

**Michael Goddard, University of Salford**

## **It really makes you sick!: Digital Affective Pathologies and How to Resist Them**

While early theorisations of the digital tended to focus on its cognitive aspects and present the digital in terms of disembodiment, more recently a body of theory has emerged that investigates the affective potentials of the digital in a manner that short-circuits consciousness or at least situates it in relation to affective processes taking place at an often subliminal level. One line of such thinking can be seen in the work of Brian Massumi developing from his pre-digital analyses of the 'autonomy of affect' and the deployment of directly affective modes of communication by right-wing political figures such as Ronald Reagan and George Bush (Sr.) to his recent analysis the the US terror alert spectrum in 'Fear: The Spectrum Said' and other related texts. Drawing on both the writings of Deleuze and Guattari and a range of other philosophical resources ranging from Simondon to Whitehead, Massumi's work uses these philosophies to confront what he sees as an emergent pre-conscious affective politics of control that poses a major problem for existing modes of resistance. From a different yet related 'post-Deleuzian' perspective, the Italian media and political theorist and activist Franco Berardi (Bifo) has developed over a number of works a symptomatology of the present in terms of media pathologies, making direct links between the hyper-development of digital media and culture and a range of subjective pathologies and their remedies, ranging from epidemics of depression, panic and attention deficit disorders to new forms of violent psychosis which he sees as intimately linked to Neoliberal modes of media proliferation. This paper will explore both these theoretical trajectories in order to construct both a composite diagnosis of contemporary affective pathologies and to speculate on the potentials for modes of affective politics.

Massumi's two series of political critique of American Neoconservative politics dealing respectively with Reagan, George Bush Sr. and the first Gulf war and around 15 years later with George W. Bush and the infinite war on terror might not seem to have a lot to do with digital culture. However, these interventions are inseparable from a reconsideration of affect expressed in other texts of a more philosophical and aesthetic rather than a political nature, beginning with an absolutely key text in the contemporary 'affective turn', namely, 'the autonomy of affect'. I will therefore begin by looking at this text, before proceeding to show how it informs some of Massumi's more recent and politically oriented writings, passing by way of his polemical 'On the Superiority of the Analog' to emphasise what all this has to do with digital conditions of both subjectivity and politics.

The point of departure for 'The Autonomy of Affect' like several other essays in Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual* is a case of behaviourist, cognitive science unearthing aberrant phenomena, an aberrance and failure that is of much more interest than when everything goes according to plan. In this case it concerns a German TV film of a melting snowman which, when its effects were scientifically researched revealed very little about cognition but in Massumi's reading quite a lot about affect. What the film revealed was that the affective charge of the film was in excess and autonomous from both its signification and from individuated emotion but rather circulated as an anomalous effect generating intensity or event. Crucially affect is associated with emergence of the new, of the unexpected, in short with the event itself, Massumi arguing that this will never be captured in the grids of structure and significance, however deconstructively applied. Without going into detail of the other 'aberrant' research Massumi adds into the mix, the further development of this theorisation of affect is that affect is linked not only to emergence but to the virtual (and it is here that there is a kind of pre-emption of the digital). Fully formed emotions and perceptions would be the capture of this virtual force of affect that in its virtuality is transindividual and translocal and above all open. All of which is a synthesis of Simondon's ideas about individuation and Spinoza's account of affect with cybernetic concepts of feedback and recursion.

