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## **Affective Habits: Sensation, Duration and Automation**

**Carolyn Pedwell**

This chapter<sup>1</sup> begins with a critical hypothesis: in order to better understand the logics, challenges and potentialities of social change at the current conjuncture, we might need to attend more carefully to the relationship between *affect* and *habit*. That is, in the midst of the turn to affect, renewed interest in habit, the rise of various ‘new’ materialisms and ecological approaches and the growing salience of algorithmic life, both apprehending and pursuing socio-political transformation may require closer engagement with the emergent links among sensation, duration, repetition, iteration, automation and atmosphere.

I use the term ‘affect’ to encompass a varied collection of sensorial processes, relations and experiences – ranging from individual expressions of feeling to the production of sensation within human-technology assemblages. In doing so, I acknowledge how embodied sensations and psychic and cognitive experiences are constitutively intertwined<sup>2</sup> – while also recognising that affective processes always exceed the boundaries of human subjectivity and consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, affect is an inherently *relational* term – it signifies emergent interactions of human and non- or more-than human actors which are productive of different kinds of sensation and becoming. In turn, ‘atmosphere’ is a key concept that helps us to address ‘how collective affects become conditions that shape without determining capacities to affect and be affected’<sup>4</sup> – whether this pertains to the fluctuating mix of tension and excitement pervading a competitive sporting event or the differential sensorial experience of inhabiting an institutional space marked by whiteness. In short, atmospheres are, as the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay adapts some material from previously published work by the author: Carolyn Pedwell, ‘Transforming Habit: Revolution, Routine and Social Change’ in *Cultural Studies* 31 (2017), pp. 93–120; idem, ‘Mediated Habits: Images, Networked Affect and Social Change’ in *Subjectivity* 10 (2017), pp. 147–169.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

geographer Ben Anderson puts it, the ‘mediums through which ordinary affective life is lived and organised’.<sup>5</sup>

I became interested in the relations between ‘the affective’ and ‘the habitual’ through writing a book about empathy.<sup>6</sup> I was struck during this process by how much of the work on empathy in particular, and affect and emotion more generally, is invested in the transformational promise of a kind of *affective revolution* at the level of the embodied subject or social collective. The underlying assumption of many calls for empathy – or indeed other emotions, whether compassion, hope, shame or anger – as affective panacea seems to be that, deep down, people are capable of acting ethically, but are routinely prevented from doing so because they are too busy, too ignorant, or too isolated from the reality of the injustice that others endure. If people (especially those in positions of social privilege) *could only be affected powerfully enough*, through being exposed to the visceral truth of others’ suffering – and their own complicity in it – these narratives suggest, they would be compelled to fundamentally alter their ways of seeing and being in the world.

Yet is this how ‘progressive’ change – or indeed any enduring social change – actually works? Does a radical break or a revolution at the cognitive, psychic or affective level provide the basis for *sustained* transformation at a deep embodied, material and structural level? One of the problems with this seductive (and ubiquitous) narrative of empathy’s transformative force is that it rarely addresses the question of *what happens after empathy* in an explicit or sustained way. Such accounts also often fail to engage fully with the powerfully ingrained (though not necessarily conscious or visible) patterns and habits that function to keep existing modes of being, seeing, feeling and acting in place.

Visions of affective transformation informed by the continental philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze do not subscribe to linear notions of time and social progress and tend not to invest in emotional identification as a driver of change. Yet in other important respects this work resonates with narratives of transformation via empathy. Many Deleuzian-inspired accounts focus on encounters that produce what Brian Massumi refers to as ‘a shock

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

to thought':<sup>7</sup> an affective jolt that works less to reveal truth than to 'thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry.'<sup>8</sup> What is often valued in such narratives is the promise of those fugitive affective moments in which thought might escape the discursive relations of power that normally constrain it, allowing something genuinely different to emerge. My sense, however, was that across these and other narratives of affective transformation we are offered enticing accounts of how affect might signal or spark embodied change, but less compelling explanations of the processes through which that change might produce effects that *endure*.

