

PREFACE

Ten Points to Begin

1

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? One need not linger in the humanities but might consider newly resurgent neuroscientific work on the emotions; one need not even concern oneself only with scholarship but note the untamed mobility of affects such as terror and disgust, anxiety and hope, in political and popular debates of the early twenty-first century. Indeed, the importance of affectivity has been so well documented in the disciplines of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, literary theory, critical theory, feminist and race studies, philosophy, and studies in representation, including film and new media, that several scholars have started asking broad questions about why it is that so many have turned to affect in the first place. Thus, the newest turn in the theoretical humanities would seem to be a meta-turn that turns toward the turning toward affect itself.¹

2

While an intellectual history of the turn to affect would take this book too far afield, I am comfortable joining those who speculate that the contemporary critical investment in affectivity across the humanities has to do with a post-structuralist response to perceived omissions in structuralism—or, indeed, may be part of a post-poststructuralist or anti-poststructuralist response to perceived omissions in poststructuralism. The turn to affect, thus, is part of a larger reawakening of interest in problematics of embodiment and materiality in the wake of twentieth-century Western theory that, for many, was all semiotics and no sense, all structure and no stuff.² Given that work on shame, guilt, compassion, and love has been crucial to the "turn to ethics"; scholarship on

shock, agitation, and surprise has been key to the “turn to modernity”; cultural studies has been taken over almost entirely by work on identity and emotion (queer rage, gay shame, feminist melancholia); and considerations of sensation, materiality, and distributed agency have been integral to the recent interest in the non-human (animal care, vital matter, the animated environment), we might be better off suggesting that the “turn to affect” in the humanities is and has always been plural, a set of many turnings that are problematically lumped together in a false unity that imagines that one singular intellectual arc could describe them all.

3

From this set of rotations, what has become visible, what is it that humanistic scholarship has newly encountered? Has this revolution revolutionized readings in the fields in which it is most vigorously represented: literary, film, and media studies? Insofar as affect has been positioned as what resists systematicity and structure, has it in fact been able to recover notions of contingency, possibility, and play? Has the turning toward affect in the theoretical humanities engendered a more complex understanding of texts? Have accounts of affects produced more nuanced, delightful interpretations of forms in texts—and have they recovered the dimension of being *surprised* by representation?

4

*“Affect,” as turned to, is said to: disrupt, interrupt, reinsert, demand, provoke, insist on, remind of, agitate for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up. Thus, turning to affect has allowed the humanities to constantly possibly introject any seemingly absent or forgotten dimension of inquiry, to insist that play, the unexpected, and the unthought can always be brought back into the field. In this way, the affective turn in general is resonant with broader strains in what has been dubbed “metamodernism” as a “structure of feeling” that oscillates between modernist stabilities and postmodern relativisms.³ One of the symptoms of appeals to affect in the negative theoretical sense—as signaling principally a rejection: *not* semiosis, *not* meaning, *not* structure, *not* apparatus,*

but the felt visceral, immediate, sensed, embodied, excessive—is that “affect” in the turn to affect has been deployed almost exclusively in the singular, as the capacity for movement or disturbance in general. (When Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie succinctly declare “affect is not form,” it is because they align affects with “*transitions* between states” and the very essence of what is dynamic and unstable, against an impoverished notion of form as inert, passive, inactive.⁴) Deleuzians, with their emphasis on affect as a pure state of potentiality, tend to be particularly guilty of the sin of generality. This terminological lump risks the vagueness of purely negative definitional endeavors and largely cedes specificity—generic, emotional, historical—to cognitivists in literary and media studies, who have taken Aristotelian taxonomizing to heart in their ever-narrowing treatment of, say, startle in horror films, or empathetic weeping in melodramas. There is a formula for work on affect, and it turns on a set of shared terms: speed, violence, agitation, pressures, forces, intensities. In other words, and against much of the spirit of Deleuze’s philosophy, which celebrated the minor, the changeable, and the multiple, Deleuzian theories of affect offer all repetition with no difference. When affect is taken as a synonym for violence or force (or intensity or sensation), one can only speak of its most abstract agitations instead of any particular textual workings. Thus, the turn to affect has tended to make the same argument time and again—each a version of, “We urgently have to attend to X!” where X stands for a member of the set {excess, affect, sensation, embodiment, intensity, resistance, whatever}. Each wild agitation for an attention to affection ultimately calls to mind Hermann Lotze’s insistence, put to use by Heidegger in his *Habilitationsschrift* in relation to the methodology of modern philosophy, “Das beständige Wetzen der Messer aber ist langweilig, wenn man nichts zu schneiden vorhat” (The constant sharpening of knives is boring if one never gets around to cutting).⁵ Lotze does not imply that continual edge-refining is an unproductive or wasteful use of one’s time; he does not write *nutzlos* (useless) or *sinnlos* (pointless) but *langweilig* (boring), a bad state in place of merely bad function. To endlessly hone if one does not (perhaps ever) intend to incise is to block the affective possibility of pleasurable anticipation of action itself. The effect of repeatedly intoning a polemic for force is the deforcing and deflating of that very concept. The result is that the defenders of affect are left with only the mild rhetorical force of summary and paraphrase, intoned synonyms, and thematic generalizations. Repetition without difference can have the stultifying effect of invoking, in the end, only the affective modality of tedium.

