



## Creative paranoia: Affect and social method



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### ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, various critics have proposed that scholars should turn from critical hermeneutics to engage with new modes of social inquiry. The common charge is that critique has become paranoid and cannot register the dynamic affects that vitalise everyday life. In response to this shift, my paper poses several questions. For instance, are the suspicious sentiments of critique so disconnected from our current civic atmosphere? And do the times and spaces we are living in truly demand methods that are less wary and reactive? To explore these questions, the paper examines an intriguing, internal conflict within Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007), a text that has been widely acclaimed as an answer to calls for methodological change. Though it is marked as a departure from 'paranoid reading', I argue that Stewart's ethnographic work, set amidst environments of precarity and fiscal crisis, gives us cause to reconsider the social utility and creative potential of suspicion.

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Over the past decade there has been a growing chorus of discontent with what are perceived to be the suspicious reflexes of critical methods. The common charge is that critique has become paranoid and stagnant; unable, and often unwilling, to register the dynamic attachments and affects that vitalise everyday life. Bruno Latour, for instance, argues that critique's 'debunking' and 'iconoclastic' narratives (2004: 238) have 'had the immense drawback of creating a massive gap between what was felt and what was real' (2010: 4). Rita Felski similarly claims that critique is 'a stance of permanent scepticism and sharply honed suspicion [...] propelled by a deep-seated discomfort with everyday language and thought' (2008: 13). It is, she states, a method that 'requires us to go behind the backs of ordinary persons in order to expose their beliefs as deluded or delinquent' (13). Both Latour and Felski argue that a suspicious stance devalues ordinary logics and divorces the critic from their social environment.

In this article I would like to raise some questions that unsettle the seemingly disparate identities that justify this turn — the

critical, structural forms of attention assigned to the critic on one side and the affective, dynamic attentions that animate everyday life on the other. For example, are the suspicious, wary sentiments of the style of critique under question so disconnected from the atmosphere and actions of our current civic sphere? And do the times and spaces we are living in truly demand methods that are less critical, wary, and discerning? As a way into these questions, this article will address an intriguing, internal conflict within a text that has been widely commended for its response to calls for methodological change, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Though it is marked as a departure from 'paranoid reading', I argue that Stewart's work gives us reason to reconsider the potential, character, and social utility of suspicious attention, and thus the division of critical and social methods. By highlighting this counter-narrative within Stewart's work, my discussion also addresses broader questions about the nature of affect and the value of critical reading that have arisen in recent and prominent debates about methodology.

In line with Latour and Felski, further arguments against suspicious reading claim that it is not germane to our political present. In their editorial opening to 'The Way We Read Now,' for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that 'symptomatic reading' is no longer relevant to contemporary political realities, and has

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come to seem 'nostalgic, even utopian' (2009: 1–2). They describe this perspective as a common, collective sentiment, stating: 'Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in [the current] era' (2). This sense of waning relevance echoes the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggested, as early as the 1990s, that the paranoid forms of reading applicable to the Cold War era and during the 1980s AIDS crisis had taken on a 'dogged, defensive narrative stiffness' (Sedgwick, 1997: 23). Sedgwick argues that criticism retaining a paranoid structure has 'done so increasingly outside of a context where it had reflected a certain, palpable purchase on daily reality' (2007: 640). More recent affect theory has also described critique as inadequate for the task of understanding social dynamics. Brian Massumi argues that critique 'loses contact with other more moving dimensions of experience' and 'doesn't allow for other kinds of practices that might not have so much to do with mastery and judgement as with affective connection' (Massumi in Zournazi, 2002: 220). Due to what he describes as affect's autonomous, indefinable nature, Massumi states that '[affect] is not ownable or recognisable, and is thus resistant to critique' (1995: 88).

This representation of a critical hermeneutics as out of touch with social life has inspired a call for new methods. Many of the critics mentioned above, as well as others, have proposed alternative methods (Sedgwick, 1997; Law, 2004; Warner, 2004; Thrift, 2007; Felski, 2009; Latour, 2010; Bewes, 2010; Muecke, 2010). These proposed forms of inquiry are variously described, in contrast to critical reading, as free of suspicion or judgement and more accommodating of divergence and ambiguity. In an argument for fictocriticism, a method that combines both critical and fictive genre elements, Stephen Muecke states that in contrast to 'traditional sociological texts', his text 'is organised around flows and coagulations of thoughts and feelings (Muecke, 2010: 1). Outlining his 'Non-Representational Theory', Nigel Thrift similarly explains that 'it is imperative to understand [...] multiple registers of sensation operating beyond the reach of the reading techniques on which the social sciences are founded' (12). According to such arguments, to reunite with vital forces of contemporary life, scholars must break from suspicious and demystifying forms of social inquiry.

