Abstract
A number of recent tendencies seem to have resulted in the evaporation of the social in visual and cultural theory. This article begins by exploring arguments for the ‘power of images’, invoked by scholars for good reason to draw attention to the ways in which images appear to compel their own interpretations. The problem only arises when this power seems to have its own autonomy, and its origins in social–historical relations are ignored or obscured. Similarly, recent important correctives to social and cultural theory have taken their critiques too far in the direction of a notion of experience unmediated by language, experience and social life. Specifically, the article addresses revivals of phenomenology, theories of affect, theories of the post-human and neuroaesthetics. All of these correctly note the sense of immediacy in aesthetic experience, but mistakenly conclude that this ‘presence’ is not in fact mediated in many ways, necessarily invisible at the moment of the encounter. The article reviews the historic lacks in cultural theory that these developments seek to address, agreeing with their project but ultimately rejecting their overstatement of an idea of immediacy.

Keywords
affect • cultural theory • neuroaesthetics • phenomenology • the post-human • power of images
Every object sees us: there are eyes growing on everything. (Elkins, 1996: 51)

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 ... is simply to be asked what they want. (Mitchell, 2005: 48)

The object of art also possesses a subjecthood, in the sense of an agency distinct from the artist who made it – an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways. (Holly, 1996: 11)

I have become interested recently in the apparent evaporation of the social in cultural studies and critical theory. It could be that this is merely the anxiety of an unreconstructed humanist, for whom notions of the post-human, statements about the agency of objects and discoveries of the neural and cognitive aspects of human behaviour are a step (or several steps) too far. Nevertheless, I think it is worth investigating this unease and trying to make the case for a certain caution in relation to tendencies to abandon too hastily the solidities of cultural and sociological theory. One of the things I will consider in this article is why these challenges to traditional methods and theories have been necessary (and valuable) – that is, what the limits of cultural theory have been and why scholars have turned to different approaches. I am talking here about developments which might seem quite disparate: the turn to ‘affect’; the (re)turn to phenomenology (and post-phenomenology); actor–network theory in sociology and science studies; theories of the post-human (human/animal, human/nature, human/technology); theories of materiality; emphasis on the agency of objects; the turn to neuroscience in the humanities and social sciences; the insistence on ‘presence’ as an unmediated encounter (for example, with the work of art – see Gumbrecht, 2004); the foregrounding of the embodied nature of any act (even the most ‘intellectual’ practices, such as reading – see Littau, 2006). This is indeed an eclectic list. But one finds constant overlaps and common meeting points – for example, in a conference at the University of Manchester in February 2009, organized by the ESRC-funded Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, on ‘Materialising the Subject: Phenomenological and Post-ANT Objects in the Social Sciences’ (three of the themes already contained in the title, and discussion at the conference too about cognitive science, neuroscience and affect). And Nigel Thrift, in an exploration of affect in urban space, has occasion to discuss cognitive science, the idea of the ‘transhuman’, embodied knowledge and biopolitics (Thrift, 2004; see also Thrift, 2008). Whether combined or separate, though, what these developments have in common, and what they achieve collectively, is a more or less drastic threefold displacement: of the separateness (and primacy) of the human in relation to nature; of the primacy of the rational and the intellectual in human (and social) action; and of the primacy of analytic methods in the social and human sciences. All this is now in question, in multiple ways. At stake is the status of critical theories of culture – sociological, hermeneutic, semiotic, interpretative – which are
in some cases explicitly rejected. Although I won’t be able to consider each theoretical development here, I want to focus on some key issues as a way of pinning down what I see as the dangers of this trend.

I approach this from the discipline of art history (my own more recent disciplinary home). In 2007, I was invited to participate in the Royal Anthropological Institute’s annual conference in Manchester, as respondent on a panel on ‘The Power of Images’ (the papers were by Elizabeth Edwards, Christopher Pinney and Christopher Wright). I was pleased to be invited because this provided the opportunity to give some thought to a question that had begun to preoccupy me – the rise of a new kind of animism. The quotations that open this article illustrate what I mean. They are examples of a growing tendency to argue that pictures ‘speak to’ viewers, that they have their own ‘power’. David Freedberg (1989) was one of the first to make this case. His book, The Power of Images, argues that the power images (and objects) are seen to have in ‘primitive’ societies should be acknowledged too in contemporary Western society.

