

An interview with Brian Massumi

In this interview conducted by Mary Zournazi, Massumi professor at the Univ. of Montreal opens for a connection between utopia and affect. Brian Massumi has over the last 20 years elaborated strongly in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari, and has in more recent publications, esp. Parabels of the Virtual offered a number of strong texts relating to affect, digitality and virutality.

Mary Zournazi: I'd like to think about hope and the affective dimensions of our experience; what freedoms are possible in the new and "virtualised" global and political economies that frame our lives. To begin, though, what are your thoughts on the potential of hope for these times?

Brian Massumi: From my own point of view, the way that a concept like hope can be made useful is when it is not connected to an expected success - when it starts to be something different from optimism - because when you start trying to think ahead into the future from the present point, rationally there really isn't much room for hope.

Globally it's a very pessimistic affair, with economic inequalities increasing year by year, with health and sanitation levels steadily decreasing in many regions, with the global effects of environmental deterioration already being felt, with conflicts among nations and peoples apparently only getting more intractable, leading to mass displacements of workers and refugees ... It seems such a mess that I think it can be paralysing. If hope is the opposite of pessimism, then there's precious little to be had. On the other hand, if hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of a rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting - because it places it in the present.

Mary Zournazi: Yes - the idea of hope in the present is vital. Otherwise we endlessly look to the future or toward some utopian dream of a better society or life, which can only leave us disappointed, and if we see pessimism as the nature flow from this, we can only be paralysed as you suggest.

Brian Massumi: Yes, because in every situation there are any number of levels of organisation and tendencies in play, in cooperation with each other or at cross-purposes. The way all the elements interrelate is so complex that it isn't necessarily comprehensible in one go. There's always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context. This uncertainty can actually be empowering - once you realize that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. It gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation. The present's 'boundary condition', to borrow a phrase from science, is never a closed door. It is an open threshold - a threshold of potential. You are only ever in the present in passing. If you look at that way you don't have to feel boxed in by it, no matter what its horrors and no matter what, rationally, you expect will come. You may not reach the end of the trail but at least there's a next step. The question of which next step to take is a lot less intimidating than how to reach a far-off goal in a distant future where all our problems will finally be solved. It's utopian thinking, for me, that's 'hopeless'.

Mary Zournazi: So how do your ideas on 'affect' and hope come together here?

Brian Massumi: In my own work I use the concept of 'affect' as a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability, the 'where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do' in every present situation. I guess 'affect' is the word I use for 'hope'. One of the reasons it's such an important concept for me is because it explains why focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn't really settling for less. It's not exactly going for more, either. It's more like being right where you are - more intensely. To get from affect to intensity you have to understand affect as something other than simply a personal feeling. By 'affect' I don't mean 'emotion' in the everyday sense. The way I use it comes primarily from Spinoza. He talks of the body in terms of its capacity for affecting or being affected. These are not two different capacities - they always go together. When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity. It's crucial to remember that Spinoza uses this to talk about the body. What a body is, he says, is what it can do as it goes along. This is a totally pragmatic definition. A body is defined by what capacities it carries from step to step. What these are exactly is changing constantly. A body's ability to affect or be affected - its charge of affect - isn't something fixed. So depending on the circumstances, it goes up and down gently like a tide, or maybe storms and crests like a wave, or at times simply bottoms out. It's because this is all attached to the movements of the body that it can't be reduced to emotion. It's not just subjective, which is not to say that there is nothing subjective in it. Spinoza says that every transition is accompanied by a feeling of the change in capacity. The affect and the feeling of the transition are not two different things. They're two sides of the same coin, just like affecting and being affected. That's the first sense in which affect is about intensity - every affect is a doubling. The experience of a change, an affecting-being affected, is

redoubled by an experience of the experience. This gives the body's movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions - accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency. Emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment.

Mary Zournazi: Emotion, then, is only a limited expression of the 'depth' of our experience?

Brian Massumi: Well, an emotion is a very partial expression of affect. It only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies, for example. 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. So when we feel a particular emotion or think a particular thought, where have all the other memories, habits, tendencies gone that might have come at the point? And where have the bodily capacities for affecting and being affected that they're inseparable from gone? There's no way they can all be actually expressed at any given point. But they're not totally absent either, because a different selection of them is sure to come up at the next step. They're still there, but virtually - in potential. Affect as a whole, then, is the virtual co-presence of potentials. This is the second way that affect has to do with intensity. There's like a population or swarm of potential ways of affecting or being affected that follows along as we move through life. We always have a vague sense that they're there. That vague sense of potential, we call it our 'freedom', and defend it fiercely. 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. But maybe if we can take little, practical, experimental, strategic measures to 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. Having more potentials available intensifies our life. We're not enslaved by our situations. Even if we never have our freedom, we're always experiencing a degree of freedom, or 'wiggle room'. 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. Once again it's all about the openness of situations and how we can live that openness. And you have to remember that the way we live it is always entirely embodied, and that is never entirely personal - it's never all contained in our emotions and conscious thoughts. That's a way of saying it's not just about us, in isolation. In affect, we are never alone. That's because affects in Spinoza's definition are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life - a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places. Spinoza takes us quite far, but for me his thought needs to be supplemented with the work of thinkers like Henri Bergson, who focuses on the intensities of experience, and William James, who focuses on their connectedness.

Mary Zournazi: When you were just talking about Spinoza and the way you understand affect, I don't want to put a false determination on it, but is it a more primal sense of the capacity to be human and how we feel connections to the world and others? That's almost natural to a certain extent ...

