
Pragmatist Roots of the Affect Theory

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1. Introduction

Homo Aestheticus coined by Ellen Dissanayake (Dissanayake, 1995) seems appropriate to describe our contemporaries affected by overwhelming amount of information and images on the media which characterize late capitalist culture. This contention makes sense only if we figure out the term *Ästhetik* (or aesthetics in English) according to Baumgarten's usage of it. By reconsidering the original meaning of the word, i.e., "Wissenschaft des was sinnlich ist (i.e., study of the sensuous)", we could illuminate the human image in this commercialized mass media surroundings. Recent emergence of the affect theory in various forms, I think, suggests that we need to pay more attention to the human faculties such as sensation, perception, and emotion.

Brian Massumi, who has explored implications of 'the affective turn' in the various forms of cultural studies since 1990s, owed heavily to American pragmatists like William James and Charles Peirce, although he gave Gilles Deleuze and other European philosophers and Alfred North Whitehead more credits for providing the theoretical grounds for the turn. In his works like *Parables for the Virtual* (1995) he tries to build up his own theory of the affect based not only on Deleuze/Spinoza's philosophical tradition, but James/Peirce's pragmatist thoughts.

The main concern of this paper is to look into pragmatisms of James's and Peirce's in regard to Massumi's elaboration of the concepts of the affect. At the end, it will prove that some major points from American pragmatist philosophy such as the relationality of human experiences support Massumi's affect theory. The conclusion will also show that Peirce's pragmatist semiotics supports Massumi's theory of affect and cultural study in spite of his overlooking some major tenets in it.

2. Massumi's Affect Theory

There are two theoretical sources of the affect theory: one is from Sylvan Thomkins's

psychology, and the other from Massumi's philosophy derived from Deleuze study. The former is originated from Freud's psychoanalysis, and affect is considered as "the prime 'interest' motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily drives." (Greg et al, 2010; See Tomkins 1962) I'll look into the latter in order to explore its theoretical grounds.

Different from 'emotion' which is static, determinate, and subjective, affect is moving, indeterminate, and pre-subjective, passing through one state to another. Massumi explores the concept of affect in the autonomous experiences of the body before one represents and conceptualizes them (Massumi, 1995). Affect is the immediate experience of the world connected to pre-conscious or subconscious bodily movement in his version of the affect theory.

Following Spinoza and Deleuze, Massumi defines affect as power-quality which is felt and expressed, for example, looks on the face. The effect of power-quality is the *intensité* of experience to use one of the Deleuzian terms. It is the power (i.e., *puissance*) of the body which affects and is affected in the field of relations. In other words, affect has two faces of the event that happens as a *multiplicité* in the Deleuzian sense of the word. Event is inevitably relational and political. Having relations in the world or participating the world is equivalent to becoming active. Participating the relations means transforming others. Embodied beings open to the relational events encounter each other, transforming and being transformed reciprocally.

Affect as an entity unfolds itself as a continuous flow of manifestations of time. It encompasses overall affections and expressions accumulated in the body that has been passing through the time. Physiological states, vague mood, and even the feelings of life as a whole could be all considered as the affects, i.e., primary power-qualities. Affect is, in short, unconscious feeling about life. Its unspecificness derives from the unconscious memories of 'pastness' (Massumi, 2015). Pastness itself is the power-quality of time as a whole. If one reminds the meaning of *intensité* in the context of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism, it could be realized that the affect illustrated by Massumi based on the philosophy of Deleuze and Spinoza is about the value of the feeling of unique and irreducible experience unfolding throughout our lives.

The affect as power-quality is not actual, but virtual and, therefore, can make changes. Affect that constitutes pastness is a kind of excess or surplus, and accumulation of novelty and creativity. Starting from Spinoza's philosophy, Massumi underscores on the importance of the temporality of affect. If a stream of affects constitutes a body as a kind of entity, it could be called an expression of the time. Marks and traces inscribed on the body in the past drive whole new presentness or the dynamics of new life. The body going through increase or decrease of the power-quality is involved in the past. Therefore, one could say that the transition of affect toward the future includes reactivation of the past.

Massumi's affect theory is basically about the subjectivity or intersubjectivity with bodies that feel, perceive, move and have relations with others. Tracing his philosophical roots in American Pragmatism, I'll dig further on the bodily subject which experiences immediately and collectively.

3. Pragmatism and the Affect Theory

1) James's Psychological Pragmatism

Massumi relies more on James's Pragmatism than on Peirce's in unfolding his affect Theory. He couples with it Whitehead's process philosophy when establishing his own version of affect theory. Extending Spinoza's and Deleuze's concept of affect, Massumi highlights the notion of *proprioception*. It is a kind of perception that constitutes the medium depth between tactile sensibility which is 'exteroceptive', and visceral sensibility which is 'interoceptive'. He develops this more immediate perception referring to James's psychological works (Massumi, 2002).

Proprioception is sensibility proper to the muscles and ligaments as James figured out that provides the subject with the conditions of movement. It "translates the exertions and ease of the body's encounters with objects into a muscular memory relationality." (Massumi, 2002) It is, according to Massumin, asubjective and nonobjective medium depth that effects "a double translation of the subject and the object into the body." Proprioceptive memory arises on the dimension of the flesh.

