The Aesthetic Dimension of Visual Culture

The Aesthetic Dimension of Visual Culture

Edited by

Ondřej Dadejík and Jakub Stejskal

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

The Aesthetic Dimension of Visual Culture,
Edited by Ondřej Dadejík and Jakub Stejskal

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Ondřej Dadejík and Jakub Stejskal and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2428-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2428-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part III: Art in the Context of Visual Culture

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank everyone who helped with the organization of the conference "The Aesthetic Dimension of Visual Culture", from which this volume drew its essays, especially Tereza Hadravová, but also Štěpán Kubalík, Josef Šebek, and the conference volunteers, undergraduates from the Department of Aesthetics, Charles University, Prague. Thanks also to the DigiLab personnel, František Zachoval and Jan Habrman, for their excellent technical support, and to Václav Magid for the kind offer to hold the event in the beautiful building of the Academy of Fine Arts. We are grateful to Josef Šebek and Derek Paton, who helped considerably in preparing this volume for publication. We wish to express our gratitude to the Czech Science Foundation, since the conference and this volume are the results of a three-year research project conducted by the Aesthetics and Film Studies Departments at Charles University and supported generously by the Foundation (project no. GA ČR 408/07/0909). We extend our gratitude also to the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, which funded the conference. Finally, we thank our colleagues and friends at the Charles University Aesthetics Department, all of whom contributed in one way or another to this volume's coming to existence.

—Prague, December 2009

INTRODUCTION

AESTHETICS AND VISUAL CULTURE

ONDŘEJ DADEJÍK AND JAKUB STEJSKAL

I

Some fifteen years ago, the title of this volume, as well as that of the conference that preceded it, would have been regarded in certain quarters as a deliberate provocation. The provocation would have resided in the mere fact of our title's seriously suggesting an aesthetic investigation into visual culture. The 1990s was the decade when visual studies[1] was establishing itself as a new field of study that promised—like cultural studies before it—to transcend the disciplinary divides and to bring under one roof scholars from fields as different, for example, as art history, cognitive science, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, cultural theory, anthropology, and film and media studies. For some, visual studies were to inherit from cultural studies its emphasis on the critical project of uncovering ideological machinations prevalent in culture.[2] Framed thus, visual studies was to focus rather one-sidedly on the socio-cultural conditions of the visual, perceived as a means of power serving specific ideological goals (Rogoff 2004, 30–32). Theorists embracing such a version of visual studies, usually drawing inspiration from Debord's famous criticism of the "society of spectacles" and other varieties of French iconoclasm,[3] generally viewed aesthetics as an ideology that only

[1] In what follows, we will use the term visual studies to refer to a broad category of trans- and inter-disciplinary approaches to visual culture that began to emerge in the 1980s and gained institutional recognition in the 1990s (visual culture/visual studies). For a recent attempt at providing a coherent picture of this still relatively young field of study, see Dikovitskaya 2005.

[2] For a programmatic statement along these lines, see Mirzoeff 2002, 4.

[3] For the "scopophobic" trait of much post-war French philosophy, see Jay 1993.

served to legitimize the fetishist and alienating character of bourgeois high culture. From this perspective, the aesthetic dimension of visual culture is something to be dispensed with, deconstructed as one of the inherent parts of the modern epistemic configuration rather than studied as one of the possible functions of the visual. Hence the provocation.

The one-sidedness proved not to be the dominant voice in visual studies. Indeed, important visual culture scholars deliberately opposed it, suggesting a more dialectical approach to the relation between vision and culture. Some have even seen in visual studies a counter-current to the radical culturalist rhetoric of cultural studies, and have been trying to introduce a more nuanced approach to visuality.[4] But this basic opposition between nature and culture, though fundamental, does not do justice to the variety of approaches that are being incorporated into visual studies. Generally, the study of visual culture has been understood as implying a shift from compartmentalized methodologies (of art history, philosophy, visual anthropology, neurophysiology, film studies) to a more comprehensive approach. It has also been interpreted as marking a change of focus from the study of the history of objects to the study of the history of reception, response, or reaction to visual phenomena.[5] Also, and this is especially true of the German variety of visual studies, *Bildwissenschaft*, visual culture scholars have shown a revival of interest in developing an overarching theory of the image as a universal category present in every human culture (Belting 2001, 2005). What all these different perspectives on visual culture have in common is dissatisfaction with the traditional division of labour in the humanities and a call for a broader, more inclusive framework.

Does aesthetics have a place in such a framework? As our mentioning a deliberate provocation in the first paragraph is meant to suggest, not everyone would have agreed in letting aesthetics in, the main reason being a widely shared suspicion in the humanities, at least since the 1970s, that philosophical aesthetics commits the deadly sins of ahistoricism, Eurocentrism, formalism, and blindness to cultural differences.[6] Aesthetic vocabulary has also been viewed as dated, irresponsive to the challenges of new media, post-conceptual art practices, and the digital revolution.

---

[4] See the methodological debates in the first issues of the *Journal of Visual Culture* (Elkins 2002, Mitchell 2002, Jay 2002, Bal 2003).

[5] Following the pathbreaking work of art historians like Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall.

[6] For a typical expression of such a view see Keith Moxey's answer to the *October* "Visual Culture Questionnaire" (Moxey 1996).

