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Susan Lanzoni

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Introduction: Emotion and the Sciences: Varieties of Empathy in Science, Art, and History

Susan Lanzoni

Division of Continuing Education, Harvard University
E-mail: smlanzoni@gmail.com

Emotion and feeling have only in the last decade become analytic concepts in the humanities, reflected in what some have called an “affective turn” in the academy at large. The study of emotion has also found a place in science studies and the history and philosophy of science, accompanied by the recognition that even the history of objectivity depends in a dialectical fashion on a history of subjectivity (Daston and Galison 2010, esp. chap. 4). This topical issue is a contribution to this larger trend across the humanities and the history of science, and yet is circumscribed by attention to a particular kind of emotion or condition for feeling: one centered not in an individual body, but in the interstices between bodies and things, between selves and others – what we call empathy.

“Empathy” most often is seen today as an identification with, or an understanding of, the emotional life of another person (and sometimes animals), but it is historically as well as in contemporary parlance a many-faceted concept. Its constellation of meanings is, however, loosely bound by its connection to an “other;” most often another person, but in line with its nineteenth-century meaning as Einfühlung, it could be a sculpture, an architectural column, a figure in a painting, a literary or musical composition, even the shape of a stimulus in a psychology experiment. In philosophical and psychological aesthetics of nineteenth-century Germany, Einfühlung was a process of “feeling into” aesthetic productions of many kinds. Beyond the domain of aesthetics, Einfühlung also became a means for historical and psychological understanding more broadly, stretching from everyday interactions, to epistemologies of history and the human sciences (Dilthey [1894 and 1910] 1977; Makkreel 2000; Theunissen 1986). A history of empathy, then, is part of the history of psychology, but one conceived as a broad cultural history stretching from practices inside laboratories to psychological theories

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1 For a selection of this growing literature, see Bourke 2003; Daston 1995; Dror 1998; Morawski 1997; Plamper, 2010; Reddy 2001; Rosenwein 2002; Stearns and Lewis 1998. On affect theory, see Massumi 2002; Clough and Halley 2007; Brennan 2004; Sedgwick and Frank 1995.

2 A selection of this growing literature includes Alberti 2006; Focus section “The Emotional Economy of Science” Isis 2009; Lanzoni 2006; Dror 2001; Riskin 2002; Vicedo 2009; Weidman 2011; Hirzig 2006.
This present issue situates a consideration of “empathy” along these broad transdisciplinary lines, asking what empathy meant to experimental psychologists and aestheticians at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as what it means to contemporary visual studies scholars, philosophers of mind, and social neuroscientists, among others. The essays in this collection were first presented at a widely interdisciplinary workshop, The Varieties of Empathy in Science, Art, and Culture held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in October 2008. Taking a cue from William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience and its compilation of a diverse phenomenology of religious experiences, both the workshop and this collection offer no one definitive account of empathy, nor a reduction of one kind of empathy experience into another. Each of the essays rather reveals a richly toned picture of what has comprised the concept of empathy at a particular historical and disciplinary moment. These moments include that of the experimental psychological sciences at the turn of the twentieth century and the late nineteenth century, modernist and contemporary theories of visual and theatrical aesthetics, intersubjectivity in Continental philosophy of the fin-de-siècle, and contemporary neurophilosophy, social neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. As these essays attest, the problem of defining empathy poses a hybrid interdisciplinary conundrum, with little agreement, then or now, as to how to circumscribe or define the phenomenon. Even today, empathy remains a highly complex and multi-layered phenomenon – and, as showcased in this topical issue, can be understood more comprehensively according to its variety rather than its unity.

Across this diversity of method and discipline, however, there are common structures, continuing questions, and persistent dichotomies. Because empathy has a place in both aesthetics and social understanding, it fluctuates between an expressive meaning and an epistemological one. Does it tell us about others, or in the end, just ourselves? Do we project ourselves into the other and in so doing, obscure the reality of the other’s experience, or does empathy allow us to grasp an authentic sense of another’s experience? As a term of relation, does empathy tend to privilege the self or the other? And finally, is there a stress on difference or similarity across the empathic divide? As we move through these diverse cases, these overarching questions form common threads, evidencing that the dimensions of empathy are still being charted in today’s academy and beyond.

