

Body Criticism: Affect as Critical Force

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I approach the topic of this symposium from the perspective of my current engagement with the question, how new visualisation technologies in the biosciences shape our understanding of and imaginations about the body. In the last twenty years, visualisation technologies such as ultrasound, electron microscopy and magnetic resonance imaging technologies have significantly altered the ways in which human and non-human bodies are represented. These new images of the body circulate widely in various popular discourses such as science magazines, science fiction films and in a field of art that has come to be known as 'bio-art', i. e. art that involves biotechnological methods and/or manipulation of living systems (Kac 2005). Three key dimensions structure these new images of the body: a) abstract depictions vs. naturalistic coding, b) fragments of the body vs. the body as a whole, and c) microscopic vs. macroscopic images. In the context of this symposium, I will focus on the affective and reflexive engagement with bio-art from a humanities perspective. Taking as my starting point the notion of critique as the capacity to imagine how things could be otherwise (as introduced by the Frankfurt School), the humanities come into focus as a central player in the critical enterprise. It is vital for the humanities today to have at their heart a utopian outlook, on which both Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer insisted already early on in the twentieth century. What we, as humanities scholars, offer is the willingness and openness to imagine a different social order of things as well as the capability to provide the conceptual tools for both imagining and effecting social change. To put to test this approach to criticism on the backdrop of recent developments in the humanities, I turn to the concept of 'affect', defined as forces enhancing or diminishing the body's capacity to act. While 'critique', or 'critical thinking', (after Kant, and following Benjamin and Horkheimer) is very much part of the Enlightenment project and the Enlightenment belief in rationality and objectivity, the turn to affect signals the contrary, namely a call to seriously engage with the irrational forces that stir our bodies.

Albeit, at first glance, 'affect' and 'critique' seem to be at odds with one another, in this paper, I will argue that the concept of affect proves to be a valuable tool to problematize the engagement with 'critique'. It is counterintuitive to argue that something that is as far detached from reason as is affect becomes the very starting point from which critical thinking unfolds. Yet, I hypothesize that it is the very concentration on the palpable intensity which effectively mediates between biological dispositions and culturally shaped meanings, that opens up new horizons not only for aesthetic theory, but also for critical thinking.

The recent engagement with affect from a humanities perspective is characterized by (at least) two distinct positions. Thinkers rooted in the tradition of critical theory like Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, who all have made seminal contributions to the field of affect studies, engage with affect as an *object* of criticism. All of these authors hold that the affects *of others* warrant critical attention. Massumi, for instance, looks at how various audiences respond bodily to Ronald Reagan's political speeches (Massumi

2002). Sara Ahmed analyses the use of emotionally charged language and the invocation of feelings employed both by right-winged political parties and by conservative politicians to influence mass audiences (Ahmed 2010). Lauren Berlant underlines the coercion of maintaining an optimistic outlook for upholding the political ideology in the US (Berlant 2010). All of these authors insist that we need to critically engage with affect, because affect is such an effective tool for swaying public opinion. Yet, for all of these scholars, it is the affects roused in others that are in question – with two exceptions. Lauren Berlant, in her recent work on ‘affective attachments’ sets out to investigate affect’s transformative potential (Berlant 2012). She focuses on the affective attachments between people outside of normative institutions such as the family and the state and investigates how these affective attachments form and fuel alliances and subversive political activism.

A similar, more positive relating to affect also comes to the fore in Massumi, who developed an elaborate theory of ‘sensation’ that adequately accounts for the sensing and feeling body (Massumi 2002). In spite of these exceptions, the gist of approaches to affect advocated by Massumi, Ahmed and Berlant is to foreground the affects of others and to argue that these affects warrant the theorist’s critical attention.

Another line of scholarship that has lately turned to affect comes from the field of aesthetics. Recent developments in the field of visual studies, and more specifically, in phenomenological film theory are characterized by a turn to the senses other than the visual (Sobchack 2004, Marks 2002, Naficy 2001), to performativity (Bredekamp 2010, Mitchell 2005) and to affect (Curtis/Koch 2008, Papenburg/Zarzycka 2012). In this line of scholarship, the transmission of affect is often understood as the flow, vibration, frequency, circulation or the kinetic movement of bodies: to feel, it is habitually said, is to feel moved – through encounters, relationships, reciprocations, resonances, intervals and harmonies. In this perspective, image and viewer are re-conceptualized as co-emergent agents in a process that is embodied, affective and culturally meaningful (MacCormack 2004).

