

## SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING THAT IS HERE AND THERE AND ALSO GONE

PRODUCTION OF PRESENCE: WHAT MEANING CANNOT CONVEY. By Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. Pp. 180, xvii.

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Contemporary academic work in the humanities and social sciences often examines the “cultural construction” of ideas, knowledge, religions, social relations, and collective identities, all of which are viewed as “discourses” that actively shape both human societies and the meaning of the natural world. This now-familiar “constructivist” theme influences the scholarly analysis of almost every human action and strongly asserts the pervasive cultural significance of the languages that intellectuals use to describe the social world. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht understands this kind of modern humanistic scholarship as well as any academic “insider” on either side of the Atlantic, but he has written *Production of Presence* to provoke a critical conversation about the theoretical assumptions that now guide most of the teaching and research in all of the humanistic disciplines. As a European-educated specialist in Western literature, a long-time participant in academic conferences, and a professor at Stanford University, Gumbrecht expresses a deep, transnational dissatisfaction with the ways in which his humanist colleagues analyze literary texts, the fine arts, and the material objects that people encounter in their daily lives.

According to Gumbrecht, the “Cartesian legacy” and other Enlightenment-era traditions have driven modern humanists to focus excessively on the “meaning” of nature, social institutions, or human cultures, and to devalue or even ignore the real “presence” of things that cannot be easily captured in words and symbols. Where people in earlier historical eras understood the importance of simply experiencing the physical world, modern academic culture assumes that serious intellectual work requires constant analysis and interpretation of a material reality that we no longer like to call “the thing itself.” Gumbrecht therefore wants to push humanists toward a new “relation to the things of the world that would oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects” (xv). He urges humanists to become more aware of physical stimuli that “appeal to the senses” on levels that can never be adequately explained through the “absolute dominance of meaning-related questions” (16). To be sure, he frequently acknowledges that humanists should continue to examine the meaning of natural and cultural objects, but he mainly emphasizes the need for a more “presence-based” approach to scholarship

and pedagogy—because “a stronger concentration on the presence component could enrich the analytical work within the humanities” (19).

#### I. THE LIMITS OF MEANING

Gumbrecht views his critique of the “meaning-based,” or “hermeneutical,” interpretive paradigm as a challenge to the humanistic analytical method that has dominated Western culture since the early Enlightenment and even the Protestant Reformation. This kind of thinking uses a “Cartesian” dichotomy to separate analyzing subjects from the objects in nature or society that they describe. The emphasis on what objects “mean” carries analytical work beneath or beyond the level of surface appearances, but Gumbrecht complains that such analysis tends to overlook the significance of experiential encounters with things that are actually present in the observer-analyst’s physical space. These real-world things include nature, art, music, beautiful objects, bodies, and other material realities that provoke human beings to explain or interpret their sensory experiences. To use a more philosophical language, one could say that Gumbrecht is dissatisfied with epistemological debates about how we *know* the world because these arguments have displaced our ontological interest in how we *exist* as human beings in material spaces.

Gumbrecht does not make the distinction between epistemology and ontology in precisely these terms, but he divides his own analytical categories into a philosophical dichotomy by stressing the importance of *being* more than the importance of analytical knowledge. He thus relies (ironically) on meaning-based, analytical categories that often appear in histories of Romanticism’s response to Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge and science. This Romantic critique of the Enlightenment gained wide influence in early nineteenth-century Germany and extended also into the twentieth-century work of Martin Heidegger (a philosopher whom Gumbrecht both criticizes and sometimes resembles). Like the most astute Romantics, Gumbrecht does not simply reject rationalist, Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge, science, nature, politics, or education, but he shares the deep Romantic concern with layers of experience, knowledge, being, and “presence in the world” that often disappear from a Cartesian approach to epistemology, meaning, and the subject/object dichotomy.

Gumbrecht also returns to early Romanticism by invoking aesthetic experiences and emotionally intense “epiphanies” that offer an escape from the humdrum knowledge of modern scholarship. Romantic thinkers celebrated the uncanny, sensory “presence” of nature that eludes mechanistic accounts of natural processes and the meaning of material objects. Gumbrecht, for his part, wants to go beyond the analytical levels of modern interpretation to focus also on something that is already “there” before we describe it in words. “Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be,” he explains, “we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin” (106).