With the advent of the new millennium, the heyday of anti-aesthetic hostilities seems to be well over. The closing decade witnessed a widespread return of interest in aesthetics in the humanities as is testified to by the ever-growing number of academic contributions to this topic.[7] This change of fortune, however, should not lead to a return to the once discredited and abandoned positions. On the one hand, the investigation into aesthetic values of visual culture must take into account the critical perspective, which has contributed to the dissolution of the "universalising naturalism of the Enlightenment"[8] and has been accredited to aesthetics—not altogether deservedly—by cultural studies. The anti-aesthetic atmosphere prevalent in the humanities in the first two decades of the formation of visual studies has paradoxically helped aesthetics by making aestheticians more sensitive to universalizing claims about aesthetic values.

On the other hand, the anti-aesthetic sobering-up from universalism soon reached its limits, beyond which it was caught in a web of antinomies. The supposed dissolution of the universalistic illusion did not lead to a non-contradictory and unqualified adoption of a premise, which—in opposition to universalism—may be termed cultural relativism or cultural determinism. If that had been the case, the result of the sobering-up would have been a confirmation of the fact that our visual aesthetic experience is determined throughout by a given cultural code and cannot therefore lead us beyond the limits of our culture. But such a confirmation would require that we first escape our cultural code in order to gain a transcultural, *universal* perspective, which would then enable us positively to rule out any transcendence beyond cultural determinants taking place in our aesthetic experience. But it is precisely such a perspective that cultural relativism originally set out to deconstruct. Interestingly enough, far from being solely a target of culturalist criticism, the presupposition that aesthetic experience is "immediate" and universal, along with some critical evidence of the transcultural efficacy and communicability of aesthetic phenomena, which had often been overlooked in the past, has attracted a new wave of advocates, often hailing from the neurosciences.[9]

To return to our original question (whether visual studies should take into account aesthetics), there seems to be little doubt that aesthetic theory

[7] See Clark 2000, Armstrong 2002, Holly and Moxey 2002, Joughin and Malpas 2003, Elkins 2006, Wolff 2008, Halsall et al. 2009.
[8] See Martin Jay's discussion in Jay 2002.
[9] On the subject of neuroaesthetics, see the contributions of Kesner, Wolff, Hadravová, and Castello Branco in this volume.

ought to be of interest to the study of visual culture. For one thing, aesthetic vocabulary has far from vanished from contemporary debates on the nature and various shapes of our visual experiences, a fact especially pertinent where dissatisfaction with vulgar value relativism prevails. Besides, the very question—ubiquitous in the debates on visual culture—of what is natural and what is acquired in our visual experiences has been a topic in aesthetics at least since the Enlightenment. And last but not least, despite attempts to study visual culture without employing the concept of art, there is no prospect of this central subject of aesthetic theory ebbing away from visual studies. For better or worse, the question of what is and what is not (good) art will remain with us for some time to come. It is therefore plausible that visual studies can profit greatly from involvement with aesthetics, if only to learn from its past mistakes.

The essays compiled in this volume show a variety of ways of intersection and involvement between aesthetics and visual studies; some deal with the fate of visual art, some with the conditions and characteristics of contemporary visual aesthetic experience, and yet others take on the difficult question of the relation between visual representation and reality. What unites them is the willingness of their authors to think about contemporary visual culture in the conceptual frame of aesthetics.

II

This volume is based on a conference of the same name, which was held at the DigiLab Hall of the Academy of Fine Arts, Prague, on 20–22 October 2009. All the essays included here were presented at the event. As the reader will see, the topics brought up by the authors cover quite a broad range, but they can generally be classified into three loosely connected sections.

The opening, more general section is devoted to reflections on the relation between aesthetics and visual theory, and includes three longer essays by Janet Wolff, Ladislav Kesner, and Jason Gaiger. In a partly autobiographical account, entitled “In Defence of Sociology: Aesthetics in the Age of Uncertainty”, Janet Wolff retells the developments in the Anglo-American sociology of art during the last thirty years, and focuses mainly on what she calls the “dilemma of aesthetics”, that is, the uneasy relationship between aesthetics and sociology stemming from the latter’s tendency to translate aesthetic disputes into ideological ones. As Wolff suggests, there is no clear solution to this dilemma since the specificity of the aesthetic continues to escape the interpretative tools of sociology. But that should not lead to the abandonment of the sociological perspective, a

trend she spots in the recent "turn to immediacy" in the humanities (affect theory, phenomenology, theories of "presence" and materiality, and neuroaesthetics). She warns us not to succumb to another extreme, that of neglecting "sociological imagination" in the study of works of art and visual culture in general.

Ladislav Kesner's essay "Neuroscience and Art Experience: Real Promise or Real Delusion?" takes issue with neuroaesthetics, a controversial methodological current gaining ground in visual studies. As Kesner shows, within this current one comes across a whole series of simplifications and reductions which overshadow or distort the real potential hidden in this emerging field. Discussing particular examples, Kesner not only convincingly demonstrates these shortcomings, but also points to possible assets of neuroscience when applied to the visual arts, though these are much more modest than the bombastic claims of neuroaesthetics.

Both Wolff and Kesner warn against the loss of the experiential and sociological contexts in the current "turn to immediacy" (to use Wolff's term again). Jason Gaiger's nuanced discussion of the German variety of visual studies, *Bildwissenschaft*, points to another possible decontextualization of visual experience, this time that of its historical dimension. Gaiger, who is sympathetic to the multi-disciplinary nature of much of the research done in Germany today under the rubric of *Bildwissenschaft*, subjects to scrutiny Lambert Wiesing's "transcendental" or categorical approach to images and his appropriation of the conceptual tools developed by Wölfflin. Whereas Wölfflin was careful to ground the applicability of his *Grundbegriffe* in the historical material that they were to describe, Wiesing strips them of any historical context in an effort to develop a strict, aprioristic philosophy of the image. In this, Wiesing is at odds with one of the central ideas that gave rise to the *Bildwissenschaft* renaissance, that is, the overcoming of the academic division of labour.

