https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610507291_10

The Affects of Wars and Gypsy Bars: Notes on Re-reading an Old Book

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 https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610507291_10

I open my computer, type the word "affect" in the search bar and go through the files that show up in the finder window. I find hesitant writings to introduce the term in my thinking, half-hearted attempts to engage some of the literatures that brought about the "affective turn" in anthropology. There is an unpublished paper on *wudhu*, the Islamic ritual of washing the body before prayer, which references the work of Brian Massumi (2015); a summary of William Mazzarella's chapter "Affect: What is it Good for?" (2009); and there are several chapters of Anna Vos's PhD project (2020) on affective interactions between people and stones in the Roman neighborhood Testaccio. So yes, I have been looking into affect theory, but I have to admit I never really took it on. I am not sure why. I probably shied away from the learned language of Massumi and Mazzarella. In those days, my own writing was already driven by the search for a more poetic mode of engagement with the world and was less interested in the analytic mode that considers the affective dimensions of social life from a distance. Not much later, I started making essay films, reinventing my anthropology in a medium that seeks to play affects to the full.

The computer search followed the kind invitation by the editors of this volume to contribute a think-piece and consider my research with Romani musicians and their Serbian patrons in Vranje and Novi Sad as a kind of affect-research *avant-la-lettre*. Honored and moved to find my work from Novi Sad being picked up by a new generation of scholars from the former Yugoslav lands, I readily agreed to come up with something. The first thing I had to do was to go search for a copy of the book in my mother's home—my last copy was with a young Dutch-Bosnian filmmaker who had recently indicated he wanted to read it. Back on the train to Amsterdam, I opened the book. I immediately

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realized I couldn't even remember the last time I had put my eyes on this text. I figured it might have been when, after some 20 years of absence, I revisited Novi Sad—an endlessly postponed return, inspired by nostalgic feelings, but more so by the desire to encounter the Vojvodinian capital for what it is, to free the city from the particular story I had made out of it. As the rainy Dutch flatlands passed by through the train window—so similar yet so different from the Pannonian plains—I started to explore my writings.

Did I write about affect, as understood in the later texts I found on my computer? I noticed that the term affect was not in the index. The term "emotions" was, as was "body." Yet, in my current understanding of things, I would say these notions were heavily undertheorized. I found none of the current thinkers associated with the affective turn in anthropology in the bibliography. I did, however, find the work of authors such as Michael Taussig (1986; 1993), Gananath Obeyesekere (1981), Jojada Verrips (1993), and H.U.E. (Bonno) Thoden van Velzen and Wilhelmina (Ineke) van Wetering (1988), who all had, in their own particular ways, addressed the importance of affect in anthropological studies. Thoden van Velzen, who was supervising my PhD project in Novi Sad, had introduced me to a literature that sought to bring psychoanalytic insights in dialogue with anthropology, which, at the time, was still very much of the structuralist kind. "Let's not go for the crystal-clear worlds structuralists make out of their fieldwork material," he kept telling me. "When you take in people's desires, collective fantasies, drives and emotions—the psychodynamics of a society—you may not arrive at a 'cultural grammar.' Your account will be a whole lot messier. But it'll probably be much closer to what is actually going on in people's lives."

Thoden van Velzen certainly guided me towards an appreciation of the emotional undertones of the Gypsy bar (*kafana*) rituals[1]—their psychodynamics, as he would call it. Yet it is only fair to say that in the Serbia of the early 1990s—a

1 In this text, I use the term Romani whenever I refer to the actual people. The term "Gypsy" refers to the imaginary figure that occurs in Serbian fantasies, beliefs and practices.

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society in the process of violent break-ups—one would have to be blind and tone-deaf not to perceive the emotions that tear old worlds apart and bring new worlds into being. Sure, the nationalist fever produced ample talk about purity and the need to recreate a world of clear categories—and "certainties" as to what was really going on as Yugoslavia fell apart were to be heard everywhere—but such talk could not contain the shrill emotional overtones with which these things were being said, contributing to an all-pervading sense that clarity and certainty were desperately sought, but nowhere to be found, other than in such horrors as "blood in the snow and brains splattered against the wall," as I kept quoting Aleksandar Tisma (in van de Port 1998, 30).

Going through the chapters, I can see how I struggled to articulate the one basic thing that my research in Novi Sad gave me to ponder (and which would define my research agenda up until today): the finding—which was an experience as much as a lucid understanding—that "the world does not comply with our narrations of it." The war had revealed a huge gap between what people want to make out of life and being and what the world may teach them about life and being. I sought for metaphors to express this gap. I likened the experience of war to a "reform school" where "lessons" were learned. I kept going back to the image of an old peasant woman in Slavonia, going through the rubble of her bomb-shelled home, mourning the loss of an indoor plant she'd had—which she'd seen growing over the years as if every new leaf had added to her confidence in the "new times" of Titoist Yugoslavia. And I did, of course, "read" Serbian fantasies about the life and being of Gypsies as a storage space for wartime memories, unforgettable yet unassimilable with the post-war project of "picking up the pieces and trying to move on." To grasp this finding, I had mobilized Michael Taussig's *implicit social knowledge*: "a non-discursive, essentially inarticulable and imageric knowing of social relationality and history" (in van de Port 1998, 97); a knowledge gained by experience which determines "what moves people without their knowing quite why or quite how" (Taussig in van de Port 1998, 100). I had tried out Brinkley Messick's notion of *subordinate discourse* (which never made it to the English translation of the book), a non-verbal "language" used by female Moroccan carpet-weavers, which

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escaped the control of male-dominated discourses, and could thus maintain a realm of female world-making (in van de Port 1994, 144). I had sought recourse to Clifford Geertz's elaboration of the notion of *common sense*.

