Negotiating Affect in Media/Cultural Studies

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Media/cultural studies occupies a rare methodological position within and between the humanities and social sciences, with one foot in various theoretical traditions (e.g., literary, feminist, psychoanalytic) and the other in various object-oriented approaches (e.g. textual analysis, actor-network theory, ethnography). At its most astute, media/cultural studies scholarship sets the theoretical and the material in close dialogue, transgressing their boundary and revealing their mutual interdependence. Such productive encounters are not fortuitous, but rather are part of media/cultural studies' foundations. This is evident in the early texts of the discipline (anachronistically curated), for example, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, and—more recently—in the turn in media/cultural studies towards affect, which renews and extends established methodological concerns and commitments.

The affective turn, as theorized by Patricia Clough, engages "bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect . . ." (2007, 2). The simplicity and clarity of this characterization belies a nuanced and sophisticated challenge to a number of diverse intellectual traditions, including the anthropocentric social sciences, and meaning- and representation-centric strands of media/cultural studies. In its focus on preconscious bodily capacities—where "bodily" includes "capacities beyond the body's organic-physiological constraints"—the affective turn asks us to take matter seriously. This is not to continue to suppose a distinction between meaning and matter as the social sciences have done, but rather to begin

to examine the social and political implications of their "entanglement," as Karen Barad phrases it. Jodi Dean's *Blog Theory,* Steven Shaviro's *Post-Cinematic Affect,* and Jussi Parikka's *Insect Media* take up this challenge and its implications in different ways, in the process offering up compelling and varied models of accounting for the primacy of affect in contemporary society.

Of the three books, *Blog Theory* is most critical of affect, insofar as Dean links it with a strain of pernicious contemporary sociopolitical malaise. In a similar vein to that of contemporary media scholars like Mark Andrejevic, Dean argues "that contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance" (3-4). In *Blog Theory,* Dean is especially concerned with and critical of networks of enjoyment. To elaborate her critique, she makes use of work by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, and in particular Žižek's differentiation of desire from drive. As Dean explains (following Žižek), desires target lost objects, while drives target loss itself; "drive is a kind of compulsion or force. It's a force that is shaped, that takes its form and pulsion, from loss" (59). This distinction allows Dean to reframe the "enjoyment" we realize through participation online not as filling a desire but rather as fueling a drive. She writes, "I enter. I click. I like. I poke. Drive circulates, round and round, producing satisfaction even as it misses its aim, even as it emerges in the plastic network of the decline of symbolic efficiency" (60).

Žižek's theorization of the "decline of symbolic efficiency" is also central to Dean's argument. Dean argues that this decline is a result, in part, of our integration into cyberspace, and threatens three things: performativity, desire, and meaning. In her explication of this threat, she proposes that there is a "gap" left behind by the symbolic which has been occupied by "images and affects" circulated through the Internet. "The result," she writes, "is a situation of non-desire, non-meaning, and the unbearable intrusion of enjoyment." (9). Enjoyment, in this formulation, is procured at the expense not only of meaning, but also of reason: "Drowning in [a] plurality [of media], we lose the capacity to grasp anything like a system. React and forward, but don't by any means think." (3). In this way, Dean's argument stands in contrast to the utopic media scholarship of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks.* As she writes, "Rather than treating blogs as cutting-edge forms of participatory journal-

ism or new experiments in an already mundane exhibitionism, I proceed from the assumption that they are displaced mediators" (29).

A mediator, in Dean's formulation, is a "transitional figure—of an institution, practice, idea—that accounts for a fundamental change . . . [triggering] a process of change even as change quickly overtakes it" (26). In describing blogs as displaced mediators—a conceptual revision of Žižek's and Frederic Jameson's "vanishing mediators"—Dean means to suggest their relevance in contemporary society despite widespread proclamations of their death, and to recognize and depart from the imperative in media studies to examine the latest innovation. More specifically, Dean argues that conceptualizing blogs as displaced mediators reveals three key characteristics of communicative capitalism (analyses of which constitute the book's three primary chapters): "the intensification of mediality in reflexive networks (communicating about communicating), the emergence of 'whatever beings' (beings who belong but not to anything in particular), and the circulation of affect (as networks generate and amplify spectacular effects)" (29).

