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Abstract:

In recent years, neuroaesthetics has made its way into art history. Most notably, art historian David Freedberg and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese have promoted a theory based on the discovery of so-called mirror neurons. In brief, it has been shown that a mirror neuron fires an electrical signal both when a movement is performed by one's own body and when the same movement is observed in another body, in another individual. Gallese calls this circuit *embodied simulation*, and Freedberg, either alone or in collaboration with Gallese, has taken these results and simply identified this effect with empathy. Building on the theory of embodied simulation, Freedberg has generally contextualized artworks through a range of neuroscientific findings, including Antonio Damasio's *as-if body loop* and Paul Ekman's theory of linking basic emotions with specific facial expressions. Altogether, this paradigm can be called simulation theory.

Freedberg's resulting neuroaesthetic theory has some radical implications for the analysis and interpretation of artworks, even for the practice of art history itself. This article explores and challenges Freedberg's assumptions and arguments, which are sought to be refuted, partly by consulting phenomenology and the history of emotions. In particular, his peculiar concept of empathy is rejected, as it is limited to unconscious, pre-cognitive bodily automatism. The article examines his selection of artworks and finds that the scope of his theory makes it challenging to apply to modern and contemporary art. It also takes issue with Freedberg's atomistic style of analysis, where specific body segments, forms of gestures, and facial expressions, as well as motifs

FROM NEURONS TO EMOTIONS

The Pitfalls of Freedbergian Neuroaesthetics and the Promise of Emotional Art History

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of movement, are isolated from their compositional context and identified as the meaning and message of the image itself. Similarly, the article faults Freedberg's dependence on Paul Ekman's tautological attempts to locate a set of basic emotions in the face, not observed but predefined.

The article then moves on to first provide an account of the promising results generated by the intersection of art history and emotional history in recent decades. It subsequently uncovers how Freedberg ignores these recent findings and how the history of emotions challenges the neuroaesthetic perspective on emotions in artworks, at least in the form represented by Freedberg and Gallese.

The article goes on to discuss how Freedberg's theory fails to distinguish between art and reality or between art, kitsch, and propaganda. Avant-garde concepts like estrangement and shock are introduced to demonstrate that the application of Freedberg's approach—his peculiar concept of empathy—would lead to misinterpretations of the aesthetic message of avant-garde art.

Finally, the article argues that Freedberg's neuroaesthetics lacks aesthetic explanatory power and fundamentally deprives artworks of meaning. It also returns to his concept of empathy, which is challenged through both emotional-historical and neuroscientific approaches. Overall, the article concludes that while the emergence of emotions as objects of study in art history and aesthetics is a positive and promising correction to traditional ways of studying artworks, Freedberg's theory is of little assistance when explaining the occurrence and function of empathy and emotions in aesthetic phenomena.

Keywords: neuroaesthetics; David Freedberg; Vittorio Gallese; empathy; emotions; picture theory; image theory; simulation theory; embodied simulation; aesthetics

1. Introduction

From time to time, it happens that an exciting reorientation within a field occurs with the right intentions but the wrong methods. In the worst case, this deviation can lead to the loss of the field's own subject matter and its potentials, and the interest in understanding may imperceptibly shift toward an entirely different object than the one the study originally set out to investigate. This danger is particularly relevant when the boundaries between different disciplines are crossed without a clear mission direction. This article is about such a case, namely the entry of neuroscience into art history. Other aestheticians and art historians have already provided critiques of some aesthetic proclamations coming either from neuroscientists proper (Bundgaard 2015) or from art historians committed to the neuroaesthetic cause, such as John Onians (Rampley 2017 and 2021). My contribution to this critical exposition of neuroaesthetics focuses on a partnership spanning both disciplines – neuroscience and art history – consisting of Vittorio Gallese and David Freedberg. My aim is to formulate a critique and a corrective to the horizon of understanding and the conceptual framework concerning emotions in art introduced and propagated by this partnership over the past few decades. However, since it is Freedberg who asserts that art history needs to be reshaped in the image of neuroscience, and not the other way around, his agency naturally takes center stage in what follows.
So, in response to the welcome challenge issued by this journal, I still believe in the power of images, just not in the form attributed to them by Freedberg and Gallese. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate in the course of this article, the potential for art history lies elsewhere, namely in the research on emotions in art and the intersection between image theory and the history of emotions.

2. Freedberg's Project: Defining Empathy

In Freedberg's latest account of his neuroaesthetic research on the role of empathy in the experience of art, some considerations about boundary issues and methodology emerge midway. He writes:

> In this part, I want to suggest (1) that empathy is fundamentally a matter of bodily engagement; (2) that the use of the term be con-

> fined to empathetic engagement with the movements of others, or even with the implied movements of others – and not only be used in reference to their emotional condition or the stories they tell; (3) that even though empathy is not constitutive of art, the form of immersion it entails is often a critical preliminary stage in aesthetic judgment – and always an illustrative one (Freedberg 2017, 147).

He anticipates a number of expected objections:

> But why restrict the concept of empathy to the movements of the body or to the feeling of direct imitation of another person's movements? Not only because this specification provides a better sense of the frequent automaticity of responses to images, but because it also allows us a pragmatic refinement of the use of what has now become rather too loose a term. I argue for the constitutive role of movement in empathy both for the sake of analytic clarity and to distinguish the concept of empathy more clearly from other forms of deep emotional engagement with others (Freedberg 2017, 155-56).

By reducing empathy to a bodily interaction, Freedberg's definition deviates radically from mainstream scientific conceptions of empathy that go beyond neuroscience. For him, empathy is thus 1) always bodily and 2) always automatic.

3. Freedberg's Alignment in Empathy Scholarship

Where does Freedberg position himself within the vast and diverse field of empathy research? His bibliography provides a clue. It clearly orients itself toward neuroscience, with only a handful of names pointing in a different direction. Among them, only William James and Theodor Lipps belong to a philosophical and psychological tradition. Throughout the text, other figures like Robert Vischer, Eugène Véron, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht are mentioned, while there is no mention of philosophers such as Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, or Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance. This observation also holds true for Freedberg and Gallese's

2007 article, where Vischer, Lipps, and Merleau-Ponty appear, but not the intermediate cast of characters. The fact that Freedberg paradoxically selects a philosopher and phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, who did not write extensively on the issue of empathy, while bypassing the four philosophers and phenomenologists who wrote the most about empathy – and criticized Lipps – is not a coincidence.
Freedberg's text emphasizes a neuroscientific chain of reasoning but draws on psychology and art history for important complementary arguments. Just as Bernard Berenson and, especially, Aby Warburg are revered by Freedberg for their movement-oriented analytical style, other carefully chosen names appear where they suit the author's agenda. However, it is clear that all these names are selected for their ability to address the body, not for their definitions of empathy.

