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Affective encounters: tools of interruption for activist media practices

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How do cultural, artistic, and media practices participate in the distribution of affects and feelings? How, as media participants, can we use these affects and feelings in strategies of persistence, resistance, or subversion? Around these questions, in August 2014 we organized the NOISE summer-school at the Gender Studies Department at Utrecht University, the Netherlands—the first of what became a series of international events and networks around the theme *Affective Encounters*. On that occasion, a group of feminist scholars, artists, and activists from different countries and different disciplines came together to share their knowledge and teach students from all over the world for one intensive week. The intellectual discussions, activist alliances, and academic encounters that started then led to numerous other spontaneous and non-linear moments of “eV-ent-anglement” (Juhasz, in this issue): a panel during the *Visible Evidence* conference in New Delhi in December 2014; a three-day workshop at McGill University in Montreal in August 2015; and three connected panels during the conference of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) in Montreal in November 2016.

This special issue is the last part of this three-year long experience. Some of the authors published here have been with us from the beginning of this conversation; others have joined at later stages. What all the contributions have in common is that they explore questions of affect, activism, and analysis in media representations and practices, and reflect on how these practices may produce modes of perception that facilitate socially and politically transformative actions. This matter is addressed by emerging and renowned scholars in the fields of feminist, media, and visual studies. Through the matrix of interdisciplinary and intersectional methodologies, we draw here upon the most recent scholarship in the field of media studies, critical race theory, gender and queer studies, postcolonial theory, and political activism.

Being wary about media representations is nothing new—media truth claims have been questioned, deconstructed, or disavowed for decades as manipulation, falsification, propaganda, or incitements to consumerism. Today, however, our relationship to corporate mainstream news outlets, documentary, entertainment, or citizen media is even more precarious due to the condition of permanent war, state security discourses, the meltdown of finance capitalism, “fake news,” the political agendas and loyalties of networks, media assaults on

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the science of climate change, widespread anxieties after the US presidential election, and geopolitical tensions and alliances. Although image-based media have become a powerful force, reconfiguring politics, socioeconomics, cultural attitudes, as well as religion and spirituality (Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska 2012; Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka 2012), the overwhelming multiplicity and uncontrollability of disseminated data leaves audiences and participants guarded as to both the message and the medium itself. Conflict reporting, together with projects of self-care, have become the two most salient forces for the mediated construction of a cosmopolitan imagination in neoliberal capitalism: while new outlets and digital technologies spark new forms of witnessing and access, prompting us to acknowledge war, violence, and oppression, they also invite us to commodify and purchase lifestyles and ideologies, perpetually celebrating ourselves as free-market agents. As media participants, we find ourselves simultaneously informed and bewildered, agitated and passive, exposing and exposed, pulled in and kept at a distance.

When we try to take stock of the emotional fallout of the media spectacles that we witness every day, we end up left with the following questions: how can we situate ourselves within the sensational value of media broadcasting without dismissing the potential of affects, feelings, and emotions? How to accountably carry on the emotional legacy of transnational histories of genocide, colonization, slavery, and diaspora when responding to mediated events today? How to turn feelings into active refusal, into generative action, not short-circuiting within our own, restricted worldview? How to continue to expect feelings to guide or maintain us going forward, when they have failed spectacularly so many times? How to acknowledge what is widely considered “bad,” unsettling affects (anger, rage, despair, shame) that are part and parcel of our everydayness without dismissing them as unproductive?

Despite doubts, fear, and distrust surrounding them, global and local media alike have become major providers of affective economies. They trigger multiple emotional reactions, create accessible spaces that provide audiences with resources for fostering feelings and emotions, and form (and break) communities organized around love, hate, joy, rage, or loss (Arjun Appadurai 2013; Elizabeth Cowie 2011; Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyne Gorton 2013; Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit 2015). Individual, volatile emotions have become a sharable portent of political and cultural attitudes, generating emotional infrastructures that either comply with patriarchy, racism, and xenophobia, or deploy feelings as “a form of against-ness” (Sara Ahmed 2004, 174), serving progress and social change (examples here could be online communities centered around the Black Lives Matter movement). Simultaneously, companies such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, fully aware of their power to affectively mobilize their users, use proprietary algorithms that micro-target audiences with personalized content (Marta Zarzycka 2016), moving texts and images expected to generate emotional engagement to the top of our feeds and compressing the possible affective responses into a limited range of icons (heart, smiling face, face-palm).

