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Affect

Bettina Papenburg

Affect – a palpable intensity, the atmosphere in a room – is transmitted below the threshold of conscious perception, manifesting as bodily tension and relaxation. Affect is involuntary, non-conscious, contagious, and to a certain degree automatic. Thus affect is at odds with the conception of the rational subject, a clearly bounded entity, the self-contained individual that is markedly differentiated from others, which for centuries has been assumed to be the sole agent capable of critical thinking. Rather, the very workings of affect hint at connectedness, at interaction, at interdependency. Or, as philosopher Teresa Brennan puts it in her reflections on the transmission of affect: “The origin of transmitted affects is *social* in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without. They come via an *interaction* with other people and an environment. But they have a *physiological impact*.” (Brennan 2004, 3, emphases mine) As Brennan aptly notes, affect flows and circulates between people, effectively mediating between our shared biological dispositions and culturally shaped meanings. Affect takes hold of the person in the interaction with other people in a shared space, most palpably perhaps in the synchronization of kinetic movements of bodies collectively attuned to vibrations or frequencies. Affect is in essence communal, yet tangible for each of us as energy that enhances or diminishes our capacity to act.

20 The “affective turn” evolving since the early twenty-first century in fields as broad as philosophy, media studies, cultural studies, and gender studies signals an intense scholarly engagement with affect. The label announces and propels a thorough investigation of the complex feedback loops connecting people and environments, which bring forth specific moods facilitating a thought **process** and enabling meaningful social actions and political activism. Scholars working in this vein challenge the tradition that links the production of knowledge to rational thinking alone, to value-free neutrality and to disembodied objectivity, a tradition that hinges on the exclusion of affect.

Affect, however, is not solely positive and certainly not always politically subversive – indeed there is a growing body of scholarship in feminist and queer theory that engages the “negative affects” such as pain, hate, fear, disgust, anger, depression, and failure. Ever so often affects are mobilized for uncritical ends – when, for instance, television commercials entice viewers to attach specific positive feelings to consumer goods, or when video games require immediate sensorimotor responses from players. Affects are even employed for achieving destructive purposes – as in “scarless torture,” a practice used in the “war on terror” in detention camps like Guantanamo Bay, which, without leaving visible traces on the victims’ bodies, severely diminishes the victims’ capacity to act. In the German context, the affective mobilizing of the masses creating a group mob as in, for instance, Hitler’s speech at the Nuremberg Rally, or most recently by the Pegida movement, an anti-immigration movement gathering forces stretching from the far right to the center of German society. In light of these examples, the question that arises is then: how can affect work as a critical political force?

In an essay entitled “The Autonomy of Affect,” published in *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), philosopher Brian Massumi develops an elaborate theory of sensation that adequately accounts for the sensing and feeling body. However, one of the drawbacks for a more encompassing understanding

of affect's critical potential is that Massumi, following the line of Baruch de Spinoza, Gilbert Simondon, and Gilles Deleuze, insists on sharply differentiating between affect and emotion. Massumi sees emotion as contained by the subject and affect as existing in excess of the subject. He stresses the "irreducibly bodily and autonomic nature of affect" while asserting that an "emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an **experience** which is from that point onward defined as personal" (Massumi 2002, 21, bold added). While affect is a force or intensity flowing through subjects, an emotion becomes a property of the subject. Yet, as Massumi admits, affect and emotion are closely related: while emotion contains affect, emotion does not exhaust affect.

Different from yet closely related to thinkers following Deleuze's line of thought, literary scholar and queer activist Ann Cvetkovich employs the terms "*affect, emotion, and feeling ... more like keywords, points of departure for discussion rather than definition*" (2012, 5, emphases in original). Cvetkovich uses "affect in a generic sense, ... as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways (whether as distinct specific [sic!] emotions or as a generic category often contrasted with reason)" (2012, 4, brackets in original). Rather than pursuing the task of definition, Cvetkovich is interested in the question of how affect works politically. The political project Public Feelings that she herself pursues together with fellow thinkers and activists, testifies to affect's critical and **transformative** potential and, indeed, its political force.

