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Affect and Critique: Negative Dialectics and Massumi's Politics of Affect

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Brian Massumi's concept of affect offers a model of change that relies on sensory modes of resistance to neoliberal power relations. Influenced by Bergson's concepts of time and space, Massumi develops an account of perception as the capacity to entrain with ontological, affective flows of becoming before they are captured and reduced to quantifiable forms. This requires a radical reconfiguration of the body as a zone of indetermination between the virtual field of unformed potentialities and the realm of determined existence. I argue that affect theory cannot fulfill its promise to open new political possibilities without the negativity of critique that Massumi pointedly rejects. The wholly affirmative 'Yes' of affect is not enough to resist the deeply entrenched drive to quantify and commodify life.

Adorno's concept of non-identity offers a way of distinguishing between affective tendencies that deceptively serve the reification and commodification of experience and those that have the potential to resist what Adorno calls the "ontology of the wrong state of things." Negative dialectics expresses the necessity of a wholly critical 'No' within capitalist life. However, this 'No' requires extensive qualification in order to clarify what kind of intellectual and somatic commitments are required to engage in non-idealist dialectics. On the one hand, reading Massumi in the context of Adorno's concept of non-identity provides a critical edge that affect theory needs if it is to live up to its claim to be a force for change. Affect must include dialectical attunement. On the other hand, re-

examining Adorno's thought in light of Massumi's concept of the body considers a more substantial and constitutive role of embodied suffering in what is traditionally interpreted as an epistemological form of critique.

There is a radical difference between Adorno's dialectical critique and Massumi's dismissal of it. While the latter maintains that the dialectical tradition is too negative, Adorno insists that it is not negative enough. This fundamental tension between the two thinkers creates an opening to consider new political possibilities unencumbered by the privileging of one approach at the exclusion of the other.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Thesis and Scope.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Argument	14
Methodology.....	16
Contribution to the Field.....	17
Chapter Outline.....	17
Chapter Two: The Primacy of Suffering in Negative Dialectics.....	26
Introduction: The Primacy of Suffering.....	26
Kant’s Prison.....	31
The Fearlessly Passive Subject.....	48
Role of Suffering in Negative Dialectics.....	54
Aesthetic Theory: Dissonance and Suffering	59
Chapter Three: Affect Theory and Perception.....	78
Introduction.....	78
Massumi on the Becoming of Time.....	79
Perception is Subtractive.....	98
The Need for Memory	105
Chapter Four: Conclusion.....	117
Neoliberalism and ‘Genuine Pleasure’	117
Complicity.....	126
Not Negative Enough.....	142
Autonomy	154
The Body.....	163
Future Directions	175
Bibliography	181

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Thesis and Scope

How and why do subjects participate in their own repression? Even more, why do they desire it? This question has long plagued philosophers and cultural theorists. According to affect theorist Brian Massumi, dialectical critiques of ideology and poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity provide inadequate answers to this dilemma because they fail to account for the ontological autonomy of affect and its primary role in all human (and non-human) activity. Although Massumi's theorization of affect as an affirmative force of difference illuminates a profoundly important dimension of experience that has been largely neglected in cultural theory, I argue that it cannot fulfill its promise to open new political possibilities without the negativity of critique that Massumi pointedly rejects. The wholly affirmative 'Yes' of affect is not enough to resist the deeply entrenched drive to quantify and commodify life.

Adorno's concept of non-identity offers a way of distinguishing between affective tendencies that deceptively serve the reification and commodification of experience and those that have the potential to resist what Adorno calls the "ontology of the wrong state of things."¹ Negative dialectics expresses the necessity of a wholly critical 'No' within capitalist life. However, this 'No' requires extensive qualification in order to clarify what

¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

kind of intellectual and somatic commitments are required to engage in non-idealist dialectics. On the one hand, reading Massumi in the context of Adorno's concept of non-identity provides a critical edge that affect theory needs if it is to live up to its claim to be a force for change. Affect must include dialectical attunement. On the other hand, re-examining Adorno's thought in light of contemporary affect theory considers a more substantial and constitutive role of embodied suffering in what is traditionally interpreted as an epistemological form of critique.

To summarize, there is a radical difference between Adorno's dialectical critique and Massumi's dismissal of it. While the latter maintains that the dialectical tradition is too negative, Adorno insists that it is not negative enough. This fundamental tension between the two thinkers creates an opening to consider new political possibilities unencumbered by the privileging of one approach at the exclusion of the other.

Statement of the Problem

Overview of Critical Theory and Negative Dialectics

The Frankfurt School was an interdisciplinary network of German intellectuals that formed in affiliation with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in the early 1920's. It is most commonly associated with the term 'Critical Theory'. It is difficult to summarize the views of the Frankfurt School without glossing the substantial but often fruitful disagreements that emerged from its broad spectrum of theoretical and political positions. Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions were critically mined for alternative ways of thinking and being that were not rooted in the assumptions of scientific positivism or the false desires generated by the mass media. Several members, including

Adorno, were meticulously conscientious about the role of idealist thought in critical theory. Despite their differences, most Frankfurt School theorists shared a concern regarding the totalizing tendencies specific to twentieth century capitalist societies. The unprecedented assimilative powers of modern capitalist modes of production and consumption required a rethinking of the concept of critique that could resist unwitting collaboration with the forces it was meant to interrogate. Cultural critique would need to involve an unceasing critique of itself to ensure that it did not succumb to the reifying processes that had pervaded the economic, social and intellectual realms. Critical theory, according to Frankfurt member Max Horkheimer, must be inseparable from the metacritical work of becoming “self-aware.”² The reflexivity of critical theory would keep it grounded in the social-material conditions of knowledge production and would also presume that theory is not invulnerable to commodifying forces. Adorno warns, “no theory escapes the market place.”³ This defining trait of critical theory expresses the concern shared by Frankfurt School members that we are always already complicit in the forces of our own oppression. There is no such thing as an external standpoint. In fact, Adorno insisted that negative dialectics was decidedly not a standpoint, that thought which is honest with itself (critique that is metacritical) cannot legitimately claim a standpoint because this would presuppose a detachment from the current material/social situation that is not possible.

² Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell and others. New York: Continuum, 1968.

³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 4.

Adorno described this form of reflexive critique which he termed ‘negative dialectics’, as a “consistent sense of non-identity.”⁴ It is worth noting Adorno’s defense of his choice of the term ‘negative’ to qualify a tradition that already operates through the principle of negation.⁵ Adorno argues that the inclusion of the term ‘negative’ to qualify dialectics is not tautological, because it is meant to negate the positive negativity of Hegelian dialectics.⁶ It also proclaims a necessary corrective to the unchallenged cultural injunction to affirm the given. According to Adorno, this compulsive positivity had penetrated all spheres of life, ranging from seemingly non-controversial leisure time activities (gift giving, reading astrology columns in the newspaper, mounting the steps of a train) to scientific positivism and the philosophical works of Kant and Hegel. Because nothing in society is immune to the capitalist forces of conformism, Adorno claimed that negative dialectics must entail nothing more and nothing less than “the ruthless criticism of all that exists.”⁷ Maintaining a fidelity to the non-identity of concept and object and

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

⁵ “*Negative Dialectics* is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a “negation of negation” later became the succinct terms. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. The unfoldment of the paradoxical title is one of its aims” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xix).

⁶ To critique Adorno’s interpretation of Hegel exceeds the scope of this work. Adorno acknowledges that he reads Hegel against the latter’s intentions and that Hegel is a major influence on Adorno’s thought. “The enormous power of Hegel – that is the power which impresses us so hugely today and, God knows, it is a power that impresses *me* today to the point where I am fully aware that, of the ideas that I am presenting to you, there is not a single one that is not contained, in tendency at least, in Hegel’s philosophy” (Adorno, *Lectures in Negative Dialectics*, 21).

⁷ Adorno, *Lectures in Negative Dialectics*, 13.

the myriad manifestations of this relation, including within critical theory itself, is a radical departure from a mode of experience that defaults to identity and the complacency of recognition.

Because Adorno believed that any critique of society must necessarily involve a critique of knowledge, much of his philosophical work was a response to the prevailing philosophy of German Idealism. Nowhere were the consequences of idealism more obvious for Adorno than in the alienation of the individual in modern society and the widespread conviction that the reified relations between individuals and society was a form of freedom. Adorno's heterodox reading of the German Idealists was shaped by his rejection of any thought or practice that he interpreted as equating truth with the Whole and presuming the identity of subject and object. The concept could no more exhaust the object than philosophy could capture the totality of reality. The failure of philosophical idealism to account for the social conditions from which this inherent limitation of thought emerges, and more importantly, its failure to even acknowledge the actual existence of this limitation, is precisely what ensures its complicity with the given. When the complicity is successful, it is touted as freedom. Not only did Adorno reject the totalizing premise of idealism with its presentation of reality as a rational and meaningful whole, he feared that idealism signaled the dissolution of the very possibility of philosophy. Only an ongoing effort to express the futility of identity could resuscitate philosophy. As he argues in *Negative Dialectics*, "The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom."⁸ According to Adorno, philosophers

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

such as Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger, prevented the emergence of critical consciousness through their prioritization of identity over difference and their dismissal of the transformative power of objects in their concrete particularity.⁹

Philosophies which were grounded in the primacy of the subject would always be guilty of this, Adorno argued, because of the domination inherent in any one-sided account of the subject-object relation.

Hegel was particularly problematic for Adorno. His interpretation of Hegel's proclamation that the real is the rational presented intolerable consequences. The "false positivity" achieved through the negation of negation robs dialectics of its critical potential. If the totality is rational to the core, and meaning is only possible through the identity of thought and reality, then as Adorno interprets Hegel, concepts and objects that fail to coincide with this seamless integration are dismissed as irrational or irrelevant. The particular is banished by the general, resulting in a conflation of fact and value that obscures the irreconcilable contradictions that actually constitute society. However, for Adorno, in many ways Kant is as equally if not more problematic than Hegel. Like Hegel, Kant's conflation of fact and value perpetuated the given as the only possible reality. However, Kant's philosophy unwittingly expresses the despair of living in a society that thrives on the obscuration of its real conditions of reproduction. The all-

⁹ Adorno departed from traditional Marxism as well. He rejected the proletariat as a collective revolutionary subject and posited the primacy of the exchange principle over forces of production as determinative of the social realm. His deep pessimism towards political practice further distanced him from Marxist tradition(s), including Lukács to whom he was heavily indebted for his concept of reification and analysis of the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Adorno could not support Lukács' theory of the proletariat as the subject-object of history.

powerful transcendental subject that is the condition for knowledge renders itself powerless to experience anything that does not conform to its perceptual structures. Kant's transcendental approach was meant to secure for knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, an unassailable objectivity which would further the goal of the enlightenment to replace superstition with reason. In turn, rationality would lead to emancipation. Auschwitz challenged these Enlightenment principles, not least of which was the emancipatory potential of reason.

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer address this phenomenon of liberating forces taking on the traits which they were meant to overcome. In this collaborative work, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the enlightenment rationality which emerged from the need to critique the irrational and controlling nature of myth had lapsed into the very totalitarianism it set out to abolish. The archaic barbarism associated with myth had returned in the forms of anti-Semitism, the mass media/culture industry, and identitarian ideology. For instance, the enlightenment ideal of equality and freedom is falsely realized through the reduction of the heterogeneous individual to the abstract equivalency of exchange. Under these conditions, freedom is the ability to participate more fully in the dominating structures of exchange society. The possibility of negative dialectical critique that emerges from these kinds of contradictions reveals the untruth of identity.

Adorno is perhaps most famously known for his critique of the "culture industry", a term coined by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The culture industry refers to the mass production and consumption of cultural products that have been standardized by the exchange principle to meet manufactured, and therefore false,

needs. Amusement and pleasure are not offered as “flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.”¹⁰ This is a significant point because it illustrates the need for dialectical interpretation of pleasurable somatic responses that arise through encounters with structures that are ultimately oppressive. The mass deception of pop culture reduces the critic’s discourse to likes and dislikes, masking the culture industry’s identitarian logic of assuring people that they know what they like and hiding the fact that they only like what they know. This fetishization of positivity causes social relations of production to appear as immutable laws of nature rather than products of material historical conditions unique to contemporary capitalism. According to Adorno, this process of reification is specific to advanced forms of capitalism that are driven by the abstract logic of exchange. The ubiquity of this exchange principle which reduces qualitative differences to quantitative values has the regrettable result of attributing value only to what is useful for the reproduction of society. Any experience that easily conforms to existing social practices and signification is suspect because of its affirmative status in a society that only values what is fungible. “We have to ask what has to be or has not to be affirmed, instead of elevating the word ‘Yes’ to a value in itself, as was unfortunately done by Nietzsche with the entire pathos of saying yes to life.”¹¹

¹⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144.

¹¹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 18.

Overview of Massumi's Concept of Affect

Massumi's theory of affect was developed in response to the limitations of cultural theory in addressing contemporary forms of capitalism.¹² Although there are differences between contemporary neoliberal capitalism and the post-World War II Keynesian form of capitalism that neoliberals claim to oppose, both Massumi and Adorno share a concern regarding the assimilating powers of advanced capitalism. While Adorno focused on the totalizing dynamics of mass media and the conforming forces of the culture industry, Massumi analyzes the affective dimension of experience that he identifies as the primary target of neoliberal commodification. It is important to note that Massumi's understanding of neoliberalism is derived primarily from Foucault's analysis of American neoliberalism. In Foucault's account, a shift has occurred from the domination of exchange relations that Adorno considered to be the driving force of conformism, to the operative principle of competition. Under the latter, workers understand themselves as entrepreneurs rather than passive consumers, driven to invest in and thereby objectify themselves as human capital.¹³ The market becomes the ethos of

¹² Massumi has been criticized for neglecting the range of differences within poststructuralist theory and for exaggerating the shortcomings of poststructuralist discourse in order to bolster his own argument. These are valid criticisms. However, Massumi's theory of affect highlights a dimension of experience and culture that is particularly relevant to neoliberal subjectivity that is critiqued in this present work.

¹³ "...in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226).

human activity, blurring the line between citizen and entrepreneur; as a result, the boundary between state and economy is ambiguous and perpetually shifting. Under these conditions, freedom is ultimately redefined as entrepreneurial freedom.

The aspects of neoliberal governmentality that are significant for Massumi's theory of affect concern the active production of subjectivity through perpetual differentiation. The entrepreneurial self that emerges through the logic of competition must, by definition, possess the self-management skills and capacity for innovation that are not typically associated with the subject that passively consumes and conforms. In a neoliberal context, the production of different identities including the contemporary trend for personal branding, promotes the individual's economic interests and autonomy. In this sense, power is more intense than the standardization of the exchange principle because it saturates the social field in order to multiply differences and intensify interests rather than imposing a uniform standard. The cultural standard in neoliberalism is to increase the individual's affective capacities that align with market principles – to be more creative, resilient, less dependent on the social protections of government - in order to create an ongoing supply of surplus value. Although the proliferation of industries that promote technologies of the self effectively serve neoliberal principles of competition and accumulation, individuals purportedly derive a deeper (some would even say more spiritual) pleasure from them than the relief offered through conformist social norms that consumerism has provided in the past.

In theorizing affect, Massumi claims to counter neoliberal power on its own terrain. Affect is an open-ended field of differential potentialities from which reality as we know it actualizes. It is virtual in nature, a multiplicity of imperceptible tendencies

always in movement and difficult to pin down because they are always in the process of becoming. These traits are also what characterize neoliberal capitalist processes. The production of difference and the capacity for ongoing change constitute capitalism's power to re-emerge continually from crises (of its own invention) in myriad forms that remain true to the capitalist relation. The difference between the productive potential of affect and the compulsion to produce in neoliberal society, is the difference in nature of affect as a virtual state verses its actualization in capitalist capture. This is not a difference of degree; the imperceptibility of affect does not possess a greater degree of reality when it crosses the threshold to conscious perception. It simply becomes useful. The generative capacity that emerges from affect is not only activated in the service of capitalism, it is its life force. Affect is immanent to capitalism, so capitalism is "immanent to the field of life."¹⁴ In *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, authors Raj Patel and Jason Moore present an account of capitalism's entanglement with webs of life that emphasizes not just its destructive relations but also its productive powers to create new frontiers through which it reinvents itself. They identify "cheapness" as a set of strategies, always short-term, whereby crises of capitalism are managed by mobilizing natures (human, animal, plants, geology) for work and made to serve the production-consumption relation for as little cost as possible. Cheapness "controls a wider web of life."¹⁵ Moore and Patel explain: "While much has been made of its gory and oppressive history, one fact is often overlooked: capitalism has thrived not

¹⁴ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 109.

¹⁵ Patel and Moore, *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 3.

because it is violent and destructive (it is) but because it is productive in a particular way.”¹⁶ This way includes the creation of new frontiers through which diverse configurations of capital and life-making processes emerge.¹⁷ Moore and Patel could not find a suitable word in the English language for the life-making process so they employed the Greek term *oikeios*. “*Oikeios* names the creative and multilayered pulse of life making through which all human activity flows, shaped at every turn by natures that consistently elude human efforts at control.”¹⁸ Massumi argues that the concept of affect meets capitalism on its own terrain because it assumes that capitalism is an island in a vast and open-ended sea of life-making processes rather than a structural monolith with no outside. No matter how thorough capitalist capture is, no matter how powerful its siphoning off of *oikeios*, it does not exhaust the always larger flow of life. The concepts of affect and *oikeios* resonate with one another, but there is an important difference. Moore and Patel’s book haunts the reader with a grim question: Is capitalism running out of frontiers? What will happen if it does? What I aim to show in my reading of Massumi is how affect theory’s rejection of these kinds of questions undermines its power as a force for change. That said, the power of affect theory is that it attends to the externalities that capitalist relations miss, and it attempts to operate similarly to the movements that manage to elude the cheapening of natures.

¹⁶ Patel and Moore, *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 19.

¹⁷ I am avoiding the use of concepts such as ‘society’ and ‘nature’ which, as Patel and Moore point out, obscure their colonial origins and do not capture the complexity of relations of natures that are not destroyed but put to work.

¹⁸ Patel and Moore, *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 19-20.

According to Massumi, there are always potentialities in the zone of indetermination between the virtual and actual that escape capture and emerge as self-affirming movements. Their significance is their uselessness to the consumption-production processes. They could actualize as barely perceptible ephemeral phenomena or as major events such as the Occupy Movement. Affect theorists and Massumi in particular view the power of Occupy as an embodied collective becoming, direct democracy in action. Massumi writes:

Anywhere representation is eschewed in favor of presentation, in the sense of affective tuning-in; anywhere the square or the street takes precedence over the party meeting; anywhere directly embodied participation takes the upper hand from the communication of opinion or the prescription of intended outcomes; anywhere decision is an emergent property of the coming-together, for becoming-together, of a differential human multiplicity, and not the edict of an individual leader or lead group backed by an existing power structure of whatever stripe – there, a direct democracy is being improvised. There, resistance is unfolding.¹⁹

Occupy movements famously did not conform to traditional forms of activism and did not evaluate their success or failure in terms of measurable outcomes. Theorizing resistance in terms of affect meets neoliberalism on its own terrain by “acting directly in the register of affect”²⁰ rather than through the activity of ideology critique and epistemological models which are inherently constrained by disembodied concepts. In Massumi’s view, epistemological critiques analyze capitalism in terms of power structures instead of affective processes, and since ideology is an expression of power structures, it is twice removed from the true conditions of capitalism. As virtual

¹⁹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 98.

²⁰ Massumi, *Principles of Unrest*, 19.

potentiality, affect is affirmative by nature, so acting directly in the register of affect requires the perception and affirmation of the affective tendencies that escape signification. The negativity of critique is unable to recognize this form of affirmation as anything other than a form of domination.

This marks a significant departure from Adorno's negative dialectics. For Massumi, freedom is the experiential augmentation of the excess that remains after capitalist capture. As such, it must be enacted and performed, not critiqued. Adorno claims that freedom can only be described in negative terms by revealing the constitutive contradictions of society (the non-identity of concept and object). Under the current conditions of society, positive articulations of freedom will always coincide with identitarian thinking. The fetishization of the positive that is at the heart of Adorno's critique is even more powerful in contemporary neoliberal society with its drive to produce human capital. Massumi's response to this argument is that knowing how we are unfree is not the same as becoming free.

Argument

This dissertation will explore new discussions stimulated by the fundamental dissonance between Adorno's concept of non-identity and Massumi's claims regarding the emancipatory potential of affect. I will argue that affect can only live up to this promise if it is grounded in the sense of dialectical non-identity that will prevent its affirmative tendency from reproducing the very neoliberal relations that would domesticate it. I am arguing, in other words, against the autonomy of affect. Massumi's most significant contribution to cultural theory is the introduction of affect as a uniquely

powerful force in the structuring of experience through a desubjectivized body and its distinct correspondence with neoliberal processes that offers a site for contestation. But while Massumi insists that the power of affect as a liberating force depends on its ontological autonomy from the signifying and subject-producing structures of neoliberalism, I aim to demonstrate how affect is powerful to the extent that it is understood as a product of those material and social conditions. Dialectical negativity is also a product of material and social conditions, but it has the potential to experience and understand that relation reflexively. Affect is a significant dimension of this experience, but it is most powerful when it manifests negatively through the non-identity of subject and object. In other words, when it manifests through suffering.

I will examine how Adorno relies on the workings of affect more than has been traditionally acknowledged. His critique of Kant's transcendental subjectivity is rooted in the suffering embodied in everyday life in capitalist society. There is a non-conceptual nature of affect as Massumi claims, but it actualizes through suffering. For Adorno, the negative affect of non-identity can be difficult to sense because suffering is habitually perceived through rationalizations that distort the bodily 'No' that desires expression. According to Adorno, the negativity of affect is in some ways more accessible in the aesthetic realm, where dissonance is experienced in a way that can invoke critical capacities that are largely shut down in the social and political realms. In a society driven by identity, dissonance is painful because it reveals the untruth of the harmonious whole. Therefore, it is in the aesthetic realm that the value of affect as a potential critical force is most prominent. An artwork is 'true' if it provokes the sense of non-identity that musical/social norms conceal. However, the negative affects that emerge from the

experience of dissonance are always mediated through the dialectical relation. Contrary to Massumi's theory of affect, there is no such thing as immediate experience, even in the aesthetic realm. Art has the potential to express the contradictions of an antagonistic society while maintaining a degree of autonomy (never full and complete) from the exchange principle, but as a social product of material conditions it is not invulnerable to reifying forces.

What I am proposing is something less than the robust ontology of autonomous affect that Massumi locates outside of social production, but more than the cognitive activity of negative critique. It is based on the sense of non-identity that emerges from the bodily suffering of dissonance in all its forms and its counterpart in dialectical interpretation. This involves a deep engagement with affect on the same micrological level that Adorno analyzes cultural phenomena. To this end, Massumi has laid invaluable groundwork, particularly in relation to the neoliberal interpellation of the subject as enterprise. The space between affect and critique that emerges from an encounter between Massumi and Adorno offers a potentially new terrain of resistance to the neoliberal landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative strategy of reading concepts together from two traditions in Western continental philosophy: the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, specifically Theodore W. Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics, and Brian Massumi's theory of affect. My methodology also includes a reconstructive reading of Massumi's works by examining the revolutionary potential for affect in the context of

negative dialectics. This work draws on the texts of other philosophers, mainly Kant and Bergson, who were influential to Adorno and Massumi in developing their concepts.

Contribution to the Field

This dissertation aims to contribute to the growing field of affect theory as it relates to cultural theory. It further develops the scholarship on Adorno that focuses on his relevance for the contemporary dilemmas of neoliberalism. Specifically, it explores the implications for Adorno's philosophy separately from the 'normative turn' taken in critical theory by second generation Frankfurt School members such as Habermas.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction

The current chapter provides an introduction to the problems posed by affect theory and critical theory, followed by a brief summary of the argument. Reading Massumi through Adorno's dialectical concept of non-identity and the primacy of suffering can provide a critical edge to affect that is missing in Massumi's theory. Reading Adorno through Massumi develops the negative role of affect in the dialectical interpretation of phenomena. The chapter includes a brief description of each chapter and identifies the contribution to relevant fields.

Chapter Two: The Primacy of Suffering in Negative Dialectics

This chapter begins with an explanation of the primacy of suffering as a crucial element that differentiates negative dialectics from affect theory. This is the immanent,

materialistic motive for Adorno's critique of oppressive structures and practices.

Suffering is a troubled concept and requires some unpacking to understand what Adorno means by it. First, it secures an indispensable role for the body in critique. Second, suffering manifests and continually re-emerges through a specific configuration of the subject-object relation. Massumi rejects the subject-object terminology as laden with modernist postulates that portray the subject as autonomous and grounded in a universal rationality that transcends place and time. Adorno's conviction that all thought is guilty because the concept cannot directly capture its non-conceptual roots, makes him suspicious of the creation of new terminology. In this sense, Massumi's language of affect is similar to the jargon of authenticity Adorno critiqued in Heidegger's works. Suffering is caused by the contradictions of capitalism that manifest through a reified subjectivity. Posthuman concepts run the risk of ignoring the suffering subject that cannot escape its material conditions.

Kant's concept of transcendental subjectivity presented for Adorno one of the most problematic configurations in philosophy of the subject-object relation. His philosophy accurately portrayed the ideological interpellation of individuals living in a capitalist society, but it failed to see the actual ideology behind it. Adorno interprets the "Kantian Block" as an unintended expression of resignation and mourning for what is lost in establishing the inevitability of the given. The construction of *noumena* is a metaphysical mourning of what we should never forget but are always compelled to forget. Adorno claims, "I believe that this is the deepest thing to be found in Kant."²¹ In

²¹ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 177.

place of the “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” Adorno posits a “fearlessly passive subject” that is attuned to the aspects of the object that do not coincide with the concept. This involves an entrustment of experience that contradicts the subject’s perception. Suffering is this experience. Trusting it entails both a somatic and cognitive openness. It must be noted that Adorno believed the body/mind split was a consequence of an undialectical and therefore false understanding of origins. The dialectical attunement of the fearlessly passive subject is reflexively engaged with the experience of somatic dissonance and suffering. The ‘No’ of negative dialectics transforms suffering such that respite from the given becomes possible. That is all, but for Massumi that is not enough.

The second half of this chapter explores Adorno’s aesthetic theory of dissonance: its implications for theory and practice and its role in revealing the untruth of pleasure. Dissonance is fundamentally memory, an expression of the suffering that is forgotten through the imposition of norms. Adorno’s analysis of the musical system of tonality focuses on the pleasure induced by identity and the culture industry’s production of musical commodities based on this principle. His essay on jazz illustrates the seductive manipulation of tonal structures and the culture industry’s presentation of this as a revolution in music that transforms the individual who purportedly possesses the freedom of spirit and cultural sophistication to appreciate it. Schoenberg’s atonal compositions provide a counter approach to this manipulation of subjectivity by exemplifying Adorno’s concept of the primacy of the object. His music demands a level of attentiveness to the inner logic that does not rely on musical norms to pre-determine the role of each note. The listener cannot be lulled by pleasure inducing tactics. In fact, the common reaction to Schoenberg’s music was pronounced displeasure. What are the

conditions for experiencing dissonance as painful and harmonic resolution as pleasurable? What are the conditions for experiencing dissonance as memory? Adorno's negative dialectical interpretation of music provides an example of the fearlessly passive subject that trusts somatic dissonance by becoming dialectical attuned. For Adorno, music exemplifies how suffering is a condition of truth. This reading rejects the reduction of Adorno's aesthetic theory to a defense of modern art as the only source of intramundane transcendence.

Chapter Three: Affect Theory and Perception

Chapter three traces the development of Massumi's affect theory through the conceptual framework of Bergson's ontology of time and memory. It begins with what Massumi refers to as the Bergsonian revolution that turned the world on its head: the primacy of movement. "The problem is no longer to explain how there can be change given positioning. The problem is to explain the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process."²² Bergson argues that most of the problems in philosophy can be addressed by thinking in terms of time instead of space, or as Massumi describes it, passage instead of positionality. Affect is on the side of time, a temporal becoming that is characterized by indeterminacy. Its virtual status does not make it any less real than actualized reality. In fact, Massumi illustrates the worldly consequences and power of affect by analyzing how the U.S. military has used the objective uncertainty of affect to fight the war on terror. The operative logic of preemption developed by Bush and

²² Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 7-8.

Rumsfeld is a form of ontopower - the power to incite the emergence of that which needs to be captured. The operation of ontopower depends on a special kind of perception that can detect a threat before it emerges and to influence the conditions of its emergence so that it actualizes in a determinate form that can be dealt with.