Dean makes clear the politics that follow from her analysis. Opposed to the production/circulation of affect, she argues that "enchainments [of meaning] . . . might well enable radical political opposition" (31). Like those of the utopian media scholars and activists of whom she is critical, Dean's argument is politically invested in the restoration of meaning and reason, but unlike these scholars and activists, Dean remains skeptical that the Internet can deliver these given its embeddedness in communicative capitalism. Ultimately, she concludes, there is a lot of work to be done— the work of political organizing—as opposed to "presuming [political organizing] will simply emerge" (29). As she writes, "It's easier to set up a new blog than it is to undertake the ground-level organizational work of building alternatives," particularly insofar as we "may well be more accustomed to quick satisfaction and bits of enjoyment than to planning, discipline, sacrifice, and delay" (125). This is meant to contest strands of media scholarship that celebrate flash mobs and the like—a "politics of convenience" as Dean cites Cayley Sorochan (79). More important—and unfortunately, I think—it is an unacknowledged turn away from the pleasure politics of cultural radicalism and towards a more austere paradigm of politics as hard work.

Whether one is sympathetic to the politics that subtend *Blog Theory*, it is a timely book, well argued, and well versed in contemporary social

theory. It elegantly balances theory with cogent examples and interpreta-
tion, and would be a useful book to assign in an undergraduate course,
either wholly or in part (the chapters work well on their own). While it
is clearly organized and easy to follow, some of the heavy theoretical lift-
ing precedes more basic discussions of Dean's object(s) of analysis—a
decision that struck me as counterintuitive, perhaps more so for teaching
purposes than scholarly reading. Nonetheless, it is impressive that Dean is
able to weave together a number of strands of media scholarship and social
and psychoanalytic theory into a cohesive and engaging argument.

Steven Shaviro's *Post-Cinematic Affect* is more sympathetic to the con-
cept of affect, though like *Blog Theory* it situates affect alongside problem-
atic sociopolitical shifts. Shaviro builds his argument on the observation
that "digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations,
have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating
lived experience" (2). In order to "get a better sense of these changes,"
which Shaviro describes as paradoxically new and unfamiliar yet ubiqui-
tous and unnoticed, he examines four media texts: three films and one
music video. Shaviro is interested in these texts not as representations of
the contemporary moment but as "*expressive*: that is to say, in the ways that
they give voice (or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient,
free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today" (2). Expressive
here means both "symptomatic and productive"; Shaviro argues that digi-
tal film and video are symptomatic insofar as they "provide indices of com-
plex social processes, which they transduce, condense, and rearticulate"
and productive insofar as they "participate actively in these processes."
Although it is tangential to his overall argument, Shaviro does not fully
resolve the question of whether there is a difference between the symp-
tomatic (which he favors) and the representative, and it is unclear whether
he avoids talk of representation because of its ideological baggage, because
he thinks the term inadequate to describe the way in which contemporary
capitalism becomes knowable through digital video and film, or otherwise.
In this way, Shaviro's project reveals the difficulty of adapting methods of
textual interpretation—centered in representation and meaning—to con-
temporary conceptualizations of affect, which are often theorized in oppo-
sition to meaning.

Shaviro identifies four distinct "flows of affect" and he links each
of these to a specific film/video. These are Deleuze's control society
(expressed in the video for Grace Jones's "Corporate Cannibal"); "delirious

financial flows" (expressed in *Boarding Gate*); "contemporary post-cine-matic 'media ecology'" (expressed in *Southland Tales*); and the coloniza-tion of cultural predecessors by "gamespace" (expressed in *Gamer*). These films and video, Shaviro writes, "express, and exemplify the 'structure of feeling,'" which he terms "post-cinematic affect." By "post-cinematic" Sha-viro means simply to signal the ways in which cinema has been massively transformed by digital techniques.

Shaviro's reading of "Corporate Cannibal" is the most successful in the book, in part because the text itself is particularly compelling. In his reading, Shaviro articulately captures (or translates) how the nightmarish modulations of Grace Jones's figure in the video speak to the production of relational space and the aggregations and codings of bodies in a digi-tal milieu. He insightfully unpacks and interprets the politic of the video's aesthetic, as when he writes "Jones doesn't just express a new or different mode of subjectivity. She doesn't give voice to a black female perspective that was previously excluded from public expression. . . 'Grace Jones' has moved beyond identification, and beyond any sort of identity politics" (20). As Shaviro notes, this move beyond identification complicatedly works in part to express "capital itself" (29). He writes, "And just as capital continually devours and accumulates value, transforming its materials into more of itself, so Jones-as-electronic-pulse devours whatever she encoun-ters, converting it into more image, more electronic signal, more of her-self" (30).

