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Sensational Affect

The ‘affective turn’ of the first decade or so of this century seems to have developed out of a growing interest in embodiment and sensory experience, across the humanities, cultural studies, cultural history and sociology, coupled with a reaction against the emphasis on discourse and language associated with the influence of French theory from structuralism through post-structuralism and deconstruction; and these, in turn, have gone hand in hand with the growing influence of another French theorist, albeit of a different stripe: Gilles Deleuze. Most recently – and controversially – this has been joined by developments in neuroscience and the trumpeted possibilities of ‘neuroaesthetics’. While few might want to take this as far as William Connolly in claiming that ‘Affect is part of biology, if anything is’,¹ it is nonetheless true that the idea that affect connects us with currents and energies that circulate beyond and outside the human, as well as inside it, seems central to these recent discussions. As this suggests, then, ‘affect’ may turn out to be just as difficult a term as those it aspires to replace or bypass, notably ‘feeling’; and since, on any reading, it overlaps substantially with the range and concerns of ‘sensation’ as presented here, it would clearly seem appropriate, and indeed important, to consider it.²

For Teresa Brennan, an affect is ‘the physiological shift accompanying a judgment’, yet seemingly unconnected with it, whereas feelings can be articulated through the appropriate words. ‘Feelings are thoughtful, and affects are thoughtless.’³ Indeed, affects without feelings are potentially troublesome; feelings convey information about whether a state is pleasurable or not, they convey a reactive awareness of events, whether internal or external, whereas affects do not do this. As Lawrence Grossberg puts it, ‘An affect can never define, by itself, why things should matter’; it does not carry values and meanings with it. Yet it can be seen as having significance, even if not signification; it cannot be pinned down with labels, even if it seems to invite the attempt. It reveals how invigorated we feel, it shows our levels of energy or will. ‘Affect is what gives “color”, “tone”, or

“texture” to our experiences.’ It conveys a sense of embodied well-being (or the reverse), through another vague but useful term, ‘mood’. As directed outwards, it gets us a sense of ‘what matters’, and how much: ‘Mattering maps define different forms, quantities and places of energy’,⁴ Grossberg concludes. Misha Kavka adds that ‘affect “matters” in a double sense, because it links the material world to structures of feeling’, and, in turn, ‘we are always responding not just to a sensate object but to others’ feelings lodged in it’, bringing into play a necessarily social dimension.⁵ We can say, then, that if I am ‘moved’ by your gift, this does not seem to require any specific emotion or feeling, or way of expressing it; it is more like a diffuse state, an overall positive attitude of mind and body, with no particular, necessary manifestation, yet highly specific to that situation, that relationship. ‘Affect’ underlies naming or expression, but is not yet either, nor can it be fully grasped by either. It is a prelude to meaning, and an excess beyond it: the energy that drives figuration. Margaret Wetherell concludes that whatever the ‘neurobiological polyphony’ involved in its production, it cannot be separated from thoughts, evaluations and social contexts.⁶

Affects seem to exist on the borderline between awareness and the conditions that produce or ‘affect’ that awareness. For Brennan, ‘Affects are conscious as states discerned by feelings, but their production is involuntary and unconscious’, perhaps involving a shift of mood, such as from calmness to irritation.⁷ But this sense of affect as being on a borderline seems to be true more generally; when Kavka suggests that ‘affect is to be found at the join’,⁸ this ‘join’ can clearly include not just conscious and unconscious (or non-conscious), but also mind and body, and contact between bodies. Hence again the frustration one might encounter in characterizing affect is complemented by its powerful figurative potential. It also follows that although affect cannot, perhaps, be seen as a form of cognition in itself, it seems to question the boundaries of the latter, hinting as it does at an implicitly relational view of the world, whereby its self-referential quality is linked to an embeddedness in relations beyond the self. Indeed, this suggests that the whole notion of ‘cognition’ needs to be broadened, to bring out its necessary involvement with sensory and affective experience.⁹

A flash of lightning

It is Brian Massumi’s work that seems to have become most widely cited in this context, after that of Deleuze himself, whose influence is indeed quite overt in this statement of Massumi’s aims, namely to show how ‘movement,

sensation, and qualities of experience couched in matter in its most literal sense (and sensing) might be culturally-theoretically thinkable.¹⁰ This interest in matter, process and affect, and their effects on both the context and content of experience, is well brought out in an example that Massumi takes from a brief allusion in Nietzsche, and develops in his own way: a sensational event from the natural world, a flash of lightning.

