

**Carsten Stage**

**Anthony McCosker:**  
***Intensive Media. Aversive Affect and Visual Culture.***  
**Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013**

**Tova Benski & Eran Fisher (eds.):**  
***Internet and Emotions.***  
**New York: Routledge, 2014**

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Recently, various books and edited collections have investigated the emotional-affective dimensions of online communication and social media, e.g. Garde-Hansen & Gorton's *Emotion Online. Theorising Affect on the Internet* (2013), Kunstman & Karatzogianni's (eds.) *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* (2012), Blackman's *Immaterial Bodies. Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (2012), Sampson's *Virality. Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (2012), and Gregg's *Work's Intimacy* (2011). Anthony McCosker's *Intensive Media* and Tova Benski & Eran Fisher's edited collection *Internet and Emotions* are new contributions to this field of research. The books are rather different, not only in terms of genre and empirical material, but also in terms of their theorisation of the social role of affect and emotion. In many regards, it is striking how these publications approach a somewhat similar field and question – how to understand the affective-emotional dimensions of contemporary (digitised) media culture? – via two different and apparently disconnected theoretical trajectories: McCosker through theories of the so-called 'affective turn' and Benski & Fisker's collection through the 'sociology of emotions' tradition.

McCosker's book focuses on various forms of visual culture in movies, painting, photography and social media, with a special interest in visual mediations of suffering and pain. The book is divided into seven chapters and an epilogue. In the first introductory chapter, pain is very interestingly theorised as "an intensifier of media ecologies" as "pain both resists

communication and operates as a highly generative conduit for media production, circulation and attention" (p. 2). Mediated pain is described as creating aversive affects, which designates affects that "trouble but also vitalise contemporary media environments. Aversion entails impulsive recoil or even revulsion, but also attracts and initiates the modification of bodies as they are brought into and affect one another" (p. 1). The pain images of natural disasters, political violence and war often have a complex mobilising capacity by simultaneously drawing in and pushing back the recipient. Seeing pain also has micropolitical implications, according to McCosker, as the "sensibility of a pain image, whether still or in the duration of video or cinema, in the flow of television, or the networked spaces of the internet is tied to vulnerability; and vulnerability facilitates the circulation of sensation as aesthetic force, requires ethical conduct and offers a catalyst for thought, action and sociality" (p. 5). In other words, McCosker argues that seeing and sensing pain images can be a way of creating new political energies and attentions and are thus important catalysts of various forms of social reflection and action.

In the six chapters of the book, this understanding of the pain image as a mobiliser of complex political responses is analysed in media images of war (chapter 2), torture (chapter 3), natural disaster (chapter 4), masochism (chapter 5), salvation (chapter 6) and illness (chapter 7). Chapter two describes the media technological changes enabling a more immediate documentation of war and offers an analysis of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which visualises the soldier as a vulnerable body or as 'open flesh' as opposed to previous mediations suppressing the horrors of war by focusing on the 'armoured' soldier-body (p. 39). Chapter three analyses the complex affective force of torture images from Abu Ghraib and East Timor, while the very interesting chapter four focuses on the 'rawness' of social media accounts of the Haiti earthquake that "help to relay rather than represent events" by offering intensifying experiences of 'de-framing' (p. 78). In chapter five, the masochistic image, with a special interest in David Cronenberg's movie *Crash* (1996), is explored to show how eroticisation through masochism blurs the difference between pleasure images and pain images. Chapter six looks into medieval paintings of salvation and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) as forms of passionate art aimed at forming religious-bodily communities of 'feeling in common' around suffering, using affective forms of involvement. Chapter seven offers an innovative analytical perspective on the "shifting boundaries between work, illness and self" (McCosker, 2013: 140) in cancer blogs and describes them as a forms of affective labour which are "highly productive of value in their own right, a value that can be defined as personal, network-enabling and social" (p. 151).

Overall, McCosker's book is a very interesting read with its focus on pain images as forms of mediation aimed at appealing to a shared human vulnerability, on the affective and political complexity of pain images, and on the development of concepts to describe more-than-representational forms of communication (e.g. intensifying or relaying mediations). One nevertheless misses a more thorough discussion of the book's potentially prob-

lematic pre-discursive definition of affect by for instance including the recent criticism of Brian Massumi's work expressed by scholars such as Ruth Leys and Margaret Wetherell.

