a bad idea, and one current in 18th century thoughts: the idea that art and nature were very near, were linked in a deep sense. But it was liable to a search for all art as a faithful ‘imitation’ of nature and less to an analysis of the biological, physiological or cognitive structures of the human being.

Today, language still is regarded by many as an ‘interlingua,’ a ‘higher-order’ strand of semiotic systems, a resource for fusing information from different semiotic and sensory systems (Matthiesen 2001, 66). This means that language is considered as an overarching system or medium which can give birth to different perceptual sensations and imaginative representations. I indeed can describe a painting in language on the one hand, and have a visual impression of something I read on the other hand. It is however not clear where and how both descriptions meet. Moreover, the examples of graphic music notation and of music sounds like those I have described of Lachenmann and Kurtag show that verbal language is but one of the channels to convey experience of different senses.

Even if de Gébelin’s tentative project failed, ending in quite esoteric thoughts about tarot and long dictionary lists of languages of the world, his presupposition remains interesting.
The problems of outer translation — bridging different perceptual channels and rendering their meaning — are indeed still present. All artists, all translators, and even, on a daily basis and in different communication situations, all of us humans, are confronted with these problems when going from one semiotic system to another, or when translating the outer conditions of an experience — e.g. translating a novel into a movie, a painting into a song, a performance into a narrative, a dialogue into gestures.

But haven’t we all some inner propensity toward sensory integration and translation, toward transgressing the borders of our senses? Remember de Gébelin’s quest for an interrelated sensorial space which would become clear by analyzing language. How is it possible that we have an evocation of visual imagery when we read a book? How do we internalize the space and time as well as understand and feel the bodily impressions of the leading character? Why do we feel sad or emotionally touched looking at the picture of an unhappy child?

Let us start from Paul J. Thibault’s observations on what he calls ‘connotative’ non-linguistic semiotics (Thibault 2006). In his research, Thibault argues for a biologically and ecologically sustained view on semiotics. Apparently, humans are inherently able to find a solution to the problems of local coherence of a sign system because they can integrate and shift among seemingly separated perceptual, cognitive and corporeal spaces. Human meaning-making, indeed, relies upon a multimodal and embodied activity in which humans deploy a cooperative synergy of sensori-motor modalities: “simulated inner movement cross-couples with other perceptual and semiotic modalities.” (Thibault 2006, 82). Thibault presumes an integration of different levels of organization — neural, sensorimotor, bio-kinematic and expressive — into larger scale synergies. This integration is the result of the combination of on the one hand perceptual, somatic and cognitive capacities together with the corporeal traces of previous social interaction — what he names the expression plane — and on the other hand the syntax and semantics of the socially developed semiotic system — the content plane of semiosis. Material and semiotic processes are always merged with complex and never wholly predictable meaning-making activity of inner integration.

However, our cultural world structures experiences by way of classifications and semiotic separation. These available cultural semiotic categories and codes are cultural tools present in language, concept formation and further on in science. We use these distinctions in our ways of conveying messages, in expressing ourselves by different ways or channels of communication. But they separate our senses, feelings, acts and thoughts, and as such hide an original ‘effortless’ integration of the sensory domains where the continuous creation of embodied meaning relies upon synaesthesia, experience and embodied memory. Human imaginative capacities of sensory fluidity blur the frontiers of the coded semiotic systems of
human cultural organization. Leaving language and categorization here, I will further tackle shortly what I consider as three important constituents or explanations of this sensory fluidity: synaesthesia, autobiographical embodied experience, and intersubjective understanding and feeling.

3.1 Sensory Fluidity and Synaesthesia

In the first place, imaginative powers and creations are reliant on synaesthetic and multi-sensory integration. Synaesthesia is a faculty of exchange and interaction between different senses which trigger each other, integrate on a neuronal level, and unite in meaning-making activity:

*the information processed by each of the sensory modalities — visual, auditory, somatosensory, vestibular, olfactory, and gustatory — is highly susceptible to influences from the other senses* (Calvert e.a. 2004, 243)

Multi-sensory neurons are involved in many different behavioural, perceptual and emotive processes, leading to a unified percept or experience of an event or object. Input of one perceptual channel is integrated in these multi-sensory areas and enters a zone of overlap of visual, auditory and somatosensory spaces (Calvert e.a. 2004, 247). By way of these neuronal integrations, humans fill in the missing pieces and obtain a unified or stable experience of meaning in which patterns emerge. As Merleau-Ponty wrote:

*Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear and feel.* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 229)