4. The Mirror Neuron Theory

The foundation of Freedberg's undertaking is the so-called mirror neuron theory, which has led its originator and most ardent proponent, Vittorio Gallese, toward a close collaboration with Freedberg, where they frequently confront questions about emotions and empathy in the borderland between neuroscience and aesthetics. The mirror neuron theory was the holy grail in several fields in the 1990s, but it has lost its novelty, and during the intervening period, it has come under increasing theoretical scrutiny. Criticisms of the theory do not question its reality or its operation but rather its applicability to areas traditionally centered around interpretive practices.
In short, it has been shown that a mirror neuron fires an electrical signal when a movement is performed by one's own body and when the same movement is observed in another body, in another individual. Mirror neurons were first discovered in the brains of macaques and are primarily located in the premotor cortex, the part of the brain used for planning and controlling movements. This mechanism is particularly noticeable in the imitation of grasping movements, but as Freedberg points out, the brain does not only react to the movements of others. Bodily suffering and torment are highlighted in Freedberg's examples, with his primary example being the experience of puncture wounds in reality and in images. Drawing on an article from 2004 by Christiaan Keysers et al. about the brain's reactions to touch, Freedberg claims (2017, 145) that

"Gallese and Christiaan Keyers clearly set out how the sight of puncture wounds in the bodies of others generates an automatic sense of bodily infraction in observers (Keysers et al., 2004)". However, Freedberg must have been mistaken, as the mentioned article does not address pain or the experience of wounds but rather simple touch. Thus, the article does not support his conclusion about the sight of puncture wounds, and Freedberg has not included it in his bibliography.
In an older article from 2007 by Freedberg and Gallese (2007a, 201), Keysers et al.'s findings are represented more accurately and linked to Antonio Damasio's theory of the "as-if body loop". According to Damasio, this loop activates when we imagine a situation that would normally trigger a specific emotion, such as fear at the sight of a dangerous animal. The same applies to imaginative representations of perilous moments, as found in artworks. The result is that we experience the bodily state that would typically accompany a given emotion in a simulated form that feels genuine. Lately, Damasio, who initially had only indications for his hypothesis, has argued that the mirror neuron theory is indeed the basis for the "as-if body loop" (Damasio and Damasio 2006, 20).

5. The Simulation Paradigm and the Question of Unified Science

When Freedberg supplements his argumentation for the mirror neuron theory and its significance, he does so by referring to theorists like Antonio Damasio, Alvin Goldman, and Paul Ekman, whose perspectives can be grouped under the umbrella of the so-called *simulation theory*. Common to these theorists are, firstly, an insistence that emotions are always tied to the body, secondly, an assertion that emotions are always automatically triggered, thirdly, a belief that emotions are finite and historically unchanging, and fourthly, a rejection of the idea that emotions can also have a cognitive dimension.
Along the way, Freedberg makes a classic error often seen in attempts to import theory from the hard sciences into the soft sciences, namely assuming that the natural sciences have the character of unified science, in contrast to the theoretical pluralism of the humanities. Reading Freedberg, one does not get any impression that the implications, scope, and extent of the mirror neuron theory are a matter of debate, despite notable critiques raised in recent years (Mondloch, 2016, 26n5).

Gregory Hickok (2008) finds that the mirror neuron theory lacks support for the postulate of inherent understanding of actions in simulation, while Shannon Spaulding (2012) rejects embodied simulation as a source of social cognition and a replacement for mindreading, just to mention two central objections. That Freedberg (2017, 144) indirectly concedes that this is a perspective he has chosen is evident in the phrase "the mirror theorists". Finally, it is not clear from Freedberg's position that, for instance, Damasio's model of the brain is just that – a model. Damasio's model, for example, is not compatible with Karl H. Pribram's equally influential model, and so on.

6. A Bodily Fixation: No Place for Modern Art

In their 2007 article, as mentioned, the author pair takes as a starting point the following works:

- Michelangelo, *Atlas Slave*, c. 1525-1530, marble, Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze
- Caravaggio, *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601-1602, oil on canvas, Potsdam, Schloss Sanssouci
- Francisco Goya, "Que hay que hacer mas?" (What more is there to do?), plate 33 from *Los Desastres de la Guerra (Disasters of War)*, aquatint print, 1810-1820
- Jackson Pollock, *Number 14: Gray*, 1948, enamel over gesso on paper, Yale University Gallery, The Katharine Ordway Collection
- Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* (Spatial Concept, Waiting), 1960, canvas, Tate Gallery, London

It did not go unnoticed that the selection of works was fixated on violence against the body (Casati and Pignocchi 2007). Nevertheless, Freedberg's choice of works a decade later appears to have the same character, as although the selection has been supplemented with Rogier van der Weyden, Matthias Grünewald, Michelangelo (now paintings), and Franz Kline, whose brushwork is claimed to trigger a sensorimotor response (Sbriscia-Foretti et al. 2013), the focal points remain the same, still leaning toward works that address injuries to the body or an imaginary body – wounds, cuts, lesions, and stigmata.

Freedberg's anthropocentric approach aligns poorly with the primary developmental paths in Western art in the latter half of the twentieth century, where abstract and conceptual art began to assert themselves,

Fig. 1. A new generation contemplates the mind and work of Jackson Pollock at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. Image courtesy of David Grossman / Alamy Stock Photo

as argued by Casati and Pignocchi (2007). In order to make everything fit, he must make even abstract and formal works human-like. When Freedberg subscribes to the simulation paradigm, it is, among other things, to bridge the historical gap between us and the artwork, which could be a stumbling block for his project. Thus, entirely ordinary cuts, holes, and the entire spectrum of abstract forms can become a springboard for the lawful triggering of empathy.

It is the irony of fate that Freedberg embarked on his career by, like many of his generation, rejecting not only Panofsky's iconological formal understanding but also his humanism. Hence Freedberg's (2017, 147, 171) ongoing exclusion of Kant and everything he represents. For where José Ortega y Gasset (1968) in 1925 announced humanity's expulsion from art, Freedberg seems to have made it his task to reintegrate man, now as a pure automaton, into art. Like many others before him – Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno – Freedberg turns to art to illustrate or solve a philosophical problem. However, Freedberg's preferred artists are not Van Gogh, Cézanne, or Picasso, but Van der Weyden, Michelangelo, and Caravaggio.

His examples of works such as Pollock (Fig. 1), Fontana, and Kline reveal the assumption that empathy can only find its way into modern ab-

stract art as bodily imprints: Pollock's drip painting are traces of his gestural circular strokes, Fontana's cuts in the canvas are traces of the knife's guidance by the hand, while Kline's brushstrokes are an expression of the hand's work, pure and simple. Interestingly, he does not mention Yves Klein's series of canvases where the paint is applied by nude women who rolled themselves over the surface. Hence, as Matthew Rampley (2017, 87) objects, by making gesture the touchstone for interaction with artworks across time and place, Freedberg's theory has "little to say about works, such as the paintings of Ingres, where gesture has been reduced to a minimum".

In encountering modern art, Freedberg's reductionist concept of bodily empathy ends up in a predictable dead end. Conversely, the situation is different for James Elkins (2001, 1-14), who has dedicated an entire chapter in his book *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* to the tears shed by viewers when faced with the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. Had Freedberg gone the other way around, taking stock of documented examples of an empathetic – or at least emotional – reaction from the audience, he would be better equipped to locate non-figurative art on the map of empathy. The rejection of Kantianism within art history has by no means been exclusive to Freedberg. But even though the departure from Kantianism and art phenomenology, which Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois (1997) took in their book *Formless: A User's Guide*, in many ways delves into the opposite trench, their book is far more compatible with the actual developmental history of modern art than Freedberg's attempt to chart "empathetic" abstraction. Ironically, their confrontation with an anthropocentric analytical interest highlights the pitfalls of an excessive focus on the human body as the solution to everything, which Freedberg represents, now in a positivistic variant.

