

# Post-Cinematic Affect

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## CONTENTS

Preface	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 Corporate Cannibal	11
3 Boarding Gate	35
4 Southland Tales	64
5 Gamer	93
6 Coda	131
Works Cited	140
Endnotes	153

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# 1 Introduction

In this book, I look at four recent media productions – three films and a music video – that reflect, in particularly radical and cogent ways, upon the world we live in today. Olivier Assayas' *Boarding Gate* (starring Asia Argento) and Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (with Justin Timberlake, Dwayne Johnson, Seann William Scott, and Sarah Michelle Gellar) were both released in 2007. Nick Hooker's music video for Grace Jones' song "Corporate Cannibal" was released (as was the song itself) in 2008. Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor's film *Gamer* was released in 2009. These works are quite different from one another, in form as well as content. "Corporate Cannibal" is a digital production that has little in common with traditional film. *Boarding Gate*, on the other hand, is not a digital work; it is thoroughly cinematic, in terms both of technology, and of narrative development and character presentation. *Southland Tales* lies somewhat in between the other two. It is grounded in the formal techniques of television, video, and digital media, rather than those of film; but its grand ambitions are very much those of a big-screen movie. *Gamer*, for its part, is a digital film made in emulation of computer games. Nonetheless, despite their evident differences, all four of these works express, and exemplify, the "structure of feeling" that I would like to call (for want of a better phrase) post-cinematic affect.

Why "post-cinematic"? Film gave way to television as a "cultural dominant" a long time ago, in the mid-twentieth century; and television in turn has given way in recent years to computer- and network-based, and digitally generated, "new media." Film itself has not disappeared, of course; but filmmaking has been transformed, over the past two decades, from an analog process to a heavily digitized one. It is not my aim here to offer any sort of precise periodization, nor to rehash

the arguments about postmodernity and new media forms that have been going on for more than a quarter-century. Regardless of the details, I think it is safe to say that these changes have been massive enough, and have gone on for long enough, that we are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience. I would like to use the four works I have mentioned in order to get a better sense of these changes: to look at developments that are so new and unfamiliar that we scarcely have the vocabulary to describe them, and yet that have become so common, and so ubiquitous, that we tend not even to notice them any longer. My larger aim is to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century.

I am therefore concerned, in what follows, with effects more than causes, and with evocations rather than explanations. That is to say, I am not looking at Foucauldian genealogies so much as at something like what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling" (though I am not using this term quite in the manner that Williams intended). I am interested in the ways that recent film and video works are expressive: that is to say, in the ways that they give voice (or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular. By the term *expressive*, I mean both *symptomatic* and *productive*. These works are symptomatic, in that they provide indices of complex social processes, which they transduce, condense, and rearticulate in the form of what can be called, after Deleuze and Guattari, "blocs of affect."<sup>1</sup> But they are also productive, in the sense that they do not *represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them. Films and music videos, like other

media works, are *machines for generating affect, and for capitalizing upon, or extracting value from, this affect.* As such, they are not ideological superstructures, as an older sort of Marxist criticism would have it. Rather, they lie at the very heart of social production, circulation, and distribution. They generate subjectivity, and they play a crucial role in the valorization of capital. Just as the old Hollywood continuity editing system was an integral part of the Fordist mode of production, so the editing methods and formal devices of digital video and film belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of contemporary neoliberal finance. There's a kind of fractal patterning in the way that social technologies, or processes of production and accumulation, repeat or "iterate" themselves on different scales, and at different levels of abstraction.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to describe such processes in terms of affect? Here I follow Brian Massumi (2002, 23-45) in differentiating between *affect* and *emotion*. For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a "content" that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions. Today, in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, we see ourselves as subjects precisely to the extent that we are autonomous economic units. As Foucault puts it, neoliberalism defines a new mutation of "*Homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (2008, 226). For such a subject, emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as large a return as possible. What we know today as "affective labor" is not really

affective at all, as it involves rather the sale of labor-power in the form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions.<sup>3</sup>

