

ADAM GALL

thought, feeling and
nature

BRIAN MASSUMI

Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation

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WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY

Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed

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BRIAN MASSUMI

A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari

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Brian Massumi is a significant if marginal figure for cultural studies. Since his translation of *Mille Plateaux* in 1987, his position with regards to the academic practice of cultural studies has mirrored the position of Deleuze and Guattari: sometimes embraced, sometimes maligned. In writing his most recent book, *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi has brought to fruition a profound theoretical statement (or number of statements, in fact) as well as a direct engagement with cultural studies as academic practice. His new edited collection, *A Shock to Thought*, continues to engage cultural studies, though more implicitly, emphasising a constellation of possible approaches while maintaining a vague thematic unity.

William Connolly has been producing important political theory for several decades. His most recent book, *Neuropolitics*, is a continuation of his earlier work on the production of an 'ethos of deep pluralism'. Connolly has branched out, utilising as well as contributing ideas about the cinema and neuroscience, alongside his philosophical, political and religious meditations, to produce an important political synthesis. This book also takes a critical stance towards cultural studies and the humanities at large, albeit less explicitly than Massumi's work, arguing against certain underlying assumptions, in particular those that render the natural, and thought itself, static.

Massumi begins *Parables* by outlining the project of the book in lucid terms. After constructing an image of contemporary cultural theory as dependent on static ideas of positionality, he characterises the book as an attempt to

render movement, sensation and the quality of experience thinkable within cultural theory. This involves looking at the virtual ('the "real but abstract" incorporeality of the body') as part of a materialism that endeavours to avoid crude determinism. The book is geared towards producing new theoretical tools and towards engaging the problems of the world with them, rather than

falling into either the Scylla of naive realism or the Charybdis of subjectivism and without contradicting the very real insights of poststructuralist cultural theory concerning the coextensiveness of culture with the field of experience and of power with culture. (4)

The first chapter of *Parables* sets the tone and establishes a pattern that Massumi follows in several other places in the book. This chapter is titled 'The Autonomy of Affect' and has already appeared in the journal *Cultural Studies* and in several edited volumes. It begins by outlining a failed experiment in empirical psychology conducted by German psychologists, to which Massumi brings what I will call an *affirmative reading* that renders those texts into the parables of the volume's title. Rather than negating the results with criticism, he affirms the experiment as having demonstrated far more than it set out to do, and doing so in the very process of its failure. In this way he uses the experiment as a seed for producing philosophy, in line with the productive approach outlined in the introductory chapter.

In the case of the first chapter, the German experiment involved examining cognition in children who were watching a short, and apparently innocuous, animated feature. In the same chapter there is another experiment that found a missing half-second between stimulation and recognition of feeling. Massumi then turns his meditations to the virtuality of Ronald Reagan's presidency, beginning with a story from Oliver Sacks about the reactions of global aphasics and tonal agnosics to one of his speeches: it turns out that Reagan isn't saying anything rational, and he isn't saying it in any clear or consistent tone. All of these examples coalesce into an exploration of the importance of affect to cultural theory, as well as revealing the limits of the terms available for discussing it.

Massumi continues, giving affirmative readings to a range of found objects from psychology and from other sources. In Chapter 2 he returns to Reagan, this time referencing his autobiography in order to understand the dynamics that facilitated his continued presidency; Chapter 4 considers the art of Stelarc; Chapter 5, the difference between the digital and the analogue in media technology. Chapter 3 takes up where Michel Serres, Bruno Latour and Pierre Levy have left off, and uses the ball in a sport's game to produce a parable for the virtual. This chapter quite delightfully meditates on the nature of global capital, and more importantly renegotiates the question of the relationship between individuals and collectivities. If Massumi's project is to render thinkable movement, sensation, and the quality of experience, each of these chapters takes a slightly different and apparently successful approach.

In *Neuropolitics*, William Connolly is also seeking newness in thought, although his project is less radical in its rhetoric than Massumi's. Rather than emphasising the production of theoretical tools, Connolly sees the need for a new synthesis of ideas to aid in the creation of political possibilities. This new synthesis involves the isolation of an object, which is 'neuropolitics': 'the politics through which cultural life mixes into the composition of body/brain processes. And vice versa.' (xiii) He continually emphasises concepts like 'technique' and 'cultivation' with regard to politics, which initially gives the impression of a moderate reformist agenda—largely through the conservative resonances of the words themselves—although this turns into a more radical emphasis on the micropolitical.