The opening section is then followed by two thematic sections. The first, entitled "Aesthetics and Perception in Cultural Mediation", includes contributions that are tied together by a shared interest in the aesthetic dimension of our interaction with the visual environment mediated by culture. It opens with Stephen Moonie's "Aesthetics in the Expanded Field of Culture", which deals with one recurrent topic in the dialogue between aesthetics and cultural theory. Moonie focuses on questions that arise once the moralizing aestheticism of Roger Fry is confronted with the sceptical pluralism of Lawrence Alloway. Behind the antithetical relation between the two critical approaches—art's spiritual opposition to industrial society's materialism on the one hand and the appraisal of art's

contribution to pluralistic consumer culture on the other—Moonie recognizes a certain convergence, which, according to him, allows one to move beyond the simple opposition of the all-encompassing visual culture of the postmodern era on the one side and the aesthetic approach of Modernists like Fry on the other. Moonie tries to show that the contrariness of both positions disappears once elitist and dogmatic interpretations of the philosophical conditions of modernist sensibility are abandoned and room is made for the flexible and on principle incomplete character of the aesthetic as such.

The relevance of aesthetic analysis to mass visual culture is investigated in depth in Pol Capdevila's contribution, "Hidden Aesthetics in Referential Images: The Manipulation of Time". The article is an original investigation into the hidden efficacy of the intrinsic aesthetic qualities both in the production and, indeed mainly, in the reception of documentary visual communication. According to Capdevila, there are no aesthetically neutral images and a thorough aesthetic analysis of documentary images may lead to a deeper understanding of their construction, of the illusion of their supposed neutral and objective nature, and therefore also of their manipulative potential.

Similarly to the articles by Moonie and Capdevila, Alice Jedličková and Stanislava Fedrová's article, "Why the Verbal May Be Experienced as Visual", involves situating a traditional topic of aesthetic theory in a more contemporary theoretical perspective. Jedličková and Fedrová take up a perennial subject made famous centuries ago by Lessing—the relation between visually and verbally grounded aesthetic experiences. Using both visual and literary examples, they investigate the potential of literary texts to induce quasi-visual experiences in their readers. The underlying point of their discussion is that literary studies should not be hostile to the increasing interest that the humanities are showing in visual culture, but should instead approach this trend as an opportunity to reach beyond textual analysis and should try to understand both literary and visual aesthetic objects as taking part in the same "experiential culture".

The remaining two essays of this section bring us back to the topic already discussed at length by Kesner—namely, neuroaesthetics, a discipline that proposes to incorporate into aesthetics the recent discoveries of neuro- and cognitive sciences. The main aim of Tereza Hadravová's contribution "Aesthetics Based on a Perceptual Model: Which Model?" is to prove the inconsistency of some claims and presuppositions of contemporary neuroaestheticians. The starting point here is again a reconsideration of a traditional aesthetic topic, this time involving the Hutcheson-Locke perception-based conception of aesthetic

experience. Whereas the main currents of scholarship in analytic aesthetics have, according to Hadravová, dropped the perception-based model, there are certain indications that contemporary neuroaesthetics is reviving the possibility of a perception-based aesthetic theory. She isolates the view, found in the writings of leading neuroaestheticians, that aesthetic perception actually constitutes an early stage of perception proper, which happens to coincide with the "otherwise hidden perceptual grammar of the human visual brain". This naturalistic conception of aesthetic perception disregards the normative side of our aesthetic experience, that is, it offers only descriptions of the processes triggered in the "visual brain" when we experience something aesthetically, but presents no justifications for our aesthetic judgements.

In contrast to Hadravová (and Kesner), Patrícia Silveirinha Castello Branco ("Haptic Visuality and Neuroscience") gives a much more enthusiastic account of the subject-matter of neuroaesthetics—namely, mirror neurons, its probably most discussed area of research. She contrasts the legacy of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, which reduces vision to a production of purely mental images, with the new paradigm of "haptic vision". The Cartesian conception, which has been dominant in Western thought for centuries and has participated in the development of improved ways of visual reproduction, has been challenged both by the recent technological expansions (new digital media) and by the discoveries of contemporary neuroscience. Castello Branco argues—building her argument on the discovery of mirror neurons—for a "haptic" or "embodied" conception of visual perception, that is, a conception that does not limit the ability to see to the sphere of mental representations. According to her, the identification of the haptic nature of vision not only rehabilitates the oft-neglected bodily, material aspect of our visual responses to the world, but also provides a comparatively better description of the interactive nature of the experience that is inaugurated by the new media and new art forms based on them.

The essays in the section "Art in the Context of Visual Culture" in one way or another touch on the central aesthetic practice of modern culture, art, and its place in contemporary society.

Stephen Snyder's contribution, "Danto's Narrative Notion of History and the Future of Art", returns to one of the most influential interpretations of the fate of art in recent decades, Arthur Danto's. Snyder challenges Danto's analysis of the current plurality of artistic styles as the result of the end of Art by identifying an aim common to both the art avant-gardes of the twentieth century as well as contemporary art practices: to "keep culture moving" by broadening the community of its recipients. The

plurality of artistic approaches in the contemporary art world is not due to an "anything goes" atmosphere, but to a struggle to improve the state of communicative rationality (a notion Snyder borrows from Habermas) by involving new audiences in the cultural practices of art reception.

