

Sonic Symbiosis Beyond the Symbolic

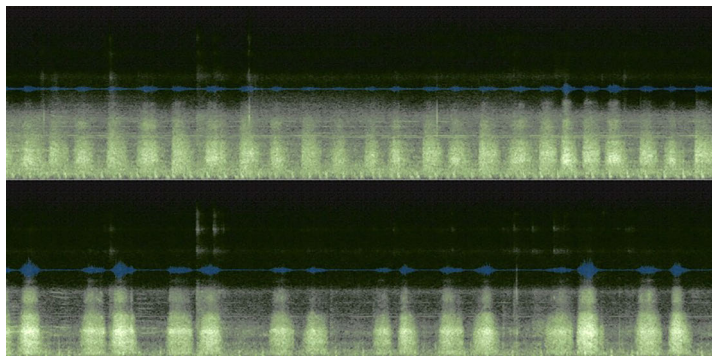
Lisa Müller-Trede

If relationality is exchange, attentiveness might be its currency. In this text, I discuss non-verbal exchanges of attention along a gift economy that assumes giving to be a creative act with inherent intra-relational rewards. To reify attention and relationality, I listen to and visualize interlocutors' breaths in the form of spectrograms. Breathing is linked to non-verbal communication in that changes in bodily motion are traceable within the sounds of breathing that occur as air flows into and out of the body while muscles are supplied with oxygen. After synthesizing the audio recording of each body's breath into one monophonic channel, I analyse this flattened visual representation with the help of a signal processing algorithm, which, as opposed to the human ear, can assume a single input while human listeners continue to hear two bodies breathing regardless of whether the data is monophonic or stereophonic. The algorithm isolates recurring sonic patterns which point to body movements that would not be decipherable in individual breaths. Through this synthesis, I have found that minute relational gestures like twitches, weight shifts, and kinaesthetic reorientations recur between dyads that share a space. Their joint breathing during these gestures sounds similar as the gestures recur.¹ This renders breathing a semiotic process that

¹ In an example I discuss in detail elsewhere, I analysed the spectrograms of two people's merged breaths alongside the video documentation of their movements. It turned out that by attending to bodies as literally joined in process rather than as individual agents, a nexus of gestures that mark a form of non-verbal communication was revealed, which would otherwise go unnoticed.

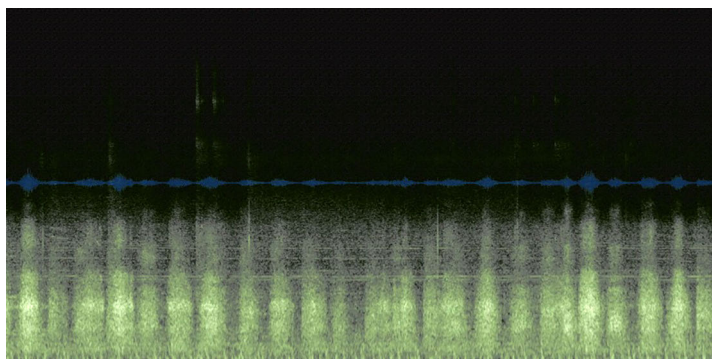
reveals a code by which bodies navigate their literal and affective proximity.

Figure 1: Stereophonic representation of two breath recordings.



Courtesy of Lisa Müller-Trede

Figure 2: Merged monophonic representation of the two breath recordings above.



Courtesy of Lisa Müller-Trede

The non-verbal and non-haptic exchanges of gestures as they are captured in joint breathing, do not rely on a symbolic order such as words or the negotiation of pressure in haptic exchanges. Instead, the coordinated expressions remain ephemeral without concrete semantic values attached to them. Searching for repetitions follows a positivist practice only insofar as it exposes patterns of relational behaviours. These, however, cannot be mapped as a concrete signifying system and remain singular clues for each particular dyad. The patterns seem to typically remain subconscious markers that occur too subtly and are too tailored to each individual partner to be named within theories of emotion or linguistics. Specifically, the simultaneous reciprocity of the exchange that operates beyond notions of active versus passive or giving versus taking, and the literal synthesis of merging the breath patterns into one joint signal reifies relationality. It demonstrates that the relation literally creates new data which constantly updates and thus defies categorization. For each dyad, these often subconscious gestures nevertheless operate as a form of orientation. Attentiveness renders this mode of communication more effective, and mutual recognition – not to be confused with agreement – seems to register as rewarding.

