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Affect Theory

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Abstract

This chapter reviews important publications in affect theory from 2016. This chapter is divided into the following sections: 1. Introduction; 2. Utility of affect, which focuses on *Obstruction* (Nick Salvato); 3. Environmental affect, which focuses on *Mirror Affect* (Cristina Albu) and *Ambient Media* (Paul Roquet); 4. Gesture, which focuses on 'Touching the Button' (Lyndsay Reckson), *The Minor Gesture* (Erin Manning) and *Gestures of Testimony* (Michael Richardson); 5. Reflections. In publications this year, there has been a significant interest in intersubjective and interpersonal affect which relates to the phenomena of shared emotions as well as the politics of affect in the emergence of studies of gesture. Since this is the inaugural chapter on affect theory for YWCCT, the opening introductory section offers a note on the rise of this dynamic and evolving field.

1. Introduction

The last twenty-five years has seen a rise in interest in the study of affect, with greater attention to the non-linguistic aspects of experience, since the so-called 'affective turn' in critical theory. 2016 saw two major developments in affect theory, with the launch of two new book series that will continue to develop this fascinating area of critical and cultural theory: Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism, edited by Adam Frank and Joel Faflak, which included *Shame and the Aging Woman* by J. B. Bouson, and *The Seduction of Fiction* by J. Vernay both in 2016; and from Duke University Press, *Thought in the Act*, edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, and beginning with Erin Manning's *The Minor Gesture* (about which I say more below).

Recent developments in neuropsychology and neurobiology¹ have suggested an importance in the role of affect in cognition. Consequently, it is now widely accepted in

the field of neuroscience that the cognitive functions of the brain do not operate in isolation, but that our affective and cognitive functions work in tandem, responding to and shaping one another. There is no such thing as ‘pure’ thinking; all cognition comes with feeling. Not only is both cognition and affect present in our subjective experience of the world but affect shapes cognition and vice versa.

In thinking about affect, it is important to separate out the diverse ways in which this is embedded in aesthetic experience and experience of human life from the subtlety of background mood to the affective aspect of movement and action, and its significance for the political and ethical. Ultimately, what is talked about in talking about ‘affect’ is felt stuff, which ranges from an intentional state (a feeling towards, about, in relation to something other) to something that forms the background of felt experience, which shapes our subjective experience and engagement with the world. There is, of course, wide disagreement as to whether emotion and affect are distinct categories but, at the very least, there is significant overlap and so it makes sense to include the emotional within the category of affect.

In the study of emotion, affect, and mood, there has been a move to connect phenomenological analysis of affect with findings in neuroscience. For example, in Albu’s discussion of the use of mirrors in art in her book *Mirror Affect*, she connects the aesthetic experience afforded by certain artworks with the phenomenon of ‘mirror neurons’ (neurons which fire whether performing an action or observing another performing that action). A further example of this kind of bringing together of neuroscience with the phenomenology of affect is found in Blud’s *Literature Compass* article ‘Emotional Bodies: Cognitive Neuroscience and Mediaeval Studies’, which although drawing on the now out-dated somatic theory of emotion from Damasio (that holds that bodily response is prior to the emotional response), presents an interesting exploration of how the paradigm of the embodied mind can be a useful frame in medieval studies: ‘While Damasio’s work might suggest for mediaeval studies an intriguing sense in which affective piety offers a different understanding of rationality, the inspiration of the mystic’s (embodied) soul offers a response to the cognitive scientist’s wish for an “embodied mind”’ (p. 463). Likewise, in *Obstruction*, there is the theme of connecting affect and cognition, and seeing the two as working together. It is therefore no surprise that in affect theory there is greater acknowledgement of the entanglement of feeling and thought.

2. Moving beyond emotions to affective phenomenology: Salvato

Philosophical approaches to affect have largely focused on emotion defined as having intentionality, that is, they have an object of focus, for instance, to be frightened is to be frightened *of* something (and for oneself or someone), but there is growing interest in related phenomenological states which lack such object of focus, which can be thought of in terms of ‘background’ feeling or mood. Two books published in 2016 provide significant analysis of such non-intentional states, Salvato’s *Obstruction* and Roquet’s *Ambient Media* (which I discuss in the next section).

