



# Technology and affect: Towards a theory of inorganically organised objects



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## ABSTRACT

This paper links debates around technology, materiality and affect to generate a theory of inorganically organised objects and affects. Drawing upon the work of Felix Guattari, Gilbert Simondon and Bernard Stiegler, the paper suggests that technical objects can be understood as assemblages of matter, which are organised by material thresholds that shape their capacity to affect. The paper then argues that technical affects are transmitted via material mediums such as air that it terms associated milieus. To understand the affective capacities of technology, one should understand how technologies reorganise and draw upon associated milieus' to generate affect and how the material thresholds of objects shape what these affects are. Developing a number of examples, the paper shows how inorganically organised affect reorganise the body and corporeally affects capacities to act and respond to the world. In conclusion the paper suggests an account of affect that focuses on objects has methodological implications for social scientists interested in studying technical processes and environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Affect is now a widely discussed issue in the humanities and social sciences (see [Massumi, 2002](#); [Pile, 2009](#); [Bondi and Davidson, 2011](#); [Connolly, 2011](#); [Curti et al., 2011](#); [Dawney, 2011](#); [Leys, 2011](#)). On a basic level affect has most often been understood as the 'capacity to affect and be affected' (see [Thrift, 2004](#)). Beyond this basic definition there are many particular theories of affect, all emergent from their own theoretical schools and traditions and each with their own ontological and epistemological implications (such as post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology etc). Perhaps the most popular of these theories is Gilles Deleuze's account of affect, itself drawn from the work of Benedict Spinoza and modified and publicised through the work of Brian [Massumi \(2002\)](#) and William [Connolly \(1999\)](#), amongst others. For [Deleuze \(1988\)](#), affect is the outcome of the encounter between entities and how entities are affected by these encounters. Examples include how a plant may be affected by water, which causes it to grow, and how an animal may be affected by poison, which causes it to die. Rather than defined by their substance, size or species, [Deleuze \(1988: 124\)](#) suggests that human and non-human entities can be defined and compared through their affects. For example, from this affective perspective, a sports car and a

race horse have more in common than a race horse and a cow because the sports car and race horse share more affects (such as a capacity for speed or an ability to manoeuvre quickly).

With this perspective in mind the aim of this paper is to modify Deleuze's theory of affect using the work of philosophers Felix Guattari, Gilbert Simondon and Bernard Stiegler to generate a theory of technical objects and affects it terms inorganically organised objects and inorganically organised affects. Briefly, inorganically organised objects can be understood as assemblages of manufactured components that allow an object to perform some kind of task or activity. Inorganically organised affects can be defined as affects that are shaped by and emerge from these objects. The potential for an affect to be generated by a technical object, is, in turn, shaped by what could be termed the material relations between components that make up an object and the absolute material thresholds that define an object by what it can do. Material relations between components can be understood as the range of movements, changes and translations that are required for a technology to undergo its normal operations. For example, an Apple iPad will only operate if the relations between particular components, such as the screen, battery and graphical processor are organised correctly, which in turn allow the iPad to translate various forms of energy, such as electricity, into images and sound. Material thresholds are the limits that determine the potential affects an object can generate, which in turn define what that object is. For example, smashing an iPad's screen creates a situation in

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which the screen can no longer translate touch into digital data, but now gains the capacity to cut or slice through skin, translating sharpness into pain. Smashing the iPad's screen is a process of surpassing the objects absolute material threshold and in doing so creates a new object. From an affective perspective the iPad with a smashed screen becomes more closely related to a knife or cutting blade, than another tablet PC because it now shares more affects with a knife (a capacity to cut) than with a digital computer (it can no longer process data).

The purpose of developing an account of inorganically organized objects and affects is threefold. Firstly, while [Deleuze \(1988\)](#) emphasises the non-human character of affect, many current studies begin and end with affect as experienced by a human being through their particular emotional capacities. For [Massumi \(2002\)](#), emotions are personalised affects. For example, an image may cause the hairs to stand up on the back of our neck (an affect) and be personalised into the emotion of fear. While there is undoubtedly a link between the affective and the emotional, this paper conceptualises affect as force that has the capacity to transform the corporeal and material basis of the human body in ways that are not reducible to a subject's emotional state. Developing an account of inorganically organized affect offers another way of approaching the affect/emotion nexus.

Secondly, developing a theory of inorganically organised objects and affects attempts to add conceptual clarity to the distinction between the cognitive and non-cognitive that is often invoked in theories of affect ([Anderson, 2006](#)). Affect is regularly discussed as operating on a reflex, or unconscious level ([Massumi, 2002](#)). Discussing the phenomenon of laughter in the work of William Connolly, Ley's asks whether a distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive is helpful:

"Is Connolly implying that, by analogy with the pain reflex, laughter can also be understood in reflex terms? If so, he is implicitly arguing that far from being a complex, social-cognitive phenomenon, laughter as an expression of amusement can be conceptualized as an automatic response to stimuli without regard to the meaning those stimuli might have for us, since they are intrinsically capable of triggering a laugh reflex" (2011: 461–462).

