Book Review: Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation

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Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002. 328 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0–8223–2882–8 (hbk); ISBN 0–8223–2897–6 (pbk)

This is a genuinely important book for anyone interested in cultural theory. Massumi sets out to rethink some of the oldest, most difficult and stubbornly recurrent thematics in the field, especially the relationships between the body, thinking and identity. His starting point is to interpose the concepts of 'movement' and 'sensation' between those of 'body' and 'change'. Those in the humanities, he argues, have tended to try to understand the relationship between the body and change without registering and exploring the significance of these two bracketed middle terms. Thus, Massumi draws on the work of Spinoza, William James, Bergson, Deleuze and others to carefully reflect upon how we are embodied, how we move and live and therefore how we belong and think.

In doing so, Massumi weaves an evocative text, at times deceptively simple and at other times forbiddingly complex. He uses parables as hinge texts to segue in and out of the strands of his narrative. Some of these parables are drawn from his own experience or popular culture; others are drawn from scientific literature, and here we find an especially challenging dimension of Massumi's work: like Bruno Latour or Isabelle Stengers (whose work he affiliates with), Massumi finds new ways to imagine how science is folded into philosophy and so unfolds, in turn, into cultural theory. Impressive here is Massumi's use of revisionist accounts of science, such as chaos theory, to offer new perspectives on the body in culture.

As well as movement and sensation, a central term of Massumi's inquiry is 'affect', something I wish to briefly discuss. Cultural theorists have devoted much attention to affect as a way of reframing and situating 'emotion', and Massumi's opening two chapters ('The Autonomy of Affect' and 'The Bleed: Where Body Meets Image') offer a fresh perspective. Affect is not a synonym for emotion, Massumi argues. Rather, affect and emotion 'follow different logics and pertain to different orders' (p. 27). Emotion is 'qualified intensity', it is the 'sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience' (p. 28). In contrast, affect is 'irreducibly bodily and autonomic' in nature (p. 28). Understanding affect in this way allows us to reformulate the relationship between the human and non-human based on both their 'irreducible *alterity*', but also their 'active connection' (p. 39).

In giving an exposition of affect, and its distinction from the emotional, Massumi offers the example of Ronald Reagan, who he feels was able to mobilize image-based power that was ideological in non-traditionally ideological ways. In explaining precisely how a subject is constituted via the affective, Massumi offers the parable of the day that Ronald Reagan gained his confidence as an actor. The young handsome character that

Reagan was playing in the movie *King's Row* has an accident and wakes up to find that his legs have been amputated. Reagan wore himself out trying to imagine how he would portray the character in this event, which he described as the 'most challenging acting problem in my career' (p. 52). The prop men arranged an illusion, so that Reagan lay in the bed unable to see his legs, and thus he was able to enter into the character. Massumi takes this story about the acquiring of a disability to be exemplary of the relationship between the body and an image: the 'coupling of a unit of quasi corporeality with a unit of passion', which he dubs an 'affect' (p. 61). This gaining of impairment provides Massumi with a metaphorics for his theory of identity: 'Rethink body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force, and violence – before code, text, and signification . . . What is left of *us*, after "our" unity has completed "his" amputation?' (p. 67).

What I find striking about Massumi's account of affect and embodiment here is the role that disability plays as a central but unnoticed trope. Here, Massumi's ideas would benefit from an encounter with emerging work in critical disability studies (a body of theory not as well known in cultural studies as it should be) – and vice versa. My other critical remark about Massumi's book is that while he often seeks to theorize media as part of the cultural formations and technologies he investigates, here and elsewhere I sometimes felt that he did not sufficiently distinguish between the specificities of particular media forms or genres.

These comments aside, Massumi's book shines with the joy of taking abstraction just one step too far, into radical empiricism. The author sets out to be inventive, affirmative, pragmatic, down to earth and up in the clouds – and well succeeds – in a book that will richly repay rereading for some time to come.

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Elihu Katz, John Durham Peters, Tamar Liebes and Avril Orloff (eds), *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are There Any? Should There Be? How About These?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003. 265 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0–7456–2934–2 (pbk) £15.99, $24.95

Say the word 'canon' in most circles these days and you are almost assured of provoking an argument. Canons – whether religious, literary, theoretical or otherwise – always are political constructions premised on acts of inclusion and exclusion, validation and negation. Indeed, as most of us know by now (though it is a lesson worth repeating), canons have long privileged the cultural and intellectual output of enfranchised groups at