I have striven to counter the still widely current view (whether explicit or implicit) that certain characteristics both of art and of responses to it are solely confined to ‘primitive’ or non-Western societies … Much of what follows deals with the sorts of behaviour in the West that rational positivists like to describe as irrational, superstitious, or primitive, only explicable in terms of ‘magic’. I would, in fact, be happy if the long-standing distinction between objects that elicit particular responses because of imputed ‘religious’ or ‘magical’ powers and those that are supposed to have purely ‘aesthetic’ functions could be collapsed. I do not believe that the distinction is a viable one. Indeed, it seems to me that we should now be prepared to remove the evidence of phenomena like the animism of images from discussions of ‘magic’, and that we should confront more squarely the extent to which such phenomena tell us about the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them (Freedberg, 1989: xxi–xxii).

Through discussion of a wide range of art works, objects and practices (including the votive image, waxworks, censorship and iconoclasm), Freedberg demonstrates the persistence in the modern world of a ‘power’ in images, as active as it is in animistic cultures. In general, he suggests, the normal emotional and psychological engagement with images is repressed and denied in our culture and his book is, amongst other things, a plea for the recognition, and reinstatement of the legitimacy, of emotional (and sexual) responses to art. But what is this ‘power’ and how do images come to manifest it? The suggestion of continuities between a West African tribal ceremony, associating ancestral spirits with a ritual mask (one of his examples, see p. 31) and practices of iconoclasm and censorship in our own recent history, which are obviously premised on a fear of the power images may have, is
illuminating, and there is no problem in acknowledging two things: that our relationship to images (as to other objects) is often an emotional, affective one; and that, even in advanced societies, we retain an idea that in some circumstances images (and other objects) are powerful, and hence may need to be hidden. But this is not at all the same thing as believing that somehow power inheres in the image/object. We can recognize the power of the image, while understanding full well that that power is (socially, culturally, perhaps politically) given to it. (Freedberg himself is more interested in the crucial project of challenging the Western insistence on purely detached and intellectual exchanges with images than in considering the sources of the image’s power. It is worth noting, though, that occasional references to, for example, ‘certain aspects of behaviour and response that may usefully be seen to be universally and transculturally markable’ suggest other reasons for a belief in features of the aesthetic that transcend the social and contingent, a belief borne out in his more recent work on neuroscience and art: Freedberg, 1989: 24; see also Freedberg, 2008; Freedberg and Gallese, 2007.)

Freedberg is not alone among art historians in wishing to restore power to images. Michael Ann Holly (1996: 9) has argued that works of art determine their own subsequent histories and prefigure the interpretations of later viewers and critics:

To acknowledge the hold that the past itself exerts on us, we need to focus on the way historical works of art position us as their ideal spectators, expect certain responses from us, and confirm in the exchange what they anticipated all along.

Rejecting the distinction between subject (viewer, art historian) and object (painting), she explores through a series of case studies of early modern European artists the ‘subjecthood’ of paintings themselves. Importantly, she notes from the outset that her project is theory driven – that it is made possible by post-structuralist critiques of the subject/object relationship. For her, then, the power of images has nothing to do with ineffable or mystical presence; rather, it is always fully embedded in systems of representation and its intersections with later viewers is always a matter of interpretation. As she puts it: ‘I argue by way of specific historical examples that representational practices encoded in works of art continue to be encoded in their commentaries’ (p. xiii). Her interest is in what she calls ‘the afterlife of the object’ (p. 14) and the ways in which the object ‘continues to work at organizing its remembrance in the cultural histories that emplot it’ (p. 15). Discussing Robert Campin’s 15th-century Annunciation (known as the Merode Altarpiece), she challenges Panofsky’s (1953) iconological account, which interprets its ‘meaning’ through the symbols in the image (white lilies, pane of glass, extinguished candle). Typical of a mid-20th-century analytic approach, this account reads the work of art as a document, of the artist and of his period. It is closed to any idea of the image playing a role in its own interpretation. Holly’s argument is that Panofsky’s method is itself the product of the ‘pictorial strategies’ (p. 156) of the painting:
It is this to-and-fro-ness, the element of play between image and text, in which I am interested. As an amateur detective myself, I am employing this fifteenth-century image to uncover the disguised agenda in Panofsky’s twentieth-century text. (p. 157)

The historiographic and conceptual intention here is very different from Freedberg’s insistence on the power of images, but both participate in the wider project of challenging an idea of the pure (inert, passive) objecthood of images, instead according them a certain agency.