If Danto, in a Hegelian vain, thinks art has outlived its aesthetic era, in which its appearance alone was revelatory of its meaning, another avowed Hegelian, Slavoj Žižek, remains firmly rooted in a distinct Western aesthetic tradition of interpreting the arts, that of the "counter-modern aesthetics". This is at least what Berta Pérez's discussion of the aesthetic aspect of Žižek's Lacanian reading of films tries to prove ("The Aesthetic Dimension of Žižek's Conception of Cinema"). Counter-modern aestheticians from the early Romantics to Adorno and Heidegger have always understood the realm of the aesthetic to be revelatory of the irreducible tragedy of the human condition, of the inability of human reason to make the world and its ultimate truth available to rational knowledge. There always remains a deep wound that grounds and at the same time avoids the very workings of our rational faculties. Thus what modern rationality treats as "objective reality" is always already fictitious. For Žižek, film, through its fictitiousness, points to this hidden tragic truth of reality and it is this view, according to Pérez, that makes this Slovene philosopher an heir to the tradition of counter-modern aesthetics.

Seeing film as much more than just superficial entertainment, as being actually involved in revealing something substantial about the human condition, is a position that was defended, long before Žižek, by Stanley Cavell. In her "Cavell on Film and Scepticism", Temenuga Trifonova critically discusses Cavell's treatment of film. In contrast to Pérez, who like Adorno thinks aesthetics should embrace the question of the truth of reality, Trifonova treats Cavell's use of the cinematographic medium for a philosophical refutation of scepticism as tantamount to the denigration of the aesthetic dimension of film. Cavell understands cinema as a modernist enterprise that sets out to refute the automatisms of conventions and traditions as inauthentic, illusionist. The result of this refutation is not, however, scepticism about the possibility of true representation, but an avoidance of this question by deploying the cinematographic means of representation, which record the unintentional, involuntary body movements that rational consciousness is unable to express as its own. As Trifonova shows, the technological automatism of the camera serves Cavell as the ultimate refutation of the desire to prove reality against the automatism of convention.

The relationship of the photographic and cinematographic arts to truth and reality has been made even more difficult by the "digital revolution".

Koray Degirmenci addresses this problem and suggests that the very existence of the modern conception of the medium of photography is at stake. Part of this conception, made famous especially by Roland Barthes, is the interplay of absence and presence: what we see before our eyes is there only because it is actually not there any more, it has been photographed. This conception, which links the medium of photography to death and mourning, has been jeopardized by the digital revolution, which tends to dissolve not so much the ontological relationship between the referent and sign, but rather the associated interplay of absence and presence, life and death.

Degirmenci's concern that the arbitrariness introduced by the digital revolution threatens to dismantle our understanding of the medium of photography, Trifonova's account of Cavell's appreciation of the philosophical potential of modern art, Pérez's interpretation of Žižek's philosophy of film as adhering to a clandestine counter-modern aesthetics, and Snyder's criticism of Danto's narrative about the end of art may all be traced back in one way or another to Hegel's famous narrative, which tells the story of how modern ("romantic") art emerged in the wake of the dissolution of the ethical substance of pre-modern society and how, at the same time, it lost its momentum as the highest expression of this substance. We are reminded of this by Miloš Ševčík's "A Change in Essence? Hegel's Thesis on the Past Character of Art as Considered by Heidegger, Patočka and Nancy", a comparative essay, which considers, side by side, three powerful interpretations of Hegel's famous declaration that for us Moderns art is a thing of the past. All three readings focus mainly on the visual arts and Ševčík shows that there is a striking similarity between Nancy's and Patočka's re-interpretations of the thesis, which both revolve around the materiality of a visual work of art. Nancy's and Patočka's "turn to immediacy" in their interpretation of that notorious enemy of all things unmediated demonstrates well a general feature of all the contributions compiled in this volume: a sense of the persistence of traditional questions of aesthetics, which keep reappearing in our attempts to come to grips with the visual culture that surrounds us .

References

Armstrong, Isobel. 2002. *The Radical Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bal, Mieke. 2003. Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture* 2: 5–32.

Belting, Hans. 2001. *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*. Munich: Willhelm Fink.

—. 2005. Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology. *Critical Inquiry* 31: 302–319.
Clark, Michael P., ed. 2000. *The Revenge of the Aesthetic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Dikovitskaya, Margaret. 2005. *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Elkins, James. 2002. A Sceptical Introduction to Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture* 1: 93–99.
—. ed. 2006. *Art History Versus Aesthetics.* New York: Routledge.
Halsall, Francis, Julia Janse, and Tony O'Connor, eds. 2009. *Rediscovering Aesthetics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Holly, Michael Ann, and Keith Moxey, eds. 2002. *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Jay, Martin. 1993. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
—. 2002. Cultural Relativism and the Visual Turn. *Journal of Visual Culture* 1: 267–278.
Joughin, John J., and Simon Malpas, eds. 2006. *The New Aestheticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 2002. The Subject of Visual Culture. In *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 3–23. London: Routledge.
Mitchell, W. J. T. 2002. Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture* 1: 165–181.
Moxey, Keith. 1996. Animating Aesthetics. *October* 77: 56–59.
Rogoff, Irit. 2002. Studying Visual Culture. In *The Visual Culture Reader*, 24–36.
Wolff, Janet. 2008. *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*. New York: Columbia University Press.

