

Preface to the second Italian edition (2009)

In the twenty years since the first publication of *The Power of Images* in English, the role of the body and the emotions has finally been reclaimed for the history of art. This has not, of course, been universally so, for the old Kantian, and Collingwoodean paradigms, in which desire, the body, and emotion were kept out of esthetics, still have their followers. Some remain powerful. But in general, the old kinds of formalism which kept body and emotion out of esthetic response have now yielded to a broader vision of the field.

I could not have predicted how swiftly some of the central topics of this book would be taken up again. Indeed, while it was still possible to give a reasonably representative selection of studies devoted to them in the Prefaces to the French and Polish editions of 1997 and 2007 respectively (reprinted below), the anthropology of response which I outlined in 1989 has now so entered the mainstream of art history and visual studies that it would be impossible to refer even to a fraction of such researches. The result has been that areas which seemed to me to have been neglected at the time (though never entirely, especially not by anthropologists and folklorists) have now been better studied than one could have hoped for even a few years ago. Subjects such as aniconism, ex-votos, wax images, pilgrimage and pilgrimage badges, popular Jesuit imagery, the vivification of dead images, mutilation, censorship, *damnatio memoriae*, and above all empathy, idolatry and iconoclasm have been investigated more widely and deeply than I could have imagined in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹ The subject of iconoclasm in particular has continued to grow and has become a central point of discussion and research in art history.²

Feminist studies were amongst the first to bring body and emotion back into the history of art and into visual studies more generally. In the wake of the initial publication of *The Power of Images*, it was sometimes remarked that I had not sufficiently attended to the problem of gendered representation and gendered responses; but this was implicit throughout the book, and explicit in several chapters. The irony with which I discussed male-oriented pornography seemed to have escaped many, as did my sustained expose of the inclination of traditional art history to assign emotional responses and their container, the gendered body.

But the main criticism of *The Power of Images* was that its analysis and discussion of seemingly recurrent behavioral phenomena implied a non-contextual approach to the history of images. Some critics maintained that I spoke of innate forms of behavior and that in so doing I neglected specific historical and other forms of contextual constraints on response. On the contrary; but no one seemed to be capable of acknowledging that context must always modify *something*: it cannot generate responses *ex nihilo*. Despite my frequent statements that my aim was not only to examine the productive effects of context, but also what it was that context was supposed to modulate, the charges continued. Few readers had heard of the notion of the top-down modulation of bottom-up responses (as if the latter did not exist at all).

At the time I was writing *The Power of Images*, anything that seemed to suggest the possibility of basic forms of human response (however capable of being modulated by context), or of what one might call the architectonics of the brain, was regarded as anathema. Such notions were viewed with suspicion by every variety of slack late-Marxism and by the many followers of Michel Foucault. There was an interesting irony

in the strength of many of the academic responses the book provoked, revealing an ignorance of Nietzsche's criticism of Kant's repression of the corporeal, and mirroring the denial that stands at the center of much of what I described. To say that the body is constrained (or liberated!) by context is a truism; to understand (rather than merely describe) how it is thus constrained is more complicated. The body has its reasons – and they are dialectical, not passive.

The *Power of Images* was an introduction to a history of the symptoms of psychological and visceral responses to images (in this sense it was Nietzschean rather than Kantian). It was not about the relations between how things looked and how people responded to them. This was the task that always seemed to me to lie ahead; but it was only in the course of the 1980s that the necessary tools for a finer understanding of the neural processes underlying psychological and bodily responses to art were finally being developed. Shortly after the book appeared, I became aware of the many ways in which the new cognitive neurosciences were beginning to make substantial advances both in the long-neglected area of the emotions and in that of embodied cognition. Both topics are of course central to *The Power of Images*. With the significant exception of the still too-often overlooked work of Peter Lang and his team in Florida³ the initial work in this area was not about real images, but rather about responses to the understanding and sight of others. Later on these researches extended significantly to understanding the actions, and then the implied actions, of others. They all took account of the embodied bases of response and perception.

I decided immediately that the abundant work in this area was of the highest relevance to the history of art. Even in the days before fMRI became widely available

for research, it was clear that newly developed brain scanning techniques allowed an enhanced understanding of the relationship between response and the functionality of areas and networks in the brain. Already in 1994, inspired by the work of Dan Dennett, I had begun exploring, in a series of unpublished lectures, the problem of whether Turing Machines could have feelings: in other words whether the possibility of defining areas of functional specificity in the brain precluded the subjective self and the capacity to feel emotions.

