

Lisa Blackman:
Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation.
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Lisa Blackman, Reader in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London, has written a very interesting but also challenging book about bodily affect and mediation. It is interesting because she traces the contemporary exploration of affect across the humanities, often referred to as 'the affective turn' (theorized by, for example, Patricia Clough, Teresa Brennan, Nigel Thrift, and Brian Massumi), back to nineteenth-century theories on contagion, crowding, hypnosis, suggestion, and the hearing of voices. The main contribution of the book is simply its investigation and reaffirmation of the importance of this theoretical legacy of the affective turn. The book is nevertheless also challenging due to the fact that it consists mainly of theoretical descriptions and discussions with rather few empirical examples.

Blackman describes the human body as dynamically intertwined with other bodies and technologies. This disturbs any idea of clear-cut boundaries between biology, technology, and culture. What distinguishes Blackman's ideas from similar theories of human/non-human assemblages (promoted by scholars such as John Law, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Nikki Sullivan, and Samantha Murray) is her focus on psychological (and human) capacities for divided attention and permeability and her interest in tracing the genealogy of contemporary affect theories back to authors such as William James, Frederic Myers, Gabriel Tarde, and Gustave Le Bon. According to Blackman, older theories of psychic transfer and current theories of affect simply share an interest in the openness, relationality, and porosity of the human body towards other forces and stimulations. The affective turn is

thus historically related to an array of earlier investigations of bodily-psychic threshold phenomena— a heritage that is nevertheless often forgotten or repressed in favour of more neuroscientific research paradigms.

Blackman is interested in the immaterial forces that surround and affect bodies and underline that the human subject is both “one and many”, as formulated by William James. Affect needs a subject to register it, but it also reveals that the subject is relational, porous, and permeable. Humans are, in this line of thinking, bodily singularities with specific histories but at the same time always already intertwined with other human and non-human actors, technologies, forces, and voices: “We extend into our environments and yet paradoxically are required to live this extension as interiority,” as stated by Blackman (p. 151).

The book consists of a Preface, seven chapters, and an Epilogue. Chapter 1 positions the book in relation to available body research paradigms and supports a broader movement from focusing on the body as a certain type of ‘organism’ to focusing on human/machine assemblages, the biomediated body, and the body as a dynamic convergence point of psychological and affective interactions. One of Blackman’s key points throughout her book is that affect should neither be understood as a process channelled by the encoding and decoding of signs nor as a purely material process of neurohormonal transmission but, rather, as a highly complex force revealing the body as both material and psychological, matter and mind, flesh and cognition, one and many. Blackman thus offers a valuable and pragmatically messy position, making it possible to mediate the differences between primarily pre-cognitive affect theories (e.g. Thrift, Massumi, and Brennan) and discursively cognitive affect theories (e.g. Ahmed, Butler, and Ngai) by insisting that the body is never only or purely material or cognitive but is always both at once. This is highly constructive because it allows us to avoid over-ideologically clean positions and to embrace cognitive-material messiness as a fundamental precondition for doing affect research.

In Chapter 2, Blackman argues that contemporary affect research grows out of a long history of investigation into psychic transfer, which has for decades been problematized due to social psychology’s privileging of human control and will power over ‘primitive’ and ‘inferior’ irrationality. In this sense, Blackman’s genealogy is also politically normative as it shows how the body’s potential for immaterial self-transgression has often been marginalized due to a certain positivist-materialist research approach and that contemporary affect theories will in a sense continue this marginalization if they do not acknowledge its theoretical legacy. Chapter 3 draws on the work of John Durham Peters (especially *Speaking into the Air* from 1999) and focuses more on how early conceptions of mediated communication as ‘mental touch’ were influenced by the fascination and fear of forces permeating and controlling human beings at a distance through psychic transfer. The permeability of the body is further explored in Chapter 4 where some contemporary conceptions of affect (especially the seminal work of Brennan and Massumi) are criticized for indirectly maintaining a neurohormonal and separated body as the material point of departure for understanding affective processes. According to Blackman, this results in the psychologi-

cal aspects of the body and its status as both one and many yet again being forgotten or even silenced. In Chapter 5, Blackman focuses on the work of R. D. Laing and his idea that humans can be positioned in complex social relations and histories, or 'knots', that often cannot be expressed in words but may be expressed through affective reactions. The rhythms of intersubjective relations can thus position the body affectively in either harmonious or disharmonious ways.

A highlight of the book is Chapter 6, where Blackman develops her very interesting understanding of the hearing of voices and divided attention. For Blackman, the hearing of voices does not mean creating contact with transcendental entities, nor does it necessarily refer to a diagnosis, although one of Blackman's goals is also to change our perception of patients 'suffering from' the hearing of voices by focusing on these voices as traces of historical entanglements with the world more than as problems that always require medical treatment. First and foremost, however, the hearing of voices signifies for Blackman a shared human experience of being affected or shaped by outside living entities that sometimes manifest themselves through an actual inner voice (who has not had an inner conversation with oneself or a significant other after a positive or negative event?) and sometimes simply stay with the body as a kind of practical and unnoticed memory or consciousness of how to act in the world.

As such, the hearing of voices is described as a more general human potential for being psychically and psychologically entangled with the world, and it points to "the body's potential for mediation" (p. 150) and "an experience of the self as more divided and distributed, of the 'other' as part of me" (p. 152). These voices could also be facilitated through "machinic perception/vision," which refer to all of the voices addressing us through the media (e.g. distant sufferers on charity shows, fictional characters in film, online bloggers, and DIY producers on YouTube) by letting us experience their experience— that is, "a form of mediated perception which [...] allows one to see through another's voice" (p. 127). By linking affect and the hearing of voices, it becomes clear that the book understands affect as having an ethical potential by opening up the affected bodies to the world and to other voices— for instance, the voices that have shaped the body through its personal history or voices becoming present via mediations of all sorts.

The chapter also initiates a discussion of different experimental practices aimed at detecting or tracing affective processes (e.g. Gertrude Stein's early experiments with automatic writing) and concludes that we:

might think of practices of experimentation as inventive strategies for producing particular forms of entanglement. This is in line with work taken up across the sciences and humanities, which approaches experimentation as performative, and where the technical framing of an experimental event provides the setting for dynamic processes of enactment to take form. (p. 144)

Finally, in Chapter 7, Blackman further explores the subject's potentiality for divided attention and openness to the other (as voice) by investigating the neuroscientific concepts of the 'double brain' and the 'bicameral mind'.

Blackman's book is an interesting and substantial contribution to the field of mediated affect studies. Particularly interesting are its genealogical investigation of the way in which theories of psychic transfer and divided attention inform contemporary affect theories and the connected point that contemporary affect theories risk participating in a long history of marginalization of irrational, spiritual, and psychic threshold experiences due to their sometimes unreflected use of scientific experiments and paradigms. And Blackman's development of the concept of the hearing of voices as a non-pathological (and possibly mediated) way of being affected by the world and others is fascinating and inspiring to read. But while being a book *about* voices, it is also a book *containing* many voices due to the overwhelming assemblage of different theoretical positions and concepts, which now and then makes it a bit unclear just how Blackman positions herself in relation to these many existing contributions. More empirical - and pedagogically explained - examples of the analytical potentials of the book or perhaps longer exemplary analyses putting the methodological thoughts about experimentation into action would thus have clarified the book's important arguments. Despite its complexity, the book can be used in post-BA courses dealing with media affect, media bodies, and human/non-human assemblages. And it certainly deserves to be read widely by media scholars interested in the genealogy of affective mediation and its psychological dimensions.

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