



## The one and the many: How threshold phenomena breach subject boundaries

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### review of

Blackman, L. (2012) *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation*. London: Sage. (PB, pp. 209+xxv, £28.99, ISBN 9781446266854)

### Introduction

'Immaterial bodies' explores how affect can change the way we understand ourselves as bounded individual subjects. Affect can be thought of as the pre-conscious instinct or the intensity prior to conscious perception or representation. Blackman looks at liminal practices, *i.e.* those which challenge the threshold between the conscious and unconscious, arguing that we are not isolated individuals but both 'one and many'. Despite our singular embodiment she argues that our consciousness is 'distributed', and our subjectivity is produced through communal, inter-relational affective communication.

That we are both singular and multiplicitous is not a new argument – she refers often to James (1890) who called it 'the problem of personality'. Using previously underexplored works on parapsychology from Tarde (1902), Bergson (1920) and James in particular this book aims and succeeds in producing a genealogy of affective communication. As the title suggests she looks at how affect is mediated (or felt and understood) through bodies, technology and discourse. She brings together such seemingly disparate practices as voice hearing, telepathy, and intergenerational memory with television and radio communication, and weaves

them into a compelling argument for ‘distributed consciousness’ and the permeability of individual experience.

As Blackman tells us there has been a shift within social science from discursive to affective modes of analysis as a reaction against discursive determinism and disembodied detachment. However affect studies is far from a unified field, including contributions from neurobiology, psychology, and social and cultural studies. Blackman successfully brings together sources from across these fields to support her argument, although the sheer historic and disciplinary breadth combined with an often inaccessible style of writing can make this a challenging read. Minimal signposting means it is difficult to dip in and out of, however it is worth perseverance, offering a unique and fascinating analysis of ‘threshold phenomena’.

In the next sections I outline the main themes within each chapter. Blackman starts by setting out her project and positioning herself within studies of affect, before moving on in Chapter 2 to explore the debates around willpower vs. suggestion and mimesis in explaining individual and crowd behaviour. Chapter 3 looks at parapsychological, or threshold, phenomena arguing that telepathy is simply communication at a distance. Chapter 4 engages with materialism and embodiment through neurophysiological arguments, whilst Chapter 5 looks at cultural studies based investigations of energy and rhythm in creating affective ‘transmissions’. Finally Chapters 6 and 7 bring together voice hearing and intergenerational memory with neuroscience and epigenetics, and explore the trans-subjective nature of affective communication.

### **The neglect of affective communication**

In the preface and Chapter 1 Blackman establishes her basic stance: firstly that affect theory is and needs to be transdisciplinary, secondly that it has neglected the liminal areas of experience which are those (not coincidentally) associated with marginalised and othered identities, and thirdly that ‘brain-body-world’ assemblages involve both singularity and plurality meaning that the boundaries of personhood are permeable.

Parapsychological material in particular is shown to have been side-lined or even ridiculed by affective theory’s use of the hard sciences of neurology and physiology to explore consciousness. She argues that telepathy, or communication ‘at a distance’, for example has been reduced to being understood as symptomatic of fantasy and irrationality, while neurobiological and psychological explanations of brain pathology or group hysteria are privileged. She doesn’t dismiss hard science

or psychology, but approaches it critically. Indeed she uses biomedical evidence to demonstrate how the physical and social are entwined, citing the morphological example of the failure of a hand transplant due to it being experienced as monstrous, thus demonstrating how individually and socially we are fearful of the 'other', and how we guard our singularity and resist inter-corporeality.

She is equally critical of the trans-human focus of Deleuzian influenced affect theory, which sometimes displaces the subject entirely. Bodies become understood as unstable assemblages which can include the human and non-human, for example the capitalist exchange system (Clough, 2007; Haraway, 1991; Massumi, 2002). However she uses this theory which challenges bodily integrity to demonstrate that 'distributed embodiment' [9] means consciousness is not just within one person. At the same time she is clear that affect is an intensity experienced in our material bodies which both requires and produces a subject. The 'immaterial bodies' of the title therefore refers to the collective affective production of the one through the many.