Benski and Fisher's edited collection is more empirically demarcated in that it only focuses on internet material. In the introduction, the editors state: "the internet offers a unique place to study emotions, not only for empirical and theoretical reasons, but for methodological reasons as well. It can be thought of as a unique laboratory for the study of emotions (...) (p. 6). The 13 contributions focus on: the rationality and management of emotions displayed online in chapter one by Svensson; the feelings of emotional presence enabled by parasocial online communication in chapter two by Boyns and Loprieno; digital methodologies for measuring moods in online spaces through automated text analyses in the interesting chapter three by Küster and Kappas; new and less restricted forms of grief practices online in chapter four by Jakoby and Reiser; the use and culturally uniting role of personalised emoticons in online debates among Muslims in chapter five by Stanton; the distribution of (not too much and not too little) hope as a crucial component of internet dating in the clearly pointed chapter six by Fürst; the polysemic quality of online liking in chapter seven by Peyton; the sometimes (too) connecting and the sometimes disconnecting emotional role of online communication technologies, especially Skype, among mixed international couples in chapter eight by King-O'Riain; the importance of digital technologies for everyday love practices of organising, desiring, wishing, disputing and feeling in chapter nine by Cantó-Milá, Núñez and Seebach; the sharing of resentment relating to online communication about job insecurity in chapter 10 by Risi; YouTube-videos of vernacular witnessing and cosmopolitan empathy relating to disasters in Japan and East Africa in the interesting chapter 11 by Pantti and Tikka; cyber-voyerism in relation to the disappearance and death of an Italian teenager in chapter 12 written by Micallizzi, and the political sharing of affect in feminist blogs in Australia in chapter 13 by Shaw.

Many of the chapters are very interesting to read, but as is often the case in an edited collection, the contributions are also quite different in terms of empirical and theoretical scope and quality. Furthermore, chapters on e.g. online illness, pornography, humour/laughter, memes and political activism could have been included – instead of for instance three chapters dealing with the establishing and maintenance of love relationships through mediation – to widen the empirical breadth of the collection. Additionally, a few of the chapters seem to be too focused on legitimising that media do not belong to a less real or engaged sphere of human life, with the result that, from a media studies perspective, they end up producing relatively unsurprising 'media are not all that bad' conclusions (e.g. the statement in chapter 2 that mediated relations, and not only face-to-face relations, can create a feeling of presence).

McCosker is highly relevant for researchers and for university classes interested in the affectively attuning potentials of a broad spectre of visual culture based on mediating pain and suffering, while Benski and Fisher's collection is important for researchers and students interested in the development of the 'sociology of emotions' tradition in light of cultural

transformations relating to the internet – or in the specific subjects of the individual chapters. And despite – or perhaps because of – their differences, *Intensive Media* and *Internet and Emotions* are interesting to read in relation to each other. Most of the chapters in the edited collection take their points of departure in a certain sociological approach to emotions, focusing on the rules, roles, forms of labour, rituals, norms, or other contextual dimensions enabling certain forms of emotional practices (e.g. inspired by Arlie Hochschild's classic *The Managed Heart* (1983), which is heavily referenced in the collection). This focus on emotions as intertwined with and produced by social logics or dynamics is contrasted by McCosker, who takes his point of departure in Massumi's description of affect as "pre-individual, prior to its cultural coding as emotion and always as relational, in the emergence of sensation before coming conscious thought, meaning, language or any other form of 'frame' or semantic network" (p. 14). In this sense, according to McCosker, affects (not emotions) are intensifying forces capable of sometimes bypassing and challenging established social logics, while emotions (not affects) are inherently socially mediated in Benski and Fisher's collection. This contrast calls for more debate and interaction between two theoretical traditions (the affective turn and the sociology of emotions), which could be said to re-actualise an early sociological dispute between a Tardean interest in the changeability of the social based on 'imitative rays' and affective contagion on the one hand and a Durkheimian interest in social logics and structures on the other.

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