It is, argues Massumi, the event itself that counts: 'There is no subject before or behind it whose deed it would be. It is an autonomous doing.' *Before* the flash, there is, of course, an electrical field, of charged particles, a *potential* for the flash, but nothing pre-determined. The actual triggering of the charge is 'a movement immanent to the field of potential, by which it plays out the consequences of its own intensity'. The lightning strike does not, then, 'resemble, represent or reproduce' the charged field.¹¹ It is a culmination of it, playing it out, performing it. The flash exists through or as that dramatization, in this intensity that characterizes the field as a continuum that only now reaches its expressive potential, actualized in the flash that retrospectively resolves or determines the field, through the event itself. Drawing on this example, Wetherell suggests that intentions, too, are often partial, uncompleted; they are like 'the moments preceding lightning strikes when sophisticated still photography shows threads of electrical connection beginning to manifest with the tallest objects in the field, before the strike completes the connection'.¹² One could say that a cloud of barely formulated 'intentional possibilities' only condense *as* intention in the moment of realization, or become *the* intention only retrospectively, in a rationalizing back-formation.

In both cases, we can say that completion or culmination are not inherent outcomes; there is a sense in which they are in excess of the processes themselves, not resulting *from* them but dramatized revisions or expressions *of* them. Indeed, Massumi writes that 'expression' here involves an immediate or unmediated revelation of 'processual immanence'.¹³ In open systems, in interactions between entities, other entities, and enfolding environments, 'effect' never follows mechanically or proportionally from 'cause'. Indeed, it is the event itself that constitutes 'cause' and 'effect' as such, in their mutual disjunction, just as the absence of the event, in all its intensity, ensures that potential causes are never 'realized' at all. We can indeed cite Deleuze himself in this context: he suggests that when there is communication between heterogeneous entities, 'Something "passes" between the borders, events explode, phenomena flash, like thunder and lightning ...' and the system is thereby 'populated by subjects'.¹⁴

All this is presented as entirely continuous with what happens to *us*, observing the lightning flash. The shock of the flash, the ray of light and associated sound,

impacts on us through various interlocking levels of embodied experience, whether physical, chemical or biological, such that each stratum 'has its own rules of content formation to feed its level-specific functioning, as well as unique forms of expression to transmit the generative impulse to other levels ...', along with 'gaps of systemic indeterminacy' between the strata.¹⁵ Hence again we find the disproportion of cause and effect. The human body is thus an integral part of these flows and currents of energy, marked by disjunctive intensities at points of transition, and 'consciousness' only arrives on the scene relatively late in any particular instance of these processes. Brennan suggests that we do indeed need to recognize that 'the body and its actions have always been ahead of the slow calculations of reflective consciousness'.¹⁶

And here we encounter the 'missing half second', the temporal gap between physiological and specifically neurological evidence of brain activity and activity in the autonomic nervous system, and the actual moment of perception or feeling, the conscious *awareness* of the impact. The half second is not empty, then, but full, excessively so, and Massumi argues that, in consequence, 'Will and consciousness are *subtractive*. They are *limitative, derived functions*, that reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed.' If, in this sense, 'the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too quickly to be conceived',¹⁷ then what does get registered is crucially affected by the conjunction of this with the 'subtractive' effect of consciousness; it disregards singularity and uniqueness, instead manifesting responses of habit, which, at its most general, acts to contain potential and channel it in pre-constituted, recognized ways, classifying and routinizing it.

At the point of perception, then, with the lightning flash separated from its process, it is already subject to appropriation in language, to sense-making beyond sense; it becomes available for absorption into meaning and myth, for thinking by analogy. Thus, Zeus is 'like' lightning, takes over its properties and its effects; his thunderbolt 'expresses his anger'.¹⁸ The lightning flash 'flows into rhetorical captivity'.¹⁹ Perception is a conscious, surface phenomenon, vulnerable to ideological appropriation, while sensation or affect make the deeper connections through the process, the currents or flows that can only be represented by being stopped, stabilized, reflectively distorted and rendered static. Invoking Bergson, Massumi positions these moments of reflective stasis as 'stop-operations', appropriate only for occasions when 'things coincide with their own arrest',²⁰ but otherwise making movement and process appear derivative and secondary, and reducing nature to inertia, its dynamism erased.