Although this book is part of the 'turn to affect' Blackman doesn't dismiss the discursive. After all exploring the boundaries of the self is not a dissimilar or exclusive project to that of the discursive. However she suggests that whilst the individual cannot be reduced to psychology and biology, neither can communication be reduced to representational practices of language or signification. Instead she looks at how affective, non-representational, intangible and immaterial means can be used to engage with the boundaries of subjectivity. Continuing from her previous work (Blackman, 2001; 2007; 2008) the affective modes which she is particularly interested in are those of voice hearing, spiritualism, and hypnotic suggestion.

Without engaging directly in notions of identity and identity politics Blackman highlights the systematic othering that is visible in studies of affect, habit and suggestion, such as women and ethnic minorities lacking willpower or character, as well as the gender relations involved in the side-lining of telepathy as a practice carried out by women unlike the showmanship involved in mesmerism. She notes that the affective and instinctual realm has been reduced to those who are othered (e.g. women, children, and animals), arguing that suggestibility has become reconfigured as will. Those who succumb to media influence for example are seen as dumb whereas rationality and intelligence are seen as able to overcome any susceptibility. She outlines how there been a historical trend to create hierarchies of people, and both a lack of will and animal behaviour has long been attributed on the basis of race, gender and class, with willpower and individuality the preserve of the white male middle-classes.

## The one and the many

This next chapter introduces one of the central themes in the book, that of automatism, and what she calls the 'habit-will-suggestion-instinct' assemblage. The argument being examined here is how we account for crowd or group behaviour. That is, whether we are suggestible and crowds or sociality produce affect, or whether crowds just provide a place or time at which we are susceptible to existing forces. She uses historical writers like James (1890) and the more recent work of Leys (1993) who argues that there is no self prior to mimesis (or the mimicry of others) to argue that social influence or suggestibility shows how the self is distributed across other actors and agencies.

The dynamic of will and automatism particularly in the form of habits and personality underpin much of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century literature discussed in this book and, she argues, is present but unacknowledged in current debates. She draws on both historical and current writers to look at 'contagion' or how affect has been seen to spread in an animalistic fashion as bodies imitate each other. She shows how this historical view of personhood as a battle between will and the instinct meant collective suggestion in the form of affect was seen as primitive or uncivilised. As part of the making of social psychology hierarchies were imposed, elevating 'order over disorder, will over feeling, and the human over both the animal and ethereal' [34]. Boundaried individualism, she argues, is therefore a construct and a mode of control.

As Blackman illustrates the power of affective commitment, or the intangible intensity produced through (human) interaction, occurring in images, songs and slogans is used in crowd manipulation. There is an opening here, which she recognises but doesn't explore herself, to pursue affective processes in social movements. The false separation of the affective and discursive are highlighted here, as non-cognitive affect is co-produced by the discursive 'milieu' (which she looks at in Chapter 6). The points she raises are not only relevant because of the topicality of Occupy for example, but are imperative because (as she notes) neo-liberalism masks questions of will and control with rhetoric around choice.

In this chapter and throughout the book, she documents the historical division between voluntarism or willpower and anti-intentionalism or understanding responses as instinctive, habitual and uncontrollable, as well as the accompanying dualism of mind and body. However her point is not to engage in that debate per se but to use it to suggest that we need to explore how mental will or physical inhibition are produced and disrupted through affective means such as instinct, memories, senses and motor automatisms.

## Communication at a distance

Having established through Chapters 1 and 2 the question she seeks to explore, namely: how can we conceive communication and subjectivity if individuals are understood as having distributed embodiment, in Chapter 3 she begins to look at immaterial or affective communication via altered states of consciousness such as telepathy.

As already noted parapsychology has been devalued and made fantastical through its alignment with the 'other', the imaginary, the magical or the freakish. As social psychologist Wetherell notes (2012: 160) seeing communal affective practice as uncanny, odd, eerie or weird is not helpful in understanding the 'waves of feeling' associated with affective phenomena. However by placing the emphasis on the prefix '*tele*' meaning 'at a distance', Blackman makes a convincing case for psychic or affective communication as simply an activity that collapses boundaries between individuals. This study is interesting in that she aims and achieves the normalisation and de-sensationalisation of those experiences which are seen as abnormal, yet paradoxically affect theory's very focus frames them as intangible and mysterious and inexplicable.