Freedberg and Gallese's (2007a, 197) consistent focus remains tied to "one aspect of the effects of works of art, namely the felt effect of particular gestures involved in producing them". However, Freedberg actually anticipates the objection that as viewers, we cannot reconstruct Pollock's motives for movement (he does not mention that the mere hanging of the canvas gives a completely different viewing angle in relation to the body and thus an insurmountable distance from the work's conditions of creation). He insists that "one still feels compelled to move in the general direction of the perceived motion of the work" (Freedberg 2017, 157). Once

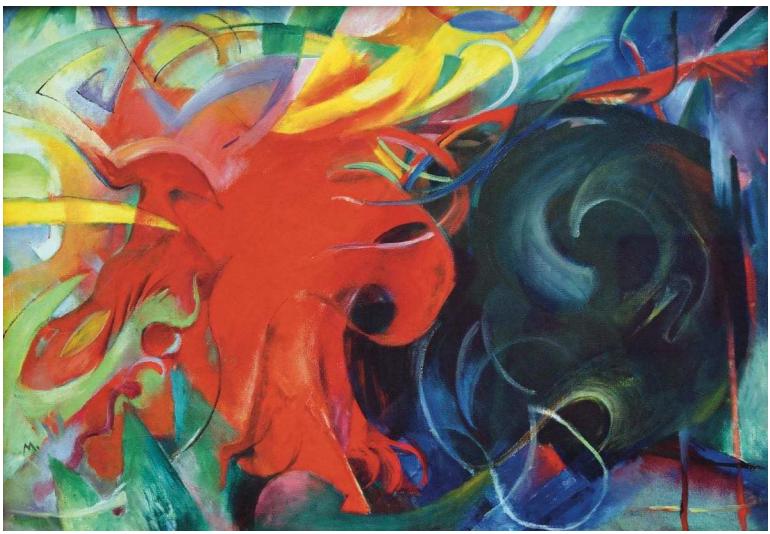

Fig. 2. Franz Marc, *Kämpfenden Formen* (*Fighting Forms*), 1914, oil on canvas, 91 × 131.5 cm, Pinakothek der Moderne, 076. Source: Flickr.
Photo courtesy of Allie Caulfield

again, he is led astray by his reductionism because, on the one hand, it is the case that viewers generally move a lot when perceiving artworks, and, on the other hand, a brand-new study (Kühnapfel et al. 2023) shows that viewers can be categorized into at least four different patterns of movement when encountering a painting, in this case by Franz Marc (Fig. 2). There is, therefore, *no prototypical viewer*, even in terms of movement.

7. An Atomistic Analytics

Since Freedberg never clearly positions himself within a specific methodological framework in art history, except for his dedication to Warburg (and anything with a hint of *Lebensphilosophie*) and a corresponding skepticism towards Panofsky and Gombrich, one must elicit his method by mapping his analytical style. As evident from all his contributions to reshaping art history in the image of neuroaesthetics, he is not concerned with the pictorial whole. In fact, he frequently equates isolated motifs of movement with the very content, message, rationale, or whatever we may call it, of the image. This can partly be a consequence of his theory being a corrective to what he views as the hegemonic cogni-

Fig. 3. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601–2, oil on canvas, 107 × 146 cm, Potsdam, Schloss Sanssouci, GK I 5438.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

tive mainstream within art history. Freedberg's practice of an atomizing analytical style is less problematic when it is directed toward modern works. Here, technique and materiality – the dripping of paint on canvas, the cut in the canvas – are to a great extent the defining features of the works, and indeed, an iconological approach would fall short in these cases. However, in the encounter with naturalistic, figurative art, the analytical approach proves to be extremely narrow, even misleading. In his latest article, Freedberg emphasizes Van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross*. He notes that the work is about compassion and locates the effect in a series of body postures, facial expressions, and gestures. But along with Grünewald's *Crucifixion* and Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, Van der Weyden's work is simply characterized as "a wide range of insults to the bodies of others" (Freedberg 2017, 146). In both his considerations, in 2007 and 2017, of Caravaggio's famous work (Fig. 3), Freedberg completely overlooks the point of the work (and the biblical passage). In the resurrected Christ, the wound has been reduced to a sign of past trials, and when the doubting Thomas puts his finger in the wound, it is to assure himself that it is indeed the dead Christ who

stands alive before him. Christ's suffering history here is only a marker for identification. Christ's wound is a sign, but because Freedberg (1989, 325, 338) has always, and most explicitly in *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, rejected the relevance of representation, temporality – that something has preceded – is also amputated.
The summary analyses, where individual motifs of movement are plucked from the whole, and where the rest of the image is not even mentioned, continue with Rubens' *The Fall of the Damned* and Michelangelo's *Expulsion from Paradise* in the Sistine Chapel (Freedberg 2017, 145, 149). Freedberg's (2017, 165-66) analysis of Pontormo's work in the Capponi Chapel fares better, as he at least comments on the color palette. His discussion of the shift "from absorption to inhibition, self-aware detachment, contemplation, and reflection" is interesting:

> When we see the *way* the picture is depicted, we become aware of ourselves as judging, assessing selves, as well, perhaps, of the fact that even our simulatory or imitative sense of their actions is an effect of the picture. At that moment we consider the other dimensions of this picture as well: formal, emotional, and compositional (Freedberg 2017, 166).

Where the early theorists of *Einfühlung*, especially Robert Vischer (1994, 102-4), described the affective-aesthetic engagement with an artwork (or other phenomenon) as a state of equal parts self-forgetfulness and meaning enrichment, Freedberg's proposal is quite different. The process indeed begins with absorption, but this spontaneous state is soon subdued by the frontal lobes to make room for the detached aesthetic judgment: "Freud, as so often, is fleshed out by neuroscience" (Freedberg 2017, 167).
The most ambitious aestheticians and art historians have always presented analysis and interpretation strategies that encompass both parts and the whole, moving from the simple to the complex, from isolated phenomena to a larger context. Whether Freedberg has similar ambitions cannot be definitively stated, but the image analyses he has so far presented within the framework of neuroaesthetics (interpretations seem to be left out of consideration) point in the opposite direction. Here, isolated observations of facial expressions, gestures, and posture are left helpless without contextual follow-up.

Aby Warburg's concept of the *Pathosformel* cannot be endorsed for this strategy, even though Freedberg (2017, 150-51) often traces the lineage of neuroaesthetics back to Warburg. First, Warburg did not launch the concept as an exhaustive interpretive model; second, it was always related to an ancient reception. As Rampley notes, Warburg's claim about images entailed that they would

> reawaken in the viewer the original emotional state that underlay their creation. … Yet Warburg never managed to resolve the fact that his own historical research contradicted his theoretical position, for he carefully documented the numerous instances in which such originary qualities were either missed or deliberately subverted or sublimated (Rampley 2017, 85).

Therefore, the *Pathosformel* concept was not detached from cultural conditioning, which Freedberg (2017, 151) feels compelled to acknowledge in the end ("The pathos-formula… is embedded in a long historical tradition").

8. How to Ignore the History of Emotions

The atomizing consciousness serves both Freedberg and art poorly, as seen in the following passage:

> These are gestures that occur across history and cultures, almost always with the same intent. One of the most frequent outward gestures of grief is throwing the arms up in the air, as can be seen in countless lamentations over the dead body of Christ. It finds expression in ancient and modern art. It is used so often to express extreme grief that it raises the question of a possible correlation between the particular gesture and the expression of that emotion (Freedberg 2017, 149).