In consonance with Stewart, I am in favour of inclusive forms of inquiry that consider non-human-centred modes of change and agency, however, I envision that this approach would mean not excluding a range of methods and possibilities from the outset. With this in mind, instead of asking how critique could be more than suspicious, with the hope of forging a new method, I want to ask a slightly different question, namely, how might this suspicion be more than critique? And by 'more than' I mean how might the desire to reveal hidden motives and agencies have a broader social location and purpose? How might it resonate in and with logics that blur what are presumed to be the distinct realms of critical and common thought? In this frame, we have the potential to decenter critical hermeneutics in a way that does not seek to exclude or dismiss it as erroneous or obsolete, but rather considers the way that all methods – not just a select 'better' few – are immanent to the social affective spaces they engage.

As Ben Anderson notes in *Encountering Affect* (2014), 'there is now an extraordinary proliferation of versions of what affect is and does' (7). He explains that this is because an interest in affect orients 'inquiry to life and living in all its richness' (7). However, critical voices within affect theory have variously argued that certain questions about living, namely critical questions about identity politics and structural inequalities, have sometimes been

set aside unnecessarily (Hemmings, 2005; Thein, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Anderson aims to address the conflict between critique and affect by offering 'a specific practice of critique [that] can sit alongside and compliment speculation and description as ways of relating to affective life' (19). With my close reading of Stewart's ethnography I hope to show that we could also face this conflict by considering how existing forms of critical attention, in all their suspiciousness, might already be viable methods for navigating social shifts. My argument therefore joins efforts to diversify the methods we can use to engage with affect by addressing a key theoretical and methodological tension within the field. It raises questions about how we ascribe values and affects to particular modes of analysis and reenlists critical hermeneutics, via Stewart, as a creative, dynamic social method.

## 1. Provocative paradox

Stewart has been portrayed as one of the primary advocates of 'non-representation,' and 'creative experimentation' (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 13), and *Ordinary Affects* as one of the 'most widely circulated books on affect,' (Frank and Wilson, 2012: 873). In *Ordinary Affects*' 115 autobiographical fragments – the longest stretching across 5 pages, the shortest just 4 lines – Stewart narrates scenes from her everyday life where people she knows, meets, or sees, respond to as-yet-undefinable, affecting forces. The fragments are prefaced by a short, critical introduction that positions *Ordinary Affects* as a correction to critical, structural, and representational forms of social science, and, in realisation of the current methodological directive, as an intuited and creative rendering of everyday life. In the very first sentences, Stewart aligns her study with the aims and terminology that codify the intervention described above. '*Ordinary Affects* is an experiment, not a judgement' she argues, '[c]ommitted not to demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity and the concrete [...]' (Stewart, 2007: 1).

The ethnography can be read as a realisation of the proposals for methodological change cited in my introduction. In the opening pages of *Ordinary Affects*, and in a series of related articles, Stewart draws inspiration from the turn against critique's key theorists. In 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World' (2008), for instance, Stewart cites Sedgwick's arguments against paranoid reading as an impetus for her work (72, see also 2011). In 'Atmospheric Attunements' (2011), Stewart also names Thrift and Latour as inspiration for her 'writing and thinking experiment' (Stewart, 2011: 445). 'Following these tendencies to rethink theory and writing,' she explains, 'my point here is not to expose anything but to pencil in the outline of what Thrift (2007) calls a geography of what happens: a speculative topography of everyday sensibilities [...]' (Stewart, 2011: 445). Noting precedents for *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart also praises fictocriticism's blurring of fact and fiction, which, marked as more sensorial than critical prose, 'leaves the reader with an embodied sense of the world' (2007: 6).

Stewart represents affect as unresponsive to structural, analytic, and critical methods. Such methods, she contends, cannot capture

<sup>1</sup> In cultural geography (Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Davidson and Milligan, 2004) and the sociology of science (Lloyd, 1984, Keller, 1985), feminist scholars have advocated for the recognition of affect and emotion as important social agencies, rather than unexplainable irrationalities. It is not surprising that critiques of the tendency to oppose affect to emotion - in a way that echoes earlier dichotomies between reason/emotion – have also arisen from feminist theorists of space, embodiment, and culture (see Hemming, 2005 and Thein, 2005 as cited above, but also Papoulias and Callard, 2010). For a thorough review of literature within the field of feminist studies dealing with affect see Gorton (2007).

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