**Empathy in the History of Psychology**

Surprisingly, the history of empathy in psychology begins not with interpersonal understanding, but with aesthetic appreciation. Some essays in this topical issue

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3 For histories of psychological terms with meanings that resonate in broader cultural domains, see Smith 1992; Harrington 1996.
unearth the unfamiliar late nineteenth-century formulation of empathy as *Einfühlung* in German theories of aesthetic response. The German art historian Robert Vischer made extensive use of the term *Einfühlung* (feeling into) in the 1870s, as an aesthetic response whereby an art object evoked actual or incipient bodily movements and accompanying emotions in the viewer, which were then projected and experienced in the object itself. An intent perceiver could empathize or feel into form as well as content. Empathy thus entailed enlivening, kinaesthetic, or vitality effects resulting from the projection of implicit movements in a perceived line, shape, or architectural form. At its apogee, *Einfühlung* was the projection not only of movements, but of one’s own personality into the object – what Vischer called the creation of a “second-self.”

By the fin-de-siècle, *Einfühlung* had become a keen topic for debate in the overlapping fields of German philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology, and the conversation soon extended beyond national borders. The schematic lines of the debate centered on whether *Einfühlung* engaged actual bodily movements and sensations in the viewing of art (Vernon Lee, Clementina Anstruther-Thomson), inner, imitative movement (Karl Groos), or a more abstracted projection of the ego’s striving into the object of contemplation (Theodor Lipps). Artists began to make use of the concept, among them, August Endell, the German designer and architect whose sculptures grace the cover of this issue. Endell studied philosophy with Lipps, and became a proponent of Jugendstil design, arguing that line and form were themselves powerful conduits of feeling.

In 1906, the journal *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* was inaugurated to gather work on the new science of aesthetics. The journal published numerous articles on *Einfühlung* hailing from Germany, England, North America, and France. Only a year later, the art historian Wilhelm Worringer published his very influential dissertation, *Einfühlung und Abstraktion*, in which he narrowed the scope of empathy to the harmonious projection of the viewer’s own feelings of vitality into artworks, closely associating it with the Greco-Roman tradition and with figural and representational painting (Worringer 1908).

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4 On nineteenth-century German aesthetics and empathy, see Allesch 1987; Müller-Tamm 2005; Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994; Jarzombek 2000; Koss 2010, chap. 3.

5 Vischer, *Optical Sense of Form* (1873), as cited in Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994, 108.

6 Some of the many participants in these debates were the philosophers and psychologists, Theodor Lipps, Vernon Lee, Moritz Geiger, Johannes Volkelt, Paul Stern, Karl Groos, Oswald Külpe, and the architects August Endell and Hermann Obrist.

7 Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1897; idem 1912; Groos 1902, 1909; Lipps 1900; [1903a] 1923; [1906a] 1920). For the context of some of these debates, and a focus on Lee’s contribution, see Lanzoni 2009.

8 Endell 1898. For more on Endell’s intellectual project, see Alexander 2010.

9 The psychologist and philosopher Max Dessoir founded the journal which became a lively venue for debate and discussion by phenomenologists, philosophers, psychologists, and art historians concerning the bodily, emotional, mental, and metaphysical aspects of *Einfühlung*, among other topics. Articulating its new mission of *Kunstwissenschaft*, or a science of art, it set its sights beyond art history and connoisseurship to the articulation of a scientific approach to aesthetics in an international context.
Amidst growing international debates on aesthetic *Einfühlung*, Anglo-American psychologists saw the need to find an English equivalent of the term. The historian of science, Susan Lanzoni, tells the largely untold story of the complex provenance of the term “empathy” in her contribution to the present issue. The term first appeared, misspelled as “enpathy” in a 1908 philosophical review, attributed to the psychologist Edward B. Titchener (Ewald 1908, 407). The British director of the Cornell laboratory for Experimental Psychology from 1894–1927, Titchener is most often given credit for introducing the term “empathy” to English speakers given his own extensive description of the translation in his lectures on the *Experimental Psychology of the Thought Processes* of 1909 (Titchener 1909). But that same year, his colleague, the philosopher and psychologist James Ward at the University of Cambridge, was also credited with the translation (Myers 1909). Both psychologists turned to the Greek “empatheia” for the translation, but Ward saw empathy as a kind of personification, in an anthropological sense, whereas Titchener hewed more closely to its kinaesthetic meanings. The appearance of multiple translations points out the ubiquity of the concept as well as the immediately divergent meanings of the new English term.