She covers wide ground in this chapter from James' (1902) investigations of mysticism and suggestion, and Mesmer's (in Riskin, 2009) hypnotic mesmerism to Guattari's (1995) pre-verbal intensities. Using Peters' (1999) study of affective communication, she argues it to be both material and immaterial. When radio was introduced, for example, at one and the same time it appeared both supernatural but also able to touch people as the intensity and suggestibility of affective communication are felt in and mediated through the body. As well as the 'uncanny' Blackman notes how printing presses, radio and television all appeared to defy the boundaries of the self/other, the living and the dead, and operate in 'invisible registers'.

## New materialisms and the mind/body dualism

One of the issues Blackman identifies is the ongoing dualism of mind/body or mind/matter. The historical literature's focus on mentalism, modern neuroscience's focus on the brain and the new materialisms of affect theory reinforce this dualism. She presents concerns with both psychology where the body is docile and neurophysiology where the mind is reduced to anatomy, but equally argues that contemporary affect theory is equally affected by reductionist materialism. For example affective theorists such as Massumi (2002) and Thrift (2004) draw on hard science to focus on the 'half-second delay' in cognition.

Despite these existing links between science and cultural theory, they use very different terminologies. Neurobiology and psychology understands affect as pre-conscious instinct prior to cognition, whereas Deleuzian influenced social and cultural theorists including Massumi (2002) talk in more processual terms of the intensity of 'becoming' and their concept of immateriality doesn't even necessarily require humanity. Blackman aims to bridge these gaps in perspective. She does this by arguing affect to be both pre-individual and trans-subjective. That is to say she shows how affective transmissions or parapsychological phenomena, cross both boundaries of the conscious/unconscious as well as the individual/many.

Through her focus on affect as a process encompassing the mind *and* body, the self *and* others, Blackman seeks to draw bridges between the immaterial and material, and enrich neurobiology with the complexity from discursive, cultural and social. However at the same time as she tempers the reductionist materialism of neurobiological affective theory by subjecting it to discursive genealogical analysis, she is not uncritical of the discursive. Not only does affective analysis bring back the body, as Clough (2007) also argues, but Blackman brings back the psychic mind too. This is not the distanced, cognitive, and representational discursive mind but a 'brain-body-world' assemblage which is emotional, experiential and interconnected to others through liminal practices.

Blackman uses the liminal or psychic to suggest that historical concepts such as habit or instinct are not simply singular trans-historical constructs. In this fourth chapter she returns to issues of will vs. automatism, outlining the radical relationality of Tarde (1902) who set out a utopian society with no barriers between minds, and contrasts it to the anti-mimetic turn of social psychologists like McDougall (1910) through which normative subjects became boundaried and make conscious choices. Her exposure of the historically based marginalisation of affect as purely a question of civilised will vs. suggestibility means everything from intuition to voice hearing is valid rather than medical evidence of illness, insanity or delusion.

## Rhythm and intensity

Clough (2007) has already noted that affective theory's origins in psychoanalysis mean a focus on the importance of repetition, such as the proposition that we repeat traumas and have bodily memories at individual and trans-generational levels. Much of the book revisits the debate over repetition as instinctive or social, and how they cross in the liminal. In Chapter 5 Blackman demonstrates how individuals are both part of wider rhythms such as cultural or governmental practices and yet can also be a 'singular host' to patterns such as depression and

mania, further emphasising the sociality of affective communication rather than the singular biological individual.

Although the term ‘affective transmission’ is used by some affect scholars (Brennan, 2004), Blackman rejects transmission along with contagion as it implies affect is singular and then parcelled up. She argues ‘it is not that affect or emotion is simply “caught” or transmitted between subjects, but that subjects get “caught up” in relational dynamics that exhibit a psychic or intensive pull’ [102]. She again questions how the materiality of neurophysiological explanations, such as pheromones influencing transmission, reduces affect to biological processes. Instead she turns to Laing (1970) to emphasise how individual rhythms are part of wider patterns. Laing’s ‘knots’ and ‘tangles’ show how rhythms overlap, change and are far from simple repetitions, and how affect is mediated through wider intangible relational webs.

