

Affect #1

“Affect” derives from the Latin noun *affectus* (something having been affected, or influenced) and its verb *afficere* (to affect, or to be affected by). Affect is an autonomous potential or capacity carried by an event or an encounter. Affect is not inert. Leaving its marks or “refrains” on human and non-human bodies which in turn intersect with landscapes and institutions, affect is found in the residues of lived encounters. It accrues in atmospheres which are co-compositional and co-constitutive as these are made by competing subjects whose presences overlap across different temporalities.[\[1\]](#) Affect is critical to recover “the minor, inconsequential, secret, atomic,” and it is “not given in advance, not apprehendable except through the thickets of formalist analysis.”[\[2\]](#)

This view of affect being linked to form and representation is however contentious given that the late twentieth-century’s “turn to affect” has rejected such tangible conceptions in favour of more fluid notions of sensation, materiality, and embodiment. It is in considering this polemic that the film theorist Eugenie Brinkema disputes affect’s repeatedly negative definitions, for example, “what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away..., indefinable,” arguing that this empties out affect into a generic category delineated by the vagueness of “pressures, forces, intensities.”[\[3\]](#)

In fact, to dismantle “the ideological, aesthetic and theoretical problems it claimed to confront,”[\[4\]](#) it pays to attend to the specific forms and materialities taken by affect, as well as to detect where these appear in representation, and through experience, both conscious and unconscious. The challenge here is to acknowledge affect as a capacity that is both felt *and* thought. The philosophy of affect, the philosopher Brian Massumi explains, is about the “movement in thought” or “the force of thought, embodied.”[\[5\]](#) For psychoanalysis, affect is irreducible to language. It is only glimpsed in the spaces of non-correspondence or what the literary theorist Isobel Armstrong calls “the broken middle,” a space held between representation/language (writing, drawing, film, sculpture) and affect.[\[6\]](#) Affect is not simply about the irrational or the unthinking, nor is it about the expression of personal emotion.[\[7\]](#) An attention to affect invests forensic scrutiny to process, or thought-in-movement. Affected by an encounter, we are compelled to make sense of, contextualize, and connect with a situation – to examine what we know, and to concede what we may not.

Affect itself is an ambiguous, alternating force. It moves between the destruction of representation, opening up an abyss in consciousness by violently breaking the barrier of repression, and appropriating, thieving, representation. It belongs to a chain of discourse and breaks it: it alternates between being bound and unbound, attached to signification and rupturing it. ... The concealing and revealing, exposing and masking process which belongs to affect is structurally tied to the possibility of meaning. [\[8\]](#)

In other words, affect might be critically grasped “as a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics”[\[9\]](#) where reciprocally, reading for form and representation are key to understanding how affect is enabled or blocked. Others including Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, Michael Taussig, Roland Barthes, and Raymond Williams have discussed affect (without necessarily naming it as such) through questions of encounter and forms of representation, including writing, drawing, and filmmaking. They examine how affect travels across modes of representation, and how discourse itself (also a form of representation) can allow the capture of affective residues. In these writings, intersecting affect is the problematic but intransigent category of experience. Rather than producing an authoritative knower, the affective experience is recast as energetic occurrences or event-based encounters which set up opportunities for potential relations. [\[10\]](#) Barthes (via the “punctum”) and Williams (via “structures of feeling”) divergently explore such possibilities for a taking apart of “experience,” understanding it as both historicized and pre-ideological; and as such, laying the groundwork for theorizing the affective encounter as the intersection of the untaught and the intuitive as much as the culturally informed.

In addition, the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant argues that intuition is embodied and learnt through memory and life experiences, “Intuition is where affect meets history.”[\[11\]](#) Berlant advances that a focus on the affective gives insights to historical situations, insights that go beyond an understanding of orthodox institutions and practices. Affective evidence squares up what is sensed against what is known or recognizable. It traces how a lived situation is negotiated between status quo and individual desire. Responding to affect’s emphasis on immediacy and its relationship to historical framing, Massumi, with Erin Manning, argue that “immediation” prioritizes the event “as the primary unit of the real.”[\[12\]](#) Massumi proposes that one learns to sense from the residue of past events so as to decipher the historical and contextual connections intuitively when a present event is encountered. This is the act of thinking-feeling:

The feeling of the transitional encounter is not “raw” feeling. It is imbued with an immediate understanding of what is under way, what might be coming – and what we are becoming. This is enactive understanding: it is one with action. It is what I call a thinking-feeling. ...[I]t is clear that the affective thinking-feeling is not the thinking or feeling of a particular object – or a particular subject. It pertains more directly to the event, what passes in-between objects and subjects... [\[13\]](#)

In the thinking-feeling of an affective event, the relation to the past is “direct, unmediated,” “Immediation is actually more intensively inclusive of the past than a reflective or critical thinking about it, because it includes the force of the past – where it is potentially heading beyond itself... Immediation is the past bumping against the future in the present.”^[14] An attention to affect thus allows the slowing down and precise tracking of a “situation,” a “happening,” “getting the drift of things” which may become an event.^[15] It allows the researcher to trace the happening’s resonance to the historical. This attunement to the affective situation creates the possibility of inhabiting the past in an embodied historical present. Hence, a historicism attentive to affect, will behave, relate, and read differently.

In admitting the primacy of these affective encounters and their concomitant evidence into a discursive framework, we can shift an academic disposition from one of habitual critical distance, which is itself non-exempt from a power to ascribe meaning from afar, in favour of one with access to critical proximity. The latter knowingly implicates the knower. It is obliged to question relationships that enable or prevent knowledge. The affective encounter demands reflexivity therefore. It is concerned not just about the subject but equally how this subject is constructed in relation to itself, and to others, so bringing in the ethical. The discourse weaves through ways of seeing and thinking and considers how these discriminate. An attention to affect thus delineates a map of disciplinary motives, blindness, and biases, showing how we are always implicated in the knowledges we produce, and therefore why affect is ethical.

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^[1] See Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink, *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 3. Sumartojo and Pink, while writing on the identification and cultivation of atmosphere, concede that to define atmosphere as “coherent, contained, staged” is to miss its changeable and charged qualities. Atmosphere is emergent. Sumartojo and Pink’s book examines where strong atmospheres are located, what they convey, what they can do, or what they make possible.

^[2] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2014), xv.

^[3] Brinkema, xii-xiii.

^[4] Brinkema, xiv.

[5] Brian Massumi et al., "Affect and Immediation: An Interview with Brian Massumi," *Disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 28, (2019): 113, <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.09>.

[6] Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 115. Armstrong reads Freud and Kristeva's definitions of affect through structures of repression and melancholia respectively.

[7] Massumi et al., "Affect and Immediation," 113.

[8] Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic*, 123.

[9] Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xvi.

[10] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2011), 1.

[11] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 52.

[12] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 147.

[13] Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 94.

[14] Massumi, 148–49.

[15] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 82.