The intention to link gesture, emotion, and meaning in one circuit characterized by regularity and repeatability through neuroaesthetics shines through here. Not only would emotions thereby take on the character of stable, unambiguous quantities embedded in a bodily grammar, but one could also eliminate any notion of representation and thus make

them immanent: feeling and imagination would become one. Again and again in his work, Freedberg makes it clear that his actual endeavor is not only to bridge the historical gap between the present and the past in specific cases but to completely neutralize historical contingency. But the project is bound to fail, and it already does so when Freedberg finds that a correlation might obtain between a particular gesture and a particular emotion. It is true that raised arms above the head are a well-known sign of grief, yet historical depictions and sources show that the same type of movement has had vastly different connotations depending on the time, place, and, most importantly, culture. Regarding the interpretation of this gesture in ancient art, Viktoria Räuchle writes the following:

> While it seems justified to interpret sudden gestures and agitated postures as visual codes for acute emotions, it is in most cases impossible to discern the exact emotion without taking into account the context. The notorious ambiguity of bodily *schêmata* can be demonstrated by the gesture of raised arms. … There is no clear-cut formula to link a certain way of raising the arms with a certain emotion. If it were not for composition and context, it would be difficult to differentiate between the excitement of the chariot race enthusiasts [Fig. 4], the ritualized grief of the mourners, or the desperate plea of Iphigenia [Fig. 5]. As Évelyne Prioux notes, one and the same *schêma* "can be used to render different emotions and its interpretation will depend on the context in which it appears" (Räuchle 2019, 86).

That Freedberg, in a roundabout way, uses the word "correlation" instead of, say, codification or convention, is telling. In one of his earliest contributions to a neuroaesthetic course correction, based on two lectures from 2004, Freedberg laments the division of roles between the historical disciplines and the natural sciences in the research of emotions:

> Given the vast amount of recent research dedicated to understanding the neural substrate of corporeal and emotional responses, it ought no longer to be possible to speak of the social construction of behavior in terms that are uninflected by attention to the anatomy, biology and chemistry of the human brain, or to its mechanisms, routes and deficits (Freedberg 2007, 17).

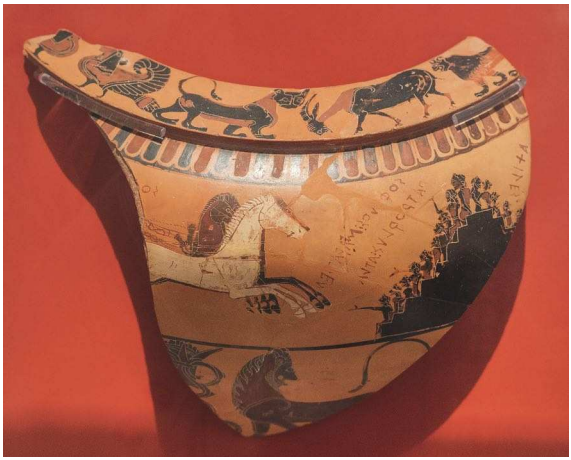

Fig. 4. Sophilos, *Funeral games for Patroclus: Attic bf. dinos*, 570–560 BCE.
Athens, National Museum, 15499. Source: Flickr. Photo courtesy of Dan Diffendale

Fig. 5. Fresco from the "House of the Tragic Poet" in Pompeii of Iphigeneia being led to sacrifice, 62–79 CE. Naples, National Archaeological Museum, 9112.
Source: Flickr. Photo courtesy of Darren Puttock

However, Freedberg's repeated exhortations to art historians to take neuroaesthetics seriously fall on deaf ears when one realizes how little interest Freedberg himself has shown in findings from the history of emotions. He sees a commonality in the understanding of emotions between the Italian polymath and architect Leon Battista Alberti and the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden, based solely on the fact that they lived in the same century:

> The point is that they were in the air for very good reasons indeed (and not just because they were fashionable). In empathy, history and context merge with biology and neurology. The reasons that such ideas were in the air in the 1430s were basically the same as they always are: they have to do with the inextricable relationship between vision, the body, and movement that lies at the roots of all forms of empathetic engagement with images (Freedberg 2017, 148).

The basis for this congeniality is supposed to be a famous quote from Alberti, which Freedberg likes to take under the wing of neuroaesthetics:

> The painting will move the soul of the beholder when the people painted there each clearly shows the movement of his own soul … we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. These movements of the soul are known from the movements of the body (Alberti 1972, 80).

But even if one were to take this alleged transfer of ideas across the Alps at face value, and even if one were to accept that Van der Weyden might have been on a pilgrimage to Italy around 1449-50 (1450 was a Jubilee year), about which we know nothing, the fact remains that Van der Weyden's painting style did not change one bit after the alleged return. If Van der Weyden had found the key to a new, more affective and realistic visual language, he would have had it from the beginning and would not have needed guidance from Alberti (who practiced many arts but not painting). Ironically, Freedberg thereby deprives Van der Weyden of his originality, which was otherwise noted by contemporary artists and intellectuals. Freedberg's nomadic use of Alberti's quote is symptomatic and not isolated. Socrates is also inscribed, as is Robert Vischer, whose

Fig. 6. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross*, c. 1435, oil on oak panel, 220 × 262 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, P002825. Source: Wikimedia Commons

project in all parameters is alien to Freedberg's, is seen as a precursor to neuroaesthetics (Freedberg 2007, 27; Freedberg 2017, 141, 160). And as mentioned initially, Freedberg frames a series of hand-picked theorists as evidence that the automatic bodily triggering of an empathic response has long been "in the air" as a potential idea.

Freedberg obviously needs the testimony of history more than he seems to be aware, for along the way, it is a recurring ambition for him to demonstrate that people in the past felt the same when encountering works of art as we do in the present. When the audience gathers in front of Van der Weyden's altarpiece at the Prado (Fig. 6), Freedberg (2017, 148) takes it as proof that "viewers continue to understand this work just as it was intended to be understood at his time". Along the way, Freedberg has made one of his typical, imperceptible conceptual shifts, as while he used to discuss certain localized motifs of movement, he now speaks about the understanding of the work as a holistic statement. In a way, Freedberg's undertaking should be seen as an attempt to ward off precisely the musealization and intellectualization of art, for he places his

trust in the transcendence of art on one and only one board, namely the direct somatic channel, which he sees neuroaesthetics as a guarantee for.

9. Emotional History and Art History: A Success Story

Fortunately, there is more promise in art history than Freedberg's theory suggests, and while Freedberg (2007, 21) has placed his trust in neuroaesthetics, which he claims to have cultivated since 1987, other art historians have successfully drawn inspiration from emotional history. In fact, it is within Freedberg's own field, the Renaissance, that this fruitful intersection between studies of emotions and studies of artworks has occurred. The late Walter S. Gibson (2006) focused on laughter in Pieter Bruegel's works, Nils Büttner (2015) has delved into the emotional life of Hieronymus Bosch based on available sources, Michael Schwartz (2016) has grappled with the masterpieces of Giotto and Piero della Francesca, while Dalia Judovitz (2016) has provided eye-opening reinterpretations of Georges de La Tour's visual orchestration of emotions, and Herman Roodenburg (2010) has focused on the concept of *beweeglijkheid* in Rembrandt and his circle. Moving forward in time, Michael Fried (2002) has, with a theoretical double movement, both situated Adolph Menzel in the era influenced by *Einfühlung* and granted *Einfühlung* a place in the history of emotions.

Finally, several groundbreaking special exhibitions in recent years have focused on either specific emotions, such as love, or on the expression of emotions, especially within genre painting. They largely constitute the vibrant corrective that Freedberg has called for, yet he does not mention them. This would not be the first time – not a single genre painting appears within the impressive 534 pages of *The Power of Images*. Even in Freedberg (1989, 338), everyday life is thus subjected to the torture of being written out of art history once again, probably because he (1996, 68, 77-78) considers all images to be fundamentally religious.