If the preceding gives the impression that this notion of the virtuality of affect will catapult us into the digital, this can be swiftly modified by an examination of a considerably later essay, 'On the Superiority of the Analog.' Here Massumi explicitly rules out any equation with the virtual in his post-Deleuzian sense with digital definitions of the virtual as in 'Virtual reality' or Virtual Worlds: 'nothing is more destructive for the thinking and imaging of the virtual than equating it with the digital' (137). This is entirely consistent with the topological account of the virtual that Massumi presents here and was already beginning to formulate in the earlier essay. If the virtual is pure potential, not yet actualised in a given form, this implies a continuum of transformations in line with topological theory by means of which, in the example adapted by Massumi from Rene Thom, a coffee cup can become a donut and then infinite other forms. The analog is superior in that it is based on this kind of continuous principle whereas the digital breaks phenomenon down into discrete entities, zeros and ones, in order to perform algorithmic operations: the digital is therefore 'possibility' which defines itself as the choice between pre-given alternatives and not potentiality or virtuality. What is interesting in Massumi's account, however, is that unlike

technophobic theorists such as Virilio or Baudrillard who entirely reject digital phenomena like virtual reality as being all too real and nowhere near virtual enough (which Massumi would partially agree with), is that Massumi then goes on to look at the way that digital processes are far more analog than they might at first appear. For example, while word processing proceeds via digital coding within the computer, it only 'works' when the words on the screen are subject to the analog processes of reading and writing which convert mere possibility into potential figures of speech and thought. Similarly, in 'digital sound' the sound is only digital in its inaudible processing but once it is converted into audible vibrations it has passed fully into an analog process. In other words at the threshold of perceptibility, digital processes are converted from discrete possibilities into continuous *potentia* that are then subject to actualisations in and by a body. The digital is therefore inserted into a regime of sensory attention or as Massumi says, frequently inattention or distraction and it is in this context that the digital produces its specific effects or affects. Consider what Massumi referred to then as hyperlink surfing but which is applicable to our more content rich forms of Web navigation; what this enables above all is a kind of productive inattention as we graze on the multiply linked Web until we hit something that actively triggers our attention. As Massumi puts it, arguing against those who would claim a kind of totalitarianism of the link that 'the open architecture of the Web lends itself to the accumulation of analog effects' (140). So perversely what seems to be a regime of binary possibility proves to be an effective activator of analog perceptual processes, ironically more than purely analog technologies like cinema whose linearity limit the possibilities of variation of attention: as Massumi sums this up, 'surfing, like its televisual precursor zapping, is oddly compelling.' In short while digital processes are incapable of directly incarnating the virtual, the potential or the affective they can do so indirectly via experiential relays: the processing may be digital but the process is always analog, hence the title of the essay. According to Massumi, what is to be abandoned most definitively is the idea of substitution (on obsessive theme of Virilio) in which the analog would be replaced by the digital to instead think 'the cooperation of the digital and the analog, in self-varying continuity.

The consequences of this strangely optimistic account of the digital can be seen in a series of politically incisive articles concerning the current infinite war on terror. Just as in the 80s it was the most politically reactionary forces that grasped how to maximise the affective potentials of television, the same was true in the new millennium, especially in relation to the so-called US revolution in military affairs that Massumi diagnoses, especially in the essay 'Potential Politics and the Primacy of Perception' as the shift from cold war strategies of prevention and deterrence to a

strategy of pre-emption in which decisive action is employed in an undecidable geopolitical environment (the domain of unknown unknowns as Donald Rumsfeld so aptly named it), in which in order to flush out potential threats that could have emerged in a given situation, a lesson learned directly from the Israeli military and deployed effectively in the second Iraq War's justification in terms of *potential* weapons of mass destruction. As opposed to empirical claims about what really exists, now relegated to the domain of what the military sneeringly call the 'reality based community', claims about potential cannot be proved wrong or subject to any moral limitation since what they claim is that a future threat could have emerged in a given situation: this is the situation in which the neoconservatives and the military have become fully Deleuzian as Weizman already demonstrated in the case of the Israeli army, while the left lags regrettably behind.

