Research Article

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Beyond Emotion: Empathy, Social Contagion and Cultural Literacy

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0061
Received April 28, 2018; accepted November 7, 2018

Abstract: This paper reviews the implications for research in cultural literacy of the current hypothesis that revolutionary advances in communication technology are inseparable from an over-reliance on emotion, both in the representation of global disaster and human suffering and as a means of manipulating public behaviour in the political and commercial spheres. It explores the view that feeling has become a simulacrum or form of "hyperreality" whose "contagion" through targeted exploitation is an obstacle to deeper understanding of social processes. It summarises the challenges which this presents for research into the nature of cultural literacy by critically considering three current paradigms: affect theory, clinical psychology including neuroscience, and memetics with due regard for recent attempts to model social behaviour through computer-based simulation. Its conclusions are that historical comparisons between past and present of the processes whereby cultural artefacts mediate emotion, combined with highly contextualised empirical fieldwork into their contemporary impact, should be key foci of critical research into cultural literacy, using the full range of technological instruments available.

Keywords: culture, affect, emotion, empathy, memetics, literacy

> It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. ... Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who [can] do something about it.
>
> (Sontag 37-8)

The above quotation is from Susan Sontag's excoriating analysis of war imagery *Regarding the Pain of Others*, published in 2003. In a comprehensive series of chapters including a comparison between photography and painterly art, Sontag considers the ethics which underpin the visual representation of soldiers and civilians in conditions of extreme suffering, torture and death. She examines the authenticity of such images and their impact, as well as the special responsibility which their reception imposes on the culturally literate viewer. By implication, at times explicitly (97), her observations are placed within a wider, now habitual, frame: the capacity of visual imagery to excite emotion to the detriment of a wider understanding of factual truth. According to Sontag, the frequent absence of information on context and setting increases the potential for images of suffering to be exploited as political, cultural and economic instruments. By extension, her analysis raises questions concerning the relationship between affect, emotion, understanding and culture with reference to the major upheavals of the present moment, most notably migration, political disillusionment, social division, fake news and the scale of human misfortune in so many parts of today's world.

Sontag's interrogation of viewers' responses to graphic representation prefigures the recent upsurge of interest in emotional identification generated by the dramatic impact of technology on all aspects of

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modern life, public and private. Such concerns have become the stock in trade of reports in the media. See for example the noise surrounding the most recent books by Kwame Appiah, William Davies and Francis Fukuyama (Adams 8-11, Davies 8-11, Ignatieff 8) in which it is claimed that the speed of information flow and the difficulty of separating fact from unverifiable comment have exacerbated populism and the impact on democracy of identity politics.

The current rate of change presents students of culture with historically unique problems concerning not only the objects of their research but also the methodologies which can most effectively aid the understanding of social behaviour. The paradoxical consequences of overemphasising emotion in modern communication has been acknowledged and comprehensively analysed by journalists, modern-day social philosophers and leading figures in the development of what has become known as "the affective turn" (see Ahmed, Berlant, Massumi). They raise the question of whether an excessive academic focus on emotion risks colluding discursively with the very processes it seeks to resist, a topic which deserves to be further investigated by researchers in cultural literacy, in part by focusing on processes termed by Massumi 101-2 and others, following Deleuze, as "emergence."

"Emergence" is the word used to describe transformative events where potentially lasting changes of attitude are physically as well as cognitively internalised by groups in society. Extreme examples of such occasions might be attendance at inspirational public speeches by political leaders at historical turning points, but the term can also embrace less prominent often iterative collective encounters which trigger processes of "becoming" in everyday life: physical participation in a culturally mixed workshop, community action project or the shared experience of a natural disaster. For such research to be convincing, it needs to draw further and in interdisciplinary combination on the full range of methods available: discursive, performative, neurophysiological, ethnographical, historical while taking account of the special insights into cultural change afforded by artistic practice and the real-life impacts of works of art themselves. The special issue of *Open Cultural Studies*, for example, edited by Toby Miller and Anna Malinowska: "Media and Emotions. The New Frontiers of Affect in Digital Culture," reveals both the game-changing interest and subject orientation of research in the field. I wish to argue like them that cultural literacy research should be on specific local contexts. At the same time, while relying on theoretical principle, there is the scope for this type of approach to be more broadly empirical in its findings and wary of overgeneralisation. Insight into affective processes in and of themselves is not enough.