Michael Schwartz not only presents a new hypothesis about how emotions were conveyed in Medieval and Renaissance art – a topic I will return to shortly – but also launches an attack on the very idea that emotions are always localizable and can be attributed to specific bodies:

> Our ways of thinking about *affetti* in European painting may not do justice to the picturing of human emotions in late-medieval

Fig. 7. Giambattista della Porta, *De humana physiognomonia libri IIII* (1586), page 59. Image courtesy of The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

and early-Renaissance art on two counts: first, by our assumption that emotions are restricted to the individual; and second, that the depiction of emotions must be limited and confined to the signs of the body and to inferences about this body's interiority (Schwartz 2016, 69).

Fig. 8. Charles Le Brun, *La Colère (Choler)*, c. 1670, black chalk on paper, 200 × 250 mm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 28328. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The addressee is not Freedberg, who had not yet identified as a neuroaesthete at the time, but it might as well be. Schwartz's criticism is directed against a tradition of schematizing emotions and bringing them into lockstep with physiognomy – an endeavor that began with Giambattista della Porta (Fig. 7) and gained momentum with René Descartes and Charles Le Brun (Fig. 8):

> The second of the aforementioned assumptions, that emotions are "in" the subject, and at best find expression through the outward signs of the body, hence to the subject's objective status and limits, is by no means wrong but is too confining. It descends from the Cartesian ontology of mental/physical dualism and, with regard to pictorial *affetti*, received its defining *imprimatur* in Charles Le Brun's atomistic codification of the facial expression of the passions, a late-seventeenth-century rationalization of *affetti* that decontextualizes the situation in which emotions take place (Schwartz 2016, 70).

10. Losing Face when Taking Grimaces at Face Value

It comes as no surprise that Freedberg (2007, 18) not only includes Le Brun in his pantheon of inspirers but also Paul Ekman, who has taken up the thread from Le Brun with new means. In an influential study, Ekman claimed not only that there were only six (later seven) universal basic emotions for all humans across ethnicity and culture (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise + contempt), but he also believed that they could be unequivocally linked to specific facial expressions. Over time, Ekman has either mimicked these facial expressions himself or had actors imitate them. The fascination of finally clearing all doubt about the status, number, and definition of emotions has given Ekman's theory great appeal, and one of Freedberg's few disciples in the field of neuroaesthetics, Gary Schwartz, has his eyes on this potential. Where Freedberg links Alberti to Van der Weyden, Schwartz does the same with Houbraken and Ekman:

> [Arnold] Houbraken (1660-1719), comes up, off the cuff, with six of the seven basic emotions (only disgust is missing) discovered 250 years later by Ekman. One could cite this as evidence for the justice of Ekman's categories, as a native truth just as apparent to an eighteenth-century Dutch painter as a twentieth-century psychologist. One can also, however, wonder to what extent Ekman's definitions were guided by commonsensical and conventional ideas that were so much in the air that he breathed them in unawares, and then externalized them in scientific publications" (Schwartz 2019, 305)-

Thus, ironically, Ekman's own denial of human cultural transformative ability is turned against him with full force, thereby robbing him of any originality. There was something in the air once again, apparently, just like in the 1430s, and Schwartz's choice of words emphasizes that Ekman merely "discovered" emotions, as if they were a purely physiological phenomenon. To be fair, it should be noted that both Freedberg (in a note) and Schwartz do not omit to mention the criticism that has been raised against Ekman. Nevertheless, Schwartz (2019, 311) cannot help but try to tailor historical testimonies to Ekman's model, and in his concluding remarks, he hopes that "neuroscience may someday be able to produce an account of emotion that takes all these factors into consideration".
Presumably, Gary Schwartz will be sorely disappointed because the insights from the history of emotions, which have finally come into their own after standing in the shadow of neuroscientific attempts to schematize and universalize emotions as unchanging bodily expressions, point in a different direction. As the historian of emotions, Rob Boddice (2018, 120-21) points out the explanatory power of Ekman's experiments falls apart for two reasons: first, emotional expressions are performed by actors, thereby breaking the allegedly unchanging and unbreakable bond between emotion and expression, and the authenticity of emotions is lost. Second, the project is tautological at its core: a finite number of emotions is defined a priori, which the mimetic performance, using the face as a medium, must prove the existence of. Finally, Ekman treats the camera as if it were a truth-teller, while anyone with insight into visual culture will know that it is the opposite: photography is a representational medium on par with similar media with all that it entails. It is astonishing that Freedberg (2017, 152, 166) can, with one hand, refer to Jonathan Crary, one of the foremost theorists of visual culture, while, with the other, he consistently strives to break down the meaning of forms of representation by naturalizing perception.
Freedberg (2007, 21, 33) subscribes to both parts of Ekman's theory, namely, "that the emotions might indeed be classifiable", and "the correlations between particular emotions and their facial expression". But as Boddice (2018, 121) objects, the undertaking is stillborn, for a form of communication, which facial expressions can be said to constitute, cannot be experienced or studied as if it were a context-less, isolated laboratory phenomenon subjected to artificially ideal observation conditions. This insensitivity to how meaning is situationally ascribed to

Fig. 9. Giotto di Bondone, *Lamentation* (*The Mourning of Christ*), c. 1304–6, fresco, 200 × 185 cm, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. Source: Wikimedia Commons

gestures, facial expressions, and other bodily movements turns out to be a general problem in neuroaesthetics. When gainsaying the tenets of the mirror neuron theory, Rampley (2016, n.p.) references Gilbert Ryle (2009), from whose criticism of behaviorism it can be derived that "an observable behaviour may have one of many meanings and we might assume that each of the different *intended* meanings of the gesture is the expression of a distinct neuronal pathway".

As Michael Schwartz notes, the breakthroughs in Giotto's and Piero's respective artistic projects are linked to a collectivization of emotions, which are no longer distributed among stereotypical personifications. Instead, individualization (the expressions of Giotto's angels) (Fig. 9) and spatial extension (Piero's use of space as a focal point for different temporalities) play key roles in the distribution of emotions:

> Intensive individuation is not at stake here. Although these figures can be said to depict "persons", they are not so differentiated and individuated as to constitute well-contoured "personalities" – that is, they do not represent modern psychological subjects possessing singular interior depths. Instead, the generalized faces, stock poses and gestures create a common humanity amongst the figures, binding them into an additive-collective response of mourning" (Schwartz 2016, 76).

11. Art, Kitsch, or Propaganda? The Problem with "Response"

When Freedberg leaves his theory with no other defense than "aesthetic response", it ends up in a surprising place. As pointed out by Casati and Pignocchi (2007), Freedberg and Gallese themselves provide ammunition for undermining their theory. They focus on the following discussion:

> Several studies show that motor simulation can be induced in the brain when what is observed is the static graphic artifact that is produced by the action, such as a letter or a stroke. Knoblich et al. showed that the observation of a static graphic sign evokes a motor simulation of the gesture that is required to produce it (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, 202).

