2. ART AND ATTUNEMENT

Why are we drawn to a certain painting or novel or piece of music while being unmoved by others that seem, on the face of it, not so very different? Can we do justice to what such a response feels like and why it matters—yet without overlooking the prompts and pressures (a college syllabus, an over-the-top review, a parent’s approving look or raised eyebrow) that incline us toward some works rather than others? Perhaps *attunement* will give us a fresh slant on such questions. To become attuned is to be drawn into a responsive relation—to experience an affinity that is impossible to ignore yet hard to categorize. Being attuned is not primarily an issue of representation, of the “aboutness” of the work of art, but its presence, in a sense that will need to be clarified.

Attunement is relevant to more than just art; we can be attuned—or not—to persons, a milieu, a style of thought, a way of life. Its salience for criticism lies in reopening questions that have been sidelined in recent years; art’s palpable force and vividness; how it can affect us in ways we struggle to verbalize or explain. And here I draw less on Heidegger or Cavell than on a remarkable essay by Zadie Smith, which I interweave with other accounts—both autobiographical and analytical—of expected or surprising affinities. Novels and music and paintings do things; they intervene in the world; they inspire and energize, seduce or repel. David Freedberg writes: “the picture is reality; it is not bad, or deceiving, or misleading, or even weak copy.” [[1]](#endnote-1) Art history has lost its way, Freedberg suggests, in placing all its bets on acts of historicizing, contextualizing, and criticizing. Amidst this flurry of activity, something quite fundamental is being lost; the presence and force of images. Why do critics turn away from the obvious, and at what cost?

Attunement is not a specific affect but a state of affectedness--denoting, as Erik Wallrup writes, the relations between persons and musical (or visual, or literary) worlds. [[2]](#endnote-2) It is not a feeling-about but a feeling-with: a relation that is more than the sum of its parts. In contrast to what we might call container theories of the emotions—a person having an inner feeling about an external object—attunement is about things resonating, aligning, coming together. Reading the opening lines of a novel, hearing a song on the radio, we may be gripped by the strength of a felt connection. At other times, we duly appreciate the skill or sophistication of a piece of art, but without feeling ourselves to be touched or moved. Why are we hooked in one case and not in another?

In addressing this question, James English distinguishes between two scales of aesthetic value: prestige and pleasure. At the end of the semester, he invites students in his survey classes to rank the works on the syllabus according to two sets of criteria: the greatest and their favorite (both categories are intentionally left undefined.) While the two lists are not complete inversions of each other, they often diverge: *Lord Jim* is ranked as the greatest but the least favorite, for example, while Ishiguro’s *Never Let me Go* rises to the top of the favorite list while being ranked as least great. English remarks that his students have no problem operating with different scales of value, differentiating between those works that afford them the most pleasure and those that are reputationally weighty or prestigious. And yet literary studies has paid little attention to these differences, assuming that education will cause them to vanish: students become good readers by learning to enjoy those works that are held to have the highest merit. [[3]](#endnote-3) This assumption is not entirely mistaken—education, as we’ll see, can be a process of coming to care for things one did not previously care for--and yet the differences between admiring a work and being affected by a work call for more attention.

Pleasure, however, may be too thin a word for my purposes. As I argued in the last chapter, we are drawn to certain works because they matter to us—a mattering that involves more than a hedonistic calculus. And while these ties, as English points out, are socially shaped, they are also varied and sometimes unpredictable —requiring close-up attention to both the response and the work*.* The language of “attunement” allows us to honor the distinctiveness of a novel, a film, a painting as well as the textures of response. Instead of an object being dissected by a critic, phenomena are resonating with each other. Something strikes a chord, or it doesn’t. (We are often *not* attuned, of course; if attunement implies an openness, a receptivity, we can tune out rather than tune in. There can be friction, awkwardness, a lack of fit.)

Referring, in its literal sense, to the act of tuning an instrument to create the appropriate pitch, attunement might seem especially suited to what Michael Gallope calls the “befuddling, vague, and untranslatable specificity” of musical experience. [[4]](#endnote-4) The philosophy of music has often claimed the ineffable as its own, in the writings of Adorno, Bloch, Jankelevitch, and others. Invocations of attunement and *Stimmung* orient us toward the non-semantic nature of music: what Gallope describes as its unique blend of sensory immediacy and formal coherence. These qualities have often inspired claims for music’s exceptional status: its difference from reading-as-interpretation as well as the distanced gaze that is trained upon images.And yet, as we’ll see, people can also be drawn to novels, paintings, or films in ways they find exceptionally hard to explain or articulate: finding themselves captivated by a singular mood or a contagious atmosphere. With regard to images, for example, W. J. T. Mitchell remarks that they possess magical qualities that do not disappear as we grow up, become modern, or acquire critical consciousness. [[5]](#endnote-5) All art, in this sense, has a non-interpretative aspect. Conversely, encounters with music are never entirely outside the ambit of language: what we happen to know about a singer or composer; liner notes on an album; a friend’s eloquent endorsement; memories of music lessons in elementary school. In this sense, as Nicholas Cooke remarks, all music is a form of multi-media.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In recent years, we’ve seen the emergence of a vibrant strand of post- or neo phenomenology in cultural criticism, architecture, geography, and other fields. Drawing on a philosophical language of mood and attunement, it offers a more concrete or historical spin. Sara Ahmed, for example, weaves phenomenology and queer theory together in illuminating ways to elucidate the politics of orientation, alignment, and habituation. And there is Steven Connor’s rallying call for a “cultural phenomenology” that is geared to mundane realities and rituals: table manners; doing the laundry, humming along to the radio. My own thinking runs along roughly similar lines. The wager of this chapter is that the fuzzy word clouds of phenomenology—its language of attunement and affinity, mood and world—can be blended with the empirical, thing-oriented, trail-sniffing emphases of ANT—and that this mash-up can enrich our understanding of what art does and why it matters. [[7]](#endnote-7)

While on vacation in Konstanz several years ago, I idly pick up a paperback with a dark blue and yellow cover in an English language bookstore. I’ve appreciated most of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels without really being affected by them, but this particular title—*The Unconsoled*— is not familiar to me. Reading the opening lines, I find myself drawn, abruptly and without recourse, into a maze-like narrative set in an unnamed central European city. A concert pianist named Ryder has arrived to perform a major concert; yet finds himself oddly paralyzed, sapped of will, all his attempts at rehearsal or preparation coming to naught. We are squarely in Kafka territory—diffuse anxiety, strange portents, conversations at cross purposes, enigmatic or eccentric figures appearing out of nowhere against a Habsburg backdrop—though the novel also brings to mind the writings of the Swiss recluse Robert Walser. As Ryder takes the elevator up to his hotel room, the porter’s fussy-pedantic monologue on his personal rules of service—a good porter will never put down a guest’s bags, not even for a moment!—could easily be an outake from Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten,* with its strange school for servants and hymns to subservience. But how could this meandering speech--extending over five pages—be spoken during an elevator ride that could only last a few seconds? And how, during all this time, can Ryder have failed to notice the young woman pressed into the elevator’s corner?

I give myself up completely to *The Unconsoled*: its warping of time and space, its pointless encounters and bungled rendezvous, make perfect intuitive sense. “Aboutness” is not entirely irrelevant to my reading experience—literature cannot help but represent—but the novel’s draw has much to do with its stylistic conjuring of a certain mood. A sense of low-grade anxiety hovers over a restrained, even stately prose; an oddly alluring flatness of tone is garnished with fillips of foreboding and unease. I cannot *not* read until the book is done, at which point I switch on my laptop, eager to find my fascination validated, to find out that others have admired what I admire. My hopes are quickly crushed: pitilessly, the critics pile on the barbs. “Ishiguro’s new novel has the virtue of being unlike anything else,” snarls James Wood; “it invents its own category of badness.´” On TV, the British journalist Tony Parsons recommends that *The Unconsoled* be consigned to the flames. Meanwhile in *The New York Times* Michiko Kakutani speaks of a “dogged, shaggy-dog narrative” that “sorely tries the reader's patience.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Who has not been taken unaware by their reaction to a novel, a film, or a piece of music? We are enthralled what we did not think we would care for; or we are left cold by what we were eagerly anticipating. Meanwhile, it is not at all uncommon to discover that others do not share our enthusiasm; that what strikes us as remarkable, they find unexceptional, even trite. We are often confounded by ourselves, in short, as well as being confounded by others. And yet neither aesthetic theories nor social theories leave much room for surprise. As Steven Connor remarks, the stance of much contemporary scholarship has a boy scout quality: be *prepared.*

That responses to art works can be unpredictable or contentious is not something that formalist approaches are likely to address—to engage in a meticulous and fine-grained analysis of a poem or a painting, after all, is to take for granted that it is worthy of attention. And yet, writes Antoine Hennion, these “famous works themselves, those absolutes of beauty, have constantly changed meaning, shape, place, and direction throughout history, along with the judgements on them.” [[9]](#endnote-9) Borrowing from the language of science studies, we can say that artistic value is black-boxed. That is to say, the many trials that art and literature have undergone are lost from sight; their value is slowly stabilized and becomes self-evident. No work, after all, is fated to be great; it must attract supporters, allies, enthusiasts, compete against rivals, counter the voices of nay-sayers and skeptics. Yet these acts of squabbling and disputation are soon forgotten and co-actors fade away into the shadows. A few especially memorable cases are enshrined in literary history and marveled at: those dunderheads who trashed the first edition of *Moby-Dick*! Yet for the most part, the rough terrain of disagreement is patched over; we perceive the work, in its numinous glory, not the grubby penumbra of hesitations, demurrals, disputations that once encircled it. It is only in the present--faced with the mortifying clash between what we know to be exceptional and the vigorous rebuttals of reviewers, colleagues, or friends—that the volatility of value becomes visible.

