

Article

Affect Disposition(ing): A Genealogical Approach to the Organization and Regulation of Emotions

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Abstract

The “affective turn” has been primarily concerned not with what affect *is*, but what it *does*. This article focuses on yet another shift towards how affect gets *organized*, i.e., how it is *produced*, *classified*, and *controlled*. It proposes a genealogical as well as a critical approach to the organization of affect and distinguishes between several “affect disposition(ing) regimes”—meaning paradigms of how to interpret and manage affects, for e.g., encoding them as byproducts of demonic possession, judging them in reference to a moralistic framework, or subsuming them under an industrial regime. Bernard Stiegler’s concept of psychopower will be engaged at one point and expanded to include social media and affective technologies, especially Affective Computing. Finally, the industrialization and cybernetization of affect will be contrasted with poststructuralist interpretations of affects as events.

Keywords

affect; Affective Computing; disposition; emotions; event; eventology; genealogy; psychopower; theory

Issue

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1. Introduction

The “affective turn” (Clough, 2007) has been primarily concerned not with what affect *is*, but what it *does*. This article will focus on yet another shift towards how affect gets *organized*, meaning how it is *produced*, *classified* and *controlled*. But instead of starting with contemporary developments in the humanities like the widely discussed approach to affects as non-human agencies (as opposed to human-centric emotions), it proposes to embed this contentious interpretation within a historical narrative in order to arrive at a better assessment of what it tries to achieve. Therefore, it will not start with the historically speaking very recent distinction of affect and emotion but will deploy the term “affect” in a deliberately indeterminate way to refer to the upheavals of humans’ bodies and minds which need to be dealt with in one way or another. One might think of the Greek term “*pathos*” as the template for this use of “affect”; as is widely known, the Latin “*affectus*” was one of the stan-

dard translations of “*pathos*” since Cicero’s time (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp. 3–5) and was only much later adopted into modern European languages.

I will propose a genealogical approach to the organization of affect, which has at least two advantages. Firstly, a genealogy is not a proper historical account, which would be impossible to give with such a vast topic. It can thus focus on general shifts and also remain rather schematic. Secondly, the genre of a genealogical account can be seen as a method of critique. Analyzing the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, who famously established such an approach, the German political theorist Martin Saar (2009) has identified three central aspects of their respective genealogies. First, they historicize the “self” or the “subject” and thus oppose all theories that rely on essentialist conceptions; secondly, they describe this process of becoming a self as a result of contingent effects of power dynamics; thirdly, they present these processes in a certain narrative and rhetorical way that involves drama, struggle, and antago-

nism. A genealogical narrative is thus conceptualized as an art of exaggeration. It aims to evoke an awareness of the artificiality of ideas of the self and the world. Saar speaks of an “affective mobilization of doubt” with the ultimate goal of an existential upheaval that might even discharge itself into a desire for transformation (Saar, 2007, 2009, p. 251).

The genealogy that will be proposed in the following pages distinguishes between seven paradigms of affect interpretation and organization, or, to use a tentative phrase, of “affect disposition(ing)”. The term “disposition” can take on a more static or a more dynamic meaning. Due to my emphasis on affect organization, I wish to convey the dynamic side of dispositions as processes and even as activities with the goal to arrange things in certain, deliberate ways. Therefore, to counter the risk that “disposition” might be understood as a static state of affairs (comparable to *hexis* in the philosophical tradition), I choose to stress the processual aspect by using the rather experimental expression “disposition(ing)”. The reason for sticking with “disposition” altogether (instead of just using “organization”, “deployment”, or “regulation”) is its welcome (and clearly not coincidental) proximity to the term “dispositif”, which has encompassed the connotations of power, order, and contingency ever since Foucault adopted it in his later writings.¹

Whenever one of the paradigms of affect disposition(ing) becomes hegemonic during a certain period, I will call it “affect disposition(ing) regime”. But even when and if that happens, the older ones never disappear. They can retain or regain their vigor by either interlinking with more recent paradigms, or by opposing them. Either way, the organization of affects has been increasing in complexity throughout human history. The fastest way to demonstrate this is by taking into account all of the verbs that can be used to address this organization: Affects can be *called*, *invoked* or *summoned*; they can be *generated* or *fabricated*; they can be *mastered*, *controlled* or *extirpated*; they can be *caused* or *triggered*; one can *immunize* oneself against their onset; they can be *produced* and *boosted* regardless of their valence or quality; they can be *modulated* and *optimized*. Each of these terms transports a whole subtext of ideas and practices, as shall now be demonstrated.

