

# Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

## Retoryka ciszy - perspektywa amerykańistyczna

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**Silence, Sound, and Affect**

**Cisza, dźwięk i afekt**

### Abstract

The present paper offers a subjective overview of approaches to affect. Research on affect accelerated in the last two decades within several disciplines, in response to different concerns and research questions, energized by new research in psychology and, more recently, neuroscience. But while affect studies scholars agree that emotions, amplified by the media, course through all social relations and electrify our entire bodies, scholars attracted to specific clusters of theories have little to say to each other. To remedy this situation, I attempt to bridge several seemingly incompatible strands of research on affects in psychology, cultural studies, and media studies, in order to bring out commonalities and patterns that may prove useful for reading literature and other cultural artifacts. Defining affects, I refer to the practice of tuning musical instruments to a specific pitch as an analogy for the way affects resonate from the macro to the micro levels of social life.

Niniejszy tekst stanowi subiektywny przegląd teorii afektów. Studia nad afektami zaczęły się prężnie rozwijać w wielu dyscyplinach w ostatnich dwóch dekadach, w odpowiedzi na różne problemy i pytania badawcze. Lecz choć wszyscy badacze afektów są zgodni co do tego, że emocje, wzmacniane przez media, przenikają całe nasze życie społeczne i elektryzują nasze ciała, często zamykają się oni w obrębie jednego paradygmatu. W niniejszym artykule staram się powiązać ze sobą kilka na pozór niekompatybilnych nurtów badań nad afektami, prowadzonych w ramach psychologii, studiów kulturowych i medioznawstwa, pokazując punkty stykowe między nimi, w nadziei, że takie kompleksowe podejście będzie przydatne w interpretacjach literatury i innych wytworów kultury. Definiując afekty, odnoszę się do praktyki strojenia instrumentów muzycznych do dźwięku wzorcowego, która może stanowić analogię dla sposobu, w jaki afekty rezonują od makro- do mikrorelacji w życiu społecznym.

### Key words

theories of affect, emotions, feelings, transmission of affects

teorie afektów, emocje, uczucia, transmisja afektów

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## Silence, Sound, and Affect

### 1. Introduction

Given the variety and volume of interdisciplinary work done on affects since the 1960s, I will attempt in this paper to take stock of approaches that have proved useful in literary and cultural studies, and to bridge several distinctive strands of research in psychology, cultural studies, and media studies that appear to be incompatible. As a belated convert to affect studies, I cannot pretend to offer an exhaustive overview, even of the publications in English. The field has drawn so many outstanding scholars that it is impossible to do justice to their research in a short paper. As far back as 2014, Eugenie Brinkema wrote: “Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect? Must one even begin an argument anymore by refuting Fredric Jameson’s infamous description of the ‘waning of affect’ in postmodernity?” (Brinkema 2014, xi). The interdisciplinary *Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies* is over 800 pages long (Wehrs and Blake, 2017). Neuroscience alone has produced enough research on affect to fill a 600-page textbook with a ten-page bibliography – Alan Schore’s 2016 *The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*. My effort to systematize existing theories of affect circulating in the humanities stems from the conviction that, far from being a passing fad, they will continue to offer vitally important insights.

But although affect studies is a growing field, it is surprisingly fragmented, with little commerce between scholars who favor specific theories and build on them. Those who draw on the theories of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who explored human socialization and subjectivity, take little interest in the ideas of Brian Massumi, inspired by Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, in which human bodies are viewed as conduits of affect as energy, co-assembled with media circuits. I want to suggest that their ideas are not mutually exclusive; taken together, they allow us to examine the work of affects at different levels of human consciousness, in intimate relations and in groups, with and without the mediation of technology, at home, in the park, in church, or in the movie theater. Tuning musical instruments provides a useful analogy for the way affects resonate from the macro to the micro