The affective aspects of this transformation were most highlighted in Massumi's recent article 'Fear: the Spectrum Said' which uses the post 9/11 terror alert spectrum as an example of how politics have now become pre-conscious and affective rather than cognitive. As Massumi puts it, 'The alert system was designed to modulate that fear ... The self-defensive reflex-response to perceptual cues that the system was designed to train into the population wirelessly jacked central government functioning directly into each individual's nervous system.' The threats that the spectrum was meant to be an indication of were extremely vague, disallowing any cognitive or critical response and instead the spectrum activated and modulated the affects of the population, at a direct and pre-conscious level. There was also a media dimension of this process that involved the resurgence of television as the key medium for affective modulation over the unpredictable effects of the more heterogeneous Web; it was television that continually broadcast the current level of threat and therefore modulated the affects of the population. While television became directly governmental and governing, power became perceptual gaining 'signal access to the nervous systems and somatic responses of the populace.' I will not go through the incredibly detailed micro-analysis of fear that Massumi gives that emphasises how fear is a uniquely future oriented and preconscious affect: we feel afraid of unspecified future events non only before they occur but also before we even know what they are or have the capacity to narrate our relations to them: the point is that the terror spectrum was an incredibly effective device for exploiting and modulating collective fear directly at a pre-individual, pre-discursive and pre-conscious level.

Despite or in some ways because of the brilliance of Massumi's analysis of affective emergence and

its political deployment by conservative political interests, they are also frustrating because they tend to come to an abrupt halt before the prospect of some type of affective resistance that they logically presuppose (in this respect they surprisingly have more in common with the scenarios of Fassbinder movies and Foucauldian analyses of power and its necessary but unanalysed resistances than they do with any kind of Deleuzo-Guattarian evocation of affirmative forces. In the last example, which can be taken as typical, the detailed micro-analysis of the reactionary but highly advanced manipulation of affect by the neo-cons is only concluded by the following sentence concerning potential resistance to this regime 'Confusingly, it is likely that it [the politics exemplified by the terror spectrum] can only be fought on the same affective, ontogenetic ground on which it itself operates.' In other words there is an extremely truncated call for a potential politics of resistance that receives no further elucidation, as if the presentation of the affective politics has exhausted or pre-empted any attempt to come up with even a potential alternative. Of course, there is an ethics involved here in this absence of a 'Michael Moore' moment, perhaps a similar ethics that also constrained a Fassbinder or a Foucault from elucidating 'positive alternatives' but the danger here is one of simply encouraging a kind of paranoia or apathy along the lines of we will never be able to match the right in its activation of the affective and the pre-discursive, especially considering its superior funding, media access and military-academic think-tanks, so all that can be done is to denounce the situation and throw up our hands in intellectual and even affective but powerless outrage. On the other hand, these affective dynamics are clearly not going to be overcome by any 'yes we can' Obamist populism, however much this and other examples of (slightly) leftist populist success stories do point to the fact that affective politics are not necessarily as one-sided as they might appear; I am sure Massumi would be the first to admit that this domain, while subject to modulation escapes absolute controllability, based as it is on pure potentials or 'unknown unknowns' so events as divergent as the circulation of Abu Ghraib images of Iranian resistance can and do occur albeit more rarely and certainly less strategically than the deployment of affective politics by the right. In these circumstances, it is far from easy to propose what a resistant affective politics might consist of but one thinker who has certainly attempted to do so is Franco Berardi 'Bifo', who in a similarly post-Deleuzian but stylistically far removed manner has posed just such problems and at times attempted to resolve them.

One place to start in this regard, and a site of special resonance with Massumi's analyses is the collective work with Vitali and Jacquemet on the Berlusconi media dictatorship, which the authors thematise as the 'Videocracy' having abandoned an earlier label of 'cyber-fascism.' What this book