PART I:

FRAMING THE AESTHETICS OF VISUAL CULTURE

IN DEFENCE OF SOCIOLOGY: AESTHETICS IN THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

JANET WOLFF

In many ways, and perhaps inevitably, this is an autobiographical story. In tracing the changing relationship of the discipline of sociology to visual studies and aesthetics I think I cannot help but speak from the point of view of a travelling sociologist—or perhaps ex-sociologist. My travels, over a period of more than thirty years, have been both geographical and disciplinary, though the two are actually closely linked. As of a year ago, and now in my final academic position, I have held the title of Professor of Cultural Sociology. But my institutional home is in the humanities—as it happens, I am currently based in a department of English and American Studies—and not in the social sciences. With this new title, I have come full circle, from a training (undergraduate and postgraduate) in sociology and a fifteen-year-long first academic post in sociology (at the University of Leeds). My "defection" coincided with my move in 1988 to the United States, where I taught for another fifteen years in departments of art and art history. So it may seem strange—perhaps hypocritical—of me to argue in defence of sociology, the discipline I apparently abandoned twenty years ago. The explanation (and I think this is inflected differently in different national academic cultures) lies in the direction taken both by sociology and by some humanities disciplines in the past three decades—changes which have meant that in some contexts and some universities art history (or English or even music) might be a more appropriate disciplinary home for me and for others with the same intellectual formation.[1] I suppose I could say (though it sounds much more grandiosely egocentric than I want to be) that sociology abandoned me. These transformations are entirely relevant to what I want to talk about today. This is, after all, not just a personal story. The defence I want to mount is really for the retention, in visual studies and in aesthetics, of the sociological

[1] Two other examples—both sociologists—are Simon Frith (now in Music, University of Edinburgh) and Michèle Barrett (English, Queen Mary College London).

perspective (or what C. Wright Mills once called the sociological imagination). And this is not only (and actually not necessarily) to be found in sociology departments.

I have come to the conclusion that today there is more reason than ever to insist on the sociological perspective. I am referring to what seems to me to be a striking—and often worrying—turn to an idea of *immediacy* in the encounter with the aesthetic object. This tendency, which by-passes or even rejects critical theory, is manifest in a range of developments and, perhaps not quite legitimately, I think of them as linked: the turn to affect, the return to phenomenology, the discussion of "presence" in aesthetic experience, new theories of materiality and of the agency of objects, and even (though on the surface this seems rather remote) the emergence of neuroaesthetics.[2] I will come back to this a little later. It is for me an interesting late twist on the continuing narrative of sociology's on-and-off relationship with aesthetics.

I

I should start, though, by explaining what I mean by the "sociological perspective" in the fields of art and aesthetics. It is an approach which takes seriously the symbolic and representational aspects of the cultural texts, while never losing sight of their production, and reception, in the context of social relations, institutions, and processes. Ideally, too, the sociological perspective is an historical one, not just in the sense that the object of study might not be contemporary, but also in the sense that the diachronic aspects of the cultural engagement should be in the line of vision. Of course this is a lot to ask of the cultural analyst—semiotics, ideology-critique, institutional analysis, social and cultural history all in one study—and in practice it is rarely possible. Here is my simplest gloss on it though: just as we would be wary of a cultural sociology which paid no attention to the visual text and its particular characteristics, so it seems to me essential to challenge the kind of textual critique, however politically attuned, that ignores (or even denies) the social aspects of art-making and art-viewing. And this brings me back to the beginning of the story of sociology's relationship to visual studies, or at least to that point, about thirty years ago, when both the sociology of art and the "new art history" were emerging.

The academic traditions I know best are the main Anglophone ones, and particularly the British and the American—the two countries in which

[2] I discuss this in more detail in Wolff, forthcoming.

I have lived and worked. I don't know how well this mini-history of visual and cultural studies translates into other European contexts. The most striking difference between the British and the American academic traditions with regard to work in this field has been the far more radical segregation and separation of disciplines in the U.S. This is by no means a new observation, but it is one worth making again, not least because some things have remained the same over three decades.[3] The British case, certainly in the 1970s, was rather different. Again, I need to resort to the autobiographical for a moment here. My postgraduate education (at the University of Birmingham) was in a sociology department. But it was a department in which I had been taught by, amongst others, a Hungarian ex-student of Georg Lukács,[4] and in which I was supervised for my PhD by a poet (then Head of Department, Charles Madge, co-founder of the Mass Observation project in 1937[5]). Birmingham was also the home of the original, and then new, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,[6] whose interdisciplinary seminars and discussions I attended regularly. By the mid-1970s, soon after I got my PhD, we saw in Britain the great proliferation of work in cultural studies, film studies, women's studies (and later gender studies), and sociology of art. What was striking was the relative absence of disciplinary boundaries. At the annual sociology of literature conferences at the University of Essex, in the new journals—for example, *Literature & History*, *Red Letters*, *Screen* (1959), *Ideology & Consciousness*, *m/f*, *History Workshop Journal* (1976)—and in the new degree programmes in cultural studies being launched at the polytechnics, faculty, scholars, and students from across the disciplines met and debated. In addition, the questions raised about visual, literary, and filmic texts were informed by a "new left" history, and a Marxist or neo-Marxist orientation, which meant that for many humanities scholars the social-historical-economic questions were central to the engagement with texts. At the same time, the sociologists of culture were often working in a humanistic tradition—more inclined to build on, for instance, texts in translation (in *New Left Review* and elsewhere) from the continent (Lukács, Goldmann, Althusser, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School) than on Britain's own statistical-welfare tradition of sociology or on the more positivistic trends in American sociology.