Such themes may seem new and unconventional in an academic culture that interprets the “world as a text” or as a complex symbolic system, but

Gumbrecht's ideas actually come back to an early Romantic sensibility that was portrayed, among many other places, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous eighteenth-century novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Describing the sharp pain of unrequited love, the youthful Werther complains often about analytical people who focus their "inquiries" solely on the external world, whereas Werther prefers "to turn in upon myself and find a world there."<sup>1</sup> This introspective encounter with his own existence is closely linked to Werther's sensual, non-scientific engagement with nature, which (to use Gumbrecht's phrase) he likes to keep "close to our skin." Here, for example, is Goethe's account of what might be called the "presence effects" that accompany Werther's walks through a natural landscape:

I heard the birds around me bringing the woods to life with their song and saw millions of little gnats swarming in the sun's red light; saw how its last tremulous rays brought the humming beetles up out of the grass, and all this whirring and buzzing around me made me more aware suddenly of the ground beneath my feet, of the moss wresting its nourishment out of the hard rock, of the brush flourishing on arid, sandy slopes. . . .

Werther's response to the natural world, in short, does not depend on the analytical, interpretive methods of a subject/object distinction. Instead, as Werther explains it, "the magnificent creatures of this infinite world came to life in my soul!"<sup>2</sup> The subject and object thus merge in Werther's sensory experiences, which he then describes with the kind of non-Cartesian attitude and writing style that Gumbrecht finds missing in the modern humanities and literary scholarship.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Gumbrecht's argument simply restates an early Romantic critique of Cartesian philosophy or Enlightenment-style analytical thought, because he also criticizes the postmodern and poststructuralist theorists who believe they have broken from the Enlightenment tradition. One of Gumbrecht's insightful themes suggests that postmodern writers (despite their reputation for epistemological radicalism) have contributed to the further draining of "presence" from the world. Extending the intellectual habits of Enlightenment-era thinkers whom they explicitly challenge or reject, literary theorists constantly analyze the meaning of objects, words, and symbols, even when they put these symbols into postmodern play. Their anti-substantialist approaches to knowledge become linguistic interpretations of other interpretations, none of which really take seriously the sensory encounter with material realities. The postmodernists—like the Enlightenment materialists—do not explore "presence effects" in the objects, texts, or arts that they interpret. On the contrary, the anti-substantialist themes of modern literary criticism have produced countless studies of meaning and frequent critiques of the "naïve" Romantic belief in an irreducible presence that is really "there" in the epiphany of aesthetic experience.

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther and Selected Writings*, transl. Catherine Hutter, with a foreword by Herman J. Weigland (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1962), 28. Gumbrecht does not discuss Goethe or refer to *Young Werther*, so these comparisons with Goethe's themes come from my own historical reading of his argument.

2. *Ibid.*, 62.

## II. THE "PRESENCE" OF AN AUTHOR

Gumbrecht is therefore responding to a cultural context that has moved well beyond the early Romantic ideas that provide one of the historical starting points for his "post-poststructuralist," twenty-first-century approach to the humanities. He does not define himself as a Romantic, and "Romanticism" does not even appear in the index of Gumbrecht's book. The Romantic tradition is nevertheless a good place in which to situate the *Production of Presence*, and I will return to Romantic aspects of the book's historical argument and pedagogical proposals. I want to note first, however, that Gumbrecht draws upon a Romantic tradition of self-referential writing that uses the author's own life as an entry into the wider story about nature and culture. Gumbrecht challenges the conventions of academic scholarship by giving himself a strong personal presence throughout this book. A photograph of his head, for example, completely fills the cover of the paperback edition, so that a would-be reader immediately encounters the author's gaze before opening the first page. Gumbrecht presumably wants readers to know that a specific person is going to engage us in a discussion about the "production of presence," much as we might join a spirited dinner conversation about how we understand the material world or our knowledge of reality. Indeed, Gumbrecht refers several times to the pleasures of good dinner conversations, and his reflections on what might be called a "perfect day" (a "moment of intense joy" or "moments of concentration" and "moments of intensity" and "intense quietness" [135, 138]) could be compared to the famous conversation about an engaged life in Louis Malle's film, *My Dinner with André* (1983).