Not only does this explanatory model make it impossible to distinguish between banal and aesthetically significant examples of writing or signs, thereby rendering, for instance, Barbara Kruger's artistic use of text (often in a context of empathic communication) indistinguishable from an average email; it will generally not be possible to differentiate between real and imagined phenomena, as also pointed out by Casati and Pignocchi. Watching a wrestling match in a sports arena will activate motor simulation in the same way as if one were face to face with Michelangelo's *Atlas Slave* (Fig. 10). Reality and fiction become indistinguishable. Moreover, as Rampley protests, the neuroaesthetic position violates Arthur Danto's (1981) "argument that visibly indiscernible artworks may still have vastly different meanings, each of which would, according to the neurological argument, stimulate a distinct set of neurons" and Kendall L. Walton's (1970) claim that "one is never simply look-

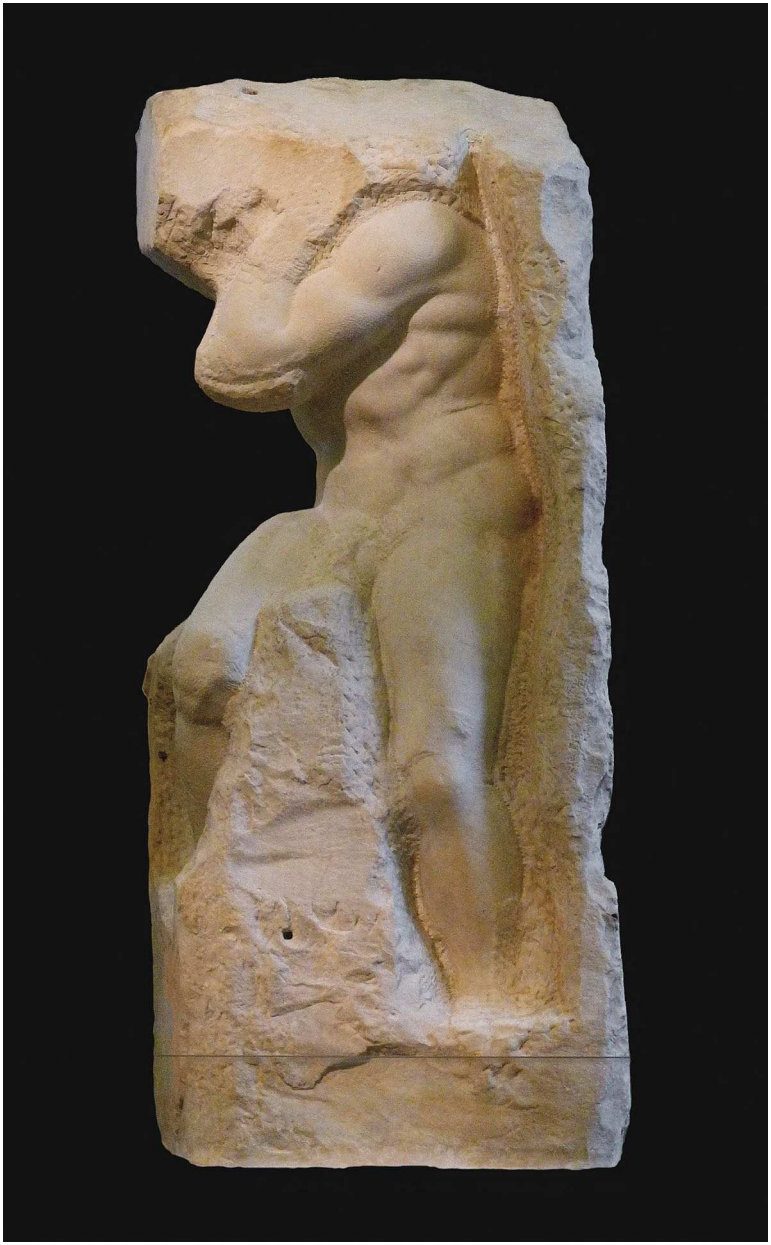

Fig. 10. Michelangelo Buonarotti, *Atlas Slave*, c. 1525–30, marble, height: 277 cm, Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze, Inv. Scult. n. 1080. Source: Wikimedia Commons

ing at an aesthetic artefact, but also making a decision about the *kind* of artefact it is, which involves reference to non-visible concepts" (Rampley 2016, n.p.). Despite a range of ambiguities in their theory, it is clear from Freedberg and Gallese's phrasings that the pre-conscious, pre-cognitive, and automatic simulation mechanism teleologically dictates the entire subsequent chain of perception, cognition, and aesthetic experience:

> some such sequence of processes (from absorption to inhibition, self-aware detachment, contemplation and reflection) is likely to occur, and that these processes are most clearly understandable, possibly entirely explicable, in neural terms (Freedberg 2017, 166).

Freedberg (2017, 151) mentions "the neural links between movement, the body, and the effective expression of emotion" and finds that "[t]hese links, annoyingly for many contemporary pundits, may well be predicated on precognitive factors that have nothing to do with the pressures of context and experience".
The only space left for aesthetics, according to Freedberg, rests with the artist, who is merely a medium for the supple imitation: "whether weaker or stronger will presumably have to do with the skill of the artist". "It is the achievement of a good painter or sculptor to have the measure of this, consciously or unconsciously" (Freedberg 2017, 145 – 46, 155). And:

> we suggested that artistic skill lies in the ways that artists more or less successfully make conscious and unconscious use of body knowledge to elicit the kinds of emotional and felt motoric responses we described in our paper (Freedberg and Gallese 2007b, 411).

The artist's latitude, therefore, lies in the effective – naturalistic? – representation of affective motifs of movement. There is a considerable amount of exaggeration of facial expressions and gestures in Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop Art (as well as in caricature) that Freedberg and Gallese could have aligned with this highly limited function of art. However, avant-garde art does not seem to interest them in the least. The same applies to contemporary art, which, despite its novel, excessive exploration of affect and its challenge to its representation (Bennett 2005, 22-25), does not seem to capture their attention.

But let us return to the problem of "response", which is a term that Freedberg does not consistently use – there is an imperceptible linguistic shift from "response" to "engagement" in several places. Whether consciously or not, this conceptual shift is not coincidental and reflects a crisis in meaning within his undertaking. "Response" can only be understood as an automatic, spontaneous, and unconscious reaction, which aligns with Freedberg and Gallese's view. Furthermore, as we have seen, all subsequent aesthetic experiences can be derived from this response, even when we do not physically mimic the observed movement, our brain simulates it. You can interpret as much as you want, but what Freedberg and Gallese term "aesthetic response" comes first and always forms itself automatically according to neural simulation mechanisms. If this sounds like both a model that poorly aligns with the actual development of art in the last century and a direct attack on the notion of the active and critical viewer, which has emerged in dialogue with modern art, it is not an unintended side effect of the theory but is explicitly intended. It is evident that Freedberg sees the role of the viewer as a source of error that must be eliminated to arrive at an art history in the image of scientific naturalism.

When Bertolt Brecht introduced his avant-garde concept of *Verfremdung* in 1936, it came with a rejection of what he called empathy theater, namely *Einfühlung*. Even though his presentation of the concept of *Einfühlung* occurred without due consideration of its actual definitions by nineteenth-century aestheticians, his intention – aesthetic alienation – was clearly different from Vischer's (Koss 2006, 152). Other well-known avant-garde concepts like Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and Walter Benjamin's *shock* went in the same direction and were equally observational and technical (Ezcurra 2012). However, even within less radical modernist currents that shared a more direct lineage with the aesthetic tradition, the ambition to promote a reflective and critical viewer was always present.

Bodily and motor responses can certainly be of interest in mapping the art experience, but when Freedberg elevates them to the origin and cause of the aesthetic experience itself, he legitimizes kitsch and propaganda (and other types of programmatic art) as rewarding aesthetic expressions. In such cases, responses and emotional contagion precisely overpower all other considerations, whether in the type of painting that forces the viewer to adopt a contrived sentimentality,

Fig. 11. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Une Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* (*Young Girl Weeping over Her Dead Bird*), 1765, oil on canvas, 53.3 × 46 cm (oval), National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, NG 435.
Image courtesy of photosublime / Alamy Stock Photo

as in Jean-Baptiste Greuze's prototypical *Young Girl Weeping over Her Dead Bird* (1765, National Galleries of Scotland) (Fig. 11), or in well-executed propaganda stunts such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935). None of these examples can be said to lack technical prowess. If one follows Lyons' classification, these types of artworks emerge when an artist deliberately aims "to generate a particular emotion or emotions in a viewer" (Lyons 1997, 143). The gradual rise of emotional impact as an end in itself, often at the expense of conventional narrative

or symbolic content, highlights an increasing awareness of emotions as a tool for the modern artist. However, such developments would go unnoticed if one were to rely solely on the Freedbergian hypothesis. The same can be said for the forms of address (or lack thereof) toward the beholder, as famously explored by Michael Fried (1980) in the context of French painting of *l'ancien règime*, where Greuze is credited with contributing considerably to an absorptive (yet expressive) transformation of painting.