In *Obstruction*, Salvato explores a particular kind of affective experience, what he calls (*a la* Lars von Trier) ‘five obstructions’ of embarrassment, laziness, cynicism, slowness, and digressiveness – paradigmatic affective states for holding cognition and affect in opposition. Salvato argues that such obstructions can actually provide a fertile environment for creativity and productivity. However, these affective states are not always of value: the experience of embarrassment can lead to dismissal or suppression and, all too common, the experience of feeling distracted (particularly by the internet, as Salvato discusses), can prevent deep engagement. What Salvato offers here is an excellent analysis of each of these affective states to show that the picture is more complex. There is a large body of literature on the way in which emotion and thought might interact, but little on how emotion, and more broadly affective aspects of experience can help or hinder thought: ‘*Obstruction* works by torquing the phenomena toward the project of rethinking thinking itself’ (p. 14). For instance, although laziness can lead to lack of productivity, it also has the potential to free up space for a different kind of thinking and reflection. Salvato’s exploration of these ‘five obstructions’ offers a way of uncovering new modes of thought which are products of these often overlooked (and often assumed to be unhelpful) affective states.

That is not to say that he takes these affective states to be misunderstood; he acknowledges that they can get in the way of certain projects. This is precisely why Salvato labels these affective states *obstructions*. In other words, they act as constraints which could represent a block to cognition but, as the literature on creativity suggests, such constraint can in fact enable creativity provided one is willing to *work* with such obstruction²: ‘To embrace obstruction is to scale the wall not in order to surmount it but

to cling to it, in such a way that the subject of this “intensif[ied]” obstruction and the obstructive wall itself change, perhaps move, precisely because of the clinging and the more granularly textured feeling of, up, and against the wall that the clinging enables’ (p. 4). To embrace obstruction as something of value requires a change in relation to such obstruction; instead of trying to break down or overcome the barrier, attention is played to the obstruction itself. It is important to note that Salvato wants to distinguish the overcomable, temporary *obstacle* from the fixed, durable *obstruction*: to treat the obstruction as obstacle will lead to frustration.

The study begins with a chapter on embarrassment (both being embarrassed for oneself and feeling embarrassment on behalf of another). Quoting Litvak, Salvato points to the potential utility in acknowledging and embracing what we find embarrassing in our own tastes:

‘we might in fact set a better example, and be better critics,’ by mobilizing an Adornian sophistication that would likely give rise to embarrassment in the face of say, Tori Amos’ music. Ironically, this sophistication may itself ‘cause ... embarrassment’ in the intellectual landscape in which ‘retaining our expensive tastes [rather than] ... repudiating them’ has been routinely indicted for its potential (though by no means guaranteed) collusion with classical hauteur. (p. 35)

For Salvato, allowing a place for embarrassment in critical inquiry allows for greater scrutiny of taste – it is not that humans proceed with existing biases in place, but that they grant unsophisticated judgments of taste a role to play. This is what Salvato calls ‘cringe criticism,’ which helps move the critic beyond an institutionalised practice. In order to develop this approach to criticism, he asks the following pertinent questions: ‘what is embarrassment, exactly? What distinguishes critical embarrassment from other versions and varieties, chiefly everyday or “garden” ones, of the emotion?’ (p. 36) and what does such ‘cringe criticism’ – that embrace of the embarrassing – open up in critical practice that would have otherwise been overlooked? For Salvato, finding a place for the embarrassing helps to move beyond an institutionalised critical practice and helps to look again at judgments of taste across the board.

Ultimately, as Salvato notes, embarrassment is a relational feeling; a concern for what others think about oneself. Embarrassment – related to empathetic response – is

something that can be felt for others or oneself. It is, in its inherent relationality, an intersubjective feeling. He asks: 'But how is this feeling, constituted by the play of self and other, more specifically inflected when it is experienced in the field of criticism? By what mechanisms or relays does critical embarrassment communicate its local difference from an embarrassment globally understood?' (p. 45). 'Cringe criticism' emerges through personal engagement with art and literature with strong awareness of the gaze of another. Judgement is therefore problematised by being set in the context of other critical judgements, both of the self and those of others.

Through his central example of the music and performances of Tori Amos, Salvato demonstrates the creative potential of embarrassment in how 'living with the embarrassment' can shape what follows, that is, the need to reflect back to the site of embarrassment as opposed to moving 'swiftly on'. Embarrassment, therefore, leads to self-reflection and desire for improvement, and can act as a catalyst for creativity.

Following this discussion of embarrassment, Salvato then moves on to provide an analysis of laziness. In doing so, he chooses to focus on a subset of 'loafers and slackers', namely, 'those who philosophize "doing nothing" and who, in the process, are not only doing *something* but are also *making* something: thinking in transmittable form, almost always a form of writing' (p. 67). His interest here is in those who embrace the obstruction of laziness to produce something that could only have come as a product of such laziness. Salvato talks about the oddity that laziness can seemingly produce *something*; a nothingness that breeds a kind of productivity. In the examples he offers, he argues, there is 'an unorthodox series of makings of equally unorthodox pieces of writing that form the material proof that "doing nothing" may consistently yield something (an essay, pamphlet, a book)' (p. 75).