If *Einfühlung* bridged the worlds of aesthetics, philosophy, and the history of art, “empathy,” newly translated, functioned in Titchener’s laboratory no longer principally as an aesthetic term, but as another element in his sensory and imagist psychology. Lanzoni shows how “empathy” was closely connected to the kinaesthetic roots of *Einfühlung* in Titchener’s introspectionist psychology. In the laboratory practice of introspection and as defined in Titchener’s textbooks, empathy was a kinaesthetic image, or an image of movement. Observers reported bodily feelings or movement as projected into the stimulus objects of the laboratory experiments, sometimes culminating in what they described as a merger between themselves and the object. The empathic tendency assimilated the peculiar or the unusual to the self, and rested on the ontological disparity between mind and things. Empathy, in this early twentieth-century laboratory version, then, traded in the strange rather than the familiar.

Titchener’s Harvard counterpart, Hugo Münsterberg, the German born and educated director of the Harvard psychology laboratory, drew on the discourse of aesthetic *Einfühlung* as an important element in his dynamic, oscillatory model of absorption and distraction in film, as Robert Brain expounds in his contribution to this issue. In a richly layered essay, Brain, a historian of science, explains how Münsterberg’s theory of the photoplay or film (one of the earliest, published in 1916), had psychological, philosophical, and material components, and emerged from the psycho–physiological laboratory tradition of experimental aesthetics, practiced vigorously at Harvard. Münsterberg’s theories thus stood at a distance from the popular, clinical psychological theories of film effects such as suggestion, double-consciousness, and hysteria.

But *Einfühlung* and its projective effects, according to Münsterberg, formed only one pole of the spectator’s experience of film. Distraction was the other key element,
and for this insight, he drew on an early experiment on distraction conducted by his students Gertrude Stein (a topic of Adam Frank’s essay) and Leon Solomons. Brain tracks Münsterberg’s theory of the “peculiar oscillation” of film as a to-and-fro motion, or as a stereoscopic reading of film: from knowledge of flatness to perception of depth; from still images to perception of motion; from riveting attention to distraction. But Brain also reminds us of Münsterberg’s Fichtean commitments: that the laboratory world of causal, mechanical relations was one to which the free, transcendental self had submitted voluntarily. The cinema-watching self was akin to this transcendental “I,” who knowingly projected itself into the images on the screen, and yet also intermittently experienced its own immersion in the images. Because this spectatorial “I” was also the transcendental “I,” Brain conjectures that Münsterberg held out hope that an audience entranced by film might also glean this philosophical truth.

**Intersubjective Empathy: Difference and Similarity**

If *Einfühlung* was debated in aesthetic circles in the late nineteenth century, it soon became an important element of interpersonal understanding. The German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps was one of the main exponents of the aesthetic theory of *Einfühlung*, and among its types, he included the capacity to understand the expressions of others (Lipps 1903b, 187–191; Lipps 1906b, 66). His contemporary, the philosopher Max Scheler, however, took *Einfühlung* to be solely a form of self-projection and not a way to grasp other minds at all. Scheler criticized Lipps’s theory for: “offer[ing] no grounds for assuming the existence of other selves, let alone other individuals. For it can only serve to confirm the belief that it is my self which is present ‘all over again’, and never that this self is other and different from my own” (Scheler 1970, 242; see also Scheler 1923, 236). Although Scheler leveled this critique nearly a century ago, the tension between the poles of self and other, similarity and difference, has remained lodged in empathy’s definition and continues to resonate in the philosophical literature.