The *Affective Encounters* issue presents gender, feminist, and queer interventions that go beyond the rhetorical and the narrative when coming in contact with the visual and the mediatized. It further explores how these strategies can mediate new social relationships and forms of resistance to the logics of patriarchy, imperialism, race, and gender inequalities and national-based hierarchies through critical engagement. As contemporary political and social realms continue to be complicit in acts of image- and sound-creation and their global transmission, this special issue solicits critical engagement with the politics of viewing, sensing, archiving, witnessing, and disseminating media content and proposes to develop and

sustain civilian skills that are not entirely subordinate to sociocultural mechanisms of racism, xenophobia, or sexism.

Drawing on feminist media scholarship, we call for connecting political processes and everyday emotional topographies in a less hierarchical, more enabling way. Affective encounters, next to communicative dialogue, can trigger communicative ruptures that break away from the dominant aesthetics of media storytelling—trophy-shot images, powerful rhetoric, easy accessibility, digital speed—that predetermine the trajectory of possible action. To understand the potential role of such interruption and suspension of meaning requires taking into account how media can represent and what they *fail* to represent. We are particularly interested in processes and tools that dissect or counter the rule of narrative—as “the organization of a perceptual field according to the imperative of rendering things readable” (Davide Panagia 2009, 3)—within dominant discourses. A turn to affective engagements enables the maker, the spectator, and the critic to engage with the non-linear and non-narrative elements of media—white noise; rhythm; hashtag; cut; cinematic blankness and slowness; spatial negotiations of emotional proximity and distance in surveillance practices and in online mourning rituals; an aesthetic of stealth, staging an act of becoming-imperceptible; unconventional framing or lack of framing altogether; lack rather than presence—thereby escaping dominant codifications of meanings, and thus generating the possibility for counter-narratives to be performed, alternative stories to be enacted, and practices of resistance to be ignited. Examples of these practices here include: tracing emotions of fear of and empathy towards refugees through the techno-affective networks of the security apparatus; portrayal of the Black experience in experimental cinema; performance of identification and solidarity for queer and trans people of color by the contemporary US liberal queer white community; a feminist procedure of digital (self)-editing by cutting, linking, looping, and thereby revisiting and remaking from the past media of the queer/AIDS digital archive; practices of bystander intervention in Black and indigenous feminist social media activism against racialized and gendered street harassment; and many others. Each essay in this issue follows instances of narrative collapse to pose the larger question we keep asking ourselves as media scholars and participants: in what ways can media practices partake in the distribution of affects and feelings as a strategy of resistance and subversion? How can affect facilitate political action, recognition, and dialogue, and bring about social change?

“Encounters” in the title is an open-ended term, inviting speculative inquiry. The volume originated from our very own series of encounters with a diverse, international group of feminist, race, and queer theory and media scholars and activists, as well as from recent political developments on the global and local scales, demanding from us various stances of involvement and exposure and various strategies of resistance and disturbance. These encounters enabled all of us to think, feel, and reminisce together. Over several years, personal affective attachments have been made and redefined, some ended, some are still going strong. Encounters with each other, with each other’s writing, and with the events brought to us through the visual media, provided us with an incentive and an opportunity to attempt to reproduce events and identities through reiterative affective practice.