Gumbrecht also refers frequently to the conferences, friendships, travels, and other personal experiences that have shaped his evolving interest in the nature of "presence." He comments on his place in the generation of "1968," which struggled to reconcile politics, ethics, and social change with the study of literature; and although he now questions the optimism of that era's political aspirations for social change, his account of the quest for presence is reminiscent of a countercultural emphasis on experiencing or sensing the world rather than analyzing its meanings. When Gumbrecht describes his interest in dance, music, colors, bodies, and Zen Buddhist rock gardens, for example, he praises the senses in a language that evokes the apolitical themes of the late 1960s. More generally, the conversational style of the book (with frequent parenthetical asides or digressions such as this) seems to express the attitudes of an author who wants both his prose and his ideas to oscillate between "presence effects" and "meaning effects." The book opens with an introductory "user's manual" in which Gumbrecht notes that his text refers to a "scandalous number" of his own previously published books and articles, but he also defends this practice by agreeing with a friend's suggestion that "we cannot help being our own intellectual environment, and we even have to be the frames of reference for the work we are interested in" (xvi-xvii). The book thus includes more than enough autobiographical allusions to convey Gumbrecht's personal "frames of reference" and to suggest how his work exemplifies a Romantic memoir tradition that he does not explore in detail—perhaps because it comes too close to his own project.

## III. THE HISTORY OF PRESENCE AND MEANING

Gumbrecht's historical overview of the "two cultures" in Western history focuses on the transition from medieval Europe to the later eras of the Reformation, Cartesian science, and the Enlightenment. Although he notes that cultures are always concerned to some extent with both presence and meaning, Gumbrecht argues that medieval Europeans emphasized "presence effects," whereas modern Western culture has generally emphasized "meaning effects." Medieval Christianity, as Gumbrecht describes it, did not draw sharp distinctions between spirit and matter. He argues, for example, that the medieval sacrament of the Eucharist explicitly produced "God's Real Presence on earth and among humans," and assured believers that "Christ's body and Christ's blood could 'really' be made present again" through the "tangible" substances in the mass (28). Medieval theologians thus restated the ancient Aristotelian belief in the fusion of "material" and "immaterial" levels of reality, both of which came together in the objects and substances that people encountered in their daily lives. Rejecting dualistic conceptions of mind/body or spirit/matter, the medieval church used Aristotle to show that "transubstantiation" was the means by which the "substantial presence" of Christ took the form of bread and wine (29). More generally, medieval Europeans saw spirit and matter entwined almost everywhere, which meant that they were engaged with "presence effects" in their work and festivals as well as in their religious rituals. The engagement with "presence" suffused medieval culture, but it elicited little analysis of the interpretive or symbolic systems that constructed its meaning (to use the language of modern humanistic scholarship).

History never stands still, however, and Gumbrecht goes on to explain how early modern writers started to "interpret the world" as they found new meanings in nature and religion. Protestant theologians such as John Calvin redefined the Eucharist as a symbolic representation of Christ's body and blood rather than a mysterious process of transubstantiation, so that the sacramental bread and wine commemorated a sacrificial event without actually becoming the body and blood of Christ himself (29-30). This theological change was only one part of wider cultural transitions that included the emergence of a new science and a new conception of human knowledge. The new science portrayed a "knowing subject" who observed and interpreted the material world from an external position that could be defined through clear dichotomies such as mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter. A new kind of knowledge could therefore develop in the work of "disembodied observers" who described the "world as an assembly of purely material objects, including the human body" (27). According to the new definition of knowledge, a thinking person was expected to go below or beyond "the surface of the world in order to extract knowledge and truth as its underlying meanings" (27-28). Interpretation and analysis of meanings displaced the earlier encounter with "presence" as the main cultural task for scientists and philosophers, and by the eighteenth century the "meaning culture" was also reshaping politics and the organization of public life. Gumbrecht argues that a new belief in the analytical work of "disembodied minds" contributed to the development of a new public