Examples of this trend proliferate. Mitchell (2005), quoted at the beginning of this article, famously asked ‘what do pictures want?’ Aiming, as he says (like Holly) to ‘undermine the ready-made template for interpretative mastery’, he wants instead ‘to put our relation to the work into question, to make the relationality of image and beholder the field of investigation’ (p. 49, emphasis in original). By this, he means (perhaps among other things) that the visuality of the image must be acknowledged, and that images should not simply be ‘turned into language’ (p. 47). Here the rhetorical effect is misleading – it quickly becomes clear that what at first sounds animistic (pictures with desires) is not that at all. Pictures have to be taken seriously, taken on their own terms – more accurately, I suppose, Mitchell is asking ‘what do pictures need?’ (or ‘how do we need to think about pictures?’). Similarly with James Elkins’ provocative title, The Object Stares Back (1996). What could this possibly mean? The quotation I began with suggests a literal reading of this – objects actually looking (back) at us. Or this:

And objects do have eyes. The knife sees me: it gleams from the tabletop and says, ‘Pick me up.’ As in Alice in Wonderland, food seems to speak. A cookie looks at me with its single eye and whispers, ‘Eat me.’ And ultimately, objects all say one thing: ‘Look at me.’ (p. 72)

But as with Mitchell, the arresting rhetoric is merely that – Elkins is no more arguing for reinstating animism than Mitchell or Holly. The suggestion that ‘the object returns the look’ (p. 70) is a way of saying that our seeing is always motivated by desire: that our (visual) engagement with the material world is always invested with meaning – meaning produced by us, but ‘discovered’ in objects and paintings. The ‘speaking’ and the ‘seeing/staring back’ are the effect of an affective relationship with the object in question. (They also describe well the phenomenological experience of the visual encounter, in which the object appears to address us.)

So, again, the power of images, in these varied but related accounts by art historians, is a power that is socially and culturally (and psychologically) given to them. The language of animism, mobilized to confrontational effect, to jolt us into abandoning our bad positivistic habits, is a metaphoric language. As Mitchell (2005: 46) points out, the idea of pictures as animated
is really a ‘constitutive fiction’, employed to urge us to take them seriously. Moreover, for these authors, the insistence on the autonomy of the image and on the complexities of our engagement with images is not an argument to abandon theories of representation, or indeed social–cultural theory more generally. Michael Holly’s (1996) argument, as pointed out earlier, is firmly grounded in post-structuralist theory. Mitchell (2005: 46) is clear that ‘what pictures want certainly does not eliminate the interpretation of signs.’

For others, though, a more unequivocal turn to immediacy (that is, a view of experience unmediated by culture or language) is in play. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s (2004: xiv–xv) insistence on the presence which characterizes encounters with cultural objects (his own field is literary studies) privileges a kind of experience that escapes interpretation and analysis altogether:

This book seeks to make a pledge against the tendency in contemporary culture to abandon and even forget the possibility of a presence-based relationship to the world. More specifically: to make a pledge against the systematic bracketing of presence, and against the uncontested centrality of interpretation, in the academic disciplines that we call ‘the humanities and the arts’.