As a companion to the chapter on laziness, Salvato proceeds to focus on slowness, which he views as a form of 'stretching, dilating, expanding' time (p. 97). In providing an analysis of both laziness and slowness, Salvato directly connects affect with temporality. Experience is played out in relation to time – whether the feeling of spending or making time, both are fundamentally feelings with a temporal dimension: 'the transition from laziness to slowness, one in which spending time must give way to the fraught effort of saving it' (p. 94). Slowness conceptualised in terms of taking time

and making time thereby draw attention to the temporality of affect. And what is the relationship between the two?

Slowness or taking time has a qualitative as well as quantitative aspect: Salvato gives the example of reading a quotation slowly, which does not merely involve taking a certain number of seconds to read that correspond to the number of words it contains, but allows a reading practice defined by a kind of careful attention. For Salvato, slowness can never be totally separated from quantification, since the experience of time necessitates some form of quantifiable measurement. Salvato explores slowness in relation to cinema, through the examples of *Old Joy* and *Wendy and Lucy*, both directed by Kelly Reichardt. Cinema as a medium is inherently related to time; it has a fixed duration but can give rise to the feeling of making time, and the opening up of an attentive space that makes that fixed duration feel dilated, which provides a greater depth to our engagement.

Salvato also provides a useful analysis of digression, again noting the way in which such an obstruction can either be something which blocks productivity or leads to a different kind of productivity. He writes: ‘Whether a given digression is trivial or consequential, benign or shattering, to be given as a digression means, in its substance, to have given the step aside from an explicit or implicit course already underway’ (p. 157).

At first glance, digression seems at odds with Salvato’s characterisation of slowness. Whereas slowness seems to enable a deep kind of attention, digression appears to lead to a loosening of attention or surface-level attention. We can see this most clearly at the beginning of his analysis where he refers to Young’s study of distraction (see pp. 159-160) and understanding of digression as a form of distraction. This presents distraction as the idea of being pulled from some worthwhile and particular activity, something that is of value and that demands attention.

However, this affective mode also has the potential to offer a valuable form of cognitive activity, one that is exploratory in a more encyclopaedic manner in the search for linkages between things rather than a deep, meditative attention on one thing. In his discussion, he opens the space to think not only of unhelpful digressions but where digressiveness can itself be valuable. He recasts it not as a mode of inattention but as “the art of strolling”. He writes:

One enlivening challenge of digressiveness—a mode of stepping aside that I distinguish from the conceptualization of distraction as variously ‘dragging away,’ ‘tear[ing] apart,’ and ‘pull[ing] asunder’—is to treat it not as an obstacle or impediment to focusing attention on what we should value, per Young’s rallying call, but as an obstruction that calls generatively into question our schemes of (e)valuation and forces us to recalibrate them, such that the relatively valuable and relatively (putatively) valueless are brought into a closer proximity, an altered choreography, perhaps even a dialectical interplay with another. (p. 160)

His comments here on digression equally apply to the other affective states he analyses. Whether laziness or cynicism, it seems there is a way to utilise such obstructions for creativity and productivity, but only by embracing them as offering valuable constraints, and not by treating them as presenting obstacles to dissolve or overcome. *Obstruction* makes a clear argument for the use value of affect for cognitive activity, especially, creativity in thinking.

3. Environmental affect: Albu, Roquet

A recent development in the philosophy of emotion and affect has been the response to the emergence of research from cognitive scientists on social cognition and the phenomenon of shared emotions.³ In short, the phenomena of shared emotion can be captured as minimally involving two people who are in a similar affective state, with the same object as the focus of their emotional response and are aware of the other as responding in a similar way. Such developments in cognitive science and the philosophy of emotion have paved the way for a shift in thinking about affect as going beyond the individual experience and engagement with the world to something interpersonal and intersubjective. Although the idea of interpersonal emotions is not new, with a large body of research focused on empathy and sympathy, shared emotion taps into a powerful form of intersubjective emotional response which is able to bind people through a kind of affective connection. In this section, I will focus on two notable contributions in 2016 to this theme of interpersonal and intersubjective affect, *Ambient Media* and *Mirror Affect*, both of which reflect on affect as something related to space. Both books therefore explore affect’s environment-shaping function and assess how this relates to interaction and

sharing amongst people, whether navigating a busy cityscape together, or working together in interacting with artworks and creating an aesthetic experience.