It took me by surprise to find that I had not yet begun my explorations of the works of Slavoj Žižek (1989), Yannis Stavrakakis (1999), and Terry Eagleton (2009), whose elaborations of the Lacanian differentiation between reality and the Real (van de Port 2011) would have greatly helped to grasp the tensions I had sought to articulate. The insight that reality is not the Real, but a social construct—a collective agreement on "what to take for real" (and what not)—which always produces a surplus of phenomena and sense-experiences that exist but need to be repressed, tabooed, denied, and kept-at-bay, was fundamental in my later understandings of my research findings from Novi Sad. Žižek's eloquent formulation of the Real wouldn't be out of place on the pages of *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild*:

> [The Real refers to] the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization … which in a sense *precedes* the symbolic order and is subsequently structured by it when it gets caught in its network: this is the great Lacanian motif of symbolization as a process which mortifies, drains off, empties, carves the fullness of the Real of the living body. But the Real is at the same time the product, remainder, leftover, scraps of this process of symbolization and is as such produced by the symbolization itself. (Žižek 1989, 169)

Rereading my work on Serbia 30 years later revealed just how much I had been grabbing for some theoretical support—any available theoretical support, really—that would keep my observations and thoughts afloat. Yet I also think that, in the absence of decent theoretical groundings, I had to rely on ethnographic descriptions to highlight the tensions that follow from the fact that "the world does not comply with our narrations of it." It could well be that my lack produced a more interesting book and a more enticing read.

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The question then becomes what affect theory would have brought to make sense of my Novi Sad findings. In that one unpublished paper on the Islamic purification ritual of *wudhu,* I find myself casting the notion of affect into the mold of the Lacanian ideas mentioned above. Or maybe I should say that I played on an elective affinity between these two perspectives: for just as the concept of the Real denotes an excess, a surplus, a leftover produced by narration (or symbolization, in Žižek's words), the concept of affect very much tries to arrive at similar understandings in the study of human emotions and affects.

Brian Massumi, for instance, seeks to differentiate between "emotions" and "affect." For him, emotions belong to the realm of semiotics: they are a culturally informed—and therefore recognizable—qualification of affect. Affect refers to the multiple experiential processes going on inside our bodies. It is a "domain of intensity, indeterminacy, and above all potentiality, which the signifying logic of culture reduces" (Massumi in Mazzarella 2009, 292). His analysis seeks to keep this multiplicity in focus, observing how it constantly plays up as an ineradicable ambiguity in all our attempts to make sense of the world and of ourselves. Massumi puts it like this:

> In cultural theory, people often talk as if the body and its situatedness on the one hand, and our emotions, thoughts and the language we use for them on the other, are totally different realities, as if there has to be something to come between them and put them into touch with each other. Theories of ideology are designed for this. Mediation, in whatever guise it appears, is the way a lot of theorists try to overcome the old Cartesian duality between mind and body, but it actually leaves it in place and just tries to build a bridge between them. (2015, 7–8, emphasis mine)

Massumi suggests we need to come to terms with the observation that there is an affect associated with every functioning of the body, every move it makes. He considers this "perpetual bodily remainder" to be *as* necessary a dimension

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of human sense-making as the body that is interpellated by—and responds to—the categories of social life.

> It's like a reserve of potential or newness or creativity that is experienced alongside every actual production of meaning in language or in any performance [...]—vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overspilling as it gathers itself up to move on. (2015, 8)

And elsewhere, he states: "if there were no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death" (Massumi 2002, 35). In other words, Massumi invites us to consider the thought that, in our attempts to make sense of the world, we are not only depending on the *disambiguation* that cultural orders offer but also on the essential incompleteness of that disambiguation—for it is that incompleteness that sets the work of culture in motion.

The resonance between what Lacanian thinkers argue about "reality" and "the Real," and affect theorists argue about "emotions" and "affect" is quite striking. In both instances, there is the recognition that the introduction of the (cultural, social, linguistic, symbolic) *form* requires the production of a *rest*; and both Lacanians and affect theorists advise researchers to pay attention to the tensions generated between form and rest and the dynamics that follow from these tensions.