level. I would suggest that a complex emotional tuning mechanism is always at work, simultaneously involving many individual and group agents, as well as the material world we live in. Our individual affect system can be likened to a musical instrument played in an ensemble in which each instrument fills a different niche but is tuned to a specific pitch and must harmonize with notes played by other instruments. Analogously, by displaying various affects, adults constantly tune children's affects to harmonize with their own. Families, in turn, attune themselves to the emotional standards of the society at large – standards which, as anthropologists and historians have shown, vary across space and time, as well as between social classes and ethnic groups (cf. Reddy 2012, Stearns and Stearns 2012, Abu-Lughod 2012). If there is discord in the family, community, or nation, emotional strings may go out of tune or snap. Beyond families, local communities, and nations, many factors at the transnational level impact the tuning process: flows of capital, goods, images, and ideas generate emotional charges that resonate at the individual level. I am not the first to argue that we need a combination of theories to think about emotional charges at the level of the body, the family, and larger social groups; emotions transmitted in face-to-face contact as opposed to those mediated through literature or film. In “Affect Theory and Audience” (2011) Anna Gibbs also discusses the limitations of the Tomkinsian and Spinozan-Deleuzian approaches to affects and argues for the need to synthesize them. But the purpose and scope of the present paper are different than Gibbs's.

## 2. Affects, Emotions, or Feelings?

Systematizing the vocabulary used by affect studies scholars is next to impossible. There is no consensus as to how many affects or emotions there are, which ones are innate and which acquired with age, which are simple as opposed to complex or self-conscious. “Feelings” seem to be the least controversial term: “A feeling is our awareness that an affect has been triggered” (Nathanson 2008, xiv). “Feelings are thoughtful, and affects are thoughtless. Feelings are meant to say, ‘I like it, it feels good to me,’ or ‘I don't like it’ and to lead to action on this basis” (Brennan 2004, 116). But the distinction between affects and emotions is blurred. Usually the word “affect” refers to the way in which a charge of energy courses through our bodies and between bodies before it is consciously recognized as an emotion, named, and thus given voice, so to speak. Affect materializes as an electrical impulse in the nervous system, a change in hormone levels in the blood, a muscular contraction (a smile, pounding heart, tense limbs, ready for flight), or a change in posture (drooping head and shoulders as the expression of shame). The affect system is an executive function that relies on the brain and central nervous

system, sensory organs, the hormonal system, as well as motor muscles, all of which make it possible to process sensory information and respond to it. While some of the responses are involuntary, the affect system is flexible and we learn to modulate our affects.

The more we learn about affect as a neurochemical process, the harder it becomes to distinguish unconscious affects from conscious emotions. One of the most important breakthroughs has been the undoing of the mind/body dualism, an insight which was already present in Raymond Williams's intuition that we need to understand "thought as felt and feeling as thought." Williams suggested that before world views and ideologies are articulated, they may emerge as "structures of feeling," barely perceptible, manifested as an "impulse, restraint, and tone" (Williams 1977, 132).

Some writers privilege one term over the other. For instance, Sara Ahmed and Theresa Brennan use both but tend to stretch emotion to cover the whole spectrum of unconscious and conscious states. Ahmed claims to have chosen "emotion" because it is in common use and has a history in feminist writings (Ahmed 2004). Those who prefer "affect," do so precisely to avoid the "exceedingly broad and elastic" common use of "emotion" which covers "hard-wired reflex reactions (like the startle response), kinesthetic turbulence, moods, sexual arousal, pleasures and desires, as well as occurrent mental states like anger, fear and sorrow" (qtd. in Brinkema 2014, 29). I generally follow Silvan Tomkins's usage of the word "affect" for both unconscious and conscious emotional states, because in literature, unlike in the laboratory, it is difficult to pinpoint the moment when affect becomes emotion. (Affect in literature is always already mediated and a writer may describe a blush without giving us access the character's state of mind, or vice versa.) However, when referring to love, hate, compassion, guilt, or remorse, which require sophisticated thought processes, I find the word "emotion" more appropriate.