The kind of perception that can detect change before it takes form and influence the shape of its actualization is rooted in Bergson's account of perception as action rather than knowledge. This is key to understanding the primacy of temporal becoming that is affect. According to Massumi, only the body is quick enough to "perceive the smaller than the smallest perceivable interval"²³ between becoming and being. Only the body can perceive pure movement. Massumi's emphasis on the body's role in affect theory has elicited various responses from disciplines that also theorize the body. Disability/Crip theory is a rich interlocutor for affect theorists. Erin Manning, affect theorist and longtime colleague of Massumi, explores the critique of neurotypicality as perception that is rooted in positionality instead of passage. Autistic perception, she argues, foregrounds movement and confuses the boundaries between "where the body ends and the world begins."²⁴ Orienting perception in terms of mobility instead of positionality is the lynchpin of Massumi's concept of affective attunement – the capacity to entrain with flows of intensity before they solidify into subjects and objects, body and world. Although some of Manning's views on autism are controversial, her framing of neurotypicality as a foundational form of identity politics interrogates material and social

²³ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 36.

²⁴ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 132.

conditions that are structured around perceptions that “chunk” the world into objects rather than temporal becoming.

While perception is constituted through action, memory directs its movement and enriches perception in new ways. Bergson’s pivotal insight was that the new can only emerge from the past. Memory is not beholden to the utilitarian demands of the present, and its engagement with perception creates a gap, a zone of indeterminacy between stimulus and reaction where movement can be redirected. Massumi’s concept of priming as the method of ontopower works with the zone of indeterminacy, inflecting the field of emergence, but not directly causing anything. Affect can only be accessed indirectly. What counts as priming is, according to Massumi, purposely vague, and it requires a “subjectivity-without-a-subject.”²⁵ The relation between subjectivity and priming is defined by the capacity for affective attunement of what I will argue is a highly modified subjectivity that is not so much a dissolution of the subject as a reconfiguration that foregrounds the body.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Chapter four begins with an overview of neoliberalism as portrayed by David Harvey and Michel Foucault, focusing on the production of subjectivity as human capital. While I believe that affect theory is responding to a unique phenomenon of neoliberalism that was not fully manifest in Adorno’s lifetime, it is not so different that it renders negative dialectical analysis irrelevant. I argue in fact that the duplicity of neoliberal

²⁵ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 121.

subjectivity and the ‘genuine pleasure’ that it generates offers a renewed necessity for Adorno’s form of negativism that has been dismissed by his critics as apolitical pessimism. Massumi’s affect theory provides a more nuanced account of the body that expands its boundaries and potentials, but bodily affective attunement by itself does not provide the critical edge that can only come from critique that is rooted in suffering. This section concludes with a brief examination of the mindfulness movement in North America as an example of how the neoliberal injunction for constant self-improvement generates technologies of the self which promote human capital as a spiritual endeavor. It illustrates the confusing nature of ‘genuine pleasure’ that cannot be easily dismissed as mere conformism.

The rest of this chapter explores the question posed at the beginning of this dissertation: How and why do subjects participate in their own repression? Even more, why do they desire it? While Massumi claims that complicity is an ontological condition under neoliberalism and that resistance entails embracing creative duplicity, Adorno argues that the best that can be hoped for is withdrawal and respite from suffering, given that the nature of capitalist domination is to forbid the recognition of suffering. Both of these approaches have significant consequences for the relation between theory and practice. Massumi dismisses critique as a “sadistic enterprise” that must be countered with priming affective experiences that generate surplus values of life. Adorno claims that any interpretation of negative dialectics that reads affirmative traits into the work of non-identity reifies the kind of negativity that exists for the sole purpose of breaking through reification. Two examples of interpretations that reify negative dialectics by not being negative enough are Jane Bennett’s comparison of negative dialectics to negative

theology, and John Holloway's equation of creativity with non-identity. Bennett's reading of Adorno is especially relevant for the contemporary debate between the traditions of new materialism and historical materialism.

One of the consequences of critique not being negative enough is the conflation of theory and practice. Adorno was suspicious of the compulsion for practice because it is rarely separated from the compulsion of identity, and the coercion of identity in thought and action is at the base of all violence. Examples of contemporary manifestations of the taming of theory for the sake of actionable, digestible forms of practice are explored through the books *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* by Anand Giridharadas, and *The Ideas Industry* by Daniel Drezner. Drezner traces the ascendancy of thought leaders over political intellectuals. The former often gain fame and fortune by delivering TED talks that go viral and usually consist of a few award winning talking points about how to improve the status quo. Thought leaders proclaim to stand *for* rather than *against* something, while public intellectuals critique what is wrong with society and address issues of social inequality and injustice.

The following section provides an examination of the definitive trait of affect – its autonomy - and how claims for an unmediated form of autonomy under capitalist processes is problematic for a few reasons. The first reason concerns the distorted concept of autonomy that is based on the structure of the commodity and serves the reproduction of capitalist social relations. The truth of autonomy lies in its untruth. The second problem with claiming autonomy, especially as non-conceptual in nature as Massumi does, is that it displaces autonomy outside of the subject's intentionality and conscious perception. According to Massumi, the subject must disappear in order to

access the autonomy and agency of affect. Massumi repeatedly emphasizes the difference in nature between emotion and affect in order to establish affect's autonomy. This seems to neglect the long and rich history of feminists working with the ambiguous nature of emotion. Affect's clean break with emotion is suspiciously clean and reflects patriarchal practices of relegating emotional knowledge to a derivative, secondary status.

Affect theory re-values the body as a vital force and radically reconfigures it in the process. This is the most significant contribution of affect theory to cultural theory. However, the affective body does not does not escape mediation. For example, while Massumi openly admits to "poaching" scientific concepts to activate creative tensions between science and the humanities, his reliance on the theories and technologies of neuroscience fail to take into account its discursive production of normal and abnormal bodies. Imbedded in this exchange is an implicit dualism of good and bad affect which the autonomy of affect by definition, resists. Is this resistance an avoidance of contradictions that plague ordinary material existence or is it a liberating force from those conditions? On the one hand, any critique of culture that neglects the expanded potentialities of the body developed through affect theory will be partial and compromised. Negative dialectics considers the body to be an essential part of critique, which is why it is grounded in suffering, but it does not attend to the body as explicitly as affect theory does. On the other hand, the absence of critique in a theory that conflates itself with practice and views the nature of thought as generally obstructive to change, has no way of discerning between what Massumi refers to as "creative duplicity" and the duplicitous affective practices and structures that ensure complicity.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PRIMACY OF SUFFERING IN NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

Introduction: The Primacy of Suffering

For Adorno, the concept of suffering is vital to understanding how oppression works. Making suffering the object of critique accords an indispensable role to the body. The body as a contested site for pain and oppression is hardly a new insight for cultural theory, but negative dialectics simultaneously assumes the body's thoroughly mediated nature and, crucially, its non-identity with the conceptual constructs employed to understand it. The tension created by bodily suffering resists the discursive reduction of somatic experience and also provides the opportunity to attend to the sensuous aspect of thought.

Suffering is a troubled concept. There is no pure form of it that Adorno relies on, although sometimes he makes statements to the effect that we just know what suffering is. These statements require further unpacking, because there are overt forms of bodily suffering experienced by the victims of Auschwitz, but Adorno also addresses more subtle and deceptive forms of suffering that are masked as pleasure. These manifestations of suffering present a uniquely insidious phenomenon that requires interpretation because they encompass forms of unwitting complicity with oppressive forces. Massumi argues that "being woke" does not incite the change that matters. But for Adorno, exposing how certain ways of acting and thinking inflict pain is the only way

to generate enough critical distance to abstain, even if only partially, from participating in one's own oppression. Adorno's famous proclamation that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly,"²⁶ expresses his conviction that diagnosing ideological deceptions offers respite from suffering. The significance of respite is too often overlooked by the urgency of practical action. Adorno warns of the consequences of underestimating the necessity of "mere" non-participation (*nicht mitmachen*) and its critical tension with the status quo. History has revealed the consequences of bypassing critique and the suffering that ensues:

It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain.²⁷

The capacity to step back from habitual affirmations of the given provides respite from the repression and rationalization of pain, and this has important implications for theory and practice. Adorno is highly critical of the value placed on practice and the dismissal of any thought that does not provide an effortless segue into its implementation. But the unity of theory and practice that activists in an exchange society seek must be regarded with deep suspicion, because history has shown (and here Adorno is mainly referring to the failure of Marxist movements and Lukac's intellectual submission to the control of party) that this unity results in the domination of practice. This default to

²⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

action unhindered by theory is itself an expression of unacknowledged suffering. “The repressive intolerance to the thought that is not immediately accompanied by instructions for action is founded on anxiety.”²⁸ Here Adorno refers to the fear that “the thought is right” and will “disenchant the pseudo-reality within which actionism moves.”²⁹ Under these circumstances, respite from the pseudo-reality would in itself constitute an act of resistance.

What suffering is, who gets to define it, how to give voice to it, and discerning what kinds of suffering obstruct freedom and what kinds suffering unmask the conditions of our unfreedom, are just some aspects of suffering that make it as problematic to pin down as theories that are founded upon notions of justice, the good, or as we will see, affect. Suffering is also problematic because it is not immune to conversion into cultural capital. However, because Adorno grounds suffering materially in the body, it harbors the potential to disrupt and evade the homogenizing capitalist logic of equivalence and exchange – not because the body provides a substratum of raw immediacy to return or escape to, but because it offers a materialist and immanent context from which to engage in analysis and critique. For Adorno, suffering is a form of saying ‘No’. What it means to say no, what is being refused and why, is the task of negative dialectics to decipher.

²⁸ Adorno, “Resignation.” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.

Subject-Object Relation as Expression of Suffering

Much of Adorno's thinking on suffering is intimately bound to his examination of the subject-object relation in capitalist society. Whether subject and object are viewed in terms of the universal and particular, form and content, or the conceptual and non-conceptual, the diremption of the subject's concepts and the objects it attempts to represent is, for Adorno, inseparable from the experience of suffering. Massumi argues that the traditional categories of subject and object are no longer useful terms for cultural analysis because they assume a mediated relation between preconstituted entities, and the emancipatory potential of affect lies precisely in its unmediated nature which cannot be captured by epistemological models of representation. However, Adorno contends that *all* thought is guilty. "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder."³⁰ Creating new concepts avoids the hard work of starting exactly where we are, within the existing conventions and practices from which suffering emerges. "Only an essentially undialectical philosophy, one which aims at ahistorical truth, could maintain that the old problems could simply be removed by forgetting them and starting fresh from the beginning."³¹ Negative dialectics begins with our unfreedom and cannot extract itself from the burden of the subject's suffering. "Only in the strictest dialectical communication with the most

³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

³¹ Adorno, "Metacritique of Epistemology." In *The Adorno Reader*, 35.

recent solution-attempts of philosophy and of philosophic terminology can a real change in philosophic consciousness prevail.”³²

Adorno’s thought on the nature of suffering is most coherent and impactful when he examines its emergence through the philosophic terminology of the subject-object relation. Adorno views subject and object as constitutive of experience, each with uniquely sedimented histories that are irreducible to each the other but cannot exist without each other. This is consistent with his anti-foundationalism and the ‘consistent sense of non-identity’ that is cultivated through the dialectical interpretation of everyday concepts and objects. New terminology does not guarantee new thoughts, and it risks neglecting the limitations in material reality that give rise to the limitations in thought reflected by the subject-object relation. Massumi’s attempt to eradicate the subject in theory is problematic because the subject is still very much alive (and suffering) in practice. Creating new concepts will not redeem the guilt of the concept, but neither will positing a non-conceptual reality that can be accessed without concepts. We could no sooner speak of a non-conceptual cognition than to lose it. While Massumi argues this is precisely what differentiates affect from conceptual cognition and its inherent limitations, Adorno soberly insists that it is a futile endeavor because it ignores the process of the subject’s critical self-reflection in getting there. He argues:

We would achieve the utopia of cognition if it might prove possible to grasp the non-conceptual not by means of some allegedly superior non-conceptual methods, but by unlocking the non-conceptual by means of the concept, and the self-criticism of concepts – without reducing what has been comprehended, the non-conceptual, to concepts by main force.³³

³² Adorno, “Metacritique of Epistemology.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 35.

³³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 74.

Negative dialectics constellates concepts in order to think the dissonance between the finitude of the subject's concepts and the object they attempt to capture. "Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object." And it is in this sense that subject and object are not preconstituted entities - although the ideology of exchange society would have us believe otherwise – but are rather expressions of the experience of living in a reality fundamentally constituted by unexamined contradictions.

Adorno and Massumi both value an interdisciplinary approach. For Adorno, the activity of constellating concepts is enriched by the inclusion of concepts traditionally segregated from other disciplines. The lived sense and meaning of subject and object and the tension between them shifts within social contexts and across disciplines. Adorno's engagement with a variety of disciplines including literary critique, sociology, aesthetics, and philosophy, stems from the rejection of the rigid separation of disciplines that a totally administered society requires.

Kant's Prison

The Belly Turned Mind

The first part of this chapter consists of an examination of the different forms of suffering that emerge through the subject/object relation in Adorno's reading of Kant. Adorno's critique of the philosophical tradition of German idealism and Kant in particular, centers around the concept of constitutive subjectivity – a concept that is at the heart of the suffering prevalent in capitalist exchange society. Adorno argues that the

force of intolerance that constitutive subjectivity harbors towards difference is analogous to the force of self-preserving instincts such as the hunger and rage that are necessary for animals to paralyze their prey. In Adorno's view, the development of the superego and the identity of the human being as a *zoon politikon* prevented openly acting on this instinct of self-preservation and was therefore masked as a "rationalized rage against nonidentity".³⁴ In Kant and philosophical idealism in general, the somatic element poses a threat to thought and is devoured with a rationalized rage. Adorno takes issue with Kant's presentation of constitutive subjectivity as an inevitable outcome of the ahistorical conditions of human experience, because there are no unmediated or ahistorical sources of human experience. Human beings are not ontologically or epistemologically hardwired to perceive the world stripped of its otherness, although it may appear this way to the unexamined life. The compulsion of identity emerged through the social-historical conditions of capitalism. The subject of contemporary capitalism is driven by intolerance of the forms of difference that resist exchange and consumption. The capacity to commodify personal forms of dissent is a continuation of the constitutive subject that only sees in objects that which can perpetuate its dominant status.

This "belly turned mind"³⁵ phenomenon of idealistic thought does not tolerate somatic dissonance. In a society where everything is subjected to the capitalist injunction of exchangeability, suffering has the potential to disrupt and elude the identitarian thinking of exchange relations. Negative bodily sensations can and do resist total

³⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

subsumption by the concept. Therefore, the experience of suffering is crucial to the dialectical interpretation of the object. “The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering.”³⁶ According to Adorno, German idealism channels the rationalized rage against the other into the constitutive subject, which holds the dual function of being the condition and denial of suffering. It is the condition of suffering because it cannot allow whatever does not already fit into its perceptual structure, thereby precluding the possibility of the other’s expression. It is a denial of suffering because to acknowledge the other’s suffering would require a subjectivity that is not rooted in identity, thereby eliminating its constitutive powers. The denial of suffering is a prerequisite for the condition of suffering.

Adorno’s Critique of Transcendental Apperception

Although Adorno rejected some major tenets of Marxism, he never lost touch with his materialist roots. This is evident in his critique of Kant’s transcendental empiricism. His close examination of the irreconcilable contradictions imbedded in Kant’s transcendental subject is key to understanding the concept and role of non-identity in cultural critique. Kant’s philosophy unwittingly reveals how the inability to see that contradictions in thought derive from contradictions in material reality prohibits critical engagement with the status quo. Adorno treats *The Critique of Pure Reason* as an object that requires interpretation to bring its sedimented history to expression. By critiquing

³⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

the “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” in Kant’s work, Adorno lays the ground for his account of the subject-object relation that shapes the experience of suffering.

Kant set out to refute Hume’s deep skepticism about the scientific laws of causality by proving that knowledge of the world is possible if it meets certain conditions. First, it must adhere to the logic of non-contradiction to avoid arbitrary constraints. Second, it must provide new information about the world that extends beyond analytic judgements that contain the predicate in the subject by logical necessity. Proving the possibility of *a priori* synthetic statements would fulfill these two conditions. Kant met the first requirement through attributing *a priori* status to the structures of perceiving and knowing. In this way, objectivity is established through relying on the necessity of formal logic that is operative in the twelve categories (Principles of Understanding) and is independent from experience. The second requirement is fulfilled by making knowledge dependent on sense perception, thereby establishing a connection with material reality.

The formal laws of reason can only contribute to knowledge of the world when they are limited to the sensory content received through the *a priori* forms of time and space. The *a priori* structures are necessary to avoid reducing knowledge to the contingency of moment to moment experience. As Kant puts it, “without intuition concepts are empty; without concepts intuition is blind.”³⁷ The seamless fit between these two is necessary for synthetic *a priori* judgements.

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 92 (A 51, B 75).

To summarize, Kant could only prove the possibility of objective knowledge by limiting what we can know to phenomena that conform to the *a priori* structures of consciousness. The consequence of Kant's Copernican Turn is that objective knowledge is based on the inability to know things-in-themselves. The grounds for the possibility of experience requires the exclusion of *noumena* from knowledge production.

Kant's Schematism also has significant implications for subjectivity, and Adorno's critique of Kant is leveled most explicitly at the ideological presuppositions contained in the Kantian subject. Kant begins his argument with the commonsense notion that in order for a sensible intuition to occur, there must be something which receives it. Intuitions must be presented to a unified consciousness. Kant explains:

It must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me.³⁸

There must be a "pure original unchangeable consciousness"³⁹ that allows an object "to become an object for me."⁴⁰ However, this *a priori* logical subject is not to be confused with the empirical subject that appears through the form of inner, temporal intuition. The empirical self is no different from any other object of experience in that it is the phenomenal product of transcendental structures. The transcendental unity of apperception however, is part of the *a priori* conditions of experience and can therefore

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 152-153 (B 132).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136 (A 107).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156 (B 138).

not be the same as the objects it is a condition for. The significance of the purely logical subject for Kant's philosophy cannot be overestimated, for it is the lynchpin on which the rest of the transcendental structures depend. "The principle of apperception is the highest principle in the whole sphere of human knowledge."⁴¹ It is to this that Adorno turns his critical gaze.

In the preface to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno announces that he aims to "give the Copernican revolution an axial turn."⁴² As explained above, Kant's Copernican revolution consisted of showing that we can only know objects on the condition that they conform to our mode of cognition. In the Kantian object, there is no longer a clear distinction between ontology and epistemology because it is ontologically constituted through epistemological structures. The transcendental turn in Kant examines the conditions for the possibility of experience. It is important to note that the kind of experience Kant refers to is ordinary, everyday experience of objects, not a specific version of transformed consciousness. The distinction between false consciousness and critical consciousness is not relevant to Kant's project, and this is precisely what Adorno takes issue with. Kant claims to have found a satisfactory answer to his question for the conditions of ordinary experience, but Adorno argues it was a bad question to begin with, one that could only be generated from a false consciousness. The rest of Adorno's critique reveals the contradictions that inevitably arise when reality is analyzed through a reified consciousness. Instead of examining the conditions for ordinary experience,

⁴¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 154 (B 135).

⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx.

Adorno's axial turn takes this one step further by inquiring into the conditions for the possibility of the transcendental forms themselves. What he discovers is that the conditions of the conditions for the possibility of experience of objects include the objects that are constituted by the forms.

Kant claims the logical subject to be the condition of the empirical, psychological subject and so by definition cannot itself be an object of experience. Adorno maintains that the very concept of subjectivity is not possible without the empirical subject from which it is derived.⁴³ Kant's reliance on pronominal references in his description of the transcendental forms is not an arbitrary linguistic slip. Adorno explains:

If you completely detach this 'I think', that is, the pure transcendental subject, from the 'I' as actual fact, then not only does all talk of an 'I' lose all its meaning but it also becomes impossible to imagine what Kant means by 'context of consciousness' or 'synthesis' or 'memory' or 'reproduction.'⁴⁴

We are fooling ourselves if we believe that our capacity to envision a pure form of apperception is possible without the actual experience of an empirical unifying consciousness. In this sense, the transcendental subject becomes a representation of the material self. Kant's reliance on "naturalistic modes of speech,"⁴⁵ such as the use of the pronouns 'I' and 'we', reveals the unconscious presupposition of the psychological subject of which the transcendental self is a hypostasized abstraction.

⁴³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

This presents a crucial contradiction for a theory of cognition that posits the transcendental unity of apperception as the highest governing principle for the “objective condition of all knowledge.”⁴⁶ Kant makes the empirical world an indispensable part of knowledge, but not in the way he claims. The outside world may indeed be the starting point, in that something must be intuited outside of pure concepts in order to provide content for the structures of understanding, (and this certainly sets Kant apart from dogmatists such as Leibniz), but the conditions for something outside of thought to be given in the first place coincide with the structures of perception of the reified empirical self. Under these conditions, the object is stripped of any non-identical qualities with the subject, rendering the object powerless to resist subsumption under the concept. The object becomes a ‘fact’ of ordinary experience. However, Adorno argues that objects of ordinary experience are not the value neutral phenomena that Kant claims them to be, since they are always already products of a reified process of production. The conflation of fact (what is) and value (what ought to be), is a result of the way objects emerge through subjective structures of knowing. We are left with possible objects of experience that are “an abbreviated version of the given world, and something that is external to, and has nothing in common with, what there is to be known.”⁴⁷ Adorno remarks that perhaps Kant gained consolation from the concept of things-in-themselves as that “other which

⁴⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 156 (B 138).

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 129.

knowledge ultimately refers to”, but, he quips, “this consolation is of the kind that we generally feel at funerals.”⁴⁸

Because the parameters of transcendental logic concern the origin and possibility of knowledge, Adorno argues that the transcendental subject acts in a way that a purely logical subject cannot. It brings about objects of experience; it acts. Adorno writes:

And if I did not possess the consciousness of such an ‘I do’, then there would be no such thing as an ‘I think’ that accompanies all my representation’. It is in this circumstance that we see why the transcendental form depends on an element of content – however sublimated, however abstract – as the precondition of its possibility and vice versa.⁴⁹

Kant’s insistence that the ‘I think’ does not act because it is a logical condition ignores its dependence on the ‘I do’ of the empirical subject. How, Adorno asks, can anything be given to a subjective form that is completely emancipated from the empirical? The doing of the transcendental “I” and its thought forms presupposes that which it constructs, for “no purely logical construct could have any sort of experience.”⁵⁰

Kant might counter this argument by pointing out that Adorno has committed the categorical error addressed in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason:

Now it is, indeed, very evident that I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose in order to know any object, and that the determining self (the thought) is distinguished from the self that is to be determined (the thinking subject) in the same way as knowledge is distinguished from its object.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 129.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁰ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 35.

⁵¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 365 (A 402).

Kant goes on to explain, “Nevertheless there is nothing more natural and more misleading than the illusion which leads us to regard the unity in the synthesis of thoughts as a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts.”⁵² By Kant’s account, Adorno is confusing the transcendental unity of apperception with the object status of the empirical self. But Adorno contends that Kant is the one guilty of the fallacious reasoning critiqued in the Paralogisms. As a “profoundly hypostasized abstraction from the individual consciousness,”⁵³ the *a priori* structures of the subject are modeled on the characteristics of immutability, that which in ordinary experience is characterized as the enduring identity of the object. We cannot know things in themselves that are not represented through the structures of intuition and the categories – and this includes the transcendental subject, “for we can understand only that which brings with it, in intuition, something corresponding to our words.”⁵⁴ And yet we can only conceive of the transcendental structures because of the phenomena they make possible. “When it comes down to it, Kant had no right to speak undialectically of such things existing in themselves, of such fixed forms given to us in reality once and for all.”⁵⁵ This rigid dualism does not hold up under dialectical analysis because the contradictions it generates are rooted in a material reality that Kant does not acknowledge.

⁵² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 365 (A 402).

⁵³ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 35.

⁵⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 286 (A 277, B 333).

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 155.

In his oft-quoted statement that form would be empty without content and content would be blind without form, Kant acknowledges a necessary reciprocity, but by not taking it far enough into the underlying dialectical relation, he is caught in a reified account of the world where the knowing subject is disconnected from its material conditions. The true nature of *constitutens* and *constitutum* is that they are extreme poles that are irreducible to each other - so there is a dualism - but at their core they are mediated by their opposite. Kant is unwilling to accept these constitutive contradictions that go beyond the preformed static oppositions of form and content, or *noumena* and *phenomena*, that he presents in the *Critique*. Therefore, Adorno concludes, “We may say that a dialectical approach establishes itself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* against Kant’s will or behind his back.”⁵⁶

Critique of Origins

This analysis of Kant’s “crass dualism” is inseparable from Adorno’s critique of absolute first principles. He reads *The Critique of Pure Reason* as a “philosophy of origins” (*prima philosophia*), i.e., as a commitment to a causal, underlying unity. Adorno views *The Critique of Pure Reason* as exemplary of an intellectually rigorous philosophy that, despite Kant’s claims to the contrary, fails to acknowledge the futility of assuming the primacy of immediacy or unity. Kant locates an absolute underlying unity in the transcendent thing-in-itself,⁵⁷ because he cannot tolerate the contradictions of positing a

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 125.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

rigid separation of realms (form/content, subject/ object, *constitutens/constitutum*), and “being constantly compelled to recognize that one cannot exist without the other.”⁵⁸ Kant cannot tolerate the contradiction because he does not understand it dialectically and must resort to origins and first principles. The intolerance for contradiction, not only in Kant, but according to Adorno, in philosophy in general, is evidenced by the compulsion to “regress to an earlier stage and relapse into sheer immediacy.”⁵⁹ For Adorno, duality only becomes a problem when it is reified and cut-off from its dialectical and always historical conditions. This is what Adorno means when he claims that nothing escapes mediation. The answer does not lie in transcendence and the dualism this creates. “The only escape route from this impasse is the one we have been trying out here in a modest way, and that is to transcend it by advancing *through* this dualism, that is to say, by demonstrating that what is divided is *itself* mediated.”⁶⁰

The dualism that Kant creates between knowledge and the forms that make knowledge possible does not, as Kant proclaims at the end of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, mean that “the *critical* path alone is still open.”⁶¹ If we are to take seriously Kant’s question of, as Adorno puts it, “what constitutes what”,⁶² then we must engage in the dialectical path. Adorno stated that his axial turn on Kant’s Copernican revolution is

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 165.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 668 (A 856, B 884).

⁶² Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 159.

the only way to provide a corrective to the “fallacy of constitutive subjectivity”⁶³ that denies the material/historical conditions of its emergence. Only by recognizing the mediated nature of immediacy and the compensatory concept of absolute origins, is it possible to break through the concepts, experience, and social relations that have become so thoroughly reified as to appear – convincingly – as second nature.

Inevitability of the Given

Adorno’s critique of Kant has important implications for his analysis of culture. Because Adorno believed that any critique of society must necessarily involve a critique of knowledge, much of his philosophical work was a response to the prevailing philosophy of German idealism. Nowhere were the consequences of idealism more obvious than in the alienation of the individual in modern society and the widespread conviction that the reified relations between individuals and society was a form of freedom. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt in 1931, Adorno outlined his concern for the actuality of philosophy if it were to resist socially sanctioned forms of thought. A philosophy which severs its dependence on “the security of current intellectual and social trends,”⁶⁴ he stated, faces the threat of its own liquidation.

Therefore, a philosophy which permits new understandings of ourselves and the world

⁶³ “To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity – this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he came to trust his own mental impulses; now he did not wish to put it off any longer” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx).

⁶⁴ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 29.

necessarily sacrifices plausibility. “Truth is objective, not plausible.”⁶⁵ Adorno never deviated from this insight and consistently developed it in close conjunction with his philosophy of negative dialectics, cultural critique, and aesthetic theory, throughout his career.

