

Keeping the Concept of Cinematic Affect “In Play”

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Following a groundswell of paradigm-shifting works over the last few decades, that have challenged the elision of the body in film studies, sensory-affective experience has become a core concept in much of contemporary cinema studies. Three key considerations—the corporeality of spectatorship, the temporality of the moment and film as an event, an encounter—have been pivotal in reframing understandings of cinematic experience to emphasise the centrality of affect. This paradigm shift has seen a proliferation of new studies, many of which apply or illustrate one of the critical frameworks of affect in ever-more diverse contexts. However, much of this recent work takes the concept as a “found object,” whose parameters are pre-defined and known, and simply “replays” it without further investigation or interrogation. This dossier seeks to keep the concept of affect “in play,” exploring some of the cutting edges of how scholars are currently thinking about cinematic affect.

The brief for this dossier asked leading and emerging scholars to explore how an embodied understanding of affect is “in play” in their current thinking about cinema. What question(s) engage them? What is the edge that they are trying to explore? How is the concept of affect productive in their current thinking? How does it help them to push the boundaries of what can be thought?

Contributors were invited to curate a short film excerpt and write about this clip to explore a particular question that is engaging their current thinking about cinematic affect. They were given the choice to write in any format they chose: it could be a traditional rigorous scholarly argument; or it could be looser, more playful, more experimental, more speculative, or written in an affective mode, trying to bring the affective dynamics of the scene into the writing practice. It was entirely up to contributors to decide how to frame the question in the field they are working in. The only requirement was to think *with* the clip, not just *about* it. The aim was to keep present together, in the writing, the materiality of the film as sound and image and the question of sensory-affective cinematic experience.

Questions of the relationships between affect, sensory experience, bodies, emotion, thought, form, force and the political emerge in different configurations throughout these essays. In the opening essay, Anna Powell explores relationships between sensory experience, affect and thought, through a close reading of the tactile imagination in Jan Svankmajer’s claymation, *Fall of the House of Usher*. Informed

by Deleuze's schizoanalysis, she argues that "affect operates in assemblage with percepts and concepts" and that "the molecular flux" of the film's tactile, affective images generates new "structures of feeling and thought" to mobilise anti-authoritarian desire.

The relationship between emotion, affect and thought is interrogated in many of the essays that follow. Steven Shaviro's contribution lays out succinctly a number of assumptions about the distinction between affect and emotion that inform much of affect theory. Emotion, in this account, is a personal experience or state, tied to a self, whereas affect is understood as pre-subjective forces that produce and precede these experiences and elude any distinction between the physical and mental. Because affect can be both actual and vicarious, he argues, it is central to understanding our engagement with media.

Paul Gormley's essay both develops and questions this apparently easy division between the power of affect and the role of emotion. Focusing on the "fragmented ... localised moments of intensity" that make up *In the Mood for Love*, in lieu of a "whole" narrative and fully psychologized characters, Gormley poses questions about the relationship between affect, history and cultural context in Hong Kong cinema and the operations of "affect in the globalized city."

A straight-forward distinction between affect and emotion is also problematic in Angela Ndalians' account of the dynamics of ruthless and graphic violence in the TV series, *The Walking Dead*. Affect, the senses and cognition are here intertwined. Drawing on Eisenstein's formulation of the shock effect of montage collisions, Ndalians explores the visceral way disgust is produced by an "affective assault" on the spectator's sensorium, understood here as "an integrated unit that combines cognition and the senses."

Shifting the lens to the relation of affect and form, Eugenie Brinkema's piece addresses the "affective specificity of no longer being loved as a formal problem," in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. Brinkema asks "what specific insights a radical formalism might generate in relation to affective intensities." Eschewing the reduction of the film to "identity politics, generic debates about pornography [and ...] sexual practices," she cleaves closely to a "formal analysis of light, color, line, figure, ground" and inter-textual connections. Adapting her premise to the form of the writing itself, she refuses any account of affect that "opposes affectivity to form, structure [and] textual detail."

For Elena del Río, "forms are never in isolation from the forces/affects that animate them [and... unhinge] them from their [representational] center." Deleuze's concept of the molecular, and an emphasis on "becoming/time," give del Río a foundation to

decipher a “politics of force” in Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day*, and to “propose an aesthetic politics of cinema [that ...] exceeds normative understandings of the political.” Here, force/affect produces a destabilising “affective-thinking-feeling”: “an irrecoverable leak that cannot be plugged.”

Rethinking the political also informs Amit Rai’s discussion of the political ontology of the affective image in India. Here, questions of affect open a line of inquiry into forms of political subjectivity and “extra-legal entrepreneurship” in poor urban communities in contemporary Mumbai. Rai brings Deleuze’s concepts of the “pathos-image” and the “affective interval” to bear on the cinephilia that infuses the practices of video piracy, in *Videokaraan*, arguing that “media and affect are twined in the body, compressing and exploding habituations continually.”

