

Joe Conway

For me, thinking about these essays within the context of our gathering, the question I am most drawn to is posed by Ruth Leys: “Why are so many scholars today in the humanities and social sciences fascinated by the idea of affect?” (435) Or, to subtract from the language so as to ratchet up the intensity: WHY. AFFECT. NOW?

Massumi’s summoning forth of Ronald Reagan and the stock market, two images whose political success owes everything to the apolitical, sub-cognitive hum of “confidence” are most telling. Again: WHY. AFFECT. NOW?

“Affect,” Massumi writes, “holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology” (42). Affect thus opens a critical space irreducible and even prior to ideology, whereas the Reagan revolution and all it brought with it— its orgies of financial deregulation, its becoming-vampire of the private sector in relation to the commonwealth, its absurd post-Cold-War declaration of liberal democracy’s victory as a universal fact inaugurating the end of history itself, etc.— self-identifies itself in public as the moment that abolishes ideology as a world-historical force. Therefore, the most exciting takeaway from these readings for me is that the turn to affect is not a complete turning away from symptomatic readings or ideological critique. We may have traded in Freud’s Victorian neurotic case studies for Sacks’ postmodern neurological case studies, but in either case, a critical procedure seeks to defamiliarize a system of behavioral norms so as to reveal something fundamentally strange about the machinery of “proper” human behavior itself.

In other words, I am making the case that Massumi’s ideas insist upon a historical narrative that places the role of ideology, or more precisely the loss of ideology, front and center. Perhaps this makes me guilty of practicing suspicious hermeneutics, but it might simply be too

late for this critic to remove the scar “Always historicize!” from my flesh where the teachers who zapped me time and again left it. The ability of affect, Massumi writes, and in particular what he calls “confidence,” to capture and direct our responses to virtual phenomena like Reagan and the stock market, prior to either ideological or economic discourse, makes affect “an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system as infrastructural as a factory” (45). So when the west deindustrializes, I suppose, its professional intellectuals get interested in affect.