For him, attributing meaning to a thing means that ‘we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and our senses’ (p. xiv). This impact – what he calls ‘presence’ – is non-hermeneutic and unmediated. It is based on a Heideggerian notion of Being which, according to Gumbrecht, ‘refers to the things of the world before they become part of a culture’ (p. 70). More in accordance with a medieval than a modern worldview (p. 79), in ‘presence cultures’ ‘the things of the world, on top of their material being, have an inherent meaning (not just a meaning conveyed to them through interpretation)’ (p. 80). This anti-hermeneutic approach is intended to supplement, not to replace, the hermeneutic – Gumbrecht says that his book is not ‘against interpretation’ (p. 2). His argument is that hermeneutic (and semiotic, analytic) approaches cannot do justice to aesthetic experience. Aesthetics and cultural theory therefore need to retain the tension between presence and meaning (p. 110). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘presence’ introduces something more radical here, going beyond the new hermeneutics of Mitchell, Elkins and Holly. It provides the theoretical (ontological) support for those who, like Susan Sontag (1969 [1964]: 19) in an influential article pre-dating this debate by more than 30 years, believe that ‘interpretation … violates art.’ Crucially, from the point of view of my interests here, it foregrounds an experience that escapes language, discourse and interpretation. The ‘power’ of images (literary texts, other cultural objects) is beyond the reach of analytic strategies; its terms of comprehension are epiphany, presentification, deixis (Gumbrecht, 2004: 95).

We find a similar urge to subvert decades of critical theory (not to mention more than two centuries of Enlightenment thought) in the recent work of historian Frank Ankersmit, which also counterposes experience to theory
and the text, seeking to ‘restore to thinking about history and history writing something of the warmth of the human heart and of what has a resonance in the depths of our souls’ (Ankersmit, 2005: 11). He sees language as the ‘mortal enemy’ of experience, as a shield preventing contact with the world, and aims to rehabilitate experience as a central category of historical consciousness. Here the ontological (Heideggerian) element is absent and one could envisage the historian incorporating the experiential into ‘normal’ historical methods, as, for example, oral historians have always done. But the hostility to language suggests again the possibility of a certain unmediated experience, to be captured by special means. And, to return to the domain of art history, invocation of the immediate is Georges Didi-Hubermann’s project, in the exploration of moments of fracture in paintings and the privileging of the phenomenological in relation to the semiotic (Didi-Hubermann, 1989, 2005). Art history’s commitment to description and analysis fails, he says, when we are confronted with the visual element that resists incorporation – for example, a patch of white paint in a Brueghel painting or a burst of colour in the foreground of Vermeer’s ‘The Lacemaker’, inexplicable in mimetic or representational terms (Didi-Hubermann, 1989: 141, 150–9). Such ‘representational voids’ (p. 156) – unlike details, which may be iconographical attributes and hence part of the ‘story’ – have a tendency to problematize the work itself, and render the phenomenological field as essential as the semiological (p. 161). He summarizes the point thus: ‘The patch could therefore be defined as that part of a painting which ostensibly interrupts, here or there, the continuity of the representational system of the picture’ (p. 164). Elsewhere he explores the effect of a patch of white in Fra Angelico’s ‘Annunciation’ in the Monastery of San Marco, suggesting that this incomplete, or meaningless, section of the fresco ‘reaches its spectator by other paths’ than the representational – an effect he calls ‘the “whack” of white’ (Didi-Huberman, 2005: 17). Again, it is a question of the phenomenology of the gaze, which here encounters something that presents itself ‘without describing or representing’ (p. 25). It is a moment in which we move ‘into the realm of an iconology that is singularly weakened: deprived of a code, delivered up to associations’ (p. 27). Didi-Huberman refers to this is as the rift between the visible and the visual (p. 27); it is the latter which refuses integration into ‘the conventional schema of mastery of the visible’, belonging in the realm of the ‘phenomenology of gazes and touches’ (p. 30).