sphere in which “parliamentary politics became as central and as emblematic a ritual as the Eucharist had been for medieval culture” (35). The search for meanings in both nature and human institutions gradually became more self-reflexive, so that an observer of the external world was expected also “to observe himself in the act of observation” (39). A new self-consciousness led the analysis of meanings into ever more complex investigations of interpretive systems, most notably in “the enthronement” of a “philosophical hermeneutics” among the late nineteenth-century theorists who shaped the emerging humanistic disciplines in modern universities. “The price that the humanities had to pay for this move was obvious,” Gumbrecht explains: “it was the loss of any non-Cartesian . . . type of world-reference” (43).

I have suggested that Gumbrecht’s concern with “presence” might be compared to early Romanticism or to Heideggerean philosophy, but his historical narrative could also be compared to Michel Foucault’s account of the transition to modernity in *Madness and Civilization* (1961): premodern European culture had valued various forms of direct, unmediated encounters with “presence” or non-rational experiences, but modern intellectuals gradually brought these mysterious experiences under the control of language, interpretation, and expertise. Gumbrecht does not align himself explicitly with Foucault (who remains too preoccupied with the “meaning” of discourses?), yet he tells a similar story about the non-rational experiences that have been devalued or disciplined in modern societies, and he shares Foucault’s tendency to de-emphasize the continuing influence of non-Cartesian themes in modern Western cultural life. But Foucault does not finally provide the critical perspective that Gumbrecht needs. Seeking an alternative to the Cartesian epistemological legacy, Gumbrecht seems to prefer Heidegger over other modern thinkers because Heidegger offers ontological arguments for “the bodily substantiality and the spatial dimensions of human existence” (46). In contrast to most twentieth-century theorists, including Foucault, Heidegger moved away from the problem of epistemology and returned in new ways to ancient questions about the nature of Being. Such questions are also important to Gumbrecht insofar as they give ontological directions for the future study and teaching of the humanities. Although he clearly rejects Heidegger’s political views and a possible “Heideggerean” label for his own project (xvi), Gumbrecht draws repeatedly on Heidegger’s conception of “being-in-the-world” to propose a new engagement with “presence” and to challenge the contemporary scholarly emphasis on “meaning” and “interpretations.” Heidegger stresses a complex human existence “that is always already in a substantial and therefore in a spatial contact with the things of the world” (66), and his attention to “substantial” things might help move the humanistic disciplines from the “linguistic turn” toward a renewed appreciation for the material aspects of human experience and cultures.

#### IV. A NEW APPROACH TO THE HUMANITIES?

Modern scholarship could conceivably make another epistemological transition because the current research paradigms emerged mainly in conjunction with the

development of modern research universities at the end of the nineteenth century; whatever has changed in the past can surely change again in the future. But how can we imagine a transition that heeds Gumbrecht's call for at least a partial step beyond "the enthronement of interpretation as the *exclusive* core practice of the humanities" (52)? The later sections of the *Production of Presence* deal largely with this question as Gumbrecht moves from his historical overview into various proposals for future approaches to humanistic studies. He suggests that scholars and teachers could achieve a better "oscillation" between a "meaning culture" and a "presence culture" if they would give more attention to "presence effects" in the arts and humanities (79). Although he definitely does not advocate a return to the Middle Ages or the complete abandonment of meaning as a problem for scholarly analysis, Gumbrecht wants the humanities to put more stress on the body, on the material reality of physical spaces and substances, on the powerful influence of unexpected events in human lives, and on the importance of extraordinary experiences that carry people out of the usual symbolic or sense-making systems of daily life.