But it was the work of Antonio Damasio in those very years that suggested ways of reshaping the understanding of the relations between emotion and the body.⁴ I had long registered Nelson Goodman's important claim that the emotions function cognitively. Goodman's view, of course, was that art was fundamentally cognitive. Although it should be remembered that in *The Power of Images* I pointedly avoided any attempt either at defining art or at distinguishing between art and non-art, I also believed that a position such as Goodman's scanted the precognitive components of responses, both esthetic and otherwise. Damasio's brilliant analysis of the relationship between movement, embodiment and emotion took the discussion in a different direction, not just by insisting that emotion formed a significant part of cognition, but that it was always linked with the body and movement (as William James had proposed much earlier). It thus opened a new window on the old problem of empathy, and offered a secure neural account of long-standing phenomenological speculation – from Visscher and the young Wölfflin through Merleau Ponty and Michael Fried (to name only a few) – about the sense of physical engagement viewers often have with works of art.⁵ Moreover, Damasio's description of the "as-if body loop", the cortical circuit which

gives spectators the feeling that they are somehow engaged in the actions they see, even if they do not actually move themselves, seemed to me to offer a constructive way of thinking about a common – and commonly intuited – response: namely viewers' frequent sense that they are somehow involved in a picture or sculpture as if they were actually present in it, or in the scene it shows, or in the actions it betokens. This latter possibility enables the inclusion of abstract works in the body (and motor) paradigm as well.

The real breakthrough, however, came with the work on mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team in Parma in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first publication to bring the attention of mirror neurons to the world came in 1996, but it was only around 2000 that I became aware of just how significant they were for a fuller understanding of human responses to images.⁶ It was in that year that I resolved to set out in greater detail their implications for the history of art, for it was clear to me that the Parma group's account of mirror systems in humans offered a promising hypothesis for the felt simulation of the actions and emotions of others. Vittorio Gallese in particular wrote a series of articles in which he outlined the relevance of the mirror researches not only for action understanding, but also for social cognition. He proposed a connection, for example, between the embodied simulation of the actions of others and the ability to understand the intentions that lie behind those actions. Indeed, his lucid summary of the notion of embodied simulation itself emphasized the ways in which the felt imitation of others could be regarded precognitive and even preconceptual. He thus offered an important way of thinking about seemingly automatic and pre-conscious aspects of response that had previously only been described in vague and metaphysical terms. The

problem of how to describe the role of the seemingly automatic in emotional, visceral, and corporeal responses to images and art has become even more critical in the most recent researches, for example, on the cognitive modulation and regulation of emotional responses. It is true that while in many fields the significance of mirror neurons and mirror systems has been exaggerated, I believe that there is strong evidence that they play a critical role in visuomotor responses to images and in the ways in which sight is transformed not just into motor responses, but into tactile ones as well.⁷ While one may prefer to use the term “matching” rather than “mirroring” when it comes to the felt imitation of others, the work of Rizzolatti and his pupils laid the foundations for a better understanding of how the body shapes the mind, as Shaun Gallagher has put it in his brilliant 2005 book of this title.⁸

Marvelous historical research is now being carried out in areas of the history of art and images that were largely neglected only twenty years ago. As I noted above, it is probably impossible to keep up with it all. But it does seem to me that just as Ernst Gombrich, over fifty years ago, pointed to the importance of incorporating at least the principles of then-new theories of visual perception in the understanding of art,⁹ so too now art historians would do well to acknowledge (and perhaps even engage critically with) the kinds of current research that casts light on the role of emotion and the body in responses to visual representation in general, and to whatever it is that is regarded as art in particular. In addition to Damasio’s and Gallese and Rizzolatti’s important work in these domains, I think also of the important work of Milner and Goodale on vision, of Ramachandran on phantom limbs, of Jean Decety and Julie Grèzes on action imitation, intention and deceit, of Nancy Kanwisher on functional selectivity for responses to faces,

places, bodies and objects. Cognitive neuroscience involves a more specialized understanding of mathematics and chemistry than most art historians are likely to have, but this does not mean that work relevant to behavioral and emotional responses to what we see should be overlooked – even as we continue our examination of the historical evidence. Such a project may seem impossibly ambitious, and it may perhaps infringe the usual boundaries of scholarly convention, but it is worth undertaking.¹⁰ As I embark on the sequel to *The Power of Images* I am encouraged by the continuing interest – as evidenced by this reimpression of the long out of print of the Italian edition – in a book that was once (and perhaps in some quarters still is) regarded as beyond the art historical pale.

¹ Recent work on several of these topics, both major and minor, include – inter multos alios – Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*: Leiden: Brill 2004; Frederika Herman Jacobs, *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Miriam Schaub, Nicola Suthor, and Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ansteckung. Zur Körperlichkeit eines ästhetischen Prinzips*, Munich: Fink, 2005; Iris Wenderholm, *Bild und Berührung: Skulptur und Malerei auf dem Altar der italienischen Frührenaissance*. Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2006, but I emphasize that this is only a very small selection of some important books amongst a very large number of further ones. In addition to the works by Jean Wirth cited in the French preface, he also produced his important *L'image à l'époque romane*, Paris, Cerf, 1999, followed now by *L'image à l'époque gothique (1140-1280)*, Paris, Cerf, 2008); while of course the many works by Hans Belting related to these topics should certainly not be forgotten as thorough and stimulating additions to the kinds of recuperation anticipated by *The Power of Images* (amongst those not included in earlier prefaces perhaps the closest is *Das echte Bild. Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen*, München: C. H. Beck, 2005).