These concerns led me to explore how paying greater attention to the dynamics of habit might help to enrich and reorient theories of affect and affective transformation. Over the past decade, an emergent critical return to the notions of habit and habituation has been gaining momentum as scholars seek to rethink the contemporary workings of material and social life<sup>9</sup> – from the psychic and embodied habits of white privilege,<sup>10</sup> to the patterned dynamics of biopolitical governance,<sup>11</sup> to the habituated gestures of the athletic body.<sup>12</sup> Might engaging more substantially with these literatures, I wondered, enable us to better grapple not only with how patterns of action become deeply ingrained, but also with how *new* modes of affective and socio-political engagement and responsivity might be actualised and sustained?

But what exactly is a habit? In *Principles of Psychology*, William James, who was trained as a medical doctor and psychologist, defines a habit by two key criteria: firstly, it simplifies the

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Massumi (ed.), *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari: Expressions After Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Clare Carlisle, Mark Sinclair, 'Editors' Introduction', in Felix Ravaissou, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle, Mark Sinclair (London and New York: Continuum, [1838]2008), pp. 1–21; Catherine Malabou, 'Addiction and Grace: Preface to Felix Ravaissou's *Of Habit*', in Felix Ravaissou, *Of Habit*, pp. vii–xx; Tony Bennett et al (eds.), 'Habit and Habituation: Governance and the Social', in *Body and Society* 19.2&3 (2013), pp. 3–29; Tom Sparrow, Adam Hutchinson (eds.), *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013); Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); John-David Dewsbury, David Bissell, 'Habit geographies', in *Cultural Geographies* 21.1 (2015), pp. 22–146; Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 2016); Carolyn Pedwell, 'Habit and the Politics of Social Change: A Comparison of Nudge Theory and Pragmatist Philosophy', in *Body and Society* 23.4 (2017), pp. 56–94; Pedwell, 2017a and b (footnote 1).

<sup>10</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of White Privilege* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Tony Bennett, 'Habit: Time, Freedom and Governance', in *Body and Society* 19.2&3 (2013), pp. 107–135; Lisa Blackman, 'Habit and Affect: Revitalizing a Forgotten History', in *Body and Society* 19.2&3 (2013), pp. 186–216.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Shilling, *Changing Bodies: Habit, Crisis and Creativity* (London: Sage, 2008); David Bissell, 'Habit Displaced: The Disruption of Skilful Performance', in *Geographical Research* 51.2 (2013), pp. 120–129.

movements required to achieve a given result, whilst also making them more accurate and diminishing fatigue.<sup>13</sup> For example, ‘a lock works better after being used for some time; at the outset more force was required to overcome a certain roughness in its mechanism’. Secondly, ‘a habit diminishes the conscious attention with which acts are performed’.<sup>14</sup> Like James, the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey understands habits as involving forms of embodied automation and concurs that ‘the more suavely efficient a habit the more unconsciously it operates’.<sup>15</sup> Dewey, however, pays more attention to how habits are produced through the ‘cooperation of an organism and an environment’,<sup>16</sup> and thus constitutively *imbricate* bodies and social, structural and ecological conditions.

Habit however not only attunes us to the powerful automated processes and mechanisms underlying the tendency for patterns of oppression and inequality to persist; it has also a necessary, yet counterintuitive, role in enabling meaningful and durable forms of socio-political transformation. James, for example, pre-figures Pierre Bourdieu’s work on habitus and socio-economic class when he refers to habit as ‘the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent’.<sup>17</sup> And yet in embodying the ‘plasticity’ of living organisms and social systems, habits simultaneously, James contends, hold the key to material change. While the automatic force of habit can compel us to repeat previous modes of action again and again, it is nonetheless only through embodied processes of habituation that new tendencies may be created which are deeply rooted and robust enough to endure.

In this way, James’ and Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism resonates with the legacy of habit in continental philosophy, namely the work of the French philosopher Felix Ravaisson. In *Of Habit*,<sup>18</sup> Ravaisson, who was an important reference for Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, explores the role of habit in processes of being and becoming. As Catherine Malabou notes, for Ravaisson, habit involves a repetition, but it is a repetition that produces a difference; that is, ‘an aptitude for change’.<sup>19</sup> In transforming a potentiality into a tendency through the work of repetition, habit illustrates powerfully that ‘if being was able to change once, in the manner

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<sup>13</sup> William James, *Habit* (London: Forgotten Books, [1914]2004), p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (London: Digireads.com, [1922]2012), p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>17</sup> James, [1914]2014 (footnote 13), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle, Mark Sinclair (London and New York: Continuum, [1838]2008).

