

Editorial

Introduction: Analysing Emotion and Theorising Affect

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Abstract: This discussion introduces ideas of emotion and affect for a volume of articles demonstrating the scope of approaches used in their study within the humanities and creative arts. The volume offers multiple perspectives on emotion and affect within 20th-century and 21st-century texts, arts and organisations and their histories. The discussion explains how emotion encompasses the emotions, emotional feeling, sensation and mood and how these can be analysed particularly in relation to literature, art and performance. It briefly summarises concepts of affect theory within recent approaches before introducing the articles.

Keywords: emotion; affect; emotions; introduction; performance; mourning

1. Introduction

Increased interest in the study of the emotions and affect within the humanities and creative arts can be identified in Australia, where there is nationally funded interdisciplinary research into the history of emotions [1]. While the study of the emotions can be found across a number of academic disciplines, historically, it was theatrical performance that publicly displayed—as well as challenged—ideas of emotional expression in society. The philosophical complexity of theatre is described in, for example: Aristotle’s expectation of benefit to society from the arousal of pity and fear [2]; Diderot’s appreciation that good actors do not feel the emotion that they portray [3]; and Bertolt Brecht’s rejection of an audience’s uncritical emotional absorption [4]. The complexities of expressed and performed emotion continue to be relevant with the growth of communication technologies in the 21st century.

This volume offers multiple perspectives on emotion and affect within 20th-century and 21st-century texts, arts and organisations and their histories, and the articles point to the wide range of approaches used in contemporary humanities and arts scholarship. No one interpretative framework predominates, as the articles confirm that the analysis or theory needs to correspond with its application and examples. In this volume, these range from: written text to visual and screen imagery; concepts of subjectivity to biography; social event to technologically mediated experience; psychoanalytic to medical discourse; and political world to cultural institution. (Applications are extended to the nonhuman and human–animal relations in my own published work.) The word “emotion” is being used in the “Introduction: Analysing Emotion and Theorising Affect” to encompass the emotions, emotional feeling (affect), sensation and mood. Emotion theory and affect theory, however, are distinguished to reflect the distinction in recent scholarship. It is the contention here that there are theoretical differences between emotional communication and ideas of feeling and affect that require explanation and invite further inquiry.

The scholarly study of emotion and affect can improve understanding within common usage—for example, by questioning the assumptions that emotions are universal and transparent things. As has

been noted, the need for improved understanding of emotion has implications for social cohesion [5]. Anthropological study reveals cultural variability, and political analysis unravels the ideological beliefs behind emotional expression. In addition, rhetorical display repeatedly demonstrates that emotion is socially performable and therefore can be manipulated. It seems even more important in the 21st century to investigate how emotions are crafted for effect in communication processes and in order to evoke feeling.

2. Communicating

The ways in which an art work presents emotion can be analysed. Emotion is constructed in literature and other art with words and/or embodied modes of expression—that is, within artistic languages. These invite responses from a reader or a spectator, although artistic creation and its reception varies considerably between art forms, and analysis needs to begin from the initial artistic process of delivery and engagement. A written text that silently engages a reader's subjective feeling and imagination is quite different to that of a music event bringing together a large listening audience—or a dancing one. Performance in live theatre might seem similar to cinematic and other screen performance because they deliver highly constructed visual and aural texts in which performer movement and expression are rehearsed and repeated, and enhanced by music. But live performance is delivered in a sustained way, whereas filmed performance is edited together into a coherent whole. Whether live or filmed, however, constructed performance often appears life-like to the spectator or viewer, because it delivers socially recognisable emotions through the narrative, spoken language, facial expression and gesture. As well as influencing social ideas of emotional expression, this process of communication raises the fundamental question: where does emotional feeling happen in relation to the art work? Emotions might be deliberately written or displayed by a performer, but emotional feeling arises through the responses of a reader or a spectator. Or does it?

The arts communicate through convention, and emotion becomes part of the structure. For example, the historical divergence between the genres of comedy and tragedy was important, because of the capacity to comment on individuals and society and—at the same time—communicate what to expect and how to react, and possibly how to feel. Comedy or tragedy suggest that emotional feeling is embedded in the artistic communication—that is, felt responses arise within familiar patterns. On the whole, art is made with intention, including emotional intention. It can provide meaningful ways of understanding emotional processes and exchanges and in variable situations within culture.