Our emotional states seem private and authentic. "Trust thyself," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Self Reliance," for "every heart vibrates to that iron string" (Emerson 1979, 128). As heirs of this philosophy, we are often unaware of emotional standards and flows as something external to our own feelings. Similarly, unless we sing in a choir or play in an orchestra, we may not be aware that choirs and orchestras in the western world are tuned to the same pitch: the reference note is the A above middle C, set at 440 Hertz, and all other notes are relative to it. Yet until the "concert pitch" was adopted internationally on the eve of World War II, pitch levels varied enormously even within the same city (Cavanagh 2009). They still do in music-making communities which have no use for the international standard, and when a musician does not use a commercial tuning fork.

Affects are correlated with sound and silence: shame and fear silence us; joy and anger can be very loud, especially in small children, before they have been trained to control their affects. We gasp when startled. When infuriated, we explode into inarticulate screams. When we are disgusted, the sound “Ugh!” exudes from deep within our guts – or does it? The danger here is to assume that affects are unconditional reflexes like bowel movements. They are not. Although Tomkins assumed that we are born with nine basic affects, each with its own facial expression, he spent much of his career demonstrating how malleable they are. In a long chapter entitled “Freedom of the Will and the Structure of the Affect System” he discussed the numerous freedoms this system affords, such as the freedom of intensity, freedom of density of investment, freedom of object, and freedom of affects to combine with, modulate, and suppress other affects (Tomkins 2008, 68-79). By studying the mechanisms of triggering and suppressing interest, joy, anger, contempt, disgust, shame, and fear, and the complex relations that develop between them, Tomkins showed that there is nothing automatic about the way adult human beings resonate emotionally.

Attunement is the metaphor used by Torben Grodal and Metter Kramer for the social modulation of emotions in their study of audiovisual media reception. Group activities such as dancing or watching films create attachment which forms the basis for the experience of emotional attunement. When watching a film, “not only do we empathize with and attune ourselves to the characters; we also attune ourselves to the other viewers we share space with when viewing a film in a theatre,” as “part of an aesthetic-emotional community” (Grodal and Kramer 2010, 30).

### **3. How Many Affects/Emotions Are There?**

Observing the people of Tierra del Fuego on his Beagle voyage, Charles Darwin (1872) distinguished six basic emotions: surprise, sadness, happiness, fear, disgust, anger. Based on years of observing American infants and adults, Silvan Tomkins distinguished nine very different ones and called them affects. He hyphenated them to show different levels of intensity: enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, anger-rage, contempt-disgust, and dissmell (an aversion to unpleasant smells). Unlike in Darwin’s catalogue, in Tomkins’s there is no sadness; his broad definition of shame covers sadness (Tomkins 2008). Those who follow Spinoza and Deleuze tend to treat affect as an undifferentiated and unitary force, an intensity of feeling, or power to affect and be affected (Massumi 2002, 34-35), not because they are oblivious of the fact that affects have positive and negative charges, but because they are more interested in large-scale phenomena independent of individual human agency.

Overlaid on the basic affects are what some scholars call self-conscious emotions. Reporting on decades of psychological research focused on shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride, Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robbins point out that these emotions have been understudied because they are less universal than the basic affects, they lack correlated facial expression, and are therefore harder to study empirically (Tracy and Robbins 2004, 3).

Love and hate are complex emotions that have proved notoriously difficult to study. “When one person says to another person, ‘I love you,’ or, ‘I hate you,’ such communications have properties which may be quite different from the affects which they are intended to communicate. The statement, ‘I hate you,’ may never be forgotten although the feeling which it communicated was no more than a sudden flash of anger” (Tomkins 2008, 326). For Tomkins love as a special form of attachment is important only insofar as it triggers enjoyment-joy and interest-excitement, or when denied – shame-humiliation (Tomkins 2008, 381-391). Love and hate are buried in the body of his chapters and left undefined. By contrast, Sara Ahmed foregrounds love and hate in her study of the politics of emotions in interracial societies, entitling her chapters about them “The Organisation of Hate” and “In the Name of Love” (Ahmed 2004).

#### 4. How Are Affects Transmitted?

Affects are transmitted between human beings through many channels, one of which is sound. Psychologist Donald L. Nathanson observed a phenomenon he called affective resonance “in a newborn nursery where the cry of one infant would like a wave course over other infants until all were crying in unison.” This suggested that people are hardwired to receive the affects of others as their own, and they continue to do so until they build a protective script or “empathic wall” (Nathanson 2008, xvi).