Imagination strongly relies upon this capacity. Interacting and understanding in the world are the result of complex inner synaesthetic exchanges that continuously take place by way of the integration and interpretation of different sensory input in our brain and its collaboration through/with our body. Thus, when looking at a painting, humans can imagine or even have the experience of walking around in the painting, of hearing noises coming from the painting, experiencing the feeling of the brushstrokes, and so on. Encountering a certain smell can trigger visual or auditory remembrance of past events and relations. Moreover, this possibility of multi-sensory integration partakes in emotion and imagination, sustained by a myriad of embodied and lived experiences and narratives.
Calvino’s written symbols open up images of visual scenes which themselves are full of haptic, emotive, motoric, and auditory experiences. His descriptions are mainly visual and he very rarely engages with other senses in his writings. Having left the book aside for five years, I was sure on re-reading it that I would find descriptions of sounds, noises, smells and other perceptions. But I realized that I had made myself these different perceptual associations — adding smell, sound, haptic contact — based on my remembrance of the book, and that I had integrated the descriptions in a synaesthetic way, re-creating a true lived experience with all its sensorial elements.

3.2 Autobiographical Embodied and Sensorial Patterns of Experience

Synaesthetic and multi-modal integration relies not only upon our human biological capacities, but also upon the individual’s autobiographical embodied experience and the intimate and transitional relationships to the environment and its objects. Even before we have languages and fully developed communicational means to express and understand our experiences, we live them, and try to make sense of them, in a holistic way. Imagination is nourished by these experiences and pops up from the conflation of old and new experiences. Recent neuro-cognitive research shows how self-projection, memory and theory of mind share the same brain areas, or otherwise looked at, how the brain integrates these apparently diverse experiential aspects:

there is a shared brain network that supports diverse forms of self-projection, which includes thinking about the future (prospection), remembering the past, conceiving the viewpoint of others (theory of mind) and navigation. This network involves frontal and medial temporal–parietal lobe systems that are traditionally linked to planning and episodic memory. (Buckner & Caroll 2006, 49)

Research concerning autobiographical recall sustains this finding. Our memories of the past and our capacities for self-projection are related: projecting ourselves in new situations, we often rely upon reminiscence, “the remembering of contextual and subjective associations from the original experience or episodic memory” (Spreng e.a. 2008, 490). These findings provide scientific evidence that past experiences are used adaptively to imagine perspectives and events that extend beyond the immediate environment. By way of these networks linking memory, space, and experience, humans can project themselves into different perspectives, places, time. Moreover, these memories can elicit strong emotions and sensorial experiences.
As such, imagination draws upon the conflation of effects and affects. The psychoanalytical notion of ‘transitional object’ of Winnicott (1968/2005) demonstrates a similar connection: the child transfers affective human relations towards a specific chosen object, which functions then as a bearer of these feelings and as an object for which to care. By transferring the holding relation with the caretaker to a holding object — and as such engaging with the environment — the child improvises a link between an internal and external reality and creates an intermediate space, called an ‘intermediate area of experience’ or a ‘transitional area.’ By extrapolating this notion and applying it to the relation of human beings with their environments, and more specifically with specific — cherished — objects in that environment, such engagement in transitional processes can be considered as an important human quality. It helps to locate the self in the context of the wider world, but also in creating an own interpretation linked to understanding and feeling of/in the world:

*The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). ... For every individual the use of this space is determined by life experiences that take place at the early stages of the individual’s existence.* (Winnicott 1968/2005, p135)

Moreover, childhood experiences are holistically stored in perceptual and embodied remembrance patterns and can be triggered by one sensory signal, opening up then a multi-sensorial and complex, imaginatively rich revival of an experience.

To see this point, recall my previous examples. In Calvino’s narrative, Venice is a transitional space: it is the city of Marco Polo’s childhood sensory experiences. All sensorial experiences in other cities are understood and translated through his original cherished relation to Venice. Lachenmann’s use of the washtub, or the breath, both refer to his attachment to life and family. Experiences of attachment and emotion linked to strong multi-sensorial responses — smell, sound, vision, touch, taste, movement — create patterns of sensorial and embodied sedimentation. As such, autobiographical embodied experiences and multi-sensorial patterns of remembrance give meaning to imaginary constructions of ‘as if’ situations. Sustained by autobiographic sensorial memory, humans can engage in embodied simulation and experience-based anticipation.

### 3.3 Imagining the Other: Intersubjective Sensory Fluidity

Imagination in artistic practice and reception is more than an emergent outcome of embodied multi-perceptual dynamics — our first point about synaesthesia. It is also an
exploratory activity relying upon subjective embodied experience — our second point about autobiographic remembrance — as well as upon an experiential intersubjective world — the third point I want to make. This last element, the shared world, is a world not only of facts and effects, but also of affects — the sharing of a human body implies an intersubjective socio-emotional layer. This sharing impedes solipsism and allows for a dialogue of imagination.