With regard to exchange systems, the reward tied to reciprocal kinaesthetic acknowledgement does not depend on symbolic orders such as words, objects, or pressure (haptics). Devoid of signification, these subtle joint gestures do not denote values but rather impulses and directions that express both a literal and an affective negotiation of distance and proximity. Since this negotiation remains largely ineffable, it is impossible to assign to it specific notions of giving or receiving. Marcel Mauss² states that the process of giving and receiving, in other words, gift economies, arrange social relations around a pressure of returning the gesture, acknowledging value, and indebtedness. While gifts strengthen social organizations by establishing predictable behaviours that enable reliable, personal bonds, giving seems most often tied to tak-

2 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1925).

ing.³ Typically, gifts are either material objects or deeds, signified and concrete. The temporality of exchange commonly involves concepts of past, present, and future. Jacques Derrida⁴ specifies Mauss' notion of the gift as a "force"⁵ which nevertheless remains tied to signifiers that need to be graspable as concrete elements in space and/or time:

However the *syn-*, the *synthesis*, the *system*, or the *syntax* that joins together gift and exchange is temporal—or more precisely temporizing—difference, the delay of the term or the term of delay that dislocates any "at the same time." The identity between gift and exchange would not be immediate and analytical. It would have in effect the form of an *a priori* synthesis: a synthesis because it requires temporization and a priori—in other words necessary—because it is required at the outset by *the thing itself*, namely by the very object of the gift, by the force or the virtue that would be inherent to it.⁶

I propose that the patterns which become visible and audible in the synthesis of breaths and movements within the spectrograms mark a symbiosis that is graspable, yet independent of conscious "a priori" activities and, hence, independent of specific virtues and inherent expectations. Without a "term" an "at the same time" is indeed possible, and the joint signal aids grasping and analysing this simultaneity. Foregrounding the immediacy of the encounter and singling out minute, subconscious, yet recurring gestures that, because of their recurrence, can be placed, even contextualized, yet not interpreted, allows a focus on that which might comprise the notion of giving. The spectrograms materialize bodies' gestures of becoming legible for one another without an a priori activity – without a term or point of reference for expectations. Sociologist David Cheal describes the impulse of giving embedded within

3 Mauss, p 85.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. I: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

5 Derrida, p 40.

6 Derrida, pp 39–40.

moral economies of the contemporary West as a sentiment of friendship, love, and gratitude. He writes that notions of giving as social exchange “involve the actor in identifying with others, so that for certain purposes the boundaries between self and other are denied, and a collective identity is defined vis-a-vis outsiders. The enclosure of persons within these supra-individual boundaries makes possible a characteristic mutuality of assistance between members.”⁷ I wonder whether the reward of recognizing the recurrence of somatic articulations is a “characteristic mutuality of assistance” active while navigating the immediacy of space and time kinaesthetically. I suspect that, whenever the minute recurring patterns in joint movements and breaths are recognized, this “mutual assistance” registers as a sentiment akin to that of friendship, love, or gratitude while they are being contextualized through brief and ephemeral gestures rather than the symbolic constructs and the naming conventions of “friendship, love, or gratitude” that tend to entail expectations and potential debts.

If, in the context of kinaesthetic recognition debt is disregarded, the notion of a conventional economy might not provide suitable terms to further develop a vocabulary around this ineffable exchange. In *Valuing Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster⁸ explains that energy transfer does not operate according to an economy conditional on limitations and demands because the energy that passes from one body to the next is abundant. She describes the energy behind kinaesthetic articulations as the source for “psychological and social spaciousness” because it is readily available and not part of a scarcity paradigm.⁹ Spacious perhaps because it does not adhere to definitions, objects, or pressures but, instead, to attention and the recognition of patterns that point in certain directions as they recur.

The spatial and affective direction, the distance or proximity that results from recognizing joint kinaesthetic expressions remains a ne-

7 David J. Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London: Routledge, 2016 (1988)), p 18

8 Susan Leigh Foster, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

9 Foster, p 77.

gotiation of space and affect that does not stand for anything but the distance or proximity itself. Beyond, prior, next to, or below the symbolic, kinaesthetic symbiosis is not concerned with points of reference in time or space other than its present expression of relationality that, even though it is being refined by recurrences, tends to happen too immediately to rise to consciousness. The subtleties of these non-verbal accentuations are surfaced by turning breath sounds into electric energy and these currents further into visual representations that can be deciphered by a pattern recognition algorithm. As long as the accentuations remain non-symbolic in their representation, the interpretation of currents and exchanges of energy remains unfazed by expectations and notions of debt – of giving more or less than the “other.” Even though bodies give themselves away as they express information about themselves in relation, the simultaneity of moving and being moved that is inherent to kinaesthetic correspondence can only provoke a sense of mutual indebtedness, or in Cheal’s words, a “characteristic mutuality of assistance.” This symbiotic means of communication establishes a sense of stability, predictability, and possible trust without expectations and may reorient the notion of gift exchange beyond economic terms.