2. Classical Paradigms

The supposedly oldest affect disposition(ing) paradigm interprets affects as by-products of being possessed by a god, a demon or another nonhuman, but personal entity.² This might be both to the subject’s advantage as well as disadvantage. Being possessed can empower a subject to become super-humanly potent, or it can devitalize it to such a degree that intervention by heal-

ers, shamans, or exorcists is called for (Dodds, 1951). Homer’s *Ilias* is full of episodic possessions of humans by gods, and even in classical times, the work of love is being described by Plato as being effected by Eros, who has at one time been called a god, and at other times a demon in the neutral, pre-Christian sense of the word (Plato, 1993). This paradigm of affect disposition can thus be called the “demonological”. It involves certain practices of dealing with non-human entities, such as prayers, invocations, summonings, or exorcisms, expulsions, and execrations—basically the whole range of techniques that are thought to be effective in bringing about either the approach or the retreat of a certain god, demon, or angel.

It is exactly this involvement of techniques and thus of human skills that gave birth to a very different understanding of where affects come from. If humans are able to control the comings and goings of affects in the guise of gods and demons, then the agency of affecting no longer comes from these non-human entities, but from the skillful practitioners. Affects can now be conceptualized in a very different manner: as the outcomes of the execution of skills by specialists who have been trained in certain techniques, such as orators, musicians, actors, playwrights, or writers. This paradigm can be called the “poietological”, insofar as “poiesis” means the bringing-about of something. In this paradigm, the focus lies in creating affects in an audience for its own sake. We know from the surviving writings of Aristotle, especially his *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1991), how differentiated this poietological knowledge was in the classical period. Also, music theory and the discourse on theatre at that time had reached a highly sophisticated level. Notwithstanding their origins in religious or spiritual practices, these arts had become more or less independent from these enframements. If we believe Plato, practical knowledge of bringing about emotions—these *techniques*, derived from the Greek term *téchne*—had gained such a force that master practitioners could basically mold their audiences in whatever way they desired and thus threatened to destabilize the political order.

Plato’s ethical and political thought reacted to this development by juxtaposing arts and rhetoric with his conception of philosophy (Plato, 2008). Regarded from the angle of affect disposition(ing), philosophy can be defined not just as a discipline of thought, but more fundamentally as a form or way of life—in the sense of Pierre Hadot (1995) and Michel Foucault (1988)—that circles around the question of how best to regulate one’s affects. Plato’s intervention centered on the concept of virtue. It aims first to define what virtue is and then to live up to that ideal standard. Affects now get reconceived as phenomena that should be organized to meet that standard, which means that they are subordinated to ethics

¹ In German, the same can be said of the term “Verfügung”: it encompasses command (by legal, military or other other ways of exerting authority), the pure fact of possessing something (“verfügen über”), as well as the technical aspects of both commanding and possessing (via the verb “fügen”). In my German-language research, I thus develop and use the term “Affektverfügung” for my genealogical approach.

² This interpretation is partly inspired by Michaela Ott’s philosophical history of emotion, or what she more generally calls “affection” (Affizierung); compare Ott (2010).

and politics, as can be best seen in the discussions of music and theatre in the political writings of both Plato and Aristotle. The Greek term for virtue, *arete*, allows this new paradigm of affect disposition to be referred to as the “aretological”: its logic pertains to whatever standard of virtues is being set. This can be shown by the classical cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, prudence, and justice (Pieper, 1965). Courage (or fortitude) is the virtue of persevering through affects like fear and suffering; temperance is the virtue of moderating all of one’s feelings, thoughts, and actions. Prudence (or wisdom) is the virtue of knowing the ultimate ideal goal of one’s actions, which is, of course, felicity or, as it is more commonly known, happiness (the Greek term *eudaimonia*, being comprised of the prefix “eu” and the noun “daimon”, refers back to the demonological regime which now gets its aretological treatment). Justice is the virtue of not overreaching in regard to money, goods, fame, or honor and thus involves the tempering of one’s desires. In Christianity, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity have an even closer connection to affects, as do the cardinal sins, which are basically emotion terms that get a moralistic, if not repressive, treatment (Brennan, 2004, pp. 98–101). Both in classical ethics and in Christian moral theology, the responsibility now lies solely with the subjects themselves. They have always to be vigilant against the onset of carnal affects, of demons who transfer their own affects onto whomever they possess, and of skillful practitioners who want to entertain or amuse their audience in ways that contradict the moral or religious standards. Once this aretological paradigm became hegemonic, it remained so until the Renaissance, which facilitated a brief, but vigorous comeback of the poietological paradigm (Meek & Sullivan, 2015).