Public Feelings, a "cell" of a larger project entitled Feminism Unfinished launched by academics and activists at the University of Texas in 2001, with various spin-offs across the US, hinges on participants professing, sharing, and publically declaring their feelings, including negative feelings, such as feeling depressed. In the context of this collective endeavor, it became apparent that depression, generally understood as a medical condition, is

22 not an individual malaise, but more accurately that it might be a **symptom** for larger social and political structural inadequacies, and that there could be alternative cures than simply treating it in a medical sense. Depression – which Cvetkovich envisions as “a form of being stuck” (2012, 26), a (conceptual) blockage, an impasse – is widespread among academics, and, as the group Public Feelings asserts, must be grasped as an effect of the political conditions, including the working conditions in academia, the marginalization of the humanities, doubts about the social relevance of one’s work, and – in the case of the US – the stifling consequences of the fact of being citizens of a nation at war.

In her personal politics and practices, Cvetkovich found remedy to depression in a combination of various forms of mental, emotional, and bodily movement – her antidote to inertia –, enabling flexibility and creativity, in a turn to the embodied senses, specifically to the haptic and the tactile, and in new ways of relating to temporality to challenge ideas of progress by emphasizing retrograde and lateral moves. In terms of academic research and writing practices, she suggests “alternatives to critique and new ways to describe feelings” (2012, 24). Her book *Depression: A Public Feeling* offers an example for what she proposes, since it combines classical methods, such as conceptual work, close reading, and narrative analysis, with the genre of the “critical memoir” (a term proposed by Jill Dolan), to the effect that portions of Cvetkovich’s book take the form of a depression diary.

On the one hand, the political employment of affect, the sharing of feelings that is, in the Public Feelings project is a very interesting and inspiring example for how processes of political transformation can be initiated on a micropolitical, affective plane, and for how negatively coded emotions traditionally linked to the medicalization of depression can be effectively recoined. It seems very promising, as this brings such feelings into position for launching a critique of social institutions and for mobilizing them against the more subtle social pressures. However, the turn

to spirituality, handiwork, and do-it-yourself work, which is the cure that Cvetkovich ultimately proposes on the other hand, is not utterly convincing.

Literary scholar Lauren Berlant, a member of the Public Feelings project and co-founder of Feel Tank Chicago – a related project “organized around the thought that public spheres are affect worlds at least as much as they are effects of rationality, rationalization, and institutions”¹ –, advocates a more persuasive, more intellectually-attuned stance. In a reflection on her intervention at a conference on political feeling (2007), hosted by Public Feelings, Berlant lays out her thoughts on acting professional in the academy: “It’s our job to show up and think, to show up and think with others, to collaborate using what we know and what we don’t know to push concepts beyond where they were when we entered the room” (2009, 133). Here Berlant responds to some academics who proudly consider themselves amateurs and situate themselves as politically progressive as a consequence. These scholars dismiss professionalism on the grounds of the understanding that acting professional equates with acting bureaucratic, elitist, inauthentic, authoritarian, and mediocre. Taking issue with this way of self-positioning, Berlant argues for accepting and confronting “the complexities of ambition and the desire for distinction and the role of discipline and normative skill-building in teaching” (2009, 133). According to Berlant, academics should face – and not evade – these desires and aim to foster an attitude that values merit and rigor. Berlant’s reflection about the **responses** to her credo and the aftereffects of her intervention is a perfect example for how addressing head-on the anxieties that come with academic **work** can facilitate a collective thought process about the working conditions in academia, the question how to situate oneself vis-à-vis those very conditions,

1 Wikipedia entry on Feel Tank Chicago, January 29, 2015: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feel_Tank_Chicago.

- 24 and the reinvention of engaged academic work reaching out to groups of workers in other fields.

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