

Affect

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Affect has been something of a buzzword in cultural and social inquiry since the early 2000s. In studies of gender, media, and communication, affect has allowed for examinations of public sentiment, the appeal of media images, texts, and sounds, as well as the entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies. While affect has arguably been present in considerations of the pleasure and impact of media in fields as diverse as feminist studies of popular culture, psychoanalytical film theory, and studies of media effects, the so-called affective turn has shifted attention away from processes of representation and subjectivation to questions of materiality, sensation, and intensity in processes of mediation.

The emergence of affect as a topic of increased academic inquiry coincides with current debates over fake news, clickbait journalism, viral social media protest campaigns, and the affective manipulation of Facebook users. In foregrounding affectations, the force of sensation, and the volatility of feeling in networked exchanges, these developments point to the shortcomings of the Habermasian public sphere of critical rational exchange that fails to explain much of them. In studies of media and communication, affect has been applied in examining the intensities of sensation fueling engagements with online discussion threads, platforms, apps, and devices; the attraction of reality television making use of affective forms of address, such as melodramatic templates of confrontation and reveal, as well as cinematic events as ones involving both the immediacy of sensation and processes of sense making. In these analyses, gender becomes framed as embodied capacities and encounters intersecting with the axes of race, age, and social class that produce relations of proximity and distance toward other bodies, whether these are human, nonhuman, or representational ones. In what follows, the entry briefly outlines the overall rationale of the turn to affect and examines some of its key stakes.

In its diverse applications spanning from phenomenology to neuroscience, feminist inquiry, science and technology studies, and beyond, affect has been deployed in questioning the Cartesian and structuralist legacies of cultural theory, and in providing alternatives to them (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, pp. 6–8). In a new materialist framework, affect theory has been a means to challenge the perceived overemphasis on questions of signification, as brought forth by the “linguistic turn” of the 1960s. These have been seen to constrain analytical attention to issues of ideology, subjectivation, meaning, and representation, as well as to reproduce the dominance of language as a framework for understanding the world and studying it. Rather than examining media images, sounds, human bodies, or material objects as texts to be read or otherwise decoded, advocates of the affective turn have turned their attention to the intensities emerging in encounters with media that move bodies from one state to another, and possibly transform them in the process. Such encounters are not necessarily for the human subjects to control, and their immediacy may circumvent processes cognition and reflection. In analyzing these, scholars have drawn on different, partly conflicting conceptual frameworks. While some foreground the dynamics of power connected to gender, those resistant to the centrality of the human subject as scholarly focus remain disinterested in considerations of embodied differences and categories of identity.

Affect inquiry drawing on the work of psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins foregrounds affect as material, inbuilt capacities particular to human bodies. Here, affect is seen as positive, negative, or neutral impulses and intensities that animate bodies and attune their mutual relations with a particular charge. Tomkins’s work on shame has been particularly influential in queer scholarship and it has also been brought together with new materialist understandings

of affect. Tomkins' affect theory has some affinity with Spinoza's anti-Cartesian examination of emotional and bodily states of affecting and being affected that may increase or diminish, affirm or undermine one's life forces. Spinoza's interest in how bodies are modified through, and affected by their encounters with other bodies has been key to Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's philosophy, as well as to new materialism that frames affect as non-subjective, impersonal potentiality, and a force that cuts across networks of human and nonhuman actors.

If human and nonhuman bodies are seen as distinct in their quickness and slowness, movement and tempo (Deleuze, 1988, 125, 127), affect is that which animates and moves them. New materialist studies of affect are aligned with posthuman theory in their resistance to the human-centrism of academic inquiry. In paying attention to nonhuman fields of impact, they have been critiqued for downplaying—and to a degree effacing—feminist, queer, and postcolonial analyses of power and ideology, the particularity of different bodies, as well as the strategic ways in which affect is channeled across media toward political and economical ends (Hemmings, 2005; Tyler, 2008). In other words, theorizations focusing on affect as an impersonal life-force have been seen as resistant to considerations of the affective politics of media culture and the social relations of power in which they operate. At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations of affect have been applied in examining a range of encounters with media, from the formation of body images to cinematic experiences and sexualized cyberbullying targeting, and giving shape to gendered, classed, and racialized bodies and their respectively different spaces for moving and operating in (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012).