<sup>19</sup> Malabou in Ravaisson, 2008 (footnote 18), p. ix.

of contracting a habit ... It is available for a change to come'.<sup>20</sup> Together, this work suggests that 'freedom and power are found in and through the constitution of habits, not through their elimination'.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge is thus to explore what might be generative about *thinking affect and habit together* to understand the dynamics of social change. Habit formation and modification are, as these pragmatist and continental philosophers illustrate, vital to individual and collective change. Affect may offer the spark that catalyses embodied transformation, yet without some form of habituation, enduring change may fail to take shape. And yet, when affective responses are sustained or repeated over time they may lose their radical edge, as we find ourselves compulsively engaging in potentially stultifying practices of 'affective citation'.<sup>22</sup> What is it, then, that enables meaningful cognitive, psychic and embodied change generated (or signalled) by affect to take shape and endure rather than simply peak and collapse or become quickly re-assimilated into 'business as usual'? How, in other words, might we better understand *the materialisation of affect* in this context?

In pursuing these questions, I draw on and extend earlier vital scholarship in affect and emotion studies. In asking why social injustice feels so intractable despite our collective efforts to dislodge it, for instance, Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* about our habitual affective attachment to social norms.<sup>23</sup> In *The Promise of Happiness*, she explores 'the everyday habits of happiness' and 'how such habits involve ways of thinking about the world that shape how the world coheres'.<sup>24</sup> Although happiness is widely regarded as 'what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life', Ahmed considers how its pursuit often involves 'the comfort of repetition ... following lines that have already been given in advance', in ways that reproduce normative ideals and expectations.<sup>25</sup> We might also consider Lauren Berlant's account of how 'cruel optimism' keeps us habitually reiterating self-defeating efforts to pursue 'the good life' in deteriorating conditions of social and economic opportunity<sup>26</sup> – or Eve Sedgwick's discussion of how dominant affective habits in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>21</sup> Sullivan, 2006 (footnote 10), p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Sciences Approach* (London: Sage, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, 2004 (footnote 2).

<sup>24</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 1, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

critical theory may trap us in epistemological ruts that prevent engagement with the evolving complexity of material and political life.<sup>27</sup>

As these examples indicate, theories of affect fuel explanations of social change but they also furnish powerful interpretations of political stasis and ‘stuckness’. Other scholars address more explicitly the paradoxical nature of affective practice: how emotional patterns that produce ‘regulation’ always also imply ‘potential’; that is, as Margaret Wetherell puts it, the possibility for embodied relations to be ‘otherwise’.<sup>28</sup> In her genealogical analysis of some of the founding concepts in social psychology, Lisa Blackman similarly highlights the ways in which affect–habit interactions can produce ‘movement and stasis, being and becoming and process and fixity’.<sup>29</sup> It is important to underscore in this vein that while Sedgwick famously described ‘paranoid reading’ as the habitual approach to critique that *always already knows what it will find*, her discussion of ‘reparative reading’ explores the potential of *new* affective habits that might reorient post-structuralist scholarship in generative ways.<sup>30</sup> Channelling Raymond Williams’ account of ‘structures of feeling’,<sup>31</sup> and how we may encounter ‘pre-emergent’ social and material forces, Sedgwick’s engagement with reparation is, in part, an exploration of how critical theory might better connect with transformation *as it is happening*.

Building on this important work, this essay explores how bringing together contemporary affect theory with classical philosophies of habit may enable us to develop a richer understanding of the logics of social change. In the first section, I consider how James, Dewey and Ravaisson addressed the role of sensation and feeling in their philosophies of habit. While Ravaisson’s ‘double law of habit’ indicates how habitual or sustained affect tends to lose force over time, it also suggests that it is the mode of attention that we bring to affective states that might prove transformative – a perspective that resonates with Ahmed’s account of (un)happiness. The second section explores the dynamics of affect and atmosphere within ‘habit assemblages’ that imbricate organisms and environments. Drawing on examples related to white privilege, athletic proficiencies and algorithmic technologies, I discuss how

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<sup>27</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Wetherell, 2012 (footnote 22), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Blackman, 2013 (footnote 11), p. 186.

<sup>30</sup> Sedgwick, 2003 (footnote 27).

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).

transformation emerges not only through reflexive processes, but also via alterations to the environments and atmospheres in which habits are formed, which may work to reorient human tendencies below the level of active consciousness. Throughout, I aim to illustrate that processes of affecting and being affected and of habituation and re-habituation interact with one another in complex ways and it is this *interaction* that is significant to the workings of socio-political change.