However, emotion as such is never closed or complete. It also still testifies to the affect out of which it is formed, and that it has captured, reduced, and repressed. Behind every emotion, there is always a certain surplus of affect that "escapes confinement" and "remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective" (Massumi 2002, 35). Privatized emotion can never entirely separate itself from the affect from which it is derived. Emotion is representable and representative; but it also points beyond itself to an affect that works transpersonally and transversally, that is at once *singular* and *common* (Hardt and Negri 2004, 128-129), and that is irreducible to any sort of representation. Our existence is always bound up with affective and aesthetic flows that elude cognitive definition or capture.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of his distinction between affect and emotion, Massumi rejects Fredric Jameson's famous claim about the "waning of affect" in postmodern culture (Jameson 1991, 10-12). For Massumi, it is precisely subjective emotion that has waned, but not affect. "If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of [affect]... If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because it is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique" (Massumi 2002, [27-28]. "The disappearance of the individual subject" with which Jameson is concerned (1991, 16) leads precisely to a magnification of affect, whose flows swamp us, and continually carry us away from ourselves, beyond ourselves. For Massumi, it is precisely by means of such affective flows that the subject is opened to, and thereby constituted through, broader social, political, and economic processes.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, and despite their explicit disagreement, there is actually a close affinity between Massumi's discussion of transpersonal affect which always escapes subjective

representation, and Jameson's account of how "the world space of multinational capital" is "unrepresentable," or irreducible to "existential experience" (Jameson 1991, 53-54). Intensive affective flows and intensive financial flows alike invest and constitute subjectivity, while at the same time eluding any sort of subjective grasp. This is not a loose analogy, but rather a case of *parallelism*, in Spinoza's sense of the term. Affect and labor are two attributes of the same Spinozian substance; they are both powers or potentials of the human body, expressions of its "vitality," "sense of aliveness," and "changeability" (Massumi 2002, 36). But just as affect is captured, reduced, and "qualified" in the form of emotion, so labor (or unqualified human energy and creativity) is captured, reduced, commodified, and put to work in the form of "labor power." In both cases, something intensive and intrinsically unmeasurable – what Deleuze calls *difference in itself* (Deleuze 1994, 28-69) – is given identity and measure. The distinction between affect and emotion, like the distinction between labor and labor power, is really a radical incommensurability: an excess or a surplus. Affect and creative labor alike are rooted in what Gayatri Spivak describes as "the irreducible possibility that the subject be more than adequate – super-adequate – to itself" (Spivak 1985, 73).

This super-adequacy is the reason why neither the metamorphoses of capital nor the metamorphoses of affect can be grasped intuitively, or represented. But Jameson is quick to point out that, although the "global world system" is "unrepresentable," this does not mean that it is "unknowable" (Jameson 1991, 53). And he calls for "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping" (54) that would precisely seek to "know" this system in a non-representational and non-phenomenological way. This proposal, again, is closer than has generally been recognized to the cartographic project that Massumi inherits from Deleuze and Guattari, and that I would like to call, for my own purposes, an aesthetic of affective mapping.<sup>6</sup> For Jameson and Deleuze and

Guattari alike, maps are not static representations, but tools for negotiating, and intervening in, social space. A map does not just replicate the shape of a territory; rather, it actively *inflects* and *works over* that territory.<sup>7</sup> Films and music videos, like the ones I discuss here, are best regarded as affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly "about."

In what follows, I map the flows of affect in four dimensions, in conjunction with four "diagrams" of the contemporary social field.<sup>8</sup> All four of these diagrams are more or less relevant to all four of the works that I am discussing; but for heuristic purposes, I will link each work preferentially to a single diagram. The first diagram is that of Deleuze's "control society," a formation that displaces Foucault's Panoptical or disciplinary society (Deleuze 1995, 177-182). The control society is characterized by perpetual modulations, dispersed and "flexible" modes of authority, ubiquitous networks, and the relentless branding and marketing of even the most 'inner' aspects of subjective experience. Such processes of control and modulation are especially at work in the "Corporate Cannibal" video. The second diagram marks out the delirious financial flows, often in the form of derivatives and other arcane instruments, that drive the globalized economy (LiPuma and Lee, 2004). These flows are at once impalpable and immediate. They are invisible abstractions, existing only as calculations in the worldwide digital network, and detached from any actual productive activity. And yet they are brutally material in their "efficacy," or in their impact upon our lives – as the current financial crisis makes all too evident. Financial flows are the motor of subjectivity, most crucially, in *Boarding Gate*. The third diagram is that of our contemporary digital and post-cinematic "media ecology" (Fuller 2005), in which all activity is under surveillance from video cameras and microphones, and in return video screens and speakers, moving images and