In contrasting perception with sensation or affect, Massumi argues that sensation as such is inaccessible to systematic thinking,²¹ and testifies to the sense in which there is more to a thing or process than there is in our perception of it: this 'extra' is the dimension of the potential, the virtual. What gets lost is the registering of the *intensity* of the flash of lightning, the flash *as* intensity, as manifestation of the virtual field. These claims are drawn together in this formulation by Gregory Seigworth: 'An affective path cannot be threaded through those places where representations or images of thought are predominant or hold sway ... Affect, then, cannot be converted into or delimited by the discursive, by images or representations, by consciousness or thought.'²² Pointing up the connection with the virtual, Patricia Clough positions consciousness as 'a derived function in a virtual field' such that its actualization delimits the field; hence 'Affect and consciousness are in a virtual-actual circuit, which defines affect as potential and emergent'.²³ Thus we encounter the world as available for interpretation and representation, the actual world as a limitation or 'subtraction' from the underlying processes and relationships which can be seen as 'virtual', both excessive yet also intense. For Massumi, the virtual is 'a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt – albeit reduced and contained'.²⁴ In short, suggests Wetherell, affect, as virtual, is 'always in the process of becoming, and the leading edge of the wave of any engagement with the world before human minds get to it'.²⁵

A corollary is clearly that insofar as we *are* necessarily aware of them, conscious of them, 'feeling' and 'emotion' do not count as affect. Emotion both reveals, yet also captures and limits, the affect that makes it possible, fixing it with a label that marks it as subjective and personal, yet also conventional, 'owned' and recognized.²⁶ Beneath appearances, then, this effectively positions subjectivity, for Massumi, as a kind of 'no-place or waiting room' through which these affects pass, as 'autonomous lines of force'.²⁷ Hence we are presented with a fundamental contrast between a world of subject and object, captured as such in perception and representation, and manifested in emotion, thereby rendered static, as states of being; and a world of processes and forces, of virtualities becoming actual, of intensities that escape even as they are pinned down, a world where dualisms and distinctions give way to fluid relations, concentration and transposition, manifest in affect as what is felt *as* change, experience as the integrity of the ongoing and the novel, the singularity of duration.

Overall, this is an invigorating and challenging application of that fusion of Spinoza and Bergson that contributes to Deleuzian metaphysics and, in

particular, has led us into Massumi's thesis of the 'autonomy of affect',²⁸ which now needs more consideration, and critical assessment.

The autonomy of affect

In image reception, our response to perception, Massumi distinguishes two levels (or systems): those of content or quality, and effect or intensity. The former pair fixes the content and form of the image in relation to conventional, intersubjective meanings, whereas the latter characterizes the strength and duration of the effect. Intensity as affect is embodied in purely autonomic reactions, most directly apparent in Galvanic skin response, whereas other autonomic responses, such as heartbeat and breathing, belong relatively more to the quality level. This may be because they are linked to our expectations, which in turn depend on consciously positioning ourselves in linear time, narrative continuity. Hence such alterations of heartbeat and breathing involve 'a reflux of consciousness into the autonomic depths, coterminous with a rise of the autonomic into consciousness.' Intensity is separate from this, to the side of it, a non-conscious 'autonomic remainder'; it cannot be assimilated to, or appropriated by, function, meaning or sequential narration. At the same time, there is a relationship between the content and intensity levels, in that an image with a more factual emphasis can dampen the intensity effect, whereas an image with an emotional emphasis can amplify it, as if compatible with intensity rather than interfering with it.²⁹ Affect, as intensity, may have links to the autonomic nervous system, then, but it is clear that it cannot be definitively located there. Indeed, it never loses this emergent sense of obscurity, defying any clear sense of place: it is already as though it cannot be *located* anywhere, as though it questions any notion of 'location' – as would perhaps be expected, given its 'virtuality'.

Elsewhere, however, Massumi offers further hints to clarify the relation between affect and the body's sensory and nervous systems. Affect is not located in exteroception (the five senses); it is associated first with interoception, the visceral, the enteric nervous system, centred on the intestines, independent of the nervous system of brain and spine, and responsible for releasing hormones. This, one might observe, also furnishes appropriate imagery in everyday language ('gut feelings'). Secondly, and more importantly, affect involves proprioception, which depends on organs such as the inner ear and the muscles (incorporating muscular memory), giving a sense of body rhythms,

pulses of energy, movement and the overall state of the body (often recorded in moods and mood swings). Additionally, every exteroceptive perception incorporates proprioception of the state of the body, normally non-conscious.³⁰ This last dimension, giving a sense of embodiment as somehow unified, as both condition and result of ongoing movement and positioning in the world, as well as a diffuse – and somehow *internal* – sense of well being (or the converse), would seem to have potential for further exploration, although it is only indirectly developed in Massumi's own work.³¹