Laura Marks’ essay brings the question of a politics of affect back to a discussion of affect and meaning. Marks takes the reader through the experience of watching Jacques Rivette’s thirteen-hour theatrical film, *Out 1: Noli Me Tangere*, a film that, she writes, “postpones meaning and rolls around in affect.” Marks’ account becomes an interrogation of the interplay—or lack of it—between affect and meaning: she argues that the “autonomy of affect [...] once believed by Deleuzians to be liberatory in itself,” is reduced by neoliberal capitalism to merely “a flicker.”

Reframing the political dimensions of affect in a colonial and neocolonial context, Jennifer Biddle explores how the specific phenomenological dynamics of film experience contribute to reconfiguring and re-remembering the encounters of the ethnographic film archive. Through a close contextual account of embodied dimensions of a contemporary collaboration between an anthropologist, a filmmaker and a group of Pintupi people indigenous to Australia’s central and western deserts, she argues that, in *Remembering Yayayi*, it is the ambiguity of cinematic affect that enables the nuances of memory and indigenous ownership of country and history to create new “screen memories” from the colonial encounter.

The imbrication of bodies and affect is also pivotal to Patricia Pisters’ article, which identifies the affective repetition of compulsive movements shared by both the “compulsive looping qualities” of GIF digital animations and the “disorderly bodily and mental landscape of bodily movements” in Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*. Through a comparison between GIFs and the dancing bodies of *Black Swan* and Powell and Pressburger’s *The Red Shoes*, Pisters examines the “specific aspects of film aesthetics in the digital age,” and new ways of engaging spectators in the contemporary globalised media world.

The relationships between bodies, spaces and objects are central to Robin Curtis’ contribution, in which affect emerges as a key concept to explore the vitality of

encounters between humans and the animate and inanimate bodies and spaces of the world. Considering a mixed-media film and sculptural installation, *AK47 vs the M16*, Curtis draws on Daniel Stern's concept of "vitality affects" and Theodor Lipps' work on empathy to consider how abstraction, movement and stasis can contain "past vitality" in the two different media.

Affective dimensions of bodies, spaces and objects again figure strongly in Jennifer Barker's article. Barker takes on a conventional narrative structure, in Todd Haynes' *Carol*, and traces the ways in which the complexity of the relationship between the two lead characters is rendered through the "affective relationships between humans and objects" and "the convergence of emotion and anonymous material affects." Juxtaposing the film with Patricia Highsmith's source novel, Barker explores how affective gestures can generate lines of flight that break out of the containment of narrative.

Jenny Chamarette shifts the affective dimensions of embodiment to focus more specifically on relations between film and the body and senses of the spectator, and to question the role of writing in exploring this. Chamarette traces the embodied work of abstract images and vocalisations in the short film, *AIR*, produced as a collaboration between two filmmakers and two sound poets. Eschewing the more distanced voice of commentary, she takes on a more experimental writing mode to explore affective dimensions of the "thinking, writing, breathing space" between the film and her as a viewer, and between her as writer and the reader.

A phenomenological approach to spectatorship also underpins Gertrud Koch's consideration of the multimodal cinematic experiences triggered by music and movement to explore ways in which aesthetic and narrative emotions differ from everyday emotions. Bringing together Jean-Paul Sartre and Siegfried Kracauer, Koch traces the "triggering power of music over affects" in the multi-layered emotions provoked by the juxtaposition of extreme violence with Nancy Sinatra's song, "Bang Bang," in the opening credits of Tarantino's *Kill Bill vol. 1*.

A synaesthetic approach to relations between music, image and affect also informs Anne Rutherford's account of how, in Kobayashi's *Harakiri*, energy is flipped back and forward between sound and image to imbue *mise-en-scène*—both bodies and space—with a heightened sensory-affective intensity. Exploring connections between Eisenstein's polyphonic montage and composer Toru Takemitsu's synaesthetic schemas, Rutherford explores how the materiality of embodied cinematic affect generates an affective-material contagion.

This introduction traces a pathway of intersecting concerns that animate the contributions to this dossier, and signals to the ongoing vitality of the concept of affect

(and its limitations) but does not in any way imply that the contributions constitute a comprehensive overview of the field, or that this narrative represents the ways the authors might directly dialogue with each other. This is but one trajectory that could have followed many other lines of connecting concerns, theoretical frameworks, insights and approaches. Rather than any authoritative collection, this dossier offers a range of interfaces and contexts within which we might continue to think deeply about how we understand cinematic affect and its ongoing transformations.

A note on spelling

In recognition of the profoundly embodied imbrications of affect, experience and identity (and its aporias) that penetrate into every aspect of our lives, and the felt resonances of and assumptions of global power dynamics that accompany them, this collection has rejected any imposition of the orthographic conventions of a single territory: contributors have been allowed the freedom to use the spelling conventions of their own cultural context.

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