An account of inorganically organised affect seeks to show where particular affects emerge from and thus show how particular forms of reflex are the product of the development of particular technical objects, through theorising their particular material components and thresholds. In this case, the cultural, somatic, technical and historical cannot be separated into distinct or discreet categories because the material components and thresholds of an object are intimately related to their design, manufacture and use. Returning to the iPad example above to clarify this, the capacity of the screen to resist smashing (which emerges from the objects material relations and thresholds) are dependent on a whole range of broader economic and political processes around manufacturing safety standards, the history of glass production and consumer rights amongst many others factors.

Thirdly an account of inorganically organised affects allows us to understand how particular affects travel and are transmitted between and across particular bodies and environments. This is pertinent, because critiques of affect often ask how such transmission is possible. As [Steve Pile \(2009: 16\)](#) suggests:

"The space between bodies is not bridged by pipes and cables, but is an invisible field within which bodies are always already located. But what is the nature of the ether that carries affects? How do we 'pick up' affects? And how far do they reach – from one body to another, across a room, through a city, nation, world?"

This paper develops the concept of material thresholds to argue that objects generate and transmit affects themselves. As I demonstrate in section two and three, concentrating on how actual

objects generate, translate and transmit affect makes it easier to understand where affects come from, how they travel and what their effects are. This in turn is linked to the methodological potential of affect as a concept because one can then think about and trace the particular actors, objects and institutions that attempt to shape affect for their own ends and purposes. This point is especially cogent considering critiques of affect often point to the abstract and undifferentiated nature of affective accounts of the social ([Thien, 2005](#); [Tolia-Kelly, 2006](#)).

The paper answers the question of transmission specifically by suggesting that affects cannot be thought outside of an environmental or ecological context. As section three argues, affects always travel through an 'associated milieu' composed of some form of matter or another. In this case affects are a matter of force as much as any kind of content. Thinking through this associated milieu also allows us to consider how the same affective force has differential impacts dependent on the body or entity it encounters and how single objects can create fields and atmospheres of affects that, in turn, generate spaces.

To make these claims the paper forms three parts. In section two I turn towards Stiegler's account of inorganic organised being, Simondon's account of homeostasis and Guattari's account of the technical assemblage to theorise how the material components and thresholds of objects shape their capacity to generate and transmit inorganically organised affects. In section three I develop the vignette of sound and tinnitus (an experience of ringing in the ears) as a way to understand how technical objects produce inorganically organised affects and how these affects shape and alter the body. Tinnitus is one of many possible examples that could be used to illustrate the idea of technical affect, but is particularly helpful for two reasons. First, tinnitus clearly shows how affects are generated by technical objects and travel through associated milieus. Second, tinnitus points to the affective afterlives that specific technical affects can have, which are often ignored by literatures that focus on affects as existing at particular moments of encounter. In conclusion I offer some suggestions as to how an object centred account of affect can be helpful for those wishing to study affect empirically.

## 2. Theorising inorganically organised objects

There is a variety of existing work on technology and affect ([Hansen, 2004](#); [Thacker, 2004](#); [Clough, 2008](#); [Parisi, 2013](#)). This literature is divided on whether affects can be differentiated according to their status as either natural or technical. For [Deleuze \(1988: 124\)](#), whose work on Spinoza is so often used as the basis for thinking on affect: "the plane of nature that distributes affects, does not make any distinction at all between things that might be called natural and things that might be called artificial". Like Deleuze, [Patricia Clough](#) critiques the possibility of an ontological separation between organic (natural) and inorganically organised (artificial or technical) affect. As she writes in relation to the work of [Mark Hansen](#):

"Whereas Hansen's treatment of new media insists on the difference between the human body and human-machine assemblages, between bodily affect and digitization – differences that hark back to the differences that haunted constructionism, Eugene Thacker's treatment of biomedicine reveals the informational substrate of the body and the impossibility of the distinctions Hansen seeks to maintain. Thacker argues that the body of bio-mediation is not merely a body-as-constructed, given that 'constructionism formulates an ontological division between the 'bio' and the 'media,' such that the latter has as its main task the mediation of some unmediated 'thing' ([Thacker, 2004: 12](#))" ([Clough, 2008: 9](#)).

[Clough](#) suggests that there is no distinction between organic and inorganically organised affect because as [Thacker](#) argues, to be human is to be shaped by and immersed in technical affects. From

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