Other scholars, meanwhile, are only too eager to underscore the contingent nature of aesthetic value—in order to explain art as politics by other means. This ambition connects sociologies of culture indebted to Bourdieu with the demystifying critiques of humanists. “Any account of artistic experience in terms of beauty, sensation, emotion, or aesthetic feeling is thus considered misleading,” Hennion remarks, insofar as it merely reflects the illusions of everyday actors.[[10]](#endnote-10) The truth of social structure not only trumps the status of first-person experience, but pulverize it into irrelevance. Here again, an ultimate cause is nailed down: no longer in the work, but in the social field or social system, which determines what we like and the reasons (power, status, ideological bewitchment, fear of being shamed) we like it. Uncertainties are smoothed over and explanations are delivered.

Cultural sociology, however, includes more than acts of critique and demystification; we might think of Howard Becker’s thick descriptions of art worlds, Claudio Benzecry on the passionate affiliations of Argentine opera fans,Tia DeNora’s reckoning with the many uses of music in everyday life, or Maria Olave’s highlighting of self-understanding, ethical reflection, and self-care as motives of female readers. All these writers dispute the view that attachments to art works can be reduced to a single logic of distinction and domination or to economic metaphors of cultural capital. [[11]](#endnote-11) Further questions arise around the predictability and generalizability of taste. It’s undeniable that a fondness for Bach or Beuys is neither universal not purely idiosyncratic, but shaped by pressures of class and culture. This point needs to be insisted upon, against those who believe that aesthetic appreciation requires nothing more than personal sensitivity or a refined mind. We are always pre-oriented by the milieu into which we are thrown; not all of art and literature is equally accessible and available to all persons. And yet the results of Bourdieu’s own surveys do not support his own arguments for the determination of taste as strongly as he claims. While the preference for classic music is influenced by social class, for example, it’s also the case that only twenty percent of professionals identify it as their preferred form and almost half have never been to a classical music concert.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Such a line of argument, moreover, cannot explain why some texts *within* a general category (whether we are talking about avant-garde art or middlebrow fiction) can resonate far more powerfully with a reader or viewer than others. That I am captivated by *The Unconsoled* rather than Ishiguro’s other works, for example, though they offer similar amounts of cultural capital. Nor can such an approach account for the change of heart or the volte-face; those times when our social circumstances remain unchanged and yet we radically revise or reverse our aesthetic judgements. How—face palm--could we have failed to see the obvious!

Both aesthetic and social theories of art, in short, struggle to account for the unforeseen. Appealing to either the work itself or to theories of the social structure or social field, they presume regularities that do not always exist, foundations that are less stable than they assume.

How, writes Janice Radway, can we more fully engage the vitality and ongoingness, the forward trajectory and the unsecured nature of social processes? [[13]](#endnote-13) Styles of thinking are needed that can be fine-tuned to the puzzle of particulars—reckoning with the surprising as well as the scripted, yet without pitching aesthetic experience outside the social world. Actor-network-theory, meanwhile, is premised on contingency. (Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*, we might remember, is organized around five sources of uncertainty.) It is this mutability that makes change possible—that allows us to be taken off guard, to revise or reverse an opinion. As constellations come together or fall apart, as actors turn into allies or antagonists, as meanings are remediated and translated, new realities come into view—and new attachments to art works are forged.

Zadie Smith’s Attunement

“The first time I heard her I didn’t hear her at all,” writes Zadie Smith, in an essay reflecting on her changing response to Joni Mitchell.[[14]](#endnote-14) During her twenties, she remembers, Mitchell’s music seemed tuneless, discordant; a white girl’s warbling that was little more than noise. At a certain moment, without being fully conscious of it, her perspective underwent a dramatic shift. Nowadays, Smith writes, listening to Mitchell brings “uncontrollable tears. An emotional overcoming, disconcertingly distant from happiness, more like joy—if joy is the recognition of an almost intolerable beauty” (105). A quite ordinary album, *Blue*—owned by millions—now unleashes extraordinary emotions, an almost unbearable intensity of feeling. How, she wonders, did she hate something so completely and then come to to love it so unreasonably? “In a sense, she writes, “it took no time. Instantaneous. Involving no progressive change but, instead, a leap of faith. A sudden unexpected attunement” (110).

Here are we to understand intense affinities that have little to do with conscious commitments? As a writer Smith has made deliberate efforts to expand her knowledge, to immerse herself in diverse traditions of writing. “By forcing myself to reread *Crime and Punishment . . .*” she remarks, “I now admire and appreciate Dostoyevsky, a writer whom, well into my late twenties I was certain I disliked’ (105). Literature, after all, is Smith’s area of expertise; through a steady accumulation of examples and exposure to the unfamiliar, she trains her perception, educates her taste, and comes to value what once seemed impenetrable, or dreary, or trifling. (She even learns to appreciate Anais Nin, a writer once alien to her sensibility.) Here we have an example of what Hennion calls taste formation as a reflexive activity: preferences that are purposefully pursued, that are based on techniques and trials. [[15]](#endnote-15) And yet not all commitments are of this kind; not all attachments arise out of effort or education. “I didn’t come to love Joni Mitchell,” Smith writes, “by knowing anything more about her, or understanding what an open-tuned guitar is or even by sitting down and forcing myself to listen and re-listen to her songs. I hated Joni Mitchell--and then I loved her. Her voice did nothing for me—until the day it undid me completely” (106). A transformation, then, that seems unrelated to will or intent: that arrives as if out of nowhere.

Taste is, of course, the preferred way of characterizing our aesthetic preferences: those affinities—for certain films, fashions, foods, even fonts—that possess a social aspect and yet that often operate at a semi-conscious or non-rational level. Taste can have a visceral force, as we are magnetically drawn to certain objects, while recoiling with disgust or irritation from others Yet the word does not quite capture those aspects of attachment that interest me here. Its connotations seem, on the one hand, too snobbish—linked to condescending or fussy distinctions between good and bad taste--—and, on the other hand, too superficial, hinting at a whimsical preference for vanilla versus strawberry icecream: “there’s no accounting for taste.”

Another word is needed for the issue at hand: that the art work creates a world and levers its own demands, to which we may or may not measure up.

The idea of attunement has a respectable philosophical legacy. It crops up, for example, in Stanley Cavell’s discussion of how we come to agree about criteria: as being not just a matter of reason, but of attunement in words and in forms of life. For Cavell, language is always bound up with relations between persons, and attunement is a real, if fragile, achievement: a testimony to our connections with others. Attunement is also the standard translation for the Heideggerian term *Befindlichkeit*—for how one finds oneself in relation to the world: an over-all orientation or disposition. And here it overlaps with his account of mood or *Stimmung,* a notion I’ve found helpful in describing the dispositions of contemporary scholarship. I share Heidegger’s view that analytical detachment is not an absence of mood, but one kind of mood that reveals the world in a specific —and partial--way. As a word that spans thought and feeling, subject and object, mood alerts us to the ways in which we are always pre-disposed.

Yet this line of thought does not quite get at what interests me here: how we attune, or become attuned, to works of art. Moods are for Heidegger intentionless, that is to say, they are not directed at specific objects. Rather, they embody an over-all orientation to the world, they are background rather than foreground; they embody a shared or collective state. “Mood is *primordial,*” writes Matthew Ratcliffe, “a precondition for any form of intelligibility or sense-making.”[[16]](#endnote-16) My focus here, however, is on how persons get (or fail to get) a work of art: as a process of adjusting, recalibrating, fine-tuning. Attunement, in this sense, involves a distinct *other*: there is a directed response and a vector of attention. It also implies a *process* and a series of gradations (in contrast to the steady state implied by *Befindlichkeit*: how one finds oneself); one can be, after all, more or less attuned. And finally, while this process of acclimatizing can hum away quietly in the background, it can also burst into consciousness with unbidden force. On these questions, Smith’s essay turns out to be more revelatory than much of philosophy amd aesthetic theory.

In looking back at her earlier self, at that stranger who disdained Joni Mitchell, Smith is mystified: “I truly cannot understand the language of my former heart. Who *was* that person?” (104). Deploying a harsh word—philistinism--that has fallen from favor in recent decades, Smith wields it in order to voice a severe self-judgment at her own failure to measure up to Mitchell’s music, her inability to hear its claim upon her. Her reproach to her younger self echoes that of her irritated husband: “It’s *Joni Mitchell*. What is *wrong* with you? Listen to it—it’s beautiful. Can’t you hear that?” (102), Here we are squarely in the Kantian realm of aesthetic judgement as being subjective yet normative: when we are drawn to a piece of music or a painting, we cannot help wanting others to share our perception. It does not just seem beautiful to us, but embodies a beauty that should be unmistakeable to others.