Roquet's *Ambient Media* focuses its discussion on developments and interactions with ambient music, video, novels and feature films to explore the way in which such ambient media is able to shape experience of a shared world. In defining what counts as 'ambient', Roquet quotes Erik Satie on 'furniture music,' which helps to make clear the environmental affect that characterises the ambient:

we must bring about music which is like furniture, a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometimes fall between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralize the street noises which so indiscreetly enter into the play of conversation. To make such a noise would respond to a need. (Satie as quoted by Roquet, p. 39)

Ambient music and video is crafted around repetitions, edited together and looped so that it can function in the background in the way that a piece of furniture can shape the feeling of space in a room.

In ambient video, creators/producers bring patterns and rhythms from one environment into another, from waterfalls to jellyfish. As Roquet notes, whereas ambient music (discussed in the early part of his book) is meant to sit in the background and not be subject to direct attention, ambient video on the other hand demands a moving in and out of focus of our attention. This discussion acts as a bridge to talking about ambient novels and feature films in the latter part of the book, where the ambient cannot sit in the background but is the focus of our attention as something directly acting as 'mood regulation' to frame our engagement with characters and narratives. In particular, ambient cinema or 'mood cinema' makes the atmosphere of central importance by allowing the mood to provide the logic of the film (or part of it) rather than relying on narrative to move things forward coherently, somewhat similar to the way in which David Lynch's mood sequences function, for instance, the 'Club Silencio' sequence in his *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Roquet argues that ambient media has the potential to enhance our experience of time and space, in particular, public space, and therefore can shape and enhance environments encountered in daily life. Roquet therefore places emphasis on the affective environment that ambient media shapes in the context of Japanese culture, which is apt for such exploration given the cultural value of space and environment in the Japanese garden. Ambient media, by providing background affective atmosphere or ‘mood’ is able to shape attention by ‘priming the brain to favour sensory cues reinforcing already established feelings’ (p. 3) and facilitate attunement ‘toward a mix of uncertain calm and drifting reflections, relaxation and wandering thoughts’ (p.3). Background affect is therefore able to shape perception and engagement with space. In developing this further, Roquet points to the utility of ambient music for its ability to provide rhythms to move us through space and time, particularly useful in helping one to get through something whether it is an arduous and boring journey or an exhausting run.

On a collective level, Roquet points to how this can work to help large groups of people move in a compatible and efficient way. Although listening to ambient music on headphones in a public space might seem that it is helping the individual to retreat from the public space to their own private soundscape, Roquet describes this as providing rhythms to help navigate that public space more easily – not to escape the environment but to enhance it, providing citizens with a form of ‘embodied security’ by offering an ‘organizing horizon,’ an affective framework that gives experience an underlying cohesion on which to hang other aspects of experience.

The third chapter, ‘moving with the rhythms of the city,’ focuses more directly on how ambient media can facilitate engagement with shared space by priming social relationships. Roquet describes how music is used in Japan to choreograph the public to efficiently board and disembark trains, cross the road, and so on, by often using the sound of birdsong: ‘Whatever daily and yearly rhythms these birds may have originally had—dawn choruses and rainy-day retreats—are eliminated in favour of ensuring the calming affordances of their perpetual chirping presence’ (p. 78). These sounds helping to orientate and organise people. With such use of ambient sounds to control the ebb and flow of people, not only does the sound affect the movement of people but the movement of people affect the sounds, with frequency and level of noise at its peak at peak commuting times. This enables efficient movement in one of the world’s busiest cities, the people of Tokyo are able to navigate around one another with ease and

significantly reduced levels of stress. What enables such complex movement on such a large scale is what Roquet calls 'rhythmic attunement'.

Ambient media facilitates cosubjectivity, that is, a social relation characterised by individuals coming to have similar feelings and behaviour, but not as a consequence of interpersonal relationships; they form them individually, but in response to some public or shareable phenomena. Cosubjectivity can be thought as living one's individual life in amongst the crowds of other individuals, allowing preservation of the individual to navigate a busy city. He argues: 'Cosubjective modes [as opposed to intersubjective] are most prevalent in crowded urban spaces designed around flexibility and mobility – in other words, the neoliberal city. In these contexts the strategic use of media allows other people to contribute to a shared energy and collective orientation without ever demanding the foreground attention themselves' (p. 134). Roquet relates this to what he calls the 'aesthetics of subtraction', where the value is in anonymity and neutrality (as with some forms of minimalism) to allow objects to fall into the background and no longer compete to be the focus of our attention, best exemplified by the store Muji which offers objects for use in daily life from forks and knives to clothing for a 'low-affect lifestyle'. The use of such an aesthetic is to facilitate cosubjectivity and 'always be ready to engage with whatever and whomever comes along next' (p. 138) without reducing to an object of desire or disgust.

