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# Attuning to What? The Uncanny Revival of the Aestheticization of Politics

Mathias Fuchs

One of the key notions posited in Brian Massumi's "Keywords for Affect," a supplement to *The Power at the End of the Economy*, is "affective politics." Massumi establishes a close connection between affect, aesthetics, politics and the body, stating: "Aesthetic politics brings the collectivity of shared events to the fore" and he continues to say that this is a "multiple bodily, potential for what might come." The problem German readers will encounter with these lines is that whenever "body," "community," and "future" (Körper, Gemeinschaft, Zukunft) are mentioned in one sentence, they'll immediately be reminded of what Leni Riefenstahl demonstrated with her film *Triumph des Willens* (1935), the infamous propaganda film of the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, Germany. Memories of the dark side of an aestheticization of political

**phenomena are roused. Many 1930s German directors, writers and painters were in line with Riefenstahl in being apologetic of the regime, often not explicitly, but via an atmospheric side by side with the ones in power. The underlying ideology of Riefenstahl's films, related texts, paintings and movies was what Walter Benjamin warned us of when he said: "Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art." This article tries to relate Massumi's concept of attunement and affective politics to earlier speculations about "affective attunement" and to put into a historic context the attempts to replace rationality with bodily intensities.**

*Political thought flourishes with noncognitive primary consciousness.*

*Brian Massumi (2014, 40)*

The discourse on affective transformations is not only a debate about the psychology of precognitive consciousness. It is also a debate about perception and aesthetics, and it is a discourse touching the very sensitive matter of the politics of affect. Far from an enlightened perspective of politics as rational decision-making or from a Habermasian *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) there are authors suggesting that politics might be triggered, influenced and shaped primarily by affects, and not by critical reason and communicative action. The notion of "attunement" is crucial for an understanding of affect-based politics. I will therefore try to trace back the concept of "attunement" to philosophical, psychological and esoteric proposals of the 1940s and 1950s.

It comes as a surprise that a school of philosophical thinking—comprising Massumi, Erin Manning and some of Massumi’s students—vehemently points out that affects have to be distinguished from conscious thought or emotions and that affect precedes psychology and the social in the formation of politics. These authors deliver quite a few hints—often vague and ambiguous—suggesting that in some undisclosed and mysterious way, affect might be accountable as the key driver for politics and the social. This is surprising against the background of an understanding of politics as a rational process and the hope that society is malleable and can be improved via enlightened thinking—or alternatively via communicative action (Habermas 1981). In his *Keywords* Brian Massumi talks about “affective politics” (2015b, 110), appropriates Alfred North Whitehead’s formula of “intensity of contrasts,” and interprets his own creation of “affective alter-politics” (111) as an affect-led form of politics. Massumi seems surprised by his own reasoning. How could the very same types of affect that William James assigned to “the neural machinery,” and that the latter held responsible for various emotions (1884, 190), now take the role of a driving force of politics? We can follow Massumi, when he muses: “This does not sound very political” (Massumi 2015b, 111). He continues: “at least not in the sense of what we usually take as political.” There is no doubting that Massumi is right again. We understand politics as collective action in the field of social relations, of power and ownership, and of access to the means of production. We are not always conscious of these relationships and ownerships, but we can try to think about them. Politics are different to belief systems or incomprehensible ventings. Politics can be talked about. Massumi’s texts are valid proof of that. But then Massumi arrives at a conclusion that hardly anyone since the days of Leni Riefenstahl would have dared to propose. “Aesthetic politics brings the collectivity of shared events to the fore ... a multiple, bodily potential for what might come” (111). Who would not be reminded of and alarmed by the proximity to manipulative propaganda and filmmaking in the style of *Olympia—Fest der Völker* (Riefenstahl 1938) or *La Nave Bianca* (Rossellini 1941)? Massumi promotes what Walter Benjamin warned us of almost a century ago. For Benjamin “the aestheticization of politics” was a key ingredient of fascism, and “the politicization of aesthetics” would rather have to be looked for. Massumi displays an interest in—and a lack of critical distance to—processes that have been used for propaganda and manipulation when he says: “Bodies can be inducted into, or attuned to, certain regions of tendency, futurity, and potential” (Massumi 2015b, 108). Petteri Pietikainen comments on this under-complex understanding of the body when he assesses what the consequence for politics would be if bodies were that simple: “Politics is

reduced to a tweaking of the *selection fitness function* and nothing more” (Pietikainen 2017, 20).

I guess Massumi writes with the best of intentions, and when he mentions former-President Barack Obama’s success in using affective politics he does not hide his sympathies for the latter. It is worrying, however, that after the publication of Massumi’s *Keywords*, another US President used affective politics for less desirable goals than the ones the Obama administration had. Massumi’s positive assessment of “the Obama campaign’s recueing of fear toward hope” (2015b, 109) would need a corrective statement today, pointing out that the recueing of fear into hope can under certain circumstances be closely followed by a recueing of hope into horror. His statement about the “reservoir of political potential” would now require more thought and a warning about the reservoir of political destructiveness of affective attunement of the collective bodies.