The authors discussed so far move beyond critical theory to address aspects of culture that analytic approaches cannot account for – the phenomenological encounter, the resistance of ‘the visual’ to interpretation, the ways in which works of art seem to address us directly. As we have seen, these theories may be more or less compatible with (or supplementary to) hermeneutic methods, though often they propose an immediacy of experience that escapes language and interpretation entirely. In their collective move away from a long-standing commitment to analytic methods, based on
a social–historical understanding of systems of representation, they participate in a larger trend in contemporary theory. We are seeing a variety of interventions whose effect is to displace a subject-centred humanist art history and cultural studies focused on meaning and interpretation. The kinds of ‘immediacy’ discovered, variously, in some power-of-images discourse, in theories of embodied experience and of affect, and in neuroaesthetics cannot be accounted for in the usual frameworks of cultural theory. Indeed, that is the point – the perceived inadequacies of cultural theory to account for aesthetic experience in particular (and human experience more generally). Theories of the ‘post-human’ emphasize the artificial separation of the human and the non-human (animal, nature, technology), whether because of advances in technology that render the separation increasingly difficult to sustain, or because the separation is itself seen as an error of modernist thinking (Latour, 1993; Spinks, 2001). Accounts of the materiality of social life, including the agency of objects and actor networks, similarly shift the focus away from a humanist social science (for example, Miller, 2005; Oppenheim, 2007). Work in cognitive science is employed to suggest operations of consciousness that have little to do with ‘meaning’ in the usual sense (Changeux, 1994; Stafford, 2007; Turner, 2002). And theories of affect stress aspects of behaviour, including aesthetic response, usually ignored by cultural theory – affect understood either as emotion (Ahmed, 2004; Bennett, 2005; Thompson, 2009) or (here linked to neuroscience or theories of the post-human) as ‘biomediated’ (Clough, 2007, 2008; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Thrift, 2004). In all cases, human agency is re-figured in terms that go beyond/before conscious thought (and beyond/before the unconscious too, understood in classic psychoanalytic terms). The corollary of this is that cultural theory is dealing with material that ‘precedes and exceeds the signifying regime of ideological systems’ (Spinks, 2001: 23, emphases in original), and that the usual strategies (social–historical, interpretative) have to be supplemented or even replaced. (In this, the new post-humanism goes much further than an earlier version, whose achievement was to manifest the subject as de-centred. The anti-humanism of post-structuralist theory did not propose the post-human, but retained the human subject, in all its complex psychic and ideological formation, as its referent.)

I think there are three reasons for the perceived impasse in cultural theory that have opened the way for the appeal of new sciences and for the seductions of immediacy. Most obviously, the emotional and affective aspects of personal and social life have been entirely ignored or marginalized in critical theory, including theories of culture and aesthetics. Something absolutely central to the experiential nature of the aesthetic encounter has been quite invisible – indeed, inaccessible – to the dominant theories and methods. So the turn to phenomenology and to theories of affect has been a necessary supplement and corrective, providing ways of addressing what Mitchell (2005: 76) calls the ‘surplus value’ of images. Secondly, critical theory and cultural studies have had a tendency to block the discourse(s) of aesthetics – that is, they have failed to provide languages equipped to consider questions of evaluation and taste, other than in sociological
terms (for instance, exploring the culture of taste-makers, arts institutions, critics etc. or studying audience/viewer/reader reception). Hence the turn to aesthetics and to debates about beauty in the past few years and the sense that theories of affect (or, for some, work in neuroscience) may be of assistance here. Finally, I would say that a misunderstanding of the normal operation of conceptual models has led some to embrace the notion that certain events, experiences and encounters somehow ‘escape’ language and meaning. That is, the sense that there is a ‘residue’, haunting the text or the discursive account, can seduce us into identifying a more mysterious, barely graspable element, in art or in other kinds of encounter. Very often, though, this is a mirage, the perception of something else entirely. The point is that any interpretative model or conceptual scheme, designed or adopted to illuminate certain features of the social or cultural scene, at the same time obscures others, leaving them invisible. So other meanings hover at the edges, sensed but not articulated, suggesting a certain ineffable presence. In fact, they may be perfectly graspable within the framework of a different conceptual scheme. It is in the nature of such schemes that they make visible some things and are blind to others. The non-discursive may simply be the not-yet-discursive, which new critical machineries may bring forward, just as feminist theory has illuminated what was hidden from the social and analytic gaze, or psychoanalytic criticism allowed new and subtle interpretations of the aesthetic encounter. (A current example is the coming-into-visibility of older women; see Wolff, 2010.)