Just this tension emerges in the philosopher Shaun Gallagher’s assessment of the contemporary neuroscientific and psychological literature on mind-reading, empathy, and simulation, in this collection. He takes to task the dominant simulation-theory explanation of empathy, which postulates that, consciously or unconsciously, we use ourselves as a model to imagine another’s situation. Among other problems, it results in, as Gallagher calls it, a diversity problem, an unmistakable echo of Scheler’s critique of Lipps. In Gallagher’s words: “when we project ourselves imaginatively into the perspective of the other, when we put ourselves in his or her shoes, do we really attain an understanding of the other or are we merely reiterating ourselves?” Adding to this

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10 Scheler offered a kind of “inner perception” in place of *Einfühlung*, which he deemed a direct apprehension of the moods and feelings of others.
problem, Gallagher asserts that we do not often match the other’s same emotional state as the simulationists argue, nor can simulation be based on automatic mirror neuron activation, for when we engage in the deliberate imagining of another’s experience, we would then have to deliberately activate our own mirror neurons. Gallagher’s assessment of current neurophilosophical understandings of empathy concludes that a simulation model over-emphasizes similarities across persons and obviates differences.

His solution is to see empathy as a capacity to entertain narratives. Narrative competency fully develops when the child is two to four years of age, when she begins to participate in, as he puts it, “inter-subjective sense making.” At this point, a child can use narratives to frame another’s experience, explaining how it is we understand experiences not like our own, thus solving the diversity problem. Empathy is not just a matter of simulating another’s experience but entertaining rich narratives that provide reasons for the ways others act the way they do. For Gallagher, then, empathy is no simple thing, and to perform it adequately, one must take into account a “massive hermeneutical background.”

If empathy, for Gallagher, is a complex interpretative task, for the philosopher of the social sciences, Stephen Turner, in contrast, empathy describes the everyday, even commonplace understanding of another – what he calls “weak empathy” in his contribution to this collection. Drawing on the history of philosophy, Turner argues for the “epistemic power of empathy,” which in its weak form provides a basic capacity to understand others, whose responses seem to be in some sense like our own. If Gallagher stresses difference, then Turner invokes empathic similarity in his assessment of the philosophical meanings of Evidenz, or that which is self evident, in the work of proto-phenomenologist Franz Brentano and the sociologist Max Weber.

Turner explains that Franz Brentano gave the philosophical idea of Evidenz an important intersubjective feature: what was evident, also had to be evident to others. This conception of Evidenz necessitated some kind of intersubjective assent, which comprises Turner’s notion of “weak empathy.” This low level phenomenon, a primal or even preconscious level of understanding others, is foundational to social life. Challenging those who posit underlying, shared structures for understanding others, Turner asserts that such tacit structures are not necessary, because a simple, empathic basis for the common and self-evident possesses sufficient explanatory power. Following another’s thought can thus offer a kind of direct intelligibility. Drawing from the history of philosophy, Turner counts empathy as a commonplace, natural phenomenon.

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11 Gallagher adapts this terminology from Bruner and Kalmar 1998.
The Social Neuroscience of Empathy

One would be hard pressed to discuss empathy today without invoking the ubiquitous references to mirror neurons, which now extend to popular arenas quite beyond the borders of neuroscience. Empathy, postulated to be a hard-wired emotional response, has been of keen interest in contemporary neuroscience, following the discovery of mirror neurons sometime around 1996 in the Parma laboratory of Giacomo Rizzolatti (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, and Fogassi 1996; Di Pellegrino, Fadiga, Fogassi, Gallese, and Rizzolatti 1992; Fadiga, Pavesi, and Rizzolatti 1996).12 First studied in macaque monkeys, mirror neurons fire not only when a monkey performs a movement, but also when a monkey watches another perform the same movement. This process has been understood as a neural “as if” response: seeing another perform the action is enough to get the monkey’s brain to fire isomorphic neurons. It has been deemed a perception-action mechanism, as representation for perception and motor action are entwined in the firing of individual neurons. The mirror neuron system, examined in numerous human neuroimaging studies, and now in some single cell recordings in human patients, constitutes for some theorists, a neural substrate for imitative behaviors at a minimum, and at a maximum, the basis for a complex emotional and cognitive empathy.13

