

# Ready for Action

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The scene is a familiar one. We're on a plane, getting ready to land. Tray table up. Seat back upright. The entire cabin is silent. Live images of moving clouds fill the video monitors (thanks to a camera mounted on the nose-cone), affording us the spectacle of the very sky through which we speed. We are inside the plane's own movie. Spellbound.

The passenger across the aisle, however, has diverged from this subtle synchronization. He has become increasingly agitated. Nervous energy surges through his body. He jostles in his seat, rustling with anxiety, his gaze darting back and forth across the cabin. He has become a disconnected bundle of rapid, uncoordinated movements, as if suddenly plunged into a free fall. Waves of tension ripple outward from him, electrifying the space around him like a brewing storm.

A tiny red call-light flickers above the man's head. His body stiffens and his face swells as if he were a volcano about to erupt. As the landing gear begins to rumble into place, he begins to emit a low, guttural roar, which seems to rise up from the very depths of his being. The roar vibrates in unison with the mechanical rumble of the landing gear. It resounds throughout the cabin, a strange hybrid of human and machinic discharge. One ascending from the belly, the other descending from the hull. As the wheels lock securely into place, the man unhinges. His guttural emission, having rapidly increased in volume and pitch, phase-shifts into a wild screech that cuts through the cabin like a knife.

In such situations – when a fellow traveler becomes drastically unmoored, his only recourse a primal screech – one cannot be “caught” looking. Decorum requires a furtive, sidelong glance. Stealing a quick succession of such looks, I notice that the man's hands are clenching the armrest with an iron grip. His head is thrown back; his eyes are closed; and his mouth is opened in a wild grimace. Is it fear or delicious exhilaration? A roller coaster ride or a dance with death?

The atmosphere of the cabin has now radically changed. Passengers shift nervously in their seats. Yet, strapped into our seats, subject to the regulatory agency of air travel and of the social contract, there are only three acceptable positions. Our heads turned sideways, we look out the window. Our heads aimed straight ahead, we look at

the monitors. Our heads lowered, we avert our eyes – unsure of how to deal politely with the outburst. We are caught in some kind of elaborate choreography that traverses body, machine, and social environment, shaped by a regulatory domain whose materialization is the plane.

In one sense, it's a choreography of power. There is a machinery and an institution that makes us adequate to see; that shapes the legitimacy of our perspective; and that positions us as subjects. And yet there are the ways in which we SQUIRM within these machineries, maneuvering in their substrata. Thousands of stimuli impinge upon us, embroiling us in a larger sensory network that spans the entire room. Our bodies negotiate this, but we're not aware of it. We might sense it as "mood." Potential actions brew inside us, to be expressed outwardly or infolded inwardly. Our interior states push at the boundaries of visibility. They may erupt at any moment. Someone could sigh. Someone could shout in frustration. Someone could gesture abruptly. Someone could leave the room. Like the volcanic, erupting man, someone could "blow their top."

The technology and the rules of air travel do not simply enclose, contain, and determine. Rather, they network particular objects and machines with the sensorial and physical capacities of the passengers. [1] They set forth a particular compositional dynamic, interweaving programs, people, and tendencies. Objects tend to do things; people do too. Objects tend to afford certain behaviors; people tend to gather in clusters and, through their behaviors, transform the vibe of rooms. Unpack the abbreviative term "airplane" and you have things-in-arrangement, programmatic impulses, and tendencies to action. You have the play of language, gesture, and sensation. Resonances are transmitted across bodies and environments. One becomes disposed for action in particular ways. The body wiggles within the ordering forces that maintain its coherency. At any moment, there is the potential of the eruption.

If power is the site of the REPRESSIVE, then this is the site of the EXCESSIVE.

SPEECH, and the SCREECH.

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Let us now probe more deeply into the phenomenon of the screeching man, who, having blown his top, transforms the vibe of rooms. And we must admit that we can identify with him, having become momentarily unhinged ourselves, or at the very least, having once surrendered to an intensity that left us speechless. A roller coaster ride; a sudden wave of erotic desire; a cheap thrill; a giddy romp. As critics, we are not likely to incorporate such moments – trafficking, as we tend to do, on streets marked with signs. But for the purposes of this travelogue, let us now consider that by privileging the semiotic we have omitted a vital mode of apprehension. Rather than reductive form, or signification, this mode is about excessive transmission. Containers and categories are deprivileged, revealed as shorthand. Transmutations reign.

The Brazilian theorist Suely Rolnik situates the distinction as follows. We have two different ways of apprehending the material world: either as PATTERN OF FORM or FIELD OF FORCE. The first involves PERCEPTION. It is the world of FORMAL presence – the world that we negotiate through REPRESENTATION. The second involves SENSATION. It is the world of LIVING presence – the world that we negotiate through TRANSMISSION. [2]

The PERCEIVING BODY, and the RESONATING BODY.