Many informed observers such as Davies and Fukuyama now agree that the segmented targeting of groups in society by the controllers of corporate communication combined with freedom of access on the part of the public is hampering rather than promoting informed cultural understanding. The same is generally thought to be true of social media. It is asserted by Krotowski for example that the formation of "strong online communities ... encourages [reductive thinking] by filtering out difference" and that "the way we currently navigate the online world may result in social division instead of social cohesion" (62) by promoting oversimplification of complex issues and the falsification of factual data (155-59). Miller and Malinowska, for their part, claim that the semantic liquidity resulting from new technology "connects to the rise of new forms of solidity that uncover new capacities and affordance for our emotional selves" (1).

The two perspectives just outlined co-exist in a state of complementary tension. Semantic mobility may have positive social outcomes in that, in theory at least, it counteracts the embedding of prejudice based on hard boundaries between social categories. At the same time, it fosters discursive fragmentation between groups by promoting sociolinguistic diversity and the potential divisiveness of identity politics, making it easier for interested institutions to mobilise popular opinion against minorities. The most obvious example of this tendency is the deliberate appeal by far-right politicians to the sense of disenfranchisement experienced by less privileged sectors of society at their exclusion from the wealth and political influence enjoyed by a supposedly indifferent minority. It is also a growing feature of commercial practices whose political analogue is the rogue on-line interference in democratic processes which chime with the baser instincts of the electorate. At least three self-reinforcing factors are at work: collective states of mind dominated by the need for recognition and material security, the excitement at being able to parade individual feelings in front of a global audience, and a system dependent on market-driven economic growth which prioritises

engineered aspiration, corporate self-interest and political short-termism over social justice.

The primary levers in the phenomenon of mediatised manipulation are empathy and fear: empathy with the suffering of the victims of war, displacement, poverty and starvation, fear fuelled by the perceived threat of immigrant populations to employment and national ways of life combined with the menace of terrorism. At the same time, in economic terms, there is growing evidence of advanced marketing programmes in which neo-evolutionary theories of emotional identification linked to psychographic data are deliberately exploited in design and promotional strategy (Bhazin). While there is nothing new about this, modern technology has enabled appeals to collective emotions to be directed with ever greater precision and impact, to the detriment of informed insight.

Not surprisingly, advances in technological power have intensified the efforts by professional commentators to bear witness to their effects and to assess their influence on social behaviour. This is taking place at a time when it has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Russian inspired hackers intervened directly in the US presidential campaign of 2016, decisively influencing its outcome (Shane 1); further, that they and other interested parties deliberately use social media to sow political discord (McCarthy). Academics such as Paul Marsden, Tania Singer and Daniel Batson, to name but three, point to the failure of social science to account for what Marsden refers to as "social contagion," the wave of sentiment which inexplicably overwhelms a community, whether at the local, national or even global levels. Obvious examples include the outpouring of collective grief in England following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in September 1997 (see Marsden "Crash Contagion"), still being milked by the British press twenty years later, or by the global outcry at the image of a small boy (Aylan Kurdi) lying on a Turkish beach, having tragically drowned in an attempt to reach the West in an open boat.

As Marsden put it, the theoretical shortcoming of sociological research in this contentious field "is probably due to a fundamental incompatibility between the concept of social contagion and the Cartesian voluntarism implicit in much social science" ("Memetics and Social Contagion: Two Sides of the Same Coin" 1). The implication of Marsden's argument was that in a systems-led, media-dominated, open-access environment, processes of collective conditioning should be regarded as axiomatic so that the greater complexity of cultural influences, including their emotional consequences, could be theorised more effectively.

If only it was as simple as that. Since the rigorous theoretical analysis by contemporary thinkers such as Sara Ahmed of the social impact of media discourse on collective emotions, it seems that despite the paradigmatic shift enabled by the application of computer technology to linguistic data, imaging and patterns of social behaviour, ethically motivated sociological research methodology is still struggling to keep pace with the impact of technological change. Social simulation modelling, for example, has failed satisfactorily to anticipate human beings' emotional responses to the introduction of new managerial systems or to predict the impact of events such the collapse of share prices or the global outcry against sexual predation. Apart from its being used primarily as a tool in product development and market research, the limitations of simulation modelling are also due to the complex concentration of diverse factors involved in any one instance of contagion, not least because of the specificity of contexts in which events occur (Jager para. 5.10).