Similarly, “affect” should be understood here as a point of departure for multiple theoretical stances; it spans different terminology and experiences, ranging from precognitive sensory and somatic involvement with one’s environment to highly mediated cognitive concepts or constructions (joy, fear, anger) and the cultural processes that they unhinge. Drawing upon existing bodies of literature that comprise a frame for analyzing the global/geopolitical

and the local/everyday potentialities of affect, essays in this issue are attentive yet critical to all the layers of what has been named “the affective turn,” expanding on affect’s conceptual, empirical, and political agenda. Although there is no scholarly consensus on the meaning or terminology of affect—definitions vary from Ahmed (2004) to Brian Massumi (2002); from Teresa Brennan (2004) to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988); from Kara Keeling (2007) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) to Silvan Tomkins (1995)—affects, emotions, sensibilities, sentimentalities, and feelings that we trace in media content make us rethink psychoanalytic paradigms alone. Simultaneously, “affect” is also embedded in cultural, economic, social, and spatial realms of cultural memory and community formation, driving forces behind human rights movements and political dissent against the state and emotional geopolitics (Rachel Pain 2008; see also Chouliaraki, in this issue). Moreover, it remains an almost-tangible commodity in neoliberalism and late capitalism (Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley 2007; Massumi 2002), frequently employed by political bodies to maintain global and local market consumerism, new forms of governmentality, biopolitics, and necropolitics, and notions of social and national belonging and anxiety (Lauren Berlant 2004, 2011). Last but not least, the concept of affect is reconsidered here in connection to technology, which, although presented as transcendent and neutral, is in fact material and invested in individual and communal agendas (Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White 2011).

While there is a powerful cultural tendency to gloss over “bad” feelings—such as depression, anger, melancholy, shame, inertia (Ann Cvetkovich 2007)—we explore here the daily practice of experiencing and undergoing “negative affects” or “ugly feelings” (Sianne Ngai 2005) and their possibility for political activism. We attempt to challenge here overly simplistic and consumable models of affect and the way that they consolidate the social privileges of class and race, frequently cancelling personalist stories of oppression and dissent. A recent example of such consolidation is the Woman’s March on Washington, and its international spin-offs, for example in the Netherlands, taking place as this issue goes to print. Unapologetic rage has been a prevalent rhetoric of Trump supporters, whether applauding insults seeping through Trump’s Twitter account, organizing militias and joining survivalist cults, waging war on queers, blacks, and “feminazis,” hate-mongering against immigrants and minorities, or promoting protectionist policies. Anger, however, is a no-show in the media broadcasting of people protesting against the president and the values of his supporters. Public resistance to the Trump administration and, consequently, its media coverage, largely appears as anger-less. But when “negative affects” such as anger or rage seem to be no longer a contrivance, but rather a disturbance, a ballast to be thrown out, a tool of division against feminist solidarity and affirmation, joy falls short. Anger highlights processes of aversion, exclusion, negation, and resistance: the passion of anger has always been an important driver of action against the systemic violence of racism, sexism, or economic inequality. Joy, on the other hand, remains fixed in the space where cultural ideas about political resistance seem to be easily adapted to imagine a non-hierarchical social world where good intentions, love, and affirmation can flourish undisturbed. Even though the official platform of the Women’s March on Washington placed the demonstration in the context of not only suffragists and abolitionists, but the civil rights movement, the American Indian movement, and Black Lives Matter, the media coverage on social media platforms and the mainstream press tapped into self-affirmatory ideals of the white middle class that moves around freely in an environment that had been safe to begin with, able to visually and ideologically enact political imaginaries and practices. White middle-class feminism uses the format and

aesthetics of the Pantsuit Nation Facebook group, where white women members frown upon the lack of positivity of Black members daily, dismissing the intersectionality of oppression and of dissent. A long lineage of feminist and queer thinkers and activists—Audre Lorde, Betty Friedan, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, campaigners from ACT UP and Black Lives Matter—have insisted on breaking the bubble of the allegedly happy status quo, and advocated anger as a signal to self and to more privileged others that wrongdoing has taken place. A hierarchical scaling of affects from good to bad overlooks agency, resistance, and action, ignoring the potential of “negative” affect in the mainstream and social media alike.