Identifiable speech: sounds forming patterns, distinct ideas and forms – as they are relayed through voice and a shared matrix of language. Vibratory screech: resonating transmission – modulation, rhythm, expression, attitude, and disposition. What is equally (if not more) important to my MESSAGE is your unconscious RESONANCE with the experience of its delivery. Just as meanings are communicated between people, sensations are transmitted among them too – as well as between people and their environments. Every social environment has its vibe. This vibe is composed of the affective resonances of everyone present, yet it spills over to include the space itself. The eruptive, screeching person exceeds his own bounds and transforms the vibe of rooms. The affective resonance is transmitted to others, moving across and between bodies, generating a sense of coincidence between subjects and objects. As when, captivated by a familiar mix, we have to move to the beat. If the energy is right, one might burst into a full-on dance move: arms aflail, hips abounce.

To feel the beat is to infuse the atmosphere with cadence; to emit and inhabit rhythmic codes with the entire body sensorium. As Jeremy Gilbert points out, music has physical effects that can be identified, described and discussed – but this not necessarily the same thing as it having “meanings.” What we derive from music has less to do with the communication of meaning, and more to do with how music MOVES us. [3]

Constantly transmitted to others, these affective resonances can accumulate into something like a collective good will (hot dance floor scene) or an excruciating anxiousness (volcanic man-out-of-bounds on airplane). Since they can be transmitted, they are a powerful social force. They can transform, traverse form, and overcome thought in a sweep of delicious delirium. They can be more forceful than ideas. They can be replicated to a certain extent, applied as a FORMULA. This is what advertising does. The tried-and-true mechanisms of “rallying the crowd” in political speech. Dale Carnegie’s enduring rules of effective salesmanship. DJ-ing. Religious ritual. Drill.

A formula is a set of forces and delineations that has crossed a certain threshold of organization such that it can now program and produce form. It is capacity-to-structure, understood through its enactions. It is not necessarily imposed but can be generated collectively and polyrhythmically, emerging from the interactions of various forces and practices. It is an organized state that is stable enough to be replicated (a certain dance move that propagates across a dance community) or applied as a template (a marketing strategy). Its source can simply be a critical mass of affective transmissions that begin, over time, to bond a community and set the stage for a shared practice, intensifying the accumulation of knowledge, technology, and materials.

The formula exists in time: it provides an infrastructure through which things move, through which things beat rhythmically. It is not a mechanism of control since it can always be disrupted and transformed. Yet it has effects: it shapes action-tendencies. It carries with it compositional imperatives both material and rhythmic. It sets forth formal dynamics, interweaving programs, actors, parts, and tendencies. It is a formalizing machine that works through the shaping of potential.

The affective FORMULA that traverses form, transforms: should this not be the OBJECT of cultural analysis?

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The resonating body + formula = the readying body.

There is a political dimension to be explored. Let us now look specifically at this readied body – the body primed for action. The concept of READINESS builds on those concepts that have circulated in this essay – field of force; sensation; affective transmission; resonance – while differing from them in its emphasis on formula and therefore politics.

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“Readiness” fits within much of the recent discourses around the phenomenon of affect. Studies of affect have provided a rich realm of exchange between cultural studies, philosophy, and science studies (for example in the work of Brian Massumi); reinvigorated phenomenological approaches to new media (Mark B. N. Hansen); and offered long-neglected ways of theorizing the dynamics of cities (Nigel Thrift). In many ways, when we speak of readiness we are already talking about affect. However affect is an ambiguous term that has multiple meanings. For some, it veers close to emotions and feelings. Yet affect – at least in the way that I want to understand it here – is not so easily positioned as such. Far from an identifiable emotion, it is rather a pure potentiality: an undifferentiated, moving kaleidoscope of sensations and states. It is a contradictory dimension in which anxieties and pleasures cohabit, before they can be categorized as such.

Readiness is simply a particular contextualization of affect: a way to cut through the ambiguity of the term’s meaning and situate it squarely within a political landscape. The political arena I want to emphasize is the escalating, increasingly competitive world of consumer-security culture – a world of shrinking time and space intervals, where there is seemingly less and less time to act. A world of multiple, perpetual crises served up as dizzying arrays of product choices, across which the desiring and protective eye grazes, no longer able to act in any one arena since it is already “too late”: the next crisis, always imminent, demands full vigilance. A world in which genuine action becomes “unproductive” and a form of perpetual proto-action takes its place. I am interested in the ways that, within this landscape, a “state of readiness” has become an economic, political, and military ideal.