Be that as it may, it is almost certainly the growing concern at technology's potential threat to personal autonomy combined with the destabilising effects of geopolitical totalitarianism which has caused the links between emotion, empathy, reason, states of knowledge, altruism, commercial interest and social behaviour to have been scrutinised more closely. Three major research paradigms can be said to have constituted reference points for this field of enquiry: affect theory, clinical psychology and socio-biology, the last provoking a polemical rejection from the advocates of simulation modelling based on algorithms (Edmonds).

The first of the above paradigms, affect theory, relies heavily on a sentient view of the world whose properties are, by definition, extremely difficult to gauge objectively insofar as they are occluded by culturally conditioned modes of behaviour which function as "frames" in the sense defined by Goffman 561-576: greetings, rites of passage, politeness and so on. Such standardised modes of behaviour have since been absorbed into the field of pragmatics: the scientific study of the conventions governing language use

in particular situations, an approach in which emotion has been subordinated to the objective analysis of socially determined structures. It has been one of the most notable achievements of affect theory that the philosophical re-examination of the relationships between physical sense impression and cognition, individual subjectivity and collective psychology have led to a fuller understanding of the impact of emotion on social behaviour and of the dangers arising from its vulnerability to the power of external forces.

The recent debate surrounding the meaning of the terms "affect" and "emotion," even if unresolved, has helped to highlight the distinction between an unnamed bodily response on the part of a subject to a given "event" and the linguistic signifiers which attach to it. By definition, as Ahmed 12 so pertinently points out, such signifiers have cultural currency as catalysts which generate exclusive categories within society. When they spike through repetition or become concentrated in clusters in popular media discourse: "the will of the people," "taking back control of our borders" etc., they invite shared emotional reactions on the part of groups which help to define the group's identity. The cases just cited reinforce solidarity amongst supporters of the United Kingdom's renouncing membership of the EU that the character of "the will" is singular, that the border is somehow "owned" by an indeterminate "us" and serves to exclude an equally indeterminate "them," and that the UK does not currently "control" its borders adequately.

One of the missions of cultural literacy research should be to remind populations, and those in power, including academics, that affective susceptibility is potentially socially destructive it if is not accompanied by knowledge and insight into the processes whereby it can be exploited by others. As Stanley following Spinoza, puts it: "An increased understanding of how affects arise and operate in turn increases our capacity to act upon them so that, in turn, we are less likely to be acted on by them" (106). Affect theory, therefore, gives rise to a paradox. On the one hand, leading proponents such as Brian Massumi 47-82 extol the total affective engagement of mind and body by individuals in a collective enterprise of "becoming" in the shared experience of nodal situations leading to new forms of understanding. On the other, through its own institutionalisation as a discourse, it risks becoming part of the very phenomenon it is seeking to mitigate: the reduction of "affect" to a vicarious commodity which leaves populations vulnerable to forces which channel and constrain the individual's capacity for personal fulfilment and, by extension, the well-being of society at large. Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" warns against precisely this form of collective anomie whilst lauding its imaginative potential for the individual subject. Her application of the term "apostrophe" describes the process whereby "subjects suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible" (Berlant 34). The problem arises when the promise of this imagined potential fails to materialise, mainly because it was artificially manufactured in the first place and then nurtured by opinionated patterns of communication.

An emphasis on emotion in defining a group's identity relies on the existence of others against which the affective distinctiveness of one's own group can be foregrounded. Clearly the quest for self-differentiation can apply as much to academic discourse as to any area of human behaviour and should be valued for its linguistic diversity. The writing styles of such philosophical figureheads as Bakhtin, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and others are striking for their singularity. However, the focus of their individuality is on the complexity of their ideas rather than on emotional appeal. Superordinate moral principles require theoretical abstraction and reasoned argument if their exposition is not itself to be reduced to the level of sentiment: what Ahmed herself in defending lexical mobility against the dangers of over-categorisation refers to ironically as "touchy-feely styles of thought" (Ahmed 207).