[3] I have discussed this difference in Wolff 1981.
[4] This was Julian Nagel, who taught sociology at the University of Birmingham.
[5] A history of this "anthropology of ourselves", produced in diaries, photographs, and film, can be seen at Mass Observation Archive, unpaginated.
[6] Founded in 1964.

The situation in the United States could not have been more different. There, in a situation where academic life was much more highly professionalized, each discipline secure in its particular range of prescribed methods, subject-specific journals and conferences, and professional bodies, there was little dialogue between sociologists and art historians. From the mid-1970s, however, a new sub-discipline of the sociology of art appeared in the U.S., quickly becoming one of the largest and most popular sections of the American Sociological Association. Its practitioners developed sophisticated techniques for the study of cultural institutions and organizations—art schools, museums, opera companies—while leaving the cultural object itself as the "black box", assumed to be irrelevant, and an inappropriate object of study, for the social scientist. Elsewhere in the U.S. art historians were slower than their counterparts in the U.K. to take to a social history of art; and literary scholars, when they began to challenge traditional critical approaches, for the most part did so by employing ever-more complex methods for textual analysis (structuralist, semiotic, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic), which rarely addressed questions of context. (The same observation of the British/American contrast has been made by others about the different trajectories of cultural studies in the two countries, Nelson 1991.)

This is obviously a schematic account and one could easily find exceptions on both sides of the Atlantic and in both humanities and social science. But I do think it is a fair characterization both of early work in the sociology of art and the humanities and of the American/British academic and intellectual differences. If anything, my impression since I returned to the U.K. in 2006 has been that British sociology in general, including sociology of culture, has in recent years become a little more like its trans-Atlantic relative—more detached from the humanities, more focused on mainstream sociological methods (surveys, quantitative measures, more interested in social-scientific models and practices) with less interest in the text itself.[7]

Nevertheless, in work by scholars across the disciplines we have seen the real benefit of the combined effect of new approaches, in the refinement of tools and methods to study (and to deconstruct or challenge) *both* structures and processes of artistic production *and* systems, and instances, of (visual) representation: that is (i) the role and power and hierarchies of arts institutions, and of cultural mediators (critics, galleries, museums, art schools, publishers); and (ii) the languages of meaning and

[7] An example of this is the excellent and wide-ranging project, based in my own university and funded by the ESRC—the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. See Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, unpaginated.

signification, and the interplay of mimesis, tradition and technique, of ideology and politics, in the visual realm. And although I would say there is still a strong tendency towards, on the one hand, textualism in the humanities and, on the other, sociological reductionism in the social sciences, particularly in the United States, there is no doubt that in the past couple of decades great advances have been made in the field now called visual studies. Museology is one example of a new area within the field which has produced subtle and illuminating studies of the interplay of art object, institution, and social and political process, for example.

II

Like cultural studies before it, visual studies at its best incorporates the sociological perspective. The purely textual approach, no matter how original and ingenious, tells us only about possible readings—not about actual, situated, contingent ones. Nor can it help us to understand either the origin (production) of the text or its past and continued circulation in our culture. These are sociological questions. As I have suggested, a good deal of recent work meets this challenge, including the work of some American scholars. But the very success of critical approaches to visual culture has produced a new problem. Again, I think the solution is grounded in the sociological imagination. I mean here what we might call the dilemma of aesthetics. The combined effect of critical readings of visual (and other) texts and the social-historical exploration of structures and processes of cultural production and selection have long made it clear that the "canon" is a social product. Feminist and postcolonial critiques, the social history of taste, and the analytic work of museum studies leave us in no doubt that in a fundamental sense the received views about Great Art are both arbitrary and contingent—they are as unaware of their own prejudices as they are of the values and power struggles that lie behind the historical construction of canons. There is no question that this insight has been valuable—politically and aesthetically. But the ensuing dilemma is the problem of relativism. (It is one that I faced myself a few years ago, in writing about a number of little-known early twentieth-century American women artists, realizing that it was not at all clear to me what kinds of "aesthetic" claims I wanted to make about them, Wolff 2003a, 2003b.) The revisionisms that since the 1970s have challenged and modified aesthetic canons have tended to sidestep the tricky question of aesthetic value, focusing rather on the processes and ideologies of exclusion and lobbying for new inclusions (women Impressionists, Harlem Renaissance artists, Realist painters, and so on). But I think not many have been willing

to abandon notions of aesthetic value; indeed the implicit assumption is that these marginalized artists are "as good as" those already canonized. It is therefore not surprising that since the 1990s there has been a new interest among critical theorists, art historians, and cultural-studies scholars in questions of aesthetics (questions both of aesthetic evaluation and of aesthetic experience).[8] The trend often referred to as "the return to beauty" is an example of this, again dating from the 1990s (both from the reaction to the 1993 Whitney Biennial in New York and from Dave Hickey's influential book *The Invisible Dragon* of the same year).[9] (A little confusingly, this movement has two contradictory elements: the clear rejection of critical theory, the anti-aesthetic, and much contemporary art in favour of old-fashioned values of beauty and the aesthetic; and the serious attempt to rescue the discourse of beauty—and other aesthetic values—*within* critical theory from their recent neglect in the academy.)