By Adorno’s reading, Kant’s philosophy perpetuated the status quo because it did not sever its dependence on the rational commitments of society. The antinomies of bourgeois thought which derived from the material contradictions of capitalist society (wage labor and capital), and the refusal of bourgeoisie thinkers to acknowledge these constitutive contradictions, led to various rationalizations of the irrational. Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself is the most obvious example of this. Taking his cue from Lukács, Adorno claimed that the structure of commodity relations had invaded Kant’s thought to the core. The complete lack of mutual reciprocity between subject and object, and the indifference of the subject to any possible influence by the object, reflects the reified relations in bourgeois society between products of labor and workers, between workers, and through the alienation experienced within each human to herself. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno compares Kant’s dualistic model for criticizing reason with the structure of a production process. “The merchandise drops out of the machine just as his phenomena drop out of the cognitive mechanism, and where the material and its own definition are a matter of indifference vis-à-vis the profit, much as appearance is a matter of indifference to Kant, who had it stenciled.”⁶⁶ The subject as a logical, abstract

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.

necessity reflects the abstraction of exchange value replacing use value. And finally, the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself is not a universal condition of knowledge, but rather a historical manifestation of the fetishism/mystification of commodities. For Kant, knowledge is objective only when it is filtered through the subject and all hope for knowing things-in-themselves is relinquished. For Adorno, true knowledge is only possible through the consistent sense of non-identity between opposing elements. This requires a dialectical movement that has no need for and does not acquiesce to the compulsion of identity. In an economy and culture permeated by exchange relations, identitarian thinking is at minimum never neutral because it legitimizes the given, and more often than not, it perpetuates the conflation of fact and value that makes political resistance difficult to define and act upon. If there is no tension between what is and what ought to be, what need is there for resistance? If the resistance is directed towards this conflation, then what would its starting point consist of? Because everything is already affirmed just by existing, the starting point would have to be negative critique, saying ‘No’ to the seeming inevitability to the way things are.

Mourning and Memory

Kant already expressed, albeit unintentionally, an implicit form of saying ‘No’ through his construction of the *noumena* and its inaccessibility via the subject. Referring to this as the “Kantian Block”, Adorno explains that the consequences of limiting knowledge in a way that only allows us to understand what we can control, creates the unfortunate effect of instilling fear and dread of the unknown. The Kantian block presumes there is something real, perhaps more real than the world of appearances, but

we have no meaningful connection to it. “This is what is reflected in the doctrine of the block; it is a kind of metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget.”⁶⁷ Adorno states, “I believe that this is the deepest thing to be found in Kant.”⁶⁸ The block is an expression of the futility of constructing totalizing systems of reality. We are fundamentally blocked from fulfilling this kind of philosophical aspiration, but the failure of philosophy is actually the only form in which we can grasp the totality, through its impossibility. Adorno states that Kant’s “entire philosophy is actually nothing more than a form of stammering, it is a form of Dada, the attempt to say what actually cannot be said.”⁶⁹ This characterization of Kant’s philosophy explains Adorno’s meticulous attention to its ruptures and antinomies because he believes these reveal the heart of Kant’s thought.

The significance of Adorno’s interpretation of the Kantian block for this present work lies in the decisive importance of the role that memory serves. The phenomenon of reification and its ubiquitous manifestation comprises the majority of Adorno’s work. Adorno was in agreement with Lukács’ claim that all reification is a forgetting. There is something we should never forget – what is it? The non-conceptual part of the concept. What compels us to forget it? The concept. The particularity of the object is the non-conceptual part of the concept. All thought is guilty because the concept operates as if it

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

were not in a constitutive relation with the non-conceptual. The guilt of the concept is, strangely, the expression of the non-conceptual. It is the experiential content that cannot be exhausted by the concept. Due to the concept's classificatory nature, the only parts of the object that can be captured are those which are capable of being repeated in other objects. The particular resists subsumption under the concept and therefore literally does not count because its qualitative nature cannot be quantified without changing in nature. The crucial characteristic of the concept is that it compels us to forget that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder."⁷⁰ The object is constituted always in a social historical context and so its particularity as sedimented history is always changing through time. On the one hand, "...the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify."⁷¹ On the other hand, "the power of memory thrives because that identity is not possible."⁷² But the fact that identity is not possible does not, as in Kant's philosophy, mean that whatever resists identity is banished from a meaningful connection with the concept that by nature always identifies. As the consistent sense of non-identity, negative dialectics holds in tension that which we should never forget but are nevertheless compelled to forget. Kant's block mourns the conflation of fact and value that compels us to forget. This is why Adorno considers it to be the deepest thing found in Kant.

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 177.

The Fearlessly Passive Subject

Adorno offers a different account of the subject-object relation to counter Kant's transcendental subject. In place of constitutive subjectivity, Adorno proposes a "fearlessly passive subject". Rather than reducing objects to the conditionality of the subject, the fearlessly passive subject directs an open and "uncoercive gaze" towards the object. "Approaching knowledge of the object is the act in which the subject rends the veil it is weaving around the object. It can do this only where, fearlessly passive, it entrusts itself to its own experience."⁷³ The veil woven around the object is reification, and according to Adorno, "reification is a function of subjectivization."⁷⁴ The reified subject obstructs the non-conceptual part of the object so that "the more we appropriate, the more we find ourselves alienated from what we are really looking for, and what we do actually appropriate is only a kind of lifeless residue."⁷⁵ The forgetting of reification is forged through a memory cleansed of the socio-historical conditions from which the subject-object relation emerges. Kant's *a priori* structures of the subject cleanse objects of their singularity and historicity that would disqualify them as phenomena, and qualify them as legitimate objects of knowledge. The conditions for the possibility of experience diminish experience to a mirror of the subject's structures of knowing. Objects that contradict the subject's mirror of knowing are not only wrong but also irrelevant. The veil deadens the world, reducing it to a lifeless residue. The fearlessly passive subject

⁷³ Adorno, "Subject and Object." In *The Adorno Reader*, 146.

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 114.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 176. "That is to say, the more subjectivism there is, the more reification, and vice versa."

opens to the part of the object that resists subsumption. The experience that it entrusts itself to is the somatic and cognitive feeling of encountering the object's resistance.

Contradiction is the experience of the subject's limitation.

The price of knowledge in Kant's world is that we cannot really know anything beyond what already affirms the status quo. The *a priori* structures of the transcendental subject not only ground ordinary consciousness but preclude the possibility of a critical consciousness that could sense the constrictive conditions of perception and would have the capacity to resist the socially habituated impulse to only register identity. Ordinary perception and cognition is false consciousness because it can only ever say what has already been determined. Under these conditions, suffering is rationalized and rendered meaningful in ways that support the inevitability of the given. Contrary to Hume, who radically altered the concepts of self, causality, and object in such a way that he provoked Kant to awake from his dogmatic slumber and write *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's philosophy is committed to "producing with the enormous power of the productive imagination the world as it already exists."⁷⁶ The more the subject constitutes the object, the farther away the object moves. Instead of seeing this as a prison of its own making, idealism celebrates it.

What transcendentalism praised in creative subjectivity is the subject's unconscious imprisonment in itself. Its every objective thought leaves the subject harnessed like an armored beast in the shell it tries in vain to shed; the only difference is that to such animals it did not occur to brag of their captivity as freedom.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 179.

⁷⁷ Adorno, "Subject and Object." In *The Adorno Reader*, 145.

Kant's philosophy unwittingly expresses the suffering inherent in social reality and sanctions it by celebrating the subject's inability to break out of its socially constituted indifference to itself. This "awareness of a defect – of the limits of knowledge – becomes a virtue, so as to make the defect more bearable."⁷⁸

Adorno reminds us however, that the imprisonment eternalized through the transcendental subject and its rationalized rage towards the other, would not have secured such a firm ground in philosophy if there was not already a corresponding degree of its truth in reality. "The separation of subject and object is both real and illusory. True, because in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development."⁷⁹ The separation is real because the abstract relations of exchange that permeate social practices and relations have much in common with the transcendental subject, in that they determine the perception and behavior of empirical beings and detach them from "what they are for themselves."⁸⁰ Adorno compares the activity of the transcendental subject to labor and the world as its product or congealed labor. Congealed labor includes all objects of experience, which along with the empirical subject, appear to stand on their own. Like commodities, they appear unattached to their material-social conditions of production. "And the livelier the subject becomes, the deader the world becomes."⁸¹ In turn, the world dominates the

⁷⁸ Adorno, "Subject and Object." In *The Adorno Reader*, 145.

⁷⁹ Ibid.,139.

⁸⁰ Ibid.,141.

⁸¹ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 115.

subject by appearing as a reified and immutable reality which the subject is powerless to change.⁸² The separation of subject and object is not just an academic distinction but speaks to the actual alienation of the self, the relations between human beings, and between human beings and nature, that is the constitutive norm of exchange society. These reified relations “that we register daily in our own bodies”, is a prison of our own making that nonetheless confronts us with the “facade of objectivity, a second nature.”⁸³

However, the truth of the separation of subject and object is also its untruth. “False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant.”⁸⁴ The subject needs the object. “Once radically departed from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself.”⁸⁵ Once again, the possibility of conceiving the transcendental subject relies on the “unreflected experience of the enduring identical object.”⁸⁶ It is the goal of achieving objectivity that is so crucial in securing the transcendental subject as the foundation for all the other transcendental

⁸² In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reason overcomes myth only to eventually turn into myth itself. “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive” (Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4).

⁸³ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 137.

⁸⁴ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 139.

⁸⁵ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 140.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

forms that make knowledge (*a priori* synthetic judgments) possible. We can only know about these transcendental mechanisms of the subject because of the existence of phenomena or objects. “Actually, everything in the subject is chargeable to the object; whatever part of it is not objective will semantically burst the ‘is’.”⁸⁷ In short, the subject is not thinkable without the object. It cannot be reduced to the object, but the subject cannot exist outside of its relation to the object.

The separation between subject and object is an illusion because the hypostasization of the separation conceals the relation of mutual interdependency. The object needs the subject. Not only is the subject not thinkable without the object, but the object needs the mediation – not constitution - of the subject. This gets tricky, because Adorno’s focus on the primacy of the object sometimes makes it seem as if the object holds autonomous status. “Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject. To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject.”⁸⁸ Contrary to idealism, the most significant aspects of the object are those that resist constitution by the subject. It is not the case that we can only experience objects that fit seamlessly within the subjective structures of knowing, and it is important that if we take this constitutive function away then the noumenal status of objects is no longer necessary. When objects are wholly confined to appearing through the transcendental mechanisms of the subject, it makes sense to acknowledge that we can never really know

⁸⁷ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 148.

⁸⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 183.

the thing-in-itself. But as sedimented content, the object contains a history or social reality that is concealed and requires interpretive engagement with the subject and its concepts to come to expression. This requires a mutual reciprocity between subject and object. The necessity of dialectical mediation is the object's dependency on the subject. "The subject is the object's agent, not its constituent."⁸⁹ It is in this way that the object is not autonomous and separate from the subject, however, it takes a fearlessly passive subject to engage the object as its agent.

Adorno is critical of reified, diminished experience. The veil of reification can be countered with the primacy of the object, but it is important to remember that this is always done in the context of the dialectical movement between subject and object. As a corrective to the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity, the dialectical primacy of the object reveals the untruth of identity and the illusory nature of philosophical first principles. "The test of the object's primacy is its qualitative alteration of opinions held by the reified consciousness, opinions that go frictionlessly with subjectivism."⁹⁰ The fearlessly passive subject is able to entrust its experience with an object that qualitatively alters its perception. This is not an erasure of the subject – only a rationalized rage against the other would interpret it this way.

⁸⁹ Adorno, "Subject and Object." In *The Adorno Reader*, 146.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

Role of Suffering in Negative Dialectics

The force of negative dialectics lies in its uncompromising commitment to a negativity anchored in suffering. What makes dialectics more than a descriptive device is the fearlessly passive subject's attunement to suffering as its guiding force. Being an agent for the object entails an affective openness to somatic and cognitive dissonance. Since the subject is historically and socially oriented to perceive identity, dissonance poses a threat to its dominance and is either met with denial or rationalized rage. The instinct for self-preservation in a society governed by the law of exchange and the profit motive requires identitarian modes of being and a rationality that is only concerned with the means to achieve these ends. The capitalist organization of reality adheres to a logic – that of exchange – and in this sense, cannot be dismissed as irrational per se. But if these market principles pervasively govern how subjects think and behave, is there any element immanent to the current historical situation that can serve as a normative guide for how things *should* be?

This kind of question is highly problematic for Adorno, because he believed that the recognition of normative foundations would compromise the accuracy and truth of interpretation. Recall that for Adorno everything requires interpretation because every aspect of reality is mediated. This especially includes that which resists positive articulation and requires negative dialectical engagement to name what is absent or wrong. Adorno understood normative foundations to be inherently repressive because of their universalizing nature that overrides temporal activity. Norms, by definition, resist change. Their successful implementation demands an intolerance towards that which cannot be determined or understood by heteronomous standards. Critics find Adorno's

rejection of all norms seriously flawed because while some norms are obviously oppressive, judging them as such requires adherence to a normative position. How else would we know that a wrong has been committed?⁹¹ Prima facie it does seem like Adorno assumes a normative standpoint, as evidenced by his frequent use of moralizing language. He consistently relied on terms such as right/wrong, true/false, and good/evil. Just as Adorno criticized Kant for unwittingly demonstrating the truth of dialectical relation in his dualisms, it seems as if a normative approach grounds Adorno's work against his will or behind his back. And yet, Adorno insists that negative dialectics is devoid of positive norms. It is not necessary to have knowledge of the good in order to name the bad. Pain does not require knowledge of pleasure.

The only guide for critique in a world dominated by capitalist relations of exchange is the experience of suffering. Negative dialectics is an attunement to the somatic process of suffering contained in the object. "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth."⁹² This is perhaps the deepest thing to be found in Adorno. Negative dialectics is the attempt to give a voice to suffering that cannot be reduced to the concept but nevertheless is expressed through concepts and their inevitable failure to fully capture it. However, the somatic experience of suffering is not a transparent matter. The truth and untruth of suffering requires interpretation that is

⁹¹ Adorno is accused by his critics of lacking a normative standpoint that would justify critique and provide guidance for political action. Honneth states, "Early on, Adorno had founded the point of departure for his critique of society so decisively on Marx's critique of fetishism that he could no longer find any trace of an intramundane transcendence in the social culture of everyday life" (Honneth, *Disrespect*, 65).

⁹² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-18.

dialectically grounded in the social and physical body. “The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”⁹³ If dialectical interpretation does not remain rooted in the somatic ‘No’, then it loses connection with the non-conceptual experience that drives thought to think against itself. Without this, philosophy is left with no other choice but to endorse a wrong world. “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.”⁹⁴ Suffering is the extremity that both drives and eludes the concept.

It is also inseparable from the body. But neither bodily suffering or its conceptual meaning can claim the status of a first or original principle so consistently critiqued by Adorno, as this would presuppose a rigid opposition between body and mind. Adorno contends that “the controversy about the priority of mind and body is a pre-dialectical proceeding. It carries on the question of a “first””.⁹⁵ Suffering is always mediated by our concept of it and our concepts are always mediated by the material conditions from which suffering arises. Unlike positive normative standards, suffering can only tell us that something is wrong but does not provide an account of the good by which we can judge why this wrong. Not all suffering points to social ills, which is why dialectical interpretation is necessary to discern whether an experience of pain is the result of a wounded ego or a reaction to a wrong world. It most definitely does not determine

⁹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

political action to correct that wrong. What it does offer is an empirical, immanent point within social reality from which critique can emerge.

There is a demand that suffering makes on us that does not emanate from a positive alternative. When Adorno speaks of the new categorical imperative to think and act in ways that will ensure Auschwitz or anything similar to it does not happen again, he is countering the ahistorical formal principle of Kant's categorical imperative. In rethinking his claim that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz, Adorno pondered whether the real question, especially for survivors plagued with guilt, should concern the possibility of living after Auschwitz when "mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz."⁹⁶ When this coldness feels far more basic than abhorrence of the suffering it causes, there is no normative account of justice or freedom that can penetrate it. The discrepancy between abstract and disembodied concepts of the good and the concrete experience of suffering that they cannot speak to marks a contradiction - a somatic and cognitive dissonance – that exceeds the boundaries of normative critique.

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum - bodily, because it is not the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 363.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

Adorno concludes that the evil perpetrated through Auschwitz was inconceivable to Kant who failed to see that the problem with evil is not that human beings do it, but that there is no alternative world where “men would no longer need to be evil.”⁹⁸ Adorno continues, “The secret of his philosophy is the unthinkability of despair.”⁹⁹ Auschwitz is proof that identity is death, so in a world where subjectivities, bodies, work, relationships, and happiness, are intimately bound up with the principles of identity and exchange, the only meaningful act is to say ‘No’. Becoming attuned to contradiction and turning away from identitarian impulses requires a fearlessness of what is stake and an unwavering trust in the bodily experience of suffering.

To see the suffering for what it is instead of dismissing the body’s response to a wrong world, to understand the nature of its concealment instead of normalizing it, are the tasks of negative critique. The ‘No’ of negative dialectics offers something that is undervalued by affect theorists but that is crucially necessary, hard won, and perhaps the most that can be hoped for in a life lived in capitalist society: respite from the given. For some, this may not be enough. For Massumi, Adorno’s negativism perpetuates suffering because it does not offer an alternative way of being, as affect does. Adorno contends that critique is transformative because it changes how individuals relate to their suffering. “That it is spoken, that distance is thus won from the trapped immediacy of suffering, transforms suffering just as screaming diminishes unbearable pain.”¹⁰⁰ Negative critique

⁹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 219. “Das Geheimnis seiner Philosophie ist die Unausdenkbarkeit der Verweilung” (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 378).

⁹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 385.

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 117.

requires both a somatic and dialectical attunement to pain, and it is the only thing that stands between a life determined by a calculus of exchange (the “damaged life” described in *Minima Moralia*) and a life that does not seamlessly fit into quantified relations of domination. In response to critics like Massumi who see dialectics as the reduction of life to the narrow parameters of logical contradiction and as the inability to see difference in non-contradictory terms, Adorno argues that as long as the structure of consciousness strives for identity, difference will always appear in terms of contradiction.¹⁰¹ Negative dialectics exposes the untruth of identity, not through taking a standpoint, but by invoking the consistent sense of non-identity that lurks behind every totalizing tendency.

Aesthetic Theory: Dissonance and Suffering

Given that Adorno’s critique of philosophical idealism presents the theoretical framework for his critique of society, what can his aesthetic theory add to this? The concepts of non-identity, negative critique, dialectical interpretation, and the primacy of suffering are essential to both negative dialectics and Adorno’s aesthetic theory. The difference is one of emphasis. Adorno’s analysis of aesthetic experience foregrounds the emotional engagement of dialectical interpretation in a way that critiquing Kant does not. Adorno understood music to be the most non-conceptual of the art forms and thus a phenomenon that could explicitly evoke a stronger somatic element of experience that the fearlessly passive subject entrusts itself to. But music could also be a formidable vehicle

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5-6.

for the ideological affirmation of exchange society. Music can carry all the opacity and abstract fungibility as any commodity, and as a commodity of the culture industry, it induces the kind of pleasure that “promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget.”¹⁰² Its affective power is widely desired, and even when it is not, its presence in everyday life is nearly inescapable. For Adorno, there is no difference between the experience of pleasure and consent to the status quo. “To be pleased means to say Yes.”¹⁰³ However, while music promotes the pleasure that causes one “to forget suffering even where it is shown,”¹⁰⁴ it also offers the potential to remember, not nostalgically but critically, the reality of human suffering and the ways that it is rationalized by social norms.

Much of Adorno’s philosophy was inspired early on by his study of music. His analysis of tonal and atonal music produced a theory of dissonance as memory. Dissonance is the moment of negativity in music that expresses the untruth of harmonic norms and the whole. By exploring the role of dissonance in the composition and consumption of music, Adorno exposes the social-historical nature of norms and the unfreedom perpetuated by them when their temporal nature is concealed. There are no natural laws of music that speak to an ahistorical human essence. There are only configurations of notes that assert specific relations between parts and whole. Because musical pieces are never completely separate from material and social conditions, the

¹⁰² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 142.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

relation between parts and whole will, to varying degrees, reflect the moral norms of society. The untruth of an artwork lies in its expression of musical norms as natural and characterized by the impossibility of alternative configurations. From this side, dissonance only exists to be resolved. The promise of resolution with the whole is fulfilled through narrow conditions that predetermine the kind of dissonance that is resolved before it even arises. The parts are predetermined by the whole. The truth of an artwork negates the myth of totalizing systems by showing how “the whole is the false.”¹⁰⁵ Adorno explains that “the question posed by every artwork is how, under the domination of the universal, a particular is in any way possible.”¹⁰⁶ Compositions based on this question offer the possibility of dissonance that does not require a ready-made solution. They have the potential to destabilize, even if momentarily, the unchallenged norm of a harmonious whole and allow for another kind of dissonance. Revealing the truth about the repressive nature of musical norms also calls into question the truth and falsehood of the freedom promised through harmonic resolution of the social whole.

The dissonance experienced in listening to music provides a concrete example of somatic responses that can be subjected to negative dialectical analysis. The operative assumption is that when harmonic conventions are breached, dissonance is experienced as a form of suffering, and since suffering is the anchor for dialectical analysis music provides the opportunity to examine emotional and cognitive entanglements with norms and their contradictions. The musical composition is an object; like all objects, it emerged

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 351.

out of and is an expression of social-historical conditions. Its sensuous nature emphasizes its enigmatic character which all objects have, but the overtly sensuous side of music makes its need for interpretation more pronounced. Art has the potential to heighten our capacity to be affected, but this capacity depends on the fearless passivity of the subject. Adorno argues that how we relate to true musical works (not culture industry products) is the prototype for cognition that assumes the primacy of the object. How the subject composes, performs, and listens to music could be thought of as a form of praxis.

To the extent that subject is for its part something mediated, praxis rightly understood is what the object wants: praxis follows the object's neediness. But not by the subject adapting itself, which would merely reinforce the heteronomous objectivity. The neediness of the object is mediated via the total societal system; for that reason it can be determined critically only by theory.¹⁰⁷

Tonality and Dirty Notes

The truth-content of a musical composition requires dialectical negotiation that is grounded in the subject's somatic response. This section explores Adorno's critique of tonality as the false reconciliation of the given world. The effect that tonal music aims to produce requires a form of subjectivity that cannot tolerate contradiction and craves the pleasure derived from recognition. Adorno's essay on jazz outlines how a musical genre that proclaims to challenge easy harmonic resolutions further solidifies the reign of tonality. The true break with tonality does not occur until Schoenberg's atonal compositions.

Nowhere are the consequences of identity thinking more evident than in the disruption of pleasure that dissonance creates in listening to tonal music. When

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Practice." In *Critical Models*, 265.

dissonance occurs, one of two things can happen. The sharper the dissonance, the stronger the pleasure experienced upon its resolution. To the listener who is accustomed to predigested music, dissonance that resists resolution will sound like noise. In either case, there is a sensuous, non-conceptual reaction. In a society constituted through exchange relations and in which the value of objects is determined by their fungibility rather than their singularity, dissonance plays a dialectical role of both enforcing and challenging the rationality of the totalizing system but can also be potentially disruptive in its revelatory value.

All pop music is composed within the musical system of tonality. The structure of this system is based on a dominant tonal center that pre-determines the chord structure, melodic developments, and forms of harmonic dissonance and resolution. If a piece is written in the key of C, the degree of harmony in every note is determined through its degree of deviation from the major scale of C. F-sharp, for instance creates considerably more dissonance than the perfect fifth interval of the note G (and there are a finite set of resolutions pre-determined by the relations of the seven notes in the key of C or any key). But F-sharp in another key, say D major, is part of the triadic major chord and does not produce significant harmonic tension. All of this is to say that any song composed within the tonal system – always a closed system - has already been written. There is a large but finite number of allowable harmonic combinations which adhere to the single rule of creating harmonic tension in order to resolve it. Notes that do not participate in this formula are heard as nonsensical noise, equivalent to a small child blindly pounding on the piano keys (which is how Schoenberg's music sounded to many).

The successful commodification of music requires that the mollifying nature of tonality be masked by the production of pleasurable effects. Above all, the economic success of tonality depends on the endless production of techniques which distract the listener from the repeated dominance of the externally imposed whole over the parts. Exposure of this truth could transform the pleasurable experience of music as we know it into intolerable mind-numbing sounds. The standardization that is synonymous with the tonality of pop music, is supposedly countered by jazz and its claims to resist tonal norms. But what jazz really offers, according to Adorno, is much more insidious than pop music, because it only offers a pseudo-individualism which does not sever its obedience to the principle of the pleasure industry to “be always new and always the same.”¹⁰⁸

The intrigue of jazz is sustained by its professed individuality and subversive harmonies that have purportedly never before been played. It is the avant-garde that transcends the monotonous harmonies of pop music and avoids the starchy bourgeois pretensions of classical music. But the formulas remain the same. They are “kaleidoscopically mixed into ever new combinations”¹⁰⁹ without affecting in the slightest the overall tonal scheme. The schemas for creating and dissolving tension are every bit as predictable as the musical genres it claims to break out of: the 2-5-1 chord progression constitutive of most jazz standards, the extensive improvisation solos which, no matter how far they play out from the tonal center, as an “outburst of untrammled

¹⁰⁸ Adorno, *Prisms*, 126.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

subjectivity,¹¹⁰ always return home. In fact, the intense feelings of elation described by jazz connoisseurs is produced in direct proportion to the increasingly prolonged dissonance during the solo session. “Jazz, like everything else in the culture industry, gratifies desires only to frustrate them at the same time.”¹¹¹

It is not a coincidence, Adorno argues, that the syncopation characteristic of jazz was derived from the military march and its totalitarian function. And yet, jazz continues to present itself as one of the most innovative forms of music. “Anyone who allows the growing respectability of mass culture to seduce him into equating a popular song with modern because of a few false notes squeaked by a clarinet; anyone who mistakes a triad studded with ‘dirty notes’ for atonality, has already capitulated to barbarism.”¹¹² All of this is amplified peripherally by the cult of jazz personalities – movies are made about Charlie Parker’s struggle with heroin addiction and the relation this had to his music and creative capacity, much ink has been spilled on Miles Davis’s prima donna stage, or Bill Evans’ ‘whiteness’. These narratives enforce the lie that jazz offers a revolutionary form of music because they distract from the fact that “sociologically, jazz has the effect of strengthening and extending, down to the very physiology of the subject, the acceptance of a dreamless-realistic world in which all memories of things not wholly integrated have been purged.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Adorno, *Prisms*, 126.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 127.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 130.

Adorno observes that all of the seemingly non-conformist elements of jazz mentioned above had already been discovered and developed by serious music since Brahms. The contingent nature of these components in jazz, evidenced by the fact that they can be rearranged in no particular order, reflects the arbitrary nature of oppressive social structures. The jazz components do not have an internal organization – “no single measure follows from the logic of the musical progression.”¹¹⁴ They have no memory, just as the social structures are cut off from their historical origins, presenting themselves as second nature. The fungibility of notes in the tonal system coincides seamlessly with a society based on exchange relations. Adorno refers to jazz as a symbolic castration. It offers a promise of freedom in exchange for ascetic denial so that jazz can meet the manufactured needs of the culture industry instead of the needs of unfree subjects. The mass deception of pop music and jazz reduces the critic’s discourse to likes and dislikes, masking the culture industry’s logic of assuring people that they know what they like and hiding the fact that they only like what they know.

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.¹¹⁵

Classical music relies on the same tonal mechanisms of identity thinking as jazz and pop music. The important distinction for Adorno is not between high and low art, which typically refers to classical and pop music, but rather between music that is

¹¹⁴ Adorno, *Prisms*, 124-125.

¹¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 139.

composed and listened to as a commodity verses music that reflects on its sedimented history of musical norms and the “voice of the nonidentical – of everything that refuses to be submerged.”¹¹⁶ Classical music can fall into the former category just as easily as pop music or jazz, depending on the composition’s relation between whole and part. The sonata form ensures just enough dissonance to generate repeated sensations of relief without confusion or the need for thought. The fact that everything is based on the formula of harmonic tension and resolution, regardless of the differences between musical genres, ensures a comfortable predictability. We’ve heard it all before even though we are told that we haven’t. But when you hear a purportedly ‘new’ pop song, a ‘new release’, it is not uncommon and does not require a sophisticated knowledge of music theory, to finish humming the tune before it is played or to at least hum a note in the scale that will inevitably follow the present moment in a chord progression. We know these formulas even if we think we do not. And there is great comfort to be experienced in this process, a pleasure derived from humming along with a tune. Pleasure is the culture industry’s goal. “To be pleased means to say Yes.”¹¹⁷ The harmonic conflicts that produce tension will always be resolved, providing a sense of ordered unity that cannot be achieved with the real conflicts of material life created by the existing social relations of production.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Adorno, *Sound Figures*, 196.

¹¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144.

¹¹⁸ The same logic applies to movie plots and narrative structures in novels. Watching the 200th episode of NCIS after a long day of work is only pleasurable under the conditions of alienating work that creates the desire for the comfort of entertainment that requires a non-thinking engagement.