Aristotle argues that performance should contribute to the improvement of society, and that the selection of genre determines emotional depiction and arousal. Since comedy presents the worse character types while tragedy presents more socially upstanding characters, he is especially interested in the capacity of tragic action to culminate in a physiological catharsis for audience members during the theatrical performance. Aristotle writes: “tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness—and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action” ([1], p. 39). The emphasis is on how spectator emotions are selectively created in theatre.

Serious drama arouses pity and fear for the dilemmas facing a character, eliciting a strong response about his or her fate mired in circumstances that are familiar to an audience but separate from their own. Pity is for another, while fear is for oneself in this process of communication and engagement that involves cognitive as well as physiological responses ([6], pp. 18–19). Aristotle recognises that fear and pity can also be aroused by a spectacle ([1], p. 49), and that only some dramatic action has the desired effect because shocked spectators do not feel pity or fear. In this framework, the 20th-century artistic intention to shock may have inadvertent emotional consequences and forestall sympathetic responses for a character. Yet there is no guarantee that audience reception will align with artistic intention in theatrical performance; comic drama might not amuse.

While nonverbal emotional expression underlies communication, it is words capturing a strongly felt response such as love or embarrassment that bridge the gap between individual experience and interpersonal exchange. Therefore, emotion can be analysed, reasoned and interpreted in

its shared expressive forms and in relation to mental images, although a single emotion remains difficult to separate out. Sometimes emotions are presented within co-existent sets, such as “distress-anguish” or “fear-terror” [7]. At the beginning of the 21st century, disciplinary knowledge about emotion can be theatrical, philosophical and psychological, and, more recently, biological, anthropological and sociological [8,9], as well as political [10,11]. Some of the arguments across disciplinary studies of emotion might be concerned with how cultural conditioning intersects with innate capacity, or how the sequential order of external and internal stimuli, feeling and expression develops [12]. The philosophical distinction between emotional feeling and emotion remains, even in neuroscience [13,14]. Problems confronting analysis include the discrepancy between the experience of an emotional feeling and its descriptor, and how indicators of individual difference undermine claims for common experience.

For the communication of a multifaceted emotion like love or hate in performance, performers might use words, as they grapple with how to make it bodily and vocally recognisable through facial and tonal expression, and it is this multidimensional capacity that sets performance apart. Further, the performer needs to display the required emotion regardless of his or her bodily feeling [3]. Thus, theatre has always raised an intriguing question as to what happens in society when feelings are being masked as they are in performance.

Emotional expression might be omnipresent in interpersonal and social engagement, but it is coexistent with social belief. There are significant social consequences when individuals are emotionally motivated in ways that contradict prevalent assumptions and norms; in extreme circumstances, this leads to attacks on others. It is argued that emotion is central to belief [5]. Spoken and/or embodied emotion might be orientated to an intention and interpretive meaning, but it remains reliant on confession, context and common values in communication.

The contention that quantifiable emotions cannot easily be separated from embodied spaces might underlie articles in this volume, as they show how emotions exist within cultural communication and can be thought, analysed and demonstrated socially. But how bodily feelings or affect come into existence and within social exchange remains contested, and a source of ongoing fascination for scholars in all fields.

3. Feeling

I often puzzle over how a creative writer manages to convey an emotional tone or mood through words on the page, stimulating an affective response. It is an even more intriguing accomplishment when a theorist can capture a range of comparable sensibilities without writing in the first person or in poetic refrain [15]. The subjective responses of the theorist seem to transfer into the written theory in ways that can be evoked in a reader. Is affect theory particularly suited to writing and reading as a mode of communication?

Emotional feeling and affect are further distinguished within recent humanities and creative arts scholarship to expand concepts and encompass affect in the surroundings [16]. While theories of performative identity reveal recent conceptual shifts in affect [15], the development of affect theory has become connected to new materialist thinking and innovative philosophical approaches to experience [16]. The term “affect” itself merits analysis and in relation to other terminology, as happens in this volume. Discourse on affect, however, largely remains theoretical and it developed in relation to ontological ideas of a becoming self. Attention is given to intensity in affect theory rather than specified feeling, and the presence of affect carries implicit associations and as a powerful force. An affective response can traverse and surround bodies in what might be deemed impersonal affect; this is informed by scientific knowledge.