While affect, in its autonomy, is not to be equated with experience as such, all this implies that it does nevertheless mark experience, through intensity, just as it does through its capacity to move across contexts. 'Autonomy' does not mean 'isolation'. As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg put it, 'affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body',³² and what Massumi refers to as affective 'atoms' are open, not closed, in that they are in touch with a whole universe of potential. Indeed, all this is redolent of Spinoza: affect is the whole world, looked at in a particular way. Affect is not owned; it is not subjective or individual, or, in a sense, really divisible, though it is expressed *in* and *through* particular events and situations. Hence, drawing this together: 'Impersonal affect is the connecting thread of experience. It is the invisible glue that holds the world together.' Affect connects *across* contexts, through the events whereby it evades capture *in* contexts. Actually existing things thereby live 'in and through that which escapes them', which immerses them in the autonomy of affect;³³ and this invisibility, this potential, refers us again to the virtual, for it is through the virtual that the autonomy of affect is constituted. Affect participates in the virtual up to the point of actualization, of emergence, that is also the event, simultaneously, of capture and of escape. In Wetherell's summary: 'If the quality track is mundanely predictable, tawdry, and stifling, then affect and its intensity keep a space open for life to erupt.'³⁴

All this shows how characterizing affect entails a string of dichotomies. For a start, affect itself can be contrasted with feeling and emotion. We then encounter non-conscious and conscious, expression and representation, virtual and actual, immediacy and habit, sensation and perception, situation and context, and finally process and stasis. But it is too simple to equate affect with the first term in each pair. Indeed, since 'process' seems basic here, what we really find is not so much virtual versus actual as 'virtual-becoming-actual' (and also, 'situation-emerging-from-context'). Here, though, problems loom. After all, fixing affect in terms of these distinctions is still *fixing* it; and as we have seen, to capture it in this way is to lose it. To 'fix' affect – inherent in any attempt to 'think' it, even if

we can avoid 'representing' it – is, at the very least, to distort it. It is an exercise in quality, in qualification, and loses the intensity in the pursuit of an understanding that can only be an external capture of it as its inner intensity escapes. Intensity becomes the unspeakable life of affect, giving a 'meaning' to our lives we can never actually grasp or articulate. The autonomy of affect seems to be brought at rather a high price: the price of its becoming ineffable. As we have seen, Massumi is forever at pains to tell us what affect is and forever precluded from doing so, forever alluding to it, elliptically, indirectly and metaphorically, while insisting on the necessity of its escape, preventing us from getting too close to it by refining it away with yet another qualification or distinction.

An essential component of the autonomy thesis, the distrust of representation, recognition, and of the linguistic and semiotic structures within which they are embedded – fundamental to the Deleuzian perspective, as we saw in an earlier chapter, in the discussion of Francis Bacon – becomes particularly crippling in Massumi. An intriguing example of the effects of this is given in a brief analysis of the act of reading itself. Arguing that every thought is accompanied by some physical sensation or other, of 'effort or agitation', such as knitting the brows or a quickening heartbeat, so that reading can never be purified of sensation, he adds that reading involves seeing through the individual letters and words, so that through the letters, 'we directly experience fleeting visionlike sensations, inklings of sound, faint brushes of movement'.³⁵ The effect of reading *as* affect thus involves rigorously excluding all content. Yet there is a palpable tension here that comes out in reading Massumi's own account. One initially reacts to the claim about the quickening heartbeat by assuming this is going to be precipitated by something in the *content* of what is being read; only subsequently does one realize that somehow this is supposed to happen *through* yet *despite* the content. One reads 'behind' or 'beneath' the letters; one does not read the letters at the level of *words* with meaning. So again, if this is an implication of the 'autonomy of affect' thesis, the whole thesis has to be thrown into question.³⁶

In particular, the link apparent here between the autonomy thesis and an implausibly rigid model of representation, as mere habit and convention, necessarily distorting and conservative, with language itself embedded in this, would rule out Wetherell's suggestion that what is most likely is that there is a pattern of affect, 'loose and often post hoc, arising in the moment of categorisation', a pattern that arises as 'the registering of core affect combines with representational processing'³⁷ – a suggestion that seems highly plausible and cuts through the complexities. Following this up, and dropping this exiling

of affect to a nebulous, impenetrable realm, one could argue that to make an affective statement, in the language of feeling, is to respond to a growing sense of pleasure or discomfort, or a change of mood, when this reaches some tipping point. It is a response to change – we become aware of feelings *as* they change, as the process forces itself sufficiently on our attention – that labels it, or ‘captures’ it, and thereby contributes to making it what it *is*, for us. In this sense, yes, it can be seen as ‘virtual becoming actual’, but in *registering* its becoming, we do not thereby betray it, or lose it; rather, we ‘place’ it differently, in a different ‘register’, that of language, another aspect of reality that has its own patterns, its own structure, its own integrity. This reflective grasp does indeed imply a moment of relative stasis, and a transformative reconstruction that, in making the feeling what it is for us, *also* registers, simultaneously, the gap of the reflective grasp itself. What we can say, then, is that it is not so much affect that is lost, as the *activity* of appropriating or representing it. What is at stake is not the distortion of some underlying but inscrutable truth, but a realization that the sense-making of ongoing experience has to meet the sense-inscription of language, and it is at this point of tension, of conjunction of incommensurables, that affect becomes partially constitutive of our experience of life.³⁸ The novelty, the charisma,³⁹ is in this disjunctive conjunction; it is not that experience is inherently novel, or language and its categories inherently conservative. Despite its inadequacies, then, we find that the ‘autonomy of affect’ thesis *does* point to something important: the mutual irreducibility of affect, of the circuits of sensation, and the arena of image, meaning and idea, caught and transmitted in the network of language.