The issue, of course, is how such shared perception comes about. As Stanley Cavell reminds us, argument will only take us so far in trying to persuade others. I can point to features that inspire or excite me, provide reasons, and justify my judgment; perhaps my fervor or my eloquence will have an effect. But there is also an inescapably subjective dimension to aesthetic response, a point at which disagreements cannot be resolved and intellectual justifications falter. In an often-cited passage, Cavell sketches the scenario of a conversation about art, with one person finally saying in exasperation: “don’t you see, don’t you hear, don’t you dig? . . . Because if you do not see *somethin*g, without explanation, there is nothing further to discuss.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

This same question—how one shifts from not seeing to seeing, from not hearing to hearing—lies at the heart of Smith’s meditation on Mitchell. “The first time I heard her,” to cite her words once more, “I didn’t hear her at all.” She continues: “My parents did not prepare me. (The natural thing in these situations is to blame the parents)” (100). Here Smith acknowledges the role of nurture in shaping taste, while also interjecting a mild note of irony—how tempting, after all, to ascribe all of our failings to our upbringing! The sounds of her youth were those of Burning Spear and the Beatles, Bob Marley and Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin and Ella Fitzgerald: the tastes, she writes, of the young black woman and the older white man who raised her. There was, by contrast, no demographic for white women’s music. Later, at university, her friends pressed Joni Mitchell upon her, fervently, zealously, to little avail. “*You don’t like Joni*? My friends had pity in their eyes. The same look the faithful tend to give you as you hand them back their ‘literature’ and close the door in their faces” (102), She steadily resists the cajolery of the true believers, is unwilling to be made over in their image.

It is in her thirties that something shifts. Smith is on her way to a wedding in Wales; her husband, a poet, suggests they make a brief stop at Tintern Abbey. Smith, intent on chasing down a sausage roll at the next motorway service station, is reluctant; her mood is sour, not least because of the enervating sounds emanating from the car’s music system: “that bloody piping again, ranging over octaves, ignoring the natural divisions between musical bars, and generally annoying the hell out of me, like a bee caught in a wing mirror” (102). As she wanders among flagstones bordered with thistles, looking out through ruins on to green hills, her mind is still preoccupied with the prospect of microwaved snacks. “And then what? As I remember it, sun flooded the area; my husband quoted a line from one of the Lucy poems; I began humming a strange piece of music. . . humming Joni, not yet conscious of the transformation” (103-104) A change has been brought about: an attunement has imperceptibly occurred. Did a unique configuration of actors-- a ruin, a landscape, a husband, some lines of Wordsworth—come together to effect a shift in perception? Or did the process start much earlier, with the fervent testimony of friends that had no impact until, combining in mysterious alchemy with an afternoon at Tintern Abbey, a defense was suddenly breached? Did the music act alone—or did it resonate only because the ground was prepared, the viewer already receptive?

If you want to effect a breach in the edifice of the human personality, Smith writes, it helps to cultivate a Kierkegaardian sense of defenselessness. Shaped by the sounds of her childhood, she had long resisted a different style of singing—distrustful of music in a way that she has never been distrustful of words. Receptivity was a more difficult state to attain. “I don’t think it is a coincidence,” she continues, “that my Joni epiphany came through the back door, while my critical mind lay undefended, focused on a quite other form of beauty” (113). Attunement cannot occur without a nascent state of readiness, aesthetics cannot forego or dispense with the first-person response. No one, after all, can listen or read or look for you; no-one else can have your aesthetic experience. And yet, in contrast to a traditional phenomenology of art —a stage stripped bare of all but a solitary self facing a self-contained work—Smith conjures up a calvacade of friendly co-actors and active mediators: the friends, the landscape, the sun, the voice of the husband, the resplendent ruin, even the longed-for sausage roll.

Meanwhile, Smith reminds us that experiences of attunement are also indebted to the words and work of others, to the laying down of a history of response. Art works that once seemed scandalous or vacuous are now unconditionally admired. If she had paid a call on Picasso on his studio in 1907 and caught sight of *Les Demoiselles D’Avignon*, she would have been “nonplussed, maybe even a little scandalized. If, in my real life of 2012, I stand before this painting in the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, it seems obviously beautiful to me. All the difficult work of attunement and acceptance has already been done by others. Smart critics, other painters, appreciative amateurs. They kicked the door open almost a century ago—all I need do is walk through it” (113). Do we perceive the beauty of Picasso because it is there or because others have inspired us to see Picasso in this way? Actor-network-theory would suggest that the antithesis is false, the question not only uninteresting but unanswerable.

And yet friends also disagree with friends; critics with critics; even museums and galleries will squabble over the merits of specific works. And while we are oriented to find some texts more resonant than others--*—*by education and class background, by pressures of gender, race, religion, sexuality, or nationality—glitches are all too common; expected and actual affinities may not smoothly coincide. It is these disjunctures that are likely to be missed by the academic’s questionnaires. As the French sociologist Robert Escarpit wrote many years ago, the “cultured man” who knows Racine will never be so foolhardy as to admit that what he really loves is Tintin.[[18]](#endnote-18) Our consciously held beliefs about literary or cultural value do not line up perfectly with our attachments (those works that captivate and change us). Such attachments are not found but forged: neither purely self-created nor epiphenomena of social systems, they are co-composed. And they are made and unmade over time.

Smith’s essay thus alerts us to several aspects of attunement. There is, first of all, the question of its duration. Is it immediate or protracted? A sudden infatuation or a steady acclimatization? And what of the time lag that can occur: a work of art that has no discernible impact on a first encounter, only to unexpectedly resonate a week, a month, a year later? Smith, it seems, could only hear Joni Mitchell when she was ready to hear her; when the ground was prepared, the listener receptive. Second, there is the status of the art work as an active force in the world. To what extent can a painting or a novel make us feel things? Who acts and who is acted upon; who possesses and who is possessed-- or dispossessed? And finally, there is the “ineffability” of a certain aesthetic relation: those aspects of experience that we struggle to articulate. Is such talk nothing more than romantic bluster and mystification, the last gasp of the ideology of the aesthetic—or does it point to something real that needs to be grappled with?

Aesthetic Time

How aesthetic response unfolds over time is exceptionally hard to pin down. This is one reason why trying to measure the impact of art in laboratory conditions—using questionnaires to assess whether people have become more empathetic after reading a few pages of Jane Austen--can seem counter-intuitive or absurd. (As if literary prose were injected directly into the bloodstream, to work its effects on the brain cells a few minutes later!) Did that painting affect me as I stood in front of it—or was it an alteration that took place over days or weeks, as it worked its way into my memory and my thoughts? At what moment does an alteration of perception or sensibility come about?

Smith’s essay tells a captivating story of conversion: one that links up to a long history of spiritual or secular transformations. These epiphanies share certain qualities: they are sudden and transformative; they resist being accounted for in rational terms; they feel authoritative to those who experience them (their force does not lend itself to doubt).[[19]](#endnote-19) An epiphany has ethical force—it is about the revelation of what truly matters—but it also has an aesthetic aspect--it is dramatic, contrast-filled, anchored in a sense of crisis. And yet, while Joni Mitchell’s music may be extraordinary, it is also utterly ordinary; listened to by millions, endlessly streamed through headphones and speakers, an integral part of commodity culture. And while Smith’s conversion takes place at Tintern Abbey, it does so within a mundane drama of summer weddings, motorway snacks, low-grade irritation, and marital squabbles.

The language of epiphanies is often dismissed by present-day critics—seen as a hangover from the era of Romanticism and its swooning poets. And yet the experience it points to has a much broader purchase. In a fascinating ethnography, Ben Green interviewed club-goers and music fans in Brisbane about their “peak experiences”-- encounters with popular or alternative music that stood out to them as especially meaningful and memorable. Their stories, he remarks, sound very similar to George Gershwin’s description of hearing his first recitation of Dvorak’s *Humoresque*: in both cases there is a sense of experiential intensity and heightened affect that seems impossible to put into words. Pushing back against the tendency to slot the study of high and popular culture into separate silos, Green draws out striking similarities. As he goes on to note, there is a fundamental doubleness about such aesthetic encounters. The epiphany is a narrative trope, a way of making sense of experience—even as it also points to an affective intensity that is felt to be beyond language. The realness of music’s effects cannot be disentangled from what people hold these effects to be. And yet a famous artist may be resisted or scorned, may be heard but not really listened to; until, for whatever reason, a barrier is suddenly breached and a certain song, as one person put it, “completely broke me to pieces.” After having paid no attention to Bruce Springsteen for two decades—too obvious, too mainstream—this interviewee was suddenly, inexplicably, moved to tears. [[20]](#endnote-20)

Not all attunement, however, arrives as a bolt from the blue. Beyond the drama of her Mitchell conversion, Smith’s essay is a guide to the differing rhythms and varying time frames of how we become attuned. There is, to begin with, the pressure of upbringing and milieu. To be born is to be thrown into a form of life, with its preferences and prohibitions, its idioms and its silences. Becoming attuned, in this sense, is a precondition of any form of being and living with others—whether we think of the young child’s attuning to the gestures and facial expressions of a parent, as described by psychologist Daniel Stern, or the later attuning to what counts and what matters in the world within one must make one’s way. In Cavell’s words, attunement is “a matter of our sharing of routes and feelings, modes of response, senses of humor and significance and fulfilment, of what is outrageous, what is similar to all else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Some of these responses are widely shared, while others are closely tied to certain milieus: ways of talking or laughing; mourning or failing to mourn; the foods that are consumed or—in Smith’s case-- the music that is loved. It is through a history of such collective attunements that we become the persons that we are.