Brian Massumi: I wouldn't tend to say it's primal, if that means more 'natural'. I don't think affective intensity is any more natural than the ability to stand back and reflect on something, or the ability to pin something down in language. But I guess that it might be considered primal in the sense that it is direct. You don't need a concept of 'mediation' to talk about it. In cultural theory, people often talk as if the body on the one hand, and our emotions, thoughts, and the language we use for them on the other, are totally different realities, as if there has to be something to come between them and put them into touch with each other. This mediation is the way a lot of theorists try to overcome the old Cartesian duality between mind and body, but it actually leaves it in place and just tries to build a bridge between them. But if you define affect the way we just did, then obviously it includes very elaborated functions like language. There's an affect associated with every functioning of the body, from moving your foot to take a step to moving your lips to make words. Affect is simply a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential - its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do. Like I said, the directness I'm talking about isn't necessarily a self-presence or self-possession, which is how we normally tend to think of our freedom. If it's direct, it's in the sense that it's directly in transition - in the body passing out of the present moment and the situation it's in, towards the next one. But it's also the doubling of the body in the situation - its doubling over into what it might have been or done if it had contrived to live that transition more intensely. A body doesn't coincide with itself. It's not present to itself. It is already on the move to a next, at the same time as it is doubling over on itself, bringing its past up to date in the present, through memory, habit, reflex, and so on. Which means you can't even say that a body ever coincides with its affective dimension. It is selecting from it, extracting and actualising certain potentials from it. You can think of affect in the broadest sense as what remains of the potential after each or every thing a body says or does - as a perpetual bodily remainder. Looked at from a different angle, this perpetual remainder is an excess. It's like a reserve of potential or newness or creativity that is experienced alongside every actual production of meaning in language or in any performance of a useful function - vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overflowing as it gathers itself up to move on.

Mary Zournazi: What immediately comes to mind is something like anger. It's a very strong bodily experience, a heat of the moment intensity - it doesn't seem to have a positive charge in some ways, you know, because it is often a reaction against something ...

Brian Massumi: I think affective expressions like anger and laughter are perhaps the most powerful because they interrupt a situation. They are negative in that sense. They interrupt the flow of meaning that's taking place: the normalised interrelations and interactions that are happening and the functions that are being fulfilled. Because of that, they are irruptions of something that doesn't fit. Anger, for example, forces the situation to attention, it forces a pause filled with an intensity that is often too extreme to be expressed in words. Anger often degenerates into noise and inarticulate gestures. This forces the situation to rearray itself around that irruption, and to deal with the intensity in one way or another. In that sense it's brought something positive out - a reconfiguration. There's always an instantaneous calculation or judgment that takes place as to how you respond to an outburst of anger. But it's not a judgment in the sense that you've gone through all the possibilities and thought it through explicitly - you don't have time for that kind of thing. Instead you use a kind of judgment that takes place instantly and brings your entire body into the situation. The response to anger is usually as gestural as the outburst of anger itself. The overload of the situation is such that, even if you refrain from a gesture, that itself is a gesture. An outburst of anger brings a number of outcomes into direct presence to one another - there could be a peace-making or a move towards violence, there could be a breaking of relations, all the possibilities are present, packed into the present moment. It all happens, again, before there is time for much reflection, if any. So there's a kind of thought that is taking place in the body, through a kind of instantaneous assessment of affect, an assessment of potential directions and situational outcomes that isn't separate from our immediate, physical acting-out of our implication in the situation. The philosopher C.S. Peirce had a word for thought that is still couched in bodily feeling, that is still fully bound up with unfolding sensation as it goes into action but before it has been able to articulate itself in conscious reflection and guarded language. He called it 'abduction'.

Mary Zournazi: Right, right. Oh, that's like a kind of capture

Brian Massumi: Yes, I think you could say that sensation is the registering of affect that I referred to before - the passing awareness of being at a threshold - and that affect is thinking, bodily - consciously but vaguely, in the sense that is not yet a thought. It's a movement of thought, or a thinking movement. There are certain logical categories, like abduction, that could be used to describe this.

Mary Zournazi: I think of abduction as a kind of stealing of the moment. It has a wide range of meanings too - it could be stealing or it could be an alien force or possession ...

Brian Massumi: Or it could be you drawn in by the situation, captured by it, by its eventfulness, rather than you capturing it. But this capture by the situation is not necessarily an oppression. It could be ...

Mary Zournazi: It could be the kind of freedom we were just talking about ...

Brian Massumi: Exactly, it could be accompanied by a sense of vitality or vivacity, a sense of being more alive. That's a lot more compelling than coming to 'correct' conclusions or assessing outcomes, although it can also bring results. It might force you to find a margin, a manoeuvre you didn't know you had, and couldn't have just thought your way into. It can change you, expand you. That's what being alive is all about. So it's hard for me to put positive or negative connotations on affect. That would be to judge it from the outside. It would be going in a moralising direction. Spinoza makes a distinction between a morality and an ethics. To move in an ethical direction, from a Spinozan point of view, is not to attach positive or negative values to actions based on a characterisation or classification of them according to a pre-set system of judgment. It means assessing what kind of potential they tap into and express. Whether a person is going to joke or get angry when they are in a tight spot, that uncertainty produces an affective change in the situation. That affective loading and how it plays out is an ethical act, because it affects where people might go or what they might do as a result. It has consequences.