What affect theory really helps me to think is what goes on in human-bodies-in-interaction-with-the-world. This is indeed what I explore in the paper, which brings up the case of a recent Dutch convert to Islam washing his foot before going to pray in the mosque (during the presentation, I played a video which, in a loop, kept showing a close-up of his fingers meticulously washing his foot under a stream of water coming out of a tap). Whereas the young man would probably signify this action, called *wudhu*, as a sign of his newfound identity, Massumi's thinking blocks any such singular reading of the ritual. Here is how I argue that point:

> Take the given that this young man was raised as a non-Muslim. That very fact might quite likely mean that this foot on the screen may have gone

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through similar washings earlier on in its life. It may have been washed like this by someone else, the mother of this young man, for instance. Or indeed, it may have received similar treatment by the young man's own hands, but in another setting, after a bike-ride or a jogging session in the park. Or it may have been stuck in an ice-cold stream during a hike in the mountains. Such lingering bodily memories may well play up in what is now the performance of a religious requirement: adding to the experience, enriching it, or—who knows—disrupting it.

And then there is the fact that these hands and that foot belong to a body that is obviously as involved in this ritual as are the hands and the foot: a body that needs to perform a balancing act to stand on one foot while washing the other; that may have a spine that hurts when having to bend over; whose eyes or ears may be distracted by the arrival of another man in the washing room; that produces an urge to urinate due to the sound of streaming water. What I am trying to say here is that bodies are always in excess of what we want from them, religiously or otherwise. There is always an experiential surplus to the activities they engage in. Indeed, to talk about "*the* body" in unified terms—as we often do with great facility—is misleading and in denial of what goes on inside our bodies at any single moment of the day: multiple sensations and experiences, all happening at the same time.

This brief reflection on a young man washing his foot should suffice to explain what I mean with the-body-that-cannot-be-told: no matter how the body is interpellated—by discourses, rituals, sensational forms—it is always in excess of the forms such interpellations offer to the subject. The infinite number of processes going on inside the body and between the body and the world are never wholly captured. This experiential surplus of the interpellated body may be muted, but it is, therefore, not gone. On the contrary, it keeps prompting alternative awarenesses, experiences, and feelings. These may resonate harmoniously with our intentions and enrich our experience with the different colors and hues of our bodily memories. In the case of this young man, they may strengthen his religious identifications, allowing for the sensation that Islam was tailor-made for him, fits him like a glove,

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> and provides a welcoming shelter for "all of him." Yet the experiential surplus of the body may also produce dissonances, disturb, distract, complicate, obstruct, or inspire us to act differently. As in: "I wanted to go praying in the mosque, but the mere thought of that cold water running over my feet kept me from going." The body is an unruly given in our lives, ever in excess of what we want from it, speaking with us, speaking against us, but always introducing a level of ambiguity into our identifications. (van de Port 2012)

Clearly, this lengthy quote aptly illustrates how I sought to bring Lacanian thinking about the Real to affect theory and how these two perspectives overlap in interesting ways. I do think that in the end, the Lacanian perspective has a wider scope, as it allows one to speak about the Real of inner experience ("perverse" inclinations, "evil" drives, and tabooed feelings which threaten carefully groomed understandings of Self) as well as the Real of social formations (one might think of destructive earthquakes, spirits haunting a secular world, or horrific atrocities occurring in a world that frames itself as civilized). So, if I were to take on affect theory, I would do so as a specification of the Lacanian perspective on self- and world-making.

The editors of this volume may not share my Lacanian "upbringing"—or the lessons of "the reform school of war" which prepared me for the idea that reality is not the Real—but I do feel they, too, are concerned to reduce the worlds we study to what goes on in and between bodies, insisting we should avoid adopting the seemingly firm separation of the spheres of the affective and the socio-political. I couldn't agree more.

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I think I owe it to *Het Einde van de Wereld*,[2] which is the translated name of a Gypsy Bar Na kraju sveta (roughly translated in English as "at the end

2 As the original Dutch version of *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild* was called.

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of the world"), to end with a note on the power of ethnography. I have used this essay to reflect on different theoretical perspectives, and I will always insist on the importance of theory for the anthropological project—even now that I do research in and through film, a medium that is widely considered to be "untheoretical" (van de Port 2018). Revisiting my work on Novi Sad does, however, remind me how attentive, careful descriptions—of a woman being taken over by a Gypsy song in a bar called Play Off; of the meaningless syllables, expressive of wails and laments, picked up from documents by a historian studying the Serbian exodus after the Ottoman conquest of their lands; of the sweet song celebrating the joy of the Gypsy tent, made of "smoke-stained cloth"—can do all the work of theory. That is probably what I took away from this exercise. Theory certainly helps you to see things differently, sharpen your thoughts, and even attune your senses. Yet theory is—and should remain—a tool for ethnographic storytelling. *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild* is a book about affects, but it never mentions them. Although no Lacanian terms appear on its pages, it is very much a book about reality not being the Real, and all the trouble that follows from it. I'd say there is a simple explanation for the absence of these terms. There were no "affects" in the Gypsy bar called Na Kraju Sveta in the village of Kovilj. Nor something called "the Real."

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