



The potential of paying attention: Tripping and the ethics of affective attentiveness



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ABSTRACT

There is enormous power and ethical potential in the seemingly simple act of paying attention and choosing what one pays attention to. Taking this power seriously, I explore the ethical value attunement, or the state of paying attention, holds in relation to affect and its circulation. Because the affective texture of the everyday is not always directly accessible to experience, the ethical potential of becoming attuned to this texture can be more effectively examined through a conceptual framework of a radically altered, affectively-mediated state of consciousness: the trip. Conceptualizing tripping allegorically, as meaning something other and more than what is literally said, I use this mode of experience as a framework to think through the question of what ethical potential lies in practices of affective attentiveness. Exploring the connections between affect, attention, and tripping, I bring these concepts together in a close reading of excerpts from David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* and *This is Water*. Engaging with the work of a writer who has always seen attention as an ethical imperative, I show that an indefinite, shifting understanding of affect can have concrete ethical applications in day to day life.

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Consulting a dictionary yields no fewer than twelve definitions for 'trip': a journey or excursion, especially for pleasure; an act of going to a place and returning; an exciting or stimulating experience; a stumble or fall due to catching one's foot on something; a mistake; and of course, a hallucinatory (or otherwise strange) experience caused by taking a psychedelic drug. While we usually think of tripping as hallucinatory and tied to the consumption of narcotics, not all trips are hallucinatory and not all drugs are psychedelics, or even narcotics. Indeed, some trips require no drugs at all (or rather no drugs that we recognize as Controlled Substances) and are comprised entirely of intense, strange, disturbing, profound, and unexpected affectively-mediated psychic experiences that challenge our ideas about intoxication and sobriety, erasing clear dividing lines between the two.

Moving tripping away from traditional, drug-centred definitions, I think of it more broadly, as a mode of being encompassing a wide spectrum of experiences. In other words, I consider tripping *metaphorically*, not as separate from other forms of experience, such as reading, art, sport, or meditation, but as an affectively-amplified part of a continuum of consciousness that can teach us something about how we relate to the world. In defining tripping

more broadly I think of the trip the way the field of Addiction Studies considers 'drugs' and 'addiction': not as contingent sociological terms, but as conceptual and philosophical frames for thinking about modes of being in culture (see [Alexander and Roberts, 2003](#); [Redfield and Brodie, 2002](#)).

There is enormous power and ethical potential in the seemingly simple act of paying attention and choosing what one pays attention to. Taking this power seriously, I explore the ethical value attunement, or the state of paying attention, holds in relation to affect and its circulation—that which is hidden in plain sight all around us. Because the affective texture of the everyday is not always directly accessible to experience ([Massumi, 2002b](#): 33), the ethical potential of becoming attuned to this texture can be more effectively examined through a conceptual framework of a radically altered, affectively-mediated state of consciousness: in this case, the trip. Conceptualizing tripping allegorically, as meaning something other and more than what is literally said, I use this mode of experience as a framework to think through the question of what ethical potential lies in practices of affective attentiveness. Outlining my understanding of affect as undefined, and thus different from emotion, to explain why attentiveness constitutes a particularly ethical stance towards affect, I examine how such an ethics might look in practice in a close reading of excerpts from David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* and *This is Water*. Engaging with the work of a writer who sees attention as an ethical imperative, I show

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that an indefinite, shifting understanding of affect can have concrete ethical applications in day to day life.

1. Affect as *something*

As an interdisciplinary term of study, affect lacks a cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to itself. As such, it is often used as a synonym for emotion, devoid of specific, contextualized meaning (Massumi, 2002b: 27). While scholars generally agree that affect encompasses the various capacities of bodies (whether animate or inanimate, living or non-living) to affect and be affected, and refers to forces and intensities that are visceral, precede conscious knowing, and insist *beyond emotion* (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), many studies of affect take definite, clearly circumscribed emotions as their starting point. See, for instance, Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where various socially-categorized emotions such as hate, fear, disgust, shame, and love are taken as points of entry to "explore how naming emotions involves different orientations towards the objects they construct" (Ahmed, 2004: 14). Naming emotions is key in theoretical models that categorize and label affects so that they can be more effectively analysed. The terms affect and emotion are used interchangeably, as synonyms, with no clear distinction between the two.