Schoenberg

Schoenberg's twelve-tone music presented a truly new musical innovation because it had no structural dependency or allegiance to the system of tonality. His early atonal compositions challenged the widely held belief amongst composers, musicians, and audiences that tonal structures expressed the natural laws of music. But there was nothing natural, he declared, about limiting music to the indifference of standardized forms that remained unaffected by the content they subsumed. However, the conditions which required the inner logic of the composition to determine its direction and form were more aligned with Adorno's conception of the primacy of the object. Schoenberg's atonal music was an exemplary instance of the whole being determined by the internal organization of the object, not by external forms indifferent to the object. The internal organization of twelve-tone composition expressed its truth free of external imposition, thereby banishing the bourgeois indifference of form to content.

It is a significant point for Adorno's dialectical approach to music that twelve-tone composition did not appear out of nowhere. To those cultural and music critics who would dismiss Schoenberg's work as 'experimental' Adorno replies there is more tradition present in his works than in those which overtly claim to be loyal to tradition. Using Freud's concept of latent and manifest content he explains why Schoenberg's atonal compositions, despite their rejection of traditional musical forms, are liberating the latent structure buried under two hundred years of manifest content. Adorno claims that the replacement of harmony and melody with polyphony is making good on the unfulfilled promise of Classicism. As we have seen, all phenomena is dialectically

enmeshed with its historical material conditions. The difference between a reified and dialectical engagement is the openness to memory which only a fearlessly passive subject can enact.

Schoenberg's compositions emerged from the decaying bourgeois forms of music, evidenced already in Beethoven's later works and Wagner's chromaticism. The prolonged dissonance and untidy resolutions in the development section of Beethoven's later sonatas signaled the exhaustion and eventual futility of tonal forms. This set a precedent for Wagner's extensive use of chromatic scales which never reached full resolution, but provided just enough harmonic traces to allow the audience familiar reference points. The impact of the famed Tristan chord from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* opera, and the conspicuous refusal to resolve it conventionally cannot be underestimated. It is reported that the orchestra commissioned to perform the piece was initially unable to rehearse it because it lacked any of the familiar criteria that would help them evaluate the correctness of its performance. In this sense Wagner's music was, at times, revolutionary. What ultimately impeded the chance to follow through with its revolutionary beginnings was Wagner's belief, influenced by Schopenhauer, that music was an expression of a subjective, irrational truth grounded in the eternal realm of spirit. This is in direct opposition with Schoenberg's assertion that the truth expressed in music had to be objective truth because it was born from the music itself.

One of the implications of this conception of music was that the truth of the composition could in no way rely on legitimation from the audience. Schoenberg insisted that aesthetic validity not be determined by the audience's reaction. It is not difficult to see the appeal this had for Adorno, who had rejected a crucial aspect of Lukács' critique

that had made truth dependent on a collective proletarian consciousness. Schoenberg's compositions exemplify Adorno's dictum that "truth is objective, not plausible." Unlike the musical commodities of the culture industry, designed to produce pleasurable effects in order to satiate the listener's false needs, the truth-value of a musical composition for Schoenberg is not subject to the audience's experience. Adorno explains, "Schoenberg's music honors the listener by not making any concession to him."¹¹⁹ Because there is no pre-existing external reference point by which the musical piece can be interpreted, the only path to engagement with Schoenberg's compositions was through a concentrated attentiveness to the inner movement and logic of the work. The act of listening in this way is already subversive for it "sins against the division of life into work and leisure."¹²⁰ Adorno acknowledges that Schoenberg's music requires the opposite of the psychological regression needed for the consumption of conventional music, and although this restricts the scale of influence, Schoenberg's compositions offer a rare opportunity to engage in praxis. "It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis."¹²¹

Adorno later criticized the devolvement of twelve-tone composition into a closed system, serving as a warning that he would repeat throughout his life that revolutionary movements are not invulnerable to the reifying processes of the culture industry. In the end, twelve-tone composition became nothing more than the "bad heir of tonality."

¹¹⁹ Adorno, *Prisms*, 154.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Adorno warns, “to be true to Schoenberg is to warn against all twelve-tone schools.”¹²²

Schoenberg’s complicity with this process began with his declaration of the possibility of the twelve-tone series to create large forms. The identity of the octave - the only remnant of tonality allowed within the twelve-tone structure – was increasingly used to this effect, defeating the initial revolutionary impulse of developing the composition from within the inner logic of tone rows. By elevating it to the status of a universal objective, Schoenberg subordinated the twelve-tone method to external categories. When Schoenberg’s followers continue to employ twelve-tone composition in this way, they achieve nothing more than an expression of their “impotent longing for security.”¹²³ The false comforts of the culture industry would fill in the rest.

There are a few final points on Adorno’s aesthetic theory and analysis of Schoenberg’s music worth considering because of the issues it raises for cultural critique. Adorno’s writing has been dismissed by some critics as obscure and elitist. But for Adorno, the essay was as much a dialectical practice as twelve-tone composition.¹²⁴ His writing practice attempts to develop thoughts differently from traditional discursive logic through the refusal to rely on first principles. Although this results in dense and

¹²² Adorno, *Prisms*, 166.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹²⁴ In *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Susan Buck-Morss compares the inner logic of Adorno’s writing to the twelve-tone movements of inversion and retro-inversion. However, she also considers the possibility that Adorno’s philosophy may have succumbed to a similar fate of reification. Whether this is an accurate assessment of his work does not diminish the relevance of Adorno’s larger point that his aesthetic theory could not be separated from his critical theory of negative dialectics.

seemingly conflicting prose, this is consistent with Adorno's self-reflexive concept of critique. Just as the singular value of each note cannot be realized until it is released from its subjection to external forms, human beings cannot be free when the words that they use are not free. Adorno argues that "the innermost form of the essay is heresy."¹²⁵ Whatever in the object is rendered invisible by thought, is expressed by the guilt of thought through the negative work of constellating concepts, not through first principles.

Truth and Untruth of the Artwork

"The comprehension of an artwork as a complex of truth brings the work into relation with its untruth, for there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment."¹²⁶ The untruth of the artwork is enacted through its perpetuation of ideology. In the case of music, tonal harmony presents the ideology of a unified whole that holds no place for dissonance unless it is experienced in terms of resolution, effectively obstructing any serious consideration of alternatives. The untruth of ideology becomes increasingly solidified with each repetition and expansion into different aspects of life. The relation between truth and untruth in any given phenomenon is never transparent because each dimension emerges through the other. Untruth moves dialectically. While it is untrue that there are no alternatives to the prevailing ideology expressed in the artwork, it is true that this is the prevailing socially constructed worldview. Just as the relevance of each note is determined by its relation to

¹²⁵ Adorno, "The Essay as Form." In *The Adorno Reader*, 110.

¹²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 347.

a tonal center, the value of each object consists of its fungibility within capital relations. In this sense, the falseness of ideology is its truth. This is the historical moment in which the artwork participates. It is always dependent on the technical, material, and musical norms imbedded within a particular social context. An artwork is true to the extent that it points to the non-absolute nature of these norms. It illuminates its own falsity that is concealed through the appearance of immediacy, its conflation of what is with what ought to be.

This tension between the truth and untruth makes the artwork an enigma rather than a mystery because it requires interpretation and concentrated engagement rather than euphoric transcendence, and dialectical struggle in place of escapism. The musical composition embodies all of these aspects because it is a sedimented object. "All forms of music...are sedimented contents. In them survives what is otherwise forgotten and is no longer capable of speaking directly. What once sought refuge in form subsists anonymously in form's presence."¹²⁷ The musical norms that constitute it are historically constructed; insofar as they are employed to advance the kind of false unity that conceals underlying contradictions in society, they enact the repressive function of norms. The moment of non-identity exposes their historical nature. Non-identity is the expressed refusal to forget that something is being forgotten and unable to come to expression. Dissonance can be the expression of this failure. Dissonance is memory. But this must be understood in terms of reified consciousness that forgets the truth of suffering. That is, rather than experiencing dissonance as obstructive to an otherwise fulfilling aesthetic

¹²⁷ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 37.

experience, we are faced with the broken promise of happiness that dissonance reveals. The untruth of harmony is exposed, negatively, through dissonance as a crack in the unified whole hinting that what is perhaps is not what should be. The negativity of dissonance is no more and no less than that. This is a significant point, because it goes against readings of Adorno that attribute a normative foundation to his work, or that judge the lack of normative foundations as a fatal deficit. The latter renders negative dialectics irrelevant for contemporary critique; the former makes it indistinguishable from other forms of social criticism. There is a third reading which attributes a weak foundationalism, but this meets the same problems that any attribution of a foundation evokes, which is a denial of a certain groundlessness that dialectical movement embodies. What singularly characterizes negative dialectics from other forms of cultural critique is the ability to name what is wrong without relying on positive criteria for what is right. The dissonant artwork refuses to participate in the unfreedom and forces of domination that lull the senses into contentment. Adorno writes, “Art is the ever broken promise of happiness,”¹²⁸ and therefore, “art breaks its promise in order to stay true to it.”¹²⁹

Adorno stated that *The Philosophy of New Music* was a “detailed excursus” to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The fact that music can provide a way to think about the nature of suffering specific to society attests to the ubiquity of exchange relations and the reifying relations that emerge from this in all aspects of life. Adorno writes:

How fundamentally disturbed life is today if its trembling and its rigidity are reflected even where no empirical need reaches, in a sphere that people suppose

¹²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 136.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

provides sanctuary from the pressures of the harrowing norm, and that indeed only redeems its promise by refusing what they expect of it.¹³⁰

Radical modern music breaks the promise of happiness made by the culture industry; its dissonance illuminates the futility of such a promise. Because this does not serve the culture industry's mission to induce pleasure and forgetfulness, society has no use for new music and it takes on an increasingly obscure role that is commonly viewed as evidence of its meaninglessness for society. But it is precisely this lack of a meaningful role which points to the impossibility of unreified experience. Adorno states that "the isolation of radical modern music is due not to its asocial content but to its social content."¹³¹ Strangely, its uselessness becomes its purpose, albeit a negative one. The tension between it and the givenness of the world lends a voice to the suffering of unfreedom masked as pleasure. New music "has taken all the darkness and guilt of the world on itself. All its happiness is in the knowledge of unhappiness; all beauty is in denial of the semblance of the beautiful."¹³²

New music exposes the whole as false and demands a mode of listening that does not fetishize the status quo. If it lacks familiar tonal handles (primacy of melody, standard chord progressions, etc.), the sensuous aspect of unapproachability – the music's "prickliness", may provoke frustration, anger, or a defensive indifference. It will not cultivate pleasure. But how do we know if negative affective reactions are based on the

¹³⁰ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 5.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 102.

fear of encountering a phenomenon that resists the socially sanctioned ways of being on which much of our survival depends or are negative reactions based on personal taste?

The answer, Adorno argues, can only be deciphered through dialectical analysis.

Dialectical interpretation reveals the sedimented history in the object, which includes the emotional reactions it evokes.

The furious listener who wrote his radio station after hearing a performance of Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge* saying that the piece had reminded him of atom bombs, whereas what he wanted from art was relaxation, exaltation, and edification, understood more in his subaltern repressiveness than the sophisticated connoisseur who simply takes note of such music and weighs up its merits in comparison to those of other products.¹³³

The subaltern repressiveness of this listener bears witness to despair. Although the object reproduces social structures of oppression, it may also resist that reproduction by giving voice to the antagonistic experience of unacknowledged contradictions that are the quiet driving force of society.

The subject's fearlessly passive engagement with a musical composition, a philosophical work, or ordinary everyday objects can give voice to the social and historical experiences that become embedded in the object as its process of coming to be. This is why interpreting artworks and critiquing the manipulations of the culture industry cannot be accomplished through cold dialectical analysis. It must also rely on affective engagement with the object. Art has the potential to qualitatively expand affective capacity, to challenge and stretch our capacity to be affected. Adorno's love of music made it the most accessible object for him to explore the primacy of the object. It is true

¹³³ Adorno, *Sound Figures*, 194.

that Adorno thought the non-conceptual form of music could invoke alternative ways of engaging sense perception and thought. Although I am sympathetic with readings of Adorno that claim he confined any hope for resistance solely to the encounter with new (atonal) music,¹³⁴ I believe that grounding this potential in suffering considerably expands the range of phenomena that offer potential for respite from reified experience far beyond music.

I therefore do not mean that people should become merely cold rationalists and shouldn't have affects and passions any more. On the contrary, if they have more affects and more passions, they will have less prejudice. I would like to say, if they allow themselves more of their affects and passions, if they do not once again repeat in themselves the pressure that society exerts upon them, then they will be far less evil, far less sadistic, and far less malicious than they sometimes are today.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Honneth writes, "Critical Theory's turn to Adorno's historico-philosophical negativism finally marked the historical point at which the endeavor to link critique back to social history failed completely. In the reflections contained in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the only remaining place for something like intramundane transcendence was in the experience of modern art" (Honneth, *Disrespect*, 65).

¹³⁵ Adorno, "Appendix 1: Discussion of Professor Adorno's Lecture: The Meaning of Working Through the Past." In *Critical Models*, 299-300.

CHAPTER THREE: AFFECT THEORY AND PERCEPTION

Introduction

At the beginning of Massumi's groundbreaking book on affect, *Parables of the Virtual*, he states that a theory of affect aims "to put matter unmediatedly back into cultural materialism along with what seemed most directly corporeal back into the body."¹³⁶ The key to doing this, he explains, is to rethink the body in terms of passage and movement rather than positionality. He then states: "When it comes to grappling productively with paradoxes of passage and position, the philosophical precursor is Henri Bergson."¹³⁷ In the nearly two decades that have passed since this writing, Massumi has drawn from a diverse range of thinkers, including neuroscientists, artists, other affect theorists, and philosophers. However, it is the influence of Bergson's legacy that continues to function as a driving force behind certain aspects of affect theory that play a critical role in the conflicting theories of affect and negative dialectics. Massumi draws substantially from Bergson's thought regarding the paradoxes of passage and how Bergson works through these paradoxes by developing an ontology of time and memory. It is from these concepts that Massumi is able to build an argument for affect as the

¹³⁶ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 4.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

source of singularity and change that he contends is missing in cultural theory, particularly in the approaches of social constructivism and ideology critique.

Massumi's conclusion that critique always "arrives too late" to effect real change is based on his interpretation of Bergson's theory of the becoming of time (the paradox of passage). The first section of this chapter explores the implications for conceptualizing time as becoming and movement, emphasizing its primordial status as the source of life and its ontological priority over space (paradox of positionality). Bergson posits that the deepest philosophical conundrums can be solved by thinking in terms of time instead of space. I then examine how Massumi uses this account of time to establish the non-mediated and autonomous nature of affect that he claims can fight neoliberalism on its own terrain.

Massumi on the Becoming of Time

Bergson's Concept of Time and Space

Bergson states that "a philosopher worthy of the name has never said more than a single thing: and even then it is something he has tried to say, rather than actually said."¹³⁸ For Bergson, thinking in terms of time instead of space constituted his "single thing". His theories of memory, perception, subjectivity, and change are attempts to continuously reformulate this distinction between time as the primacy of movement, and space as a reaction to time. Real movement, he argued, must be understood in a non-spatialized way. Movement should be thought of in terms of a pure time that is

¹³⁸ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 91.

immeasurable and indivisible; the direct experience of time is duration (*durée*), an irreversible becoming that cannot be repeated. Time is pure heterogeneity. Space presupposes a homogenous medium in which the world consists of discontinuous, motionless parts. The conventional approach to time is spatialized because it can be quantified and reduced to repeatable units. Quantifying time in this way is “a kind of reaction against that heterogeneity which is the very ground of our experience.”¹³⁹ In other words, for Bergson, the becoming of time is the primordial ground of existence. “If movement is not everything, it is nothing.”¹⁴⁰ The idea that movement has ontological priority over space, positionality, and extension, constitutes what Massumi refers to as the “Bergsonian revolution that turns the world on its head.”¹⁴¹ Massumi writes: “The problem is no longer to explain how there can be change given positioning. The problem is to explain the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process.”¹⁴² This radical insight requires a certain “miraculation”, according to Massumi. Affect theory is based on this reversal of the relation between movement and positionality where what has traditionally been posited as secondary is now primary. The ceaseless unfolding of time cannot be understood or experienced through the immobility of space, and yet time is usually presented in terms of stable, quantified units that can be manipulated for practical purposes. The pragmatic spatialization of time is not in itself a problem, as this is

¹³⁹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 121.

¹⁴¹ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

necessary for everyday functioning. The real issue is mistaking space for time so completely that the primordial becoming of time is glossed over and does not factor into philosophical or existential matters.

According to Bergson, the source of the most tenacious philosophical problems can be traced to a confusion between space and time. Traditional dualisms such as mind/body, free will/determinism, and knowledge as representation or immediate experience, are the result of mistaking space for time, of privileging quantitative change over qualitative change. Spatial distinctions involve differences of degree or number which assumes the simultaneous existence of mutually external objects. The conditions that allow for the possibility of counting and measurement consist of a motionless “reality without quality.”¹⁴³ Bergson uses the example of counting sheep to illustrate his point. Although each sheep possesses qualities that uniquely sets it apart from the others, in order to be counted, only the common element in each sheep is retained. Ignoring the qualitative differences between individual sheep is a necessary step to ensure the previous sheep remain - even if only in an ideal space in the mind – so they may be set side by side in external relation and counted. This juxtaposition of separate sheep forms what Bergson calls a discrete or numerical multiplicity, a simultaneous existence of discrete entities that can only occur within the homogenous medium of space.

While the homogenous medium of space necessitates that objects with identical traits and well-defined external boundaries remain, simultaneously, divided by spatial intervals, time is processual - it passes. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson describes the

¹⁴³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 95.

nature of inner experience to elucidate the concept of time as the primacy of movement and becoming. Psychic states, for instance, are singular experiences that cannot be repeated without changing.¹⁴⁴ Because they are not stripped of their qualitative differences and separated out in space, they form what Bergson refers to as a confused multiplicity. A discrete multiplicity can be counted, but a confused multiplicity results from a lack of intervals between states of consciousness and a lack of immobility that would enable juxtaposition. Bergson explains that “states of consciousness, even when successive, permeate one another, and in the simplest of them the whole soul can be reflected.”¹⁴⁵ A succession in space is constituted by abstract, numerical, distinctions which rely on a homogenizing process of reducing material objects to their identical elements. A succession in time cannot accommodate numerical order because nothing remains the same from one moment/movement to the next. A qualitative multiplicity consists of interpenetrating movements that cannot be isolated and compared. Bergson beautifully describes succession without numerical distinction through the example of music. The notes in a melody melt into one another. All of the previous notes of a melody can be perceived in the current note being played, because playing one note from

¹⁴⁴ Bergson’s exploration of pure time and movement in *Time and Free Will*, is undoubtedly humanist, with a clear emphasis on the psychological aspect of *durée*. Massumi, following upon Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, takes issue with this and will argue for a concept of *durée* that extends beyond the experience of human consciousness. Deleuze achieves this by arguing for intuition as Bergson’s methodology for knowing *durée*. “Bergson evolved, in a certain sense, from the beginning to the end of his work. . . . Duration seemed to him to be less and less reducible to a psychological experience and became instead the variable essence of things, providing the theme of a complex ontology” (Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 34).

¹⁴⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 98.

the melody in isolation would mean nothing, but prolonging one note changes the whole of the melody. To think of a note and melody as part to whole requires thinking in abstract terms of space, because the experience of the note cannot be extracted from the whole and parsed out among the other notes. This mutual penetration is a qualitative multiplicity, a temporal, not spatial, succession. This applies to states of consciousness as well, which is why Bergson is critical of any treatment of psychological states as distinct units that, if manipulated correctly, can be made to repeat.

It is not a coincidence, Bergson notes, that the law of the impenetrability of matter - two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time - came about at the same time as the concept of number. This is a logical necessity of thinking in terms of space instead of time, but it does not reflect the true nature of the reality of movement and the becoming of time. As a “reality without quality”, space “enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, to abstract, and perhaps also to speak.”¹⁴⁶ Spatializing movement and time is essential for language, for functioning in daily life, and it provides the conceptual tools for scientific knowledge. Strangely, survival depends to a large extent on the denial of the heterogeneous reality of movement and becoming that undergirds the world in which humans negotiate their survival.

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson explains the difference between space and time through various dualisms: exterior/interior, objectified positions in space/interpenetrating movements, immobility/process, quantitative multiplicity/confused multiplicities, extensity/intensity, and time flown/the flowing forth of time. Bergson also transposes the

¹⁴⁶ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 97.

difference between time and space into two kinds of selves: the social self and the fundamental self which endures through the direct experience of *durée*. While the former ensures our physical and social survival, it is only through the latter that freedom can be realized.

Below homogenous duration, which is the extensive symbol of true duration, a close psychological analysis distinguishes a duration whose heterogeneous moments permeate one another; below the numerical multiplicity of conscious states, a qualitative multiplicity; below the self with well-defined states, a self in which *succeeding each other* means *melting into one another* and forming an organic whole. But we are generally content with the first, i.e. with the shadow of the self projected into homogenous space.¹⁴⁷

Although it is the confused multiplicity, the succession without quantitative distinction, that constitutes the real, it is a deeply ingrained habit to spatialize time and mistake this for the mutual penetration which actually occurs at the heart of things. An object can be infinitely divided in space, but not a temporal movement or act.¹⁴⁸

Movement is indivisible. In space things are interchangeable, can be switched back and forth, added, subtracted, reversed, and so on, but if something is added or cut off from an instant of duration, it fundamentally changes in nature. “When the regular oscillations of the pendulum make us sleepy, is it the last sound heard, the last movement perceived,

¹⁴⁷ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 128.

¹⁴⁸ Bergson explains Zeno’s paradox as an example of confusing time and space. Space can be divided endlessly, but duration cannot. (If we divide any part of the melody it fundamentally changes the melody.) The Eleatics did not understand that an object can be divided but not an act. The heterogeneous moments that permeate each other in duration, if singled out and identified as positions within the homogenous medium of space, would make movement theoretically impossible. Achilles cannot overtake the tortoise who has a headstart, because he must traverse an infinite number of points along the way. Taken to its logical conclusion, not only can Achilles not finish the race - he cannot even start it. Zeno’s paradox is a classic example of confusing time with space.

which produces this effect? No, undoubtedly not, for then should not the first have done the same?”¹⁴⁹ The interpenetrating movements of duration cannot be placed in order in the same way that objects in space can form a line, but they are nevertheless organized. The notes of a melody and the cumulative movements of the pendulum are organized. They hang together in a singular way, a continuous multiplicity that cannot be repeated. The smallest change of a part simultaneously changes the whole, although it would be more accurate to speak of movements since parts imply distinct entities. There is no thing that moves, only different movements that connect, overlap, and interpenetrate. “There are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change; change has no need of a support. There are movements, but there is no inert or invariable object which moves: movement does not imply a mobile.”¹⁵⁰ The time of pure movement unreduced to spatial conditions, only answers to itself. External values such as positions in space, size, fungibility, are irrelevant to the ceaseless becoming of time.

What follows from the fact that no psychic state can ever be experienced twice is that no cause ever repeats. Every moment is different because, like the experience of a note in a melody, it is an accumulation of previous moments. The impact of the last swing of the pendulum is only possible because of the previous oscillations, none of which are identical since each oscillation is a singular coalescing of previous movements. Qualitative multiplicity does not have a linear relation of cause and effect that can be formulated and repeated, because there is nothing in the nature of time that stands still

¹⁴⁹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 105.

¹⁵⁰ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 122.

and enables reproduction, nothing that can be put to use to achieve a predetermined end. Every temporal movement is an expression only of itself.

Affect's Functional Limitations

The central thrust of Massumi's theory of affect is based on Bergson's depiction of non-spatialized time. Affect is pure movement unencumbered by spatial conditions, but Massumi retains movement as a sense of time. This will turn out to be important in his reconfiguration of subjectivity and the body, for traditionally the subject was understood as a stable identity that endured through time. Massumi uses time to challenge this account of subjectivity. It cannot be pinned down by concepts or put to use for purposes that do not directly emerge through it. In other words, affect cannot be mediated in any way without losing the qualities which make it what it is. Affect is inaccessible under spatial conditions. It is an autonomous source of existence that cannot assimilate into the world of linear causality (spatialized time) and quantifying perceptions (space) without changing its fundamental nature. The existent world as we know it consists of affect that has been captured and coded through the structured formations of subjectivity, language, rationality, and capitalist relations. It is a world understood and constructed through the conditions of space as Bergson defined it. Massumi refers to these structured formations as "functional limitations" of affect that are necessary for everyday existence. This is a significant point. The functional limitations of affect are not arbitrary or simply fortuitous; we cannot exist without them. Nobody lives in pure affect.

And yet, it is not possible to conceive of affect without relying on the structures of capture that affect is the condition for. I argue that this dependence of affect on the actualized objects that emerge from it is one of the reasons that affect is not autonomous as Massumi claims. Just as Kant's transcendental subject is inconceivable apart from the empirical subject and from the traits traditionally attributed to the objects (enduring identity) it is a condition for, the ahistorical autonomy of affect cannot be conceived of outside of the capacities that are indispensable to neoliberal capitalist exchange relations. Massumi's preoccupation with the new, the productivity of becoming, and the autonomy of affect, coincides with the vaunted self-sufficiency of the entrepreneurial subject, but Massumi argues this is precisely what makes affect theory a formidable force for change.

Adorno would be highly critical of this elision, pointing out any number of contradictions. For instance, what counts as creativity in an exchange society is that which reproduces more of the same under the guise of difference. Entrepreneurs seek out new market sectors comprised of differences that resist commodification but stimulate consumer interest, not in spite of their resistance but because of it. However, Massumi insists this is precisely why theorizing affect instead of critiquing ideology meets capitalism on its own terrain because it has more potential to redirect the way power operates if it engages the same field of tendencies. Affect modulates affect. Processing contradiction may transform symbols and meaning (spatialized reactions to time), but it has as little chance of impacting the ceaseless becoming of time as the possibility of tasting food through watching the cooking channel. This is not an exaggerated analogy.

Massumi insists that critique is indeed this far removed from the fundamental workings of reality. Bergson warns:

Just as nothing will be found homogeneous in duration except a symbolical medium with no duration at all, namely space, in which simultaneities are set out in line, in the same way no homogeneous element will be found in motion except that which least belongs to it, the traversed space, which is motionless.¹⁵¹

The autonomy of affect, which for Massumi marks the decisive turning point for cultural theory, is established through the distinction between time and space, of no longer mistaking the illusion of movement in terms of the space traversed for the pure movement/becoming of time. The definitive trait that affect shares with time is uncertainty. Affect is always in a state of becoming, of moving, unactualized potentiality. Massumi often refers to it as barely perceptible, or “smaller than the smallest perceivable moment” because it cannot be accessed by objectifying structures of perception. However, this does not make affect any less real. In fact, Massumi’s book, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception*, is an examination of how the United States military has found a way to tap into affect’s ontological power of becoming to fight the war on terror. By transforming the habitual powers of perception that can only operate under the conditions of space (as Bergson defines it), the military has developed strategies to change perception based on the evasive, always-on-the-move nature of affect. The uncertainty that lies at the heart of affect paradoxically becomes the objective primary reference point for the war on terror and has created a sea change in what counts as threat. Empirical evidence of a threat means that it has already actualized, but what if

¹⁵¹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 125.

the threat can be perceived before it actually emerges? If it has not yet emerged how can it be considered a threat? These are the questions that a theory of affect is equipped to address. The following section presents Massumi's analysis of the logic and strategies introduced by Bush and Rumsfeld, and continued into the Obama administration, to legitimize and implement their war on terror. The crucial part of his argument centers on the affective realm of uncertainty and its power of ontological becoming that drives military operations. It also sets the stage for similarly analyzing neoliberalism as powered by affective uncertainty and risk in a way that previous forms of capitalism were not.

Ontopower

In his work, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception*, Massumi explains how Bush's war on terror operated through the affective principle of uncertainty and transformed it into the most powerful operative logic of our current political era: preemption. This approach to stopping terrorism was based on the premise that by the time a clear and present danger could be detected, it would already be too late. The Bush administration developed a policy which effected a qualitative shift in military strategy to perceive and take out threats before they emerged. This had the added benefit of never being wrong, because perceiving the *potential* of a threat did not require objective evidence. For instance, even after it was an established fact that Saddam Hussein was not in possession of weapons of mass destruction, Bush never admitted that the decision to invade Iraq was wrong. Although the objective reason given for the war in Iraq, the existence of weapons of mass destruction, turned out to be untrue, Bush refused to

acknowledge that it was a gross mistake to have invaded a country based on empirically false information. His reasoning was that if Saddam Hussein had had the opportunity to own weapons of mass destruction he would undoubtedly have used them, so it was necessary to invade Iraq given the potential of this threat. This created a sea change in the definition of what constitutes clear and present danger. Danger is already present. Threat hovers over the horizon, unseen and unactualized.