provides above all in relation to Berlusconi's mode of power is a critical ecology of this 'Videocracy.' This is not to say that the book ignores such phenomena as Berlusconi's dubious economic and political dealings in which the mass media played a central role, nor the content of the communications that resulted from this situation but rather they add to these perspectives the portrait of a new technocratic and post-democratic mode of power that they argue is far from the exception it is often presented as being with regard to the global mediascape. The incisive analyses of the first part of the book while very different to Massumi's analyses of American affective politics, bring out something similar in the case of Berlusconi namely his tele-friendly ability to outpace the rationalist moralism of the left by deploying a fully mediated and affective mode of politics that can support all manner of logical and ethical contradictions without any difficulties. What this analysis is able to reveal is the futility of a moral critique of Berlusconi on the basis of corruption and scandal, as if the proof of illegality from Mafia connections, to favours done to teenage models would be sufficient to topple the Berlusconi regime. For a mode of power that has fully incorporated the hyper-spectacular languages of advertising and the televusual, however, any publicity is good publicity and the latest scandal only serves to reinforce Berlusconi's popularity with many 'ordinary Italians': 'The regime does not lose its consensus because it clearly shows its immoral nature. A good part of Italian society voted for it for precisely that reason' (71). In other words, the hyper-spectacular excess of Berlusconi over moral and legal norms, the performance of power through joy that is the basis of Berlusconi's media populism is only increased by the moral denunciations of the centre-left. The figure of Berlusconi is simply operating at a different, pre-discursive and affective level whereby his very inconsistencies and failure to conform to institutional or even constitutional norms is itself generative of the affective connectivity of power through joy: this is precisely what generates the feeling that Berlusconi is a regular guy being unfairly treated by the system instead of a quasi-fascist authoritarian.

However, what distinguishes this book from Massumi's analyses of the American right is that this critique accounts for only the first half of the book while the latter parts deal with resistance to this paradigm not in representational politics but in forms of media activism ranging from free radio stations of the 1970s such as Radio Alice to the short lived Telestreet experiment of the early 2000s to radical forms of cyberculture. This can seem at times to border on the absurd, for example, in the presentation of the David and Goliath like struggle of the telestreet network against the Berlusconi Media dictatorship, when the former only involved a few hundred activists and not many more receivers based as it was on the occupation of the 'shadow cones' of official TV stations

and using them to broadcast to a micro-local area of a few streets. However what it shows very clearly was the possibility of creating resistant networks, linked together by the shared affective desire to produce at least anomalous effects in an otherwise homogeneous mediasphere. What these micro stations set out to do was to challenge the monolithic domination of techno-communications by the Berlusconi videocracy, not with the hope of winning but rather with the following aims: 'Resist the homogenised horror, avoid the imaginary of submission, refuse the glossy hypocrisy and put into motion bizarre systems and unpredictable connections' (128). This goes some way to restore the antagonistic dynamics of affective politics and breaks the silence on practices of resistance that is characteristic of Massumi's work.

Elsewhere, Bifo focuses on the 'production of unhappiness' in contemporary digital conditions, claiming that this is a central component of contemporary cognitive capitalism. In the article 'Schizo Economy', for example, he points to the spread of a range of affective pathologies including depression, panic and attention deficit disorders and their remedies including Prozac and amphetamines. Crucial to Bifo's analysis and resonant with Massumi's presentation of the terror alert spectrum is that the digital economy is linked directly to the nervous systems of those who operate within to the extent that economic and psychic depressions become indiscernible and must both be staved off by liberal doses of speed, whether in the literal cases of an entire class of digital operators on amphetamines and prozac or the resort to 'military amphetamines' in order to displace the economic collapse which could only succeed on a very temporary basis since 'it is absolutely inadvisable to take amphetamines when you are on the edge of a possible depression.' For Bifo, what this suggests is an introjection of digital, capitalist logics of hyper-competitiveness within the collective nervous system, an injection that cannot be maintained indefinitely and must lead to psychic collapse; however, the key point to bear in mind is that this psychic collapse is not the mere effect of economic stress but rather its cause since the digital economy is directly plugged into the psychic functioning of those operators who make decisions in the global market.