To develop this argument, it is useful to bring in Deleuze at this point. He asks us to think of the affective encounter, or affect *as* encounter. This is the moment of ‘sense’, of what can *only* be sensed, as opposed to recognized. ‘In recognition’, he writes, ‘the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived.’ Affect does not involve an object, ‘placed’ in the imagination, memory or thought: ‘It is not a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible. It is not the given, but that by which the given is given.’ From the point of view of recognition, it is indeed ‘imperceptible’ (*insensible*).⁴⁰ Leaving aside the critique of recognition for now, Claire Colebrook helpfully presents this in terms of language: sense is ‘the virtual milieu through which we live and become. Sense is not reducible to the “meanings” of a language; sense is what allows a language to be meaningful.’ Language is not owned by subjects and used to name or represent objects, or not until it helps to shape, articulate and

produce itself as flow or process, 'stream of consciousness' perhaps, its power as affect '*moving towards* designating a world'.⁴¹

It is indeed important to be reminded that this encounter between a living language and the living world of which it is part may indeed have affective presuppositions as well as consequences, though this should not be confused with the *internal*, structural presuppositions of language, explored by semiological and other theories, let alone used to disparage the importance of this dimension. If affect as encounter requires that affect involve contact, impact between entities, and refers to the singularity of the effect, we can add that, in the modern world, this can crucially involve the impact of a book or film, of media transmission, as readily as a conversation. Such impact is never reducible to the content, but it does not exclude it, either. Meaning can have affective consequences, can be experienced, felt, even though an analysis at the level of meanings, of meaning as such, will never locate it – any more than such an analysis would be reducible to it. As for 'recognition', the extent to which this happens is internal to these encounters of language, bodies and worlds; it is not the exclusive preserve of language and its representational capacity. 'Recognition' need not preclude affect; we refer to a 'shock of recognition', after all, the singularity of the encounter having a dramatic effect. The affect is the impact-as-experienced, as felt, an active response *within* the passive – which may well involve recognition. But if affect, in Deleuze's 'sense', is not usefully conceived as the necessary *absence* of 'recognition', it is nonetheless true, and important, that it runs along a distinctive track. In effect, this has enabled us to reconstruct Massumi's distinction between two levels or tracks, 'content' and 'intensity', without the indefensible aspects of the autonomy thesis and the implausible and self-defeating critique of representation and recognition.

We can clarify this by pointing out that language *does* make a difference here, precisely because affect, in its impact, follows from the message – whether as form, content or context – as effect follows from cause, rather than as logical or imaginative connections in a chain or pattern of meanings. These latter connections, of course, have their own importance; but they are not connections in circuits of sensation. They cut across, at a tangent. Hence the appearance that signification is somehow secondary or irrelevant is not without foundation; from this latter point of view, meanings *are* secondary, in the sense that their status *as* meaningful is elided in the very triggering of the affects. This does not mean that 'effect follows cause' in some deterministic way – as argued earlier, the gap here, the sense in which effect (affect) is in excess of cause, is still crucial – but they are homogeneous in kind. If, for example, figuration in

terms of electrical energy is seen as appropriate for one – as has often been the case – then it will be appropriate for the other, too. This is what tells us that we are situated in the circuits of sensation.

If 'affect', in the most undifferentiated sense, is severed completely from its translation into specific affects as they occur as feelings on particular occasions – and it is important to insist that it is indeed *translation* that is involved here, the work of culture, a shift of register that involves language in specifying feeling, rather than just 'expression' or 'manifestation' – then indeed there seems to be nowhere else to anchor it save by latching it decisively on to the neurons or other appropriate physiological entities postulated by contemporary neuroscience, on pain of it disappearing completely into the nebulous or the ethereal. Nor, as we have seen, is this move so very new: indeed the language and imagery of neurons and synapses goes well back into nineteenth-century science (and it is important to insist, again, that it is 'language' and 'imagery' that are involved here).⁴²