The alternative academic pursuit of "presence" would thus have to challenge a pervasive "anti-substantialist" theory that views references to pre-discursive "realities" as naïve or simple-minded, but this is precisely the challenge that Gumbrecht proposes when he urges humanists to emphasize aesthetic engagements with art, music, dance, and theater. Returning implicitly to the themes of early Romanticism, he argues that the arts generate "moments of intensity" that take people beyond the usual linguistic frameworks of their culture and stimulate "something that our everyday worlds are not capable of offering us" (100). Aesthetic experiences foster an awareness of presence, a "focused intensity" and an "epiphany" of appreciation for beauty, for sounds, and for whatever the senses may encounter—the graceful movement of a great athlete, for example, as well as the emotionally charged performance of a great musician. Such epiphanies last for only a short time, yet the intensity of these experiences "may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things" (116). The epiphany may temporarily reduce self-conscious reflections about "meanings," and it might cause agitation or even a temporary loss of control over oneself, but it can also lead to "that specific serenity" that accompanies "the feeling of *being in sync with the things of the world*" (117). Teachers of the humanities should therefore try to help students experience "the things of the world in their pre-conceptual thingness" (118), an ideal that probably lies beyond the typical academic classroom, though it shapes Gumbrecht's pedagogical desire for a new emphasis on the arts at every level of a humanistic education.

This deeper engagement with the arts, however, must also include an interpretive framework that helps students understand how their response to "pre-conceptual thingness" or the emotional intensity of art, music, and dance also depends on "meaning effects" and the language of cultural traditions. Gumbrecht assumes that there is always "an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects," so nobody can simply escape from the languages, symbols, and historical contexts that influence their responses to things in the world. The meaning-obsessed

humanists nevertheless need to recognize that “within this specific constellation [of both meaning and presence], meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and that the—unbracketed—physical presence of things . . . will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension” (108). Gumbrecht, in short, wants humanists to understand what historians have often described as an interactive, evolving relation between the material world and language; material realities shape languages, but languages constantly shape the historical meaning of all material realities. This interaction changes over time, and there is often a “tension” in the oscillations between presence and meaning (13), but these oscillations will always remain at the center of what we know as “human experience.” Gumbrecht’s pedagogical insistence on the importance of “presence” may be more significant for teachers of art and literature than for historians because even the most fervent cultural or intellectual historians have rarely suggested that linguistic analysis should ignore the material realities of human cultures and lives. Gumbrecht’s prescriptions for literary scholars, however, imply that the emphasis on “thingness” and material reality challenges much of the contemporary scholarship within his discipline.

At the same time, Gumbrecht challenges every professional historian who sets out to interpret the meaning of archival documents and past events. Historians would (in his view) gain a new comprehension of the past if their research also referred more often to “presence effects” and material objects in past societies. Gumbrecht claims that a traditional belief in the “lessons of history” has been discredited because most people no longer believe that the past can be used to guide or predict the future. Similarly, a once-confident belief in the laws of history (represented, for example, by Marxism and other nineteenth-century narratives of historical progress) attracts few adherents after the horrors of twentieth-century revolutions, wars, and genocides. Historical knowledge can nevertheless remain vibrant and engaging, Gumbrecht argues, when it helps people understand the presence of the past in material objects. Hence, a lively new form of historical study now contributes to popular museum exhibitions of rare historical objects that provide a “*presentification* of the past, that is, the possibility of ‘speaking’ to the dead or ‘touching’ the objects of their world” (123). Here again one might connect Gumbrecht’s desire to evoke “presence” (in this case, the presence of the past and the dead) with Romantic projects in early nineteenth-century Europe. His approach to historical knowledge can be compared to the early historic preservation movement and to the Romantic belief that people could best understand history through direct encounters with the physical sites and material objects that were part of past lives. Although most historians assume that written texts, inscriptions, images, and other documents provide the most informative contact with the people of earlier historical eras, Gumbrecht suggests that the “presence” of others can be evoked more vividly through things than through words. “The desire for presence,” he writes in one summary of his historical themes, “makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects ‘mean’) if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds . . .” (124). Although he reiterates his emphasis on the oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects,

Gumbrecht encourages historians to become more interested in “conjuring” up the presence of the past through objects rather than through the study of documents that have been collected for interpretation. Sensory encounters with an earlier material culture, Gumbrecht argues, allow us “simply [to] enjoy our contact with it” (125).