synthesized sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere. In this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot meaningfully distinguish between "reality" and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric. *Southland Tales* is particularly concerned with the dislocations that result from this new media ecology. Finally, the fourth diagram is that of what McKenzie Wark calls "gamespace," in which computer gaming "has colonized its rivals within the cultural realm, from the spectacle of cinema to the simulations of television" (Wark 2007, 7). *Gamer* posits a social space in which the ubiquity of gaming has become nearly absolute.

In three of the four works I am discussing, I focus upon the figure of the media star or celebrity. Grace Jones has always been a performance artist as much as a singer. Her music is only one facet of her self-constructed image or persona. "Corporate Cannibal" gives this persona a new twist. *Boarding Gate* is a star vehicle for Asia Argento. Its concerns are close to those of Assayas' earlier films, and especially *Demonlover* (2002); but these concerns are filtered, and rearticulated, through Argento's visceral, self-consciously performative onscreen presence. *Southland Tales* has sprawling, multiple plotlines and an ensemble cast; but nearly all its actors, including Justin Timberlake, are pop culture figures who actively play against their familiar personas. Kelly thereby creates a sort of affective (as well as cognitive) dissonance, a sense of hallucinatory displacement that largely drives the film.

Jones, Argento, and Timberlake are all perturbing presences, exemplary figures of post-cinematic celebrity. They circulate endlessly among multiple media platforms (film, television talk shows and reality shows, music videos and musical recordings and performances, charity events, advertisements and sponsorships, web- and print-based gossip columns, etc.), so that

they seem to be everywhere and nowhere at once. Their ambivalent performances are at once affectively charged and ironically distant. They enact complex emotional dramas, and yet display a basic indifference and impassivity. I feel involved in every aspect of their lives, and yet I know that they are not involved in mine. Familiar as they are, they are always too far away for me to reach. Even the *Schadenfreude* I feel at the spectacle of, say, Britney's breakdown or Madonna's divorce backhandedly testifies to these stars' inaccessibility. I am enthralled by their all-too-human failures, miseries, and vulnerabilities, precisely because they are fundamentally inhuman and invulnerable. They fascinate me, precisely because it is utterly impossible that they should ever acknowledge, much less reciprocate, my fascination.

In short, post-cinematic pop stars allure me. The philosopher Graham Harman describes *allure* as "a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing's unity and its plurality of notes somehow partly disintegrates" (Harman 2005,143). For Harman, the basic ontological condition is that objects always withdraw from us, and from one another. We are never able to grasp them more than partially. They always hold their being in reserve, a mystery that we cannot hope to plumb. An object is always more than the particular qualities, or "plurality of notes," that it displays to me. This situation is universal; but most of the time I do not worry about it. I use a knife to cut a grapefruit, without wondering about the inner recesses of knife-being or grapefruit-being. And usually I interact with other people in the same superficial way. Now, in general this is a good thing. If I were to obsess over the inner being of each person I encountered, ordinary sociability would become impossible. It is only in rare cases – for instance when I intensely love, or intensely hate, someone – that I make the (ever-unsuccessful) attempt to explore their mysterious depths, to find a real being that goes beyond the particular qualities that they display to me. *Intimacy* is what we call the situation in which