Connolly's project is conceived in terms of an expanded version of the minor philosophical tradition spanning from Lucretius to Nietzsche, as articulated by Deleuze. Connolly's version of this tradition, including the addition of contemporary scholars such as Isabelle Stengers, finds its common ground in reflecting 'upon nature, memory, thinking, the layering of culture, and an ethics of cultivation'. (2) Connolly also draws on the work of contemporary neuroscientists (Damasio and others) and pays attention to cinema as a way of informing his explorations. For Connolly, the cinema is important to politics because:

[t]he words, sounds, images, and rhythms through which films prompt a synthesis of experience by viewers simulate the way multimedia techniques and ...

micropolitics works in other venues. Film analysis helps us to discern multimedia techniques at work in organizing perceptual experience, consolidating habits, composing ethical dispositions, and spurring new thoughts into being. (xiii)

Each of the chapters contains, as an illustrative or contributing example, an engagement with a particular film. The first chapter, which looks at the layered character of thought, and attempts to envision a network of brain, body and culture, discusses *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). The second chapter is a meditation on perception that draws on Bergson and neurophysiology and contains an exploration of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Connolly then examines how the natural is conceptualised in science and cultural theory, and then what an ethics of immanent naturalism can look like. While continuing with this ethical dimension, the book changes tone for the fifth chapter, which meditates on religious experience and develops a pragmatic mode of religion that fits into Connolly's broader ethos of pluralisation.

In the final two chapters, Connolly places his ethos in context by outlining democracy on a time-scale appropriate to contemporary existence, recognising that deliberative politics moves more slowly than culture and capital are capable of doing. These final chapters restate some of the arguments for a transnational cultural studies, in particular arguments that capitalism has changed its character, and that transnational networks of media and culture have altered the way we can think about

politics. These chapters offer a contribution of Connolly's ethos in a context of transnational economic and cultural formations.

A Shock to Thought begins by outlining the Deleuze–Guattarian concept of expression, viewed through Massumi's particular lens. It is this concept that thematically ties the collection, although Massumi is averse to a programmatic conception of that link. Like *Parables*, this introduction functions as a statement of intent, also stating its philosophical enemies, in particular a model of expression that sees it as an expression of something. Deleuze and Guattari are instead interested in an asignifying expression: an expression not determined by content and that is capable of autonomous movement.

What follows is a series of pieces on a wide range of topics from popular culture to psychoanalytic theory, utilising Deleuze and Guattari's concept of asignifying expression as part of the contributors' theoretical approach. This layout creates something akin to a record-company sampler. There are fifteen diverse 'tracks' demonstrating a range of possibilities, casting a wide net for anybody interested in utilising Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy productively. While clearly the collection does not provide a simple introduction to this philosophy, a student of cultural studies could do far worse than to look here for ideas on how to utilise philosophy in cultural theory.

While *Parables* embraces a diversity of sources, *A Shock to Thought* is more diverse again. The essays in the collection include discussions of Kantian aesthetics and their possible correlation with Deleuzian ideas (pieces

by Relissa MacMahon, Steven Shaviro, Stephen Zagala), a use of the bestiary to examine Deleuze–Guattarian concepts (Gary Genosko), a catalogue of the modalities of the non-human (Alan Bourassa), a reading of embodiment in the work of Pier Pasolini (Michael Hardt), a meditation on Artaud (Catherine Dale), a re-engagement with subjectivity (Paul Bains), work on Merce Cunningham's choreography (José Gil), a brilliant examination of the fatwa issued on Salman Rushdie (Mani Haghighi), as well as explorations of Japanese calligraphy (Thomas Lamarre), sound technology (Aden Evens) and virtual reality (Andrew Murphie). The final two pieces consist of an opaque essay on Lacanian psychoanalysis by Brachta Lichtenberg Ettinger, and a fragmentary interview with Guattari conducted by the same author.

These pieces, while diverse, do not necessarily represent the boundaries of what is made possible by thinking the cultural in terms of an asignifying expression. Rather they function much as the individual chapters or sections of chapters do in *Parables for the Virtual*. That is, they offer trajectories for thought and theory, although each tends to be (as expected) self-contained. This containment seems temporary: already the first three pieces in the collection reference each other explicitly, and many of the others could combust into interesting combinations.

The approaches of Massumi and Connolly can be compared firstly in terms of tone. Connolly's approach tends to emphasise a critical and analytic mode of text construction: Connolly argues against other philosophical positions quite explicitly and in depth. This is a key

point of difference between him and Massumi, who tends to critique more generously by gearing his reading of other work towards producing new ideas himself. At times the only manifestation of this difference is in the tone of the writing itself.

What they both share, most obviously and immediately, is a willingness to embrace concepts from the sciences, a practice which both are careful to qualify as more than a wholesale and reductive importation. Connolly deems the nature–culture binary, which also divides the humanities from the sciences, to be predicated on an overly simplistic or deterministic reading of what constitutes ‘nature’. It is no new thing to recognise the impossibility of this binarism: Lévi-Strauss saw that nature and culture were coexistent in the apparently universal phenomenon of the incest taboo, causing a fundamental problem for his structuralist anthropology.