Debates on the foundational quality of mirror neurons for empathy now pepper the wider literature on social neuroscience. More significantly, the value and impact neuroscientific data for the humanities and social sciences has become a contentious topic for humanities scholars, philosophers, affect theorists, and psychologists, among others.14 What seems clear is that the “social brain” already relies upon an interdisciplinary assortment of scholars for its understanding (Decety and Lamm 2006, 1147).15 The neurobiologist Jean Decety has argued for the inherent interdisciplinarity of the new field of social neuroscience, which includes cognitive, evolutionary, and social psychologists. This expansive approach to the “social brain” is precisely at issue for the anthropologist of science and medicine Allan Young in his contribution to the present issue. He attends to the evolutionary “back-story” of contemporary social neuroscience, which weaves together theories of mind-reading, empathy, and the

12 For early work on biological models of empathy, see Brothers 1989.
13 It was only in 2010 that single mirror neurons in humans were identified in epileptic patients (see Keysers and Gazzola 2010). A small selection of neuroscientists and psychologists who argue that mirror neurons underlie empathic abilities, understood as a form of simulation include Gallese and Goldman 1998; Gallese 2001; Wicker et al. 2003; Keysers et al. 2004; Iacoboni 2008, 2009; Iacoboni et al. 2005. This literature has also been repeatedly invoked in popular accounts, for example, Blakeslee 2006 and Brooks 2011.
14 See the recent debate on the merits of affect theory and the uses of neuroscientific findings for the humanities: Leys 2011a, 2011b; Connolly 2011.
15 The journal Social Neuroscience, edited by Jean Decety, was inaugurated in 2006 to speak to this interdisciplinary audience.
emergence of self-consciousness into an account of how we became what we are as humans.

Young begins with a searching review of mirror neuron research of the past fifteen or so years, arguing that the significance of mirror neurons has been exaggerated in popular accounts, and that some go as far as to see mirror neurons as being intrinsically empathic. He then describes the neo-Darwinian narrative that grapples with the evolutionary puzzles of altruism and the large size of the human brain, which have propelled ever-changing accounts of human nature. The problem of the connection of altruistic behavior to natural selection, for instance, was answered by the benefits of kin selection, along with the positive effects of reciprocal behavior, like grooming. The problem of cheaters in a system of reciprocity in turn gave rise to the social behavior of altruistic punishment (which would punish cheaters for the good of all) along with the evolution of the positive sentiments of gratitude and sympathy.

Young argues that our capacity for altruistic punishment is closely entwined with our facility for empathic cruelty. In recent neuroscience experiments, punishment of this kind activated pleasure centers in the enforcer’s brain, so that punishers were able to actively imagine, as well as to take pleasure in, another’s punishment (de Quervain et al. 2004; Takahashi et al. 2009; Singer et al. 2006). Empathy, as Young paints it, and as recent neuroscience seems to indicate, has two sides – both pro-social and cruel. This complex evolutionary backstory, as Young narrates it, provides not only an underlying evolutionary narrative for social neuroscience research, but more significantly, a model for the way we understand ourselves today.

**Spectatorship and Visuality**

If empathy was born in aesthetic theory as *Einfühlung* in the late nineteenth century, it has found a place there again today, but transformed. In German circles, it is no longer *Einfühlung* but *Empathie* and is invoked in visual studies as a form of immersion, and as a way of mediating the gap between spectator, art work, and film (Wulff 2003; Vaage 2007). As theorized by the visual studies scholar Robin Curtis in her contribution to this issue, spatial immersion resonates strongly with the historical conception of *Einfühlung*, an overlooked source of aesthetic theorizing. She draws upon the rich aesthetic meanings of *Einfühlung* as an embodied, kinesthetic experience, often described in multimodal ways, in the work of Hermann Lotze, Robert Vischer, and Theodor Lipps. Although the birth of film and the heyday of *Einfühlung* theory coincided in the mid-1890s, the language of film did not borrow the terms of *Einfühlung* in a direct way (although Brain shows in his essay, that at least implicitly, Münsterberg drew on such concepts) (Curtis 2009). Nevertheless, Curtis demonstrates the embodied and synaesthetic qualities of historical *Einfühlung*, and argues that it provides an enlightening stimulus for contemporary analyses of the filmic experience of space. Early *Einfühlung* theory offered a complex kinesthetic
encounter with both form and space that can challenge the neatly separated poles of representation and abstraction that so often infuse contemporary discussion of aesthetic experience. Curtis’s contribution evidences how nineteenth-century psychological models of aesthetic experience, along with more current models of the intermodality of experience, can be brought to bear on the embodied ways we imaginatively construe the spatial qualities of visual experience.