In *Precarious Rhapsody*, which focuses on the effects and implications of the digital on subjective mutations, films and contemporary art-works become privileged referents for honing in on the qualities of contemporary affective pathologies and especially on what might be called a generalised culture of suicidal violence. Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2002) for example, opens Bifo's discussion of what he calls the 'frail psychosphere' of today, supported by other examples both from video art and violent televisual events that point to an evacuation of empathy constitutive of

a cognitive mutation:

*Elephant* speaks of a generation that is emotionally disturbed ... and a cognitive mutation that is unfolding in the context of a communicative transformation: the passage from conjunction to connection (86).

While this might seem like a mere replay of arguments about digital disembodiment, it is in fact making a point about cognitive mutation, a mutation which most cognitive theories are blind to since human mutation is not considered an acceptable proposition. However, if we accept that human cognition takes place in a dynamic environment, then surely drastic changes to this communicative environment will not be without modifying effects on the human organism and these effects are precisely what Bifo aims to track. Bifo does this by a detailed reading of affective mutations over the last three decades in conjunction with political and technical cultural transformations engaging with phenomena as seemingly diverse as No Wave, the virtual class, military training and digital pornography. The final result of this history is the rather depressing conjecture of the emergence of a connective generation in which sensibility and sensitivity have been annihilated and which 'is showing signs of an epidemic of emotional atrophy' (102) thus returning to the slogan of 'no future' with which the book begins in its examination of heterogeneous events of 1977. Bifo in fact ends the book on the very topic of the future by revisiting the celebrated futurist movement with its at once liberating and bellicose first manifesto. For Bifo we are now living in a world that has realised the futurist utopia of glorifying machines and infinite speeds, now transferred from a mechanical to an informational model. This dystopian psycho-cognitive automatism is what the book as a whole explores in its different dimensions and in these concluding sections, Bifo proposes rethinking the whole idea of activism in the light of its dystopian results, making reference not only to the techno fetishism of the Futurists but also the masculinist heroics of Leninism. The future of the early 20th century vanguard is perversely embodied for Bifo by the Finnish student who turned up for class and killed eight of his classmates and himself, wearing a T-shirt with the phrase 'humanity is over-rated' (129). In contrast, Bifo proposes an inverted post-futurist manifesto that culminates in the following call: 'We will sing to the infinity of the present and abandon the illusion of a future' (137).

This forgetting of the future in favour of slowing down and savouring of the present might seem naïve and idealistic in the light of the internalisation of future causality analysed by Massumi or the

varieties of pathological affective mutation diagnosed by Bifo elsewhere in *Precarious Rhapsody*. Nevertheless, I would argue that in order for a progressive affective politics to emerge, this kind of naivete is almost necessary for the survival of any effective form of political resistance. On the other side of the war on terror this kind of affective politics is perhaps evident in a very different cultural product to those analysed by Bifo or the technocratic affective modulation enacted by the Neocons that Massumi analyses. In Chris Morris's *Four Lions*, there is an incredible figuration of both the kind of everyday stupidity of a group of Islamic suicide bombers but also the stupidity and banal cruelty of the society that surrounds them. Passing itself off as a comedy, perhaps the only comedy to truly tackle the difficult subject of the 'War on Terror', might this film not be considered as the reinvention of a political cinema but one based on a politics of affect rather than the cognitive denunciations that still characterise filmmakers like Michael Moore, whatever their attempts to match the right in affective manipulation: the most powerful weapon in affective politics may be less in conventional forms of activism than in a comic refusal to take the affective manipulations of power seriously, the decision to laugh in the face of tragic manipulations rather than accepting their sombre affective tonalities. In this sense the resistance only hinted at in Massumi's work and unevenly expressed in that of Bifo might find still more effective forms of expression via digital media. This might well be equally applicable to theory and it is telling that the most effective contemporary critical practices seem to be accompanied by a comic dimension which is certainly the case with both much of Bifo's work and Massumi's analyses of the American right in the earlier period of the 1980s; one can only hope that in the research he is currently conducting into US politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that this resistant Nietzschean humour will make a forceful return in the time of digital politics.