However, such demand for attunement does not always have benefits for individual citizens, even if when working well it enables a city to work efficiently. Where individuals fall out of rhythm, it leads to withdrawal and isolation from society. Given the relationship between the affective shaping effect of ambience on space, Roquet notes the political dimension of mood: 'Every atmosphere includes a largely imperceptible border demarcating who can move seamlessly within it and who is made to feel uncomfortable, out of place, abject. Learning to trace out these transparent lines is a crucial part of making the air legible' (p. 16). Roquet talks about the need to learn to 'read the air' or become attuned to the atmosphere in order to appreciate what is acceptable within that space but this equally limits the possibility for challenging the status quo.

A further theme in the book is the relationship between ambient media and therapy culture, such as the rise in playlists for energising, relaxation, reflection: 'Ambient

media fulfils the therapy culture imperative for calming affect, providing a sense of restfulness and relaxation for the humans spending time with them' (p. 18). Ambient media, music, literature and film adhere to the principles of the Japanese garden as a place for relaxation and, most importantly, reflection, by creating 'mood spaces', which act to regulate mood to enable thinking and reflection: 'ambient works open up spaces within the overall calm to register a wider range of emotional uncertainty, even anxiety. By affording a calm both effective and indeterminate, ambient media sets up the possibility for an equanimous reflection on larger and potentially threatening externalities" (p. 18). But Roquet's criticism of such therapeutic/healing atmosphere is that it is limited to what is compatible with 'calmness' and so shuts off certain avenues of thought: 'Recognizing these limitations, however, can lead to a better understanding of what role calm and comfort might play as part of a socially responsive literature' (p. 176).

Albu's *Mirror Affect* is also concerned with the role of affect in shaping interaction in public space, but is focused on public engagement with works of art: 'artworks that put the behaviour of visitors on display provide occasions for retrieving a sense of physical proximity to others' (p. 30). Albu gives the example of how Ken Lum's installation, *Pi*, in an underground passageway in Vienna, simultaneously interrupts the flow of people through the passageway whilst encouraging their movement through. Whereas *Ambient Media* is centrally concerned with environmental affect as a background shaping of human interaction, *Mirror Affect* emphasises the role of human interaction in generating affect through group dynamics that emerge in response to 'mirrored' works of art.

Mirror Affect makes a significant contribution to the topic of shared affect and shared emotion by bringing the notion of 'shared' and 'community' to the level of affective engagement and response by investigating shared and interpersonal responses to installation artworks whether in the gallery or public spaces, with particular emphasis on participatory or audience-dependent works. Often, such discussion is limited in terms of understanding the potential of affective response in determining a relationship to another by focusing on empathy and sympathy. Yet what we see in the artworks discussed in *Mirror Affect* is a sharing with other spectators and sharing in the problematising of space that such installation works generate. The important thing is that we have further investigation into this phenomenon so that we recognise that notions of empathy and sympathy do not capture the richness and variety in collective affective response.

Albu makes clear the interpersonal nature of reflective and responsive artworks which gives rise to what she calls ‘mirror affect’, that is, the ‘intense bodily experience triggered by reflective or responsive artworks, which encourage participants to take note of their collective physical presence as well as of their interpersonal perception and behaviour’ (p. 6). We can therefore see this as a richer notion of affect that points to an important shift from individual response and experience to something shared and shareable with others. However, as the book develops, she complicates this notion of ‘mirror affect’ as something which is shared in the sense of two people mirroring their affective response and expands it to capture a binding of affect, something like cosubjectivity, whereby the individual self is reflected in the relationship to others: ‘The term *mirror affect* is essentially an oxymoron: on the one hand, it suggests a perfect correspondence, similar to that existing between a person and his or her reflection in a non-distorting mirror; on the other hand, it points to the ineluctable differences that exist between self and others despite strong connections’ (p. 257).

Such experience of collective affect impacts the individual self since it facilitates a move away from understanding oneself in individual terms. But Albu wants to talk in terms of group dynamics rather than forming communities, since she takes it that viewers can respond to one another and shape their experience in relation to one another without the strong bond found within a community. A group dynamic can dissolve as quickly as it emerged; it can undulate rather than develop on a singular trajectory. Where affect takes on a more intersubjective flavour, works can highlight peculiarly collective affect such as social tension or the feeling of collaboration in the absence of community. In doing this work, Albu focuses on participatory works which emphasise working groups of spectators as opposed to the introspective spectator, in other words, the work cannot be experienced and appreciated without interacting with other audience members. The emphasis here is on interaction rather than participation; it is more about the audience interacting with one another (sometimes facilitated by or merely mirrored in the work itself) rather than multiple series of individuals interacting with the work. Albu therefore highlights a performative role for spectator in the gesture of ‘mirroring acts’.