### **Beyond Desensitization: Affective Inhabitation**

Although not their specific focus, pragmatist and continental philosophers of habit had pertinent things to say about the relationships among affect, emotion and transformation. For Dewey, in *Human Nature and Conduct*,<sup>32</sup> the problem with modes of social reform that depend predominantly on the production of certain feelings (i.e. the generation of empathy, compassion or moral indignation) is that they tend to remove thought from embodied action and the individual from their environment. That is, such strategies assume that exposure to new *affective knowledge* is enough to actualise ‘progressive’ change, without attending to the imbricated embodied and environmental factors that work powerfully to perpetuate existing patterns of behaviour. More broadly, Dewey acknowledges the potential of feeling to spark cognitive and embodied transformation, yet he is suspicious of the capacity for such change to be anything other than transitory: ‘impulse burns itself up. Emotion cannot be kept at its full tide’.<sup>33</sup> With this latter point, he gestures to a key contradiction animating the long history of investing in feeling as a driver of social change: On the one hand, affect may powerfully catalyse or signal embodied transformation, yet without some form of habituation, durable change may fail to take shape. On the other hand, when affect is sustained or repeated over time it may fizzle out or lose its radical edge.

It is, of course, this assumption regarding the temporal inevitability of affective desensitization that underscores the logic of concepts such as ‘compassion fatigue’.<sup>34</sup> As Susan Sontag famously argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a central truth in affective life is the ‘wearing off’ of shock through repetition.<sup>35</sup> Instead of producing a ‘shock to

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<sup>32</sup> Dewey, [1922]2012 (footnote 15).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003).



thought'<sup>36</sup> that generates critical inquiry or action, her work suggests that ubiquitous images of suffering may simply elicit 'the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, unless they *lead to action*, repeated compassionate responses can become no more than an affective script; an emotional short-hand that modulates feelings in familiar ways but does little to change everyday habits of social interaction and political engagement.<sup>38</sup>

The tendency for the force of affect to weaken or dissipate over time is central to Ravaissou's discussion of the logics of habituation. Within his 'double law of habit', *sensation*, once repeated or sustained, dulls and loses force whereas repeated or sustained *action* gains in strength and momentum. As Ravaissou puts it:

The continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured.<sup>39</sup>

James's analysis resonates with and extends this framework: The repetition of feelings that routinely fail to be translated into action, he suggests, frequently leads to affective inertia: 'The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages of the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale'.<sup>40</sup> Not unlike Sontag, then, these philosophers appear to view compassion as an 'unstable emotion' that 'needs to be translated into action' if it is not to 'wither'.<sup>41</sup>

Together, this scholarship highlights the limits of models of affirmative social change premised exclusively on affective rupture or revolution. Yet, I wondered, are feeling and action as opposed as these perspectives would seem to suggest? Is habituated affect always deadening of radical political force? What are the roles of passivity and activity within habit-affect interactions? While Ravaissou's analysis would appear to provide strong theoretical underpinning for the equation of repeated sensation with increasing passivity, the workings of

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<sup>36</sup> Massumi (ed.), 2002 (footnote 7).

<sup>37</sup> Sontag, 2003 (footnote 35), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Pedwell, 'Mediated Habits', 2017 (footnote 9).

<sup>39</sup> Ravaissou, [1838]2008 (footnote 18), p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> James, [1914]2004 (footnote 13), p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> Sontag, 2003 (footnote 35), p. 90.

habit and affect are actually more complicated than this. As Clare Carlisle notes, the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler, in his 1736 text *The Analogy of Religion* argued that, in particular circumstances, feeling or sensing can be ‘turned into an activity’ which can ‘engender a heightening of experience rather than a diminution of feeling’.<sup>42</sup> Ravaisson illustrates this point through a comparison between the ‘drunkard’ and the connoisseur: While the drunkard ‘tastes his wine less and less as he continues to drink’, the ‘connoisseur develops a refined palate that makes him increasingly discerning’<sup>43</sup> – his taste ‘becomes more and more delicate and subtle’.<sup>44</sup> That is, *through his attentiveness*, the connoisseur transforms the effects of affective repetition so that they intensify, rather than diminish, his sensorial experience. From this perspective, feeling and action are not as distinct or oppositional as they may first appear; in fact, they are intimately intertwined. Significantly, this kind of example does not invalidate the double law of habit; instead, it indicates that *sensing has been made into an activity*, ‘so that the law of active habit has greater effect than the law of passive habituation’.<sup>45</sup>