So far, scholars have focused on what images *show*, instead of what images *do* (Bolt 2004, Bredekamp 2010, Mitchell 2005). They have studied images primarily as representations of reality. What they have largely ignored is the capacity of images to *shape* and *change* reality. I argue that we have to address the performative power of images and, to this end, have to study the rhetorical strategies that image-makers employ to address viewers emotionally. What I propose is to take further what has been done through the performative paradigm in other fields of the humanities and the social sciences (as introduced by J. L. Austin in 1955 and further substantiated by Dell Hymes in 1973) and continued in diverse fields ranging from visual studies (Mitchell 2005) to gender studies (Butler 1991, Braidotti 2001, Grosz 1994), among others.

To exemplify this point, allow me to give an example. Australian sculptor Patricia Piccinini in her sculpture entitled *The Comforter* (2010) (cp. fig. 1) depicts a so-called ‘wolf girl’ who holds in her arms a creature that, at first glance, looks like a baby, but which, on closer inspection, appears to be a shapeless hybrid, armless, eyeless, with short legs and huge finger-like protuberances on its head. This depiction inspires in the viewer contradictory feelings. The initial beauty and harmony of the composition, when seen from a distance, yields an impression of shock when discerning the disfigurement of both the girl and the baby. Here the artist combines two things: she effectively contrasts what has long been perceived as an ‘aberration of nature’ (the ‘wolf

girl') with an imaginary product of bioscientific experiments ('the baby'), also depicted as aberration. Notions of 'the normal body' are challenged by the juxtaposition of these two forms of aberration, which are shown in a relation of care, instead of disgust. The tenderness with which the girl turns towards the creature alludes to our shared responsibility for the products of bioscience.

As should have become clear from this example, the focus on affect opens up new horizons for our encounter with artworks. It allows us to break away both from semiotics and from cognitivist theory as well as from social constructivist approaches, and enables us to find a new language to articulate aesthetic experience in more encompassing terms. Affect studies give us the tools to attend to important aspects of our bodily encounter with images that have been ignored in twentieth-century aesthetics.

More specifically, the turn to affect facilitates to address passion, pain and desire, i. e. dimensions that are at the heart of feminist approaches to knowledge. The tradition that links the production of knowledge to rational thinking, to value-free neutrality and to disembodied objectivity has no place for the passions. A turn to affect is so very productive for feminist thinking, because it helps us to challenge the conception of knowledge production as something rational and objective. Affect theory points out that passion and rationality are fundamentally entangled. Some feminist scholars caution against a feminist engagement with affect (Hemmings 2005). These critics assert that feminists resorting to affect very willingly conform to and confirm the stereotypes that have been projected on women for centuries: women were not seen rational agents, but instead, they were perceived as driven by emotionality and thus incapable of rational thinking.

This criticism opens up a pressing question: Why is it important for feminists to engage with affect, nonetheless? It is important for *epistemological* reasons. We face a long history in which women have been excluded from the academy on the grounds of their alleged incapacity for rational thought. 'The female sex' has been associated with the passions, with the body and with a capricious emotionality. Given this long tradition of exclusion from the 'hall of fame' of rationality, it is all the more pressing for feminists to turn to affect. If we want to produce passionate knowledge we should attend closely to the forces that stirr our bodies.

To corroborate this point, I would like to give an example from the field of law, i. e. a discourse that is considered to be distinguished by rationality and value-free neutrality. Thus, law is a field in which we would least expect to find affects to play a significant role. Specifically, court decisions related to life science research are believed to endorse logical arguments. In the U.S., the Supreme Court decides about what can be patented and what cannot be patented. The court decisions set the parameters for the choices made by the Patent and Trademark Office. Alongside the rational verdicts setting national research agenda, these decisions also reveal public fears and wishes ignited by these research agendas.

For instance, in 1981, the United States Supreme Court approved the patenting of a living organism. The patent was for an oil-eating bacterium. But Chief Justice Warren Burger, in his verdict, warned about the potential for 'a gruesome parade of horrors'. 'We are told,' Burger wrote, 'that genetic research and related developments may result in a loss of genetic diversity and that its practice may tend to depreciate the value of life... At times, human ingenuity seems unable to control fully the forces it creates - that, with Hamlet, it is sometimes better "to bear those ills we have than fly to others we

know not of.” (Burger, quoted in Anker & Nelkin 2004, p. 47)

While the Supreme Court’s decision is communicated in the decree, the public concerns are addressed in the additional reflections. Interestingly, in the legal discourse, i. e. one of the social discourses that is considered the most ‘rational’, the affective implications of court decisions are addressed explicitly.

In this short paper, I have argued that the turn to affect in the humanities effectively challenges and extends approaches to critical thinking. The task of critique in the humanities should include affect to be able to adequately tackle complex issues such as the fears and wishes engendered, expressed and transformed by changing images of the body in bioscientific technologies. Thus the turn to affect is paramount to the critical engagement with the ambivalences that the life sciences continuously produce. It is the critical task of the humanities to investigate what is the affective stake of popular images in generating a reflexive process about the new biotechnologies.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Patricia Piccinini, *The Comforter*, 2010

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