As far as I can see, the problem of aesthetic evaluation in the post-critical landscape has not yet been satisfactorily addressed. The loss of certainty—the more innocent assumptions about truth and value that we inherited from Enlightenment thought—and the recognition now of what I've called "the age of uncertainty" mean finding a different way to discuss and assess works of art. An easy answer is to point out that we do so simply with reference to the standards and criteria operative within the discourse of aesthetics (technique, formal aspects, originality, and so forth), acknowledged as itself contingent. The more radical solution is to draw the conclusion that aesthetic categories and hierarchies are *nothing more than* socio-political and ideological constructs, and perhaps also to accept the co-existence of multiple canons. I think neither will really do—they seem to me to abdicate too quickly from the resistant problem of the aesthetic. The first, it is fair to say, relies on the relative autonomy of aesthetic language, at the same time offering a weak definition of what is "good" in art; the second risks a sociological reductionism which denies that autonomy, while avoiding entirely the question of the specifically aesthetic character of judgement. Neither manages to conceptualize aesthetic judgements as *both* discursive *and* socially grounded.

I recently attempted to get a little further with this problem—my case study was the perceived inferiority of early twentieth-century English art on the international scene—by borrowing from the adjacent "value" fields of moral and political philosophy, both of which have had to agonize about how to defend certain values in a post-universalist ("uncertain")

[8] Among many other examples, see Bérubé 2005.
[9] Hickey 1993. See also Danto 2003; Beckley 1998; Beauty Matters 1999.

time (Wolff 2008a).[10] My proposed solution was sociological, intended both to respect the relative autonomy of aesthetic discourse and, at the same time, to insist on the *social* location of dialogue and dispute about culture. Just as others have been struggling to avoid the moral and political relativism consequent on the demolition of Enlightenment notions of universalism, turning to something like a Frankfurt School notion of "communities of discourse", I suggested that we consider the negotiation of aesthetic value in these terms, so that the discourse of aesthetics (the specific criteria for judgement) would be taken seriously, but always in the context of the social groups and interests which underlie these debates. I have to admit it is a rather weak—and ultimately unsatisfactory—solution. Its sociological intention I continue to stand by. But again, I think, the specificity of the aesthetic escapes. It is a project I have not yet given up on.

III

In the past year, I have been thinking again about sociology and aesthetics for other reasons. The new provocation, which I referred to earlier as "the turn to immediacy" in art history, literary criticism, and other studies of culture, can best be identified with examples. Here are five. They come from different disciplines and they represent very different theoretical and methodological projects. What they have in common, I maintain, is a rejection of interpretative methods and a firmly anti-sociological point of view.

> [W]hat we call "aesthetic experience" always provides us with certain feelings of intensity that we cannot find in the historically and culturally specific everyday worlds that we inhabit. […] I prefer to speak, as often as possible, of "moments of intensity" or of "lived experience" (*ästhetisches Erleben*) instead of saying "aesthetic experience" (*ästhetische Erfahrung*)—because most philosophical traditions associate the concept of "experience" with interpretation, that is, with acts of meaning attribution (Gumbrecht 2004, 99–100).

This is a quotation from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's book, *Production of Presence*, whose indicative subtitle is *What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Gumbrecht is a literary scholar, whose other publications have been on philology and literature. But this is a study of aesthetics, making the case

[10] For an example of the debates in ethics and political philosophy, see Squires 1993.

for the nature of all aesthetic encounters—his examples include music and the visual arts. The central argument is that the aesthetic encounter is characterized by a certain "presence", which precedes meaning and interpretation. Gumbrecht is not against interpretation; indeed he says that we should conceive of aesthetic experience as "an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects" (ibid., 107). But for me the question is about this notion of "presence". It is proposed as a kind of pre-social, pre-interpretative, phenomenological event, and explicitly opposed to the fundamentally hermeneutic project of literary (and other cultural) studies.

The second quotation, this time from the field of visual studies, is from W. J. T. Mitchell's well-known essay, "What Do Pictures Want?". His aim too is "to undermine the ready-made template for interpretative mastery" and his intention, in the essay and in his book of the same title, is to identify aspects of the work of art which resist interpretation (Mitchell 2005, 49).

> What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders. [...] What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want [...] (ibid., 48).

The anti-hermeneutic rhetoric here too suggests a kind of immediacy—a direct contact between the picture and the viewer. Mitchell's project is far from Gumbrecht's phenomenological-ontological defence of "presence": despite the provocative title it is essentially an argument against the kind of interpretative reductionism that ignores the specificity of the visual image. But it is an example of a trend in the past few years to talk about the "power of images" and to write about paintings as if they have their own agency, and as if our encounter with them at some level escapes the mediating effects of biography, culture, and the social world. Elkins (1996) and Freedberg (1989) are just two examples of this, as is Georges Didi-Huberman's suggestion of how the "patch"—the accidental feature in a painting—requires a phenomenological supplement to semiotic (interpretative) methods (Didi-Huberman 1989).[11]

In the social sciences, this move away from actor/viewer-centred interpretation is paralleled in work on the "materiality" of objects in anthropology and in Actor Network Theory (ANT) in sociology. In both cases, socio-hermeneutic approaches are supplemented with, or superseded by, variously, a focus on the agency of objects, the pre-cognitive and pre-social, biological aspects of human life, and the blurring

[11] For a discussion of this, see Wolff, forthcoming.

of the divide between human and non-human. For example, in the presentation of an "artefact-oriented anthropology" Amiria Henare and colleagues propose "an anthropology that holds issues of interpretation at bay" (Henare et al. 2006, 1, 4). Here the *things* with which subjects engage in everyday life, rather than conceptualized as passive objects, or even as animated by human intentions, have a different status, produced in a new ontology in which "the things encountered in fieldwork are allowed to dictate the terms of their own analysis" (ibid., 4). Actor Network Theory, similarly, emphasizes the agency of non-humans in social encounters. This brief account will have to do as a shorthand summary:

> [Actor Network Theory] can more technically be described as a "material-semiotic" method. This means that it maps relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and "semiotic" (between concepts). It assumes that many relations are both material and "semiotic" (e.g. the interactions in a bank involve both people and their ideas, and technologies. Together these form a single *network*) (Actor Network Theory, unpaginated).[12]

Again, the usual methods of cultural analysis, fundamentally interpretative (and, as I have been suggesting, ideally sociological) are supplemented by aspects of social life seen to escape the semiotic frame.