As a vehicle of divisive political ideology, language is another channel for the transmission of affect, one which Sara Ahmed examines in depth in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Hateful words, she explains, stick to certain bodies in multi-racial societies, making those bodies appear to the speaker to be full of hate, and thus frightening (Ahmed 2004, 13, 49-60). As those bodies interact with other bodies, they are transformed into “objects of feeling” and evoke emotions that “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place” (Ahmed 2004, 10-11). Language-borne emotions like those discussed by Ahmed may be disseminated through art, music, literature, and film, which may be created expressly for this purpose.

Emotions may be bound up language, but most scholars agree that affects are pre-verbal and non-semantic. Consider the way drivers communicate their anger

from behind car windows, raising each other's pulse, or the way someone's disapproving gaze or even the prospect of someone's disapproving gaze makes us blush and stop whatever we were doing. Therefore much affect transmission occurs soundlessly. For Tomkins, the most important transmitter of affect was the face, which he saw was the primary site of emotions (Tomkins 2008, 113-133). In fact the face in his theory functions like an interface: "Affects are not private obscure internal intestinal responses but facial responses that communicate and motivate at once both publicly outward to the other and backward and inward to the one who smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects" (Tomkins, qtd. in Gibbs 2011, 254).

While these observations are fairly intuitive, few non-specialists are aware that affects are transferred by means of hormones, whose particles are carried in the air and inhaled by other bodies. From the lungs these hormones enter the bloodstream "and with them is carried the presence of the other and the social in the system" (Brennan 2004, 139). Neurologists refer to this process as chemical and electrical "entrainment" (Brennan 2004, 7).

Anna Gibbs likens affects to epidemics: "populations are swept through by contagion without ever coming to form an aggregated force. What this ultimately calls for is an audience research which takes the form of an epidemiology of affect [...] involving the identification of vectors of contagion and the mapping of affect-born migration of ideas, only some of which will be successfully propagated" (Gibbs 2011, 264). Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), which presents a case for understanding depression as a widespread reaction to the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, could serve as an illustration of one such emotional epidemic. Interestingly, these ideas on the transmission of affect are not new. Prior to the rise of individualism, the idea of the transmission of affect was widely accepted, Teresa Brennan points out. It continues to be so in non-Western cultures, but in the West affect has long been seen as the property of the individual, rather than the individual being possessed by affects: "As the notion of the individual gained in strength, it was assumed more and more that emotions and energies are naturally contained, going no farther than the skin" (Brennan 2004, 2). That notion can no longer be sustained: the construction of "the self-contained Western identity [...] depends on projecting outside of ourselves unwanted affects such as anxiety and depression in a process commonly known as 'othering'" (Brennan 2004, 12).

Since affects course silently through the body and are difficult to distinguish from one another, our caregivers name them and encourage the expression of some but not others. Adults may loudly express their anger to get children to tone down their (loud) excitement or induce (silent) fear. (Loud) expressions of contempt or disgust are used to trigger (silent) shame. Such tuning is culture-specific. An affect

outlawed in a family or community may mutate into another (for instance anger into anguish or sorrow).

Literature, too, socializes us into cultures of feeling. It helps both writers and readers to understand how they felt, feel, should or may want to feel some day. Literature shows strategies for managing affects and expands the range of what writers and readers are capable of feeling. Finally, literature may suggest possible causes of our more elusive, supposedly groundless feelings, such as irritation or discomfort.

## 5. Studying the Work of Affects

Interest in affects is nothing new: they intrigued the ancient Greek philosophers and Hebrew theologians; all societies have attempted to theorize affects and control those which are perceived as dangerous or disruptive, for instance by defining them as “demons” or “passions” to be reined in, or as “sins” to be stamped out in order to avoid eternal damnation (Brennan 2004, 4-5, 21-22). Anger, Tomkins points out, is the affect that “societies try hardest to contain within that envelope under the skin, or to deflect it toward deviants in the society and toward barbarians without” (Tomkins 2008, 687).

