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Response to Massumi's Ideas on the Affective Turn

Affect has become an important way of describing how effective a particular piece of literature is at creating a response from the reader. It is often associated with the emotional response generated by a particular passage or work. Emotional and affective responses are often considered the same, though there are differences. The debate about the importance of affect occurs when literary theorists attempt to decide if different from emotion in intent and how relatable it is to the audience. In many ways it is more difficult to provoke affect in an audience, and is often cast aside for the more easily understood emotional responses that occur while reading a work.

Massumi associates affect with the physical response that the reader makes before he or she is able to apply a thought out emotional response. He claims that it is a scientifically explainable, unconscious response to stimuli. He claims that there is a half of a second during which the body somatically responds to the stimulus before the brain can process a response. Massumi believes that the affective response is a scientific one more than an emotional one. He believes that this half-second difference proves that there is a scientific difference between an affective response and an emotional one.

While the science behind the physical body having a reaction before an emotional one is undeniable, it is difficult to use this in a critical, literary way. When people read a passage that elicits a response in them, they are unable to determine the half-second between the physical response and the emotional one that occurs. The reader will likely experience the physical and emotional responses at the same time, resulting in the emotional response being seen as the one causing the physical reaction. While there are differences between affective and emotional responses in literary criticism, the ideas established by Massumi are difficult to use in this way.

The differences between emotion and affect come down to intent and the ability for the author to defend the reactions of the audience. When an author writes an intentionally emotional passage or piece it becomes possible, even necessary for him or her to defend the feelings generated by the work. The author can show that the feelings created either follow or are different from the ones that were intended in the writing. The emotions are open to criticism by the author or other critics of the work. They can be interpreted differently, responded to, and justified. On the other hand, affect is more abstract and less open to interpretations and critiques. If a reader feels a non-specific response to a work, how could it be possible to respond to the reader's response? It allows prevents the author from claiming that a certain response or feeling was certain to had in a given piece. As long as the response is one of affect rather than emotion it is almost impossible for anyone to suggest that

the response is right or wrong. It is an entirely individual recognition of feelings generated by the writing.

Affect is one of the ways that writers can elicit a response from their readers. It is an intriguing topic amongst critics because it can often be difficult to tie down exactly how affect works and when it is successful. It leads to discussions about the author's intent as well as trying to determine if the response generated is an emotional one or an affective one. This distinction is what leads to conversations about the effectiveness of writing. Being able to create a response from your reader, even if it is one that is difficult to describe or defend is important to becoming an established writer.