Yet affect remains important to ideas of an embodied self. Bodily responses seem to fluctuate in and out of self-awareness, and since neuroscientific study confirms that some condition of feeling is ever present whether or not it is consciously recognised [13,14]. Further, bodily affect also has

real-world applications and therapeutic significance. For example, transgender identity seeks to reconcile the body's affective dissonance.

While affective responses within art need to be framed as separate to that of lived experience, they can nonetheless assist social understanding. Felt responses are assumed to be vital for the function of art and performance [17,18]. Yet reception theory points out that a reader or a spectator brings his or her accumulated experience—including that of compounded bodily experience including feeling—to the watching of cinema, or the viewing of art, or the reading of literature. Therefore felt responses vary greatly. Discussion about a whole audience reaction or broad spectrum of readers can be theorised rather than substantiated—conversely, an expectation of a singular response such as sympathy or empathy might simplify complex contradictory responses. Affect theory confronts the conceptual problem that besets theatre reception theory, whereby a claim made for the affect of one is not necessarily applicable to all. Allowing for the philosophical proposition that the subjective experience of another (or others) is unknowable, writing or speaking about affect or feeling in the first person often typifies responses to this problem. Although the analysis of emotion and theories of affect are both utilised in the study of cinematic performance [19], the speculative dimension to spectator affect in theatrical performance is greater because it does not have fixed imagery. Yet such instability in the interpretation of affect might be more applicable to the processes of lived experience.

When I first studied performed emotion, I found that the mercurial dimension evident in emotional feeling also applied to specific emotions, because even an idea of love or anger was challenging to quantify. Such emotions can be described and communicated through textual examples, but this invariably reduces and objectifies the accompanying feeling experience. The problems of language are recognised by those studying emotional feeling across a range of disciplines. I remain intrigued by the complex effects achieved with performed emotions that convey what seem to be feelings and moods through display, and knowing that performers must manifest intangible qualities on cue that are not necessarily felt. However, this may or may not always convince. Sometimes I find myself asking whether the performer is delivering the emotion at his or her own instigation, or from the written text, or at the request of the director. Sometimes I ask: was I simply responding to the music? Further, an actor might learn by watching other actors rather than imitating social expression. I end up asking: whose emotions or feelings are being played? In this way, theatrical performance reveals multiple layers of feeling that might also happen simultaneously in other human interactions.

I became particularly interested in how the subjective awareness of emotional feeling was culturally represented through drama and the other arts—how a character or persona describes a phenomenology of feeling and bodily awareness. Descriptions of feelings in fictional settings may well shape social interactions, and performance often sets a precedent for how to talk about emotional feelings.

Brecht argues for performance that dispenses with life-like acting because it encourages unthinking immersion by spectators in emotional feelings rather than critical evaluation. While this is often interpreted as an either/or response to emotion in theatre, ironically his epic theatre may deliver emotional expression that is less ambiguous. Emotion is logical and thought in Brechtian theatre and its styles of acting ([20], p. 623). Brecht was analysing the social function of intense affect to overwhelm, even to immobilise, and therefore like Aristotle, Brecht advocated the careful and selective use of emotional feeling in art. By implication, affect can be politically managed and therefore manipulated and these risks need to be recognised.

Accordingly, what is asked of affect theory is how it illuminates the embodied processes and reactions of experience. While concepts of affect sit easily within the realm of what might be imagined, a cognitive interpretation of effect and meaning can be convincing, and ideally in an explanation of affective exchange. Inquiry into feeling remains intriguingly profound in the effort to outline if and how affect happens.

4. The Volume

While articles in this volume discuss either emotion or affect, interestingly, two broad thematic groupings encompass both. It might be expected that this volume would attract articles on emotion and affect in *all types of performance, which make up the first thematic grouping*, but the breadth of the research in these articles is an unexpected and exciting development. In approaching live performance through affect studies, Ana Pais explores how affect might be considered to circulate in performance and how an audience can “re-affect” its spaces. Based on research interviews with 50 performers in the USA, Brazil and Portugal, Pais analyses language about experiences of performance for expression, sensation and imagery. She describes a “specific kind of knowledge” about affect that is used widely by performers about audience engagement and an “affective emancipatory” effect. Pais draws on Teresa Brennan’s argument that the transmission of affect is felt through the senses, and elaborates that this is captured in language describing the senses, rhythm, repetition and bodily expression.