In modern times, scholars like the Enlightenment theologian Jonathan Edwards investigated “religious emotions” (inclination, affection, passion, and love), as well as ways in which affects can be harnessed to serve evangelical purposes. Occultist researchers in the late nineteenth century were interested in visceral, non-intentional ways in which bodies resonate with affect in the process of trans-generational haunting and hear voices. Their once discredited hypotheses are being looked at with renewed attention by such scholars as Lisa Blackman (2012). Drawing on neurological and psychiatric research, Blackman argues that ‘threshold phenomena’ like voice hearing and suggestion are important as evidence of

some kind of transport between the self and other, inside and outside, and material and immaterial. This transport cannot be understood by the concept of social influence with its presumption of pre-existing entities interacting [...] I approach these phenomena as modalities of communication, rather than irrational forms of perception, that disclose our fundamental connectedness to each other, to our pasts, and even to past histories that cannot be known (Blackman 2012, 20).

Along with Brian Massumi (1995) and Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007), Blackman insists that affect does not require a subject, that the human psyche “is trans-subjective, material and immaterial, living and nonliving, and organic and inorganic,” which allows her to investigate present-day testimonies of transgenerational haunting and voice hearing (Blackman 2012, 20-21).



Affects have been studied by psychologists since the late nineteenth century, including William James and Sigmund Freud; by anthropologists since the early twentieth century (Rajtar and Stryczuk 2012), and more recently by sociologists and neuroscientists (Schore 2016). In the last two decades, knowledge about affects has circulated between the biological sciences, psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural (especially media) studies, as well as studies of the reception of literature and art. Each of these fields or disciplines has developed theories that respond to its own needs, from psychotherapy to understanding xenophobia, voter behavior, plot construction, and aesthetic response. To give some idea of the range of contemporary writings about affect, feelings, and emotions, I will briefly mention a few.

From the perspective of 1990s critical theory, which provided my first toolbox, psychological research in general seemed reactionary because it drew attention towards the individual psyche and away from research that supported systemic change. Yet those who study affect today insist that it is simultaneously personal and political. Perhaps the best example of affect studies as critical theory is Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which asks: "What do emotions do?" (Ahmed 2004, 191). What do they do in the globalized world to create and maintain racial boundaries? How does hate of others masquerade as love for one's own group? Her ideas are helpful for understanding many of the disturbing phenomena we witness across the world, as migrations increase. Also working at the intersection of psychology and political analysis, Ann Cvetkovich and Feel Tank Chicago scholars have been thinking about depression not as an individual medical disorder but as an affective response to sociocultural and political phenomena in late capitalist economies. Political depression, according to Cvetkovich, may take root when "customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better" (Cvetkovich 2012, 2). Once identified as a "public feeling," depression may serve citizens as an impulse to reclaim agency by becoming politically engaged in novel ways.

Affect is indispensable for understanding the process of identity formation. Symptomatically, neurologist Alan Shore titled his study *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self* (2016). But already in the 1940s, psychologist John Bowlby began his research on the detrimental effects of disrupted infant-caregiver attachment – an early contribution to affect studies (Bowlby 1946). Continuing this line of investigation, in the 1950s and 1960s Tomkins studied both the neurology of affects and the affective socialization of children. Some of his most interesting findings concerned shame, an affect triggered not just by expressions of contempt or anger, but by the caregiver's withdrawal of interest/attention. Using Tomkins's

writings as a springboard, literature scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adam Frank, Elspeth Probyn, and Tomasz Basiuk explored the many faces of shame as a response to publicly expressed contempt and disgust.

Shame is usually triggered by contempt and disgust. Concerned about the devastating psychological effects of shame, law professor Martha C. Nussbaum examined disgust as a political emotion which poses as a gut feeling. Her book *From Disgust to Humanity* (2010) studies the legal discourse on sexual orientation, exposing the politics of disgust as a political perspective that associates same-sex practices with bodily functions, and thus, with disgust – an emotion that may be harnessed during political campaigns (xiv).