Even if one adopts a more sympathetic stance toward sentimentalism, kitsch, and propaganda in art – all of which have undeniably shaped visual culture – Freedberg's model still fails to account for the distinct emotional impact and persuasiveness these art forms have on the beholder. It is easy to mock Kantian aesthetics, but Freedberg forgets that it has also made the modern, critical viewer possible. As mentioned earlier, when he conceptually oscillates imprecisely between "response" and "engagement" in the discussion of the same phenomenon, the aesthetic experience, the viewer sneaks into his theory as a stowaway.

12. A Theory without Meaning

Despite severe criticism from colleagues regarding the use of "response" in *The Power of Images* (Gombrich 1990), where Freedberg, among other things, trivializes famous history paintings and mythological statues in the name of desire and pornography, the concept has continued to accompany Freedberg like a deadweight. Stepping up one level of abstraction, the stumbling blocks for Freedberg and Gallese already begin with a fundamental, hubristic mistake that is unfortunately typical of much neuroaesthetics: they assume that their observations of the brain inherently hold meaning that extends into the humanistic field, including philosophical aesthetics. An observation of a mirror neuron or a motor imitation thus becomes a statement about aesthetic matters. However, as Sartre (2014, 13) rightly said, "emotion *does not exist*, considered as a physical phenomenon, for a body cannot be emotional, not being able to attribute a meaning to its own manifestations".

That Freedberg (2017, 172) speaks of understanding (and not just perception) in connection with unconscious simulation is clear:

> The possibility that gestures and emotions might be understood through embodied simulation suggests a form of translation not necessarily constrained by cultural bounds. You understand the emotions such movements entail because you have a body, not because you know the story (Freedberg 2017, 155).

The first casualty in neuroaesthetics is usually the imagination. It is sacrificed on the altar of automatism, and with the loss of imagination, the viewer's role in the reception of the artwork disappears as well. In Vischer's (1994, 114) work, imagination has a dedicated section, and he even talks about two different forms (*Vorstellungswille* and *Phantasiewille*). Imagination not only amalgamates the findings of perception into a unity, but also ensures that deviations from reality can still be accepted when they serve the purpose of art. Not only does Freedberg (2017, 172) exclude imagination from his investigation, but he also seems to believe that it is purely discursive and intellectual – something found in books and traditions. Imagination, one must understand, is not sensory – an idea that may come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the fantastical worlds of Bosch and Arcimboldo, the surrealism of Dalí and Oppenheim, the visionary seascapes and landscapes of Turner and O'Keeffe, or the immersive installations of Kusama and Kapoor, to name just a few notable counterexamples among countless others.

Whether a theory progresses from the general to the specific or vice versa, or positions itself at various points along the spectrum from ideographic to nomothetic, its conceptual framework usually becomes increasingly refined, and its explanatory power strengthens. With Freedberg's neuroaesthetics, it is the opposite, as simple arguments and interpretations, such as those with Freudian connotations in *The Power of Images* ("fear of the body", "fear of the lifelike", "fear of the possibility of arousal by image"), have merely received an updated theoretical packaging, rather than an expanded conceptual framework ("the fear that to embrace the findings of science might entail the surrender of context", "high rationalists, fearful of superstition and emotion", "the fear of evoking the body in the very processes of sight itself"). In comparison, William Lyons (1997, 143), using examples from the history of painting, identified seven ways in which emotions can be expressed in the chain from artist to artwork to viewer. Each of these points opens up inviting theoretical horizons, which art history is currently exploring.

13. Empathy?

What Freedberg (2017, 164) describes and designates as empathy is only empathy in a very narrow and peculiar definition, deviating from both the common understanding of empathy and that of philosophy. His reliance on Theodor Lipps explains the matter, as Dan Zahavi (2014, 131) has stressed that there is a direct line from Lipps to participants in today's simulation paradigm, including Gallese. In a nutshell, Lipps' theory gave rise to the notion of empathy as imitation (*Nachahmung*). In Lipps' framework, empathy is limited to experiences one has had in the past and involves a form of projection, which he calls *self-objectification*. The experience of empathy is the experience of one's own feelings in an objective form transferred to another person. The limitations of this definition quickly became apparent to Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, each of whom rejected aspects of Lipps' theory. As Stein pointed out, Lipps had described phenomena like motor imitation or emotional contagion, not empathy – for example, when laughter spreads from person to person. Empathy had a more complex psychological nature. According to Lipps' standards, we do not have access to another person's emotional life; instead, we simply reflect our own feelings onto the other.

Conversely, Lipps' critics view empathy as a form of experiencing others that lies between perception and imagination. The imitation model turns out to be neither sufficient nor necessary for the activation of empathy, and there are numerous shortcomings: Scheler argues that Lipps' model cannot distinguish between correct and incorrect readings of another person's mental state because it involves projection. Husserl points out that if we could only read feelings that we have experienced ourselves, it would place absurd limitations on empathic engagement. Scheler notes that we can read a dog's joy without being able to wag a tail ourselves, and bodily differences and impairments do not hinder the occurrence of empathy. Both Husserl and Stein acknowledge that givenness plays a role in empathy, meaning that we experience recognizable feelings, just not from a first-person perspective, but within the other person (Moran 2004, 130-33).

Freedberg (2017, 161-62) writes at one point that, in his definition, empathy is always only bodily, never discursive. However, in the example he provides, he goes further: In a meeting with a stranger, perhaps on a plane or a train, we hear a sad story, such as the loss of close family members:

> This is not empathy. This is not a matter of spontaneously feeling the pain of others, except in an entirely metaphorical sense. This is rooted in your past. It is based on anecdotes that involve appraisal, but not on automatic responses of the body (Freedberg 2017, 162).

Interestingly, Stein already discussed a similar situation back in 1917. She recounts that in interacting with another person who tells of the loss of loved ones, you can see the pain on their face. She claims that this is still a form of perception. Dan Zahavi (2014, 134) explains: "Why? Because although I certainly do lack a first-person experience of the distress – it is not given as my distress – it is nevertheless the case that I experience rather than imagine or infer my friend's distress". This stands in contrast to purely cognitive conveyances of emotions, such as if the same story were communicated in a letter.

Empathy, of course, requires a form of perception of another party, whether that party is a human or an animal. But, as Stein asserted long ago, empathy can arise from the combination of bodily and discursive input. Freedberg's adamant rejection of any form of two-way communication and perceptual complexity in the emergence of empathy indicates that he argues in bad faith to forcefully drive home a notion of empathy as a robotic response, not an equitable engagement.

Even without consulting the phenomenological tradition, it should have dawned on him that his concept of empathy was off the mark, for even results from his own field, neuroscience, point in a different direction. An experiment from 2012 showed that the degree of empathy varied with the subjects' current emotional state and level of attention. Additionally, psychopaths naturally possess mirror neurons, and the type of neurological empathy mechanisms that Freedberg and Gallese champion are even activated when subjects enjoy the experience of the pain of others (Boddice 2018, 129, 130). As a concept of empathy, Freedberg's proposal is not only inadequate (as Lipps' was), but also misleading.