The core of this would seem to be the claims made by some neuroscientists that when we observe an action, specialist 'mirror' neurons are activated, just as if we were about to carry out the action ourselves; the one is mapped onto the other. This is also said to apply in situations where we observe someone in pain, with the result that we can experience something of that same feeling. Put like this, the claim has a degree of plausibility, and is not particularly novel; examples that fit this have been discussed since Hume and eighteenth-century sensationalist psychology, even if the language of 'mirror neurons' is new. Furthermore, unless one is wedded to an extreme mind/body dualism, it is difficult to see how changes in feelings could fail to have some correlation with changes in the nervous system, and, more specifically, the brain. Taking it further, though, causes problems. Daniel Stern writes, of the mirror neuron activity just described, that it 'permits us to directly participate in another's actions, without having to imitate them. We experience the other as if we were executing the same action, or feeling the same emotion.'⁴³ Considered critically, this claim reduces questions of meaning to descriptions of brain function, allowing no place for the relative autonomy of language and thought and the cultural appropriation of natural processes as necessarily involving a transition into a different register or mode of nature, that of culture as nature's reflexive mode, its difference from itself. What the quote certainly *does* do is present us with a textbook case of the language of the circuit of sensation, where affects flow between and across populations in an unmediated, direct way, like contagion: boundaries dissolve, individuals blend into an undifferentiated mass,

bobbing around in a sea of neurons, illuminated by flashes of lightning across the turbulence ...

In summary, there does seem to be a sense in which affect is coextensive with the whole universe, *insofar as* this can be seen in terms of energy, of chains of connections and disjunctions, experiences of impact and shock. This much is in common to both Deleuze and Massumi, and is consistent with the arguments developed here around circuits of sensation and the way they have been experienced and theorized in the modern world. What Deleuze is concerned with, beyond this, is not so much the autonomy of affect, as its irreducibility to recognition, to appropriation as representation or categorization. While Massumi shares this emphasis, he ties it to the requirement that affect be autonomous in such a radical way that it becomes 'virtually' inaccessible, at the level of conscious experience, or – so as to ensure escape from the latter – swings over towards flirting with neuroscientific models that would indeed keep it resolutely distinct from actually experienced sensation, but at the cost of an uncritical scientism that rather gives up the ostensible aim of making the language of science 'culturally-theoretically thinkable'. In order to preserve the insights of this work, we need to drop the autonomy thesis, but we also need to abandon the critique of representation, common to both authors,⁴⁴ since, as has been seen, this mislocates the distinctiveness of affect and makes it impossible to think the processes whereby sensation and sensationalism can show the power of affect as it moves *through* and *across* image, representation and media, and the way in which our theories of affect are *themselves* embedded in historical processes.

Sensational subjects

While affect does of course relate to the nexus of issues around attention, distraction and shock defence, it really addresses a set of concerns at a tangent to this. Given that affect does in some sense 'get through', whatever its source, we can ask where it is located, *in* its effects, and what implications does it have for our sense of selfhood. How, indeed, does the self become such that it can be 'subject of sensation'? In considering the nature of affect and where it happens, it was suggested above that its occurrence below or prior to events that impact our senses and consciousness – related to its virtual aspects – should not be interpreted in a way that renders it inscrutable. Avoiding this seems to position the self as a channel, passage or switchboard where circuits of affect pass

through and intersect, with implications for our sense of self-awareness and embodiment. But – as with its place in other discourses of modernity – it is difficult to avoid the figure of the self as an interior space, even though here the emphasis is on this space as the relatively passive subject of these sensational currents that have their being, origins and effects in ways that operate, at least partly, ‘beneath’ or ‘beyond’ the reflexive grasp, even though, as we have seen, this grasp, as a ‘making sense’, also figures them in the form in which they can present themselves to us. Hence this model of selfhood is difficult to reconcile with ideological emphases on a substantive, ‘rational’ self, one that ‘owns’ its experiences and is ‘master’ of its body.

The point about affect is that it happens *to* us, locates us in circuits that connect the body in its internal and external states, in its fragmented reality as body parts, and the bodies of others, yet it does so in a way that brings in to play some notion of a whole body response, a sense of embodied personhood at least in the minimal sense of a capacity for integrated orientation and for ‘feeling’ beyond individual senses and organs. At the same time, there is never a simple fit between this ever-unfolding state and its appropriation in language and thought, just as this appropriation also marks an intervention in this process that both introduces the possibility of a split between self and body yet also marks a continuation of the process itself. Hence Rei Terada, in her critique of ‘auto-affect’, as ‘the mode of transparent self-reflexivity’ that reveals the ideal of immediacy, of presence, in the tradition of Western thought, follows Derrida in postulating auto-affect as ‘the self-differential encounter of experience itself’,⁴⁵ beyond any possibility of seamless recuperation in a state of pure self-consciousness.