This issue constitutes an effort to challenge powerful metanarratives and to continue to think about how these metanarratives can be dismantled. The European border, understood as a space of “humanitarian securitization,” is discussed by Lilie Chouliaraki and Pierluigi Musarò as a mediatised border: a network of mediations where emotions co-exist and co-articulate through digital media. Borders in Greece and Italy are explored as *techno-affective networks* of reception for migrants and refugees, wherein a diverse range of mediated emotions take place. Both the narrated and the enacted border have in common a mediated structure of communication that devalues, silences, and marginalizes certain emotions of the border over others, eventually positioning its negotiations of identity into pre-existing classifications of “us” and the “other.” Cutting across the two relatively distinct spheres of migrant reception (military securitization and humanitarian care, connoted respectively as masculine and feminine), the essay further argues that they both present structural similarities of power. Nonetheless, through the study of lived realities, the authors show the affective permeability of security, and how complex identities that challenge the gendered pattern of border emotionality can emerge.

A different kind of mediated affects are discussed by Amanda Lagerkvist and Yvonne Andersson in their study of death—*the grand interruption*—and online activities of mourners. Re-centering a discussion of the affective turn in new materialism around death and illness—rather than around life—the authors show how the internet has spawned *lifelines*, both individual and collective, where finitude and shared vulnerability can be constructive on a cultural level—for collectives, groups, and societies. They do so by engaging existential philosophy, where the vulnerable body is understood as a point of departure for productive political agency and an ethics of care that stems from those bodies who are hurting, aching, bleeding, dying, and connecting—through online participation. Framing life and death as respectively mediation and interruption in our digitally mediated everydayness and online connections with others, the essay contributes to the feminist analysis of affective encounters complicating the overemphasis on “narrative content” as key in communication.

In keeping with digitally mediated encounters and relations of care, Carrie Rentschler’s essay analyzes practices of bystander intervention in Black and indigenous feminist activism against racialized and gendered street harassment, both online and offline. The recent social media conversations of hashtagged and Storified Twitter are considered here as platforms of care for survivors and targets of violence. The affective dimension is at play at multiple levels: in the gendered and racialized performances in the harassing situation; in the ordinary affects that shape experiences of harassment; in how affects are reported and communicated online; in how public feelings of oppression are shared once Twitter becomes an activist tool of disclosure and reporting; and finally, in how these activist practices become affective pedagogies that shape collective states of public feeling. Online communication practices are conceptualized as a feminist activist assemblage that connects social media dialogues

with the work of social movement organizations, linking the affective work of caring for survivors with the intersectional political vision of a transformative model of justice.

Other essays in this collection, however, challenge the notion of affective care. Jasmine Rault's analysis of *Gaycation* as a media production of an affective uniformity that reproduces hegemonic whiteness as a series of generalized "nice feelings," is such a case. The essay argues that in the series, US liberal queer whiteness is enacted as a performance of feelings (of sympathy, empathy, identification, and solidarity) towards queer and trans people of color. Rault shows how *Gaycation* contributes to a strategy of sameness-feeling by staging a series of affectively controlled encounters around the world. In these encounters, homophobia, transphobia, and the illusion of LGBT community function to generate a uniform affect that reproduces and maintains hegemonic whiteness as both unmarked and hyperconscious, eventually obscuring violent dynamics, and confirming an innocent white imperialism secured by colonial modernity. *White noise* is deployed as a concept to make sense of a kind of filtering—absorbing, distorting, backgrounding, and reorienting—that works as a reactionary technique to secure white liberal modernity.

Ryan Watson's essay also intervenes in the debate on the role and political potential of affects in documentary media. Considering the interfaces, modes of engagement, as well as the wealth of stories, evidence, and testimonies in two recent interactive documentary projects, *Public Secrets* (2006) and *Points of View* (2014), the essay explores how the interactive documentary form allows viewer/users a multi-faceted affective encounter with a range of subjects and evidence. Watson articulates how these projects—rendering visible systemic structures of violence in incarceration of women in California and the Israeli occupation of Palestine respectively—use interactive forms to engender an expansive, deep, and transformative witnessing. Watson finally shows how that interactive documentary technique facilitates a myriad of affective and effective encounters, and engenders an "affective radicality" that moves viewers/users into larger networks of political discourse, militant activism, and practices of resistance.