Activist philosophy has been pursuing by Massumi together with occurrent arts such as performances by a number of contemporary artists. It has its basis on James's *radical empiricism* in the context of his pragmatist inquiry. The basic tenet of radical empiricism is that everything that is experienced is real in some way and that everything real is in some way experienced. (Massumi, 2011)

As a radical empiricist, James defended the immediacy of an experience of activity. One should start philosophical thinking in the midst of something's happening. James underscored in his radical empiricism that one's experience gets changed: "a unique content of experience is 'change taking place'." (James, 1912) This is what Massumi tries to mean when describing the affect as power-quality that can affect and be affected. He makes a link between James's radical empiricism and Whitehead's process philosophy to consummate his activist philosophy. He equates activity with life after coupling activity with process and change of the events happening through the time.

2) Peirce's Semiotic Pragmatism

Massumi calls his activist philosophy speculative pragmatism because of his definition of 'abstraction' that he borrowed from Peirce's pragmatist inquiry. I think that Massumi could enrich his activist philosophy with Peirce's semiotic pragmatism reinforced by contemporary neuroscientific researches. When they say that the affect theory replaced semiotics providing a new perspective for cultural studies, I don't think it is Peirce's semiotics based on pragmatism but poststructuralism from which they have tried to escape.

Considering humans as signs, Peirce approached the human subjectivity or the *self* by way of both speculative philosophy and empirical science. He used the word 'self', but his usage of it was so different from the one of Descartes, actually was opposed to it. In 1868 Peirce tried

biological approach to the bodily awareness, building up a correlation between mind and neural cells in the body. Peirce said, “Feelings, we all know, depend upon the bodily organism. The blind man from birth has no such feelings as red, blue, or any other colour; and without any body at all, it is probable we should have no feelings at all.” (Peirce, 1958) For Peirce, feelings are the felt dimension of cognition, involving the ideation that makes cognition possible in the first place. (Trout, 62). Feelings or sensations that Peirce described is not something belonging exclusively to physical dimension of humans, but something encompassing the whole beings.

To experience a certain feeling, according to Antonio Damasio, means to have a capacity of prediction and planning for the future opportunities and dangers (Damasio, 2003). Peirce suggested that bodily feelings cannot be separated from the reasoning in general. They might be pre- or sub-conscious, but belong to the rudimentary state of reasoning in the organisms. In short, immediate feelings, dynamical emotions (or actions in Peirce’s terminology), and logical thoughts are all in a continuum according to Peirce. It could be said that so-called rational judgments or decisions are based on the affective process common to every organism’s survival.

Peirce’s consideration of habit throughout his academic career reinforces the bodily-minded subjectivity, because his conception of habit highlights the social and relational aspects of *the self*. In one of his later writings, he said that *the self* or individual personality is equal to a bundle of habits. (Peirce, 1934) As he identified the meaning of a concept as a tendency of actions or a habit in his early pragmatist epistemology, he was in mind that a man-sign is both a physical organism and a mental habit. Since a habit is general, it can be differentiated from individual habitual actions. Likewise, the self or personality itself are also general and it should be lived in a continuous flow of time (Peirce, 1934). For Peirce, a private self that manifests in a specific moment and a single event cannot represent one’s subjectivity in proper.

In his later inquiry into semiotics, Peirce defined habit as a sort of interpretant, i.e., an interpretative expression of a sign. He identified habits as ultimate logical interpretants and discriminated them from energetic interpretants or actions. (Short, 2004) Habits are laws or tendencies of actions, whilst actions are individual momentary events. They are driving forces that lead the practices of our lives. Habit as ultimate logical interpretant is originated from agents’ belief or the whole concept of a word in the context of Peirce’s earlier pragmatist epistemology. As de Lauretis said, with the habit “the chain of meaning comes to a halt, however temporarily, by anchoring itself to somebody, to some body, an individual subject.” (de Lauretis, 1987)

Peirce’s theory of the self should not be considered as a renewed version of traditional representationalism. His pragmatist semiotics is so distant from traditional epistemology that has required a pre-existing transcendent being. I guess that Peirce’s trial to reveal how feeling and actions could produce meaning and make changes in the world will provide more solid ground for the affect theory.

4. Conclusion

It is not individual rational subjects but collective affective intersubjectivity that is focused in the various forms of affect studies. The possibility of change of the world by affective subjects/objects seems to attract many critics of contemporary cultural surroundings. I used 'subject/object' here to refer to "the subject that is inseparable with its body and interconnected to others."

Researchers of the affect theory consider affect as the possibility of transformation in the bodies encountering with each other, and pay attention to the human subjectivity with communicative and responsive bodies. Subjectivity - precisely intersubjectivity – explored by Massumi in the dimension of the flesh could be more deeply explored by James's psychological pragmatism that he sometimes referred to. Peirce's semiotic approach to the human subject as an embodied consciousness and a habit could be also a strong support to Massumi's affect theory.

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