In complicating the presumed link between feeling and inaction, Butler’s and Ravaisson’s interventions resonate with the philosophy of Spinoza and Deleuze<sup>46</sup>, for whom affect indicates constant movement, flow and transformation in a universe where nothing ever truly repeats. The above discussion thus raises critical questions about how we currently understand socio-political activity, progress and change – what we think counts as transformative political action as well as how, and why, we routinely interpret passivity as that which simply reifies the status quo. While repeated or sustained affect is frequently associated with the de-politicising reversion of activity into ‘passive forms of “being made aware” or “having been stated”’,<sup>47</sup> what happens when we view passivity as involving its own potentially generative forms of activity? In other words, what might be opened up when we re-read passivity as *affective inhabitation*?

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<sup>42</sup> Carlisle, 2014 (footnote 9), p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Ravaisson, [1838]2008 (footnote 18), p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> Carlisle, 2014 (footnote 9), p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London and New York: Continuum, [1968]2011).

<sup>47</sup> Jodi Dean, ‘Affect and Drive’, in Hillis et al (eds.), *Networked Affect* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), p. 99.

Ahmed addresses these questions in *The Promise of Happiness* when she considers how unhappiness ‘might offer a pedagogic lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness’.<sup>48</sup> Although ‘being unhappy’ is often represented as a passive state to be avoided through taking appropriate action (i.e. making ‘the right’ choices and staying on ‘the right’ path), something different might transpire, Ahmed suggests, when we ‘think about unhappiness *as more than a feeling that should be overcome*’.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, what affectively inhabiting unhappiness might enable is an understanding of how dominant narratives of happiness routinely ‘redescribe social norms as social goods’<sup>50</sup> – whether those norms pertain to heterosexual marriage or neoliberal subjecthood. In this context, Ahmed proposes that unhappiness itself could be interpreted as a form of political action: ‘the act of saying no or of pointing out injuries’ that ‘affirms something, right from the beginning’.<sup>51</sup>

Ahmed’s argument here is not, of course, that we ‘have an obligation to be unhappy’,<sup>52</sup> but rather that, as Butler and Ravaissou suggest, it is the *mode of attention that we bring to affective states* that might prove personally and politically transformative. Continuing with the theme of affective inhabitation, a number of further questions arise: If affect functions not only as a jolt or spark that might move us (at least temporarily) but also a ‘binding technique’<sup>53</sup> that keeps us attached or ‘stuck’ to a particular state or site, how might we consider some of the more productive implications of such affective attachment? When might such immersive processes generate not (or not only) affective desensitization, but rather (or also) attentiveness, connection and care that transform sensing ‘into an activity’ with a range of political and ethical implications?

Such concerns are engaged suggestively by Jill Bennett in *Empathic Vision*.<sup>54</sup> Here, Bennett explores the capacity of our affective engagement with ‘non-representational’ art to transform habitual modes of perception in ways that may be conducive to critical ethics and politics. Crucially, however, she stresses, drawing on the work of Deleuze and Massumi, that there is an important difference between images that are simply shocking and those which function as

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<sup>48</sup> Ahmed, 2010 (footnote 24), p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>53</sup> Dean, 2015 (footnote 47).

<sup>54</sup> Bennett, 2006 (footnote 8).

a ‘shock to thought’<sup>55</sup>. Beyond the ‘the activation of an affective trigger’, genuinely transformative engagement with visual art requires the development of an ‘affective connection’<sup>56</sup> that *sustains sensation* to enable different forms of affective inhabitation – compelling us to notice, attend to and reflect on the intensity our encounter and its critical implications. When this happens, I want to suggest, sensing can be ‘turned into an activity’ that engages the possibility of transformation at the level of habit – calling our attention to, as Tony Bennett puts it, the emergence of ‘gaps, intervals and blips’ in patterned perception which may ‘afford the opportunity for new forms of practice to be improvised’.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, if perception is continually mediated by ‘affective scripts’ that have become habitual<sup>58</sup>, the very fact that such scripts are reproduced through the force of habit means that they are open to the possibility of modification. It is when we are made consciously aware of such patterns of seeing, through a sense that they have been disrupted, that we become attuned to the surfacing of ‘actionable spaces’<sup>59</sup> for transformation.

