

Affect

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As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate, to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.
—Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”

In his 1984 article “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson famously declared postmodern culture to be proliferating a “waning of affect” characterized by “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness.”¹ The integrity of the unitary modern subject was now dissolving into schizophrenic fragmentation, its depth displaced by multiple forms of discombobulating surface articulations. This waning of affect, laments Jameson, does not deflate or eradicate expressive forms, but rather shifts their register from the realm of substantive feelings to fleeting “intensities.” Jameson’s concerns represent the culmination of an argument he began outlining in the pages of *Social Text*. If, in the inaugural issue of *Social Text*—in an essay titled “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (*ST* 1, 1979)—Jameson can yet hold out for cultural forms whose manipulation and containment of conflicting social anxieties do not close down “their Utopian and transcendent potential,” by the time he alights on “*On Diva*” (*ST* 6, 1982), he is ready to diagnose “the disappearance of ‘affect’ in the older sense, the sudden and unexpected absence of ‘anxiety.’” Bye-bye chatty unconscious with all its anxious

outpourings of repressed desires. Behold “the silence of affect” and a “new gratification in surfaces.”

These are claims he returns to and refines in an interview with Anders Stephanson, which originally appeared in *ST* 17 (1987) and was reprinted in *ST* 21 (1989), a special issue/book titled *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*. There Jameson spells out more clearly the transformation he has in mind: from “hermeneutic emotion” (anxiety was his paradigmatic example) to “what the French have started to call *intensities* of highs and lows.” These intensities, he says, “really don’t imply anything about the world; you can feel them on whatever occasion. They are no longer *cognitive*” (*ST* 17, emphasis in original).

Ironically, some thirty years after Jameson’s first exploration of these questions, it is *postmodernism* that has ceased to be sounded as a term of, and for, critical analysis. Nor have Jameson’s fears about the waning of affect been realized, at least not in the terms in which he predicted affect’s demise. Indeed, it may be that this misdiagnosis has itself helped to generate or, more accurately, regenerate critical interest in the cultural politics and claims of affect. We could thus say, reading against the grain of Jameson’s linked essays, that he was in fact extraordinarily prescient about the growing centrality of theories of affect to conceptualizations of subjecthood, being, corporeality, *and* politics.

On one hand, whether or not Jameson was correct about the waning of affect may depend on what definition of affect is being mobilized. According to Jameson’s analysis, the demise of affect was due to the death of the depth psychological subject; their twinned obituaries were themselves linked to the end of left politics. In the wake of these linked deaths arose surface relations to commodity culture, a flattening of politics and feeling. On the other hand, in his desire to distinguish the modern subject’s integrity of feeling from the ephemeral surface intensities of the postmodern subject who is not one, Jameson himself could not have more symptomatically staged the terms of debate of the recent emergence of affect studies. What some have hailed as a recent “affective turn” in fact draws across older formations of sentiment studies; theories of emotion; “structures of feeling” (to invoke Raymond Williams’s oft-cited formulation); the work of Gottfried Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others; and science and technology studies. Thus, what appears to be a “new” critical, conceptual lens that has gained significant intellectual and scholarly cachet in the last decade is in fact indebted to multiple, and often contradictory, genealogical threads.

These contradictions have produced rich and fruitful debates over what affect “is” and/or “does,” as well as exposed intellectual tensions about the relation and difference between affect and terms such as *emo-*

tion, feeling, and sensation with which it is sometimes used interchangeably (Jameson himself uses *affect* and *feeling* interchangeably). In the rough schematic, hardly exhaustive, that follows, we are less interested in delimiting the boundaries of what affect is or is not and more compelled by the generative and productive multiplicity of its deployment as an analytic and political frame. Affect may anchor claims about the materiality of bodies and physiological processes that are not contained or representable by language or cognition alone. Philosophical inquires into bioscience, for example, propose affect as both a “precognitive” attribute (not in terms of a telos, but in terms of a quality) of the body as well as emotion’s trace effect. This conception of affect poses a distinction between sensation and the perception of the sensation. Affect, from this perspective, is precisely what allows the body to be an open system, always in concert with its virtuality, the potential of becoming. As Jameson’s own references to the death of “the older psychological subject, with its anxieties and its Unconscious” (*ST* 6, 1982), suggests, psychoanalysis, too, has had much to say on the matter—and topography—of affect. Recent and forthcoming work at the intersection “between” psychoanalysis and affect attempts not so much a return to the modernist subject of depth as a reopening of the relations between ontology and epistemology, and between psychoanalysis and phenomenology.² Finally, much productive critical work has been invested in how concepts like affect, emotion, and feelings aid in comprehending subject-formation and political oppositionality for an age when neoliberal capital has reduced possibilities for collective political praxis.

The provocation of all of these critical approaches is to ask how affect—and emotions, feelings, and sensation (call it what you will?)—might be mobilized toward different political ends. While we are not particularly interested to settle these terms, as such attempts may be seen as semantic quibbles or demands for genealogical purity and loyalty, it is interesting that some theories of affect foreground affective (and affected subjects) while others see the promise of politics working through precisely the surface intensities of bodies that Jameson so quickly dismisses. While Jameson registers his complaint about the waning of affect predominantly in relation to aesthetic production—architecture and painting—he does so out of concern and worry over precisely this question of left political resistance. More recently, two major special issues of *Social Text* have continued these lines of inquiry regarding affect and politics—Patricia Clough’s “Technoscience” (*ST* 80, 2004) and “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” coedited by David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz (*ST* 84–85, 2005). Both these collections foreground work that understands affect as simultaneously vital to the conditions of possibility for identity politics yet indicative of their limitations. Jameson worried that the death of the modernist subject meant the end of

politics—and let us be clear, a certain kind of politics. However, recent work in affect studies—across manifold interdisciplinary and genealogical influences—points not only to different ways of conceiving bodies and subjects of politics but also, and perhaps more crucially, takes on the imperative of (re)imagining the terrain of politics “itself.”

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53–92.

2. See the essays collected in “Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project,” ed. José Esteban Muñoz, special issue, *Women and Performance* 19 (2009).