Gumbrecht’s proposals for a new engagement with “aesthetic intensity” and material remnants shape his more general argument for a pedagogical method that would help students understand the complexity of all human cultures and lives. Modern states and economic institutions expect universities to train technicians and professional experts, but Gumbrecht wants humanists to defend an Ivory Tower where “we can analyze risky topics” and avoid the popular desire “to reduce their complexity” (127). The humanities should therefore provide a distinctive cultural sphere in which students pursue what Max Weber described as the academic willingness “to expose oneself to unresolved problems and unpredictable intellectual trajectories.” (129). Gumbrecht notes that Weber’s early twentieth-century vision of “unpredictable intellectual trajectories” differs from the objectives that most universities now promote in their distance learning programs and online courses. These new technologies usually diffuse information and technical knowledge rather than Weber’s exposure to “unresolved problems,” so Gumbrecht sees computerized pedagogy as another reason for humanists to defend the significance of “presence effects” in human cultures and thought. Great teachers, he explains, stimulate the creative thinking of their students, but the virtual reality on a computer screen cannot provide the kind of teacher–student exchanges that develop when people are present in the same physical space. Gumbrecht warns that this loss of presence is one of the dangers that humanists face in our age of virtual education, and the demise of traditional teacher–student interactions should provoke meaning-obsessed academic scholars to reaffirm the significance of “presence effects” in humanistic disciplines. The humanists, he writes, must “realize that our own teaching profession . . . has always been about real presence. But there is no guarantee that this will continue. The future of presence needs our present commitment” (132).

#### V. CRITICS AND THE PROBLEM OF PRESENCE

Gumbrecht’s summary of the Western historical transition to a “meaning culture” therefore concludes with theoretical and pragmatic arguments for a renewed emphasis on the inescapable reality of “presence” in past and present human lives. Gumbrecht wants his humanist colleagues to understand that something really is “there” in the world, but he knows he is swimming against a theoretical tide of literary scholarship. Prominent poststructuralist critics such as Jacques Derrida were by no means the only modern theorists to deconstruct traditional beliefs in a substantial “presence” outside of texts, language, or cultures; indeed, whole generations of humanist scholars have tried to send the “naïve” idea of “unmediated material reality” to the trash bin of intellectual history.

Gumbrecht thus concludes his book with a kind of personal “reply to my critics,” which again places the author’s autobiographical presence at the center of

the text. He particularly wants to refute critics who suggest that his desire for a new exploration of “presence” has transformed him into a religious thinker or would-be theologian. Gumbrecht insists that his project in fact excludes the most important aspect of traditional religious thought—the quest for a divine or transcendent Being beyond the physical world. Denying that he wants to pursue this kind of metaphysical search (which, of course, is not the only form of religious thought), he explains that he actually seeks a deeper consciousness of “thingness” and the material reality of objects in this world (145-146). The fascination with “things,” however, raises another possible critique because some readers may see the constant references to material objects as a new form of fetishism. Gumbrecht also rejects this possibility and notes that his discussion of things has nothing to do with an obsessive desire to possess, sell, or control them (144). Finally, it may be tempting for critics to describe Gumbrecht’s constant praise for “presence effects” as a rejection of the humanistic analysis of meaning, but this too, in his view, misinterprets or overlooks his account of the oscillating interaction between “meaning effects” and “presence effects.” Analytical concepts and the study of meaning remain essential for human thought, he repeats in his final chapter, even though his overall argument frequently reminds readers that it would be “important and helpful . . . to have *concepts that would allow us to point to what is irreversibly nonconceptual in our lives*” (140).