From a preemptive standpoint, if you feel a threat, then it is a threat, and the best way to fight it is to incite its emergence from its indeterminate state of potentiality into an active form. Rumsfeld's famous distinction between the "known unknown" and the "unknown unknown" is crucial for the operative logic of preemption. The unknown unknown refers to the nature of terrorism as a proliferative but unspecified threat. "The most effective way to fight an unspecified threat is to actively contribute to *producing* it,"¹⁵² Massumi explains, so that the threat can emerge and be detected in a determinate form that can be dealt with. Terrorism operates through a decentralized network (there is no identifiable national army), and the form of attacks are always changing – anthrax, bombs, mass shootings, vehicular terrorist attacks. Therefore, the best way to detect the next attack is to incite the conditions of its emergence and stop it before it actualizes. Although this may actually be a more effective way to fight terrorism than the traditional approaches of mobilizing a large military with better weapons, it requires that the state adopt terrorist tactics. Massumi writes, "You cannot engage the enemy if the situation is so asymmetrical that there is no ground in common to serve as a battlefield. You have to

¹⁵² Massumi, *Ontopower*, 12.

become, at least in part, what hates you and what you hate back. You have to undertake a becoming-terrorist of your own.”¹⁵³ This is the operative logic of preemption, a conditional logic of ‘could-have, would-have’. Importantly, it does not rely on objective evidence (empirical proof of possession of weapons of mass destruction) but rather on objective uncertainty. The terrorist may or may not possess weapons for an attack, but if he *could* have access to them, he *would* use them. This could-would logic of pre-emption is not confined to military strategy. It seeped into the domestic realm through Bush’s color-coded terror alert system which kept the population affectively primed through fear. Massumi notes that the colors which signaled low threat – blue and green – were rarely if ever used, orange being the most commonly presented color. This had the effect of instilling enough fear to keep the population in “affective attunement”, without being provided with any content. “A threat is only a threat if it retains an indeterminacy.”¹⁵⁴ Massumi continues, “When a government mechanism makes threat its business, it is taking this virtuality as its object and adopting quasi-causality as its mode of operation. That quasi-causal operation goes by the name of security. It expresses itself in signs of alert.”¹⁵⁵

Preemption combines the epistemological and ontological realms, creating a way to perceive a threat before it emerges by catalyzing or flushing it out of its state of

¹⁵³ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 11.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

potential. Preemption is a form of ontopower – the power to incite the emergence of what needs to be contained.

Ontopower is not a negative power, a power-over. It is a power-to; a power to incite and orient emergence that insinuates itself into the pores of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become, as yet barely there. It is a positive power for bringing into being (hence the prefix “onto”).¹⁵⁶

Preemption is not prevention because it does not rely exclusively on the ability to analyze empirical data in order to determine a linear cause of the problem. Massumi remarks that prevention does not have its own ontology and consequently runs on “borrowed power.”¹⁵⁷ It is a retroactive engagement with an object that already exists determinately. For instance, the prevention of homelessness works on a fully determined object. If the predominant cause of homelessness is determined to be unemployment, then preventative measures will involve political programs designed and implemented by the logic of specific domains, such as labor and education. Prevention and preemption both aim to stop something, but preemption works by intervening at the level of emergence, and prevention must apply external measures from pre-existing fields. One brings something into being, the other manipulates what is already in being.

Massumi argues that the general concept of preemption is as old as war itself. But whereas the nature of danger is that it is already present, as in “clear and present danger”, the nature of threat is unactualized potential. It is a “futuraity” that acts in the present through the perception/action of threat that has not yet even emerged. “The preemptive

¹⁵⁶ Massumi, *Ontopower*, vi-vii.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

problem of how to perceive change, and how to do so in potential – which is to say, in an interval smaller than the smallest historically perceivable – is disturbingly fresh.”¹⁵⁸ The disturbingly fresh element here is time as Bergson defines it: distinct from space, but not from the movement of becoming. The operative logic of preemption weaponizes time, because “it is necessary not only to perceive potential, but to perceive it before the enemy perceives your perceiving it – or even perceives itself on the verge of an event. A perceptual arms race ensues.”¹⁵⁹

The capacity to perceive potential that is on the verge of actualizing requires a speed of engagement that is not possible with conscious cognition. Only the body can process this kind of movement, occurring in an interval smaller than the smallest perceivable. Only the body can be primed for “readiness potential”¹⁶⁰ or “embodied unknowing”¹⁶¹ that operates in the affective field of becoming. The body however, is already a problematic concept. What counts as a body figures into what counts as a subject, which is almost always entangled with the concept of agency. Massumi argues that the kind of body needed for the perception/action of incipience does not match the modern notion of the human body as a substantial entity that acts on intention. Massumi prefers to think of the body as “bare activity” that is astir before actualizing into a subject

¹⁵⁸ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 225. Entrapment is a form of preemption. It is illegal in policing because it crosses the line between detection and incitement. But in the war on terror, incitement is the only way to detect a not-yet emergent threat.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

or individual capable of conscious intention. The question of affect asks not what a body is, but what it can do. How can the body become a perceiving of change? The military's mission "to contract all of war into the micro-interval of perception, in order to re-factor its power potential,"¹⁶² requires a reconceptualization of what a body is and what a body can do. Massumi's examination of two military documents published at the turn of the millennium, *Network Centric Warfare* and *Power to the Edge*, illustrates the transformation of military strategies towards the priming of non-conscious perception in military bodies.¹⁶³ Ideally, this would transform the military itself into a self-synchronizing body capable of engaging in network-centric warfare, where the hierarchy between command and control is so flattened that decision-making and execution can occur at the level of ontogenetic movement. Those typically placed at the bottom of the hierarchy (human and non-human) who await orders, are empowered to act as quickly as a threat is perceived, effectively blurring the lines between action and perception. Network-centric strategies enable rapid, horizontal reconfigurations that can communicate as quickly as they act. This marks a qualitative shift from platform-centric warfare which relies on the mobilization of large sections of the military. This "frictional force-against-force"¹⁶⁴ assumes a symmetry of battle amongst nation-state entities that

¹⁶² Massumi, *Ontopower*, 147.

¹⁶³ *Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority* (NCW), by David S. Alberts, John J. Garstka, and Frederick P. Stein. *Power to the Edge: Command and Control in the Information Age* (PE), by David S. Alberts and Richard E. Hayes.

¹⁶⁴ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 139.

does not apply to the battle against terrorism. The asymmetrical warfare of terrorism requires bodies that can operate directly in the interval behind or beneath (spatial terms are always problematic but unavoidable) or before (spatialized term for time) empirically actualized historical moments. Massumi defines the animating force of this interval as “transhistorical” and “nonlocal” to emphasize the difference between becoming and history, or time and space.

Ontopower, the power to bring into being, is activated through perception. Perceptual cueing, micro-perceptions, perception attacks, perception/action – all of these rely on the capacity to engage with the interval between becoming and being. The smaller than the smallest perceivable does not refer to size but to speed. The interval is barely perceivable because it is a becoming-movement that is nearly impossible to detect and requires capacities of somatic sensing that contradict habitual perceptions of space and immobility. In a world that privileges quantification and classificatory logic rooted in spatial conditions, this kind of movement is not even on the radar. This is why perception of the smallest perceivable interval requires, as Massumi puts it, a capacity for “embodied unknowing” – a task, I will argue, that is significantly more challenging than Massumi acknowledges. (The difficulties encountered with this will be explained later on.) Nonetheless, it is this kind of perception that holds the potential for resistance to neoliberal capitalist power. Ontopower is not a power-over but a power of bringing to be. The war on terror and the operative logic of preemption is one example of how ontopower works. It also illustrates Massumi’s larger point that ontopower can only be transformed or resisted by another ontopower. The workings of neoliberalism are ontogenetic, inciting the emergence of differences that can be commodified. Massumi

argues that this account of neoliberalism diverges from critiques that focus on the homogenizing powers of capitalism which assume a power-over model of conformism. Resistance can only emerge through a counter-ontopower. Tapping into the confused multiplicity of temporal becoming could invoke new ways of being that lie outside of capitalist relations.

Every ontopower has its own logic. The operative logic of preemption is a self-legitimizing process. The invasion of Iraq was not wrong because it was based on affective facts instead of objective empirical facts. Saddam Hussain would always pose a threat to American security because if he were presented with the means to attack the United States, he would use it. He would if he could. Just because he did not have the means did not eliminate the threat he posed. That is an affective fact. Preemptive logic has justified other actions such as the Patriot Act, mass surveillance of U.S. citizens, and domestic policing techniques. These all engage in the self-legitimizing logic based on the affective fact of threat. Massumi argues that preemption and neoliberalism have a symbiotic relationship. They share a common goal of American security, and they pursue this through using the affective power of uncertainty. A counter-ontopower would bring about different affective facts and require a different logic. Preemption is self-legitimizing and weaponizes time. Neoliberal capitalism commodifies everything, including and especially dissent. A counter-ontopower would operate at the level of emergence, placing perception in the smaller than smallest perceivable interval to foster certain potentials and not others through the quasi-causality of priming. Any tendencies that emerge and remain self-affirming, in other words, are not put to work to extract surplus value in the form of capital, pose a threat to neoliberal ontopower: “You could

even say that *every* tendency arising in the capitalist field is adventitious to the extent that it affirms itself...Such tendencies are passional: that is the best word for a movement that affirms its own occurring.”¹⁶⁵ This does not make them invulnerable to the apparatuses of capture – some may seem more amenable to appropriation than others – but fostering these potentials at the level of emergence engages “the battle on the only terrain there is: becoming.”¹⁶⁶ Seen from the theory of ontopower that operates directly in the register of affect, neoliberal apparatuses of capture seek the emergence of difference, even if it comes in the form of crises. In contrast, conformity feeds off of what has already taken determinate form.

If affect is the ground of our existence, the source of ontopower, how can we place ourselves in this interval smaller than the smallest perceivable? If that is where the real power of existence lies, how can it be accessed? Massumi claims that “priming” the conditions of emergence is the predominant, perhaps only, method for doing so. Priming relies on the capacity to directly perceive time, to sense the movement that moves too rapidly for conscious cognition but not for the body. Massumi uses the terms “priming” and “affective attunement” interchangeably because they both involve a concept of perception that is more powerful, but also more nebulous, than the consciousness of the subject. In order to understand how exactly perception works in Massumi’s theory of affect, we will once again turn to the writings of Bergson.

¹⁶⁵ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 26-27.

¹⁶⁶ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 244.

Perception is Subtractive

Bergson defines perception in terms of action, not knowledge. The debate between idealism and realism is about knowledge. How do we know what we know? How do we know if what we know is true? How is knowledge justified? When we perceive an object, are we perceiving the actual object or a representation of it? What is the nature of matter? The question about perception is rooted in a dualistic impasse between mind and matter that has only been able to be addressed thus far by privileging one over the other. According to Bergson, realism reduces mind to matter, and idealism reduces matter to mind. As long as perception is assumed to be about knowledge, this impasse will never be resolved. Bergson argues that the problem itself is a badly posed question and needs to be restated. Instead of using the epistemologically laden terms traditionally employed in reference to perception - thing, appearance, representation - Bergson proposes the term 'image'. "And by 'image' we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing; an existence placed half-way between the 'thing' and the 'representation'."¹⁶⁷ Everything is an image. Matter is an aggregate of images. The body is an image. The brain is also an image. Interiority and exteriority concern relations among images.

Using the concept of 'image' allows for a conception of perception in terms of action instead of conscious reflection or representation. "Perception, understood as we understand it, measures our possible action upon things, and thereby, inversely, the

¹⁶⁷ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, vii-viii.

possible action of things upon us.”¹⁶⁸ Notice there is nothing in this statement that relates perception to truth or the reality of objects. The totality of matter consists only of images. Each image “gathers and transmits the influences of all the points of the material universe.”¹⁶⁹ The body, however, is a privileged image because while it can transmit movement like all other images, it has the capacity to react to certain images or parts of images and remain indifferent to others which hold no interest for it. Generally, the influence images have on one another is determined by the laws of nature. But the image of the body can execute *eventual* reactions/movement on the objects surrounding it; the images within the body’s horizon reflect the body’s virtual but not pre-determined action on them. The important point here is that nothing is added to the images. Perception isolates or subtracts certain parts of the totality of given images. “For it is possible to sum up our conclusions as to pure perception by saying that there is in matter something more than, but not something different from, that which is actually given.”¹⁷⁰ The body, as the center of action, receives and gives back movement. The brain, also an image, cannot add anything to the stimuli it receives from the channels of the nervous system. Bergson compares the brain to a telephonic exchange. Its only function is to transmit movement either by delaying or redirecting it centrifugally through the nerves back to the periphery. In reconceptualizing perception as action, the brain is no longer seen as the place where

¹⁶⁸ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 57.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

representations reside. Pure perception, “whereby we place ourselves in the very heart of things”¹⁷¹ is “a system of nascent acts which plunges roots deep into the real.”¹⁷²

The subtractive element of perception is a major theme in Massumi’s work and has far-reaching implications for concepts such as volition and agency that are often associated with the subject. Agency, Massumi argues, is overrated because it is added on after the fact, occurring first in the body, as Bergson’s account of the body shows, and only later as conscious thought. Massumi illustrates this point by citing the results of Libet’s neuroscientific experiment that identified a half-second lapse between physical stimulation of the body and conscious awareness. Subjects were instructed to flex a finger and then indicate the moment when they chose to do so. The readings from the EEG machine they were hooked up to displayed brain activity for this action a half-second before it reached consciousness. Libet concluded that conscious decisions are preceded by brain activity that suggests the decision was already made before it reached the threshold of consciousness. The results of this experiment corroborate Bergson’s theory that perception is subtractive.¹⁷³ In order to be functional, something must be selected from the totality of images and movements. For Libet, conscious decision is not additive; it is an expression or response to a movement already underway. The response can

¹⁷¹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 73.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷³ This also marks the difference between affect theory and phenomenology. Libet’s experiment relegates intentionality, a key concept in phenomenology, to an effect of a more fundamental non-conscious process.

consist either of a veto or agreement to the work that has already been performed through the body/brain. Conscious intention is secondary to this process.

It should be noted in particular that during the mysterious half second, what we think of as “free,” “higher” functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by autonomic, bodily reactions occurring in the brain but outside of consciousness, and between brain and finger but prior to action and expression.¹⁷⁴

Massumi explains, “Will and consciousness are *subtractive*. They are *limitative*, *derived functions* that reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed.”¹⁷⁵ The half-second experiment attests to the imperceptible movement of the body that occurs too quickly to be registered. The non-conscious perception that military bodies are being primed to experience – the smaller than smallest perceivable interval – is based on the principle of perception as movement and as subtractive action. Bergson states, “What you have to explain, then, is not how perception arises, but how it is limited, since it should be the image of the whole, and is in fact reduced to the image of that which interests you.”¹⁷⁶

Affective Critique of Neurotypical Perception

The strong emphasis on the body in affect theory, and Massumi’s goal to put what seems “most directly corporeal back into the body,”¹⁷⁷ has elicited responses from a wide

¹⁷⁴ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 29.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 34.

¹⁷⁷ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 4.

variety of disciplines that focus on theorizing the body. I will explore one area in particular that has developed through dialogue with Massumi's concept of the body which is the critique of neurotypicality in disability theory. Similar to Massumi, this area of study addresses the ontological priority of the body and explains perception in terms of movement rather than representation or discourse. It also views neuroscience as an important interlocutor. The critique of neurotypical perception, which is perception conditioned for space rather than time, is presented in *The Minor Gesture*, written by Erin Manning, a longtime colleague and collaborator with Massumi and affect theorist in her own right.

Manning describes neurotypicality as a form of foundational identity politics that fixes the body in alignment with a world pre-defined through space, a world already "chunked" into individuals and discrete objects. Neurotypicality assumes a determined form of the subject as sovereign, rational, and most importantly, as the source of agency. Manning asks, "What if instead we approached this question of how body and world co-compose from the perspective that "finding" the body in time and space is a learned experience?"¹⁷⁸ Massumi's definition of affect as a bodily capacity to affect and be affected is based on the inseparability of the body from the ontological becoming of time. The inherent relationality of the body makes it a center of indetermination that can perceive/act before it molds to the imperatives of a neurotypical world.

¹⁷⁸ Manning follows this question with another that references Bergson's conception of movement. "What if we followed Bergson's account...concerning the functioning of "continuous movement," thereby questioning our presuppositions about what is voluntary?" (Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 113).

Autism is now commonly characterized as a mode of being that is neurodiverse. This is a pointedly more neutral, less tragic way of describing autism than the standard account given in neuropsychology that classifies autism as a pathology. It is a pathology marked by the inability to affect and be affected in normative ways in relation to other human beings, manifesting in antisocial behaviors that range from a discomfiting avoidance of eye contact to violent outbursts that result in injury to self and others. Individuals with autism display what is commonly interpreted by neurotypicals as a disturbing lack of empathy that is detrimental to daily functioning and relationships. Manning however, contests this account of the affectless body of the autistic.¹⁷⁹ If anything, autistics are too relational - with everything. This often results in privileging objects or the environment as much as or more than, humans. In autistic perception there is, initially, no separation of the self from the environment, because it “foregrounds mobility, and to cut into this mobility is singularly difficult.”¹⁸⁰ Already we can see why this account of autistic perception offers a way of thinking through the ontological priority of time/movement as constitutive of perception. Massumi insists that while affect is pre-individual it is not asocial. “Affect, as the openness to being affected, is

¹⁷⁹ The use of the term “the autistic” rather than the more widely approved person-first language of “a person with autism”, is intentional. This is the language Manning chooses because it reflects the standpoint of advocates and activists that reject the view that autism is a condition that should be cured. (The group Autism Speaks is an exemplary model for a finding-the-cure approach). Autism is a fundamental mode of being in the world and the “autistics” who advocate for this have compared themselves to activists in the LGBTQ movement who protest “curing gayness”. They consider person-first language as a perpetuation of the belief that autism is an unfortunate medical condition that hinders one from being a whole person.

¹⁸⁰ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 138.

directly relational. It is pure sociality, in the sense of the social in the openness of its incipency, ready to become all manner of social forms and contents.”¹⁸¹ In autistic perception, there is a hypersensitivity to the field of relationality and the co-composition occurring through body and world. It is extremely difficult for autistics to translate, for instance, movement across contexts. This is not hard for neurotypicals because they habitually parse and generalize experience in order to repeat it. But autistic perception is movement of “experience in the making.”¹⁸² It does not halt and reflect; it does not act like a subject with volition. It is, as Bergson explains pure perception, a movement “whereby we place ourselves in the very heart of things.”¹⁸³ The reason this is so disconcerting for neurotypicals is that placing oneself in the very heart of things entails a way of being that is non-voluntary and compulsive, a body acting in ways not directed by a conscious, rational subject. A common neurotypical complaint is that autistic bodies move too much and often programs are implemented to minimize these movements. In a neurotypical world, autistic movement appears as a lack of agency and is therefore at best not taken seriously and at worst treated as pathological behavior.

Autistic perception troubles the concept of agency and autonomy. In the moment of stimulus, there is just the agency of the event, or as Manning calls it, “agencement”. What is viewed as inattention and poor impulse control by neurotypicals is described by autistics as a feeling of aliveness and intensity. It is not a coincidence that Massumi

¹⁸¹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 205.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁸³ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 73.

frequently defines affect as intensity and relation. “I think there can be another notion of autonomy that has to do more with how you can connect to others and to other movements, how you can modulate those connections, to multiply and intensify them.”¹⁸⁴ Put another way, Massumi refers to affect as “being right where you are – more intensely.”¹⁸⁵ In autistic perception there is no sense of individual volition because there is no feeling of “where the body ends and the world begins.”¹⁸⁶ It is more intimately caught up in pre-conscious activities, moving on the cusp of the virtual and the actual. The autistic is not constantly trying to manage experience because she is openly engaged in the making of it. “This makes the field lively with attention, an attention that affects the you you are becoming.”¹⁸⁷

The Need for Memory

The body is always in movement, or in passage, and as such is constitutionally indeterminate. However, this does not answer the question of why some movements pass without delay through the nervous system and the brain and then back out onto the images that provoked the stimulus, and why other movements are delayed. According to Bergson, the gap between stimulus and response created by the temporary delay of movement by the brain, is what makes bodies “centers of indetermination”. The higher

¹⁸⁴ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 40.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸⁶ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 132.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

the complexity of the nervous system in an organism, the wider the gap between stimulus and reaction. Bergson argues this is why humans have a greater potential for different responses to stimuli than jellyfish. When a jellyfish is poked, the reaction is instantaneous. There is practically no difference between stimulus and response. The reason humans have the ability to choose what action will follow the reception of a stimulus is because there is a more significant gap in between.

The answer to the question of how movement or perception is directed is provided through the concept of memory. It is memory that comes forward to meet perception in the gap. Bergson explains that there is in fact no such thing as pure perception. This is a theoretical construct Bergson employs to develop an understanding between the difference in kind between perception and memory. It counteracts the traditional account of memory that relegates it to faded version of perception, a difference in degree. Perception is always oriented toward action and not knowledge, but it needs memory to guide how movement is returned or redirected. The body is a center of indetermination because it is the gap where the virtuality of memory and the action of perception meet.

Pure memory is the storehouse of all past experience. It is not located in the brain because it is not an image and cannot be contained by an image. Its virtual status is different in kind from the actuality of matter or images and therefore cannot be abolished or compromised if there is damage to the brain. Because memory is usually thought of as a weaker version of perception, it is difficult to fully appreciate the crucial role that Bergson gives it in our moment-to-moment existence. A common obstacle to accepting that memory has as much ontological reality as perception is that memory is never fully present in our consciousness. Why, Bergson asks, is there no difficulty attributing

existence to objects that are not within our perception, (I know that my front yard exists even when I am at work thirty miles away), but we cannot attribute the same weight of reality to memories and the past? Reframing the question of memory in terms of time and space eliminates this problem. This is a crucial point for Massumi as well. Affect theory posits that it is the unseen, non-spatial, pre-conscious, realm that holds the strongest potential for change and is therefore the realm that we should strive to connect with to effect political change and to simply feel more alive. Confining reality to what is present and actualized through the conditions of space is a prison of our own making. Because perception cannot add content, it must rely on memory to direct its action. Perception is always already poised toward the future –each movement measuring our *possible* action on things – and is always already engaged in the past. In this sense, the present does not hold the kind of weighty significance that is habitually assumed by common sense notions of the present and contemporary calls to “be in the now”. Bergson’s reframing of memory and perception in terms of time and space rejects this valorization of the present. “You define the present in an arbitrary manner as *that which is*, whereas the present is simply *what is being made*. Nothing *is* less than the present moment.”¹⁸⁸ Perception is so crucially engaged with the past that it begs the question not of how can we account for memory, but rather how is it that we forget?¹⁸⁹ The role of

¹⁸⁸ Massumi, *Matter and Memory*, 93.

¹⁸⁹ “We shall no longer have to account for remembering, but for forgetting” (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 122).

memory cannot be underestimated. Perception, Bergson concludes, is really just an excuse for memory.

Memory, however, must become entangled with the movement of perception in order to actualize, to become embodied in the world. Unlike perception, memory cannot act, because “it is from the sensori-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life.”¹⁹⁰ Memory needs perception for life, vitality. It needs a body. Bergson explains that memory “is continually pressing forward, so as to insert the largest possible part of itself into the present action”.¹⁹¹ Without the action of perception, memory is useless. However, its impotence in relation to action in the world is what allows the whole of memory to be perfectly preserved in its absolute singularity, because it is not determined by utilitarian needs of survival and daily functioning. Every moment/movement of duration passes (such is the nature of the becoming of time) but the past is never abolished. Bergson states that “its essence is to bear a date, and consequently to be unable to occur again.”¹⁹²

This leads to a crucial question. If the past is incapable of repeating, and perception wholly relies on memory to direct its action, how is it that memory and perception interact at all? How does the past repeat itself in the present? Perception needs memory and the “lessons of experience” to guide its movements and ensure survival. How does perception call forth memories (which in their virtual state are by

¹⁹⁰ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 197.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 90.

nature useless,) that will become useful in the present moment? How do two dimensions that are different in kind remain in active relation?

Bergson posits that the mutual engagement of perception and memory is based on recognition. The figure sketched by the movement of perception attracts memories that most effortlessly fit its shape. The memory that most closely resembles the image outlined by perception will come forward to “graft itself on an attitude or a movement.”¹⁹³ If there are aspects of the image that are not adequately responded to, then other planes of memories will be drawn forth to insert themselves into the perception, enlarging and enriching the perception, which in turn calls upon more detailed memories. Bergson describes this circuit of perception and memory in terms of tension. The more a plane of memory contracts to fit into a perception, the less of its qualities, tones, or contextual nuances are able to come through. In other words, the tighter the contraction the more generalized and impersonal the form of memory becomes and therefore the more amenable it is to materializing into action. Bergson explains that “to act is just to induce this memory to shrink, or rather to become thinned and sharpened, so that it presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it will thus be able to penetrate.”¹⁹⁴ Largely dilated planes of memory are the most fugitive and obscure because they are farther removed from the demands of action and utility. Bergson concludes that these memories require a greater arrestment of movement to come forth. The dreaming that occurs during sleep is the

¹⁹³ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 120.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

most extreme example of this. “To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream.”¹⁹⁵

Priming

The interaction of memory and perception is foundational for affect theory because it provides the conceptual framework for understanding the method of priming. Massumi identifies priming as the method of ontopower in that it cultivates the capacity to perceive the smaller than smallest perceivable moment before potentialities actualize. “Priming is the royal way to the modulation of events before they happen.”¹⁹⁶ Priming is where affect theory is enacted. But what is it exactly? What gets primed? Is it the mind, the body, thoughts, emotions, or physical environment? Massumi’s claim that there are countless pre-conscious primes in every instant seems to equate primes with virtual tendencies, but priming is supposed to work on these tendencies, not be them. Massumi puzzlingly also describes primes sometimes as conscious maneuvers. Given that pre-conscious and conscious dimensions are differences in kind, priming becomes an inherently ambiguous concept. However, what priming does is less ambiguous than what counts as priming. Priming inflects the parameters or context in which tendencies arise. It is essentially concerned with “situational emphasis” and indirect forms of influence. Another term to express this indirect approach is cuing. Cues operate in an open-ended

¹⁹⁵ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 94.

¹⁹⁶ Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, 30.

situation which does not shut out the complexity of underlying tendencies. Cuing pokes the event but does not determine it. While this results in less control over the outcome, the payoff is that it “brings something to life in the situation rather than carving away at life to make it conform or mold.”¹⁹⁷ Priming does not impose, it cultivates. Direct intervention operates externally as a negative control, but priming constitutes an affirmative approach that is immanent to the true potential(s) of the situation. In this sense, priming is a “mechanism of ontopower”¹⁹⁸ because it moves within the incipency of actions and indeterminate objects taking form. It cues the field of emergence. Massumi has identified priming as the royal road to inciting the only kind of change that matters. Where is the true potential for change? It is not located in the realm of space where everything is already actualized and subversive acts have been pre-coded by the conditions of emergence. Qualitative change can only occur from the zone of indeterminacy where potentials can still be modulated because they have not yet taken form.

As the method of ontopower, priming gives a sort of ontological nudge to the field(s) from which potentialities emerge and eventually actualize. Because it does not move linearly, its power is quasi-causal or modulatory. It inflects, tweaks, and fosters in order to move within the ontological uncertainty of the gap between the virtual and actual fields. Reducing the zone of indetermination to a passive-active relation presupposes some very limiting concepts about relationality and causality, mainly that entities pre-

¹⁹⁷ Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, 30.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

exist their interaction. Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" offers a helpful framework for thinking through the nature of relationality that characterizes affect. It is worth quoting at length.

That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational not an absolute sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.*¹⁹⁹

The ontological entanglement of intra-action enacts a causality that is not linear; it does not depend on a causality that operates with distinct, isolated entities in passive-active relation, distinguished by concepts of absolute exteriority and interiority. Intra-action directly relates to the performative nature of change: "...matter is a dynamic expression/articulation of the world in its intra-active becoming. All bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity – its performativity."²⁰⁰ Because nothing is pure cause or pure effect, there is no center to agency, and what comes to matter literally is the doing or becoming of matter. Intra-activity is performative all the way down.