The question is to what extent we have to give up on cultural studies – by which, again, I mean social–historical, critical, interpretative approaches to culture. It seems to me that a great deal of the new work under discussion here fits perfectly well into modified versions of the field. Not only that – I would argue that candidates for unmediated experience are rarely that. The affective (which we certainly need to be able to consider) is unlikely not to be mediated by biographical and cultural factors. Arguments for hard-wiring and for human universals, which would pre-empt such questions, have to date been either unconvincing or not particularly enlightening. For example, the turn to neuroscience in art history and aesthetics seems to me to have minimal pay-off, and even then it fails to persuade that the brain somehow eludes interpretative and experiential factors. Susan Leigh Foster, like others in the field of dance studies, has suggested that we can understand audiences’ response to watching dance in terms of the empathy engendered by the firing of mirror neurons (Foster, 2008; see also the AHRC project, ‘Watching Dance’, 2008). This kinaesthetic empathy, detected in those watching the bodily movement of others, is grounded in processes discovered by neuroscience:

These neurons fire when the subject performs an action, and they also fire when the subject sees the action being performed. Thus as we watch someone moving, motor circuits in the brain are activated
that do not necessarily result in visible movement, but nonetheless rehearse that movement … The viewer, watching a dance, is literally dancing along. (Foster, 2008: 54–5)

But although it is interesting to learn the physiological coordinates of felt emotions, or (though this is not necessarily what it claimed or demonstrated) of aesthetic appeal, what does this add to critical dance studies? I suppose a universalist claim about responses to perceived motion would be something we would need to take into account, but in the absence of any such evidence it seems clear that the responses (with their manifestations in brain chemistry) are no less socially or experientially grounded than we assumed. Indeed, Foster acknowledges that the behaviour of mirror neurons is not a given: ‘scientists have found that viewers trained in a specific form of dance will “dance” along more intensively with that form than with a form they do not know’ (p. 55). This seems intuitively right and probably accords with experience for many of us (dance-trained and otherwise). What it means is that the study of dance audiences is still dependent on socio–historical and interpretative methods of analysis (and Foster is certainly not arguing against this). I suspect that, for other scholars, more imperialist claims are made for cognitive science (that is, that aesthetic and other experiences may be entirely explained in terms of neural events): I have not read widely enough in the field to review such claims. I cannot really see that we are better off knowing about kinaesthetic empathy and its manifestations in the brain. The contribution here is mostly by way of supplement, in the demonstration of how a certain type of engagement can be seen in action in (for instance) a brain scan. And by the time these ideas are translated into the field of art history, the reward is even less impressive. For example, David Freedberg claims that viewing a painting of a dance – Rubens’ ‘Peasant Dance’ – mobilizes those mirror neurons, ‘explaining’ the emotions that art inspires.

As we learn more about the biological basis of empathy and emotion … we can stop talking vaguely as we art historians habitually do of corporeal involvement with paintings and sculpture. Instead, we can speak quite precisely about the neuronal basis of the empathetic feelings in our bones, or in our veins, when we see a particularly striking movement in a picture. (Freedberg, 2008; see also Freedberg and Gallese, 2007)

Not only is this further removed from an account of the art object and its viewer (it is the representation of a dance which is at issue, where at least for Foster it is the dancing body itself, the actual subject of dance studies); it seems a very limited kind of art history that is reduced to looking for images of bodily states in order to find a basis for supposed neuronal responses. A book-length study by John Onians (2007), another recent art-history convert to neuroscience, claiming an extensive list of precursors in ‘neuroarthistory’ (Aristotle, Montesquieu, Kant, Marx, Ruskin, Riegl, Gombrich and more), succeeds only in rendering the project both extremely vague and rather
incredible. (For a devastating critique of attempts to apply neuroscience to literature, demonstrating the limits of neuroscientific knowledge with regard to human experience, the ignorant and cavalier applications of its most basic ideas to the arts, and the inexplicable willingness to ignore crucial issues of context, see Tallis, 2008.)