Some of the earliest scholarship on emotions in the interracial context was carried out within the framework of psychoanalytical criticism by Anne Anelin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2000). Cultural studies critic Sue J. Kim has written on anger in a similar context, showing how literature and film work to suppress anger as a response to race-based injustice, or, on the contrary, affirm such anger. In a similar vein, Jeffrey Santa Ana's *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotions* (2015) explores the economy of affect (a term introduced by Ahmed) in American minority literatures, showing which affects minority subjects have had to either display or suppress. In a capitalist economy, Santa Ana argues, race often determines whose happiness is paramount, who performs the emotional labor of keeping others happy, and how the laborers feel. Although Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings* (2005) – a study of such negative emotions as envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia – is not expressly about race, it does include a nuanced analysis of irritation in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, a novel set in the 1920s United States. The mixed-race protagonist's irritation, which lends itself to the reader, is shown to be the effect of untenable positions in which she repeatedly finds herself on account of her ambiguous skin color, without a political language in which to articulate her resentment through full-blown anger. Ngai shows how the irritable (and irritating) protagonist makes a series of rash moves in her life in an attempt to ease her discomfort, which ends only with her death.

Many academics have been interested in sympathy, empathy, and compassion. We do not usually associate Judith Butler with affect theory, yet she has studied compassion under another name, when writing about grief and “grievability” in the context of modern warfare. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), and in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) she challenged the generally accepted fact that we use group identity as a criterion when deciding whether or not to grieve (be saddened by) the death of nameless strangers. Non-fellow-citizens, for instance, are generally not grievable because we

do not recognize them as living beings in the way we do fellow-citizens. “What would it mean if those killed in the recent wars were to be grieved in [...] an open way? Why is it that we are not given the names of all the war dead, including those the US has killed, of whom we will never have the image, the name, the story, never a testimonial shard of their life, something to see, to touch, to know?” And she answers: “open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential” (Butler 2009, 39), which is why compassion for foreign war victims is not encouraged. Appealing to our emotions rather than to our sense of justice might, Butler implies, be a more effective way for us to recognize all human lives as equally deserving of compassion and protection from harm. By contrast, in the introduction to *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (2004) the editor Lauren Berlant insists that appeals to justice are more effective because she suspects that compassion might be little more than a feel-good emotion, allowing us to empathize with those who struggle and fail, without having to work towards a more equitable system. “What if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality? [...] Justice is objective; it seeks out the cold hard facts against the incoherent mess of feeling” (*Compassion* 10). The capacity of literature and film to evoke empathy and compassion has been extensively researched, for instance by Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) and Howard Sklar in *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion* (2013) and Margrethe Bruun Vage in “Fiction Film and the Vagaries of Empathetic Engagement” (2010).

Why people are interested in and enjoy specific works of literature, art, and film is yet another question affect studies scholars have tried to answer. Embarking on such projects, Ernst Van Alphen (2008) and Rita Felski (2018) voiced the difficulties they faced when trying to explain their own and other people’s affective responses to art. For Felski, emotional “attachment” to works of art is an alternative to the critical response, which she argued against in *The Limits of Critique* (2015). “Attachment” has both affective and ethical force. In recent lectures and the forthcoming book *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Felski (2008) foregrounds two ways in which we bond with aesthetic objects: identification and attunement. New research is also being done on media communication understood as “the articulation between the nervous, technical, and social systems which constitute the total human fact” (Stiegler qtd. in Gibbs 2011, 253). In an era when humans around the world spend much of their day facing various screens, corporations that produce media content want to better understand how to sustain consumers’ attention while the consumers want to know what is happening to them as they watch. As Nancy Gibbs explains, the media “hook” our interest by using “sensory appeal and the

creation of novelty,” and they “amplify affect [...] by their ubiquitous use of faces, voices, and music” (Gibbs 2011, 253).