² Amongst important works (and collections) not mentioned in the earlier prefaces were inter multa alia, Christian Hecht, *Katholische Bildertheologie im Zeitalter von Gegenreformation und Barock. Studien zu Traktaten von Johannes Molanus, Gabriele Paleotti und anderen Autoren*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1995; Cecile Dupeux, Peter Jezler and Jean Wirth, *Bildersturm. Wahnsinn oder Gottes Wille*, Munich: Fink, 2000 (catalogue of an exhibition at the Bernisches Historisches Museum and the Musée de

l'Oeuvre in Strasbourg in 1999-2000); Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman, eds., *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Peter Blickle et al., eds., *Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder. Reformatorischer Bildersturm im Kontext der europäischen Geschichte*, Oldenbourg: Wissenschaftsverlag: 2002; Margaret Aston, "The Use of Images", in Richard Marks and Paul Williamson, eds., *Gothic Art for England 1400-1547*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum/New York: Abrams, 2004.

³ Lang's productivity was remarkable. In addition to his pioneering establishment of the IAPS database, see also articles – amongst very many others – such as Lang P.J. et al. (1993) Looking at Pictures: Affective, facial, visceral and behavioral reactions. *Psychophysiology* 30, 261-273; Lang, P. J. et al (1996) Processing emotional pictures: differential activation in primary visual cortex. *Neuroimage*, 3; and the work by him in and his long-time collaborator Margaret Bradley with another researcher of the emotions, R.D. Lane, eg. Lane, R.D. et al (1997), Neuroanatomical correlates of happiness, sadness and disgust, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 154: 926-933.

⁴ See, to begin with, his *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York: Avon, 1994 (including the major work he did along with his and his colleagues Hanna Damasio, Daniel Tranel, and Ralph Adolphs – who continues to work productively in this field – in the 1980s), as well as his subsequent *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt, 1999, and *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, New York: Harcourt, 2003. Of the many popular books in the field of neuroscience now available, Damasio's remain amongst the very finest (despite the much noted simplifications in his interpretations of Descartes and Spinoza).

⁵ For further references to (and a brief discussion of these phenomenological precursors, see David Freedberg, "Empathy, Motion and Emotion", in K. Herding and A. Krause Wahl, eds., *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen: Emotionen in Nahsicht*, Berlin: Driesen, 2007, pp. 17-51 (see also David Freedberg, "Empatia, movimento ed emozione", in: G. Lucignani and A. Pinotti, eds., *Immagini della Mente. Neuroscienze, arte, filosofia*, Milan: Cortina, 2007, pp. 13-68.

⁶ Though their significance was presciently noted not only by Damasio but also by Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Raison et Plaisir*,

⁷ The first major presentations of the mirror results were Rizzolatti, G., Fadiga, L. Fogassi, L, and Gallese, V. (1996) "Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions", *Cognitive Brain Research* 3: 131-141, and Gallese V, Fadiga L, Fogassi L, Rizzolatti G. (1996) "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex." *Brain* 119: 593-609; these were followed by works such as Gallese, V., Keysers, C., and Rizzolatti, G. (2004) "A unifying view of the basis of social cognition", *Trends in Cognitive Science* 8 (9): 396-403 on embodied simulation, and Keysers, C., Wicker, B., Gazzola, V., Anton, J.-L., Fogassi, L, and Gallese, V. (2004) "A touching sight: SII:PV activation during the observation and experience of touch", *Neuron* 42: 336-346 on tactile responses.

⁸ Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁹ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton: Bollingen, 1960 and many later editions.

¹⁰ Some of the possibilities in this domain have been realized by the practical work of the Art and Neuroscience project founded by me at the Italian Academy for Advanced studies in America in 2001, as well as by the productive writing and editorship of Andrea Pinotti of the Università di Milano for some years now, as evidenced by his *Estetica della pittura*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007, and Chiara Cappelletto, *Neuroestetica: L'arte del cervello*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008, as well as the books edited by him and others, including Andrea Pinotti and Giovanni Lucignani, *Immagini della mente. Neuroscienze, arte, filosofia*, Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2007

The brief outline by myself and Vittorio Gallese, Freedberg, D. and Gallese, V. 2007. "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience", *Trends in Cognitive Science*, May 2007, Vol. 11, No. 5, pp. 197-203 anticipates the work that I will present in much fuller form in my forthcoming book on the relationship between art and neuroscience.