Second, there is a remaking of taste through education, as a matter not just of thought but of perception and feeling; a matter of getting to know and of coming to like; of learning to distinguish and discriminate; of experiencing what lies beyond the bounds of previous experience. Such a remaking can be both formal and informal, institutional or self-taught. Smith’s essay describes her eagerness to apprentice herself in a literary tradition, to learn the complexities of a craft. Education can shake up preferences and remake perception; one becomes attuned to what once seemed opaque or irrelevant, one comes to admire what one seemed unworthy of affection. And so *Demoiselles D’Avignon* may come to seem beautiful, thanks to others--smart critics, other painters, appreciative amateurs—who paved the way. But education can also involve estrangement and shame, as Smith well knows: a sense of embarrassment at one’s own lack of knowledge or “bad taste,” disorientation at a failure to grasp what seems self-evident to one’s peers, or a growing alienation from a family of origin whose world one no longer shares. (We might think here of Smith’s 2012 novel *NW* and its working-class heroine Leah, entirely at sea in her philosophy classes at Edinburgh, “listening to warbling posh boys . . . being more bored that you have ever been in your life.”)[[22]](#endnote-22)

And there are, finally, those flashes that come as if out of nowhere, unexpected and unprepared for. The language in such cases is often that of being arrested, transfixed, frozen in place. Here, for example, is the writer Patricia Hampl hurrying through the rooms of the Chicago Art Institute on her way to meet a friend at the cafeteria:

I didn’t halt, didn’t stop. I was stopped. Apprehended, even. That’s how it felt. I stood before the painting a long minute. I couldn’t move away. I couldn’t have said why. I was simply fastened there.

I wasn’t in the habit of being moved by art. I wasn’t much of a museum goer. I’d never even taken an art history class, and I thought of myself as a person almost uniquely ungifted in the visual arts. . . Maybe only someone so innocent of art history could be riveted by a picture as I was that day by Matisse’s gazing woman . . with her no-nonsense post-Great War bob, chin resting on crossed hands, elbows propped on the peachy table where, slightly to the left, a pedestal fishbowl stands. . . I wasn’t thinking in words; I was hammered by the image

Indifferent to art, Hampl is brought up short by a painting: as she says, “hammered by the image.” Such accounts (for there many others to be found) would appear to give the lie to the claim that a love of art is always tied to appropriate schooling. Unfamiliar with Matisse’s oeuvre, Hampl does not approach it through the usual categories of art history-- unaware, as one of her friends informs her, that *Woman Before an Aquarium* is classified as a minor work. As in Smith’s case, the lack of insider knowledge does not seem to impede attachment but to intensify it. (Curious about the painting that had inspired Hampl’s book, I chased it up in the Chicago Art institute last summer, only to be disappointed by a glum, pasty-faced woman trapped inside a drab canvas, with no trace of the sun-bright colors or bold outlines that I associate with Matisse. Did we react differently to the same painting—or in some sense see a different painting?)

While a sudden relevation is, by definition, unexpected and unprepared for, there are differences in how it relates to a prior history of exposure. Like virtually every Westerner of a certain age, Zadie Smith had heard Joni Mitchell’s music long before her change of heart at Tintern Abbey; there was a delayed reception, a time lag. For Hampl, meanwhile, the first sighting of *Woman Before an Aquarium* was also the moment of conversion: seeing and being struck by Matisse’s painting occured in one swoop. Here differences of medium also come into play: paintings afford the possibility of instantaneous apprehension, of seeing something all at once. Music, meanwhile, can only be experienced over time; it is intrinsically tied, through its form, to process, sequence, and continuation. Pictures, as a result, would seem to have a greater potential to trigger a sense of surprise or astonishment. [[23]](#endnote-23)

An intriguing example that falls somewhere between long-term exposure and love at first sight is offered by Geoff Dyer in his account of his obsession with *Stalker*. What prompted this obsession, Dyer wonders, and why did he latch on to this specific film? How could the agonizing slowness of Tarkovsky’s takes come to affect him so strongly? After describing a scene in Tarkovsky’s film involving a bird, Dyer writes this:

It was not a case of love at first sight—the first time I saw *Stalker* I was slightly bored and unmoved. I wasn’t overwhelmed . . . but it was an experience I couldn’t shake off. Something about it stayed with me. I was living in Putney at the time and one day my then-girlfriend and I went walking in Richmond Park. It was autumn and a bird flew over the sloping ground toward a clump of trees, flapped and flew in a way that was strangely reminiscent of the way that second bird had flown into this vast room of sand. I wanted to

see the film again immediately after that, and since then, the desire to see it again—and again and again—has never gone away. [[24]](#endnote-24)

The film, at first, has no appeal; there is no immediate hook; Dyer remains unmoved, even bored. And yet some scrap or residue lingers in his mind, waiting to be activated. At some point (a month later? a year later?), as he is strolling through the park, the flapping wings of a bird brings back the memory of a scene in *Stalker* and an enduring tie is forged. A period of *incubation* was necessary, it seems, before the film could take hold. The pathway is created not by words—although Dyer has much to say about Tarkovsky’s dialogue—but by a pattern of movement that sets up a reverberation, a kinaesthetic resonance. (Just as Smith did not fall for Mitchell by learning about open-stringed guitars, Dyer did not become obsessed with Tarkovsky by reading about his films.) The book that transpires is a scene-by-scene description of the film and also, he writes, an account of watchings, rememberings, misrememberings, and forgettings. “I do know,” Dyer remarks, “that if I had not seen *Stalker* in my early twenties my responsiveness to the world would have been radically diminished.” [[25]](#endnote-25)

As we see from even this handful of examples, the time span between encountering a work and its effects is unpredictable. We can be hooked immediately, or after a week, a month, or a year have passed. Delay, deferral, time lag are not uncommon; aesthetic experience is aslant of clock time and pursues its own rhythms. Virginia Woolf writes of reading a book and waiting for “the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall asleep.” [[26]](#endnote-26) Later the book will return, she remarks, but it will do so differently. An affinity can be registered suddenly or slowly; an attraction can be instantaneous or build over time.

Perhaps we may be tempted to allot the sudden attraction— arriving out of nowhere, unbidden and unprepared for—a greater weight. Whether its object is a person or a painting, the *coup de foudre* claims a certain authority; fracturing familiar schema and assumptions, it promises a liberation from routine. In the art of modernism, for example, we often see a visceral distrust of story and sequence; a conviction that truth can only be found in the flare-up of a sudden illumination: what Karl-Heinz Bohrer calls “the annihilation of continuity by the ecstatic moment.”[[27]](#endnote-27) It is in the glimmer of the transitory experience that a shard of authenticity can be found. Similar themes crop up in critical theory, as in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s reflections on Barnett Newman’s massive red painting, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. What renders this work sublime, Lyotard insists, is its emphasis on the “now,” as that which dismantles or disarms the viewer’s consciousness. Newman’s painting is the quintessential instance of presence without meaning; of a monumental thereness that is shorn of any representational content or narrative coherence. The work of art is extraordinary because it assails the continuity of time. [[28]](#endnote-28)

Not all instances of attunement, however, are as dramatic as those of Smith or Hampl. T. J. Clark’s *The Sight of Death* is an exercise in slow, sustained looking, as Clark returns over a period of months to look at two paintings by Poussin hanging in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. His text is a painstakingly precise record of what he sees: shimmering birch leaves; the curls on the head of a goatherd; tonalities of blueness; the smudge of sun on a horse’s backside; patterns of cubes and parallelograms; the balancing of background and foreground and shaping of space; how the moods of a painting can be transformed by changes in natural light. Poussin, he remarks, is a painter of the unnoticeable; of a hillside with no significance, of marsh grass and winding dirt roads. Slowness, here, does not negate or annihilate surprise but makes it possible. “Coming to terms with pictures is slow work,” writes Clark. “But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Such slowness can be a process of unlearning; not the drip-drip of habituation, but the coming into view of something new.

Little has been written, Clark continues, on the practice of repeated looking; we believe, somehow, that images happen all at once. Of course, art historians and critics *do* look at paintings for extended periods; but they have written little about what it means to do so, about the experience of returning to an image over and over again, at different moments, under varying conditions, with shifting feelings and expectations. We need, Clark writes, “to throw the image back into the flow of time”—where time means not the history of its making but the period during which viewers look away and then look back, shrug their shoulders, move closer to look at a dog peeking out from behind a chair in the painting’s corner, stand back to appraise a larger pattern. “Paintings are capable of getting in the way of our framing of them,” Clark remarks;, they not always do what we expect. [[30]](#endnote-30) While he does not invoke the word, *The Sight of Death* is unmistakeably a record of an attunement: one that is premised on slowness rather than of speed.

As Clark would be the first to admit, being able to gaze at paintings for hours requires the privilege of a certain freedom from temporal constraints: punching the clock; lengthy commutes from the suburbs; the fractious demands of children. And yet slowness might also have a broader relevance. For Jean-Marie Schaeffer, what defines aesthetic experience is *delayed categorization*. It is only when we suspend our rush to analyze and summarize, to judge and to justify, that a work of art can begin to reveal itself. Attunement, in this light, becomes a slow and often stumbling process; a gradual coming into view of what we would otherwise fail to see. Yet this is not a matter, Schaeffer insists, of valuing difficulty for its own sake. Our encounters with art are not cut off from the world, but infused with thoughts and feelings that shape other aspects of our lives. What art does offer, though, is a training in modes of paying attention. Through its relentless curiosity about detail and nuance, its fierce concentration on the qualities of its own medium, it invites us to look closely at what we might otherwise overlook. Patience and slowness are mandated, not the greedy and indiscriminate gulp.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Much of Schaeffer’s argument seems entirely plausible—until it collides with the problem of counter-examples. The claim that delay is fundamental to aesthetic experience cannot account for the bolt from the blue: Hampl’s experience of being hammered by the image; Smith’s unanticipated conversion. In such cases, there is no tentative process of feeling one’s way, but an abrupt swerve into commitment. And yet one would be hard-pressed to claim that these do not qualify as aesthetic responses. Perhaps, then, there is no formula for specifying the “right” rhythm and speed of attunement, no general model that we can pin down, whether one of suddenness or slowness. Bence Nanay, for example, contrasts Richard Wollheim, who needed to look at a painting for at least an hour in order to have an aesthetic experience, to Clement Greenberg, who was known for instanteous appreciation and split-second judgment.[[32]](#endnote-32) We are left, simply, with the temporal variability of people becomg attuned to works of art.