Here again, neuroscientific and psychological research on self-projection plays an important role, as the responsible brain network is not only implicated in memory and position, but also in acts of simulating other’s perspective. Different authors in these fields describe the bodily attunement and emotional engagement, or the intersubjective embodied engagement, through which one enters into a reciprocal relationship with others (Colombetti 2011, Stanghellini 2004). We share similar human bodies and similar world experiences; we often also share cultural codes and worldviews.

Moreover, recent brain research shows evidence that in brain activity regions responsible for autobiographic memory and theory of the mind overlap (Spreng e.a. 2008) — as mentioned in the citation before,

> there is a shared brain network that supports diverse forms of self-projection, which includes thinking about the future (prospection), remembering the past, conceiving the viewpoint of others (theory of mind) and navigation. (Buckner & Caroll 2006, 49)

Autobiographic memory allows for the retrieval of not only thoughts, but also experiences, places and sensations related to these. A theory of mind implies an understanding of the intentions, behaviours and underlying internal states of the others. This brings together an individual’s subjective past experiences and intersubjective understandings.

But also in present experiences, we engage actively in merging our and other’s activity. The mirror neuronal system integrates intersubjective understandings. It functions as a multi-sensory system that integrates different sensory stimuli and converts these into sensorimotor representation (Pineda 2008, 46). Mirror neurons have the ability to remap others’ motor states onto the observer’s own motor representations. This means for example that, being a pianist myself, upon seeing a pianist playing, the same neuronal zones will be activated as if I played myself. As such, the activity of mirror neurons shows that multi-sensory neuronal processes integrate also bio-kinematic and sensorimotor processes. Such processes realize a synaesthetistic link with corporeal traces or embodied memories of previous social and individual actions and interactions. The mirror neuronal system also provides a cue for
some basic intentionality, understanding what the other does, thinks, feels, even if it is as yet not clear how this system sustains complex human cultural behaviour.

4. Conclusion

This article started with the question how we can transfer and share our imagination with others. Recurring to three possible answers — synaesthesia, embodied autobiographical remembrance, and intersubjectivity — we turned this question into a further reflection on the possibilities of self-projection. How can we, on the basis of imaginative and mediated artistic output, on the basis of descriptions or codes that represent perceptions, expressions, gestures, feelings, acts, engage in situations of ‘self-projection’?

A first observation is that arts-oriented encoded symbols are open to interpretation: they can be used, received and interpreted on the basis of personal experience and culturally shared meanings (Deakon Crick & Grushka, 2009). A second part of the answer lies in the faculty of synaesthetic and multimodal integration where parts of the information given for one kind of perception, are communicated to other perceptual modes and merge into a broader multi-sensory experience.

Without having the space to explore more deeply the notion of sensory fluidity, a first tentative approach has been offered here. Sensory fluidity has been explained as a threefold human capacity that allows us (1) to integrate sensorial experiences from different perceptual origins, (2) to link past present and future by way of sensorial and embodied patterns of remembrance, and (3) to share intersubjective patterns of affect and effect bridging idiosyncratic with universal human experiences. The graphics of the scores and the sounds in Lachenmann and Kurtag, as well as the narrative of Calvino, all rely upon embodied memories. They allow us to adhere to universal human expectations and synaesthetic blendings, or at least to invite sensorial or embodied familiarity. An artistic output, whether book, music score or performance, offers a bridge between personal and intersubjective spaces projecting the self into another here. Artistic creations can realize a conflation of different times, humans and spaces. This is facilitated by embodied sedimentation, which is personal as well as humanly shared, and by the capacities of synaesthesia and self-projection, which allow a graphic, sound or sentence to trigger deep imaginative experiences.

Human sensorial fluidity plays an important role in our confrontations with art, not only stimulating our habitual perceptions, but also surpassing them. When encountering an artwork, the profane suddenly takes a sacred aspect: what is before us is no more the pure
object or manifestation we encounter — as it is in and for itself — but blurs with our experience of it. Something matters behind, beyond the matter. There is an addition or unknown depth to the material world, which we, as human perceptual and meaning-making beings, add. A process of signification comes to the foreground and reaches out across the frame, the form and the content of the representation, to become a potential force of opening intense situations. The setting and stimulation inherent in the manifestation of the art object or subject, move the receiver, offering intense emotional and aesthetic information. The artwork apparently realizes a ‘resonance’ for us not experienced by other species. The dog will jump over the artwork or smell it, while the horse may recoil from it. Humans, however, are captured, moved by an artwork, and enter a situation of transgression, on the liminal regions of embodiment and cognition, of perception and language, reality and imagination, realizing complex multi-sensorial experiences (Coessens 2009).

Sensory fluidity, then, refers to the human capacity to integrate complex but specific patterns of effects and affects, acts, interactions and enactions, perceptions, emotions and thoughts and all other embodied experiences. It is a capacity which continuously nourishes all imaginary constructions and sensorial experiences but remains tacit, in the background of all imaginary expressions.

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