

Capaciousness



Gregory J. Seigworth

MILLERSVILLE UNIVERSITY

Affect is rangy. That's a given. No surprise then: different disciplines and angles of academic inquiry will take affect (and affects) up in subtle and often dramatically different ways – hooray! Hence, it is not uncommon then that these disciplines and angles will often find themselves engaged in lively, sometimes unexpected, conversations around both traditionally cherished and newly inspired points of consonance and dissonance – more hooray! Crucially, what 'works' – or doesn't work – within, say, one explanatory-exculpatory framework might find experiential-experimental purchase in another framework of inquiry. And, yes, sometimes conflicts arise within the self-same framework (see, for instance, psychology): hello age-old internecine battles over the reach/over-reach and sense of modesty/immodesty conferred upon different criteria for valuing advancements in the humanities and social sciences. Without a doubt though, the very ranginess of affect acts as a substantial source of these intra-, inter- and cross-disciplinary tensions.

Given this, it is worth trying to find ways – when possible – to make these shimmering, perhaps spikey, moments of disciplinary interface into something that is illuminatingly-mutually productive and not talking-past-each-other into a combative void. But having said that, there is sometimes nothing quite like an invigorating debate around those procedures and processes and problematics that have come to animate and sustain a particular zone of recognizable inquiry: whether a discipline, a field, a practice, etc. Ultimately, the point is not to dissolve tensions by imagining that affect study will somehow magically turn into some kind of overarching über-discipline (as if!) or, even more basically, into a single multi-discipline-straddling methodology – because that ain't happening. Ever.

Perhaps the key question for affect studies when it comes to such relatively pesky issues as disciplinarity is merely this: how might any specifically-angled engagement with ‘affect’ precipitate a re-imagining of the thresholds and continually shifting weight-bearing presuppositions / procedures / objects / relations that give unique texture, shape & rhythm to any discipline’s sense of capaciousness? How far might a given set of knowledge-practices and theories stretch at their boundaries and yet remain recognizably, albeit elastically, ‘within the true’ of their own singular historically-derived sets of practices and problematics? If affect and, consequently, the study of affect is capacious and rangy (and it is), then those specialized methods/practices & initiating presumptions that characterize any discipline offer a kind of necessary boundedness for the infinities of making-room that help give form(s) to force(s).

For me, this links up too with one of the more puzzling allergic reactions to affect theorizing in recent times; the study of affect is not only perceived, for some, as an unwelcome blurring of certain disciplinary boundaries and procedures but, more so, as an outright rejection or negation of such world-making fundamentals as ‘consciousness,’ ‘intentionality,’ ‘cognitive,’ the ‘discursive,’ the ‘individual,’ the ‘linguistic,’ the ‘social,’ the ‘representational,’ the ‘human,’ the ‘personal’ etc. etc. – after all, studies of affect have been known to attach a ‘non-’ and/or a ‘pre-’ prefix to these terms. With the affixing of the dash (-) of the non- / pre-, some have heard the opening of a gap: a rupture, a tear, a spacing, a kind of chasm. Cognitive here //sever-// non-cognitive over there. Personal here //sever-// pre-personal over there. As if grappling with affect is somehow done by way of a magical presumption of purity and un-contamination [“the body now free of the mind!”] or the production of sequence of neatly aligned separations [“slip the bonds of the discursive, join the pre-linguistic, and win a trip to non-intentionality!”].

To the first of these, I will simply note that ‘non-’ is not ‘anti-’ and that affect study does not – indeed, cannot – sustain its workings through negation or inversion or exclusion. Suffice it to say, this would violate affect studies’ hard-earned (not necessarily hard-wired) capacities – the always making-room of ‘to be affected’ and ‘to affect’ – for capaciousness: its mode of attention to the ‘more-than,’ the ‘other-than,’ the ‘different-than,’ its attunements to what exceeds and what seeps from the atmospheres and folds of encounters. “As if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie,” as Katie Stewart writes in the afterword

to this issue. And this seems an apt reply to anyone who hears affect theory as caught up in some manner of performative self-contradiction – “Hey! First, you said ‘non-’ and then snuck it in through the back door!” Well, not exactly. Affect study uses ‘non-’ to show that the back door was never a door at all (back or otherwise). It is an immersive universe; forgo the standard entry points and exits, instead it’s doors (and more than a few windows) all the way around. ‘Non-’ is not the evacuation of or the vacancy surrounding an existent-something (cognition, intentionality, human, et al), but the saturating/magnetizing circumambience of everything. Think of affect’s ‘non-’ as a way to take note of this excess. Affect study then as excess-entialism.