My fourth example, in this rather too hectic summary of the move away from the hermeneutic-semiotic, is the increasingly influential "turn to affect", across a range of disciplines. (Like the other trends I have so rapidly summarized here, the "turn to affect" includes a range of quite diverse theories, more or less radically anti-semiotic—again, I am obliged to generalize to make the point.) The focus is on aspects of aesthetic or social encounters so far ignored in cultural theory—emotion, feeling, sensation, and so on. Vocabularies are therefore mobilized to enable us to take account of the affective aspects of reading, or of performance, or of social encounters (Littau 2006, Thompson 2009, Ahmed 2004). Sometimes the affective is understood as "biomediated" (Clough 2008, Sedgwick and Frank 1995, Thrift 2004); for other authors it registers simply the emotional aspects of social and cultural life. There is no question that this has been a valuable development, and not least for aesthetics, allowing us to address obviously crucial features of the encounter with the art object. My question about it, as with the other tendencies I have briefly reviewed, has to do, again, with a certain assumption of immediacy—the idea that some part of aesthetic experience

[12] See also Oppenheim 2007.

is “pure” or direct, unmediated by either biography or society. This is another way of saying that it is unamenable to socio-hermeneutic analysis.

Finally, I take the case of neuroaesthetics, which in many ways is remote from what is already an extremely eclectic group of theories and approaches. But I have exactly the same concerns about this new field, in which (for example) the pleasure in watching dance performances or in viewing a painting by Poussin is explained by the firing of mirror neurons (the “empathy” process detected in brain scans; Foster 2008, Freedberg 2005). Let me emphasize that I am referring here to work by students of culture (respectively a dance studies scholar and an art historian), not by cognitive scientists. Here is a statement by one of its converts, the art historian Norman Bryson, in an introduction to a book of essays on photography by Warren Neidich:

> The radicalism of neuroscience consists in its bracketing out the signifier as the force that binds the world together: what makes the apple is not the signifier “apple” [...], but rather the simultaneous firing of axons and neurons within cellular and organic life [...].
>
> The cultural space that Neidich’s writings portray is much more rooted in the subject’s sensory, kinaesthetic, emotional, and gestural experience than in the essentially textual space described in poststructuralist thought, where the key issues are representation, code, and meaning (Bryson, unpaginated).

I am at a loss to understand even the desire to take cultural studies in this direction, and so far have completely failed to see how it is a contribution to aesthetics. Of course that probably makes it all the more interesting a topic for discussion and debate. As must be clear by now, I refer to it here by way of concluding my list of anti-semiotic, anti-humanist, and anti-sociological developments. I must repeat that not only are all these approaches very different from one another; even within each category (affect theory, “power of images”, theories of presence) there are quite important differences. I think the justification of bringing them together is that it is worth noting the confluence of these challenges to critical theories of art and culture, which in diverse ways collude in the promotion of an idea of immediacy. And although I share with many an enthusiasm for some aspects of this work (for example, the recognition of the power that images do have, and of the active role of objects in social life, as well as the importance of affect in aesthetic encounters), I am very wary of the motives behind and the consequences of the abandonment of mediations.

So I conclude with a few thoughts on why we might be seeing this trend today and what I think some of the dangers of this work might be.

IV

Much of the work I have discussed has made timely and valuable contributions to critical theory and visual studies, in particular productively addressing the "aesthetic gap" that still, as I have suggested, haunts cultural studies. Focus on the "power of images" ensures that we pay attention to how paintings and other works do seem to address us, and to acknowledge the existential reality of our relationship to cultural texts—as long as it is clear that the "power" is ultimately one given to them by us, perhaps developed and consolidated over time, rather than a mystical, animistic, or ontological characteristic. The same applies to any idea of "presence" in the literary text, as well as to those approaches which highlight the "active" role of objects in social life—whether ANT or theories of material culture—again, as long as "active" remains in quotation marks and does not suggest agency independent of human (past or present) activity. The turn to "affect" enables discussion of the important question of the appeal of works of art, of the emotional and subjective aspects of our encounter with them. These are questions often ignored or marginalized in visual and cultural studies and their consideration is a crucial supplement to this work. In general, the fact that critical theories of art and culture continue to have real difficulty in providing language equipped to consider questions of evaluation and taste renders these recent interventions both welcome and extremely useful. My reservations about all this work, across such a diverse range of theories, are about its anti-analytic, unsociological, often ontological grounding—in short, the tendency often (though by no means always) central to this work towards a promotion of *unmediated* experience. Against this, I want to continue insisting on the fact that all such experiences are always mediated, by biography, by culture, by society. If paintings seem to address us—to manifest a kind of "power"—then however immediate this feels subjectively, it is always amenable to socio-historical-hermeneutic analysis. The "affect" experienced in an aesthetic encounter, similarly, is intimately bound up with the viewer's experiential framework, despite the fact that this is (necessarily) inaccessible in the moment itself. Even in the case of neuroaesthetics, it seems to me impossible to argue that the physiological-cognitive processes identified when, say, someone is watching a dance performance are not already mediated by that person's knowledge of or involvement in dance—that is, by a complex set of social,