

Affect, Fields of Immi(a)nence, and Differential Attunement in Massumi's *Politics of Affect*

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In *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi presents us with ways of thinking-feeling affect, describing it as an “invitation to voyage.”¹ As he states in the preface, *Politics of Affect* is neither a comprehensive monograph nor an introductory text, but rather operates as an attempt at living out conceptually the immediately bodily and infra-linguistic Spinozan-Bergsonian nature of affect. Massumi is giving us a coherentist matrix on affect from which to move forth — even if isolated by its progressively going ahead of the pack, into new horizons (and sunsets) — rather than starting from a commonly held position and building into conclusions about affect (i.e., a foundationalist epistemology); moreover, he is clear that affect is transversal — as well as traversal itself — insofar as it blurs traditional categories and forces us to continuously rethink assumed terms and speciations — both at the point of departure in our study of affect and perpetually in each new affective development of everyday life. Massumi notes further in the preface that his work on affect is united by the central thread of process philosophy — broadly construed across Bergson, James, Whitehead, Simondon, Guattari, and Deleuze — yet while I believe this caveat to be elucidating and helpful on the whole, I mention it only in passing since it is not the focal concern of this presentation. I focus instead largely on the parts of Massumi's

¹ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), vii.

fourth chapter, “Affective attunement in the field of catastrophe,” that allow us to better pursue a study of feeling, emotion, affect, and art. For Massumi, affect is center-stage. As such, I intend to focus largely on Massumi’s conception of affect and its related elements, namely proto-conscious bodily experience, thinking-feeling, perceptual feeling, potentiality, movement, emotion as a particular expression of affect, fields of immi(a)nence, the event, differential attunement, the interval, identity, art as non-monolithic and augmenting, ideology, and pain events.

For Massumi, affect starts with Spinoza.²; citing Spinoza’s *Ethics* almost directly, affect is both the capacity to affect and to be affected as well as the change in one’s own capacities that arises from that being affected, insofar as affect augments or diminishes the abilities of an individual body.³ Pulling this definition into a more proper situatedness within process philosophy, Massumi emphasizes the felt transition that accompanies this openness to affecting and to being affected — focusing on the transitive component of this affection rather than letting the claim remain in a rigid and abstract factual state where its implications might yet ring dull on contemporary ears. Further, Massumi rightly notes that for both Spinoza and Deleuze, this transition is *felt*.⁴ Affect which augments and diminishes the capacities of an individual always comes with a feeling, as it is the transition which carries feeling, not the affect itself; however, this does not mean that all affect is felt, as it is not the case that all affects necessarily result in an

² Ibid., 3, 48.

³ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 278 (Part III, Definition 3): “By emotion [affectus] I understand the affections of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections.”

⁴ Massumi, 4, 48.

augment or diminishment of one's capacities.⁵ Massumi also discusses the idea of doubled experience, wherein the body has direct experience, which we as consciousness have experience of at a second level — a reflective, cognitive level. This experience of experience, when taken with the notion of feeling an affective transition, would seem to leave room for one to infer that all affect, whether it results in an augmenting or a diminishing or nothing at all, creates bodily experience, and it is only when we transition to new capacities that we become consciously aware — capable of consciously experiencing our ceaseless bodily experiences.

The experience of a change, an affecting-being affected, is redoubled by an experience of the experience. This gives the body's movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions — accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency. Emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment.⁶

Thus, we can see that we are already far away from the notion of affect as an emotional outburst or gesture. Instead, we have on our hands something like a relational field of co-constitutive ecologies of being, with emotion being the subjective registering of our constant affecting-affection.

Being grounded in the body, affect is also immediate, constant, and infra-linguistic. The 'body' does not need a mediation between itself and what we would traditionally consider the 'external' because external affection is co-constitutive of our existences. By body, Massumi means something more like "body of affects and relations" than strictly physical body,⁷ but because affect is material, both meanings are intended; much of chapter one emphasizes the

⁵ Spinoza, 278 (Part III, Postulate 1): "The human body can be affected in many ways by which its power of activity is increased or diminished; and also in many other ways which neither increase nor diminish its power of activity."

⁶ Massumi, 4.