In his introduction to the book, Shaviro suggests an equivalence between the symptomatic and productive functions of digital film and video. However, his readings tend to favor the symptomatic over the productive. In other words, Shaviro focuses more heavily on the ways in which these texts evidence affect than in the ways they produce or circu-late it. His analysis of *Gamer* is the most "productive" of his readings, inso-far as it poignantly takes up the non-representational elements of digital film and video.[1] For example, in an effort to theorize the film's frenetic mix of editing and programming, Shaviro writes, "Contemporary film editing is oriented, not towards the production of meanings (or ideologies), but directly towards a moment-by-moment manipulation of the spectator's affective state" (118). Shaviro elaborates the implications of this shift for cultural studies, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guatarri: "If we wish to grasp the operation of post-cinematic-forms 'we will never ask what a [media work] means, as signified or signifier'; rather, 'we will ask what it functions

with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities'" (120). In the case of *Gamer*, Shaviro explains, "frequent cuts and jolting shifts of angle have less to do with orienting us towards action in space, than with setting off autonomous responses in the viewer" (124). In this way, the directors "force us to pay attention to *how* [the film] works, instead of *what it* means" (127).

This last statement reveals how even Shaviro's most "productive" reading edges toward the symptomatic; there is a blurring between the two. Put another way, for Shaviro, a primary utility of post-cinema's production or circulation of affect, like its representing or indexing of affect, is to render the shift to affect knowable. Politically, it isn't enough for audiences simply to forge an affective relation with a media text, the affective should make itself knowable somehow. To this end, Shaviro follows Jameson's idea that social transformations are knowable through "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping," or what Shaviro describes as "affective mapping." Shaviro argues that the purpose of such an exercise is not simply to represent transformations (as an image might), but to guide negotiations and interventions (as a map does). He therefore sees a way out—of sorts—through those media implicated in the problem of communicative capitalism (as Dean would have it); contemporary digital film and video do not simply produce/circulate affect, or evidence it, but suggest or open up possible courses of political action given the predominance of affect in contemporary society.

Interestingly, this raises the question of the task of cultural criticism; what does Shaviro's analysis do that the texts he examines haven't already done—particularly if his larger aim is "to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century" (2). Shaviro wisely acknowledges this dilemma and implicates his project in it. In partial response, he writes, "In order to come to grips with social and technological change, we need a 'constant revolutionising' of our methods of critical reflection. . . . In this regard, cultural theory lags far behind actual artistic production" (133). As already noted, he also argues that digital cinema and video might aspire to Jameson's vision for cognitive mapping: "to help us 'to regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.'" Shaviro humbly qualifies this when he writes, "I am not bold enough to claim that [these four texts] have in fact accomplished anything like this. And I certainly do not claim . . . that these media works, or my discussion of them, could somehow constitute a form

of 'resistance'" (138). Regardless of the extent to which *Post-Cinematic Affect* lives up to these venerable goals, it is a nimble and incisive explication of contemporary social shifts, and it makes concrete some dense and tricky theoretical terrain. For these reasons, it would be a useful addition to a graduate or advanced undergraduate course.

Parikka's *Insect Media* is the most innovative of the three books, and does the most to advance, rather than simply explicate, published understandings of affect, with particular attention to using affect to deconstruct the integrity and centrality of the human in thought. In the first half of the book, Parikka examines the ways in which insects have been understood as media. He argues that insects offer a model of relationality which does not presume individuation, but rather posits individuation as a result of affective alignments or organization. Put another way, "innate, morphological essences" are displaced by "intensive potentials" (xxv). Similarly, Parikka argues that insects, as a model of the perceptive, sensing, and affective, offer an alternative to meaning- and representation-centered paradigms in cultural studies and related fields. Of course insects are not the only animals which make possible this shift in focus, but as Parikka writes, "they are paradigmatic examples of the many, the emerging swarm order that questions notions of sovereignty, life, and organization that are so crucial for current articulations of politics, networks, and technology" (xxxiv). In making these arguments, Parikka draws from the work of entomologists and ethologists (e.g. William Kirby and William Spence, Etienne-Jules Marey, Jakob von Uexküll, Roger Caillois) as well as theorists who have similarly taken up questions of "insect media" (e.g. Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze).