Agency

Let’s return to Hampl’s phrase: “hammered by the image.” Clearly Matisse’s painting is doing something—though of course most viewers will not react in the same way as Hampl. How, then, are we to understand this doing? In what way can we think of an art work as being an actor? What is interacting with what? And in what sense does a work’s agency either afford or undercut our own?

Hampl’s book belongs to a genre: memoirs reflecting on what it means to be obsessed or possessed by a painting. Other recent examples include Mark Doty’s *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, a meditation on the author’s affinity with a seventeenth-century canvas by the Dutch artist Jan Davidsz de Heem, and Michael White’s *Travels in Vermeer*, in which the author decides, in the aftermath of a divorce, to see as many of the world’s Vermeer’s paintings as he can track down. Tying these works together is an emphasis on a painting’s power of address: its ability to engage and take the measure of the viewer. In Doty’s words: “I have felt the energy and life of a painting’s will; I have been held there, instructed.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Meanwhile, countless memoirs testify to literature’s impact on a life. In *My Life in Middlemarch,* for example, Rebecca Mead invokes “the strange potency of a great book: the way a book can insert itself into a reader’s own history, a reader’s own life story, until it is hard to know what one would be without it.”[[34]](#endnote-34) In all this talk of the energy of paintings or the potency of novels there is an insistent theme: that art can *do* things to people: that it can make things happen.

Unti recently, there was a chasm between such autobiographical reflection and academic writing: not just in style, but in their underlying premises. It is not only the casual mixing of art and life that jars with the protocols of scholarship, but the belief that one can be transformed for the better by an aesthetic encounter. The New Critics, for example, brushed aside the question of literature’s impact on its readers--such talk was a matter for psychologists, not literary critics. And later historical and political approaches waved the banner of “context” and “structural conditions” in a way that left little room for reflection on how art affects *persons.*

Yet countercurrents have always existed. The mid-century philosopher and musicologist Jankelevitch gently mocks the “stalwart spirit who focuses on musical form in order to demonstrate that they have not been duped.” “Everyone knows the type,” he remarks, “the cool cerebral people who affect interest in how the piece is ‘put together’ after the concert.” For Jankelevitch—who has been called the anti-Adorno—this “fear of being bewitched, the coquetry of refusal, the resolve not to ‘submit’” is a symptom of modern alienation rather than any form of resistance to it.[[35]](#endnote-35) And the contemporary scholar Carolyn Abbaté pursues a similar questioning of formalism and historicism in music; both approaches, she remarks, rely on a critical distance that is supposed to shore up one’s liberal credentials. And yet “it is in the irreversible experience of playing, singing, or listening,” she writes, “that any meanings summoned by music come into being. Retreating to the work displaces that experience, and dissecting the work’s technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish not to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us.”[[36]](#endnote-36)Musicology, she suggests, has been exceptionally adept at avoiding the fundaments of musical experience.

Meanwhile, in his 1989 book *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg questioned the phantom of pure response (the disinterested and disembodied aesthetic gaze) as well as art history’s obsession with large-scale history and context. Instead, he conjures up a dazzling spectrum of reactions to art works over hundreds of years:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. [[37]](#endnote-37)

Paintings are powerful, Freedberg argues, they inspire devotion, anger, consternation, anger, and love; they can make things happen.

While Freedberg’s book was widely reviewed, its immediate impact was quite modest. Art history continued to trundle along well-worn paths: critical analysis of the social construction of art and taste, close attention to the formal composition of paintings—or, in some cases, a blending of both. Yet the question of what art *does* is once again being broached, thanks to the intellectual excitement generated by Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency.* Approaching art as an anthropologist rather than an art historian, Gell is deeply interested in the question of art’s influence and impact on the world. “I view art as a system of action,” he writes, ‘intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Arguing against semiotic approaches that treat art as a visual sign to be deciphered, Gell focuses not on what art works mean, but what they do, how they captivate, fascinate, and entrap spectators, their associations with magic and power*.* This means, Gell contends, turning away from aesthetic questions in order to define art objects as actors that sustain social relations. *Art and Agency* is a pivotal text in its stress on the relational dynamics of art, whose impact is being felt in art history, visual studies, and cultural sociology.

And yet Gell’s counterposing of agency and aesthetics—his assumption that art as social action has nothing to do with aesthetic experience—should give us pause. Surely the reverse is true: the perception of phenomena as aesthetic phenomena, rather than destroying their impact, creates their impact. The “specialness” of art—as shaped by social institutions, shared yet idiosyncratic responses, and the works themselves—is not an air-tight chamber cut off from the world but a dynamic and agitated force-field of action and transformation. It is *because* art is held to have special qualities that it can have such intense effects. And here Gell fudges somewhat on the issue of agency; art objects, after all, do not act in the same way as his other examples of mantraps or poisoned arrows insofar as they depend on the consent and participation of humans. As Caroline van Eck points out, reacting to art works as if they were alive has nothing to do with cognitive confusion or delusion, but with *experiencing* them as living. [[39]](#endnote-39)

Here we might look to James Elkins’ *Pictures and Tears*: a compendium of people crying in front of paintings. Elkins is interested in strong emotional responses that contravene art’s association with detachment or disinterestedness. One of his respondents writes: “I cried at a museum in front of a Gauguin painting—because somehow he had managed to paint a transparent pink dress. I could almost see the dress wafting in the hot breeze.” [[40]](#endnote-40) What kind of causal relations are at work here? Even if this particular viewer is highly sensitive or sentimental and is primed to respond in certain ways, it is nevertheless this painting and not another—it is how *this* pink dress is painted, the delicacy of its flimsy fabric, afloat in the air—that triggers a physiological as well as emotional reaction. The picture is doing something; it makes a difference. And yet the object does not contain its own effects: whether a viewer responds with tears or a smile of pleasure or turns away in indifference cannot be predicted by analyzing the painting, even though these responses define its impact for that viewer. Meanwhile, other factors also play a role in wetting the viewer’s cheeks: the framing space of the museum; the proper name Gauguin; the knowledge that the thing to do in an art gallery is to stand in front of a painting and look with rapt attention. Not a zero-sum game, then, but a coming together of multiple factors: what we have called *distributed agency*.

To explore what art does, in short, is not to bracket its distinctiveness as a work of art—these questions are interconnected rather than opposed. It is precisely these qualities—these affordances-- that allow a work to reattune us in ways we do not expect and may not be able to predict. Whether she is listening to Bach rather than Beethoven, or Motley Crue rather than Metallica, matters enormously to a music lover; these names do not only connect to large-scale patterns of taste, prestige, or cultural hierarchy, they are also attached to different objects. And yet, as Hennion remarks, “we have to actively make the objects of our pleasure emerge in all their differences, and make ourselves aware of those differences.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Art’s specialness can only be realized through practices of discrimination.

Hennion and Latour both draw on the language of “instauration,” taken from the French philosopher Etienne Souriau, to talk about how things are realized—that is to say, how they are made real. And here art has its own modes of instauration—its particular ways of having an impact. What is the difference between being carried away by a story and by a subway train? It is not that one experience is false or illusory while the other is real, remarks Latour. Rather, the former requires our attention and participation in a way that the latter does not. The effects of paintings, novels, and plays depend on their being taken up by readers or viewers, as intermediaries through which they must pass. Without their input, a painting is reduced to nothing more than daubs of pigment on a stretched canvas; a novel dissolves into endless black squiggles on glued-together sheets of paper.

We are confronted with what looks like a puzzle: an acknowledgement of the agency of art works, yet these works act only only insofar as readers or viewers or listeners allow themselves to be acted upon. This puzzle speaks to the irresolvable ambiguities of agency: we make works of art even as they make us. If we find ourselves transfixed by a Rembrandt painting or feel compelled to listen to Mitchell’s “California” for the fiftieth time, the division between doer and done to is hard to pin down. We are made to do something by the song that moves us, but our letting ourselves be moved is no less active than the song’s making. Who is setting what in motion? Phrases such as “active dispossession” or “consensual self-abandonment” are used by Hennion to capture the confusing swirl of active and passive; the ways in which music or art or film lovers seek to abandon themselves; how people strive to be overcome by the objects of their passion. The double verb “faire faire” –meaning “to be made to do”—conveys the uncertainties of agency, as we allow ourselves to be acted upon. We are made to do something by the song that moves us, but our letting ourselves be moved is no less active than the song’s making. [[42]](#endnote-42)

Yet here again we need to attend to variations in experience: even if aesthetic response is co-produced, the balance of power is not always the same. One does not like wine or music just by chance, Hennion remarks; rather, one enters into an “activity which has a past and a space marked by its objects, other participants, ways of doing things, places, and moments, and institutions.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This observation makes perfect sense for the groups that Hennion studies: music fans; wine lovers; music fans; film buffs. To define yourself along these lines is to enter into an existing field of practices, to make a conscious decision to pursue certain interests or passions One is initiated—into certain ways of talking, modes of being, collective attunements--but one also initiates, choosing to define oneself as a certain kind of person. And yet, as we’ve seen, not all attachments are formed in this way. This does not mean they are inherently inexplicable, but their causes are likely to be heterogeneous, dispersed over time, and exceptionally difficult to trace.And experientially, such an attunement may feel very different—like an overcoming rather than an embrace.