To be clear, the zone of indeterminacy is not the entirety of virtual reality even though the virtual realm is by definition indeterminate. The zone of indeterminacy is the gap between the actual and virtual, perception and memory, conscious and pre-conscious, but more importantly, and as a starting point that should not be overlooked, the zone of

¹⁹⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 392.

indeterminacy is Bergson's depiction of the gap between stimulus and response. This last understanding of the zone must be met with cautious qualification. I share Massumi's concern that the stimulus-response model risks presenting an oversimplified account of a highly complex and always changing relation between affecting and being affected. But inasmuch as human beings have the capacity to delay the movement between stimulus and response, they have the potential to change the course of action. When Bergson speaks of the ability to "withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment", he is referring to this delay of movement between stimulus and response that ultimately can evoke a flow of fugitive memories that come to life and enrich perception in new ways. However, Massumi's enthusiasm to engage the creativity and openness that lies at the heart of affect underestimates the initial interruption of perception that makes the delay between stimulus and response possible in the first place. The rhetorical effects of Massumi's writing on affect theory generate a dizzying sense of a reality brimming over with microshocks, the ceaseless movement of pre-conscious forces, and intense flashes of the Real occurring at imperceptible speeds.²⁰¹ What gets lost in the allure of the reeling, imperceptible present that has become so central to affect theory is the inaugural withdrawal from the action of the moment. It is difficult to imagine how stepping back is even possible when the present that has already passed in the mysterious half second is forever out of reach. "For the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too

²⁰¹ "At this point, the impression may have grown such that affect is being touted here as if the whole world could be packed into it. In a way, it can and is" (Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 43).

quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened.”²⁰² How does one withdraw from the action of the moment that has already happened? Priming is able to operate within this paradox of time because it does not rely on linear causality. For Massumi, stepping back from the action of the moment entails stepping into flows of becoming that are already underway.

Priming and Subjectivity

Massumi states that the effectiveness of priming as a method of ontopower is based on “the individual’s susceptibility to its own tendential infra-churnings and, on the other, on its openness to the situation - the individual’s bipolar affectability.”²⁰³ This statement highlights an issue that is central to both affect theory and critical theory – the formation and role of subjectivity. Some theorists argue that the posthuman turn in cultural theory has troubled the concept of subjectivity so radically that it is no longer a relevant tool for analysis in contemporary discourses addressing issues such as globalization, technology, new materialism, or critiques of capitalism. The autonomous, rational subject of modernity is unable to engage with the vitality of matter (resulting in irreversible damage to the environment), and it refuses to acknowledge its ontological entanglements with non-human natures (animals or other humans who are deemed less human because of disability, race, gender, etc.). From this perspective, the modern

²⁰² Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 30.

²⁰³ Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, 30.

subject is generally considered to be a cultural dead-end, obstructive to both creativity and an affective openness to life.

Massumi identifies with these critiques of the subject and states that the explanatory power of affect theory is based on a rejection of human-centric subjectivity and its supporting dualisms of mind/body and nature/culture. The potential for political and social change that affect theory offers requires a subjectivity-without-a-subject.²⁰⁴ Massumi's subject is flattened out; it has no psychological interiority that anchors the subject as a unified center of experience. Any conventional attributes of subjectivity are mechanisms of capture and closure of affect. Feelings, for example, are too personal, too bounded by a private interiority to accommodate the transversal flows and intensities of affect. An emotion is a meaning-making activity, Massumi explains, a qualification of affect, a "sociolinguistic fixing of an experience."²⁰⁵ "It only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies..."²⁰⁶ Affect, on the other hand, operates through a different logic. Massumi repeatedly states that "it is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 28.

²⁰⁶ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 5.

²⁰⁷ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 28.

Another attribute traditionally belonging to the subject is cognition. According to Massumi, cognition and volition arrive too late. Like emotion, cognition and volition also must be understood as different in nature from affect. They are not the agential forces that the individual subject believes them to be, as demonstrated by Libet's half-second delay. Decisions do not originate in these higher faculties but are reactions to movements already underway. "Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement,"²⁰⁸ and subjectivity is the most basic and tenacious form of the confinement of affect. In this sense, the development of a theory of affect cannot escape its centeredness around subjectivity. The goal is to flatten the humanist subject by showing that agency is not confined to intentionality. The capacity to affect and be affected is shared by human and nonhuman entities. If intentionality is subtracted from the definition of agency, then agency extends to all of material reality. Libet's half second has debunked the myth of intentionality and has dissolved epistemological processes into ontologies of becoming.

²⁰⁸ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 35.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Neoliberalism and ‘Genuine Pleasure’

Massumi’s concept of affect aims to provide an alternative explanation of neoliberalism that does not focus on ideology and policy but rather on the affective tendencies that underlie political events and capitalist relations. It is my contention that affect theory is indeed responding to a unique phenomenon of neoliberalism that was not fully manifest during Adorno’s lifetime, but I am not convinced it is so different that it resists critical examination through the framework of negative dialectics. The power of neoliberal processes to expand market rationality in unprecedented ways through the management of subjectivity, and the entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberalism that places more value on creative differentiation than passive consumerism, presents contemporary dilemmas around power, pleasure, and subject formation. For Foucault, this marks a new kind of power that changes the role of government, economic value, and human nature, and replaces the subject as exchange partner with the subject as entrepreneur. This results in technologies of the self from which individuals derive genuine pleasure. Although the term ‘genuine pleasure’ will require some unpacking, it generally connotes a qualitatively different form of pleasure than the relief provided by compensatory consumerism. Massumi claims that neoliberal subjectivity and pleasure is more complex and ambiguous, but I maintain that the constitutive role of identitarian thinking retains its

primacy even in the production of difference because it serves the same function, analyzed by Adorno, of masquerading as an escape from oppression when it is actually flight from the last remaining thought of resistance. Massumi depicts Adorno's capitalist subjects as dupes, but neoliberal subjects as paradoxical. While there are important differences in how subjectivity develops under forms of capitalism that emphasize standardization and stigmatize difference versus the neoliberal form of capitalism that appears to promote autonomy and individualization, I interpret these divergences as different styles of reification that obscure the mechanisms of domination that individuals are subjected to. Because neoliberal forms of fungibility produce the pleasure of personal fulfillment and growth, it may be more difficult to parse out the relations of domination that inhere in certain affective structures, but the material contradictions they emerge from continue to endure.

Massumi's theorization of the body in affect theory is timely and necessary to address the duplicitous production and capture of affect. Adorno also privileges the body by anchoring critique in suffering, but Massumi's attention to the more nuanced aspects of perception based on Bergson's concept of perception as sensori-motor, provides a theorization of the body that expands its boundaries and potentials. However, bodily affective attunement is not enough by itself to resist subjugation to forces that, as Adorno warned, would lead to "Auschwitz or anything similar to it". The body and suffering always contain a non-conceptual dimension, but they require negative dialectical interpretation to understand their participation in coercive relations.

The overuse of the term neoliberalism can have the unfortunate consequence of rendering it a meaningless category for analysis, especially when it is used as an empty

placeholder for all the ills of the world. The use of the term neoliberalism in this present work is grounded in two specific perspectives. The first view is derived from David Harvey's work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, which presents a study of the historical and institutional processes that established neoliberalism as the dominant political economic reality. Harvey's Marxist analysis portrays neoliberalism "as a failed utopian rhetoric masking a successful project for the restoration of ruling-class power."²⁰⁹ The second perspective is grounded in Foucault's series of lectures given at the Collège de France in the late 1970s in which he examines the self as enterprise.

Harvey's account of neoliberalism is as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.²¹⁰

Neoliberalism is not just an economic policy; it is a theory of human freedom. However, according to Harvey, it is really a project for the restoration of class power disguised as a path to equality and prosperity for all. When analyzed as a political movement, neoliberalism is associated with the ideas generated by a small group of intellectuals known as the Mont Pelerin Society (1947), which included Friedrich von Hayek, Ludvig von Mises, Karl Popper, and Milton Friedman. "Liberal" refers to their ultimate concern for individual freedom. "Neo" signifies the belief in free markets as the means to realize that freedom. Neoliberalism did not come to dominate public policy until the 1980s in response to various crises attributed to the failures of Keynesian economics such as the

²⁰⁹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 203.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

OPEC oil crisis, stagflation, high unemployment, and slow economic growth. Its most powerful proponents, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, promoted deregulation, privatization, financialization of capital, low taxation, and the dismantling of organized labor. Thatcher famously announced there was “no such thing as society – only individual men and women.”²¹¹ “Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul.”²¹²

Thatcher’s assertions reflect the neoliberal requirement that in order for individuals to realize their entrepreneurial freedom, the role of the state must take a back seat to the structuring forces of the market. The state’s primary function is to enforce private property, contracts, and freedom of exchange, including the creation of new markets. However, this is not as innocuous as it sounds, because enforcing these rights often requires a coercive state. It is not a coincidence that neoliberal states increasingly lean towards authoritarian practices, relying more on the courts and military, defending corporate interests even when this means suppressing dissent, forcing open markets where there are none, and relying heavily on public/private partnerships that erode democratic processes.

The difficulty in challenging the contradiction between the neoliberal distrust of democracy and its commitment to individual freedom, lies in the ideological fusion of freedom with entrepreneurial freedom that has been so widely disseminated through think tanks, universities, media, politicians, corporations, and other civic institutions, and has

²¹¹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 59.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

achieved the status of common sense. And yet the implementation of neoliberal policies creates so many contradictions with the theory, it is perplexing why it remains largely unchallenged. How, Harvey inquires, do financial bailouts or the break-up of monopolies fit with the foundational belief in a non-interventionist government? Can the unprecedented inequality of wealth continue to be rationalized as part of the larger movement towards freedom for humanity?

From a certain Marxist perspective neoliberalism is not new. The conditions that Marx identified as constituting the fundamental capitalist relation are still prevalent in the twenty-first century. Harvey argues that the elements of primitive accumulation outlined by Marx in the twenty-sixth chapter of *Capital Vol.1*, also characterize neoliberal processes of accumulation through dispossession. Overall, neoliberalism has not been successful in stimulating economic growth globally. “Its actual record turns out to be nothing short of dismal.”²¹³ Its greatest success has been the redistribution rather than the generation of wealth, and it has achieved this through enclosure of the commons with extensive privatization, the predatory and fraudulent practices of financialization, creation of debt crises in developing countries, and state redistribution of wealth from the lower to upper classes through corporation-friendly tax structures.²¹⁴ In assessing neoliberalism, “the first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is.”²¹⁵

²¹³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 154.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-164.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

The challenge in naming neoliberalism as the restoration of the ruling class, is that it is “one of the primary functions of neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists.”²¹⁶

From Foucault’s perspective, neoliberalism ushers in a new production of subjectivity. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault draws a distinction between classical economic theory that views the worker as *homo oeconomicus*, a “partner of exchange”, and neoliberal theory of *homo oeconomicus* as human capital, the entrepreneurial self. The transformation occurs through the identification of the individual as worker/consumer to human capital that must be invested in, accrued, and subject to the competitive laws of innovation. This change in the conception of *homo oeconomicus* marks the shift from a society of standardized commodities and mass production to a constant drive for differentiation. Difference overrides homogenization and is seen as a way to pursue freedom from conformism. The income a worker earns is seen as a return on investment that the worker has made in herself as capital and will become the source of future income. In this context, individuals are more accurately conceived of as “enterprise-units” rather than laborers. The logic of exchange is replaced by the principle of competition. This has significant implications for the constitution of subjectivity.

The ‘genuine pleasure’ derived from neoliberal processes of self-management is confusing because it involves cultivating desirable emotional and social competencies such as compassion, resiliency, and creativity. It is difficult to make the case that increasing the individual’s range of coping skills in a volatile job market is a form of

²¹⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 202.

suffering. It is not. It is however, evidence of the power of capitalism to absorb critique, for these were the qualities that earlier critiques identified as antithetical to capitalism. Greed-is-good capitalism has been replaced with caring capitalism, rampant materialism with ethical consumerism, the calloused zero sum logic of the market with the win-win mantra of socially conscious business practices. Are these changes examples of capitalism's potential for true change or of its capacity to respond to critique by making it profitable? The lines between capitalism and resistance have become increasingly blurred under neoliberalism. Massumi confesses that one of the catalysts for his work on affect theory was the alarming resemblance between the language of critique during the May '68 revolution and neoliberal discourse. What is the difference between the affectively attuned individual that Massumi equates with emancipatory potential and the neoliberal subject who is sensitive to others and responsive to changing environments?

If the individual is the object of investment, then the imperative to always be increasing one's economic value becomes deeply internalized. There is no aspect of life that cannot be monetized. To invest in oneself as human capital requires a perpetual commitment to self-improvement, to developing techniques that increase productivity and employability in a hyper-competitive and inherently unstable job market: learning to brand and re-brand oneself, practice resilience in the face of adversity, be flexible with layoffs and frequent job changes, to have near constant availability for cost-cutting measures like dynamic scheduling or the gig economy. There is no realm of existence that is off limits to the imperative of unending self-improvement and self-regulation required to increase one's economic value as human capital. This profit-oriented outlook effectively erases the lines between work and leisure, making it easier to conflate

techniques to improve employability with self-worth and a meaningful existence. The assimilation of spirituality becomes normalized under these conditions.

One example of the neoliberal conflation of human capital with the therapeutic self is the increasing popularity of the mindfulness movement in North America. Although mindfulness practice is a contemporary form of Buddhist meditation, it is marketed through TED talks and workplace trainings as a form of secularized Buddhism without the cultural trappings, offering techniques that can alleviate stress, increase brain power and productivity, discover personal bliss, improve sexual performance, increase memory and creativity, and countless other benefits. Consumers of mindfulness trainings are assured of its scientifically verified results, citing MRI scans of meditating monks and studies of increased brain plasticity in long-term practitioners, touting meditation as the new science of the mind. In his work, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David McMahan observes that “crossing over from meditation as an *object* of scientific investigation to characterizing it as *itself* a science, however, is not without problems.”²¹⁷ Which parts of Buddhist practice are taken up by science and why do some aspects have more cultural currency than others? When disembedded from its traditional soteriological and social role, “its ends are no longer determined solely by the authority of Buddhist tradition but also by modern psychology, which in turn is embedded in the broader discourses of modernity that stress autonomy, self-direction, and self-discovery.”²¹⁸ The genuine pleasure derived from self-transformation cannot be entirely

²¹⁷ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 209.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

written off as false consciousness, but its compatibility with neoliberal principles and treating the human being as capital is not a coincidence. It also cannot be relegated to the private sphere, because in neoliberalism there is no longer a meaningful separation between private and public domains, leisure and work. A recent PBS special, “Mindfulness Goes Mainstream”, explores the psychological and medical benefits of meditation “now embraced by millions of ordinary people” (although it is always accompanied by celebrity testimonies – in this program it is the singer Jewel). One of the ordinary individuals interviewed in this episode was the owner of a midwest insurance company whose life-changing experience with mindfulness practice led him to ‘offer’ this practice to his employees. He established “Mindfulness Mondays” where employees are encouraged to participate in mindfulness practice, and workplace hallways are adorned with mindfulness aphorisms. In the interview, he boasts about the increase in employee work productivity levels - calculated to an exact percentage - since introducing meditation practice to the workplace.

From a business perspective, this is seen as a win-win situation for all. The worker must bear the burden of the stress caused by the structural instability of neoliberalism. Mindfulness practice offers a remedy that is not threatening to employers (its focus on inner transformation does not tend towards collective solidarities), and employees can feel meaningful about their lives and be less consumed by negative emotions. The management of subjectivity in this way depoliticizes the structural tensions produced by a neoliberal economy and makes critique of historical and social conditions antithetical to spirituality and its focus on the present moment.

Complicity

This dissertation began with two questions. How and why do subjects participate in their own repression? Even more, why do they desire it? Affect theory and negative dialectics overlap in their shared concern over the nature of complicity with duplicitous forces of domination that generate personal fulfillment, thereby making pleasure a political issue. Massumi claims that “complicity is an ontological condition under neoliberalism,”²¹⁹ because oppressive forces and resistance to those forces emerge from the same ontological field of affect. He writes: “It’s very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there’s been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.”²²⁰ For Massumi, this confusion is not a mistake. Inevitably, resistance resembles the dynamic it opposes because it dips into the same virtual realm that capitalist power does; both movements access the virtual realm of becoming rather than being confined to the actual realm of determined entities. The difference is that capitalist movement primes virtual tendencies which are put to work for the generation of surplus value, and resistance ideally primes virtual tendencies that are incited to generate surplus values of life. Resistance to the capitalist agenda requires an affective attunement to the “bare activity” of life-making processes so they can be modulated before emerging in ready-made form for enterprise. Effective priming strategies and keen affective attunement open the possibility for self-

²¹⁹ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Values*, 68.

²²⁰ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 21.

affirming intensities to emerge. “Intensity does not ‘have’ value. It *is* a value.”²²¹

Massumi refers to this kind of intensity as a surplus-value of life because while it may not be invulnerable to the influence of capitalist processes that generate surplus value, it is at least less amenable to them. There is no guarantee that a surplus value of life would not dissipate as soon as it emerged or would not be captured within a capitalist movement. But it could also become a prime that attracts future intensities. Ontological complicity means that there is no outside because the outside is already the most immanent inside, or as Massumi puts it, the most “immanent outside.”²²² Affect is everywhere but cannot be found anywhere since it disappears the moment it is perceived by the knowing subject. Massumi means this to be a fruitful paradox that complicates rigid divisions between subject/object, nature/culture, human/animal, representation/non-representation, and material/immaterial. To the extent that affect evokes new ways to think about agency and change unmoored from these dichotomies, it warrants consideration. But it is not yet clear how grounding cultural theory in an ineffable vitality that eludes critique can offer an alternative to capital as the dominant organizing principle of life.

Recall that in Massumi’s analysis of Bush’s operative logic of preemption, ontopowerful strategies require a “becoming-terrorist of your own.”²²³ Guns and armies

²²¹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 99.

²²² The Mobius strip offers a helpful starting point for conceptualizing the inseparability of interiority and exteriority, but it is limited because it relies on the spatial condition of Euclidian geometry. Topological movements capture the complex dynamics of indeterminacy and determinacy, which is why Massumi describes the workings of affect in terms of enfoldings and infra-churnings.

²²³ Massumi, *Ontopower*, 11.

cannot catch terrorists because they do not operate on the same battlefield. Massumi similarly concludes that using critique to resist complicity with capitalist power is the equivalent of mobilizing large armies that can only capture terrorists once they have committed their acts of destruction. Critique always arrives too late because it does not recognize the asymmetrical battlefield it is fighting on. A becoming-capital of your own levels the playing field. Because we are ontologically complicit, resistance must “embrace *creative* duplicity: emergent ways of strategically playing the ontological condition of complicity, to tendentially postcapitalist effect.”²²⁴ Saying ‘Yes’ by priming new flows of self-affirming intensities offers alternative modes of experiencing the world that, importantly for Massumi, are beyond the human.

For Adorno, the issue of complicity is thoroughly entangled with suffering, but to say it is ontologically established as Massumi claims, is to attribute the status of second nature to a social-historical phenomenon. Any analysis of oppression must begin with the premise that “the mechanism of domination is to forbid the recognition of suffering.”²²⁵ Complicity rationalizes suffering and obscures the social-historical memory of how it came to be. Given the confusing and ubiquitous nature of capitalist power, finding respite from the normalization of suffering constitutes a break with complicity. To underestimate this break is to underestimate the effectiveness of capitalist power to

²²⁴ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Values*, 69.

²²⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 63.

normalize exchange relations as the only rational way of life.²²⁶ The key then to resisting domination begins with the recognition of suffering. This requires interpretation, especially when engaging with affective structures that produce genuine pleasure. A world where most forms of suffering are transparent is not a world constituted through capitalist relations. Adorno's attention to sensuous critical thought reveals a contradiction between what we are experiencing and what we think we are experiencing. Noticing this gap gives expression to suffering and breaks from the domination that forbids the recognition of suffering it produces. While Massumi argues that thought is not quick enough to catch on to the moment before becoming turns into being, Adorno contends that negative dialectical thought 'primes', to use Massumi's term, the subject to entrust its own experience without reifying it. Complicity occurs through reification; theory names this process and aids in the expression of suffering. "Theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core. What would be free from the spell of the world is not under theory's jurisdiction."²²⁷ Suffering is theory's jurisdiction. Without negative dialectical interpretation, which is not the same as rationalization, it would be difficult to discern between true experiences of respite from suffering and experiences of increasingly alluring forms of complicity. Saying 'No' is to recognize suffering for what it is. The question of whether this qualifies as theory or

²²⁶ Massumi claims that neoliberalism intensifies this rationalization of suffering by transforming the individual as wage laborer, (who traditionally stands in contradiction to the capitalist), to human capital, where the contradiction is more deeply internalized. However, I argue that this is still a form of contradiction and therefore does not transcend the need for negative dialectical interpretation.

²²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 31.

practice I think is one that Adorno never fully answered and it is easy to mine his work for textual citations to support either side. However, Adorno was unequivocal in his denouncement of practice that bypasses or conflates with theory. He was uncompromising on the emancipatory value of grounding theory/practice in suffering. Practice that presumes the irrelevance of critique simultaneously presumes the irrelevance of suffering. It is therefore crucial to reveal the conditions that make critique seem unnecessary or even ridiculous.

Affect theory openly promotes the conditions that minimize the relevance and effectiveness of critique. It does so through the intentional conflation of theory and practice. Massumi is very critical of critique. At its best critique only debunks what it aims to eradicate, but it does not add anything to the world. At its worst, critique becomes part of the problem it is meant to deconstruct because it obstructs creative thinking and practice that could incite change. Massumi states: “However strenuously it might debunk concepts like “representation,” it carries on as if it mirrored something outside itself with which it had no complicity, no unmediated processual involvement, and thus could justifiably oppose.”²²⁸ Massumi attributes the “intemperate arrogance of debunking” to a reactive mode akin to Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*.

However, any account of Massumi’s critique of critique must begin with his troubling generalization of critique. Significant differences among critical theorists are ignored in Massumi’s works in order to exaggerate certain problematic traits that affect theory can then rectify. Part of his methodology entails the creation of new concepts and

²²⁸ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 62.

terminology in order to shed unwanted conceptual baggage. It can be argued that the work of positing a new theory, developing the terminology and conceptual frameworks that can facilitate discussion about affect, takes precedence over addressing specific thinkers whose work assumes, according to Massumi, similar problematic conceptual parameters. “The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect. Our entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences.”²²⁹ Massumi is concerned that due to the “absence of an asignifying philosophy of affect, it is all too easy for received psychological categories to slip back in.”²³⁰ Creating new concepts requires a clean slate, terminology that is unburdened by philosophical assumptions from post-structuralism, psychology, semiotics, or ideology critique. It can also be argued that exaggerating the shortcomings of previous theories serves as a strategic overcorrective to unchallenged dominant concepts. Adorno confessed that he employed this strategy to replace the idealist subject with the primacy of the object. “It [the object’s primacy] is the corrective of the subjective reduction, not the denial of a subjective share.”²³¹ Adorno engaged with specific thinkers, but this is critique and Massumi is not interested in tearing down others’ work. He states, “Foster or debunk. It’s a strategic question,” and he adds, “it is simply that when you are busy critiquing you are less busy augmenting.”²³²

²²⁹ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 27.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Adorno, “Subject and Object.” In *The Adorno Reader*, 143.

²³² Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 13.

If helpful insights from other theories are overlooked in the process of augmenting, perhaps it is safe to assume that there will be no shortage of critiques, like the present work, to address these gaps.

That said, by avoiding substantial engagement with theories from the traditions he has rejected, Massumi runs the risk of committing some of the same mistakes he holds responsible for cultural theory's dead-end. Despite his adamant rejection of the uninventive and destructive nature of theories of critique and the academic culture that endorses such methods, Massumi does not escape his own complicity with this form of objectifying judgment. He dismisses epistemology and any theories that privilege the knowing subject as irredeemably disembodied and then opposes it to an unmediated, autonomous ontology that is the true source of freedom located in the corporeality of the body. But this critique of critique relies on a very limited and narrow understanding of the mind and consciousness which not only Adorno, but also feminist theorists, queer theorists, critical race theorists, and disability theorists do not endorse. In her response to *Parables of the Virtual*, feminist theorist Clare Hemmings comments on the tendency in academic disciplines to objectify the old in order to usher in the new. "In the search for 'the new' that bears no resemblance to the past, the identifying features of that past are inevitably overstated, and the claims for that new embellished in ways that must at the very least fall short of rigorous."²³³ When positing a new theory, Hemmings observes, there is a "vested interest in reading for generality instead of complexity."²³⁴ Massumi is

²³³ Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn", 555.

²³⁴ Ibid.

no exception to this practice. Perhaps this is unavoidable to a certain degree, which is why putting new theories into dialogue with specific theorists from the rejected traditions is a necessary stage in the development of the new. Putting Massumi in dialogue with Adorno subjects affect theory and its claims of emancipatory potential to a more rigorous interrogation than its initial presentation against the proverbial straw man Massumi has created out of “critique”.

I will first present Massumi’s argument against critique and then examine how these concerns can be addressed through the concept of non-identity and the primacy of suffering that constitute negative dialectics. Massumi argues that critique always arrives too late because it does not operate pre-emptively at the level of ontological indeterminacy. There is no capacity to incite the new because critique is unable to “go kinetic.”²³⁵ Massumi claims that he is advocating for a form of critique that does not succumb to the self-defeating cycle of traditional critique because, he claims, it is immanent. When immanent critique is grounded in affect theory, it goes kinetic by assuming the primacy of movement and becoming attuned to the stirring field of emergent potentials. Immanent critique is “active, participatory critique. . . .it actively alters conditions of emergence. It engages becoming, rather than judging what is.”²³⁶ There is no outside to capitalism because capitalist movements regenerate directly in the register of affect. For critique to be effective, it must acknowledge there is no choice other than immanence and so it must “modulate the constraints at the constitutive level,

²³⁵ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 67.

²³⁶ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 71.

where they re-emerge and seriate.”²³⁷ Massumi’s motto is: “Don’t mediate. Modulate.”²³⁸ The affective fact that we are unavoidably ontologically complicit means that operating at the threshold of the virtual and actual realms provides a better chance, but not a guarantee, of effecting real change. The assumption that the most immanent parts of the world are thoroughly mediated confines critique to a limited jurisdiction of already actualized tendencies.

Massumi presents an analysis of the limitations of identity politics to illustrate the ineffectiveness of critique and its potentially damaging effects. He argues that while it is an effective strategy initially to mobilize anger in response to the disenfranchisement experienced by individuals who share a common identity, this is ultimately a limiting condition for change because anger is “the most active of “sad” affects. Despite its intensity, anger remains on the reactive spectrum. What has been achieved is “a becoming-active of the reactive.”²³⁹ Critique plays a pivotal role in the cycle of reactivity or *ressentiment* because it provides compelling analyses of systemic oppression that feeds off of anger. There is movement, but it remains trapped in a closed circuit of pain, reaction, and negative critique. “Capacitation is arrived at, but its reaccess is always via a detour through reaction, raised to a higher power by negative critique.”²⁴⁰ “Critique is immobilizing”, because it reduces the open-ended, affective field of relational

²³⁷ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 71.

²³⁸ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 198.

²³⁹ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 56.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

singularities (potentials) to a single oppositional relation between active and passive. This effectively separates a body from what it can do because it only acts after something has been done to it. Its potential for action is pre-determined by the postural assumption of fear. Only when the qualitative multiplicity of the affective field has been reduced to a one-dimensional relation of opposition is critique able to engage.

Critical practices aimed at increasing potentials for freedom and for movement are inadequate, because in order to critique something in any kind of definitive way you have to pin it down. In a way, it is an almost sadistic enterprise that separates something out, attributes set characteristics to it, then applies a final judgement to it – objectifies it, in a moralizing kind of way.²⁴¹

If critique could enable the body to be poised for “readiness potential” before perception becomes predominantly organized around reaction, then critique would become unrecognizable as such.

Negative dialectics does not engage in this “sadistic enterprise” described by Massumi, because cultivating a consistent sense of non-identity troubles the reified relation between active and passive that must be assumed in order to objectify and moralize. Adorno’s fearlessly passive subject is not passive in a reactionary way, and as the object’s agent, it is active in its openness to the unfamiliar and uncomfortable aspects of the object. A consistent effort is required to say ‘No’ to impulses that solidify experience into a subject which only knows what it can control. The linear active-passive relation that Massumi associates with critique would obstruct the mediated relation between subject and object. By Adorno’s account, the truth of constitutive subjectivity consists of its fundamental passivity in conforming with the given. There is a

²⁴¹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 14.

tremendous amount of experience locked up in the reifying processes that occur with deceptive naturalness in everyday life. The fearless passive subject is active in unlocking these processes through trusting its own experience of the object's dissonance.