What is clear from this discussion is that meaningful and enduring forms of transformation require the ongoing interaction of affect and habit– a relational dynamic central to processes of affective inhabitation. But under what environmental, material and affective circumstances sensing prompted by particular encounters or experiences might become an activity that enables intervention in everyday conduct to re-make existing habits of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting remains an important open question.

### **Habit Assemblages, Affect and Atmosphere**

When we contemplate the workings of habit it is often easiest, and perhaps most meaningful, to conceptualise habits as *personal* embodied capacities or characteristics. Habits, for Dewey, however, are never simply individual or indeed collective; rather, they are relational transactions *between* organisms and environments which are always in process. Instead of conceptualising individual habits in isolation (as if they were *owned* by particular subjects), then, this work compels us to think more ecologically about the workings and implications of

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<sup>55</sup> Massumi, 2002 (footnote 7).

<sup>56</sup> Bennett, 2006 (footnote 8), p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Bennett, 2013 (footnote 11), p. 126, p. 125.

<sup>58</sup> Sontag, 2003 (footnote 35).

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, 2013 (footnote 11).

*habit assemblages*. A key question thus becomes how to identify and intervene in ‘mind-body-environmental assemblages’<sup>60</sup> in ways that might enable affirmative change.

The previous section addressed the transformative potential of *becoming aware* of our less-than-conscious habits in ways that might enable us to improvise new forms of practice. Thinking through habit assemblages, however, suggests that transformation emerges not only via ‘intelligent’ intervention<sup>61</sup> in everyday conduct, but also via alterations to the environments and atmospheres in which habits are formed – processes which may function to reorient human tendencies below the level of active consciousness. From this perspective, durable change might require something *different to* models premised on the exposure of pernicious patterns or the generation of critical reflexivity. In this vein, Dewey argues that, if affirmative transformation is the goal, compelling people to focus on what is *wrong*, on what they *should not be doing*, could be the worst possible approach because it maintains attention on ‘the bad result’ rather than on a potentially generative change in the making. Similarly, as Sedgwick suggests in her account of paranoid reading, repeated acts of exposing ‘the bad’, and mimetically tracing its contours, often work precisely to *reproduce its force*.<sup>62</sup>

One key area in which such provocative contentions are being grappled with is the affective politics of racism. As Sullivan discusses in *Revealing Whiteness*<sup>63</sup>, it has often been assumed that providing data regarding the lack of scientific basis for the category of ‘race’ or raising consciousness regarding the destructive implications of racism will contribute to the end of racial discrimination. Yet, in targeting conscious rationality, such strategies often do not address the unconscious psychic and affective habits underlying white privilege – habits which may *actively resist* efforts to unveil them. Rather than only confronting habits of racial privilege directly, Sullivan proposes that we might more productively focus on transforming the ‘political, social, physical, economic, psychological, aesthetic and other environments that “feed” them’<sup>64</sup> – an approach that aims to disrupt the *automatic stimulation* of psychic defence mechanisms linked to white fears of lost privilege and control, while simultaneously avoiding the *amplifying repetition* of insidious racialising patterns and problematics.

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<sup>60</sup> Tony Bennett et al (eds.), ‘Habit and Habituation: Governance and the Social’, in *Body and Society* 19.2&3 (2013), pp. 3–29 (footnote 9).

<sup>61</sup> Dewey, [1922]2012 (footnote 15), p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Sedgwick, 2003 (footnote 27).

<sup>63</sup> Sullivan, 2006 (footnote 10).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

As part of a wider anti-racist politics and praxis, environmentally-attuned techniques are multiple and diverse. Some work largely *imperceptibly*, re-aligning embodied routines and interactions through adjustments to environments, infrastructures and atmospheres – as in the design of architectures that aim to encourage ethical cohabitation or what Paul Gilroy calls ‘multicultural conviviality’.<sup>65</sup> Other approaches, through choreographing affective disruptions to the smooth-running of habits, seek to shake up habitual expectations of white privilege – for instance, a recent photo essay published in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, which features images of talking and laughing Asian women at a nail salon having pedicures done by white women, a young white girl gazing up and multiple shelves of black dolls, and a Latina woman in a luxurious apartment being served tea by a white maid.<sup>66</sup> The hope is that, if collectively developed and enacted across multiple sites of socio-political salience, such techniques will subtly, yet powerfully, intervene in everyday modes of seeing, feeling, relating and responding – enabling the development new anti-racist tendencies and dispositions.