‘Pre-’ is similarly oft-misinterpreted. Before consciousness? Before the individual? Before the social? Etc. On the immediate face of it, these questions seem almost willfully naïve: sort of like shining a flashlight into the darkness that protrudes in front of such more steadily-lit entities. ‘So, you wish then to insert your dim flashlight-findings before the more tried-and-true-and-trusted? And these faint pre-glimmerings will somehow invalidate or overwrite the understandings that we’ve gleaned about the workings of consciousness, the rights of the individual, the power of the social?’ Admittedly, I am being over-dramatic here when actually the role of ‘pre-’ in the study of affect is rather low-key and modest (in much the same way that Nietzsche said that we should recall consciousness to its necessary modesty). Questions – like those posed at the head of this paragraph – presume that we know well-enough in advance what consciousness, the individual, the social (and more) already encompass; they assume that, when ‘pre-’ is added, it indicates something that applies before the coming-into-coherence of the individual, the social, the cognitive, the discursive. But the case is slightly other than this. ‘Pre-’ points to the co-constitutive nature of particular things such as consciousness, the individual, the discursive [etc.] along with what is supposed to fall out or recede into the background as the context / conditions of emergence. ‘Pre-’ signals the co-participation of a particular surfacing effect (like ‘consciousness’) and the wider fielding of its production. Perhaps it is not so curious then, when during an interview I asked Brian Massumi: ‘Is there anything before affect?’ He replies: “There is everything before affect: participation” (Massumi 2016).

It is as if, by way of ‘pre-,’ the same query that affect (in)famously asks of a body – ‘what can it do?’ – is likewise asked of the cognitive, the personal, the linguistic, the individual, the social. Because we don’t yet know. ‘Pre-’ addresses the establishing of a recognizably coherent-enough actuality (say, the linguistic) while not letting go of the processes, conditions, and contexts that give contour / texture / rhythm to its arising (hence, the pre-linguistic). Thus, it yields, for example: the consideration of consciousness alongside the processes that produce

the distinction between consciousness and its other(s). Or, in another instance of ‘pre-,’ it means considering the individual and the social alongside the processes that lead to their mutually exclusive [now turned inclusive] bifurcation.

If ‘non-’ is a ground-clearing maneuver that can afford studies of affect the opportunity to figure in the (often gradual, barely noticeable) seepages and excesses of more-than, other-than, different-than(-human / -intentionality / -representational etc.), then ‘pre-’ (individual/social/linguistic etc.) offers the perpetual alongsidedness of the processual. In brief, ‘non-’ says ‘not only this but more’ whereas ‘pre-’ maintains, over and over again, ‘yes and... yes and ... yes and...’

Because there are not any readymade steps to follow, no half-buried answers waiting to be uncovered, every project related to affect enacts yet another context and set of conditions to be unfolded anew. The question of affect modulates at every point of contact, relying – yes – upon quasi-steadying disciplinary and sensory mechanisms of investigation but also across the length and breadth of intersecting / diverging trajectories of matter and matterings.

Talking about affect divorced from any particular context is, let’s just say, difficult. Perhaps not entirely pointless – after all, theories of affect do coalesce and vibrate and unfasten around shared pathways of situational emergence and fade – but if affect study is to be capacious (as I have maintained it must) then it cannot be closed down (as outlined above) around any specific disciplinary route or explicit set of step-by-step methods, or cleanly-scrubbed concept-clusters or rote performative gestures. Cast a wary eye upon anyone who tells you that they have located the *one way* that critical attention to affect should be pursued.

But perhaps a few capaciously-oriented parameters could be ventured ...

At its most fundamental abstraction, I would argue – ready your wary eye! – that the study of affect works to provide a contextualized account of relationality (in-between-ness) and singularity (this-ness) at the same time: by never letting go of the scalar nature of vicinity (about-ness: micro/macro level of forces, histories, & present pressures) and the continuous gradience of intensities (forcefulness or the +/- sensate slope of alteration in the ongoing state-of-things). The body (a body) – bearing, materially & immaterially, all of its affecting ‘non-’s and ‘pre-’s as its own unique and modulatory sets of capacities and intransigencies – figures in as orienting trajectory or pathway, defined by its viscosity (pleated-ness: its rhythmic composition of stickiness and porosity).

These features – inbetween-ness, this-ness, about-ness, and forcefulness + a body’s pleated-ness – are not prescriptions for practice (hardly), but are more like zones or thresholds that fuzz in and out as they come to figure into one’s accounting of affect (or affects) situationally. Sometimes – indeed, more often than not – slippery things & event-processes don’t resolve themselves into neat little compartments and tidy vectors and right angles, and so the study of affect stakes out a place in the numerous incoherences that texturize a world. Recognizing that untangling or separating-out and critical distancing are not always the only or best available options, affect study frequently chooses to ‘middle out’ by wading into the ambient overdeterminations of existence and the energies that move (or impede, swerve, etc) bodies (of all kinds) in the very midst of their activity. Yes, this middling-out of affect study can often feel like a muddling-through (‘That’s it?! But where is, um, agency? We want theories that jump up, assert themselves, and knock things over’). But why shouldn’t one modest aim of affect study be: to make or foster along, even if the barest ripple across the surface, a more expansive ongoing-ness (which is not to ignore those visceral moments in the present that need expansive resistance too). And while that is never enough (when it is ever enough?), it can be a start, this making room. This capacious-ness.

References

- Massumi, B. (2016). Writing Space: Interviews. Interview with G.J. Seigworth. *WTF Affect*. Available at: <http://wtf affect.com/brian-massumi/>. Accessed 1 July 2016.