3. Modern Paradigms

I would like to suggest that these three classical paradigms of affect disposition(ing) suffice to describe the organization of affect at least from a genealogical point of view up until the beginning of the modern era. The cultural accelerations that seem to define that period are being mirrored in regard to the question of affect disposition(ing). Within the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, four new regimes of affect disposition(ing) emerged. The first is (unsurprisingly) connected to René Descartes (1649/1989), who in his treatise *The Passions of the Soul* maybe for the first time presented a strictly mechanical theory of how affects are caused by certain movements in the body and especially in the brain. Descartes’ mechanical thinking inspired a lot of Baroque theories of affects, not just within philosophy, but also in the arts and music theory. Actually, the so-called “doctrine of affects” (Affektenlehre) that circulated widely in discourses of music, painting, and theatre and was used in the composition of works of art, depends on Cartesian mechanistic thought. In music, the idea was that a certain tune or triad could elicit a very specific affective re-

sponse (Pischner, 1963, p. 24f.). To be fair, recent scholarship has noted a conspicuous lack of definite conceptualizations of such mechanisms in the music theories of the 17th and 18th centuries (Sparshott, 1998); it now seems that the notion of an Affektenlehre, as alluded to in the writings of Athanasius Kircher (1662/2006) or Johann Mattheson (1739/2008), was never really followed up by a systematic scheme, apart from more or less idiosyncratic suggestions by composers of what musical element has what effect on listeners. But of course, Descartes was just one of many proponents of mechanism, a theory that gained prominence through the writings of Galilei, Newton, Huygens and many others and was also applied to the question of how to successfully elicit the desired affective states by actors, playwrights, and artists. The festivals of Louis XIV at Versailles, which became legendary not just for their splendor, but also for their measured and controlled deployment of all known media of affect elicitation, can be seen as an early epitome of the mechanization of affects and the development of a “machinery of emotions” (Kolesch, 2006). I, therefore, propose to call this new affect disposition(ing) regime the “mechanological”: it defines affects *as being mechanically elicited in sequences of cause-and-effect*, regardless of sociocultural influences. The mechanological paradigm thus tends to a reductionism and to blend out social or cultural contexts. Moreover, the means of affect elicitation are thought to transmit affective impulses more or less loss-free. The medial aspect of the cause-and-effect sequence thus gets neglected. The mechanological paradigm’s persistence can be seen in the contemporary theory and practice of psychopharmacology (Stein, 2008), but also in advertising, in muzak (the correct term for what more often is derogatorily called “elevator music”; see Lanza, 2004), in the social psychology of influence and persuasion (Levine, 2003) and so on—basically in all disciplines that deploy cues for eliciting certain affects and view the respective media simply as carriers for their transmission.

In the 18th century, affective mechanics gave rise to an even subtler way of supposedly dealing with unwanted emotional states. It is centered on the term “interests” that has now become an anthropological principle, whereas before it had pertained to the financial realm. The desire to gain more money, also called greed (which of course is an aretological term, as it denotes that desire as a vice), was now reconceived as a strong, but calm passion (Hume) that should be regarded as a perfectly natural “self-interest” (Hirschman, 1977/2013). Moreover, it was said that following this self-interest holds all the other passions, especially the more violent ones, at bay, and that self-interest is not just natural, but even rational in the sense that it can be calculated by others. Thus, instead of fighting this affect, it was proposed to follow its command; the promised advantages were not just for individuals, but for society and humanity at large, and paved the way for the idea of the liberal global market. The idea of not eradicating this af-

fect, but using it to hold other, more dangerous affects at bay, has striking similarities to the discovery of the technique of vaccination. During the 18th century, the practice of inoculation was imported to Britain and then the rest of Europe from Turkey, where it had been used for centuries (Bazin, 2003). Its success in fighting the smallpox, one of the most dreaded diseases due to its high number of casualties and disfigurement of survivors, led to further experiments which at the end of the century resulted in the discovery that using a serum from cows affected with cowpox was the ideal solution, because the cowpox-virus (called *vaccinae*) immunized humans to the same extent that the smallpox-virus (called *variolae*) did, but with much less risk. This immunization technique attracted attention from Michel Foucault (2009) and Roberto Esposito (2011) in their respective writings on biopolitics. The radical new idea was not to exclude the danger but to include it in a controlled form. I want to propose that this model of immunization was also at work in the re-conception of the passion of greed as a controllable self-interest. I would also hold that this “immunological” affect disposition(ing) regime does not, and never has worked in the intended way. But it was successful in providing economic thought with an effective fundament, and with the contemporary global dominance of neoliberal thought which is centered on rational choice theory and the figure of the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2015) it continues to be operative, crises notwithstanding (Pixley, 2012, pp. 54–63).³