However, as pragmatist and continental philosophers of habit underscore, environmental changes – be they material or immaterial, internal or external – are not always (if often) amenable to our control. As James argues, constituted ourselves as ‘bundles of habits’<sup>67</sup> we are always already part of the shifting relations in which we seek to intervene and, as such, Dewey points out, ‘there is no ready-made self behind activities’<sup>68</sup>. Moreover, singular actions can have unexpected ripple effects throughout relational networks and consequently prediction of human-environmental interactions is a tenuous exercise.

The geographer David Bissell addresses the volatility of habit-affect assemblages in his account of ‘the yips’; a condition affecting elite golfers in which ‘short putts and chips requiring fine coordination skills and motor control ... for no apparent reason [become] disrupted by sudden and unpredictable involuntary twitches in [the] hand’.<sup>69</sup> Although this phenomenon might be interpreted as ‘a form of muscular fatigue from over-practice’, this

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<sup>65</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004); Greg Noble, ‘Cosmopolitan Habits: The Capacities and Habitats of Intercultural Conviviality’, in *Body and Society* 19.2&3 (2013), pp. 162–185.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Harvard, ‘These Three Images Made a Powerful Statement about Race and Power Among Women’, 16 May 2017, *Mic*, [https://mic.com/articles/177195/these-three-pictures-make-a-powerful-statement-about-race-and-power-among-women#\\_8LLLwrDo6](https://mic.com/articles/177195/these-three-pictures-make-a-powerful-statement-about-race-and-power-among-women#_8LLLwrDo6) (accessed: 1.12.2018).

<sup>67</sup> James, [1914]2004 (footnote 13), p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Dewey, [1922]2012 (footnote 15), p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> Bissell, 2013 (footnote 12), p. 120.

explanation discounts the fact that the yips tended to emerge only ‘when playing under pressure’ in a competition environment.<sup>70</sup> For Bissell, this points to the role of anxiety, affect and atmosphere in habit assemblages; how sudden transformations to embodied habits can emerge through immaterial processes in ways we may not be able to calculate or control.

More than this, however, Bissell draws on Ravaissou’s philosophy to suggest that we might, in fact, ‘apprehend the yips as a *new habit* that inserts itself within the golfing body’.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, for the French philosopher, it is ‘one and the same force that gives rise to desirable habits involved in skilful performance and the less desirable habits of illness, both exhibiting a form of creative non-teleological evolution’.<sup>72</sup> From this perspective, Bissell proposes that ‘skilled performances might be better understood as *competencies that temporarily possess us*’ – an observation that underscores Dewey’s central claim that habits do not ‘reside *within* bodies ... but are the dynamic through which bodies come into being in the specific way that they do’.<sup>73</sup> Beyond the realm of sport, this example illustrates powerfully that ingrained forms of habituation are more vulnerable than we might assume and habit-affect interactions will always exceed the reach of human mastery.

In addressing the complexity and unpredictability of habit assemblages we also need to consider the role of *non-living* entities and processes in such relations – how habits can *take on a life of their own* that far exceeds human modes of sensing, perceiving and cognition. I am thinking here especially about the growing salience of pattern recognition via algorithmic technologies and artificial intelligence in everyday life. In our current age of media analytics, an ever-growing swath of ‘our cultural experiences, social interactions, and decision-making are governed by large-scale software systems’ that operate via algorithmic procedures.<sup>74</sup> For the affect theorist Patricia Clough, it is important to note that such technologies are ‘no longer slowed by the process or practice of translating back to human consciousness’.<sup>75</sup> Significantly, adaptive algorithmic environments are also providing resources for ‘the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 125 (italics by author).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>74</sup> Lev Manovich, ‘The Algorithms of our Lives’, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2013, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Algorithms-of-Our-Lives-/143557> (accessed: 1.12.2018).

<sup>75</sup> Patricia Ticineto Clough et al, ‘The Datalogical Turn’ in Philip Vannini (ed.), *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 146–164.

inanimate to become sentient'<sup>76</sup> – dynamics that raise crucial questions concerning our capacities to intervene in contemporary ecologies of habit.