For all its immaterial production Blackman doesn’t deny, in fact she argues that, affect is mediated through physical bodies and experienced as emotional and bodily intensity. Following a fairly distanced and analytical investigation of materiality in the previous chapter, here she turns to intensity. Examples of ‘outsider art’ and ‘in yer face theatre’ are used to emphasise affect as embodied, experiential and most importantly energetic.

She returns at this point to affect as a spiritual and creative ‘becoming’ that pushes at the thresholds of individuality and sociality. In particular she identifies that mania, mystic or drug induced ecstatic states became a focus of research. Those individuals marginalised on the basis of mental health, psychopathy or degeneracy hold a particular fascination for affective theory as they are seen as having a breach in bodily and mental function, such as Guattari’s (1995) interest in psychopathy as a creative becoming. Again this exploration is critical – noting the romantic and gendered analysis of creative mania in the mid twentieth century. Blackman herself questions why such practices have an ‘affective force or psychic pull’ to scholars, suggesting by way of Foucauldian cultural theory that we aren’t fully aware of the relational dynamics in which we are located. This forms part of her own reflexivity. Even for Blackman, though she is clear to avoid pathology, those phenomena breaching normative bodily and mental function offer a glimpse of the liminal.

### **Trans-subjectivity**

In Chapter 6 Blackman uses examples of automatism (such as automatic writing) as well as hearing voices to identify how we operate at different ‘registers of

experience'. She presents a combined analysis of voice hearing and intergenerational shared memory using the concept of the 'diasporic unconscious', that is to say the transfer of affect across space and time. She draws on her own history and work with hearing voices as well as Cho's (2008) Korean diasporic and voice hearing experience to show how embodied practices such as art, theatre and dance as well as voice can act as carriers of intergenerational histories and trauma. This breaks down the barriers between the individual and social, showing that affect is trans-subjective – a manifestation of our shared unconscious.

The will/suggestion duality remains central to her investigation – individuals who hear voices have been seen historically as having a split or double self, divided between the animal or 'other' and the civilised. She notes how this analysis links into wider cinematic and literary culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and its fears of possession and control by the 'other'.

This notion of divided attention, where the individuals' actions might be guided by a secondary personality, or agency, is further explored through historical automatic writing experiments by Solomons and Stein (1896). These experiments looked at what can be produced when the mind's attention is elsewhere, and Blackman argues that these, along with Cho's work on intergenerational memory, show the importance of our milieu in shaping our attention and consciousness. Although affect is usually thought of as a non-conscious process connecting bodies (Venn, 2010), Blackman in this chapter shows the virtual inseparability and reciprocity of the processes of cognition and affect, as well as the permeability of the boundaries between the one and the many.

## **Bicamerality and neuroscience**

Chapter 7 turns to neuroscience and psychology to explore the notion of the bicameral or double brain and affective transfer within and between individuals. She moves to examining our 'interiority' and the threshold between consciousness and the unconscious.

In particular she focusses on Jaynes' (1976) 'bicamerality' theory which, although now largely ridiculed, suggests that around 3000 years ago humans developed from having consciousness based on brain separation, where the right brain hemisphere guided the left brain hemisphere, to our current state of self-consciousness. He suggests this would account for residual voice hearing. Although she does note some voice hearers find the book helpful, there are concerns with this theory, not least of which is the dehumanisation of historical



and present voice hearing individuals as unevolved. She neither agrees nor disagrees per se with the theory, although she notes how it supports her argument that voice hearing is neither about suggestibility nor illness. This chapter develops her key themes about the interconnectedness of the one and the many and of affect and cognition, as she argues the bicameral brain is based on interdependency rather than separation.

Jaynes' work appears here as just one part of the genealogical analysis in which Blackman looks at how neurological models of right/left brain division have dominated twentieth century psychology. As she shows the double or two-sided brain appears to have emerged from a need to explain apparently unconscious actions, yet became tied into notions of civilised will/animalistic suggestibility which still continue in notions of the rational/creative left/right brain.

She goes on to present more nuanced and recent neurological work on strokes and memory, to make her point that the brain produces different modalities of consciousness. Not only can some stroke patients experience disassociation and synaesthesia but may be able to write even if they can't speak. She contrasts this complexity of experience with the pathologisation that occurs through anatomical explanations of voice hearing as a localised, medicalised brain dysfunction in the brain hemispheres.

