

Colleen Weir's response to the Favret, Leys, and Massumi readings

I want to preface my response by acknowledging that these articles are my first introduction to the field of affect studies, so I am a complete novice to this approach, but as someone who does research in nineteenth-century literature, I am very interested in the concept of emotions and how emotion affects the interplay between speakers and receivers. My research deals more with intentional and conscious forms of communication, whereas affect studies tends to focus on the non-intentional and non-conscious, but reading these three texts has been enlightening, and I look forward to coming to a better understanding of the field at our conference. I found that I had more questions than answers—questions which may be addressed by other theorists—but I will risk asking what may be simple or obvious questions in order to better understand affect.

I appreciated Leys's clear and thorough discussion of the variety of schools of thought in affect studies, and I was intrigued by her acknowledgement that many affect theorists hold that “affect has the potential to transform individuals for good or ill without regard to the content of argument or debate” (Leys 451). This observation, while potentially alarming, seemed very timely for making sense of current political and rhetorical phenomena. Massumi illustrates this point through his Ronald Reagan example, asserting that “confidence is the apotheosis of affective capture” (42). As I understand from these readings, affect does not have to do with intention, and the non-conscious emotional responses themselves do not contain meaning, but the receiver instead creates meaning. If affect is not intentional, can affect, in the hands of a novelist or a political strategist, for instance, still have an intended effect? Can the unintentional be intended? In other words, is it possible for a Ronald Reagan to be aware of his audience's non-cognitive response to confidence and use that awareness to achieve a particular end? Again, I am just trying to make sure that I understand affect correctly, so I would be happy if someone could clarify this point for me.

I had a similar question when I read Favret's survey of criticism on shared feelings and transmission in Romantic literature. Again, I think my question here is related to the one above: to what extent is affect transmissible and can those acts of transmission be intentional? Given the prevalence of didactic literature in the nineteenth century, could we see didactic novelists and poets trying to use affect to achieve particular ends?