### **Affect Attunement—Divine Light**

The *Keywords*’ considerations of attunement refer to Daniel Stern directly, and to Deleuze/Guattari indirectly, via the concept of “microperceptions” (Massumi 2015b, 107). The notion of “attunement” has roots in experimental psychoanalysis and in French philosophy. Guattari followed Stern’s observation of children at an early age experiencing their environment via an empathic contact with a caregiver before they are able to use language; he calls this mode of perception “affect attunement” (Stern 1985, 138–61). The term is most often associated with said philosophers, but it has deeper roots in less prominent esoteric schooling and dubious doctrines. If we follow the line of influences that the notion of “affect attunement” has been built upon we will not only find Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Daniel Stern, but also healer-gurus like Lloyd Arthur Meeker and the contested pseudo-scientist Albert Ackerley.

In his para-scientific writings, Meeker (1907–1954), who called himself “Uranda,” proposed that affective attunement would be the core mechanism for energetic medicine (1988). Meeker and his spiritualistic group of the *Emissaries of the Divine Light* taught a healing practice based on bodily and ethereal energies. In the training-school classes at the cult’s Sunrise Ranch, potential healers had to recognize their skills of moving the invisible forces within the triangle of God–Patient–Chiropractor. The *G-P-C* method was hoped to be an effective tool to compensate for misalignments and suppress pain. Originally based on physical patient–therapist contact, the esoteric healers soon reached out for further possibilities. Ackerley, who

first worked as an assistant and marketing manager for Meeker, started experimenting with a tele-therapeutic approach. Originally claiming that he could establish the *G-P-C* triangle without touching the patient, he extended the effective radius of his alleged healing rays to a few meters and then to transcontinental distances.

The intellectual climate of the USA in the 1940s and '50s privileged theories based on energetic flow, touch-free transmission, and remote effects. This added to the Emissaries' chance to establish their cult as a scientific business. In the fifth decade of the twentieth century, tele-healing groups, ham radio communities, the Manhattan project and cybernetics research flourished, received widespread attention, and were nourished by hopes and fears that there is "something up there in the air." For a collective phantasm, it does not matter whether the remote actors up there are German airplanes, radio transmission stations, or Divine energy beams.

### **Teleological Society—Travelling by Telegraph**

One should add that the 1942 "Cerebral Inhibition Meeting" in New York City, an important predecessor conference to the series of *Macy* conferences, introduced hypnosis as a central topic and discussed it extensively. Hypnotic communication was examined as a teleological process for a non-material, long-distance control technique. A year after the "Cerebral Inhibition Meeting" Ross Ashby and Norbert Wiener named the group, consisting of the formerly mentioned and Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, Warren McCulloch, Frank Fremont-Smith and others, as the "Teleological Society" (Masani 1997, 490).

Wiener's fantasy of teleporting an architect through space is characteristic of the obsession with non-corporeal travel. In *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) Wiener suggests a thought experiment: if we can code the structure of human design decisions as a message, then the work of an architect who is occupied with planning a building in a far-away land can be sent through telegraph lines. In some way this would be equivalent to reconstructing the human architect at the remote location. In Wiener's words: "... the idea that one might conceivably travel by telegraph, in addition to travelling by train or airplane, is not intrinsically absurd" (Wiener 1967, 139–40).

## Hearing Voices

The possibility of intercorporeal communication was a challenge and a tempting thought for scientists Ashby and Wiener and for esoteric healers Meeker and Ackerley. It was—and still is—the core to paranormal experiences. Lisa Blackman (2010) points out that the spiritualist practice of hearing voices is based on the possibility of telepathic transfer.

One example that perplexed me at the time ... was the particular affective workings of practices within the UK Spiritualist Church, which enacted voices as modes of telepathic transfer; that is, the understanding that voices can be heard and transferred between members of the group and even between the living and the dead. (Blackman 2010, 164)

In the case of hearing voices, an inaudible voice has to be made perceptible by the spiritualist community members and it therefore has to be made physical. The process is a materialization of an imagination or an expectation. This materialization stunt can only be performed with a method at hand called “attunement,” as Blackman explains:

The voice-hearer would subtly shift their attention and focus to feelings, sensations, rhythms and movements which would allow them to attune to the more pre-verbal and intensive dimensions of the voices. This attunement might take place within an associated milieu known as the ‘development circle’, which connects the group members such that they might experience a flow of energy within the room or particular setting. ... The voices ... become shared rather than isolated singular experiences. This is a mode of ‘being-with’ that mediates the voices such that they might be considered intercorporeal and plural where distinct boundaries between the self and other, inside and outside, and material and immaterial dissolve. (164)

In the 1940s the idea of immediate transmission had become a popular trope. It was in the very same decade that Wiener proposed to teleport architects and that the *Emissaries* healed over distances. In addition, during the 1940s, secret services from both the West and the East experimented with telematic technologies. We cannot but be bewildered when we remember that *KGB* agents cut rabbit throats in Leningrad to scientifically measure the delay of a reaction of the twin rabbit in Vladivostok. The idea was that some information might travel faster than light and that an immediate transmission could pave the way to powerful Cold War weapons. US military research played with science fiction scenarios as well. Experts

in wireless communication, telematic control and nuclear ray technologies played at the border of what we consider scientific today. It is therefore also comprehensible that the *Emissaries of the Divine Light* suspected that the CIA tried to hijack and then shot down the airplane of their leader Lloyd Arthur Meeker in an attempt to better understand the secrets of attunement.