How might the institution of theatre itself encompass emotion? Julian Meyrick applies Alain Badiou’s thinking and includes emotion in his analysis of how theatre connects to its city location, with a case study of an important regional theatre: Studio Arena Theatre, in Buffalo in the USA. As he traces two parallel 20th-century histories of rise and decline, Meyrick describes how the city–theatre can be interpreted through decisions, agency and emotions. If the Buffalo theatre company’s prolonged existence was reliant on the conviction of its supporters and makers in their adherence to a type of “thought” event, the theatre’s demise was hastened by its emotional tensions. For example, artistic programming that required the inclusion of productions that challenged audiences as well as those for entertainment eventually led to large deficits.

Emotionally diverse theatrical genres, acted emotion, and personal emotional experience converge within Anne Pender’s biographical account of Tony Sheldon’s long career in theatre. The article reveals the difficult issues that arise for actors when personal emotional experience cuts across the emotional interpretation required for professional roles. As one of Australia’s most accomplished actors and well known internationally, Sheldon’s working life spans the full range of genres from Shakespearean drama to comic music theatre. Actor parents facilitated experience as a child actor, but on-the-job training later created personal difficulties for the young adult actor trying to interpret emotions and instructions about them.

Denise Varney’s article explores circular influences between seminal modernist visual art and theatre and the implications for identifying sources of artistic inspiration. In a careful analysis of the play *The Ham Funeral*, by the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Patrick White, Varney connects its narrative to the experience of White’s friend, the painter William Dobell, a winner of the Archibald Prize. Geographical sociopolitical circumstances and gendered identities manifest through events that Dobell observed and which both artists then turned into emotionally poetic, significant art works. In this instance, personal friendship coincides with professional artistic practice, but the emotions criss-crossing between both spheres become additionally entangled within White’s dramatic world.

A film about sentiment and sensation provides a framing example for Magdalena Zolkos’s exploration of affect theory in relation to ideas of the subject. This consideration of the concept of affect—after Brennan—investigates how sentiment and historical medical discourse also challenged foundational ideas of the individual Western subject. As happens with ideas of affect in modernity, sentiment undermined the expectation of self-contained subjectivity historically. Zolkos argues that theories of sentiment and affect both suggest a porous self. The point of importance is that they assume an embodied subject, and whereas sentiment theory reached out from individual sensory experience, affect theory argues for the existence of affect outside the singular body.

Concepts of *cultural or public mourning emerge as the second strong thematic grouping* in three articles in this volume, although approached from completely different perspectives. In her exploration of the multiple uses of remediated surveillance CCTV technologies and their scopic function, Nicola Falkenhayner finds that images become memory cues for multiple narratives which intersect to create a conflicting field of social memory. Footage of Princess Di’s hours prior to her death are released by

the 2007 inquest and are repeatedly used in the 2011 quasi-documentary *Unlawful Killing*, to suggest supposedly missing footage. Imagery might not of itself narrativise, and it does not show what someone might emotionally want to remember, yet it prompts interpretations and personal responses that continue to frame this significant death within public mourning.

In his complex analysis of emotions in three mediated performances, Ian Maxwell draws on Heidegger's philosophical exploration of being-in-the-world to explore how emotion is revealed as both a consequence of, but also indicative of, the effort to avoid recognition of a fundamental void within experience. If the moods that someone experiences generate the self, they also potentially expose an underlying nothingness with, for example, the shock of death and loss. Responses through actions that can be shared and with emotionally significant objects mean that the subject seems to retain a sense of self while suggesting how the being-self is layered into existence. Maxwell's fascinating examples include the children's film *Inside Out*, and media showing public mourning over the death of the Australian cricketer, Phillip Hughes.

Hadeel Abdelhammed's analysis of two plays produced in Iraqi theatre in 1987 and in the 2010s contrasts the social effects of civilian life during two different periods of war. Her analysis innovatively considers the depiction of personal mourning and emotional suffering, including the constant waiting during wartime, and most significantly by female characters in these two plays written in Arabic: *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* (1987) by Farouk Mohammed and *A Feminine Solo* (2013) by Mithal Ghazi. As well as these noteworthy gender-specific perspectives, Abdelhammed's analysis reveals how one play is itself a casualty of war, with the lost script reconstructed from remembered fragments so that it becomes indicative of mourning for the loss of culture.

These eight articles show how the study of emotion and affect can enhance understanding of the self and social beliefs and behaviour. They expand the possibilities of scholarship in the humanities and creative arts. The emphasis on emotion and affect in these fields of knowledge remains provocative.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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