Affect can be conceptualized as intensity of sensation, or a resonant connection, which affords emotions with their force and quality. Understood in this vein, affect, as precognitive, impersonal force, and emotion, as subjective interpretations of sensory states, are factually inseparable. Following this line of thought, feminist scholars have conceptualized affect as a resource and a strategy of engagement that is activated and oriented toward specific political goals and outcomes in media culture (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Hemmings, 2005). Examinations of online hate, for example, involve the particularity of the bodies under attack, inasmuch as they do the speeds and rhythms of networked communication, the specificities of information architecture, and the logics of sharing. Online hate sticks differently to bodies differently marked in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, ability, or body shape (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018).

Here, affect operates less of a pre-subjective force than a contextually laden physical intensity that presses on people, moves them, and organizes their mutual relations. The viral expansion of the #MeToo campaign since October 2017 similarly speaks to the point of conceptualizing affect as social fuel emerging in networked encounters that has the potential to give rise to contingent affective publics of political engagement, in this instance as one emerging from experiences of sexual harassment and mundane sexism experienced by women (Papacharissi, 2014). In the case of #MeToo, the viscerally and personally felt resonates with, and is amplified by, shared articulations of sentiment in ways that bridge the anecdotal and the structural. The viral circulation and massive accumulation of personal stories within #MeToo speaks of the force of affect in social organization and practices of resistance.

Moving beyond the question of whether affect is something best considered as personal, impersonal, or both, it is evident that affective economies lie at the heart of media culture, from shivers of interest evoked by celebrity gossip to those involved in novel Tinder matches, Netflix suggestions, favorite radio shows, breaking news, or live television spectacles such as Eurovision, royal weddings, and super bowls. In addition to shaping ways of relating to media images, affective intensities can be seen as shaping ways of being in the world more broadly.

In her analysis of media images of fat, Katariina Kyrölä (2014) examines them as a corporeal pedagogy of sorts that trains people's ways of perceiving their own embodiment in gendered terms. Reaching beyond studies of representation—namely analyses of how fat bodies are depicted in the media—this perspective allows for a consideration of relating to and experiencing media images and their visceral force.

As people watch television shows through streaming media services, tweet in response to live broadcasts, and browse online newspapers, online platforms relying on targeted advertising are increasingly central to all kinds of media consumption. It then follows that affective media economies have grown inseparable from the monetization of user data as it is constantly tracked, archived, analyzed, and sold. In the context of user data, gender emerges as a central classification that is combined with both variables such as age or location and a range of considerably more granular specifications. User actions and motions create affective value for the people involved while simultaneously generating rich data archives on consumer and lifestyle preferences, travels and visits, values and beliefs for the platform to own, repurpose, and monetize. Affect then takes on the role of glue in generating stickiness that makes people pay attention, share the content, and repeatedly return back to the site in question. These developments have been examined through theorizations of affective and immaterial labor.

While affording means of analyzing the contemporary landscape of networked connectivity, affect can equally be deployed in examining the historical layers of media culture from Hollywood cinema to tabloid publishing, televised sports events, and fanzine production. It remains central not to frame affect as a scholarly concern particular to the current scholarly context. Rather, expanding the framework of affect to extant scholarship helps to make evident the degree to which considerations of affective intensities and attachments are long-standing concerns in studies of gender and media. Studies of fandom, for example, can be seen as having long engaged with affective attachments that play out between fans and stars of different genders (Stacey, 1994).

In its focus on encounters that move bodies from one state to another and affect their capacities of acting in the world, the notion of affect helps in conceptualizing the intensities that encounters with media entail. Frictions between different theorizations of affect remain, and they need to be accounted for when working with the concept. Despite these frictions, theorizations of affect are united by an interest in materiality and intensity while accounting for both human and nonhuman bodies. The framework of affect makes it possible to consider gender as particular relations and qualities that emerge, oscillate, and alter as bodies become animated and differently positioned in their encounters with the world, rather than as a pre-established category or a mode of being. Understood in this vein, a focus on affect does not necessitate a turn away from questions of meaning or social power in studies of gender and the media. Rather, it entails a shift in perceptual focus where the somatic and the semiotic, the material and the textual, affect and representation, matter and meaning are seen as entwined and inseparable from one another.

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