What are the material-social conditions that confine thought to the kind of sadistic enterprise described by Massumi? What kind of suffering does this sadistic thought mask? Finally, what kind of thought can resist this reifying function? Adorno writes: "Prior to all particular content, thinking is actually the force of resistance, from which it has been alienated only with great effort."²⁴² Negative dialectical thinking is an open thinking because it is attuned to cognitive and somatic dissonance that arises from the object's truth content that contains its own untruth. The pinning down of an object for final judgement can only be met with thinking that is a force of resistance to the façade of objectivity produced by the identitarian thinking that Massumi calls critique. Adorno sometimes portrays a bleak world, but this is not the same as the sadistic *ressentiment* that can only understand the world in order to dominate it. Thinking should not be reduced to a psychological process or to a "timelessly pure, formal logic."²⁴³ Thinking also should not render the subject's role irrelevant or dispensable. Finally, and most relevant to the examination of the role of thinking in developing affective attunement, Adorno writes, "Thinking is a mode of comportment and its relation to the subject matter with which it comports itself is indispensable."²⁴⁴ Adorno understands the nature of the

²⁴² Adorno, "Resignation." In *Critical Models*, 293.

²⁴³ Adorno, "Notes on Philosophical Thinking." In *Critical Models*, 130.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

concept and its universalizing, identity-oriented activity which is why the non-conceptual part of the concept is a significant part of negative dialectics, but not in the same way that it is for affect theory.

Massumi's call to go kinetic reflects a performative approach to knowing that conflates theory and practice in a way that Adorno views as highly problematic. The suspicion with which Adorno views practice is a response to the conflation of theory and practice by those who view theory non-dialectically as passive. Adorno was particularly suspicious of the compulsion for putting theory into practice because this was rarely if ever separated from the compulsion to identity. The coercion of identity in thought and action is at the base of all violence. "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death,"²⁴⁵ and yet, post-holocaust philosophers and activists failed to learn this tragic lesson. "One continually finds the word *critique*, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word *constructive*. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized."²⁴⁶ Adorno continues, "By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses its vehemence."²⁴⁷ Requiring that critique include an account of a better world obstructs the opportunity to observe the problem that generates a need for a better world. This is not a view generated from a sadistic mode of thought but rather from a comportment of thought to the pain and loss of the suffering subject.

²⁴⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

²⁴⁶ Adorno, "Critique." In *Critical Models*, 287.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The prescience of Adorno's observation as it applies to contemporary American society in 2019 is as brilliant as it is unsettling. In *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, journalist and author Anand Giridharadas examines the role of the rich elite who have benefitted from neoliberal policies and want to use their wealth for social change, but only if it can be achieved in market-friendly ways. The belief that social problems can be solved more efficiently and "at scale" through better business deals and market consensus rather than the work of participatory democracy, goes unchallenged. The values, vocabulary, assumptions, and entrepreneurial spirit of the business world are promoted as the universal tool kit for social change. The belief that those who have become successful in this world are considered the most competent to change it, ignores a significantly inherent conflict of interest. "The people with the most to lose from genuine social change have placed themselves in charge of social change, often with the passive assent of those most in need of it."²⁴⁸ This plutocracy of economic elites who consider themselves leaders of social change are also the sponsors of intellectual production, including public ideas events like TED, PopTech, South by Southwest, Aspen Ideas Festival, the World Economic Forum, or "anything sponsored by the Atlantic".²⁴⁹ Daniel Drezner, foreign policy scholar and author of *The Ideas Industry*, distinguishes between public intellectuals and thought leaders. Public intellectuals question apparatuses of power and will point out "when the emperor has no clothes."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*, 9.

²⁴⁹ Drezner, *The Ideas Industry*, 11.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

Thought leaders “know one big thing and believe that their important idea will change the world.”²⁵¹ “The former are skeptics; the latter are true believers. The former is a critic; the latter is a creator.”²⁵² The popularity of TED talks is an unsurprising outcome of neoliberal principles that frame critique as an out of date and resentful response to the speed and innovation of technology and globalization. TED talks are twenty-minute sales pitches, often ending with standing ovations and no forum for question/answer dialogue. This is a perfect venue for unbridled optimism and win-win initiatives that are not subjected to the scrutiny of intellectual debate. What is conspicuously absent in the Big Ideas events is discussion of inequality and injustice. The “thought leader three-step” consists of focusing on the victim rather than the perpetrator, personalizing the political, and being “constructively actionable”. The only problems allowed to be presented are ones that can be followed by “digestible lists of tips on how to fix things”.²⁵³ The last step in the thought leader three-step is only possible if preceded by the first two. Suffering must be first be depoliticized and confined to the private sphere of the individual before it can be addressed.

This is what Adorno meant when he argued that the ideals of freedom and political change “can no longer be read out of reality as a concrete tendency.”²⁵⁴ What are the conditions that make critique seem irrelevant or obstructive to change? Drezner and

²⁵¹ Drezner, *The Ideas Industry*, 9.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*, 100.

²⁵⁴ Adorno, “Critique.” In *Critical Models*, 287.

Giridharadas answer this question by analyzing the conditions that promote the ascendancy of thought leaders and the phenomenon of TED talks, that promote the belief that in order to change the world one must first financially master it, and that obscure the contradiction of changing the status quo by profiting from it. In short, the conditions that value practice, action, and measurable outcomes coincide seamlessly with the rejection of any theory that is not already the same as its practice.

Massumi's argument that critique must go kinetic certainly is not promoting anything close to a thought leader three-step, but his dismissal of critique because it does not meet his conditions of performativity is concerning given the neoliberal priority for action over thought. And yet, Massumi insists that resistance is not thought. "Resistance cannot be communicated or inculcated. It can only be gestured. The gesture is a call to attunement."²⁵⁵ The concept of attunement is crucial in affect theory. Change emerges from affect because all of existence emerges from affect, so resistance necessarily *is* attunement to this non-conceptual reality. Understanding this involves cognitive activity, but Massumi argues it is not the destructive thought of critique. It is thought that identifies that which cannot actually be thought without eluding thought's grasp. This can only be truly appreciated once thought gets out of its own way and is replaced with a bodily attunement to affect. Massumi expands the definition of the body so that it is not confined to the knowing subject and consists instead of a bundle of capacities that are always in flux and ready to perceive pre-conscious change. However, this important

²⁵⁵ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 105.

reconfiguring of the body does not provide an answer to how one would discern whether one is truly connecting to affect or to flows of affect already captured.

Neoliberalism encompasses an experience economy. This is a newer frontier than the service economy or production of material commodities. The focus on customer experience as the product profitably coincides with the transformative experiences valued by entrepreneurial subjects. Neoliberalism ushers in an unprecedented blurring of boundaries between the subject as entrepreneur, consumer, and citizen. It would seem that critique is more relevant now than ever, but under neoliberalism and affect theory, it is viewed as a worn-out model of change and caricatured as elitist and resentful.

Affect theory points to the possibility of experience not incited by capitalist processes and that embodies self-affirming intensities, but it is more often than not an ambivalent experience because of its fleeting quality. Affect lurks in the useless which, because of its irrelevance is barely perceivable. “So if we’re interested in resisting capitalist capture, an important element of that would be to find ways of re-valuing the ephemeral.”²⁵⁶

The kind of affective experiences that generate a surplus value of life can and do often overlap with capitalist surplus power and this fact of affect contains both the problem and solution. For Massumi, complicity is the touchstone of affect. “Don’t bemoan complicity – game it. Don’t critically lord it over others with your doctrinal prowess – get creatively down and dirty in the field of play.”²⁵⁷ This quote is from

²⁵⁶ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 97.

²⁵⁷ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 69.

Massumi's most recent book, in which he grants slightly more value to critique than in previous works, drawing a distinction between critique that arrogantly presents as the only form of meaningful resistance and critique that knows its place as backup for "assisting movements of escape", for supporting "their primary task of self-affirming their qualitative difference, of carrying themselves to higher, tendentially postcapitalist, power. It [critique] cannot, and should not, direct them."²⁵⁸ Critique may prove helpful in some situations under limited conditions, but it can never play a significant role in the incitement of counter-ontopower. However, what counts as priming for a counter-ontopower is frustratingly vague because the target is always on the move. Massumi explains that "under neoliberalism, priming goes feral."²⁵⁹

Not Negative Enough

The way forward is not clear. Affect theory and negative dialectics are not prescriptive, but for different reasons. For Massumi, affective attunement requires an experimental approach. In response to the criticism that valuing the ephemeral and decentering the human depoliticizes and obscures the mechanisms of capitalist power, Massumi explains that the constitutive relationality of affect already invokes the political albeit not in traditional terms. Given its "proto-political"²⁶⁰ nature, affective experimentation would orient away from established interests and toward a coming

²⁵⁸ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 69.

²⁵⁹ Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, 31.

²⁶⁰ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, ix.

together of different tendencies of becoming that collectively emerge in a singular event that could never have been consciously engineered. Because “the concept of affect is politically oriented from the get go,”²⁶¹ a politics of affect starts in the middle, from the zones of indetermination between virtual tendencies and their actualization. A politics of affect requires a capacity to perceive change in the making. “To affect and to be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity. This openness is also taken as primary. It is the cutting edge of change.”²⁶² The postcapitalist future that Massumi envisions will not be ushered in by re-positioning and re-signifying actualized entities and relations within a structural matrix that admits of no openings.²⁶³ Processual entanglement is primordial. We just need to perceive it. Capitalism is not constituted through structures and systems because its nature is fundamentally processual. Unlike a system,

a process is in touch with a great outside. It is defined by its openness to that great outside: by how it dips into and captures the tendential potentials stirring there. These potentials are unlimited....Rather than any in-itself of things, we're talking about the of-itself of the world, the giving-of-itself of the world's potential....²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, viii.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁶³ Reprogramming the code re-arranges actualized concepts, identities, or political structures, but it does not change the playing field itself. “For structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant rules” (Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 27).

²⁶⁴ Massumi, *Principles of Unrest*, 28-29.

Affect is more immanent to capitalist processes than structures because it is the source to which capitalist relations repeatedly return to for renewal and re-emergence, always in a different form (no repetition without difference even if the difference is barely perceivable). Resistance to capitalist power is a confusing relation, but it is meant to be because capitalism is not a structural monolith. It is, as Massumi describes it, always outrunning itself, spilling over its limitations and dipping into the world's potential for new frontiers of production of surplus-value. By situating political change in the "felt excess of potential,"²⁶⁵ affect theory embraces a robustly affirmative approach to how it characterizes capitalist relations and the productive value of escaping those relations. Resistance primes the field of emergence toward "the production of self-affirming surplus-values of life that answer to a purely qualitative economy, multiplying and accelerating that escape from capitalism, that leak from it."²⁶⁶ The production of surplus value is countered by the production of surplus-values of life. Ontopower and counter-ontopower do not move through or from critiques of reification. "Reification is just a passing phase in a process of continuing variation. Contemporary capitalism is more moving than it is reifying."²⁶⁷ However, what is at stake in assuming that "things don't stand still long enough to become fixed,"²⁶⁸ is the capacity to contest material blockages

²⁶⁵ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 101.

²⁶⁶ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 100. Note that Massumi is not advocating for an accelerationist theory of resistance whereby the crises of capitalism are incited to accelerate into the big crash.

²⁶⁷ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 84.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

that do become objectified and that impose serious restraints on an individual's ability to move more freely, that is, to move ontogenetically. Yet, even if increased access is granted to the productive processes of affect, being more intensely in relation (one of the ways Massumi describes affect) does not necessarily provide a way of discerning who or what is excluded from or harmed by that relation. It is not clear how the suffering caused by persistent structural violence can be alleviated or given a voice through forces of becoming without first recognizing the forces of endurance that are deeply imbedded in ordinary life. But Massumi insists that resistance to complicity is not about being right (affect transcends such moralizing positions) but living more intensely, of inciting surplus-values of life "that makes the event worth living for its own intensity – where, instead of being right, it becomes beautiful."²⁶⁹

By comparison, Adorno is an affective killjoy. He states:

There is no way out of entanglement. The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuses of one's own existence, and for the rest to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell.²⁷⁰

I select this grim quote to highlight a crucial aspect of Adorno's negativism that I think becomes lost on both his critics and advocates. The problem with negative critique is not that it fails to locate a redemptive element immanent to social reality, or that it shuns political practice, or as Massumi claims, that it tears down the world instead of augmenting it. According to Adorno, if there is a problem with negative critique it would

²⁶⁹ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 69.

²⁷⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 27-28.

be that it is not negative enough. The desire to instrumentalize non-identity in order to seek normative foundations despite Adorno's anti-foundationalism, is intricately linked to the compulsion, however subtle, for identity. Even readings that interpret negative dialectics through the lens of negative theology, as I will examine below, reifies rather than accepts the negativity of negativity. "Against this, the seriousness of unswerving negation lies in its refusal to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are. To negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather that the negation was not negative enough."²⁷¹

I turn now to a reading of Adorno by political theorist Jane Bennett that situates the dialogue between Massumi and Adorno within a similar contemporary dialogue between new materialist approaches and the historical materialist traditions. Bennett's vital materialism shares with affect theory a rejection of traditional notions of matter and subjectivity, and replaces epistemological models with ontological modes of knowing-being. Bennett engages specifically with Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics which is rooted in the historical materialism of Marx (even though Adorno rejects some Marx's major tenets). In her book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett provides a new materialist approach to reconceptualizing matter as a vital agentic force and concludes, like Massumi, that the demystifying activities of critique assume a narrow definition of political agency as human agency. This precludes the consideration of matter as generative, dynamic, and emerging through intra-actions rather than the laws of linear causality. Understanding matter in this way challenges well known binary

²⁷¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 159-160.

distinctions between human/non-human, organic/inorganic, and life/matter. Crucially, Bennett focuses on man-made items and other objects that seem most devoid of life: a plastic bottle cap, a dead rat, a black work glove. Despite their passive and inert appearance, these material objects manifest a vibrancy or “thing-power” that exceeds their ordinary status as inanimate matter. Bergson’s concept of *élan vital* is invoked as an example of vital materialism that is worthy of engagement because it offers a critique of mechanistic models of nature that does not shun science. Bennett concludes that Bergson fell short of a full-fledged vital materialism because *élan vital* supplements matter rather than understanding materiality as a life force in itself. Thing-power serves “to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed”²⁷² and, “if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things elevated.”²⁷³ Bodies are assemblages of interpenetrating forces which interact with other assemblages, which is to say that the idea of human agency is misleading when it is extracted from the larger network of assemblages that it is ontologically always entangled with.

Bennett anticipates that affective attunement to the constantly shifting boundaries of the body will cultivate ethical accountability to the open-ended field of human, organic, and inorganic things; it will radically transform the notion of self-interest through the realization that caring for the self requires caring for the assemblages in which it is imbedded. This ethical attunement is not possible without first coming to

²⁷² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 12.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.

know the thing-power of everyday objects. Unlike Massumi, Bennett engages specifically with a theorist from the critical tradition that she is providing an alternative to.

Jane Bennett writes this about Adorno: “Negative dialectics has an affinity with negative theology: negative dialectics honors nonidentity as one would honor an unknowable god; Adorno’s “specific materialism” includes the possibility that there is divinity behind or within the reality that withdraws.”²⁷⁴ Bennett then makes the claim that “a vital materialism is more thoroughly nontheistic in presentation: the out-side has no messianic promise.”²⁷⁵ This is a surprising conclusion because Bennett otherwise demonstrates a firm understanding of significant aspects of negative dialectics, including the primacy of suffering. She remarks that nonidentity “makes itself known with the least distortion in the form of an unarticulated feeling of resistance, suffering, and pain.”²⁷⁶ Bennett also recognizes Adorno’s commitment to using the concept to understand the non-conceptual and the idealist rage against nonidentity that can be countered by the preponderance of the object. And yet, she argues that Adorno treats non-identity as an “absent *absolute*, as a messianic promise.”²⁷⁷ Attributing an absolute status to nonidentity reifies the very negativity that is meant to break through the veil of reification. Referring to an unqualified negative theology further obscures the negativity

²⁷⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 16.

²⁷⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 16-17.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 127, endnote (39).

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 (emphasis mine).

of negativity that Adorno consistently invokes in response to affirmative approaches. Adorno writes, “It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope.”²⁷⁸

Bennett and Massumi are both committed to a radical reconfiguration of the human as sovereign, intentional agent and advocate for a dissolution of the subject that attributes agency to all human and non-human actants. And yet, both affect theory and new materialism require a knowing subject that can transform dominant epistemological models. I believe there is no way to avoid the human subject as the locus of knowledge that undergirds the change that matters in affect theory and new materialism. Whether it is Barad’s concept of agential realism that aims to replace representational knowledge with intra-active mattering, or Massumi’s concept of the embodied knowing of ontopower, or Bennett’s “careful course of anthropomorphization”²⁷⁹ to reinvigorate the liveliness of matter, all of these approaches start with the subject that produces the right kind of knowledge about the world, including an awareness of its own epistemological shortcomings. Only after a new materialist epistemological stance has been established can the understanding of the ontology of relation generate a self-evident ethical responsiveness that is performative in nature.

Bennett inquires, “What are some tactics for cultivating the experience of our *selves* as vibrant matter? The task is to explore ways to engage effectively and

²⁷⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

²⁷⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

sustainably this enchanting and dangerous matter-energy.”²⁸⁰ All of three of these theorists bemoan the lack of political strategies offered by critique. Barad states that “the ubiquitous pronouncements that experience or the material world is “mediated” have offered precious little guidance about how to proceed.”²⁸¹ Massumi complains that critique never adds anything to the world. Bennett argues that critique has value only if followed by positive, utopian formulations, and that, “the capacity to detect the presence of impersonal affect requires that one is caught up in it. One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and adopt a more open-ended comportment.”²⁸² How to discern between the experience of commodity fetishism and thing-power is not addressed. Bennett explains that her experience of the liveliness of the dead rat, plastic bottle cap, and other debris that had collected in a street grate one morning was influenced considerably by readings of Thoreau, Spinoza, and Merleau-Ponty. I consider these sources to be forms of intellectual priming that cued Bennett’s “anticipatory readiness on my in-side, by a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power.”²⁸³ I point this out to reiterate that one cannot dispense with conceptual priming, especially if there is an intention to break out of spatially oriented modes of perception. The difference between the subject who senses the shimmering, vibrating nature of things and Adorno’s fearlessly passive subject is significant. The subject that perceives thing-power

²⁸⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xix.

²⁸¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 152.

²⁸² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 5.

foregrounds a sensuous aspect of the object that is interpreted experientially as an unusual immediacy (and can often include a visual bias), that one gets “caught up” in. Bennett describes it as a naïve ambition. In this regard, thing-power offers an alternative relation between subject and object, but it does not necessarily minimize the difference between them as Bennett claims, and it does not address and therefore resist the reified separation between subject and object that makes the experience of thing-power so unusual to begin with.

Recall Bergson’s claim that there is nothing less than the present moment. Although Adorno ultimately rejected Bergson’s two forms of cognition, the enduring influence of Bergson’s thought in Adorno’s work can be found in the constitutive role of memory in every iteration of the subject-object encounter. Our obligation is to memory. Change begins with confronting the norms of forgetting. This is the missing dimension in Bennett’s (and Massumi’s) work, and so it is unsurprising that Adorno’s negativity would be viewed by Bennett as an absolute; from the vital materialist’s perspective memory is too bound up with subjectivity and the dialectical obsession with negativity that is all too human. In her critique of demystification, Bennett remarks, “If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it.”²⁸⁴ But this is not the posture of the fearlessly passive subject that is constituted through its unknowing openness to the object. Just as the fearlessly passive subject is oriented to notice and value some things (suffering, non-identity) more than others, the vital materialist subject resonates with

²⁸⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

some things (inorganic elements, nonhuman actants) and not others based on an epistemologically informed perspective.

Thing-power counters the traditional separation between subject and object but does not address the social and historical conditions that sustain this separation. When things start to spark and shimmer what is being obscured? Asking this question presumes a lack of engagement with the economic forces (of exchange) that require a conception of nature and inorganic things as passive objects there for the taking. Adorno states: “For our knowledge of nature is really so preformed by the demand that we *dominate* nature...that we end up understanding only those aspects of nature that we can control.”²⁸⁵ One of the issues that lies at the heart of new materialist approaches that Bennett exemplifies is the hope that awareness of the vitality and relationality of matter will catalyze ethical action. But it is not clear what political strategies or practices are offered beyond an inner transformation of the self to be more open and attuned to the non-human and inorganic forces it is entangled with. It is also unclear how, in the absence of negative critique, this reconfigured materialism would not simply embolden new strategies for control and diminish accountability.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176.

²⁸⁶ Bennett admits that her controversial analysis of the North American Blackout could easily support the power grid companies' refusal of responsibility by attributing agency to all of the actants in the assemblage: plastic, electron streams, wire, wood, sweat, profit motives, static, computer programs, and legislation. A negative dialectical interpretation would highlight the overriding movement of profit that seems to get lost in the ontological continuum of human and non-human actants.

While Bennet provides an example of reading negative dialectics in a reifying way based on her philosophy of new materialism, John Holloway's interpretation of non-identity provides an example of reifying Adorno's negativity from within the tradition of historical materialism. Holloway writes:

Does Adorno actually say that *we* are non-identity? Not as far as I know. Perhaps I am reading him in a non-identitarian way, against and beyond Adorno. But how else can we understand non-identity? Non-identity can only be a force that changes itself, that drives beyond itself, that creates and creates itself. And where do we find a creative and self-creative force? Not animals, not god, not nature, only humans, we. Not an identitarian we, but a disjointed, ill-fitting, creative we.²⁸⁷

It is tempting to read Adorno in this way, to see the work of non-identity as a self-creative force. It stands to reason that the negation of identitarian thought (and all that it negates) could invite an opening for creative activity. But for Adorno this only stands to reason under conditions that presume identity. "Auch im Äußersten ist Negation der Negation keine Positivität."²⁸⁸ Only a reified consciousness would fail to see that "dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction."²⁸⁹ Holloway provides a strong defense of the difference between negative dialectics and traditional dialectical materialism based on the former's rejection of any form of synthesis. However, Holloway's portrayal of non-identity as more than the untruth of identity that could potentially provide respite from suffering, hints at a different kind of synthesis that oddly resembles Massumi's language

²⁸⁷ Holloway, *Negativity and Revolution*, 13.

²⁸⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialektick*, 385.

²⁸⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

around affect. Holloway states that, “The movement of non-identity is the movement of creativity. Non-identity is an overflowing beyond what is, it is change and self-change, creation and self-creation. To put non-identity at the center of philosophy is to put negation-creation at the center.”²⁹⁰ This is a rather unsubtle instrumentalization of non-identity as the means to the production of the new. Adorno was very clear on this point that as the consistent sense of non-identity, negative dialectics requires an attunement to the consistent guilt of one’s thinking which would lend a voice to suffering, not to catalyze the creation of something new. Holloway’s belief that every break with identity is an opening for revolutionary acts of creation is guilty of the “bad positivity” that Adorno warned against. All reification is a forgetting, and what is being forgotten in Holloway’s affirmative account of non-identity is the determinate negation of the concrete particularity of objects. Adorno writes:

In other words, negativity of this kind is made concrete and goes beyond mere standpoint philosophy by confronting concepts with their objects and, conversely, objects with their concepts. Negativity *in itself*...is not a good to be defended. If it were, it would be transformed into bad positivity.²⁹¹

Autonomy

There is a political promise in affect theory that is based on the autonomy of affect. The concept of autonomy is connected deeply and directly to the core of affect and it cannot be compromised without breaking its promise of emancipatory potential from neoliberal capture, not so much through acceptance and resistance but through the

²⁹⁰ Holloway, *Negativity and Revolution*, 8.

²⁹¹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 25.

creation of surplus values of life. However, any engagement with the concept of autonomy will be deeply entangled with the logic of exchange relations and the material contradictions it is grounded in. Just as the separation of subject and object is both real and illusory, the concept of autonomy must be understood through the dialectical relation of its truth and untruth.

One consequence of the reification that occurs in contemporary capitalism is the displacement of autonomy outside of human agency and into the immutable forces that act upon humans. In a society constituted through exchange relations, a fundamental disconnection occurs between the immediacy of what appears and the hidden aspects of that appearance. The hidden parts can only be accessed through the dialectical relation between the two. This idea is not original to Adorno. It is straight-up Marxism. In the opening lines of *Capital Volume I*, Marx states “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.”²⁹²

Commodities appear as discrete objects unattached to the matrix of social relations and production from which they emerge and through which they are sustained. The appearance of a commodity is not a false semblance because it is a material object that can be sensed. It is just that what is being sensed is a very narrow aspect of the object; it is unreflectively characterized as an autonomous entity. This allows it to be quantified and used in the rationalized calculation of exchange. The success of capitalism rests on this ‘phantom objectivity’ or autonomy that is not limited to objects. It extends to the

²⁹² Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, 125.

relations between people and to consciousness itself. Lukács states: “Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange.”²⁹³

This distorted form of autonomy as the immediacy of empirical facts that present as natural and rational is the inevitable result of the constitutive role of exchange relations.

The social contradictions sedimented in the concept of autonomy are lived through the subject-object relation. The subject is autonomous to the degree that it makes of itself an object, i.e., to the degree that it is modeled after the commodity structure of the object. In neoliberal capitalism this means the subject becomes both commodity and human capital. In turn, objects and the social processes of their production appear to possess an autonomy that is impervious to the actions of the subject. Whether it is the subject taking on the status of an object or the object appearing to possess the active powers of a subject, the truth of autonomy in contemporary capitalism is its coincidence with the reifying structures of exchange. By subjecting them to these reifying processes, subject and object become interchangeable with one another. This autonomy is more real and grounded in material reality than any abstract concept of autonomy divorced from social institutions and practices that permeate everyday existence. Therefore, the truth of autonomy is its deceptive absence. The untruth of autonomy is the ideological hypostasization of its commodity nature, its hardening into a norm that does not tolerate tension between fact and value. What ought to be already is.

Massumi argues that affect cannot be perceived by the conscious mind because it is thoroughly non-conceptual in nature and this is what constitutes its autonomy.

²⁹³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, 91.

Concepts cannot access affect without missing it. What are the historical-social conditions for autonomy to be conceived of in this way, as barely accessible to the human subject, as fleeting, ephemeral, and too quick to have been perceived? The autonomy of affect is always there, the ground in fact of everything, but its virtual churnings and conditions of expression are mysterious and elusive. What are the implications for autonomy when agency and vitality are decentralized and distributed to all of matter, human and non-human? Massumi's use of Libet's half-second experiment proved that intentionality is a ruse and agency is not a property of the volitional subject. Massumi's subjectivity-without-a-subject means that the agency and autonomy traditionally attributed to the sovereign modern subject is everywhere and perhaps arguably nowhere, because what happens when this equality is naturalized ontologically in an exchange society? The conditions of the limitations imposed on the concept of the modern subject do not necessarily cease by locating autonomy in a non-conceptual reality. It is not at all clear how analyzing material reality in terms of non-conceptual flows and intensities addresses the necessity of reified dualisms such as subject/object, nature/society, human/non-human that sustain capitalist modes of production. Massumi claims that redefining autonomy through the concept of affect, as relational all the way down, prevents it from being pre-social and in need of social mediation. "Affect, as the openness to being affected, is directly relational. It is pure sociality..."²⁹⁴ By this account, the meaning of autonomy opposes the traditional traits of sovereignty and enclosed self-sufficiency. The autonomy of affect has a vitality and agency that makes it have "an

²⁹⁴ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 205.

appetite for its own eventuation and final characterization.”²⁹⁵ But when affect does eventuate, the subject seems to lose most if not all meaningful connection with it. Why is this considered normal?

In light of these considerations, it seems that Massumi’s question of how “to explain the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process”²⁹⁶ needs to be re-visited every time the solidity of objects is encountered. Given the flows of intensity and the singularity of tendential becomings percolating in the field of affect, it truly is a wonder that anything can appear stable and fixed. And yet the predictability of structural inequality and the endurance of capitalist modes of production and accumulation make the intra-action of affective intensities seem like the exception rather than the ground of existence. It is first and foremost theory that provides a view of the world that is not immediately obvious. Adorno’s statement that “truth is objective, not plausible”, certainly applies to the truth of affect, but does not justify an exemption from the examination of its untruth. One of the main inquiries in this dissertation concerns oppressive beliefs and practices that are supported by affect theory. Can Massumi’s call for a “revalued postcapitalist future”²⁹⁷ be fulfilled through an affective ethical attunement to excess and materiality? Can microperceptions that sense the smaller than smallest perceivable moments take on the reproduction of the status quo in all areas of life, including the deeply entrenched psychological, structural, and political compulsion

²⁹⁵ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 205.

²⁹⁶ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 8-9.