⁷ Ibid., 51.

materiality of Spinoza's usage of 'body' in the *Ethics*. Going back to Massumi, this notion of immediate, infra-linguistic bodily affection has three main implications. The first implication is that much of our actions occur without our having time or even the capacity to consciously register or reflect on them; thus, it's important for us to remember that in times of catastrophe, of intense interpersonal conflict, and of deeply affecting art, we are influenced and, *critically*, act on said influences, by entities which are proto-conscious. Secondly in this bodily agency there is a sort of pre-division between thinking and feeling, such that we arrive at an aspectual dynamic of thinking-feeling — a term which, at the macro level of Massumi's thinking, denotes the ethico-epistemic breakdown required by progressive political theories of affect, wherein the relationship between knowledge, belief, feeling, thinking, agency, action, morality, and pragmatic capacities are inextricably bundled together. Questions of ethics divorced from belief and social affection no longer make sense. Third, feeling of the transition from one affective state to another cannot be strictly said to be emotion, but we can reliably conceive of it as something like a perceptual feeling — a conscious impressionism, if you will.

So a way of thinking about this politically is in terms of pragmatic presuppositions that are perceptually felt without being thought out... It's completely on the level of immediate perception, even though its non-actualized. You're non-sensuously feeling it. It's a kind of thinking-feeling of what's happening, including what *may* happen.⁸

Massumi includes "what *may* happen" because affect(s) exists largely in terms of potentiality — such is simply another way of conceiving of capacity and ability, offering such questions as "*How many options are available to us?*" or "*Where can we go from here?*" Thus, affect is always a matter of potential energy — a crystallized (perhaps ossified) present moment pregnant with a highly-divergent, multiplicitous, possibility-laden future.

⁸ Ibid., 120.

Just as this potentiality of future activity (or passivity, depending on from where the adequate causation of the action comes — whether from something conscious within the present agent or from something historical, proto-conscious in the body, adequate causation pulsing and channeling through the body from its long, infinitely unique history of previous environments) exists as a virtuality, so too does Massumi's 'semblance.' As Massumi puts it, aligning himself surprisingly with the phenomenological tradition and the eidetic-noetic reduction to conclude the nature of constitutive structures of consciousness, "I use the term 'semblance' to develop the idea that there are dimensions of an event that are not actually present but are necessary factors for its constitution."⁹ Semblance helps Massumi introduce his concept of our process of affection in relation to different temporalities, a topic he discusses in terms of movement. Our movement in time, as creatures of process and of affection, is one of having "the immediate past [folded] into the present, as the present is [itself] turning over into the future."¹⁰ Our presence in what we might want to statistically refer to as the 'now' is much like an instantaneous slope in calculus: fixed but with a path of movement coming before and already moving itself forward. Dialectical interplay between affect and collective individuation articulates that we come into collective spaces with unique, individuated past movements and momentums, are affected collectively within an ecological field, and move forth from this affection with a new trajectory — but importantly, the past and the future are virtually embedded within the crystallized 'now.'

With this conception of ourselves as thoroughly affected threads of momentum operating collectively within spheres of relations and ecologies of being, we can draw out another central component of Massumi's conception of affect: immersive, inescapable fields of immi(a)nence.

⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰ Ibid.

When we talk about how affect works now, I think we have to start from the fact that we are all braced in that field of immi(a)nence. Our bodies and our lives are almost a kind of resonating chamber for media-borne perturbations that strike us and run through us, that strike us and strike beyond us simultaneously.¹¹

I find this description of resonating chambers with fields of immi(a)nence particularly helpful; a field of immi(a)nence is, in some ways, just a way of conceiving of the inherent potentiality of all ecologies, both living and non-living. In other words, the affective potential we have accrued as living bodies has an equivalent counterpart in all other bodies, which we experience from our conscious state of affective-receptivity as semblant, trace immanence latent in our environment. Drawing on Benjamin, one could alternatively conceive notions of immanence and potentiality as historicities of affect, each with their own historicities of affect (and histories of affects), that accrue so thoroughly in the latent constitution of bodies — i.e., the body is a text by holding its immanent possibilities. In fact, this Benjaminian interpretation would not be much of a stretch, since Massumi references Benjamin at multiple points throughout the work. Thus, we exist as resonating chambers inescapably immersed in fields of immi(a)nence — thoroughly communal in our immanent histories and thoroughly collective in our being bound together with our spheres of relations in the ‘now.’ Massumi calls this matrix of immediacy and interdependence the event, probably for simplicity’s sake. Of course as we have just seen, he means so much more when he uses that word.