## 6. Agency and Affect

One of the major debates about affect concerns the question subjectivity. Are our bodies merely the conduits of affect understood as an asubjective force or do we retain a degree of agency when responding to the affects of others? According to Brian Massumi, affect is an energetic dimension or a capacity of human bodies. Affects are experienced as “intensities” that happen at the neurochemical level of the body, in split seconds, often unregistered by the conscious mind (though registered by sophisticated electronic equipment). Because these “intensities” are so polyvalent and elusive, they have been treated by scholars indebted to Massumi as a sort of last frontier, somewhat like Freud’s unconscious, a sphere within which a great deal happens to us without our conscious knowledge, because as individuals we are co-assembled with media circuits as well as affective communities within which neurochemicals flow largely beneath the threshold of consciousness. Using ideas derived from Spinoza and Deleuze, Massumi imagines affect as “a certain intensity, a higher or lower degree of spasmodic passivity [as well as] an ability to affect and a susceptibility to be affected” (Massumi 2002, 61). There is little room in his theory for the rational subject in control of his or her emotions:

Our brains and nervous systems effect the autonomization of relation, in an interval smaller than the smallest perceivable, even though the operation arises from perception and returns to it. In the more primitive organisms, this autonomization is accomplished by organism-wide networks [...] One could say that a jelly-fish is its brain (Massumi 1995, 97-98).

Massumi suggests here that the human body perceives affective stimuli much as the jelly-fish does – autonomously. In a similar vein, Brennan considers the human body to be a thinking apparatus, one that knows how we feel, and often responds before the brain does (Massumi 1995, 136, 149). One influential example of the spasmodic passivity of human bodies co-assembled with media circuits can be found in Massumi’s analysis of the football match as a physical event involving bodies circling around an inanimate object, the ball, which organizes human affect. Mediated by television, the players’ intensity produces an intensity in the spectators. Understandably, Massumi’s work has been particularly useful to media studies scholars working on theories of biomediation (Gibbs 2011, 253).

Tomkins also assumes that the affect system is, to a certain extent autonomous and functions below the threshold of consciousness: “most of the characteristics which Freud attributed to the Unconscious and to the Id are in fact salient aspects

of the affect system” (Tomkins 2008, 72). But in contrast to Freud and Massumi, who see humans as determined by drives affects respectively, Tomkins allows for considerable human agency in managing affects:

Part of the power of the human organism and its adaptability lies in the fact that in addition to innate neurological programs the human being has the capacity to lay down new programs of great complexity on the basis of risk taking, error and achievement – programs designed to deal with contingencies not necessarily universally valid but valid for his individual life (Tomkins 2008, 64).

He posited that we develop individual scripts for managing affects, and that those scripts are constantly reshaped by a feedback loop between the senses, nervous and hormonal systems, and the brain. Affect calls attention to stimuli and motivates us to act. “Nothing becomes conscious unless it is amplified by affect [...]. Affect makes good things better and bad things worse” (Nathanson 2008, xii).

Rather than focus on a singular abstract affect, Tomkins explored economies of interrelated positive and negative affects, within which there is room for immense individual variance. He argued that the interruption of a positive affect, or expectation thereof, triggers a negative affect while the reduction of a negative affect is experienced as a positive affect. From infancy onwards, he insisted, memories of events involving a sudden emotional change are stored in the brain in clusters of good and bad “scenes” and used to understand the self’s position in relation to others, so as to avoid negative affective experiences in the future and increase the probability of experiencing positive affects (Tomkins, 2008, 669-670). Based on the memorized scenes we create “scripts,” which are hypotheses or sets of rules for “predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling” scenes (Tomkins 2008, 669). Whenever new scenes are added to a cluster organized by a script, the script is reevaluated and may be overwritten. But nuclear scenes and scripts, those acquired early and etched deepest into our memory, are difficult to rewrite. They “account for the human variance which we traditionally call “personality”: “Such scenes and scripts,” Tomkins wrote, “matter more than anything else, and they never stop seizing the individual. They are the good scenes we can never totally or permanently achieve or possess [...]. If they reward us with deep positive affect, we are forever greedy for more. If the good scenes are good, they may never be good enough, and we are eager for them to be improved and perfected. If they punish us with deep negative affect, we can never avoid or escape, nor renounce the attempt to master or revenge ourselves upon them, despite much punishment” (Tomkins 2008, 676). Other types of scripts, which Tomkins identified late in his career, include addictive scripts, antitoxic scripts, ideological scripts, which cast the world in terms of binary oppositions, heaven and hell, utopia and dystopia, enlisting