For Albu, mirroring can be understood in terms of three different affective processes: ‘Observing their reflection in relation to those of other viewers; Purposefully or incidentally behaving in the same way as other viewers; and Imagining themselves in the positions of others’ (p. 17). Albu offers a range of examples of artworks that highlight

each of these types of mirroring: 'Artworks that conspicuously show viewers to themselves as they collectively experience shared fields of sensory stimuli stage perceptual scenarios that allow for the recognition of undeniable differences in affective and behavioural responses' (p. 17). She focuses on artworks that have reflective properties, whether consisting of mirrored surfaces or responsive features, such as Rauschenberg's *Mud Muse*, in which viewers see the increasingly dynamic mud bubbles as a consequence of the collective noise produced in the gallery. In Robert Morris' sculptures, with his use of mirrors, viewers' awareness of their own reflections does not produce a renewed self-interest, but instead the self is considered in relation to others as an object of joint viewing, which enables viewers 'to imagine multiple ways of seeing' (p. 38).

In her discussion of responsive artworks in her chapter on 'Mirror Frames', Albu delves deeper into this idea of connecting with others by pointing to an interesting form of affect that is formed in response to the experience generated by other participants. In the context of Dan Graham's 1976 installation, *Public Space/Two Audiences*, she comments that 'he argued that art viewers are generally invited to identify with art objects and to ignore the social and institutional dimension of art galleries. This tendency, he asserted, diminishes self-awareness and renders viewers oblivious to the conditions of perception' (p. 139). In response, *Public Space/Two Audiences* resisted attempts by viewers to adopt an external viewpoint, since the installation consisted of two rooms separated by a sound-proofed glass wall, with a mirrored wall at one end of one of the rooms, thus forming two groups of spectators who can only ever look at one another from within a particular space and can only hear what's happening in one room: 'By introducing individuals into public situations that solicited responses or at least some sort of visual interaction with variable environments or social situations, [Graham] endeavoured to challenge the boundaries between a seemingly autonomous private self and a socialised self' (p. 145). She also notes that viewers would imitate one another's gestures, which she connects with the idea of mirror neurons: 'As we watch the gestures of someone else, the same neurons fire in our brains as if we were performing their actions ourselves' (p. 196). This, Albu describes as a process of affective attunement; not simply a mimicking or mirroring but as something developed together and in response to one another.

Similarly, in her chapter 'mirror intervals', Albu focuses on large scale mirror installations such as Anish Kapoor's *Sky Mirror* (2001), Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather*

Project (2003) and Doug Aitken's *Mirror* (2013). She argues that such large-scale responsive and 'mirrored' artworks resist being treated as an autonomous object because they are situated in busy public spaces making it rare to be looking at solitary human reflection and therefore difficult to detach from the human images reflected in them. She writes: 'By fostering interpersonal relations between viewers engaged in aesthetic contemplation, these works are anything but autonomous art objects and show that we, as individuals, are anything but autonomous from each other or the spaces we inhabit' (pp. 155-6), since these works afford the richest aesthetic experience when viewing others through them.

Throughout the book there are references to a kind of affect directed towards others, or created by a collective dynamic. This should not be viewed as a form of emotional intentionality, but rather a feeling that emerges from awareness of others, or affective reactivity. As a consequence of the group dynamic that emerges in the engagement with such audience-dependent artworks, viewers develop a sense of connectedness, or intimacy, in virtue of merely being a member of that group with its collective agency, response and experience.

4. Gesture: Reckson, Manning and Richardson

In this section, I turn to the theme of gesture that was the focus of a number of works published in 2016, most notably Lyndsay Reckson's 'Touching a Button', Erin Manning's *The Minor Gesture*, and Michael Richardson's *Gestures of Testimony*. These works contribute a significant development in affect studies by moving beyond connecting affect to cognition (the feeling of thinking) by extending it to action (the feeling of doing).

Reckson's article, 'Touching a Button' provides a good example of the exploration of gesture and the affective aspects of bodily movement. How should we understand 'gesture'? Not only is it something with a significant felt quality, but it is something enacted and embodied, an action that is felt prior to clear articulation in thought. To 'touch a button', as Reckson highlights in her paper, is a performed action that brings something to an end and therefore carries great significance. Reckson's view of touching a button as a gesture runs counter to Agamben, who writes that in gesture 'nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported'.⁴ Yet Reckson illuminates

the connection between this gesture of touching a button and the temporal since it is this 'felt' act that brings about a moment of finality and so does not 'endure' or 'support': 'it marks the moment of shock, of some unaccountable thing being "done", finished, or posthumous—of stillness wrought from gesture's movement' (p. 32).