Gumbrecht thus urges humanists to appreciate these nonconceptual layers of human life and to recognize that the analytical “Cartesian dimension does not cover (and should not cover) the full complexity of our existence” (142). He nevertheless assumes that the Cartesian legacy will continue to influence our intellectual culture, so he seems finally to concede that a greater awareness of “presence effects” is perhaps all that humanists can hope to achieve in contemporary academic institutions. Some critics may describe this desire for presence as a “religious” attitude, but Gumbrecht himself is not much interested in drawing clear lines between theological and non-theological forms of thought. His own search for intense (but also quiet) engagements with presence leads him into Japanese theatrical traditions that are connected to various aspects of Zen Buddhism. Although he stresses that he is not one of those Western enthusiasts who glibly advocate Zen thought as the winding path to deeper levels of presence or being, he clearly believes that his responses to No and Kabuki drama could well exemplify what humanists need to recover in their teaching and in their lives. “Their presence on the stage,” he explains in a description of the actors at a Japanese theater, “ends up producing moments of silent intensity, that is, moments of extreme quietness and of extreme excitement” (151).

#### VI. THE HUMANISTIC ENCOUNTER WITH “THINGNESS”

Gumbrecht’s proposals for what teachers and students might experience through their study of the humanities would redefine most scholarly conceptions of reliable knowledge and the dominant academic concern with the cultural construction of meaning. Historians may well wonder, however, if Gumbrecht’s proposals carry significant implications for historical scholarship or teaching. As I noted

earlier, most historians believe that they encounter a past material, social, or human presence in the documents and sources they use to reconstruct the meaning of historical events. This connection between documents and social reality no longer seems as transparent as positivist-minded historians once assumed, yet most historical narratives still claim to evoke the presence of past people or social groups; we might use Gumbrecht's terminology to say that the work of professional historians typically examines the oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects. Historically-minded readers are therefore likely to raise questions that differ from the literary anxieties about Gumbrecht's revival of "presence," the return of theology or the danger of fetishism. When one places Gumbrecht in the broader context of modern intellectual history, for example, it becomes evident that he cannot really move outside the "meaning culture" of his own historical era. Gumbrecht himself recognizes that his own approach to things draws inevitably on the languages and "meaning effects" of modern academic culture; and intellectuals (like everyone else) cannot escape from the historical context in which they interpret the world. Giving new attention to "presence effects" appears to be a more limited project than Gumbrecht acknowledges because there is no way to describe presence without using languages that carry historically situated meanings.

Gumbrecht's call for more engagement with "thingness," however, could push literary theorists toward a renewed emphasis on the historical contexts and personal experiences that influence literature and the arts. Although he does not explicitly refer to what intellectual historians describe as the interaction between texts and contexts, Gumbrecht wants literary scholars to accept the common historical claim that texts, artistic objects, and philosophical theories all take on specific cultural meanings because of their location in diverse cultural contexts and their connections to the experiences of social life. Historians have increasingly questioned the traditional belief in "experience" as a stable grounding for historical knowledge or identities, and Gumbrecht could draw on these historical debates to expand his analysis of the relation between presence and experience.<sup>3</sup> Coming to Gumbrecht's book from their own recent analysis or reconsideration of experience, historians might well interpret Gumbrecht's account of "presence effects" as a familiar claim for the historical significance of human actions in *particular* places, times, and material contexts. The problem with Gumbrecht's argument for historians is therefore likely to emerge in his somewhat one-dimensional desire to encounter the past through objects rather than through written documents or other linguistic "testimonies" from past generations. Historians want to understand how human experiences gain meaning, but they also believe they can best understand past realities through the written records and thoughts that people produced in their own historical eras. Although material objects,

3. The critical rethinking of "experience" as a foundational category of historical thought has drawn on many of the poststructuralist and linguistic theories that also shaped literary criticism in the late twentieth century. See, for example, the influential critique by Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), 773-797, and the extended commentary on historical debates about experience in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 216-260.

architectural monuments, artworks, and oral histories also provide valuable information, the rigorous historical analysis of most human societies requires a careful study of written sources, and there would be pedagogical risks in teaching history mainly with things instead of texts or documents.