our faith and engagement as well as damage reparative scripts which begin with a “good scene turned bad” but include rules for reversing the damage (Tomkins 2008, 679-684). Thus, in a depressive reparative script, an individual who has failed to meet the expectations of a beloved both knows how to do so and wishes to do so and often succeeds, thereby repairing the damage and lifting the depression” (Tomkins 2008, 679). Literature, particularly that which draws on autobiographical material, provides ample evidence of the fact that our highly selective memory does tend to store emotionally-charged scenes which we retrieve in clusters that support or contradict various hypotheses about the world we live in. Some literary works, like Sui Sin Far’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909), William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), or Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Hand of God* (1995), consist almost entirely of such scenes, strung together by implicit scripts.

Thanks to neurological research, we know today that memory does not resemble a film archive with a convenient search function: sensory information is processed and stored in many parts of the brain: sounds are stored in the auditory cortex, memories of faces in the fusiform gyrus, and emotions in the amygdala, while the hippocampus assembles the information more or less accurately. But although we understand the workings of memory differently than Tomkins did in the 1960s, his hypothesis about affective scenes and scripts that organize individual memory – and perhaps also mediated group memory – still stands.

## 7. Conclusion

Massumi’s ideas, though invaluable for investigating mass culture, seem too vague to be used on their own in studies of much literature, film, art, and their reception, because writers, filmmakers, and artists are interested in the singular, the quirky, and the unpredictable, and audiences respond idiosyncratically. The transfer of affect, whether face-to-face, through literature, or through media technologies, is far from automatic. For instance, as Paul Silvia has argued, our ability to become interested in or excited about a creative work depends on a combination of novelty and intelligibility; if confusion dominates the encounter, interest is extinguished (Silvia 2005). In his study of gay male autobiographies, Tomasz Basiuk has shown that literary performances of gay shame can trigger a wide range of emotions, depending on who the reader is (Basiuk 2013).

That is why we need a combination of theoretical approaches that explain how affects sweep across communities and are disseminated via the media, but no less importantly, how early life experiences in the family predispose or immunize people (and literary characters) to absorbing the affects that sweep across

communities. Also, when thinking about emotional responses to creative works, we need to see how individual predispositions are shaped by affective training. By referring solely to large-scale flows of affect, or affect as a force, we cannot explain why some individuals and groups happen to be more or less receptive to the flows of fear, hatred, depression, compassion, etc. Why do works that feed on and generate hate, for example, find receptive audiences in some places and periods rather than others? Why do affective responses diverge within the same place and time? To use Ahmed's vocabulary, whose affects "stick" to whom, and why is this unpredictable? If contempt and anger are used by some to shame or frighten others into silence and submission, under what circumstances do the silenced speak up or scream out their righteous indignation? To answer these questions we need Tomkins, who, based on decades of psychological observations, argues that we are raised by families which have their own affective norms; each of us has a unique set of life experiences, some of which prove to be formative (nuclear) because they are intensified by affect; and each of us interprets our archive of nuclear scenes according to individual scripts, so there is substantial variation in the way we respond to the flows of affect.

Yet Tomkins's account is also incomplete because it foregrounds the nuclear family, only occasionally acknowledging the impact of cultural, political, and economic pressures on the adults who mold children's affective systems. Adults do this to socialize children, first – into the nuclear family, and, second – into society, whose affective economy is shaped by discourses, institutions, and events that are place- and time-specific: gender, race, and class hierarchies, economic slumps, armed conflicts and cold wars, pandemics, party politics, as well as cultural representations, including folk songs, fiction, radio broadcasts, TV news, movies, and billboards. Only by combining diverse approaches, such as Massumi's psycho/neuro/endocrinological theory of assemblages and affective flows, Ahmed's cultural theories, and Tomkins's psychological family-based approach can we come closer to understanding how affects resonate.

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