If Einfühlung theory shares some similarities with a modern conception of immersion, it has also occupied an important pole in twentieth-century debates on spectatorship, which have fluctuated between a relation of distant theatricality, on the one hand, and one of emotionally driven participation, on the other. Brecht’s alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) moved against empathy as a kind of mindless absorption – an automatic, often unconscious, identification that took place between a sentimental theater-goer and a powerful dramatis persona (Brecht [1932] 1992). In Brecht’s epic theater in contrast to the Aristotelian variety, stage directions, set design, and even the emotive qualities of the actors were all designed to deflect the empathy of the spectator and to prevent one from being carried away.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of engagement or distance, the literary scholar Adam Frank illuminates diverse psychologies of emotional connection in the writings of Gertrude Stein, in his contribution to the present collection. Although Frank sees Stein’s poetics as a refusal of a simple identification or empathy in line with a Brechtian approach, this does not mean an outright refusal of emotion. Stein rather speaks of “loose emotional coordinations” between audience and players that can induce reverie and lead to new knowledge. Frank relies on Silvan Tomkins’ psychology of emotion to characterize the excitement that Stein employs in her construction of portraits of others. By coordinating her own movements of excitement to match those of another, Stein claims to capture the other’s personality. This is one model of knowing and understanding others, centering on an empathic synchronization of the emotion of excitement.

Stein ultimately models her play-writing on the experience of landscape, as Frank points out, leaving questions of narrative aside. As Stein intones, “what is the use of telling a story, since there are so many, and everybody knows so many.” Her approach allows for a fluid emotional coordination between the viewer and theatrical landscape, accentuating the many elements of play production: lights, sound, bodily movement, costume, and the dynamic quality of the actors’ interaction. Stein’s writings not only became a tremendous influence to the performance avant-garde, but as seen here, can continue to offer a compelling modernist picture of affective exchange.

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16 The philosopher Jacques Rancière contrasts Brecht’s epic theater and Artaud’s theater of cruelty as exemplars of these two poles: “Modern attempts to reform theatre have constantly oscillated between these two poles of distanced investigation and vital participation” (Rancière 2009, 5).

17 Walter Benjamin described Einfühlung as a method of historical identification, often with the victors of history (see Benjamin 1969, 256).
If the postulated biological substrate of mirror neurons has driven the recent neuroscientific fervor on empathy research and a greater attention to empathy concepts of late, this shift has been balanced by a number of significant continuities in the depiction of empathy over the past century, as revealed in this topical issue. Is it the self or the other, similarity or difference that is emphasized across the empathic divide? Is empathy embodied, or is it primarily a meeting of minds? What epistemological function does empathy serve? The historical and contemporary debates brought into conversation in this issue are evidence that empathy has been, and might only be fully understood from an interdisciplinary framework. Indeed, empathy as a psychological concept is not reserved for the hallowed halls of the academy, laboratory rooms, or philosophical tracts, but winds its way into many corners of our lives, from our aesthetic reactions to our everyday understanding of others.

At the same time, the selection of these particular essays is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive on the theme of empathy. Barely touched here, but discussed at the workshop were the range and limits of empathy for the grasp of traumatic and victim experiences in art and narrative; discussions of numbness and a perceived cultural lack of empathy; the capacity of empathic connection in multicultural therapeutic contexts; the philosophical interplay of empathy and the imagination; empathy in neuroaesthetics; and psychoanalytic notions of empathy. Yet, as an attempt to articulate the many historical and contemporary dimensions of feeling into, projecting, and understanding the life of others, objects, performance and visual display, this issue marks a beginning effort to chart an expansive territory.18

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18 This is not to say that there are not other “beginnings” of this sort, particularly in the area of social neuroscience (see Decety 2011; Decety and Ickes 2009; Coplan and Goldie 2011; see also the volume exclusively on the German aesthetic concept of *Einfühlung*, Curtis and Koch 2009).
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