Once the affects became rehabilitated in the Enlightenment era (the mechanological and the immunological regimes did their best to weaken the aretological paradigm), the path was cleared for an unhindered release of affections of every kind. With the 19th century’s rise of industrial modes of production, it was only a question of time until the production of affects was fully underway. The emergence of mass media was intrinsically connected to a steep rise in the production and distribution of affects, first via cheaply produced newspapers. The question of affective quality was now set aside by a focus on quantity. The more affects, the better—this credo builds the basis for what later on was called the “cultural industry”, a term that fittingly points to the industrial subordination of traditional forms of affect disposition(ing). In this new paradigm, which I call the machinological, affects are *understood as outputs of a machinic system that need to be boosted*. In contrast to the mechanological paradigm, the machinological is no longer based on the conception of closed systems within which the sum of forces equals zero. Industrialization adds to the machinic the idea of an open system that will always provide new forces. Cinema is the foremost medium that executes this logic, with radio, television, video games, and nowadays social media as its compan-

ions. The current social media debate points back to this principle: the algorithms used by the platforms that are criticized for their facilitation of hate speech, shit storms, and fake news are designed to evoke as many affects with as many people as possible. The overall effect of this disposition(ing) regime is agitation, if not outright addiction (Alter, 2017). And agitation ends in depletion and exhaustion if it is not countered by some other force.

4. Psychopower

Recently, the concept of cultural industry was updated by philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler, who in his book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* linked it to Foucault’s genealogy of power, which famously diagnosed the emergence of contemporary biopower. In Stiegler’s view though, “biopower is no longer the force of *our age*” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 126), because populations are increasingly being governed by the capturing of their minds through marketing and entertainment technologies; Stiegler therefore also calls it economic psychopower, basically understood as the domination of people’s minds and souls by catching their attention and inducing a never-ending chain of affects. As Stiegler conceives this new form of power as being inherently a relationship based on domination, the question is: Who is in charge? Who executes this psychopower? Stiegler’s answer is as simple as it is unsatisfactory. It is the “programming industries”, which are basically the combination of the cultural industries of Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and the consciousness industry of Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1974). Like the proponents of the Frankfurt school, Stiegler does not take into account the specific relations that audiences have to those programs that are being provided by those industries. It would seem that cultural studies never existed. He would probably respond to that critique that whatever stance one takes towards the programs of those industries, one is already caught inside the attentional and/or affective loop that was specifically designed for that purpose. But this argument only works if one affirms solely the machinological disposition paradigm, which states that affects are machinic outputs that need to be boosted, regardless of their quality (and the same applies for attention). So what Stiegler describes here is basically the pathology of the machinological disposition regime, which leads in his view to “uncontrollable societies of disaffected individuals” (Stiegler, 2013), who are disaffected precisely because they are subjected to a never-ending stream of affective and attentional modulation by the programming industries following a capitalist logic.

As underdeveloped as this concept of psychopower may be, it might still be useful when applied to the emergence of affect-responsive media. Twenty years ago, Ros-

³ The rise of behavioral economics directly addresses the shortcomings of the rational choice model, as can be seen in Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008, pp. 6–8) opposition of the idealized “Econs” or “economic men” and the more realistic conception of not always rationally acting “Humans”. With their metaphor of “nudging”, they interestingly resort to a mechanological approach. The (supposedly) better-informed nudge nudges the lesser-informed nudged in order to elicit in him the (supposedly) better behavior and decision-making.