George Steiner has some interesting things to say about how works of art can affect us, seemingly against our will. While often seen as the most mandarin of critics, Steiner is perfectly willing to admit that aesthetic quality, however we choose to define it, may have little to do with the affective force of art. In a memorable passage he reflects on Edith Piaf’s “Je ne regrette rien” and the puzzle of his own response. “The text is infantile, the tune stentorious, and the politics which enlisted the song unattractive,” Steiner begins stonily, yet “the opening bars, the hammer-beat *accelerando*. . . tempt every nerve in me, touch the bone with a cold burn and draw me after into God knows what infidelities to reason, each time I hear the song and hear it, uncalled for, recurrent inside me.” [[44]](#endnote-44) The phrasing is a tad over-heated, but it is to Steiner’s credit that he is willing to own up to the intensities of his response: how a popular tune is able to seize command of his mind and body. While he begins with the defensive jabs that intellectuals are so fond of--sentimental, manipulative, melodramatic—he ends in a different register

Manipulative, especially, strikes me as an unhelpful word that shuts down thinking about art and agency before it has even begun. To dub something manipulative is to assume that there is something false or dishonest about being moved by art—that a lump in the throat testifies to the shallowness of the work rather than our own vulnerability. We find ourselves only a hair’s breadth away from the perorations that rained down on the “cheap emotions” in the middle of the twentieth century: Clement Greenberg, Milan Kundera, Dwight McDonald. And here Steiner is more open-minded: while “accredited monumentalities pass us by,” he writes, “the ephemeral can be addictive. It is the sheer force of the experience, its insertion into the quick of our being, which challenge understanding and clear phrasing.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Like myself, he’s curious as to why certain works of art stick, bond, have an impact, whereas others disappear without leaving a trace. As Steiner notes, there are certain attunements that knit together those of similar milieu and educational background. And yet there are others that are irreducibly particular—“as if the honeycomb of each individual receptivity, of each individual psychic indwelling, were intricately specific.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Such affinities are distinctive, yet not necessarily chosen; a certain work grafts on to our psyche whereas another does not even begin to take hold.

Presence

We come, finally, to the question of presence—meaning not just that art works exist, but that their existence seems exceptionally vivid: they embody some kind of overwhelming *thereness* that cannot be bracketed or overlooked. As we’ve seen, such perceptions are not uncommon—but how do we honor and make sense of them? At one point in the history of criticism, such perceptions could not be honored, but only condescended to; the most damning thing one could say about other critics was that they unwittingly subscribed to a metaphysics of presence. These prohibitions have now loosened somewhat, but squabbles and stand-offs are still frequent. In one corner: those convinced that aesthetic experience exceeds linguistic and conceptual framing; in the other, those adamant that any such talk can only be romantic blather or reactionary bluster.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has recently offered a vigorous defense of aesthetic presence. As he defines it, such presence is spatial rather than temporal; it appeals exclusively to the senses; it involves moments of intensity (epiphany); and it arises from the “thingness” or materiality of the work of art, as something that *is* rather than represents. Gumbrecht is at pains to insist that he does not see presence as destroying or negating meaning; aesthetic experience is an oscillation (and sometimes an interference) between presence effects and meaning effects. He is not, he stresses, against interpretation, but the current bias toward analytical and hermeneutic approaches calls for a correction. We urgently need to consider, he writes, how art can generate a sense of “*being in sync with the things of this world.”[[47]](#endnote-47)*

Gumbrecht cites the pushback he received from friends and colleagues when he started down this track; raised eyebrows and skeptical looks; accusations of mysticism and religiosity; concerns that he was taking a rightward turn. What lies behind this response? A sense of the vividness of a work is, after all, a common experience that—as we’ve seen-- crosses boundaries of class and ideology. We are not moved by the same works or in the same way, but most people can point to novels or songs or films that they consider special, that affect them strongly in ways they find hard to articulate. Why, then, should talk of presence be seen as risible or reactionary? Janet Wolff, for example, takes issue with Gumbrecht’s line of thought and the implication that we can have a visceral encounter with a work of art, worrying that this kind of thinking is leading in a conservative, even a proto-fascist direction. What bothers her, she writes, is the abandonment of mediation as a category.[[48]](#endnote-48)

This worry that a stress on presence will result in a bracketing of the social aspects of art does not seem entirely unjustified. In a book called *Art Matters,* for example, Peter de Bolla sets himself the task of arriving at “a better understanding of what it means to be moved profoundly by a work of art.” [[49]](#endnote-49) A very worthy task; yet the possibility that such experience might vary—that people are moved by different things and in different ways—is something he seems reluctant to address. Rather, de Bolla’s account of his own reactions to Barnett Newman, Glenn Gould, and Wordsworth come to stand for aesthetic experience tout court. Any concerns that these works or his own response might not be representative are waved away as symptoms of a desire to be politically correct or appear fashionable. Instead—and there is a parallel tendency in Gumbrecht--art’s presence is treated as a purely individual and strangely asocial matter. One of the potential pitfalls of phenomenology, Annamarie Mol remarks, is that one person’s self-ethnography can be elevated to grandiose proportions. [[50]](#endnote-50)

I’ve argued, meanwhile, that art’s presence is not attenuated by its relations, but made possible by its relations. That we find a piece of art to be extraordinary, radiant, sublime—that it fills up our consciousness, crowding out awareness of other things, such that the rest of the world briefly dissolves into nothingness--does not mean other actors were not involved. It is not a sign that we have vaulted into the stratosphere, far removed from the things of this world. Rather than subtracting from art’s presence, these things help to bring it into view. Mediation does not block access to phenomena, but makes it possible. As the philosopher Alva Noe puts it, we *achieve* presence; it arises out of interaction, engagement, involvement. Noe discusses the experience of listening to an album of music, or of looking at paintings in a gallery, where at first the songs or the pictures all seem pretty much the same—undifferentiated, uninteresting.

But suppose you don’t give up. You listen to the record again and again; you begin to notice different qualities in the different songs. As you familiarize yourself with them, they begin to engage your attention and offer you comfort, or excitement, or stimulation, or pleasure. Perhaps you discuss the music, or the paintings in the gallery, with a friend, and she draws you attention to patterns or devices or lyrics. Whereas before the works—the songs, the paintings—were flat, opaque, undifferentiated—now they reveal themselves to you as structured and meaningful, as deep and involving.[[51]](#endnote-51)

This description holds not just for music or museum paintings but for horror movies or science fiction novels; as we delve more deeply into a particular genre or form, are exposed to the force of more examples, or mull over them with friends, so the work becomes more vividly present, more solid, more real. To be sure, the deliberation that Noe sketches out here is not always in play—as we’ve seen, it is possible to brought up short, to be taken off-guard by one’s own response. What his description drives home, however, is that presence is *co-made* rather than simply found.

In one sense, the point might seem obvious, even commonsensical. Why, then, is it so hard to take it on board? Perhaps because of the hold of a certain philosophical picture: language as a screen or veil separating us from a reality that we can never know “in itself.” To invoke presence, in this line of thought, is to deny that the language-screen exists and to believe—with a touching naivete—that we can gain access to the plenitude of things as they really are. (Here I’m invoking the premises of the linguistic turn, which has cast its long shadow over the humanities in recent decades.) The response of the skeptic, then, is to flip things around and to insist that what we take to be is real is its antithesis. Presence is a projection, a flimsy fiction imposed onto an unknowable and unreachable world. We see only what our system of language allows us to see, or what it dictates that we see.

Increasingly, scholars are becoming restive with this picture of how language works. Language, they point out, is far from being a closed and self-contained system; words are interwined with our ways of engaging with the world. Because these engagements are infinitely varied, it makes no sense to speak of language as such; all we can do is assess the merits of language in use. Language, in short, is more like an interface than a firewall; an array of devices that connects us to other things, including those that most matter to us. Toril Moi, for example, offers a forceful challenge to the theories of language that have shaped literary studies over the last few decades. Drawing especially on Wittgenstein, she questions the assumption of a gap between language and meaning, or between words and the world. Language neither represents, nor fails to represent. Instead of constructing general theories of language, she remarks, we do better to attend to the richness of examples and the extraordinary variations of language in use.[[52]](#endnote-52)

If we think of language in this way, we are no longer crestfallen to discover that it does not match up exactly to the things to which it relates, any more than a hammer need resemble a nail. Some devices—some ways of talking or writing—are better suited to our purposes than others, some will sustain us while others are likely to lead us astray, but we are no longer held captive by a certain philosophical picture. There is no yawning gap between two spheres of “language” and “reality” but multiple relations of likeness and difference, as heterogeneous phenomena jostle, collide, and connect. There are countless contact zones. And that we can be surprised, discomfited, or changed in ways that we did not anticipate reveals the flimsiness of the “projection” thesis—things live their own lives, they can resist or evade our framing, they are not just servile minions of linguistic schemes.

Words and the world, remarks Latour, are not two hostile kingdoms at war with each other, such that we must pledge our fealty to the former or the latter. Language, rather, is one salient actor in our multimodal involvement with reality. Images, for example, have a rather different impact to words. When someone says that their experience of a painting is hard to articulate, there is no need to reproach them for buying into a metaphysical wholeness beyond language. We need not wring our hands about resorting to the language of the ineffable, Clark remarks; some things—such as experiences of painting or music—are far harder to verbalize than others.[[53]](#endnote-53) The point is not that such experiences are unmediated; one of the ways we learn to look at paintings is by looking at other paintings. But what we see does not translate perfectly into what we say. Reading Clark on Poussin is not the same as looking at a Poussin painting, even though the two experiences can certainly affect each other.