It has been said that today, in a multitasking world, attention has become promiscuous: we do not focus our awareness so much as engage in “continuous partial attention.” Readiness might be understood as the embodied analogue to this: continuous-partial-action. Yet readiness never results in an identifiable act. It exists somewhere between an internal bodily state and a conscious opening out onto the world. That is, it is located somewhere between affect and attention: between ambiguous bodily stimulation and focused alertness. It is a form of attention that is not available to the conscious mind, but is shared nonetheless by the synesthetic perceptual faculties of the body substrate, such as what we might understand as the register of the proprioceptive or the visceral. In other words it is something that wells up inside you and is somehow “known” by your body, but which is not yet is unavailable to your conscious thought.

In this sense readiness has no stable object. It is a continual state of heightened alertness at the level of resonance, not form. It is field of force, not formal pattern. ANY NUMBER OF FORMS WILL DO, AS LONG AS THE FORMULA IS IN PLACE. Think of how it is in cinema: in the melodrama or the Hollywood action-adventure movie, it doesn’t really matter who the characters are, or where it takes place, as long

as the formula holds. Even tragedy itself could be understood as a formula. Likewise warfare: today's enemy is tomorrow's friend. The objects are interchangeable.

Readiness, then, is a continuous, heightened state of alertness and preparedness that has no stable object or output. For, again, it never results in identifiable acts. It is incipient action, extinguished as soon as it is expressed. It is the body's way of preparing itself for expression, a lived interior state that pushes at the boundaries of activity. In the state of readiness, one is truly ready for anything – be it danger or desire. For at the affective level of readiness, pleasure and fear work in conjunction (as they do in the genre of tragedy), an interlocking mechanism of stimulation that is contradictory only at the level of language. In this sense readiness is the arena where combat and shopping can work in tandem: they both arouse the body, an arousal whose source or content is indistinguishable at this level. The body is rendered susceptible to formula, disposed to think and act in certain ways.

Readiness shapes tendency, structures disposition. Again, it is always en route, always emerging. Yet it is not only internal: it works laterally across bodies and environments. As provisional as they might be, its objects are group constructions, hybrid compositions: identifiable within the formula, yet interchangeable.

We might say that readiness is the lived, embodied dimension of vigilance. In his study of modern psychology L. S. Hearnshaw suggests that the term vigilance was adopted by the Cambridge psychologist Mackworth in his wartime studies of visual and auditory monitoring, and defined by him as “a state of readiness to detect and respond to certain specified small changes occurring at random time intervals in the environment.” [4] Following Friedrich Kittler, we could situate a term like vigilance firmly on its media-technological base: perhaps at the advent of real-time tracking (specifically, radar), which could only be as good as the operators who were primed to detect deviation in its patterns. Jonathan Crary would likewise originate issues of vigilance in the continuous scanning of radar screens by human operators during World War II, and thus to the efficient use of new real-time technology. [5] Vigilance, for our purposes here, is real-time attentivity: attention on a heightened state of alert in response to the demands of instantaneous detection technology. Its civilian analogue is the just-in-time consumer-trader, ever-alert at the computer monitor, finger poised to click. The consumer-trader that no longer “sees” in the traditional sense so much as calculates potentials. The trader-gamer armed with a joystick, one foot in the future.

Pattern of form and Field of force. Language and Readiness. Both are always in play. While the perceiving body READS, the resonating body READIES.

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We have a critical vocabulary to understand the power of media in terms of its ideological effects. Yet we lack a vocabulary to understand the power of media otherwise: that is, in terms of its ability to transmit affects. During at least the last forty years, criticism has focused on the social and cultural construction of knowledge. It has directed attention toward the conditions that make meaning possible. It has been useful for debunking beliefs, powers, illusions, essentialist truths. But for the reasons pointed out here, it only gives us half the picture: the world of form, rather than that of force. Language, rather than readiness. Speech, but not the screech.

How, then, can we expand the language of cultural analysis in order to account for this affective dimension of readiness? And, further, how can we use this orientation to

generate a reinvigorated, performative politics? Might we speak of an “affective critique”? Or is the term “critique” no longer useful at all?

Walter Benjamin made a call, many years ago, that criticism, like advertising, should affect the reader with intensive, visceral projections that circumvent any form of contemplation. An intensity that, something like a “burst of energy,” affects the very life of the subject.

Has this not become precisely the aim of contemporary power?

(Are we then to play the same game?)

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Technologies of bioanalysis are probing deeply into this intimate, affective space of readiness. Here is one thing that they have revealed: a particular action is already set in motion by the body about 0.8 seconds before we consciously experience performing it. The body readies itself for action BEFORE it has a conscious experience of the action. According to Nigel Thrift, we can expand the timespace of embodiment accordingly, then, such that it incorporates a “constantly moving preconscious frontier.” [6] In other words, what we experience as the immediate presentness of the body is, in a sense, already past. To incorporate the preconscious frontier in our understanding of embodiment is to widen the durational expanse of the present moment, revealing the ways that the body inhabits this space, now understood in political terms. It is to open up a political space between action and thought. An operational gap between affect and contemplation.