alind Picard (1997) published her seminal book *Affective Computing* which gave a then still futuristic, but now burgeoning, research discipline its lasting name. When the *Oxford Handbook of Affective Computing* was published a few years ago (Calvo, D’Mello, Gratch & Kappas, 2015), it became visible how clearly Picard had outlined the road to make computers able to *detect* human emotions as well as to *simulate* emotions for software agents to induce affective reactions from their human users (Yonck, 2017). Accordingly, Picard was invited by the editors of the *Oxford Handbook* to recount her road to establishing the research group on “Affective Computing” at the MIT and her development of the first steps in theory as well as practice (Picard, 2015). The idea is to close this loop of interaction so perfectly that there can be a fully responsive emotional rapport, or affect attunement, between humans and computer agents or robots. The ways that human affects are quantified, categorized and identified—in one word *decoded*—are for several reasons questionable: for their reliance on contentious psychological theories of basic emotions (Ekman, 1999), for the supposed affective indexicality of the human face and other physiological data, and for the negligence of ambivalence, irony, and humor that so often accompany or even constitute emotional expressions. But even more contentious is the outsourcing of the faculty of affect regulation to automatic systems operating on hidden algorithms. A new paradigm of affect disposition is emerging by *interpreting affects as information that is being used for the modulation and optimization of psychical and social systems* (Angerer & Bösel, 2016). Due to its dependency on the cybernetic ideal of an autonomous system of control, it can be called the cybernetological affect disposition(ing) regime. With the emerging technologies of affect detection, mood tracking (Pritz, 2016), affect generation and synthesis, sentiment analysis (Ahmad, 2011), psycho-informatics (Markowetz, Blaszkiewicz, Montag, Switala, & Schlaepfer, 2014) and automated persuasion (Stock, Guerini, & Pianesi, 2016), the concept of psychopower is becoming more relevant. Future analysis of how affect regulation changes with the implementation of these affective media should, of course, not just look into the technologies themselves, but how they become integrated into habitual forms of affect regulation.

5. Eventology

Concluding this article, I would like to briefly point out a parallel development in regard to the conception of affects, one that is more or less directly opposed to the cybernetic model of control. It originates in poststructuralist and process-philosophical theories of the event. Brian Massumi is probably the most outspoken theorist who considers affects as events, thus pointing to their disruptive force (Massumi, 2002). Taken as events, affects by definition *cannot* be controlled, even when humans

and human-made technologies try to capture and master them. Something always escapes such attempts and continues to exert a force of its own. Affect is more than human minds or technical sensors can register and process. By redirecting attention to this surplus force, Massumi and others propose to acknowledge that there is always some differentiating moment at work. One cannot be affected the same way twice. At a very basic level, there is always change and transformation, however slight or negligible such a change may seem. This is also the reason why Massumi puts so much stress on the difference between presubjective affect and the subjective experience of an emotion:

Because affect concerns the movements of the body it can’t be reduced to emotion. It is not subjective in the sense of belonging to a subject to which the body belongs....It is only on the level of emotion that this subjective form of *the affective event* comes to be experienced as belonging to a subject separate from the event. (Massumi, 2015c, p. 105)

This distinction between processual, bodily affect and its capture in the form of a subjective, representable emotion has been adopted by many of the theorists who follow the *affective turn*. Massumi does not, however, assume that affect is opposed to thought, as some commentators seem to believe. On the contrary, thought for Massumi is inseparable from affect, which involves “feeling in thinking, and vice versa” (Massumi, 2015a, p. 91), and inspires the term “affective thinking-feeling” (Massumi, 2015a, p. 94) as a way of saying that the unfolding of an affective event in the body includes a mental pole from the onset (Massumi, 2015a, p. 212). This mental aspect of affective thinking-feeling is not just located in the brain, nor does it necessarily imply reflective thought. But it does involve spontaneity to a certain degree on a level that precedes intentional and representational thinking (Massumi, 2015a, p. 181). All these ideas are employed by Massumi to stress the novelty and creativity that each affective event implicates and that seem to get lost, forgotten, or disavowed when affects get prematurely identified as a certain emotion.

This conception also necessitates addressing power very differently from Stiegler, who only regards it as something that is exerted by humans.⁴ Poststructuralist affect theory revolves around a non-human-centric basis: matter (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). Events are generated by matter which forms the ontological basis in these theories; they may, therefore, be dubbed “eventological”. The conception of affects as events can likewise be called the foundation of an eventological affect disposition(ing) regime, which acknowledges that affects cannot simply or fully be controlled or produced, at least not in a deterministic way. For Massumi, they can either be indirectly occasioned by providing event-friendly circum-

⁴ Massumi recently proposed to dub this non-human-centric mode of power “ontopower”, as the “power through which being becomes” (Massumi, 2015b, p. 71).

stances; or they can be modulated or “tweaked” once they have begun to unfold: “It is the tweaking of an arc of unfolding, on the fly. It is, therefore, more akin to the deflection of inflection of a prescribed intention, or pre-intended prescription” (Massumi, 2015a, p. 96).

6. Conclusion

With this reconception of affects as events, the question of disposition(ing) reaches a turning point. Up until now, the paradigm shifts always extended or claimed to extend the power of disposition(ing). However, on this occasion, with the emergence of eventology, dispositional power is decreased. It is as if the genealogy of affect disposition(ing) now enters a phase of its own decomposition, of its own deconstruction. But whether this new eventological paradigm has the strength to ever become hegemonic and thus to effectively antagonize the cybernetological and machinological regimes, is a question that cannot be answered at this point.

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