Mediation, in other words, is tied to the affordances of different media and cannot be fully captured via notions of reading or text. When we watch a film, many aspects of the sensorium are engaged: lighting, color, camera angles, facial expressiveness, music, and sound combine to conjure up a certain atmosphere long before a word of dialogue has been spoken. Perhaps we are caught up in a sense of elation or gripped by a sense of dread; a cinematic world is created that causes things to show up in certain ways. The resort to language may come belatedly, as a way of trying to verbalize or make sense of the experience; it is not the only or even the primary medium in play. Vivian Sobchack write beautifully on this question in describing her embodied response to Jane Campion’s film *The Piano,* which sensitized the surfaces of her skin, such that her fingers responded to its opening shots before her mind was able to make sense of them. We do more than interpret a film or even *see* a film, Sobchack writes:

My experience of *The Piano* was a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience of the movies: the way we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texure of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us; to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by a sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on the screen.[[54]](#endnote-54)

The issue here is not just sensory and embodied forms of awareness, but the crucial addendum that these forms act and react. Far from being recording devices like cameras or cassette recorders, our sensory capacities distinguish and discriminate, carve out grooves of response. An unfamiliar genre of music sounds perplexing, grating, discordant; yet if I hear it over and over, it may start to resonate, to echo insistently in my mind. Moving to a big city, I am dazzled by the confusion of gaudy neon signs, flashing lights, video advertising screens; as days pass by, this confusion slowly dissipates and the kaleidoscope of color comes to seem comforting rather than chaotic. This, precisely, is what it means to become attuned; we are talking about forms, of alignment, a co-ordinating of senses, affects, bodies, and objects that can happen with or without linguistic support. Academics have a tendency to over-intellectualize knowledge, which can also be a matter of practice, habituation, flair, or “feel.” For the experienced chess player or omelet maker, Gilbert Ryle writes, it is less a matter of thinking than of doing. [[55]](#endnote-55) In like fashion, engaging with art may involve modes of apprehension and sensation that have little to do with ideas.

Once we realize there are many kinds of mediation—which need not be conceptual or even linguistic—the dichotomy of the social versus the aesthetic/affective loosen their grip. It is no longer a matter of contrasting a “social” response to a “pure” response (whether to side with the former or the latter), but of tracing out the various ties that bind readers and viewers to works they care about. These ties, as we’ve seen, can be longstanding or newly fashioned; they can be consciously embraced or linger below the radar of consciousness; they can be unmade and remade, as old loves give way to new passions.

In *Pictures and Tears*, James Elkins has some harsh things to say about art history and theory: that it is dry, alienating, self-involved, overly abstract, and oblivious to the beauty of images. It is not only qualitatively different to the affective force of personal response—Elkins writes movingly about his own fascination, as a fourteen-year old boy, with Bellini’s *The Ecstasy of* *St Francis* at the Frick—but it destroys it. (Other critics, as we’ll see in Chapter Four, take a rather different view.) Reading books about the history of Bellini’s painting, he writes, “took my own experience away and substituted a different kind of understanding. The one didn’t correct the other, it swamped it. My historical knowledge dulled my encounter with the image, deflected my attention onto other things . . . and finally extinguished the emotion I had once felt.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

Yet this difference cannot be parsed in terms of an opposition between a purely subjective experience and the cultural baggage later imposed upon it. As Elkins concedes, the love of lonely woods that draw his teenage self to Bellini’s painting was also influenced by various sources, including the ideas of nineteenth-century writers like Ruskin; he was the unconscious heir of a tradition. “The things I loved about the woods—the thorns, the swamps, the slanting light from the winter sun—were all the stocks-in-trade of Romantic poetry and art criticism.” [[57]](#endnote-57)His early response to Bellini may have been more intense or enraptured than his later perspective as a scholar of art, but it was not, therefore, unmediated. And, of course, other prompts and pressures were also in play. Consider how many actors had to be assembled—art museums, techniques of display, conventions of looking at paintings, exposure to linguistic and iconographic traditions, encouragement from family or friends or books--so that his younger self could have a glorious epiphany at the Frick!

The language of presence, then, points to a real experience, yet one that cannot be understood simply by looking inward. Such a view, to put it simply, overlooks the many other actors that are involved. Hennion writes: “music is not simply a matter of a particular piece; it passes through a multitude of mediators beginning with the present (the sound of an instrument, the atmosphere of a hall, the grain of a record, the tone of a voice, the body of a musician) and the duration of a history (scores, repertoires and styes, genres and more or less stable forms), as well as for each individual—a past, works heard, moments lost, desires unfulfilled, roads travelled with others, and so on.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Things, persons, events, spaces, come together—not to diminish or undercut the presence of the art work, but to disclose it and bring it into view.

A New Constellation?

Attunement is one of a cluster of terms --affinity, atmosphere, *Stimmung*, mood—that share certain resemblances. Isabelle Stengers describes how affinity is carried over from medieval alchemy into eighteenth-century science, where it comes to denote the chemical bonds between substances. Later, its meanings will expand to those forms of interpersonal chemistry—emotional, erotic, or spiritual--that may elude explanation or rational thought. (The parallels between chemical and personal bonds are a guiding thread of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*). An affinity is akin to an inclination, according to the OED; it involves a turning or bending toward something. We may be reminded of Nathalie Sarraute’s novel *Tropisms*, which documents the infinitesimal and imperceptible movements that take place at the threshold of consciousness. Without being aware of what they are doing, persons incline toward or away from each other, like plants turning slowly toward the light. [[59]](#endnote-59)

Meanwhile, “atmosphere” has been championed by Gernot Böhme as the central term of a new aesthetics. The etymology of *atmos*—the Greek word for steam—refers to what is nebulous and diffuse: lacking contours, boundaries, or clear demarcations. As an aesthetic category, it has less to do with judgment or meaning than with modes of perception and spatially extended qualities of feeling. An atmosphere envelops, surrounds and radiates. It is not inside the head, nor can it be imposed by an individual will. Rather, atmosphere speaks to how we find ourselves immersed in a world that shows up in certain ways, encompassing both perceiver and perceived. Picking up on the same term, Dora Zhang expands on its political and public as well as aesthetic entailments. “Created by a myriad of interacting elements—objects, bodies, relations, affects, colors, sounds, smells, speech,” atmosphere is, by its very nature, difficult to pin down. Invoking the term may court charges of irrationalism or mysticism. Yet becoming attuned to atmosphere—what it allows for and what it precludes—is a vital skill; one that might usher in new ways of doing politics, or what Zhang calls an “affective climate change.” [[60]](#endnote-60)

Finally, there is *Stimmung*, which can be translated as both mood and attunement—with the German word having philosophical, metaphysical, and auditory resonances that are not carried over into English. The idea of *Stimmung* stretches back to classical and medieval notions of cosmic harmony, as in the heavenly music of the spheres, and is embraced by the German Romantics, especially Schiller, Herder, and Kant. Tracing its history, David Welberry describes the association of *Stimmung* with vibrations, tonal variations, and echoes. Even as it retains this hint of musicality, the word gradually drifts free from its original meaning—the tuning of an instrument—to become increasingly subjectivized: hailed as a defining feature of aesthetic experience. [[61]](#endnote-61)

Thanks to this history, *Stimmung* was excoriated by Adorno and other critical theorists as a regressive idea. How could one speak of concord or reconciliation in a world that was so profoundly out of joint? Harmony could only be a deeply ideological concept in the harsh light of modern alienation and political catastrophe.[[62]](#endnote-62) Increasingly, however, these Romantic connotations (always less evident in English than in German) have started to fade and the critique of *Stimmung* and its correlates can now seem overwrought. While attunement, for example, refers to a “tuning in” among two or more actors, it brings with it no larger moral message and involves no metaphysical guarantees. Indeed, as shown by my example of *The Unconsoled*, it is not uncommon to be drawn to what is disorienting, discordant, uncanny: to find oneself attuned with what is out of tune. (This phenomenon would play a central role in a work that cries out to be written: an affective history of criticism.)

Mood, meanwhile, is rapidly becoming a key term of affect studies. Critics have expanded on its most striking elements; that moods are ubiquitous (there is no mood-free relation to the world), and that they circumvent oppositions of subject and object (we do not have a mood but find ourselves in a mood, such that mood implies and involves milieu). In this respect, mood resonates with the arguments of my first chapter; we cannot extricate ourselves from attachments because we are already pre-oriented by the world into which we are thrown. The world never presents itself as valueless, observes Jonathan Flatley: things always appear to us as mattering or not mattering in some way. And here mood serves as the “affective atmosphere in which intentions are formed, projects are pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Moods are modes of existence that form and inform relations to the world.

My preference for the language of attunement stems, as I noted earlier, from my concern to tease out the vectors of relation *between* persons and art works. As a noun-verb, it captures better than mood or atmosphere the act of synchronization or modulation; how phenomena are changed over time by resonating or aligning. “Every attunement,” writes Kathleen Stewart, is “a tuning up to something, an accredition chosen or unwillingly shouldered.” [[64]](#endnote-64) Yet all these terms—mood, atmosphere, affinity—offer vital resources for criticism, combatting the intellectualism of recent theory without falling back into notions of pure, unmediated feeling or the picture of a self cut off from the world.