Returning to the art historical context, we can also observe that any attempt to reactivate Lipps' explanatory model would be a dead end. When encountering an artwork that carries emotional content, we hardly ever experience the depicted emotions themselves but rather different ones. We can be surprised, feel uncomfortable, and experience sympathy when facing Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) (Fig. 12), but we do not take on the painter's anxious and desperate state of mind (Robin-

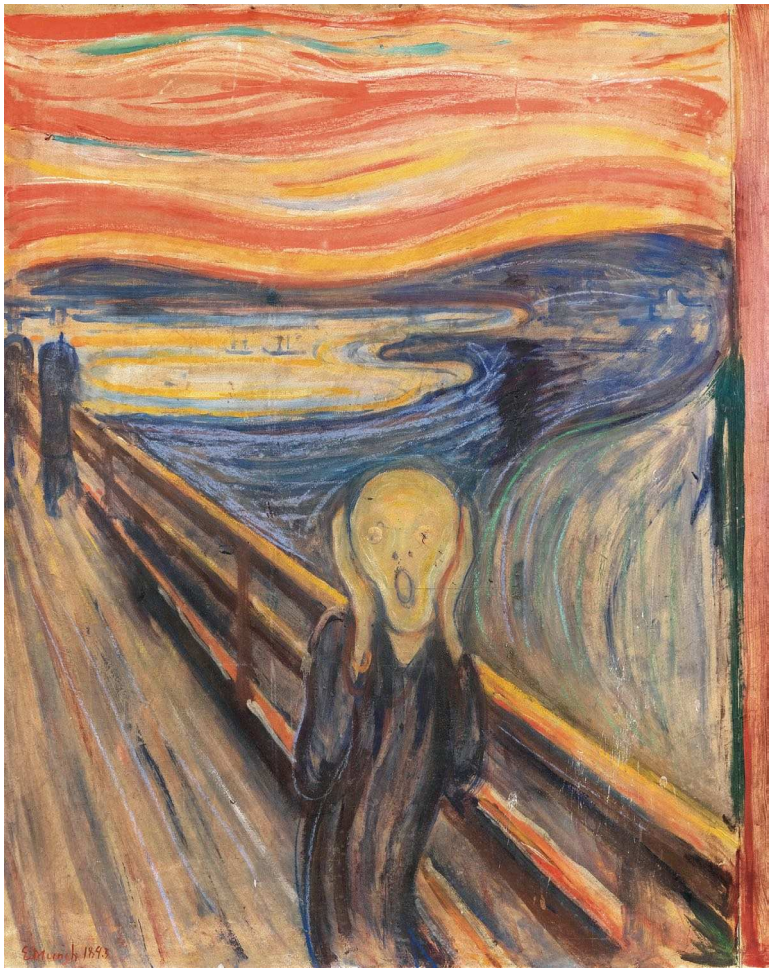

Fig. 12. Edvard Munch, *Skrik (The Scream),* 1893, oil, tempera, pastel, and crayon on cardboard, 73.5 × 91 cm, Nasjonalmuseum, Oslo, NG.M.00939.
Image courtesy of IanDagnall Computing / Alamy Stock Photo

son 2004, 180, 187). Upon seeing Jan Miense Molenaer's *The Five Senses: Touch* (1637), where a woman is giving a man a whack on the neck with a shoe (Fig. 13), we do not feel pain but rather laughter. The examples are numerous. The reason for this is twofold: we always understand that we are dealing with fiction (Walton 1990), and empathy is not an emotional duplicator but far more complex.

Fig. 13. Jan Miense Molenaer, *The Five Senses: Touch*, 1637, oil on panel, 19.6 × 24.4 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, 572. Source: Wikimedia Commons

14. Conclusion

While Freedberg's earliest forays into neuroaesthetics still came with certain reservations, his latest contributions take a more confident direction, declaring that, in encountering Rogier van der Weyden's work, we feel the same as a viewer in the fifteenth century (Freedberg 2007, 19; 2017, 148). In his article, he seeks to use neuroaesthetics as a magic potion that can dissolve historical distance, confirm the constancy of perception and emotion, and make the meaning of the artwork synonymous with its uniform creation and reception, so that the act of interpretation can be entirely dispensed with. In this endeavor, he finds himself aligned – consciously or not – with the 20th-century formalists who "sought to bypass all notions of cultural mediation in order to ground aesthetic response in raw perception" (Rampley 2017, 87). Yet Freedberg's insistence on gesture (or traces thereof) as the prerequisite for the transmission of what he terms "empathy" between artwork and beholder ends

up being an exclusionary mechanism that robs large parts of modern and contemporary artworks of their empathetic or affective appeal. This outcome does not exactly align with Freedberg's stated ambition of an art history transcending time and place, encompassing every thinkable artistic statement from cave paintings to the present day.

The path to this goal does not pass through a thorough delineation of the various stages of the perceptual and cognitive processes and their respective contributions to aesthetic experience, as in the aforementioned case of Robert Vischer. Instead, it takes an atomistic, myopic approach to image analysis, where motifs of bodily movement are isolated, and they are then paired with similarly isolated observations of brain activity. In his obsession with isolating motifs of bodily movement on the canvas or in the stone, Freedberg does violence to both the life-world of the artwork and its perception.

In the case of Van der Weyden's altarpiece, Freedberg (2017, 144) goes to great lengths to downplay the religious message of the ensemble so that empathy in a generic sense can emerge victorious as the main theme and function of the work. This seems to mark a revision of his hypothesis in *The Power of Images*, but that is beside the point. By all accounts, Freedberg seeks to achieve at least three things with this move: first, to relieve the beholder from the temptation to seek out background information on the artwork, thereby rendering both connoisseurship and scholarship irrelevant; second, to nullify Hegel's alleged "death of art" by stripping the religious component of an artwork of any significance; and, third, to undermine the importance of reception aesthetics for art appreciation. Naturally, the role left for art history in this scenario is greatly diminished compared to its current status. Moreover, Freedberg's framework overlooks any consideration of style – a factor that, despite its controversial reputation following the rise of New Art History, remains integral to aesthetic experience. For instance, how could one distinguish a Postmodern pastiche from its Baroque predecessor if not for the defining stylistic traits of each?

In light of the powerful title with which Freedberg made a name for himself in 1989, *The Power of Images*, he has ended up with a remarkably powerless proposition about what images can do. He has so little confidence in their power that they can only be understood as absolutely minimal and primitive signals that unconsciously impact the body. Not only are masterpieces in Freedberg's narrative explained as if they were

advertising or propaganda, but it also becomes inexplicable why people flock to art and its imagined reality when, according to neuroaesthetics, the world of reality and its movements can have the same effect on the brain. At the same time, a proper history of art, with all its distinctions and discrete concepts, becomes impossible – and this applies to both the old and the new contributions of art history. Freedberg's universalism is a Pyrrhic victory for art history, and above all, it offers no explanatory power:

> When scholars in the humanities bow down before certain influences from neurobiology but do not have the requisite experience or knowledge to challenge them, we end up with throwaway analyses that beg more questions than they provide answers (Boddice 2018, 117).

In comparison, the wide-ranging analyses inspired by W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005) famous question, "What do pictures want?" exhibit much more vigor and strength. Both Mitchell's faith in the power of images and the recent surge of emotional history in art history, as demonstrated by numerous studies – including my own – affirm that image theory is far from being poorly positioned in the present.

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