In analysing the gesture of 'touching a button', Reckson draws a connection between photography, such as Vander Weyde's photographs of the 'death chamber' at Sing Sing, with literary works, such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Auto-biography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912), to link the capturing of the photographic image with the use of the electric chair in the USA at the turn of the twentieth century. This study illuminates the violence, in particular racial violence, enacted in push-button technology. As Reckson notes, in the same year that Kodak began mass-producing cameras for the public, the first electric chair was being installed in the USA. In 1904, William Dean Howells made explicit the parallels between the act of photography and the act of killing in the use of the electric chair, with the separation of the one being photographed and the one to be killed from those on the other side of the wall where the button is located: 'With the lightest touch of a button, then, Howells linked the cultural shock of electrocution to the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: thrilling but also potentially numbing or deadening, and available to almost anyone' (p. 37). Reckson points to the two sides of gesture: the affective touching and being touched. Just as touching a button can bring about finality, being touched can also represent the irreversible such as coming to see such a connection between the modern camera and the electric chair; photography is recast in that context as something which represents a disconnected act of deep significance.

By thinking of gesture as performative, Reckson unites the affective with the political and ethical. Gestures are cultural phenomena that emerge and evolve over time: 'Gestures make and unmake sense. Lodged in repetition and citation, they are themselves a kind of itinerant archive, testimony to the body's historical and political conditioning' (p. 57). Gestures can be performed as habitual and therefore begin to unmake sense through the automatization of action and in this sense a political act is performed with a sense of detachment and lack of understanding of its significance. In pointing the way forward, Reckson argues that the automatic 'touching of buttons' can be disrupted: 'Lingering over such gestures, then, might offer its own performance of arrest: a way of holding out for

different configurations of power, and of gesturing toward a future that might (still) be otherwise' (p. 58) and so through such lingering or pausing, other expressions of power can come to the fore, allowing other possibilities to emerge.

In *The Minor Gesture*, Erin Manning offers a further way of conceiving the phenomenology of 'gesture' as connected to political action through a connection with music and the relationship between the major and minor key; there are certain actions that show up in relation to more dominant actions, which are still themselves deeply significant. By paying attention to such gestures, despite their 'minor' status, enables new ways of being and expression to come to the fore, and moves us 'beyond the neurotypical' to embrace 'neurodiversity'. By shifting attention from the dominance of knowledge and certainty to the emergence of thought through feeling, to produce 'affective tonality' which shapes thought in relation to bodily movement, and allows diversity of experience to emerge and challenge that very dominance of preconceived knowledge: 'A minor gesture that activates the collectively at the heart of thought effects change. It affects not only what the text can become: it alters to the core what thinking can do. It gives value to the processual uncertainty of thought as yet unformed, and gives that thought the space to develop collectively' (p. x).

The minor gesture 'makes felt the unsayable in the said, brings into resonance field effects otherwise backgrounded in experience. It is the forward-force capable of carrying the affective tonality of nonconscious resonance and moving it toward the articulation, edging into consciousness, of new modes of existence' (p. 7). It does not give expression to the unsayable directly but through affect in the moment of an event or act, which alters the shape of what is articulated.

Affect also suggests a connection beyond the mere ethical to the political: 'The register of the minor gesture is always political: in its punctual reorienting of the event, the minor gesture invents new modes of life-living. It moves through the event, creating a pulse, opening a new way for tendencies to emerge, and in the resonances that are awakened, potential for difference looms' (p. 8). The minor gesture is always in relation to the dominant framework, perspective, narrative and so opens up a gap to something other and challenges those accepted categorisations and norms of thinking and perceiving.

Manning highlights this political potential for minor gesture in her final chapter where she discusses the grand gestures of state apologies and reconciliation, which she argues reinforce the grand narrative that places such wrong-doing in the past and thereby fails to acknowledge how the grand narrative itself may be harmful and continues to act in the silencing of others: ‘Grand gestures operate within the bounds of the possible. They mobilize around the solidity of narrative already composed’ (p. 221). In contrast, minor gestures open up possibilities, and therefore become the signal for the site of change and unexpected movement to alternative narratives.

As with *Mirror Affect*, reflecting on participatory art leads to a consideration of affect as related to the environment and therefore a broader kind of affective experience: ‘How do we make felt, for the human participant, a minor gesture that remains largely imperceptible? Does the work do its work if it cannot be readily experienced as such by the human?’ (p. 81). Affect needs to operate at a level that allows it to underpin/shape cognition rather than such a participant being aware of the resultant affect they are expected to feel; the feeling must be prior to cognition and expectation. But equally, Manning emphasises a kind of affect that brings to the fore a feeling of being a part of a larger environment, something relational, something that helps people to see themselves as part of something bigger.