In university research during the 1950s, army facility projects and secret investigations in top-level labs run by the CIA and KGB converged with esoteric experiments of long-distance attunement. This idea seems to have been prevalent then: killing, healing, economic operations, urban planning, and technical networking can happen without physical contact and possibly without delay. These processes might be executed ubiquitously and regardless of the material conditions of communication.

In the 1970s and 80s these ideas seemed to lose their attraction, but a revival of remote technology conceptions can be observed at the end of the 20th century. Massumi uses a vocabulary that picks up the technological terminology from what was cutting edge in the 1950s. Immediation, he explains, “has more to do with complex field effects, and their wave-like amplification and propagation, than with point-to-point transmissions,” and he continues “[a]ttunement’ refers to the direct capture of attention and energies by the event” (Massumi 2015a, 115). Waves and energy are no longer considered paradigmatic categories when we think about connectivity today. The electrical engineers’ vocabulary has been superseded by notions from computer science: the cloud, ubiquitous computing, the World Wide Web, telemedicine, and Virtual Reality. These are the structural backbone of a connectivity without limits. On the material level, drones, surveillance cameras and mobile phones complement the setting well. Popular quasi-scientific fairy tales like the one about the butterfly who flaps his wings and instantly causes a hurricane on the other side of the planet are taken out of context and prepare a paradigmatic basis for seeing “connectivity” (Ascott 2000) or “superconnectivity” (Ascott 1988) almost everywhere.

## **Affective Politics as Aestheticization of Politics**

Of course, Massumi’s theoretical approach, his carefully chosen wording and his political ethos make him stand apart from the *Emissaries of the Divine Light*. In many ways Massumi’s theory is quite different from Meeker’s. The former is wise enough to insist on “actual differentiation” and he points out that “thinking-feeling” is never a homogenous phenomenon (Massumi 2015b, 111), as the spiritualists and the fascists would have liked

it to be. Still, it is not easy to pardon Massumi for referring to Stern's and Guattari's notions of attunement without even mentioning the irrational undertones and connotations. It is one thing to dream about the possibility and foster hope in the prelingual and presocial connectivity of bodies and "masses." This might be some form of late-hippie romanticism. It is another thing to advocate attunement for politics: this can be a politically dangerous suggestion in a time when a vague notion of an "alter-politics at the collectively in-braced heart of every situation" (109) could play into the hands of political actors keenly waiting to replace solidarity, critical discourse and socio-political consciousness with collective attunement. Those who build politics upon "a collective event ... distributed across those bodies" (109) promote what Walter Benjamin wisely warned us of: the aestheticization of politics.

Benjamin reverses the aestheticization in the field of politics when he says:

The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life. ... Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art. (Benjamin [1936] 2002, 122)

Do Massumi's "affective politics" focus on expression and forget about the structures of ownership Benjamin makes us aware of? It is difficult to imagine how political economy could fit into the system of an affect economy. The former makes sense if there is the possibility of studying relationships rationally. The latter is concerned with nonconscious processes. In his book *The Power at the End of the Economy* (2015c), Massumi stresses the importance of "nonconscious dimensions" and the individual's affective potential to "resonate" with others on infra-individual and trans-individual levels. In the end such a project has to arrive at a point where the aestheticization of economic and political relations replaces the analytical approach.

Kerstin Stakemeier proposes that an aestheticization of politics is based on a concept of aesthetics that is "not specifically reactionary. It is rather specifically progressive in terms of capitalist self-conception. It allows for a fusion of the aesthetic aura of immediateness with the administrative distance of the political" (Behrens 2015, n.p.). She also lays out how the evasiveness of the aesthetic smoothly combines with the post-Fordist achievements of continually growing, friction-free productivity. Following this line of thought, it would come as no surprise that "affective alter-politics" are a model for theorizing about society that is shaped

exactly as society is. It lacks negativity. It is most closely aligned and assimilated with the object of investigation: capitalist society. It replaces thought with vibes. It celebrates instinct as a productive force (Massumi 2014) and places “the human on the animal continuum” (3). According to Massumi we have to move beyond “our sole proprietorship of language, thought, and creativity” (3). This might be a noble and most humble gesture, apologizing for the anthropocentric overestimation of exclusively human abilities to think and act rationally. But to conclude from this that we have to “see what the birds and the beasts have instinctively to say about this” (3) will lead to a big disappointment. The birds and the beasts will not solve our problems. When Massumi wonders *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (2014) he might have called for bad advisors. The animals will be exploited and destroyed by the same system that exploits us. It would be better to rationally analyze this system with language, thought and creativity than to ask our fellow victims, the beasts, about their instinctive thoughts on the matter.

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