But Connolly is operating without explicit reference to that tradition of thought, instead being interested in privileging particular ‘images of nature’ (see Chapter 3) over others in order to constitute a nature–culture continuum, instead of a binary. In doing this he utilises the work of Prigogine and Stengers whose explication of non-equilibrium systems in chemistry engenders the natural with a dynamism other than that attributed to it in classical scientific models, as well as implicitly in the models of the humanities. Massumi also envisions a continuum, mentioning the concept several times, though Connolly’s exposition is more thorough. With an apparently simple formulation (of a continuum, with limits but not boundaries),

the stultifying one-upmanship of ‘nature versus nurture’ and other apparently fundamental debates is quietly forgotten. Both Connolly and Massumi would see such a conceptual opposition as far too rigid and non-productive.

Massumi, as I have already explained, uses empirical psychology as a jumping-off point for cultural theorising. He is also, following Deleuze and Guattari, happy to get his concepts wherever he can. He articulates an adoption of concepts from science without a requirement that they be used ‘correctly’. In this way, the philosophical positions of the sciences are not imported wholesale along with the concepts. This scientific engagement is perhaps under-represented in the pieces in Massumi’s edited collection, which may be simply reflective of the emphasis on expression, although the idea of exploring scientific expression sounds quite interesting to me.

For both Massumi and Connolly there is an emphasis on a form of non-rigid conceptualisation, inherited from the tradition of philosophy they espouse. Massumi uses the word ‘vague’ to describe the concepts he hopes to develop, while Connolly operates in terms of Nietzsche’s ‘approximation’, which is an implicit recognition of the inherent excess of the world over concepts developed to apprehend it. Massumi emphasises the productive nature of such vagueness or approximation—rather than preventing lucid thought, it comes to initiate new thinking by allowing for an element of the affective to enter thought. Both authors emphasise the excess of the world beyond the knowable. Thinking, therefore, is not straightjacketed by a requirement that it be comprehensive.

Given this emphasis, it is perhaps surprising that the figure of Immanuel Kant is prevalent in Connolly's book. Indeed, as a consequence of his engagement with and use of Nietzsche, Connolly ends up arguing with Kant throughout. This has the effect of revaluing Kant, but in a way that does not attempt to repress him; as Deleuze has done before him, it is clear that Connolly is not engaging Kant in order to negate his critical philosophy. Instead, Kant is treated as a potent enemy. Following in a similar vein, Kant comes to inhabit a significant proportion of *A Shock to Thought*. The first three pieces in the collection explicitly revalue his aesthetic theory, emphasising the immanence of his conceptualisation of beauty over the reinstatement of transcendence that is supposed to follow the rupture of the sublime. This revaluation of Kant is avowedly at odds with that of many postmodernists who have come to emphasise the apparently radical sublime.

Both Massumi and Connolly explicitly engage the fields of cultural studies and cultural theory, and they make a number of criticisms. For Massumi these criticisms are also demands that, as far as I can see, can only be productive if addressed. Effectively, the cultural theorist or cultural studies practitioner is being asked to work harder. For Massumi this involves introducing complex conceptualisations of movement and affect into cultural theory in order to avoid the stasis inherent in representational and positional theories. Massumi also notes that cultural studies 'clings to the notion that expression is of a particularity' and therefore hinges expression to a constituency. (253) Massumi sees

this as the role of science, and a relinquishment of the self-activity of cultural studies.

Connolly is less demanding, although in the process of producing his own synthesis he urges a rethinking of thought and, in turn, of culture. His explicit criticism of cultural theory is that it contains a reductive image of nature (see Chapter 3), and also that it ends up implicitly adopting concepts such as race in a deterministic fashion (see particularly his assessment of Walter Benn Michaels in Chapter 2). Connolly's criticism is not so far shy of Massumi's: it is in the tying of ideas and thoughts to a constituency that pluralism fails. His critical target, then, is also the uprooting of a certain kind of positionality, although he does not articulate it in these exact terms.

A Shock to Thought is, from Massumi's perspective at least, a set of texts that do not fail in the way that he believes much cultural studies has. Having outlined his agenda in *Parables* as well as demonstrating it through the parables themselves, the edited collection is the pay-off: a form of cultural studies that does not take expression to be an 'expression of'. Of course, the authors in the collection would not necessarily have had this agenda in mind when they produced their essays. Ultimately then, what Massumi is articulating through the publication of this essay is that while there is a reductive form of cultural studies that may cease, in fact, to be cultural studies, there are also a diverse range of practices that are already operating contrary to this form.

A Shock to Thought is a sampler that demonstrates *some* of the potential of the field, casting

a wide-enough net to catch the interest, and urge forward the productive power, of cultural studies practitioners. While more homogeneous in their construction, both Connolly's and Massumi's texts direct practitioners towards something similar, while providing a more programmatic way of going about just that. While this is almost certainly a side issue for Connolly, who remains interested in a particular political agenda, it is nevertheless a significant by-product of the reading of these texts that they spur forward productive thought that is entirely relevant to contemporary cultural studies.

ADAM GALL works as a research assistant in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney, where he is currently undertaking a PhD.