Gumbrecht's critique of the academic quest for complex meanings in texts and cultures also carries the (unintended) risk of merging with a wider popular skepticism about the work of intellectuals. We live in a culture that celebrates personal experiences and produces an endless stream of visual effects, advertising, and political sound bites. Most of these images are designed to provoke a sense of presence and intensity, but they do not encourage critical analysis of the historical, economic, and social forces that shape the meaning of shared cultural beliefs and collective identities. Gumbrecht apparently wants students and humanists to encounter "presence" in ways that also help sustain critical reflection, yet he does not explain how a deeper engagement with the non-linguistic levels of experience will add critical perspectives to a public culture that has already abandoned rational political debates and in-depth analysis of social and political problems. Gumbrecht complains that modern intellectuals always want to develop self-conscious, critical interpretations of everything from personal experience to public policies, so his conception of a "presence culture" seems to suggest a less analytical or critical-minded approach to the natural world and human history. In this view, humanists and other intellectuals should be more alive to the "flow" of things and less obsessed with analyzing what things mean, but this theme becomes a disquieting aspect of Gumbrecht's argument because it implies a clear preference for presence cultures over meaning cultures. Although Gumbrecht claims that he has no desire to denigrate the intellectual analysis of meaning, he clearly likes intellectual traditions (running from early Romanticism to the generation of 1968) that criticize the ways in which systematic analysis of nature and culture undermines the sensory intensity that people should experience in the epiphanies of a fully engaged life. I have noted that Gumbrecht's interest in earlier "presence cultures" resembles Romantic critiques of the Enlightenment and that his proposals seem less radical when placed outside the context of late twentieth-century academic culture. The Romantic critique of Europe's "Cartesian legacy" (like Gumbrecht's critique) did not completely reject analytical methods of interpreting the world, but it provided an influential warning (also like Gumbrecht) about the dangers of reducing everything to subject/object dichotomies and ignoring the emotional intensity that both nature and art can often provoke.

Gumbrecht's critique of modern humanistic scholarship avoids the excesses of anti-rationalist thought by stressing the oscillations between meaning and presence, but he de-emphasizes the role that language plays in shaping even the most intense encounters with material objects and the creative arts. Intellectuals who write about literature, politics, science, music, or philosophy must use language to evoke the multiple realities that Gumbrecht wants humanists to explore; the use of language, after all, is central to a human being's conscious presence in the world. Gumbrecht's emphasis on the complex interplay of presence and meaning nevertheless offers a useful reminder about "meaning effects" for historians who may still believe they can simply describe the material reality of past societies

and a useful reminder about the enduring influence of the material world for historians who use abstract languages to explain the meaning of philosophical traditions or literary texts. Historical reality, as we know it, will always be mediated through systems of language and meaning, but Gumbrecht rightly insists that language does not convey the full meaning and presence of the material world.

Although this claim may seem provocative or wrong-headed to the most linguistic-minded theorists in academic circles, Gumbrecht's belief in a world outside of texts is not a new idea for most historians or even for most modern advocates of the Romantic tradition. As historians and literary scholars continue to debate the complex relation between language and the material world, however, they can use Gumbrecht's themes to redirect humanists toward the arts, the importance of "thingness," and the experiential intensity of sensory encounters with the material world. Gumbrecht may be less radical than he imagines when he invokes the non-linguistic levels of being; and he could say much more about the possible dangers of a popular "experience-based" culture that devalues the critical quest for knowledge and the analysis of meaning. Yet his insistence on the historical significance of presence effects and material realities provides important theoretical and pedagogical alternatives to the cultural theories that swept across the humanities in a poststructuralist wave after about 1970. In contrast to many of the specialists in other humanistic disciplines, historians have generally tried to ride the linguistic wave without ignoring the material world through which it always flows and changes directions. Still, historians might well find relevant themes for their own research and teaching in Gumbrecht's forceful reminder that art, music, and material objects should remain a central component of education in our era of "outcomes assessment" testing, online courses, and information-based university degrees. Gumbrecht shows how the arts evoke meanings, emotions, and forms of "presence" that words will never completely express. Historians and other humanists can extend these themes for themselves and their students by continuing the search for ineffable levels of human experience that are as old as antiquity, but also as new and unexpected as the mysteries of strange art, haunting music, the Grand Canyon, or a Zen Buddhist rock garden.

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