Critical positions that align affect with what generally and amorphously resists (structure, form, textuality, signification, legibility) hold on to the notion of a transcendental signified, hold fast to the fantasy of something that predates the linguistic turn and that evades the slow, hard tussle of reading texts closely. What I claim in this book is not only that this desire is retrograde and reintroduces an untheorized notion of affect (specifically, one that is fundamentally *incapable* of dealing with textual particularities and formal matters), but that the return to affect on the part of critics from wildly divergent disciplinary backgrounds is, in most cases, a naïve move that leaves intact the very ideological, aesthetic, and theoretical problems it claimed to confront. Thus, even some of the most radical theory coming out of the humanities today begins with the premise that affects and feelings are the forgotten underside of the linguistic turn. Indeed, in some cases the affection for affect has itself been subsumed by a more powerful yearning for a standing before or outside of that very moment in theory that demanded the deep attention required for interminable difficult reading.

The thing is: Affect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed.

This drive for some magical mysterious intensity X that escapes signification, while durable and even understandable, is a mode of thinking that only defers the more pressing matter: how is critique to keep grappling with affect and affectivity in texts if, indeed, one cannot read for affects to discover anything new about them? Divorcing affect from reading for form only puts off the moment at which the turning toward affect might be as notable for its critical revelations as for the novelty of its mere turning toward. This book is, among other things, an attempt to defer that problem no longer.

If affect is conceived of as synonymous with force, or as intensities, or as the capacity for stage changes or movement as such, then it opens up very few theoretical avenues—Why turn to affect at all? In the end, ethics, politics, aesthetics—indeed, lives—must be enacted in the definite particular. There is no reason to assume that affects are identical aesthetically, politically, ethically, experientially, and formally; but only reading specific affects as having and being bound up with specific forms gives us the vocabulary for articulating those many differences. Otherwise, “affect”—that thing so celebrated for its resistance to systematicity—becomes not only what does not resist, but in fact what confirms every time the same model of vague shuddering intensity. Why ask cinema *and* affect if the answer is to be the same every time and every time in the same way?⁶

The one way out for affect is via a way into its specificities. That approach will be called—unsurprisingly, for historically it was always the way to unlock potentialities—close reading. There is a perversity to this: if affect theory is what is utterly fashionable, it is answered here with the corrective of the utterly unfashionable, with what is, let us say, an *unzeitgemässe* call for the sustained interpretations of texts. This book’s insistence on the formal dimension of affect allows not only for specificity but for the wild and many fecundities of specificity: difference, change, the particular, the contingent (*and*) the essential, the definite, the distinct, all dense details, and—again, to return to the spirit of Deleuze—the minor, inconsequential, secret, atomic. Treating affect in such a way deforms any coherence to “affect” in the singular, general, universal and transforms it into something not given in advance, not apprehendable except through the thickets of formalist analysis.

A consequence of decoupling textuality and theory—which I will argue comes from the tradition of arguing *for* affect by arguing *against* reading for form—is a suffocating dearth of material with which a theorist can press on affect in a text and an almost nonexistent ability to let affect press back against theory. The loss works both ways, for not only do critics fail to find in the details the

workings of violence or intensity, but such a reading strategy closes down the paths by which textual specificity might speak back to, challenge, undermine—or perhaps radically revise—the very theory at stake in any argument. How much more arresting is an analysis that allows the particularities of any individual text to disrupt those terms known in advance, to challenge the forms of the affects one is claiming those very texts provoke? What lines of thought might be set loose by interrogating the relationship between a cinematic grid of color and the most visceral of the negative affects, disgust? How might the straits of anxiety be a matter of a broken horizontal line? What, in other words, would happen to the study of both affectivity and form if we were to reintroduce close reading to the study of sensation, not as felt by moved bodies, but as wildly composed in specific cinematic, literary, and critical texts? In this book, the specific structures of any affective form will be closely read *for*—and are not assumed to be an immediate or diffuse unmediated sensation. The turn to affect has corresponded with a disciplinary turn away from detail, from specificity and the local, from the very groundings for the persuasions germane to defending any theoretical movement. Treating affect as a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics is an attempt to reintroduce particularity to any consideration of affects. It is also an attempt to seize the passions of affect studies for textual interpretation and close reading.

10

I do not merely mean that we need a return to reading for form in the midst of the ongoing turning toward affect;—I am claiming that we require a return to form precisely because of the turn to affect, to keep its wonderments in revolution, to keep going.