

Affect

Affect through images as potential of social transformation

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In recent years, the field of Media Studies has seen a number of concepts being proposed as operational categories to make sense of the rapidly changing landscape of production, dissemination, and reception of media products. Affect seems to be the most recent one, but if we are to understand its relevance for contemporary media research, we must first learn how the field got to this point.

In 2004, Couldry (p. 119) argued that a *practice turn* in Media Studies was needed to explore what people are doing “in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts”. This new paradigm of media research would allow researchers to move beyond the futile attempts to find evidence of causal links between media consumption and cognitive and moral shifts on audiences; recognize that the analysis of institutional structure that produce media cannot tell the meaning of media products when inserted into everyday life; and acknowledge the constraints in terms of breadth and width of inquiry brought about by an approach to media analysis that considers the text as the primordial starting point of people’s relationships with media. Media practice understands media consumption beyond a passive act of reception. In fact, there is no more consumption but engagement instead, as users (instead of audiences) participate in a process encompassing a broad range of socio-cultural practices.

As Mark Hobart (2010) has pointed out, approaching media as sets of practices is not unproblematic. He signals three major challenges: how to understand other people’s practices, interpret them, and appreciate the significance of the practices to participants. However, it is

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possible to overcome these challenges methodologically, as several scholars have demonstrated (Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Schreiber, 2017; Flasche, 2021; Kannengießer, 2022). Lines of inquiry centred on media-practices are about a sense – a feeling – that is personal and intersubjective, as well as specific, and that is in constant interplay with the technological conditions in which it arises. Because what “practice is depends on who we are describing and when” (Couldry, 2004, p. 125), so media practices need to be explored “alongside other everyday practices and within social processes” (Moores, 2012, p. 11). I would go one step further and add “where”, thus place, to this. The use of mobile phones surely provides a tangible example of how socio-material conditions impact the emergence of place. It has sparked vivid debates about the extent to which it is appropriate to discuss private matters in public space (Chalfen, 2012), or about the added audio-visual contamination of portable media-able devices. In doing so, I am going back to McLuhan's notion of humans being extended in order to emphasise how the medium itself, regardless of its content, impacts on new modes of everyday social interactions.

Hepp (2013) argues that the material dimension of media, i.e. technologies, interfaces, and infrastructures, impact stabilisation and imbalance of power inasmuch as they are necessary for mediated communication to take place. And in supporting simultaneous and mutual participation, contemporary media practices lead to affective and digitally mediated everyday experiences. One could even talk about media of (dis)affect. Döveling, Harju, and Sommer (2018) talk about emotions as cultural practices being linked to Internet (social media in particular) and how a common way to create and sustain cultural belonging today is by emotional resonance. They explain how we are immersed in digital affect cultures, in which emotions are “cultural products governed by implicit norms of what and how we should feel and how we should express [ourselves] [...] in any given scenario” (ibid., 2018, p. 2). Thus, emotions are collective cultural practices responding to power and are activated in the moment(s) of sharing. Affect is then a collective and normative cultural construct framing emotions that when mediated online a) obliterates traditional spatio-temporal contexts; b) collapses the true/false dichotomy; and, c) replaces facts with shared emotions. In their words, affect is “shaped by communication while at the same time influencing our communicative action” (ibid., p. 3). We see this play out in the way online audiences/publics come together or disband around emotion, not facts. Digital artefacts

such as images shared under a hashtag invite community, define the ideological landscape of a concrete audience/public, and foster individual and collective action (Prieto-Blanco, García-Mingo Prieto-Blanco, Díaz Fernández, 2022).

What does this mean for the study of images? Well, we observe how the field moves from considering images as representations, to thinking images as sensorial/sensory experiences that mobilise emotion and help to transform personal interpellations into political and economic interests (Prieto-Blanco, 2018; Mühlhoff et al., 2019). In particular, photographs set in motion affective processes especially when they are embedded in everyday practices. We know photographs, like other biographical objects such as heirlooms, encapsulate emotions and facilitate transmission of intergenerational memory and trauma. We know that photographs pierce us, wound us, communicate with lyrical expressiveness, and connect us across time and space. Accordingly, the sites of research need to move from fenced off texts to spatial and embodied processes in which the role of the researcher needs to be accounted for (Prieto-Blanco, 2021). This requires a holistic approach to research that can only be delivered by being attached to research (Hennion, 2012, p. 8), possibly through considering media as practice and employing holistic methodologies such as ethnography (Prieto-Blanco, 2016) and narrative inquiry (Bach, 2007; Squire, 1995). And finally, images are understood as emplaced artefacts whose handling (production, dissemination, storage) triggers emotional responses. Thus, visual inquiry needs to be performed through the labour of feeling (Campt, 2019, p. 80), through offering ourselves to the process. Such an approach to visual analysis, photography in particular, means to understand it as affective action, as embodied and verbalised feeling, emotion, and thought precipitated by an encounter.

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