The last key concept for Massumi with which we are concerned herein is differential attunement:

We’re all in on the event together, but we’re in it together differently. We each come with a different set of tendencies, habits and action potentials. That’s what I mean by differential attunement: a collective in-bracing in the immediacy of an affective event, but

¹¹ Ibid., 113.

differently in each case. We each come with a different set of tendencies, habits, and action potentials.¹²

We are already familiar with the notion of ‘differential’ due to our discussion of movement, momentum, and semblance. The idea is the same: we come into situations with a set of biases and prejudices — both simply various ways of referring to affect — and through the event will depart from the catastrophe with differing, individuated trajectories. Attunement here refers to a captivation of attention. As Massumi elegantly puts it, “It’s the idea of an event snapping us to attention together, and correlating our diversity to the affective charge this brings, energizing the whole situation.”¹³ Attunement refers to the crystallizing tendency of the catastrophic event, as well as its broad social capacity to align diverse interests and histories along a common motive.

In this event, the emotions experienced, especially those experienced collectively, are transmitted between individuals — that is, affective attunement is something very different from affective transmission. In affective transmission, one or more individuals are the real source of a feeling, which in turn gets transmitted to other individuals as a sort of contagion.¹⁴ However, in affective attunement, *the affect is not in us; we are the affect in motion*.¹⁵ In affective attunement, we as individuals — as experiences? mere events? — collectively exist within the same external space of affect which engenders similar feelings across multiple individuals with differential attunements, especially in the case of catastrophes where the effects of disaster are so grandiose and impactful so as to be affectively universalized — epochal-turning, even if still differential.

¹² Ibid., 115.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cf. Max Scheler on emotional contagion.

¹⁵ Massumi, 121-24.

Alongside this notion of being within affect, within the event and immersed in fields of immi(a)nence, arises the space for what Erin Manning calls ‘the relational third’ or ‘interval.’¹⁶ The interval is the space within which the self is constituted by one’s historical affect and present environment. It is a notion which allows us to swap a static, ontological identity for a human de-centered becoming. As Manning notes, it is not supposed “that there is no identity — no human, no animal, no plant — but [rather] that the species is not where the process begins or ends.” We have a crystallized identity as individuals, sure, and yet this identity is constantly co-constituting itself in recreative re-creation through the event, the fields of immi(a)nence (time and space), the spheres of relations, the histories of affects, the interval, the relational third, etc. We are not stable, and this should humble us.

The goal for Massumi, in all of this, is to expand the capacity of bodies — to augment potentiality. Thus, we could make the tentative moral claim that creating a polyvocality with plenty of space for individuation, decentralization, and polylogism is always morally desirable. It is here that we can finally see the capacity of art within all this. Near the end of the interview, Manning makes the fleeting claim that “art can do the work of keeping experience complex by creating an open field for thought in the making.”¹⁷ In other words, we might say that works of art are, in the first instance, non-monolithic and as such affect us in positive, augmenting ways which only ever enhance our capacity to act; it would seem that the only art we should be on guard against is that which Adorno warned us of: art which conforms and liquidates the subject, even art which angers and sparks controversy can be said to augment our capacity for action,

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

though we should be wary of works which might function so as to actualize and force a reliving of an individual's past trauma, as a shattered perspective is certainly a diminishing of capacity.

I would like to briefly address two issues which I thought were important but not necessarily central to the main thread of this presentation: ideology and pain events. Affect in new media is not ideological or homogenizing in the first instance for Massumi, and while I might agree with this, we should be wary to note that affect always renders us as being regulated by adequate causes outside of our own origination and willingness. It's not entirely accurate to say that we are socially regulated through propaganda, but we must still admit that we are not totally free agents, if we are to take the implications of affect seriously and especially if we conceive of freedom from a dualistic perspective.¹⁸ Second, Massumi briefly mentions how some children will point to the cite of a pain event when you ask them where 'it' hurts — namely Massumi asked his son Jesse this question. As a young child, Jesse was unable to differentiate between his body and the environment, citing the location of knee-ground as the event of pain. If we take this proto-differentiated state as informative and valuable at the heterophenomenological level, as Massumi and Manning do, then it should be noted that this leaves open a particularly striking amount of room for an individual's experience of pain to always be a collective event, insofar as the pain event is partially outside the conscious, differentiated body of an individual. Pain is in the mind, but the mind, insofar as it is constituted by affect is thoroughly collective — is through our intermeshing worlds. That is, *knee-ground* unveils the *I-world* tantric intermesh.

¹⁸ Ibid., 213-15.