Expanding this, we can point to ‘awareness’ as a significant but difficult concept here. It is not necessarily a matter of being conscious of something, in the sense of a capacity to be articulate about it, describe it adequately; it may be more diffuse, contextual, responsive, more a matter of background than of foreground. At this point, some similarity with the ‘distracted’ self, encountered earlier in this book, becomes apparent. One can be ‘aware’ of something without it being at the forefront of attention. Perhaps it is an overall sense of ‘belonging together’, of parts or aspects being in some sense related to ‘self’ as a focus or perspective, something ‘felt’ but presupposed, rather than available for conscious registration. In terms of the body and its sensory organs, it is clearly proprioception that is most significant here. At the same time, something is ‘felt’ in the stronger sense, too, in the sense of ‘impact’, hence bringing intensity, or the *variation* in intensity, into the picture. Intensity can involve discontinuity,

across thresholds, the boundaries that separate parts, entities and levels, while indicating relations between them, the fact that they are *in* relation. In sensation, the variation in intensity is felt, for Massumi, as self-relation, manifest in this 'feeling of having a feeling', hence '*the felt reality of relation*', giving one a sense of vitality, of being alive, in a 'continuous non-conscious self-perception'.⁴⁶

In order to make further sense of this, Massumi invokes the concept of resonance,⁴⁷ a concept that plays a significant and stimulating part in his account, while not getting much explicit discussion – as indeed is the case with Deleuze, who is clearly, once again, the source of this. Sensation has a self-referential quality, hence can be described as 'a resonation, an interference pattern'. Taking the example of an echo, Massumi argues that its location is problematical – not *on* but *between* the walls – and that its complex patterning involves a kind of self-relation via self-replication, such that the bouncing back and forth of the sound multiplies its movement without cutting or fragmenting it, hence its 'complex self-continuity'. The reverberation of an echo can therefore be understood as a self-multiplication via superimposition. This 'complicating immediacy of self-relation' can be seen as intensity,⁴⁸ and is a clue not only to our awareness of self as relation but also to the way the impact of sensation works more generally, leading us to understand that classic dualisms, such as mind and body, passivity and activity, could be seen 'not as binary oppositions or contradictions, but as resonating levels', with affect as their 'point of emergence' from virtual coexistence to actuality, such levels being conceptualized as foci of self-organization, always precarious, but 'locked in resonance with each other' each recapitulating the same event in different ways.⁴⁹ If we now draw directly on Deleuze, we find that when two sensations confront each other and communicate, 'we are no longer in the domain of simple vibration, but that of resonance', and that even with simple sensation, the fact that it passes through different levels means that 'Vibration already produces resonance'.⁵⁰

At its most general, then, resonance is a feature both of the impact of a sensation as it crosses levels or boundaries between systems, whereby it is registered in these different levels or systems, and of the intersection of sensations with each other, producing novel configurations. All this invites us to consider extending the range of application of the concept, however speculatively (and despite the likely disapproval of Massumi and Deleuze). If a cave or valley can resonate with the echo of a voice, the poet Shelley reminds us that there can also be 'fertile valleys, resonant with bliss'; and an old building can 'resonate' in ways literal and metaphorical (and is there a difference here?), with memories perhaps, the presence of the past in the present, conveying a sense of

‘presence’ that is encompassing, excessive, potentially uncanny.⁵¹ And when the dictionary tells us that resonance is the ‘sound produced by a body vibrating in sympathy with a neighbouring source of sound’, then this is itself a definition that resonates with its own connections, its own history, the conjunction of ‘vibration’ and ‘sympathy’ recalling Hume and the eighteenth-century cultural imaginary when these terms played off one another to encapsulate not just the whole discourse of sensibility and sentiment but to communicate something of the structure of feeling itself.⁵²

If ‘affect is the zone of potential emotions’, a ‘primordial soup’ of feelings,⁵³ then resonance is the sensory experience of this indeterminate domain, a domain which is as much an undifferentiated state of space and time as something that exists within it. Returning specifically to that level of experience that we call ‘awareness’, with its hint of the pre-conscious or not fully focused, where affect resonates, reverberates, as if simultaneously stretched and deepened, we can say that this is a powerful stimulus either to full reflexivity or to creative figuration, as we try to convey this experience of a perhaps disconcerting otherness within the same, or the ‘becoming’ in the given.⁵⁴ When sensations cross each other, or cross boundaries, the reverberation or resonance that transmits impact into intensity shows how a *relation* is established, a relation of the smallest possible difference, within the ‘walls’ – which, in this case, are partially constituted by this very impact, as an effect, just as consciousness *reinforces* this, ‘actualizes’ it, by the reflexive act itself, with its projection and distancing. Massumi’s ‘complex self-continuity’ is at any rate not self-identity, but the ‘echo’ of these smallest differences may well resonate *as* continuity, as we experience a sense of the *diffusion* in intensity, the intensity in sensation that constitutes it *in* its uniqueness, as experience, as the becoming in stasis, the moment as process, Terada’s ‘experience of self-differentiability’.⁵⁵