These techno-social developments do not, in my view, signal the irrelevance of human sensation, cognition or interpretation within projects of social transformation that might address the links between affect and habit. But they do, as Mark Hansen contends, point to the need for 'fundamental rethinking of the human and of human experience' in relation to 'networks of media technologies that operate predominately, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness'.<sup>77</sup> From this perspective, Massumi's influential concerns regarding critical theory's tendency to engage with the non-human as a 'construct of the human'<sup>78</sup> are increasingly salient. Habits are always *more-than-human* and the processes they enable – whether those of regulation or potentiality – work at scales and speeds that are not always 'our own'. As such, thinking affectively, materially and ecologically about these dynamics necessitates moving beyond 'the body', 'the subject' and 'the human' as central touchstones – while appreciating that habit is precisely what *connects us constitutively* to non-human processes, infrastructures, and entities; which are always part of ourselves.

Collectively, these examples underscore why pursuing social transformation at the level of habit requires a speculative and responsive (rather than calculative and predictive) approach. As Dewey's philosophical pragmatism suggests, such an orientation necessitates remaining alert to the changing dimensions of a situation as it unfolds temporally and spatially, instead of assuming that fixed trajectories can be known in advance. This imperative resonates with affect theory's interest in sensing and responding to change as it is happening – whether via Williams' structures of feeling, Sedgwick's reparative reading or Ahmed's everyday habits of happiness. For these scholars, what is vital to the possibility of affirmative transformation is not that we fixate on a faraway future, but rather that we *affectively inhabit the present*, understood as itself active and brimming with change. Not all elements of habit assemblages are knowable, let alone controllable, and the dynamics of affect and atmosphere will always exceed our attempts to govern them. Nonetheless, it is only through inhabiting the affects,

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<sup>76</sup> Matt Sledge, 'CIA's Gus Hunt On Big Data: We "Try To Collect Everything And Hang On To It Forever"', 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013, *Huffington Post*: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/20/cia-gus-hunt-big-data\\_n\\_2917842.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/20/cia-gus-hunt-big-data_n_2917842.html) cited in Clough et al, 2015 (footnote 74), p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Hansen, *Feed Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 2, 5; see also Chun, 2016 (footnote 9).

<sup>78</sup> Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', in *Cultural Critique*, 31 (1995), pp. 83–109.



habits and relations of everyday life *in process* that we might activate the potential for existing socio-political tendencies to *become otherwise*.

## Conclusions

This essay has explored how bringing theories of affect together with philosophies of habit might offer a generative framework for grappling with the logics, challenges and potentials of socio-political change today. As a means to complicate compelling yet arguably limited narratives of affective revolution, turning to pragmatist and continental philosophies is productive, I have suggested, because they highlight habit's role in enabling what Ravaissou refers to as both 'addiction' and 'grace'.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, habit's double nature makes it a rich concept for addressing the propensity of harmful socio-political patterns to persist in the face of efforts to generate greater affective awareness of their damaging effects, as well as the material forms of automation and coordination on which meaningful societal transformation may depend. From this perspective, neither affect or habit *alone* is sufficient to generate enduring forms of socio-political transformation. Rather, change is continually unfolding through evolving sets of relations in which *interactions* between the affective and the habitual are significant, if not always in predictable or even discernible ways. It is through learning to affectively inhabit change *as it is happening*, I have argued, that we might become better attuned to the speculative possibilities that everyday habit assemblages entail.

Importantly, however, what is at stake in unpacking the relationship between habit and affect in this context is not only how change *works* at a material level but also *what counts as change*. Approaching habit through the lens of evolving assemblages and ecologies highlights powerfully the impossibility of preserving linear models of social progress and transformation. As I have discussed, narratives of social change premised on the force of feeling often focus on the transformative potential of turning point moments, pivotal events or revolutionary encounters. What attending to the dynamics of habit assemblages indicates, however, is the significance of *linked* moments of affecting and being affected, of habituation and re-habituation, that resound across time.<sup>80</sup> Within this ontology of change, the *accumulation* and *reverberation* of seemingly minor interactions, gestures, affects and habits

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<sup>79</sup> Ravaissou, [1838]2008 (footnote 18).

<sup>80</sup> Carrie Rentschler, Samantha Thrift, 'Introduction: Doing feminism: Event, archive techne', in *Feminist Theory* 16.3 (2015), pp. 239–249.

may be just as (or more) significant than major events. Though, as Dewey argues, change at the level of habit is itself potentially revolutionary.