It is not especially surprising that music and painting promote talk of attunement, and yet forms of literature—as well as ways of reading literature—are also amenable to such an approach. Poetry is an obvious candidate, given its ties to the sonorous and the resonant, but attunement has a wider relevance for drawing out relations between mood and style. W. G. Sebald’s abiding concerns, for example, include questions of spatial orientation and of a person’s attunement, or lack of attunement to place. Yet his writing also strives to reattune the reader, deploying language to cast a pervasive mood. What David James calls the solace of Sebald’s style—its slowly unfurling sentences and stately phrasing, its subdued, aloof, and melancholic tone--works both with and against the bleakness of works such as *Austerlitz*. Style can have a compensatory as well as expressive force, as a tentative and temporary counterforce to the historical catastrophes it records. [[65]](#endnote-65)

And here Anna Jones Abramson captures well the salience of literary forms of attunement: a text is not a sequence of signs to be decoded but a structure that we come to inhabit. “Reading atmospherically, our bodies become instruments—what is the tone, the pacing, the mood; what feels impending, what feels hauntingly persistent?” [[66]](#endnote-66) Rather than clearing the fog away, attunement alerts us to the messy co-implication of text and reader. Meanwhile, Robert Sinnerbrink expands on how mood reveals a cinematic world, with *Stimmung* encompassing both the expressiveness of a film and the affective responsiveness of viewers. It has less to do with narrative—the “aboutness” of character identification considered in the next chapter—than with setting a scene: via visual framing; the blending of music and sound, or silence; the rhythms of glances and gestures. The aesthetics of mood informs experiences of being caught up in a film.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Attunement, of course, can also manifest itself in rather different ways. We might think of shared attachments that are fleeting and ephemeral: a catchy hit song, a new gadget, a summer movie, a style of wearing one’s hair, that at a certain moment seem vital, urgent, indispensable, only to fade into oblivion a few weeks later. There is a mystery about such waves of collective enthusiasm and the ways in which affinities are sparked. While capitalism plays an obvious part in promoting fashions and fads, economics can tell us nothing about why certain things “catch on” while countless others are met with collective indifference. Meanwhile, references to mood, ambience, atmosphere are now ubiquitous in everyday life as well as criticism-- shaping everything from the design of department stores and coffee shops to contemporary fiction, music, and experimental video art.[[68]](#endnote-68)

In thinking about attunement, I’ve tried to do justice to the stakes of the word: to describe modes of alignment that are affectively powerful yet hard to clarify or pin down. Attunement, in this sense, can work within yet also against the pressures of education, class, and culture; aesthetic attachments may or may not form along expected lines. And here I’ve considered differing rhythms of attunement as well as variations of scale; that it can be a matter of stability, but also surprise; that it can be collectively shaped but also idiosyncratic. Rather than presenting a general theory, I have tried to build up a picture by looking at examples and seeing where they lead us.

At the same time, I have also argued a thesis: that attunement is not the result of a break with the social—a flight into otherness, a withdrawal into interiority—but of things “coming together” in expected or unexpected ways. We often give art an exceptional credit for ushering newness into the world—as if it were the sole agent of change in a world of sameness, monotony, and soul-crushing predictability. That art can invigorate or surprise is not in dispute. Yet I have argued—with the help of Zadie Smith, Antoine Hennion, and others -- that the art work cannot act by itself; it needs allies, supporters, helpers. And crucially, that our experience of art is co-produced does not “take away” from the value of the work, but makes it possible. Mediation does not detract from the magic of art, but creates it. Hennion puts it beautifully in one of his eloquent descriptions: the “musician sitting down to the keyboard . . . knows there are his scales, his score, his touch, and the skills he has acquired, that without them he is nothing, and yet, even if he starts with these mediations, nothing is settled, the music will have to emerge; there is nothing that is automatic or guaranteed. . . . The surprise that peels away from the flux of things is the most ordinary of experiences.” [[69]](#endnote-69) What Hennion says here about playing the piano holds equally for the experience of listening to music, or reading a novel, or looking at a painting. “The surprise that peels away from the flux of things”—could there be a better way of describing the puzzle of our attunements?

1. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Erik Wallrup, *Being Musically Attuned: The Act of Listening to Music* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James English, “Prestige, Pleasure, and the Data of Cultural Preference: ‘Quality Signals’ in an Age of Superabundance,” *Western Humanities Review.* 70, 3 (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nicholas Cooke, *Analysing Musical Multi-Media* (Oxford: Oxford Universit Press, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Steven Connor, “CP; or, A Few Don’ts By a Cultural Phenomenologist,” *Parallax*, 5, 2 (1999): 17-31; Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology and Technoscience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009); and my references to neo-phenomenology in *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008). There is also Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: Th*e *Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013) and Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Chase up reviews\*\*\* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Antoine Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of* Culture, ed. Mark. D Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (Oxford: Blackwell’s, 2005), 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Antoine Hennion and Line Grenier, “Sociology of Art: New Stakes in a Post-Critical Time,” in *The International Handbook of Sociology*, ed. Stella Quah and Arnaud Sales (London, Sage, 2000), 344. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Claudio E. Benzecry; *The Opera Fan: Ethnograph of an Obesssions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200); Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds,* revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also Rita Felski, “My Sociology Envy,” <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/rita-felski-my-sociology-envy/> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Tony Bennett, “Habitus Clivé: Aesthetics and Politics in the Work of Pierre Bourdieu,” *New Literary History,* 38, 1 (2007): 206. Here Bennett is giving an overview of an argument by one of the most important critics of Bourdieu, Bernard Lahire, as articulated in his *La culture des individus: dissonances culturelles et distinctions de soi* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 2004). And see also Jeffrey C. Alexander, “The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu,” in *Fin-de-Siecle Social Theory:Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London: Verso, 1995) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Janice Radway, “What’s the Matter with Reception Studies?” in *New Directions in American Reception Studes*, ed. Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 339. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Zadie Smith, “Some Notes on Attunement,” *Feel Free* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 100. Further citations appear in parentheses in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Antoine Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste,” 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Mathew Ratcliffe, “Heidegger’s Attunement and the Neuropsychology of Emotion,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences,* 1 (2002), 289. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stanley Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002*),* 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Robert Escarpit, *Sociology of Literature*, trans. Ernest Pick (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Morris Beja*, Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), . 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bill Green, “Peak Music Experiences: A New Perspective on Popular Music, Identity, and Scenes.” Ph.D Thesis, Griffith University, 2017, 106. Similar descriptions of conversion to Springsteen can be found in Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among* *Springsteen Fans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an earlier, and still important critique of high versus popular culture oppositions, see Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Frith writes: “I would argue, at least as a starting premise, that in responding to high and low art forms, in assessing them, finding them beautiful or moving or repulsive, people are employing the same evaluating principles. The differences lie in the objects at issue (what is culturally interesting to us is socially structured), in the discourses in which judgements are cast, and in the circumstances in which they are made” (19). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 52; Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985*).*  [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Penguin, 2013), 36 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Geoff Dyer, *Zona: A Book about a Film about a Journey to a Room* (London:Vintage, 2012), 142-143. I am grateful to Namwali Serpell for bringing this book to my attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Dyer, *Zona,* 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?” *The Second Common Reader* (London: Harvest, 2003), 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness:On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Clark, *Sight of Death*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L’experience aesthetique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy* (New York: Beacon, 2002), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Rebecca Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch* (New York: Broadway, 2015), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbaté (Princeton. N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003), 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Carolyn Abbaté. “Music--Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry,* 30 (Spring 2004), 505-506. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Freedberg, *Power of Images,* 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Caroline Van Eck, “Living Statues: Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency,* Living Presence Response, and the Sublime,” *Art History*, 33, 4 (2010), 646. On Gell’s confusion of the agency of art with poisoned arrows and landmines, see Richard Layton, “*Art and Agency:* A Reasssessment,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9, 3 (2003), 447-464. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. James Elkins *Pictures and Tears: A History of People who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 248. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Antone Hennion, “Objects, Belief, and the Sociologist; The Sociology of Art as a Work-to-be Done,” in *Roads to Music Sociology*, ed. Afred Smudits (Springer 2018), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Actor-network-theory and after?* [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste,” 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)*,* 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford University Press, 2004), 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Janet Wolff, “After Cultural Theory: The Power of Images, The Lure of Immediacy,’ *Journal of Visual Culture*, 11, 1 (2012), 3-19. Where Wolff goes badly wrong is citing ANT as an example of an approach that ignores mediation. In reality, ANT is *premised* on mediation. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Peter De Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Annamarie Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions.” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 50 no. 1 (2010), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Alva Noe, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Clark, *Sight of Death,* 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Gilbert Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* vo, 46 (1945-46), 1-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste,” 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. See Isabelle Stengers, “Affinity,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment,* ed. Michel Delon (New York: Routledge, 2003); Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms*, trans. John Calder (New York: New Directions, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” *Thesis Eleven,* 36 (1993): 113-126; Dora Zhang, “Notes on Atmosphere,” *Qui Parle,* 27, 1 (2018): 121-155. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. David Wellbery, “Stimmung,” trans. Rebecca Pohl, *new formations*, 93 (2017), 6-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. For a thorough discussion of *Stimmun*g’s meanings in German Romanticism and its later excoriation, see Wallrup [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping; Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19. For other helpful accounts of mood, see, for example, Lauren Freeman, “Toward a Phenomenology of Mood,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 52, 4 (2014): 445-476; Ratcliffe, “Heidegger’s Attunement,” and the *New Literary History* special issue on Mood, 43, 3 (2012), ed. Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” *Rubric*, 1 (2010), 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. David James, “Critical Solace,” *New Literary History*, 47, 4 (2016): 481-504. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Anna Jones Abramson, “Joseph Conrad’s Atmospheric Modernism: Enveloping Fog, Narrative Frames, and Affective Attunement,” *Studies in the Novel,* 50, 3 (2018), 350. I thank Jessica Swoboda for bringing this essay to my attention. And see also Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2 (2009): 77-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Robert Sinnerbrink, “*Stimmung*: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood,” *Screen* 53, 2 (2012): 148-163. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. See Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmosphers of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), and also Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society*,2 (2009): 77-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Antoine Hennion, “From ANT to Pragmatism: A Journey with Bruno Latour at the CSI,” *New Literary* *History*, 47, 2-3 (2016): 289-308. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)