Both *The Minor Gesture* and *Gestures of Testimony* share in a project to investigate how to make the unsayable sayable, that is, how to express what resists being captured in language. Richardson connects affect with action via the illocutionary act of testimony, the practice of storytelling and the problematic nature of witness, when it is the attempt to witness something that cannot be externalised. Reflecting on works by Kafka, Orwell and Coetzee as well as poetry from detainees at Guantanamo alongside Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* and Brian Massumi’s *Semblance and Event*, this book focuses on the themes of torture, interrogation, detention and the resulting trauma in the post 9/11 world and the problematic nature of how to talk about what cannot be captured in representation, what is ‘unrepresentable’: ‘Torture performs the subjection of the body to power from which, perhaps, speech or representation become a near-impossible task. For the tortured, their sense of self is shattered ... It returns in fragments, shards of the past that cannot become memory, only slip into the body and work their way deeper’ (p. 8). As Richardson notes, a representation may well be able to accurately document the events of torture ‘yet fail to account for its fundamental violence’ (p. 8). For one to succeed in an offer of

testimony, he or she relies on language as the vehicle for such testimony. Experience of pain and trauma is felt in a bodily way which falls outside of what can be expressed in words: 'To lose language is to lose the common ground of humanity, at least within the experience of pain and in its narration after its occurrence. This problem of narration intensifies the challenge of witnessing to possess veracity' (p. 138).

Richardson asks, how can literature enable one to bear witness to pain and trauma? What sorts of insights can literature offer? What modes of reading and writing torture can help overcome the problematic nature of expressing the incommunicable? Richardson invokes the notion of "literary witnesses" through engaging with novels that attempt to do just this.

For Richardson, what literature can offer is 'semblance' of trauma, that is, not something that attempts to represent trauma, but recreates it in the experience it affords and spills over into the narrative and aesthetics of the work: 'Writing torture, its affect and its pain, could mean writing fiction that is primarily affective, rather than symbolic, figural, or concerned with linguistic play. It means writing that gestures beyond the page, beyond language even' (p. 155), and as Richardson notes, writing torture involves both the experience and expression of affect.

The significance of such 'literary witnesses' is deeply political. Where the affective affordances tip over into action is in fiction's potential to reshape the nature of debate and understanding of the concepts on which those debates are based to directly impact the political domain to help bring about justice. 'Literature offers no salvation, but it can and must deepen our knowing and feeling' (p. 24). Instead of attempting to accurately describe pain and trauma, literature's role is in deepening our experience through response to such works, which impacts on our understanding of concepts of pain, torture, detention and isolation that underpin political debates beyond the literary context.

5. Reflections

What can be seen in the developments in affect theory in 2016 is a significant development of themes such as phenomenology of affect, especially in terms of developing deep analysis of individual affective states and revealing their potential utility; a politics of affect in terms of developing understanding of the influence of

affect in intersubjectivity and cosubjectivity; and the nature of affect in bodily movement and action, further strengthening the connection between politics, ethics and affect. The field has shifted from a concern with a solitary, individualistic affect and affective intimacy to something with more global significant. Work in affect theory has relevance for the political and environmental challenges the modern age poses, one wherein the digital obstructs engagement with one another, and dampens the need for collective action and attention to the complexity of ambient noise. Where the digital threatens to obscure the meaning behind actions, affect sharpens the focus on what we need to attend to and the experiences they afford.

Works Reviewed

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Endnotes

¹ J. R. Gray, T. S. Braver, and M. E. Raichle, 'Integration of emotion and cognition in the lateral prefrontal cortex,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, 99 [2002] 4115-4120; L. Pessoa, 'On the relationship between emotion and cognition,' *Nature Review: Neuroscience*, 9 [2008] 148-158; L. Pessoa, 'Cognition and emotion,' *Scholarpedia*, 4:1 [2009] 4567; F. Dolcos, A. D. Jordan and S. Dolcos, 'Neural correlates of emotion: cognition interactions: A review of evidence from brain imaging investigations,' *Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, 23:6 [2011] 669-694; S. Duncan and L. F. Barrett, 'Affect is a form of cognition: A neurobiological analysis,' *Cognition and Emotion*, 21:6 [2007] 1184-1211.

² Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (Routledge [2004]).

³ See John Michael 'What Are Shared Emotions (for)?' *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 7, 2016: 412 doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00412.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. (UMinnesotaP [2000]), p. 57