

Affect as an Infrastructure: Folding and Unfolding the City

Paper Presentation

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Part 1—The Fold

The phrase “folds of the city,” while not exactly a commonplace, appears sprinkled through a range of literature on the city, from academic theses to Russian futurist poetry to travel magazine pieces. In most cases, it is used to refer to the concealed spaces (sometimes full of charm and sometimes full of menace) that might not be evident in macroscopic views upon, or conventional journeys into, the urban landscape. These folds of the city, then, are often places particularly valued for academic investigation—its probably not a surprise that two recent academic conferences have included the phrase in their titles—as possible locations for resistance, secret knowledge, and other phenomena that benefit from some shelter from direct exposure to the dominant forces that tend to flatten the urban fabric.

My interest, though, is thinking about the folds of the city in a rather different light—rather than concealed spaces, I want to suggest that the real folds of the city might be the subjects produced by the urban milieu and, especially, its unique affective economy. In other words, I wish to consider the ways that the “blasé cosmopolitan,” “the knickerbocker,” “the hipster,” and a range of other urban subjects might be understood as folds in the affective plane of the city, a plane that constitutes a kind of complementary infrastructure to the more commonly understood material one. Brian Massumi, arguably the most prominent figure in contemporary affect studies, first presents affect as an infrastructure in his article, “The Autonomy of Affect,” an early piece in his development of the affect paradigm. Indeed, at the end of the piece, Massumi argues that affect is not merely an infrastructure, but in fact “it is beyond infrastructure, it is everywhere in effect” (106-107). I’ll provide some critical comments on this later, but would note that he first raised the possibility of the infrastructural character of affect some 20 years ago).

There is a certain irony in this effort, as it recruits two figures often posited as mortal enemies of the subject-centered tradition in contemporary critical theory, Gilles Deleuze and Michele Foucault. Indeed, it is Deleuze’s work on Foucault—in my view

his greatest work—that the fold becomes an important means for understanding subjectivity. As Deleuze puts it, “Foucault seems haunted by the theme of an inside that is merely the fold of an outside” (97). Deleuze continues, “It is as if the relations of the outside folded back to create a doubling, allowing a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitute an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimension” (100). Interestingly, both Foucault’s original work and Deleuze’s interpretation bear the influence of classical Greek thought, in which the Polis was much more than a city space but also bore strong social and ethical implications for the subjects within. I have written elsewhere on the relationship and indeed resemblance of this model to the neo-pragmatist model of the subject formulated by GH Mead and developed in a range of subsequent literature (e.g., Joas, Tugendhat, Kogler), but the central salient point here is that this is a substantive model of social subjectivity, while produced by the social order nonetheless attains a degree of autonomy—located most critically in a capacity for reflexivity—that would hardly match a vulgar understanding of a Foucauldian hyper-behaviorism or, conversely, a Deleuzian schizo anti-subject.

But today I want to focus on the figure of the fold, and in line with the conference theme, the urban affective fold. This requires a consideration of affect as operating as an “outside,” to Deleuze’s term, which would certainly match the way that it is constructed in a large section of the emergent “affect studies” canon, as both pre- and trans-subjective; while I have some reservations regarding a full embrace of the affect studies position, the description of affect therein might constitute an intriguing first step in thinking about subject-formation as a fold in the plane of being. Later, in the essay I’ll consider some ways that cinema models this process, but for the moment, I want to consider the ways that the Deleuzo-Foucaultian neo-pragmatist subject might be thought as the unstable product of a kind of affective infrastructure, one providing a set of resources for self-formation but also contingent upon the vicissitudes of the folding and unfolding characteristic of a dynamic urban milieu.

In understanding affect as constituting an infrastructure, I am thinking here of the ways that more conventional urban infrastructures create patterns of experience and physical movement, but also the ways that they inevitably produce resistance and provoke the development of alternative pathways (the locus for much of DeCerteau’s work, as well as that of his intellectual descendant John Fiske) and models for new actions, what we are now charged to call “innovation.” Institution man, the flaneur, and the anxious urban innovator are all possible products of this urban infrastructure, and it might be worthwhile to think of affect as a key component here. In a certain respect, this might constitute a third term to both the Marxist materialist economy (the forces and relations of production) and Bataille’s general economy, the latter an intervention enthusiastically embraced by Jean Baudrillard and anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, among others as means of accounting for a symbolic economy beyond, or in the most radical formulations exceeding the material, “restricted” economy.