²⁹⁷ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 5.

to convert qualitative differentials into exchange values? “Something as simple as a shift in attention, even a blink, is a kind of microshock that forces us to re-establish focus, re-jig our potential actions, refresh our relational field - re-chunk.”²⁹⁸ This kind of “minor gesture” has the potential to effect real change because it is grounded in an autonomous dimension of reality. The condition of this autonomy of affect is its non-conceptual nature. There is more opportunity to access autonomy in the literal blink of the eye than in any conceptual activity. If this is true, how would one know whether the non-conceptual experience of the blink is truly an unreified experience in excess of the capture of affect? How can one be sure of the absence of any subtle conceptual murmurings that may arise in having touched the gap between being and becoming? Massumi might reply that there will always be an element of uncertainty, as this is the nature of affect. This may be the case, but it is also a circular argument that does not acknowledge the constitutive dependence of the autonomy of affect on its concept.

The truth of affect’s autonomy is that the attempt to establish a non-conceptual form of knowledge is an attempt to manage the guilt of the concept. For Adorno, the guilt of the concept can only be revealed by going through the concept. Massumi, following Bergson, attempts to go around it. Adorno critiqued Bergson for positing another reality free of the classificatory domination of the concept.

Bergson, in a tour de force, created another type of cognition for nonconceptuality’s sake. The dialectical salt was washed away in an undifferentiated tide of life...The hater of the rigid general concept established a cult of irrational immediacy, of sovereign freedom in the midst of unfreedom.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 129.

²⁹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 8.

What Bergson failed to realize, Adorno concluded, was that “every cognition including Bergson’s own, needs the rationality he scorns, and needs it precisely at the moment of concretion.”³⁰⁰ Similarly, Massumi’s theorization of affect’s autonomy needs the mediation of the concept for its expression. Referring to both Bergson and Husserl’s failure to break out of the subject’s dependence on classificatory concepts by positing a truer form of cognition in “the concept of immanent consciousness”, Adorno observed that “for all their lack of success, what they aspired to reflected a very profound collective need.”³⁰¹ Massumi is responding to the prejudice for perceiving in objects only that which can be measured and compared to other objects. This mechanical, causal, scientific use of reason and the “impoverishment of experience”³⁰² it produces, motivated Bergson to find a cognition of Freud’s dross or “dregs of the phenomenal world”³⁰³ that slip through the net of conceptuality. But unlike Bergson, Massumi uses the concept of the non-conceptual to analyze the operation of capitalist power and to experiment with theorizing affect in relation to contemporary issues like cryptocurrencies or the war on terrorism. To the extent that Massumi establishes the indispensability of the body and the necessity of its radical reconfiguration in terms of what it can do rather than what it is, affect theory offers helpful ways to think through some of the dilemmas of neoliberal

³⁰⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 9.

³⁰¹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 73.

³⁰² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

³⁰³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 69.

capitalism. But it reaches its limit when it invokes a non-conceptual and unmediated autonomy.

The role of emotion in affect theory provides an example of this limit. Emotions share the same obstructive and derivative status as concepts. At times Massumi exerts greater effort in establishing an unbridgeable divide between affect and emotion than between affect and conceptuality. “It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion.”³⁰⁴ He argues that the “narrativizable action-reaction circuits” of emotion are incapable of autonomy. Emotions are too personal, too subjective, and too signified to move the way that affect moves. However, the possibility of the idea of affect is dependent on the nature of emotionality that affect is the constitutive condition for. The definitive traits of affect coincide with the terms used to describe emotion. For instance, Massumi defines affect as pure intensity untainted by content or meaning. However, attributing a generic intensity to affect would defeat its nature as singular, intensive becomings. The meaning of sadness is the feeling of sadness. The same goes for any emotion, including anger. Emotions cannot be reduced to their socio-linguistic fixing, although they cannot be separated from it either. According to Massumi, affect is the vague sense of openness or freedom that lies at the edge emotion. “But no matter how certainly we know that the potential is there, it always seems just out of reach, or maybe around the next bend. Because it isn’t actually there – only virtually.”³⁰⁵ Massumi continues, “But maybe if we can take little, practical, experimental, strategic measures to

³⁰⁴ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 28.

³⁰⁵ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 5.

expand our emotional register, or limber up our thinking, we can access more of our potential at each step, have more of it actually available.”³⁰⁶ On the one hand, Massumi treats emotion as a gateway to affect. The larger and more nuanced the emotional spectrum, the greater the chances are of perceiving the futurity or becoming in each moment. On the other hand, emotions are inherently limited because they can only call forth a limited selection of memories, thereby narrowing the scope of potentials to act on. Affect is vastly open-ended and profoundly intense. By comparison, emotion is claustrophobic and partial. “No one emotional state can encompass all the depth and breadth of our experiencing of experiencing – all the ways our experience redoubles itself. The same thing could be said for conscious thought.”³⁰⁷ If emotions are on the same level as conscious thought, it is not clear why conscious thought which includes critical thought could not also function as a gateway to affect. As I have been arguing throughout, negative dialectical interpretation can also be a form of priming.

There is a long and rich history of feminists who have grappled with the nature of emotion, negotiating a constantly shifting balance between arguing for its legitimacy as a form of intelligence while avoiding being essentialized by it. Although Massumi attributes a certain power to emotion, it is ultimately confined to the capture and coding of affect and does not speak to the complex nature of emotion and its relation to power that feminists have explored for years. Within this context affect seems suspiciously unmessy and because of this it is considered to be a superior mode of being. In her book

³⁰⁶ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 5-6.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

Ugly Feelings, Sianne Ngai explores the ambiguity of unwanted emotions that would seem to shut down agency such as boredom or irritation. She also explores the ambivalence of emotion. Envy, for example, could be an expression of insecurity and a critical response to institutionalized inequality. It is not easy to determine the potential of any given emotion because it can encompass bodily perceptions and intensities as well as socio-linguistic content. Adorno states, “Once the last trace of emotion has been eradicated, nothing remains of thought but absolute tautology.”³⁰⁸ Affect is characterized by uncertainty, but it is not the ambiguous and sometimes ugly character that emotions carry. It is a profoundly desirable and sanitized kind of uncertainty that can be weaponized to catch terrorists and control populations, or it can be mobilized to resist neoliberal capitalist power and live life more intensely. But just as Bergson needs the conceptuality that he scorns, Massumi needs emotion to understand affect.

The Body

Adorno’s great contribution was to reveal how unforgiving this reality is and the difficulty of sustaining a commitment to non-identity under conditions that do not tolerate difference as negativity, much less a “ruthless criticism of all that exists.”³⁰⁹ The importance attributed to the body in Adorno’s works is expressed dialectically in negative terms by critiquing identitarian modes of thinking and feeling, (already a division of labor reflected in the separation of mind and body), that depend on the erasure of the body that

³⁰⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 123.

³⁰⁹ Adorno, *Lectures in Negative Dialectics*, 13.

suffers. This is why an undiminished experience of suffering becomes the last line of defense in the narcotizing absence of memory promoted by the culture industry and the neoliberal confusion about self-enrichment. One of the most effective and enduring strategies for ensuring complicity with capitalist power is the promotion of social practices, theories, and stories that reify the body. “Anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist.”³¹⁰ Unreified experience is not forthcoming to a body that wards off perception of its own memory. Under the pressures of habit, perception makes do with the immediate semblance of objects, but the suffering of the body can express the contradiction of the object as long it resists the construal of positive meaning from its pain. Adorno’s claim that “what hope clings to...is the transfigured body,”³¹¹ means that the untruth of the body’s negation by identitarian thought can be dialectically engaged to give expression to the repressed memory of the object. In order to do so, one needs to relate to suffering similarly to how one listens to new music. “New music keeps reopening the wound, instead of affirming the world as it exists...”³¹² The old view of the body as substance or essence relies on a consistent view of reality that aligns with the subject’s dominance. The transfigured body that suffers is dialectically indispensable, that is, it is hopelessly entangled with its concepts while it continually unfolds against them.

³¹⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 47.

³¹¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 400.

³¹² Adorno, *Sound Figures*, 120.

Although considerable differences separate affect theory and negative dialectics, there is an important sense in which both theories crucially depend on the body and its reconfiguration. Affect theory conceives of the body in terms of movement and what it can do, providing a robust alternative to the body that is invoked dialectically. Such a conception makes a heavy demand on the subject to unlearn habitual perceptions that assume passive-active relations between the body and world. According to Massumi, this is problematic because it attributes a single entity as the linear cause of suffering and limits the vast scope of becoming to a narrow orientation of “becoming-reactive”. Its only action is reaction, constituted and renewed through a fear of potential rather than an embodiment of it.

From the standpoint of affect theory, this becoming-reactive of the body enacts the illusion that the body is separate from what it can do. This is a constitutively “stupid” mode of being, because it relies on a habitual perception that blocks out the complexity of relations moving through the object. Massumi prefers the term stupid over the concepts of delusion or illusion, because the latter refer to a cognitive deficit (and are too closely associated with the debunking activity of critique), and assume rationality to independently possess its own motivating power. However, as Hume pointed out, only affect motivates reason, and only affect can modulate affect. Massumi’s “analytic of stupidity” addresses the “existential posture having to do with how one’s life is anchored in the field of bare activity, and what potentials that posture toward the immanent limit allows to express themselves – how a body perceives and channels potential.”³¹³

³¹³ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 49.

Ressentiment, for example, is constitutively stupid because its power to act is defined by an object misperceived as the linear cause of suffering or a social wrong. Objectifying a threat in this way may be necessary in some contexts for basic survival, but it is detrimental to the possibility of a life lived from its full moving field of potentialities.

Massumi extends this logic of the analytic of stupidity to explain how the “‘I’ is constitutively stupid.”³¹⁴ When the ‘I’ is experienced as a solid unity in reaction to the perceived objective cause of its pain, it is cut off from the larger field of affect in which it is never not embedded and from which different potentials for perception are always stirring. Massumi critiques identity as an embodied stuckness that relies unnecessarily on a claustrophobic relation that blocks out the “larger field brimming with alien, non-I, even nonhuman, perspectives.”³¹⁵ Massumi insists that “critical reflective consciousness”³¹⁶ lacks the kind of perception that can break through this attachment to stupidity.

How to break through is the crucial question. Massumi references Whitehead’s example of mistaking the objects reflected in the mirror as real objects in front us. The act of reaching out to touch them jolts perception and forces the body to recalibrate. Bergson’s definition of perception as that which “measures our possible action upon things, and thereby, inversely, the possible action of things upon us,”³¹⁷ means that the

³¹⁴ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 60.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹⁷ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 57.

recalibration involves a different orientation of the body and its potential action in relation to the mirror and to the mirror on the body. The field has shifted, and the interaction of the virtual in the actual is tweaked by the perturbation of grabbing something that is not there. Massumi describes this as a “relational groping in error, knocking against the surface of the mirror - against the clarity of conscious perception as it presents itself.”³¹⁸ The gap between ‘I’ and the complex field of the emergent potentialities of the non-I in which it is situated, is always present. But how can it be made available? From the perspective of a fully determined subject, the gap between the virtual and actual is habitually glossed over before it has the chance to matter. Massumi refers to Erin Manning’s concept of the minor gesture as something immeasurably small in quantitative value and yet so vital to qualitative change. Affective attunement fosters the kind of sensual awareness that can perceive these minor gestures. It is a mode of paying attention to the useless, the ephemeral, to thwarted perceptual expectations, or to a feeling that something just happened and you missed it. Noticing these minor gestures resituates the body “in a more complex relational field in a way that supplements the perception with an immediate, embodied understanding of the potentials brewing.”³¹⁹

Whatever form priming takes, if it is to be effective it must orient attention to the gap between being and becoming. In chapter three I remarked that Massumi does not stress enough the difficulties encountered in attending to the initial interruption of perception that causes this gap to appear. Massumi is right to avoid describing the gap

³¹⁸ Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 60.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

primarily in terms of stimulus and response, since theoretically so much more is going on in the encounter between the virtual becoming of time and its actualization. And yet, finding this gap in the midst of spatially primed perception that is perpetually covering it over, manifests *experientially* as a break between stimulus and response. It is precisely in the moment of stimulus that we have the ability, as Bergson explains it, “to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment.”³²⁰ This arresting of movement as the point of departure is a necessary step to destabilizing the speed of habitual reactions. In other words, resting in the gap is a somatic critique of what reification feels like. However, in much of Massumi’s work the effect of this crucial engagement with the gap is overshadowed by the subsequent “aesthetic act”, as Massumi calls it, that “brings the contrastive intensity of active potential into the specious present as such, to stand alone, with no other value than itself.”³²¹ While Massumi relies on Libet’s half-second to invoke suspicion about intention, attending to the gap between stimulus and response requires a reflexive intention that is aware of its deceptive nature. Resting in the gap falls into a tricky practice of maintaining the intention to not believe in intention.

I argue that negative dialectics provides an orientation, missing from Massumi’s account, that focuses on suffering as the catalyst for arresting somatic and conceptual reactivity.

According to Adorno, the groping in error of non-identity can be triggered by an experience of suffering or false pleasure (still a form of suffering), but the bodily recalibration is guided by concepts that reveal the contradiction between what the subject

³²⁰ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 94.

³²¹ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 67.

is experiencing and what the subject thinks it is experiencing. The two are intricately related, constituted dialectically through each other. This dialectical attunement is a form of groping in error. Affect theory draws attention to a different part of the process of recalibration that focuses on the dissolution of the subject and the solidity of the body.

We think of ourselves as directing the shifts in our attention. But if you pay attention to paying attention, you quickly sense that rather than you directing your attention, your attention is directing you. It pulls you into your coming perception, which dawns on you as attention's next-effect.³²²

Awareness starts with a subject who is aware, but then this transforms into something like awareness being aware of itself while the subject becomes absorbed into a looking with no reference point. What happens to the body in this fluid state? Does it become less physical? Does it become more energized and alert? What causes it to tighten and become too focused, too intentional? I think Massumi's concept of the body as action and not substance highlights the moment to moment habitual default to spatial conditions that solidify the body far beyond what is necessary for survival. Even the term 'embodiment' is problematic for Massumi because it presumes a pre-existing fixed body that incarnates different ideas. Thinking of the body and world in terms of affect provides a framework through which the body can be re-imagined as an amorphous, confused multiplicity capable of interpenetrating with other bodies to the point where referring to them as bodies becomes a conceptual constraint that blocks their passage.

Affect theory re-values the body and corporeality as a vital force, and any critique of culture that does not include this as an essential dimension of reality will be partial and compromised. The impasse between negative dialectics and affect theory concerns the

³²² Massumi, *Ontopower*, 65.

issue of mediation. Massumi argues that only the desubjectivized body can meld with the becoming of time that is the primal ground of reality. Conceptuality and critical analysis are obstacles to realizing the embodied knowing of affect because they require a mediating subjectivity. However, Adorno's observation about Bergson highlights a crucial point that Massumi consistently evades, which is that every attempt to break through conceptuality to a non-mediated experience involves thought. The futility of Massumi's claim to the possibility of accessing an unmediated reality can be tested by a simple experiment: try not to have a thought. This usually triggers a barrage of thoughts. Commonly cited examples of non-conceptuality such as being thoroughly consumed in an intense sport, communing with nature, experiences of extreme shock, or anything starting with 'Zen and the art of...', are mediated experiences. Although they are viewed as purely somatic activities unencumbered by thought, closer attention reveals increasingly subtle and almost imperceptible layers of conceptual activity. Massumi's affective attunement would direct attention to the first perceivable moment (the smaller than smallest perceivable moment) of these experiences in order to notice the sensation before it is covered over with thoughts about the sensation and subsequent thoughts about those thoughts. But even in that initial moment of the smallest perceivable, the mind is at work, whether it is the subtle conceptual exertion to notice the moment, or the thought that the moment is being noticed. It is difficult to prove that there could be a somatic experience unaccompanied by thought, because it is thought that does this work.

The impossibility of an unmediated experience is the closest Adorno comes to positing a seemingly immutable given about human nature. To start with the presumption that bodily sensation always occurs with some form of discursivity is not the same as

reducing the body to a discursive construction. It means the attention that priming cultivates needs to include conceptual activity because it is not possible to exclude it. The ground of negative dialectical attention is suffering, but the experience of suffering is already an interpretation. Negative dialectics detects the reified elements within that interpretation that impose a layer of suffering upon suffering. There are no origins in this scenario, only beginnings in the middle, which is what Massumi claims the constitutive relationality of the body to be.

The process of negative dialectical interpretation that attends to the suffering of reification does not identify an original suffering. Instead, it draws out memory and facilitates an encounter with an always unique past. The fearlessly passive subject shifts its trust to experiences of somatic and cognitive dissonance, but it is not a blind trust, as it has already been guided by the intention to sense dissonance or contradiction. Due to the diremption of subject and object inherent in reified experience, one element may overshadow or block out the other. It is only when the body is seen as solid that the mind becomes separate; inversely when concepts are reified, so are the objects they classify, including the body.³²³ Does the body lie? To the extent that sensual perception covers over the backlog of incomplete experiences that have not been allowed to come to expression, the body lies. But the lie is an expression of experience that has been cut off from its memory. The body dialectically expresses the truth of its untruth. The fearlessly

³²³ “The assumption that thought profits from the decay of the emotions, or even that it remains unaffected, is itself an expression of the process of stupefaction....The faculties, having developed through interaction, atrophy once they are severed from each other” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 122).

passive subject attends to dissonance because it is the gateway not to an unmediated origin such as affect, but to an active engagement with the full intensity and reality of thought. By constellating concepts, the dissonance which expresses the guilt of thought is unlocked.

By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the “more” which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.³²⁴

Constellations are a form of memory that is evoked through relating familiar concepts to each other in a way that brings out the particularity of the object suppressed by identitarian logic. Creating new concepts does not eradicate their universalizing nature. The depth of attunement to contradiction determines the intensity of the body’s openness and curiosity around its experience. Is there a heightened sense of sharpness or is there an experience of opacity and dullness when the fearlessly passive subject attends to sensations of genuine pleasure? If pleasure numbs suffering, then breaking with this form of complicity requires an undiminished but not unmediated experience of suffering.

I have proposed a reading of Adorno that points to the centrality of suffering in constellation with the body and critique. The body is invoked to attest to suffering, but there are some experiences that Adorno dismisses as regressive when in fact they may present a more ambiguous space for interpretation. For instance, although Adorno’s nuanced analyses of joyful encounters with tonal music provide a compelling

³²⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 162.

interpretation of these experiences as false pleasure, it cannot go unnoticed that it is the music that makes bodies want to move and dance that Adorno considers to be the most repressive. The serious music that Adorno views as authentic in its truth content because it reveals the falseness of the whole, demands by comparison a less embodied engagement for both listeners and performers. It is also notable that in his critique of jazz, Adorno feminizes the regressive nature of jazz music that makes the body move. “ ‘Give up your masculinity, let yourself be castrated,’ the eunuchlike sound of the jazz band both mocks and proclaims, ‘and you will be rewarded, accepted into a fraternity which shares the mystery of impotence with you.’”³²⁵ By this logic, truth recedes the more the body moves and this is an inevitable result of compromised masculinity. The craving for immediate experience that jazz promises to fulfill emerges from a false, feminized consciousness.

Massumi predictably concludes that critique lacks the theory and capacity to entrain with the intensity of affect because it over-values conceptuality at the price of neglecting the potentialities of the body. However, while affect attends more explicitly to the body as movement and fluctuating flows of intensity than negative dialectical critique, its concept of the body does not escape mediation as Massumi claims. For instance, Massumi’s reliance on the theories and technologies of neuroscience fail to take into account its discursive production of normal and abnormal bodies. Autism remains classified as a pathological affective disorder. Erin Manning’s depiction of autistic perception, while highlighting aspects of autism that offer glimpses into the ontologically

³²⁵ Adorno, “Perennial Fashion – Jazz.” In *Prisms*, 129.

relational nature of reality, reproduces the dualism in neuroscience of normal and abnormal bodies by simply reversing the roles. Neurotypicals are the ones who suffer from an affective deficiency, and autistics have a natural, biological disposition to be on the right side of reality. All of this is complicated by imaging technologies that scientifically verify the absence of affective relational capacity (empathy) in autistic brains, perpetuating its pathological classification. One of the stranger cultural phenomena that have emerged from this production of normal and abnormal bodies, is the trend of individuals claiming to be on the autism spectrum in order to rationalize awkward and socially inappropriate behavior. Because affect is prior to discourse and meaning, the scientific truth of bodies and brains is privileged over critical discourse about who is excluded from material resources and supports, which voices are heard or silenced, what subjectivities have the capacity to change and what kind of bodies require a cure. The body is the site of suffering and is inseparable from identity, as evidenced by the norms that reinforce social exclusion of some bodies and not others. Autistic perception may very well be attuned to a dimension of reality that neurotypicals would benefit from experiencing more of, and the normative standards that exclude people with autism need to change, but this does not lessen the actual physical and mental pain of needing to interact with caretakers for basic bodily functions, or experiencing a beautiful snow fall as a deafening cacophony of shattering glass. The neurotypical ability to chunk the world into manageable units of experience would bring tremendous relief to someone who is incapable of pulling back from the compulsion to constantly foreground movement. No amount of inspiration porn or mood stabilizing pharmaceuticals can alleviate the daily sufferings of the autistic body. I am not suggesting that Massumi and

Manning should refrain from continued exploration of the potential of affective wisdom expressed through autistic perception, but critical examination of the suffering experienced by individuals with autism would provide a fuller engagement with the complexity of relations between messy bodies, the social function of science, the production of norms, and the realm of affect. I realize that what I am proposing is precisely what Massumi aims to provide an alternative to, but if structures and institutions are defined by what escapes them, could affect be defined by what escapes it? Massumi's response to this would be a resounding 'No' and that to propose such a relation misses the most crucial feature of affect – its autonomy.

Future Directions

In my reading of Adorno, I have argued that the concept of non-identity dialectically invokes the body through the primacy of suffering. Because the conceptual mediation of suffering is unavoidable, interpretation focuses on the reifying conceptual processes that produce and sustain suffering as second nature. Although this critique of the guilt of the concept assumes from the outset a non-conceptual element, the indispensability of the somatic dimension of reality is not fleshed out, so to speak, with the same degree of rigor and micrological astuteness that is applied to the dialectical analysis of the concept. The alienation that ensues from the non-identity of the concept and object then is limited to epistemological parameters that proclaim to address suffering on all levels, but is heavily directed towards philosophical anti-idealism. This presents a challenge for how negative dialectics would engage effectively with, for example, contemporary environmental issues that new materialism approaches are

attempting to address. Although Adorno is rooted in the Marxist tradition, and although Marx addressed the capitalist exploitation of nature through the concept of the metabolic rift, it is not clear how the critique of the kind of suffering that manifests through the universalizing nature of the concept and the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity can adequately address global warming. While Adorno recognizes the concept's constitutive relation with the body, what is needed for negative dialectics to fulfill its critique of a wrong world without reproducing complicity with oppressive structures, is a more rich and nuanced delineation of the human body and the earth's body. Proclaiming its importance is not enough.

Affect theory addresses this need by reconsidering the body in terms of what it can do rather than what it is and by stressing the performative nature of affect that never fully resides in a specific body and extends to all matter through transindividual movement. This has proven to be particularly suitable to engaging with the duplicitous affective processes of neoliberalism that are not confined to the immediate sphere of production and that saturate every conceivable (and inconceivable) social space. However, Massumi's claim that only the body can perceive change at the ontological level of incipiency - the only terrain on which capitalist power can be challenged - underestimates the perseverance of the reified body and the social-historical conditions from which it emerges. One example of this was outlined in the previous section regarding Massumi's neglect to recognize the contradiction of the discursive production of normative bodies in the field of neuroscience which provides Massumi with evidence

for the autonomous pre-ideological and “irreducibly bodily”³²⁶ nature of affect. Another example that I have returned to throughout this work is the paradox of neoliberal self-enrichment techniques that simultaneously empower the individual in genuinely fulfilling ways and ensure that the myriad forms of innovative transformation fuel the capitalist production of surplus value. Affect theory can only offer the possibility of resistance once its ideological commitments are revealed and subjected to negative dialectical interpretation that is grounded in that suffering. Its purported autonomy is both its truth and untruth. Priming must include the critical work of negation if it is to be effective as an indirect incitement of counter-ontopower.

The mutual dependency of affect and critique bears an interesting resemblance to Kant’s condition for the transcendental structures: “without intuition concepts are empty; without concepts intuition is blind.”³²⁷ On the one hand, critique needs affect to sink its teeth into something – the fullness of the world. Adorno argued that theory reacts to the world and then added that the world is faulty to the core in order to ensure that human suffering would always be the focus of critique. Affect theory expands the scope of reality that causes thought to think and articulates a paradoxically more robust and subtle body than the body implicated through dialectical absence and lack. Without the movement and materialization of affect, negative dialectics would be nothing more than a lifeless activity of the intellect. On the other hand, affect needs negative dialectical critique to confront its blind spots and to reign in its self-legitimizing compulsion for

³²⁶ Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 28.

³²⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 92 (A 51, B 75).

affirmation. Without critique, affect lacks direction. Without affect, critique does not have sufficient corporeal grounding.

The inherent limitations of both approaches warrants a consideration of a possible third way that can build on the profound insights of affect theory and negative dialectics and address the deficits that block their fruitful integration. One possible future direction for the dilemmas posed by affect and critique could be found through a constellation of disciplines that not only reconsider the privileged position of the human subject without resorting to a universal flat ontology, but that also offer different ways to analyze the uptake of affect by discourses that work through hierarchical ontologies of being. Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, is a transdisciplinary work that explores the concept of animacy through the lens of critical linguistics, queer theory, disability studies, animal studies, critical race theory, and new materialist theory. The concept of animacy includes some of the definitive aspects of affect theory: the capacity to affect and be affected, transversal engagement with organic and inorganic bodies, and intensity. Chen also acknowledges the work's debt to Bennett's vital materialism, although it is significant that her explorations go beyond expanding vibrancy and liveliness to materialities typically characterized as inanimate. For Chen, animacy is a "specific kind of affective and material construct"³²⁸ that can be used to queer reified hierarchies that classify humans, animals, plants, metals, etc. according to their degrees of liveliness. While building on the insights of affect theory, she takes it in a different direction by "leveraging animacy toward a consideration of affect in its queered and

³²⁸ Chen, *Animacies*, 5.

raced formations.”³²⁹ For example, Massumi challenges the distinction between humans and animals by showing how capacities considered unique to humans such as reflexive consciousness, language, and distance from instincts, are only possible because of the animality within humans. Animal play creates the conditions for language and abstract thought because it operates within the affective zone of indiscernibility that is the source of creativity and “lived abstraction”. While Massumi demonstrates how humans and animals are not ontologically distinct but rather exist on a continuum, Chen examines the animacy hierarchy operative in establishing the human’s superiority through invoking less animate nonhuman animals – a hierarchy that cannot be separated from the racialized discourse of animality and colonial history. Her analysis of the media discourse surrounding the mauling of a woman by a chimpanzee who had been a former TV animal celebrity and the public reaction to this incident reveals the invocation of racialized and sexualized hierarchies of animacy that are also deeply entangled with the liveliness of language. In another example, Chen discusses the unprecedented animacy of one of the most inanimate elements of matter. The racialization of lead in relation to the Chinese toy panic in 2007 reanimated “lead’s deadness” to a “new semiotic-material form of lead.”³³⁰ As an agent of harm to predominately white middle-class children, this transnational “yellow lead” triggered anxieties about disability, race, and geopolitical instability that replaced previous domestic concerns about lead toxicity in the buildings of poor black

³²⁹ Chen, *Animacies*, 5.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

neighborhoods. Chen's disruption of the binary of life and nonlife shows the extent to which relationality (which is key to affect) and critique are determined by animacy hierarchies.

"The stakes of revisiting animacy are real and immediate, particularly as the coherence of "the body" is continually contested."³³¹ By tracing the affective movement and conceptual mediation of animacy, Chen's work offers a way to think about the body in a way that cannot be adequately addressed through generic notions of the somatic or the spectral figure of a dialectically induced body. It also situates affect in a more intimate relation with critique so that perceiving the vitality of matter can include the possibility of engaging with material, social, and semiotic contradictions that may direct animacy in oppressive ways. There are areas of Chen's work that invite further elaboration. The liveliness that is extended to bodies and other myriad forms of existence risks discounting the potential value of being immobile, stuck, or immersed in unwanted states. I have shown how this is a similar liability for affect theory and how the dialectical negativism of critique attempts to speak to this missing part. Massumi states: "Our degree of freedom at any one time corresponds to how much of our experiential 'depth' we can access towards a next step – how intensely we are living and moving."³³² The queering of animacy and its attendant discourses of race, sex, and disability provides the analytical tools and the terrain in which these concerns can start to be addressed.

³³¹ Chen, *Animacies*, 7.

³³² *Ibid.*, 6.

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