Neuroaesthetics may be at the more extreme end of anti-hermeneutic interventions, but it shares with certain theories of affect, of presence, of the agency of objects and of the materiality and sensual nature of experience, a susceptibility to the lure of the immediate. This is based on the conviction that aspects of experience escape language and signification. Norman Bryson, like Freedberg and Onians a long-established art historian newly persuaded by the promise of neuroscience, is clear about this characteristic of objects we encounter:

While each artefact may carry a meaning or meanings that belong to the order of cultural symbols, the artefact cannot be derived from these alone. It comes into being through the interaction of a welter of factors that lie beyond the symbolic register. (Bryson, 2003: 4, emphases in original)

It is this postulation of a mysterious quality, variously found by authors in the opacity of an image, the resistance of a text to assimilation into an interpretative scheme, the felt immediacy of sensual experience, or the intensity of an emotional response to an art work, that I want to challenge. To do this, I’ll start by itemizing, and endorsing, a number of transformations of traditional, text-based, interpretative-critical theory:

1. The visual (and other sensory) aspects of social life must be acknowledged and accounted for in cultural studies/anthropology/sociology, as must the fundamentally embodied nature of all experience. To say this is not to describe something that escapes culture. As David Howes (2005: 3) has put it: ‘The human sensorium … never exists in a natural state. Human are social beings, and just as human nature is itself a product of culture, so is the human sensorium.’

2. The particular characteristics of visual texts and objects must be respected – their specific ‘visuality’ understood and analysed. This visuality, however, does not need to be construed as a strange ‘opacity’, refusing analysis. Nor does the discovery of certain unassimilated sections of a painting. Keith Moxey (2009) has recently made one of the most persuasive cases for this, with regard to some of Brueghel’s paintings. The analysis of the works is subtle and compelling, and the moment of fracture nicely described. And yet I remain unpersuaded that the failures of the ‘reality effect’ (the result of unassimilated moments) and the incomplete project of ekphrasis (the ability to describe the scene
fully) commit us to a notion of ‘presence’ or unmediated experience (see also Moxey, 2008).

3. Images (and objects) often have a ‘power’ in personal and social life, which means they are deferred to, they are prized/abhorred/fearred and so on. This power is culturally, or personally, accorded to them – it does not inhere in them. As Hilary Mantel (2009: 25) has put it, writing about a ‘charmed’ bracelet she once owned: ‘when we are in a situation of threat … it’s natural, if irrational, to use some object to polarise our fears … we endow the object with the power that’s really our own.’

4. The objects we interact with in everyday life are not simply inert, passive, background things; they have meanings, histories, an active role in social encounters. This does not mean they are animated, or have intentions.

5. In 21st-century Western culture, the advances of technology, medical science and information sciences have brought radical modifications of what humans can do, often in close association with these technologies. The boundary between human and non-human is not confused or blurred as a result of this.

6. Cultural studies/art history/anthropology/sociology must take account of the affective and emotive aspects of everyday life – something ignored by critical theory until recently. We have no reason to assume that affect is in some sense ‘pure’ (separate from/prior to our lifetime experience, or the context of its effect), or that it cannot in principle be captured and described by both subject and observer.

I suppose we could add to this: (7) Brain scans may reveal physiological counterparts to processes of feeling and thinking.

The point is that none of this mandates a sociological/anthropological method privileging – or even featuring – non-discursive strategies to deal with elusive, pre-signifying events. (Pre-conscious perhaps – but that is what psychoanalysis is for.) The experiential sense of an unmediated encounter with (for instance) a painting does not mean either that the encounter is unmediated (simply that the subject is unaware of what is at work) or that the observer/ethnographer cannot mobilize analytic–discursive strategies to try to address the phenomenon. The fact that we cannot easily find words for an experience (including an emotional one) does not mean that it cannot be put into words – or even that it is not already informed by our (fundamentally linguistic) being. (I leave entirely out of this case discussions of ‘bare life’ or ‘creaturely life’, proposed by Giorgio Agamben, Eric Santner and others, noting only that a commitment to such notions would certainly mount a different objection to my line of argument – and also that I would probably feel compelled to figure out my own objection to these accounts.)