Another entanglement with another media genre is explored in Ayanna Dozier's essay. In her analysis of Julie Dash's *Four Women* (1975), the author examines how Black women's experimental cinema gets around, negates, and dismisses recursively predetermined film portrayals of The Black Experience, precisely through its embodied and feminist use of Black expressive culture. Dozier argues that *Four Women*, and to an extent, Black women's experimental cinema, is a cinematic practice that is interested in *doing* rather than providing meaning. As such, it effectively counters and resists the audience's expected affective return with the cinematic image of Blackness. Mainstream cinema, then, is understood here as profiting off stabilized and collapsed forms of affect, reduced and qualified in the form of emotion or feelings. Cinema's deployment of these forms of affect—expressed through aesthetics—is designed to reap emotional returns for the audience in its affective coding of whiteness. Black women's experimental cinema, on the contrary, works through the generative possibilities of cinema's ability to convey affect by working outside and against the internal reward system of mainstream cinema's aesthetics, through its emphasis on the corporeal.

This collection of essays then continues with two contributions that engage with affect in relation to time, stillness, and in/visibility, through different mediated encounters. Toni Pape identifies an *aesthetic of stealth* as the staging of acts of becoming-imperceptible, through various contemporary media. He contends that the aesthetic of stealth resonates

with a broader shift in the functioning of contemporary political culture, the requirements it formulates, and appropriate modes of action. The essay revolves around three very diverse media, each articulating one step in the argument: Hito Steyerl's video piece *How Not to Be Seen*; the TV series *The Americans*; and the video game series *Tomb Raider*. Pape situates stealth aesthetics in the political context of a shift away from struggles for visibility to a withdrawal from representation and the preoccupation with becoming-imperceptible. In this sense, stealth enables and requires a certain kind of affective encountering with the environment that entails specific perceptual, embodied modes of attention. Finally the essay argues that in an aesthetic of stealth, political action is removed from rational engagement and plays out in the immediacy of sensory perception: stealth is "activist" in the sense that it shapes a world in constant becoming, instead of assuming a pre-existing political arena in which to intervene as a stable political subject.

From stealth to standstill. Elske Rosenfeld's essay explores stillness and its potential to counteract systemic violence even in moments of the most un-revolutionary everydayness. Rosenfeld investigates various films and events, from Ulrike Ottinger's *Countdown*, to Thomas Heise's films, to theorize stillness as a refusal to move and as a space for something to emerge. From art to activist practices in the street, the essay elaborates how the standstill becomes a revolutionary gesture, and how it moves communities and bodies together; a revolution is a moment of standing still together, in which the differences between moving and being moved, between moving and standing still, between becoming political and being recognized, or recognizing oneself as such, are lost. The essay traverses socialist, post-socialist, and modern times; pasts and futures; the speeds and standstills of bodies in the streets, encountered through a camera or studied as performative events. The slowing down here is more than a refusal to be efficient, or to be fast. Rosenfeld presents a politics of standstill as a politics that is responsive to reality and can replace "a politics based on ideas," which often proves to be too fast for us.

Finally, in keeping with the feminist potential of encounters and experimentation, knowing the importance of documenting collective affective works but in the constant attempt to counter the rule of master-narratives, we close our issue with cuts. Alexandra Juhasz's essay "Affect bleeds in feminist networks" is one of her many attempts to document and process a year-plus long project of eV-ent-angement. The eV-ent-angement itself has several components: writing about and documentation of performances and academic talks about feminism, digital media, and affect; digital media connected to these occasions; digital fragments produced by the audiences of these talks; and the digital platforms that hold said fragments. As is true for many digital projects, a lot of data, affect, and ideas were mobilized and shared in order to keep an idea open to encounters. This essay is one possible structure to hold and process the practices, concerns, and findings of media participants, struggling to manifest, affirm, and preserve fragments of ourselves. With this and other essays proposing a shift from the commitment to coherent, discursive, representational, or interpretive signification, our goal is to outline new and urgent directions for future research on representational strategies and perceptual modalities of today's media.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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