Francisco Varela suggests that what we understand as the “now” of the present is a duration lasting 0.3 seconds. Contrary to the informational computational model of the brain – this “now” is not a steady string of temporal quanta, like a ticking clock. Rather, it is a “HORIZON OF INTEGRATION.” It is an internally-generated flow based on layers of dynamical self-organizing neuronal assemblies. In other words the “now” is dynamically dependent on a number of dispersed internal assemblies and not on a fixed integration period. [7] For Varela, affect PRECEDES temporality and “sculpts” the dynamics of time flow. For Mark Hansen, affect provides the bond between temporal flow and perceptual event. [8]

We are speaking, then, less about the structuring of action than about the shaping of tendencies. A field of resonance shaped by formula. Perhaps this suggests that technologies of control are not really about acts but about potentials: an implosion of real-time such that all that remains is an anticipatory orientation. Statistical inclinations. Pre-emption.

In a competitive world where there is less and less time to act, or where action plays out in fractions of seconds, the focus moves away from exterior movements and instead toward DISPOSITIONS TO ACT that accumulate just at the horizon of the visible. A technological expansion of the now in order to generate a “pre-objective present.” A pre-objective present that comprises the very ground for experience as such. [9]

Affect is bound up with the formation of subjectivity. What we might call self-affection – the affective experience of one’s self, one’s vitality – is part of a process of subjectivization. So we are talking, fundamentally, of SELF-READINESS as a SUBJECT-CONSTITUTING EXPERIENCE.

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In such a landscape, we can certainly say that power has become affective. (Has it not always been so?)

What possibilities exist, then, for political action? For Brian Massumi, political action has to learn to function itself on the same level as affective power: it has to meet affective modulation with affective modulation. [10] Yet does it not also need to reveal the terms of this modulation – in other words, the structuring of the affective formula?

An affective, performative politics is certainly of the order, yet is this not the aim of political violence? For Massumi, the crucial question is whether there are ways of practicing an affective politics that doesn't rely on violence and the hardening of divisions along identity lines that it usually brings. Such an expressive or performative politics would require, following Brian Holmes' reading of Suely Rolnik, an understanding of political resistance not only in terms of sterile confrontation with an objectified other, but in terms of a transformational dynamic of reknitting and even REINVENTING the relation with the other. [11]

Perhaps, too, the affective FORMULA that traverses form, transforms, should not only become the object of cultural analysis, but also that of performative and aesthetic practice? The affective formula that carries with it formal imperatives both material and rhythmic, interweaving programs, actors, parts, and tendencies. The affective formula that is geared to encounter other formulas and transform them from within.

In any case, we are talking about a political practice that is not "oppositional" but compositional.

## Notes

1) This statement borrows from Matthew Fuller in his important book *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (The MIT Press, 2005), p. 71. I am indebted to Fuller for many of the insights in this paragraph as well as elsewhere in this essay.

2) See Brian Holmes, "Emancipation," *nettime* mailing list, 5 July 2004. <http://www.nettime.org>, and Suely Rolnik, "The Twilight of the Victim: Creation Quits Its Pimp, To Rejoin Resistance," available at <http://ut.yt.t0.or.at/site/index.html>. A collection of Holmes's and Rolnik's writings are available on this site.

3) Jeremy Gilbert, "Signifying Nothing: 'Culture', 'Discourse', and the Sociality of Affect," *Culture Machine* 6 (2004), <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j006/articles/gilbert.htm>.

4) L. S. Hearnshaw, *The Shaping of Modern Psychology* (Routledge, 1987), pp. 206-209, as cited in Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (The MIT Press, 1999), p. 34.

5) Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (The MIT Press, 1999), p. 34.

6) 30. Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annaler* 86 B (2004), available at <http://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/~kstrauss/thrift/downloads/Thrift.pdf>. I am indebted to Thrift for many insights around affect and affective politics.

7) Francisco Varela, "The Specious Present: A Neurophenomenology of Time Consciousness," in J. Petitot, F. J. Varela, B. Pachoud, and J-M. Roy, eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 276-277; 301. As cited in Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (The MIT Press, 2004), p. xxv. I am borrowing from Hansen's phrasing of Varela's insights.

8) Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (The MIT Press, 2004), p. xxv.

9) Mark B. N. Hansen, "The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004), pp. 589.

10) See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Duke University Press, 2002).

11) See Brian Holmes, "Emancipation," *nettime* mailing list, 5 July 2004. <http://www.nettime.org>, and Suely Rolnik, "The Twilight of the Victim: Creation Quits Its Pimp, To Rejoin Resistance," available at <http://ut.yt.t0.or.at/site/index.html>.