Thus, in addition to the material infrastructure (the built environment, the flows of economic capital, human movements through diaspora, immigration, and gentrification) and the symbolic order (which might constitute a second, general economic

infrastructure), one could posit an affective economy, a distribution of moods, sensations, and similar states that work in concert with but never reducible to the other economies.¹ The process of folding that Deleuze locates in the later Foucault's theory of subjectivity is also irreducible to a single register and would necessarily be understood as the intertwining of material, symbolic, and affective as they align in such a way that the reflexive possibilities of subjectivity emerge.

There is a secondary connection to Baudrillard's work here in that his formulation of seduction, a preoccupation in the work that immediately followed the Bataille-inflected treatment of symbolic economies described above, echoes some of the dynamics of the folded subject. Indeed, seduction might be understood as a process of unfolding, or perhaps a game of unfolding and refolding, in which subjects engage one another and move back and forth from degrees of revelation and concealment. Our subjectivity, in the Baudrillardian seduction paradigm, is defined by its artifice, an artifice that can never be eliminated; we can never, to pursue the metaphor, be smoothed totally flat but we are inevitably altered by being drawn into the game of seduction and that this applies to both seduced and seducer. When a city is described as "seductive," for instance, it almost always connotes that its appearance, its artifice draws us in and we are moved to enter its folds while at the same time, it opens us up, it plays with those immanent affective forces that turn in on one another to produce the reflexive grounds of the self. We explore the city and at the same time, it reaches us.

Part 2—Films and Folding

To avoid drifting into pure abstraction, I want to reflect on the question of urban affect and the folded subject through a brief analysis of two sets of films that reflect on the urban experience—primarily in terms of negative affect, in this case—and the subjects it produces. The first is "the Pittsburgh Trilogy" by American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, which consists of three non-narrative films shot in 1971, and the second (a trilogy of my own making, not intended as such) consists of three films by New Hollywood director Paul Schrader, *Hardcore*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, and *Light Sleeper*, from 1979, 1990, and 1992, respectively, that focus on existential encounters with Hollywood, Venice, and New York. Both directors have philosophical inclinations, although their approaches (and indeed, their philosophical foundations) are radically different and these films can be understood, collectively, as a kind of "before and after" reflection on subject-formation as a folding of affect, materiality, and the symbolic. Important here is the way that such a process is bound to the particular character of a given city.

In the "Pittsburgh Trilogy," Brakhage takes inspiration from the great modern poet Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* and particularly the phrase "polis is eyes" which appears in "Letter 6" of the poems, a much-discussed reflection on the fusion of space,

¹ Massumi has something like this in mind, but as indicated in the earlier quote, he assigns a certain a priori status and arguably primacy to affect, placing it (as he says) "everywhere" which might also make it nowhere.

perception, and the aggregation of perspective in the city (or, perhaps better city-state). Across the three films, centered, respectively on the police, the hospital, and the morgue, Pittsburgh appears as a setting for the cycle of birth, life, illness, and death. The use of bureaucratic institutions and an impersonality of photographic subject—from the anonymous police officers and citizens in *Eyes* to the lumpen patients *Deus Ex* and most strikingly the corpses in *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* comes into collision with Brakhage's famously hyper-subjective camera, one that he imagined as an extension of his eye and his consciousness. The first-person cinematographic address provides an experience without much direct identification with anything other than the camera and the city, or at least three sites within it, is experienced as series of encounters as perceptions and experiences, often disturbing, but never integrated into any engagement with a personhood beyond the fused spectator/filmmaker/camera.