Unlike Dean and Shaviro, Parikka employs an expansive conceptualization of media in the book; readers expecting a treatment of media as the term is colloquially used, i.e. a "narrow understanding based on technologies" (xviii), may be disappointed. Instead, Parikka follows a "deterritorializing" shift "to a wider and more innovative distribution—to organic, chemical, and other alternative platforms, where not only the established forms of transmission of perception count but also the realization that basically anything can become a medium." Elsewhere he writes, "we do not so much *have* media as we *are* media and *of* media; media are brains that contract forces of the cosmos, cast a plane over the chaos" (xxvii). This understanding makes possible his treatment of insects as media—a more interesting analytic move than simply unpacking the metaphorical

use of "swarm" (for example) to describe the behavior of networked Internet users.

The second half of the book focuses on media more traditionally conceived, particularly the final chapter, which examines the film *Teknolust*. Again, Parikka proves to be an inspired curator, drawing together works by a diverse group of scientists, engineers, artists, and theorists such as Norbert Weiner, Karl von Frisch, William Grey Walter, Richard Dawkins, Craig Reynolds, Gilbert Simondon, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway. As in the first half of the book, some of the material Parikka presents has already been treated by the scholars and theorists he draws from, though *Insect Media* stands out in its comprehensive vision, focus, and contemporary relevance. Furthermore, Parikka's argument is provocative and compelling, and offers important contributions to cultural/media studies, science and technology studies, and social theory. That said, *Insect Media* occasionally lacks overall organizational coherence, despite heavy rhetorical scaffolding throughout. In general, both the writing and organization could have benefited from additional editing, and for this reason I would hesitate to assign the book, particularly in an undergraduate course.

At the chapter level, *Insect Media* identifies and examines a number of "key case studies," organized according more to theme than to object. These include "the fabulations of the insect world as a microcosmos of new movements, actions, and perceptions" in contrast to "intelligent, tool making animals" (chapter 1); insects and animals as "builders, architects, and geometricians" (chapter 2); cybernetics "as the crucial mode of interfacing animal affects and technological systems" (chapter 5); and "the culture of the visual" in 1980s and 1990s cinema "as a culture of calculation based on insect models of automated systems" (chapter 6) (xxx-xxxii). Parikka mines these case studies for their theoretical implications, or modulations as he sometimes calls them. Again, the primary theoretical implications Parikka elaborates concern the possibilities for thought opened up by decentering the human.

While affect stands out as the salient organizing concept of the book, Parikka writes that biopower is "the key theme . . . not merely as the capture of life as *object* the of power," as in Foucault's conceptualization, but rather (following Baruch Spinoza and Rosi Braidotti) where life itself is seen as "intensive, creative and infinite," that is, where life becomes a subject (xxiii). Put another way, despite Parikka's identification of biopower as the key theme, the book does not substantively explore the political impli-

cations of the shift to affect—though certainly they entail the emergence of biopower. Parikka offers only a few words on the matter in the book's epilogue. One is left wondering how an analysis of power might be built from Parikka's thorough description of insect/animal affects, not simply in terms of their capture and control within capitalism (Parikka briefly cites Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato to this end), but as the subject of power, as Parikka suggests in his introduction. At the end of the book Parikka sagely concludes, "In the contemporary context, we cannot avoid the question about the political stakes of thinking in terms of metamorphoses, difference, and intensities; they are far from self-evident promises of resistance but need to be framed and understood in wider assemblages of enunciation" (205). Unfortunately, Parikka does not offer much guidance in the way of such framings or understandings, though *Insect Media* creates an opening for future work that might take up this project.

Together, these three books make a strong case for the continued importance of theorizing and thinking critically about affect. Their breadth captures the versatility of the concept, in terms of both the kinds of objects (material and discursive) that can be "opened up" by scholars of affect and the kinds of politics afforded by theorizing the affective. If anything, the shortcomings of each book speak to the need for continued work on affect; certainly media/cultural studies still has much to gain from this line of inquiry.

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Notes

1. This is unsurprising, as many key sequences of *Gamer* translate for cinema the look, if not the feel, of gaming. Video games are, perhaps, a better fit for a productive account of affect, as evidenced in Alexander Galloway's *Gaming*, a book Shaviro cites in this chapter.

Works Cited

Clough, Patricia T., ed. with Jean Halley. 2007. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press.