Consider, as a point of contrast, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, where a careful distinction between affect and emotion is maintained by referring to forces and intensities only as *something*, consistently refusing to give any feeling a determinate name or category. Stewart's understanding of affect encompasses "impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, [...] forms of persuasion, contagion and compulsion, [...] modes of attention, attachment, and agency" (Stewart, 2007: 2)—a variety of experiences that are not quite emotions and cannot be easily classified as such. Affects are not like emotions or any other formal structures that have been socially categorized, such as ideologies, worldviews, or systemic beliefs, but more like Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, which "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (Williams, 1977: 132–133). This distinction between affects as undefined intensities and emotions as categorized feelings is important, as it is precisely amorphousness and a lack of definition that opens affect to a form of ethical potentiality more definite understandings of emotion foreclose.

Tripping, an affectively-mediated experience, alerts us to this difference and its significance. A trip is primarily felt rather than understood, and imparts mainly affective, or sensuous knowledge—a knowledge that is difficult to communicate in any coherent way, rendering itself largely non-narrativizable. Trips are like affects in that they do not have to await definition to exert palpable pressure on those who undergo them. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize this affective dimension of tripping in their description of the trip's accompanying phenomena, such as hallucination, in which something one sees, hears, or realizes actually "presuppose [s] an *I feel* at an even deeper level, which gives hallucinations their object" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004a: 20). A trip is an affectively-based (*I feel*) event that exposes levels of meaning beyond those available in the realm of everyday experience, ones that do not necessarily make analytical sense.

It is difficult to name or define precisely what occurs during a trip, where the body becomes the Body without Organs: a "connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities" (2004b: 179). In tripping there are affective intensities that cannot be easily pinned down for analysis, momentary feelings that pass before they can be fully grasped as disparate emotions. Many writers have argued that as an occurrence that is strange,

outside of ordinary human experience, and primarily felt rather than understood, a trip is inherently unrepresentable, or always at least partially inaccessible through the symbolic, or semiotic level of language. Following an extensive attempt to convey the feeling of an LSD trip, Tom Wolfe gives up and writes:

But these are *words*, man! *And you couldn't put it into words*. The White Smocks liked to put it into words, like *hallucination* and *dissociative phenomena* [but...] The whole thing was...*the experience*...this certain indescribable *feeling*...Indescribable, because words can only jog the memory [emphasis in original]. (Wolfe, 1968: 44–5)

Even Edgar Allan Poe, who declared that he "never had a thought which [he] could not set down in words" and did "not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language" found his opium dreams to be a "class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, [he has] found it absolutely impossible to adapt to language" (Poe, 1902: 88). Tripping shows us that undefined intensities exist before becoming identifiable as specific, socially-categorized emotions, and that these amorphous affects nonetheless shape our world in very real ways.

This lack (indeed, impossibility) of definition marks the trip as a space of openness and potential. Henri Michaux, who spent a great deal of time attempting to write about his mescaline trips, described tripping as being "as if there was an opening, an opening like a gathering together, like a world, where something can happen, many things can happen, where there's a whole lot, there's a swarm of possibilities, where everything tingles with possibility" (quoted in Plant, 1999: 146). Anything can happen during a trip, and trips routinely exceed the intentions with which they are undertaken.

Openness of definition makes room for potential. Affectively speaking, this can be understood by looking at Deleuzian theories of expression, in which expression is a movement from the force of that which is expressed, whether linguistic or extra-linguistic, to content, the concrete form this expression takes, mediated by "the process of *their passing into each other*: in other words, an immanence...[a] gap between content and expression" (Massumi, 2002a: xviii). What happens in this gap is crucial, since the force of expression has no concrete existence, only "dynamic potential," until it is captured "by a content-expression articulation, as in a 'net'" (xx). Coming to rest momentarily in a concrete object such as a body, expression becomes more definitely signified, allowing its content to emerge, but also limiting its potential by restricting its circulation. In other words, once expression stops its process of immanent movement and becomes static, or captured without the chance of renewal (as in a concrete definition), all dynamic potential is lost.

Returning to Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, it is easy to see how affects, knowable only as a vague *something* that is happening, make the world "tentative, charged, overwhelming, and alive," rendering it "a beginning dense with potential" (Stewart, 2007: 128–9). Because nothing is defined, the potential for something new to take place is enormous. Discussing Deleuze's model of expression, Brian Massumi points out that the "actual definition says too much in being born: it annuls the potential, bringing a current of expression to the end of the stream" (Massumi, 2002a: xxxii). If definition turns formless affective expression into content, such as a discernible emotion, it is clear that dynamic potential cannot exist in an affective model using definite emotions as its starting point. Once captured in the content nets of specific emotions, affects lose their capacity for movement and change.

This is not to say that emotions do not have any radical potential, only that their potential functions differently than that of affects and their undefined *somethingness* which is the focus of my

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