While it is untenable for scientific discourse to claim to represent a rhetorically transcendental neutrality, it is correspondingly self-limiting to adopt wholesale the fashionable discourse of the generic subject matter under scrutiny without demonstrating a degree of stylistic distance. The extract below is the opening statement from the influential anthology *The Affect Theory Reader* edited by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, improbably entitled "An Inventory of Shimmers":

> Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (1)

Such discourse, specifically the meaning of expressions such "the duration of passages," "non-human, part body and otherwise," "intensities" and "resonances," not to mention the length and syntax of the final sentence, should not be confused with critical phenomenological analysis based on qualitative data. It does little to explain the readiness of Islamic zealots to blow themselves up in the quest for immortality or cold-bloodedly to murder surgeons striving to save the lives of children in bombed out hospitals, as if, in the wake of the postmodern rejection of transcendental rationality, "shimmering" were the only meaningful theoretical response to complex issues such as migration, war, genocide or the persecution of minorities. In extending the signifier of the body from the corporeality of the subject to a metaphorical evocation of a discursively and economically constructed social constituency, the two entities risk becoming physically as well as symbolically interchangeable. If misapplied, the move deflects the angle of research from an emphasis on social and cultural construction or the in-depth qualitative analysis of personal testimony to one focused on the primacy of the sentient subject.

If taken to such discursive extremes, affect theory risks complementing the processes whereby all-powerful political and media-led forces deliberately appeal to the aspirations of specific interest groups. As already suggested, the exciting experimental work of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi in *Sense-Lab* at The University of Montreal marks a serious attempt to rise above this paradox by simulating processes of "emergence." But even the brilliance of these forms of experiential learning has its limitations. Antonio Negri perfectly sums up the situation in his wry promotional blurb on the rear-cover of Massumi's *Politics of Affect*:

> A politics of affect—what might that mean, given that we are completely immersed in affects? Spinoza and Deleuze have pressed us too forcefully into that particular sea. Massumi teaches us carefully how to swim in it. Not only a politics but also a practice of affect, a form of life.

One of the many challenges facing research in cultural literacy is to review ways in which the aspirations explored in laboratory conditions are being successfully exported to real life social and professional situations along the lines persuasively articulated by Massumi and Manning themselves.

By way of contrast with the "soft-sociological" preoccupation with affect, the second approach to the analysis of the relationship between emotion and morality is grounded in the scientific method of experimental psychology. It focuses on the phenomenon of "empathy" itself as a source of motivation, lauded by many, including political leaders such as Barack Obama in his now famous Diwali speech of November 2009 and academics such as the Stanford-based Director of the *Center for Building a Culture of Empathy*, as a state of mind directly related to altruistic action and, by extension, to the promotion of international understanding. According to this argument, empathy and moral development are two sides of the same coin, necessarily linked motivationally, the one being the precursor of the other. In questioning this assumption, I am arguing that empathy may well accompany ethical principle but that it is not necessarily its cause. Experienced doctors do not emotionally identify with chronic alcoholics when they refuse them liver transplants or with seriously brain-damaged patients when they decide to switch off life-support systems, any more than do committed teachers when dealing with difficult students or lawyers defending clients whom they know to be guilty of reprehensible crimes. This does not stop them from being passionate about their professions or caring about the relative success of their altruistic missions. The very word "professional" entails following a code of conduct which overrides personal considerations. Ahmed's comprehensive deconstruction of "pain" in chapter one of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* perfectly describes the anomalous position of people who, through force of circumstance, have to live with the pain of others. Echoing Sontag's moral condemnation of media-induced public prurience, Ahmed (20-32) reminds us in her criticism of charitable publicity that "sensational stories can turn pain into a form of media spectacle" and later in her conclusion to the chapter that in her own analysis

> Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. The impossibility of "fellow feeling" is itself the confirmation of injury. The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitance. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics (Ahmed 32).