The bureaucratic infrastructure (the buildings; the role positions of cop, coroner, doctor, criminal, and corpse) and the affective infrastructure remain disjointed here, uncollected through any form of reflexivity. In *Eyes*, the human figure of the cop is disjointed into objects, body parts (particularly hands), and instruments, while in *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* presents the corpses being autopsied as post-human in the strictest sense as curiously aesthetic—at least to this viewer, the film is not grotesque or horrifying in ways that the topic might suggest, but rather melancholic. Pittsburgh, in the Pittsburgh trilogy, is drained of human life, in a way, except as noted, that of the viewer, even as it is encountered through institutions intimately connected with human services, to use the governmental term.

Schrader's city films are near opposites in certain aesthetic terms, although they share a sense of both dread and mystery with Brakhage's Pittsburgh films. However, this isn't the free floating, hyper-subjective and real-time affect characteristic of the latter, but rather both embodied in characters and narrativized (anathema to Brakhage's polemical aesthetics, by the way) in tragic tales of urban seduction. As upright Calvinist Jake VanDorn's daughter is sucked into the porn underworld of Los Angeles in *Hardcore*, Marianne falls back into a cocaine habit in chic 1980s Manhattan in *Light Sleeper*, and English couple Colin and Mary are drawn to the sinister Robert and his beautiful Venice apartment in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the films present the merging of attraction and menace through both the seduced (whether as innocent schoolgirl, recovering addict, or bohemian bourgeoisie couple), seducer (suave eurotrash in both *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Light Sleeper* and sleazy porn kingpin in *Hardcore*), and in the case of the latter two films, an attempted redeemer (Jake in *Hardcore* and aspiring urban martyr John LeTour in *Light Sleeper*).

All are products, whether through seduction or abjection (or perhaps both), of the city and linked to its particular dynamics, and most are transformed through the narrative, damaged or enlightened by the folds of the city (the massage parlors of Hollywood, the gay bars of Venice, or the nightclubs of Manhattan) that work to fold them. The sensations of Brakhage's Pittsburgh give way here to embodied exemplars; the police station, the hospital, and the morgue are all present, but they act as more than just tapestries of perception and feeling and are deeply implicated with the existential

contours of the characters that are pushed into encounters with them (it is implied that Marianne is pushed out of a high-floor apartment in the aptly named “Grace Towers”—“Fall From Grace,” the tabloid headline screams).

It might seem perverse to juxtapose such divergent cinematic examples—apples and oranges, one might say—but the movement from “polis is eyes” to a “fall from grace” provides an intriguing parallel to the theoretical work described in part 1. The pure experience, the “blooming, buzzing confusion,” to use William James’ term, of Brakhage’s work and particularly as it is applied to the institutional infrastructure of rust belt Pittsburgh stands as the cinematic registration of the raw materials of the collection and reflection that produces the figures that appear fully formed, though with a certain existential plasticity, in Scharder’s films. Olson’s classical fascinations are germane here as Brakhage and Schrader replay the movement from Heraclitian flux to Classical self-formation (as interpreted by Foucault, anyway) in their versions of the city film.

In concluding, I want to move from this perhaps somewhat opaque case study to some general thoughts on the relations between affect and the folded subject. One of the vulnerabilities, arguably, of affect studies is the challenge of dealing with the process of individuation (as Habermas reminds us, inevitably a social process) that distributes affect. As Ruth Leys notes in her much-discussed critique of the “affective turn,” affect theorists face some significant challenges in the attempt to separate out affect from intentional subject-based processes of cognition, to preserve its status, “as a nonsignifying, nonconscious “intensity” disconnected from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong” (441). The temptation of a hyper-Deleuzian, vitalist model of affect can be resisted if one looks to Deleuze’s work on Foucault—rather than, perhaps, his work with Guattari—work that tempers the asubjective drive of the latter. The notion that affective economies operate alongside material and symbolic ones in the constructing the grounds for the subjective folding that initiates reflexivity might provide one route into a fuller investigation of how specific environments, in this case cities, function as the grounds for subject formation. As Brakhage and Schrader attempt to capture, respectively, the immanent affective encounter with the institutional fabric of the city and the existential lifeworld that is a product of a life of such encounters as it forms the urban subject. This, I think, is how we unfold and refold the city and how it does the same to us.