Visual studies, sensory anthropology and new theories of affect have without doubt changed the way in which we study cultures (and culture). In many
ways, it remains quite difficult to see exactly how we can go about the job – for instance, understanding the connection between affective and interpretative relationships to an object or a cultural text. My argument throughout has been that we need not be terrorized, or seduced, into conversations about such mysterious things as ‘presence’ or immediacy or speaking pictures or animated objects, or into a premature and mistaken abandonment of critical theory. If, as Norman Bryson (2003: 4) has suggested, theory has been impoverished by its containment in what he calls ‘an essentially clerical outlook that centers on the written text’, at the expense of feeling, emotion and sensation, the solution seems to me to be continue working on that theory, not to give up on it. To conclude with a suggestion of what this means, and coming back to the question of the power of images, I turn to Keith Moxey’s (2008) thoughtful exploration of the ‘iconic turn’ in visual studies. He sets out the ‘new fascination with the object’, characterizing the work of art historians in Germany, France and the United States:

Bored with the ‘linguistic turn’ and the idea that experience is mediated through the medium of language, many scholars are now convinced that we may sometimes have unmediated access to the world around us, that the subject/object distinction, so long a hallmark of the epistemological enterprise, is no longer valid. In the rush to make sense of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, our tendency in the past was to ignore and forget ‘presence’ in favour of ‘meaning’ ... Works of art are objects now regarded as more appropriately encountered than interpreted. (pp. 131–2)

Reviewing the arguments for presence, the power of objects and the encounter with the work that is not mediated by language, he takes seriously the arguments of Gumbrecht, Elkins, Mitchell and Didi-Huberman, as well as introducing to Anglophone art history the contributions to this debate of Gottfried Boehm, Hans Belting and Horst Bredekamp, all of whom propose a view of visual objects that ‘cannot be reduced to codes and signifying systems’ (p. 138). He goes on to contrast this work on the iconic presence of images with the interpretative model of visual studies and concludes that in fact the two approaches are compatible, each needing to be supplemented by the other. Crucially, this is possible because the supposed power of images is (as I have argued earlier) power we have given them.

Different though they appear to be, the ontological and semiotic perspectives on visual objects may in fact be reconcilable. The ways in which objects call to us, their animation, their apparent autonomy, stem only from their association with us. To insist on their ‘secondary’ agency, is not only a means of recognizing their independence but also their dependence on human culture. They may haunt us but their autonomy is relative. They cannot exist without the power with which we invest them. (p. 142)
So, for Moxey, the iconic turn – the emphasis on the actuality and visuality of the text – is valuable because it insists that we pay attention to how the text works. This means, for example, ‘analyses of media and form that add richness and texture to established forms of interpretation’ (p. 142). One could say that the risks of reductionism that accompany hermeneutic models are avoided by the insistence on (visual) textuality here.

And yet this is not quite enough for the case we need to make in response to theories of presence. The authors reviewed by Moxey surely mean a great deal more than that one should pay attention to formal qualities of a painting. There is often (though not always) an ontological dimension to the argument for presence (as we saw earlier in the case of Gumbrecht). In general, there is a clear investment in the notion of unmediated, pre- or non-symbolic experience. In treating respectfully discussions of ‘unmediated experience’ and the ‘animated status of images’, Moxey necessarily takes on the task of either accepting these terms or rejecting them. The fact that visual texts have (as of course they do) very specific characteristics that cannot be confined by interpretations, but that participate in evoking responses from viewers, is a rather weak version of the argument for presence. My own inclination is to take even further this dismantling of the new mysticism which increasingly seems to characterize work in cultural studies – to challenge head-on the belief in elements of culture or cultural experience that escape language and thereby resist socio-cultural analysis.

It does not exactly sum up the points I have tried to make here, but I end with a quotation from an article by E.H. Gombrich (1982 [1972]: 142–3). Acknowledging the power of the visual image to arouse emotions, he points out how limited this is in the absence of knowledge and context:

We should never be tempted to forget ... that ... context must be supported by prior expectations based on tradition. Where these links break, communication also breaks down. Some years ago there was a story in the papers to the effect that riots had broken out in an underdeveloped country because of rumours that human flesh was being sold in a store. The rumour was traced to food cans with a grinning boy on the label. Here it was a switch of context that caused the confusion. As a rule the picture of fruit, vegetable or meat on a food container does indicate its contents; if we do not draw the conclusion that the same applies to a picture of a human being on the container, it is because we rule out the possibility from the start.

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