A sensational world

Affect corresponds to a truth of experience: that the world *does* impact on us, that there is energy and force in this, that it is apparently unpredictable, and cannot ultimately be subsumed under meaning, even though this disruptive power of affect can equally well be transmitted through media and the products of culture. Thus Anna Gibbs tells us that ‘Contagion is everywhere in the contemporary world. It leaps from body to body, sweeping through mediatized populations at the speed of a bushfire.’⁵⁶ Affects swirl around, pushing us this

way and that, ever capricious, yet all the more domineering in their manifestations, characteristically affecting us, initially, below the level of full conscious awareness. Contagious, transmissible, they leave us vulnerable both to the media and to reinforcement through interaction with others,⁵⁷ like disease epidemics or fashion. Indeed, 'fashion' and 'affect' can reinforce one another, in the similarities of their initiation, transmission, and dissipation. Both make possible, and strengthen, aesthetic and moral responses, even though ostensibly both are apparently autonomous, uninterested in such effects. Additionally, sensationalized affects can be appropriated as melodrama, embroiled in an unthinking politics of denunciation, again powerfully reinforced through the media. The very features of affect that apparently make it distinctive can also make it dangerous, and theorists who reinforce this sense of its autonomy can be part and parcel of it, unwittingly contributing to the problem rather than helping us understand it.

On the face of it, then, Fredric Jameson's much-quoted characterization of the postmodern in terms of a 'waning of affect' would be wide of the mark, overtaken by events: affect has not 'waned', it has attained plague-like proportions. But when he adds that feelings increasingly tend to be 'free floating and impersonal',⁵⁸ we can make sense of this as suggesting a transformation of affect that detaches it from the earlier, moral concerns of sensibility, giving it both a harder edge and a potential for multiple forms of signification, opening it up as both resource and channel for consumerism. Affect becomes diffuse, off the peg, personalized rather than personal, yet always available for intense display and self-assertion, and a contributor to the politics of trauma. In this sense, 'waning' can suggest a kind of desensitization to affect that, in turn, opens it up for reinforcement: sensational affect can all too easily be part and parcel of a melodrama of affect. And any theorization of this that merely has the effect of reinforcing it should at least consider the narrowness of its own premises – whether a rigid separation between affect, on the one hand, and feeling and emotion, on the other, for example, as suggested by some proponents of the 'affective turn', can really provide the basis for understanding, or merely reproduces the 'waning of affect', as reinterpreted, at a more abstract level.

When we think of these currents as 'impersonal' we are hinting at another problem – not just that individual persons can be 'picked on' in essentially random or capricious ways, but that such a 'de-personalizing' is also in a sense 'de-humanizing'. A significant slide occurs here: personal to impersonal gets mapped on to human to non-human, culture to nature and mind to body, along with a series of loaded corollaries, such as the alleged primacy of self-interest

(coded now as biological, hence immutable). This is where the contemporary obsession with neuroscience, as the successor to fashionable sciences of earlier in the modern period, can be linked in, along with, more generally, the cultural prestige of reductionist psychological and biological approaches. All this becomes both explicable, in the light of these cultural developments, but also dangerous, uncritically normalizing what are actually *historical*, cultural and economic patterns of behaviour that 'resonate' powerfully through modern Western civilization. Hence another slide, perhaps most dangerous of all: from historical contingency to trans-historical universality and necessity. We thus witness an odd revival of *one* aspect of the Enlightenment legacy, amid the wreckage of so much of the rest: a new credibility attached to the search for 'laws of human nature', laws which can envisage the emergence of the posthuman along with the residue of the pre-human, blessed alike by the uncritical acceptance of contemporary techno-science, abstracted from its context.⁵⁹

The collapse of the grand narratives of 'the social', along with associated notions of 'progress' and 'emancipation', together with a reduction of 'reason' to 'technological mastery', means we are seen increasingly as naked, unprotected, buffeted by the forces of chance or fate that show the Janus face of modernity as mastery, the 'mastery' that that promises us control but ends up controlling us – not through some malevolent design, but through the very unpredictability of its effects, effects which are, nonetheless, invariably socially differentiated in their impact. In short, the creativity inherent in sensational affect, and its capacity to transfigure experience in positive ways, remains trapped by that very autonomy, celebrated by some of its theorists, that also, in practice, leaves it bereft of any meaningful links with the cultural, emotional and intellectual currents that could realize this transformative potential in our lives.