people try to probe each other's hidden depths.<sup>9</sup>

What Harman calls *allure* is the way in which an object does not just display certain particular qualities to me, but also insinuates the presence of a hidden, deeper level of existence. The alluring object explicitly *calls attention* to the fact that it is something more than, and other than, the bundle of qualities that it presents to me. I experience allure whenever I am intimate with someone, or when I am obsessed with someone or something. But allure is not just my own projection. For any object that I encounter *really is* deeper than, and other than, what I am able to grasp of it. And the object becomes alluring, precisely to the extent that it forces me to acknowledge this hidden depth, instead of ignoring it. Indeed, allure may well be strongest when I experience it *vicariously*: in relation to an object, person, or thing that I do not actually know, or otherwise care about. Vicarious allure is the ground of aesthetics: a mode of involvement that is, at the same time, heightened and yet (as Kant puts it) "disinterested." The inner, surplus existence of the alluring object is something that I cannot reach – but that I also cannot forget about or ignore, as I do in my everyday, utilitarian interactions with objects and other people. The alluring object insistently displays the fact that it is separate from, and more than, its qualities – which means that it exceeds everything that I feel of it, and know about it. This is why what Kant calls a judgment of beauty is non-conceptual and non-cognitive. The alluring object draws me beyond anything that I am actually able to experience. And yet this 'beyond' is not in any sense otherworldly or transcendent; it is situated in the here and now, in the very flows and encounters of everyday existence.

Pop culture figures are vicariously alluring, and this is why they are so affectively charged. They can only be grasped through a series of paradoxes. When a pop star or celebrity allures me, this means that he or she is someone to whom I respond in the mode of intimacy, even though I am not, and

cannot ever be, actually intimate with him or her. What I become obsessively aware of, therefore, is the figure's distance from me, and the way that it baffles all my efforts to enter into any sort of relation with it. Such a figure is forever unattainable. Pop stars are slippery, exhibiting singular qualities while, at the same time, withdrawing to a distance beyond these qualities, and thus escaping any final definition. This makes them ideal commodities: they always offer us more than they deliver, enticing us with a "promise of happiness" that is never fulfilled, and therefore never exhausted or disappointed. In terms of a project of affective and cognitive mapping, pop stars work as anchoring points, as particularly dense nodes of intensity and interaction. They are figures upon which, or within which, many powerful feelings converge; they *conduct* multiplicities of affective flows. At the same time, they are always more than the sum of all the forces that they attract and bring into focus; their allure points us elsewhere, and makes them seem strangely absent from themselves. Pop culture figures are *icons*, which means that they exhibit, or at least aspire to, an idealized stillness, solidity, and perfection of form. Yet at the same time, they are fluid and mobile, always displacing themselves. And this contrast between stillness and motion is a generative principle not just for celebrities themselves, but also for the media flows, financial flows, and modulations of control through which they are displayed, and that permeate the entire social field.

## 2 Corporate Cannibal

Nick Hooker's video for Grace Jones' "Corporate Cannibal" is in black and white. Or, more precisely, it is just in black. The only images that appear on the screen are those of Jones' face and upper body. These images were captured by two video cameras, in a single take. The director recalls that, at the time of the shoot, Jones had just spent several months in Jamaica; as a result her skin "was intensely black, like *dark*, dark black." There is no background to contrast with the black of Jones' figure, or with what Hooker calls "the raw glow of her skin" (Hermitosis 2008). The video was actually shot in color, with a white wall for background; but in postproduction the director "desaturated the footage...and brought up the contrast which made the white wall fall away entirely and consequently enhanced the blackness of her skin" (Hooker 2009). As a result of this treatment, there is literally nothing in the video aside from Jones' skin, her features, and her silhouette. Behind her, there is only an empty blankness; it is this absence of any image whatsoever that we see as white. Evidently this play of black and white, and of full and empty, has racial implications, as well as formal and visual ones – implications to which I shall return.

The video works by continually manipulating Grace Jones' figure. In the course of the song's six minutes and eight seconds, this figure swells and contracts, bends and fractures, twists, warps, and contorts, and flows from one shape to another. At the start, there is just a twisted, diagonal double band, extending across the empty screen like a ripple of electronic disturbance; but this quickly expands into Jones' recognizable image. At the end of the video, the entire screen goes black, as if it had been entirely consumed by Jones' presence. In between, Jones' image is unstable and in flux; nothing remains steady for more than a few seconds. Certain configurations tend to recur, however. In