The focus of this chapter is to explore our 'interiority' or the lived singular experience and to challenge the ongoing separation of affect and cognition, but as well as challenging divisions within the individual, she challenges division between the one unified individual and the many. She ends this chapter by demonstrating how sociality is active in producing the affective body, arguing affect is a coproduction between individuals and their milieu, such as media and consumer culture. She points towards new areas which support more affective understandings of communication, such as the study by epigenetics of transmission and enactment across generations.

It is a challenging task to combine work with different scientific and cultural paradigms, without losing the detail of both and making meaningless generalisations, and I found myself wondering what a neuroscientist might make of some of the arguments. Although slightly more introduction and contextualising of more recent work on bicamerality might have been useful for social scientists Blackman succeeds in demonstrating the permeability of the self/other.

## Conclusion

In this slim but densely packed book Blackman makes a compelling argument for engaging with those ‘registers of experience’ that are overlooked in trans-human based affect theory or the purely neurological or psychological understandings of the pre-conscious, as they allow us to connect with non-representational, non-conscious intensities of experience. Her project of exploring affective communication, or those practices which bridge the threshold of the conscious and unconscious and ‘the one and the many’, requires us to account for where the boundaries of individual subjectivity lie. Works which invoke materialist and relational ontologies, each of which makes assumptions about pre-existing processes and selves are skilfully combined and the tensions inherent in corporeality explored in this book. She makes a good argument for a greater dialogue between neuroscience, critical psychology and cultural studies as well as with historical texts.

What spoke to me wasn’t so much the detailed ins and outs of the interrelations of historical and neurological affect theory, which I have barely scratched the surface of here, but the broader contextualising of liminal or psychic processes as historically othered, and her rehabilitation of ‘threshold phenomena’ in demonstrating affect as a relational, embodied and immaterial production.

Despite the challenging nature of some of the material and its presentation I found the argument more illuminated when presented through the wide range of examples, such as the historical detail of Gertrude Stein’s involvement in studies of automatism. However many examples, such as the section on synaesthesia could have been explored in more depth and at more length. I also wanted this book to produce some of the affective transmission, that as she notes is difficult in an academic register, but which has been so successfully produced in fiction such as Sarah Water’s (1999) novel *Affinity* where desire and the psychic intermingle, but this sort of rhythm was lacking.

Having said that, as an academic text it effectively unpacks areas neglected by discursive theory. The Foucauldian discursive background can be seen in genealogical analysis, the interest in power relations, and the focus on the production of the subject, yet she is not rigid in this. She uses the discursive paradigm to explore affect, which produces insightful commentary. She notes how bodies are often seen to be ‘dumb matter’ in discourse but equally she’s questioning of the anti-intentionalism of affective theory based in neuroscience in which responses are hard-wired and automatic. By looking at how the individual is affectively constituted through intangible ‘processes of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies’ [4] she challenges the dominance of

psychological and anatomical explanations which rely on bounded ontologies of the self. Singularity can be lost in the focus on multiplicity in affect, but that is not the case here. Using the notion of a permeable threshold, between the conscious and unconscious and between the one and the many, to denote when the subject is open or closed to other phenomena or affective flows provides a way of still seeing personhood. In this study the individual and their experience matters.

One final point – although an appreciation of power relations underpins this book, in the exploration of affective communication as a mode of control and way of ‘othering’, it is only in the epilogue that she links affect to the current political climate of neo-liberal capitalism. Yet it is here that the contemporary relevance of her work becomes clear. She argues that we valorise autonomy and self-determination not automatism, the psychic or liminal in our neo-liberal culture. Echoing Malabou’s (2008 cited [187]) concerns over how neuroscientific discourse naturalises the way we understand capitalist labour as based on flexible and adaptable units in its modelling of brain ‘plasticity’, she highlights the politicised nature of perspectives on affect. She refers back to Malabou (2008), who asks ‘what should we do so that the consciousness of the brain does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?’ (*ibid.*) Blackman’s suggestion is twofold and reiterates her main points: firstly to become more consciously aware of the unconscious, and secondly, to challenge singularity and embrace our psychic connectivity as both the one and the many.

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