While there is no lack of generic definitions of empathy as a concept, for example that cited by Singer and Lamm: "An affective state which is isomorphic to another person's affective state" (82), recent research shows that the link between mutual representation, moral responsibility and subsequent action is considerably more complex and controversial than is commonly suggested. In one of the most quoted papers on the topic: "These Things Called Empathy," Daniel Batson breaks down the popular notion of "empathy" into eight distinct aspects of human behaviour; these include amongst others prior knowledge of another individual, projecting oneself into that person's situation, imitating the behaviour of the other, imagining how other people as a group are thinking or feeling, and experiencing distress at the representation of others' suffering. Batson's analysis does not claim that empathy with the situation of others does not in some circumstances contribute to subsequent altruistic action; it simply argues that it does not necessarily do so and that the factors which contribute to the popular understanding of the term are diverse and complex. Indeed, while Batson is frequently cited as the main proponent of linking empathy to altruistic behaviour: the so-called "empathy-altruism hypothesis," he is at pains to demonstrate that the neurophysiological triggers giving rise to empathy, known as "mirror neurons," involve mental processes which are distinct from the cognitive operations entailed in forming moral principles. Further, he insists that these two sets of actions involve the stimulation of nerve centres in different parts of the brain which are capable of being activated independently of each other.

The logic of this argument rests on two premises explored by, amongst others, Batson and Rutsch: first that moral thinking engages levels of knowledge and awareness which may well not be present in displays of empathy, and second that moral action deriving from compassion for the other should outweigh, or at least substantially modify, the satisfaction of needs emanating from the self. Genuinely altruistic action, although possibly initiated by emotion, is the outcome of consciously motivated thought leading to a decision to act. As pointed out by Tania Singer in her address to the 2012 Davos World Economic Forum, this view does not preclude such actions being the expression of impulses based on training or habit-forming repetition. However, following Batson, it seems inappropriate to refer to these reactions as "empathetic." The neurophysiological evidence of all three analyses demonstrates conclusively that compassion draws differentially on affect and cognition, or what are sometimes referred to in the literature as "bottom up" and "top down" impulses (Jankowiak-Siuda et al.).

What emerges from the investigations just outlined is that "empathy" is subject to the same semantic manipulation as any other frequently reiterated lexical item in general usage, words which run the risk of viral contamination associated with simulacra, precisely because of their insubstantiality. The analogy with political discourse speaks for itself: "Brexit means Brexit; but what does Brexit mean?" (Geoghegan 3). In short, ably assisted by the media, empathy and realism find themselves in conflict with each other, undermining the potential for effective action, leaving individuals more susceptible to external influences and less equipped to comprehend the forces which shape their lives.

Informative and essential to the argument as they are, clinically based psychological analyses of empathy and morality suffer from the drawback that they focus exclusively on the generic psychological properties of a particular mental phenomenon. The scope of this approach has included the question of whether empathy is a natural or culturally acquired instinct. This has led to the broad but hardly surprising conclusion that, from an early age, imitation of empathetic behaviour is a significant factor in psychological development. However, the relationship between imitation and acquisition at the level of the individual cannot, of course, be directly equated with the phenomenon of cultural transmission within wider society even though the fundamental principle may be the same. As has already been argued, social contagion depends on the provisional coincidence of many more diverse factors such as the collective psychology of a group, community or consumer market, physical situation, cultural tradition, historical context and, crucially, the media of communication and conducive political and economic conditions. The third paradigm I wish to consider, evolutionary memetics, a theoretical offshoot of genetics, has offered an illustrative template against which it was thought until recently that the impact of emotion as a cultural virus could potentially be explained.

"Memetics" derives from the concept of the "meme," a term originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his application of Darwinian principles to theories of social change. By analogy with genetic selection, Dawkins examined the processes whereby behaviours, ideas and, indeed, scientific theories become embedded in social practice and how they mutate over time. As he memorably expressed it in 1976: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins 249). Intuitively, his hypothesis that forms and behavioural patterns operate more or less independently of individual control, extend over time and develop salience through imitation in a competitive environment was and remains extremely attractive. In fact, despite recent attacks on memetics as a branch of social science, the term "meme" has entered public discourse through natural propagation.

Perhaps the most notorious recent example of a self-generated internal virus whose contagion has had untold and durable material consequences is that of the economic collapse of 2007–08 which, against all the predictions of the most eminent economic thinkers of the time, contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The spread of the virus was based precisely on imitation, first by systemic electronic triggers and then, as the crisis deepened, by human agency, as had already been revealed in albeit different economic environments in 1721 and 1929. The genetic analogy retains its validity as a paradigm not simply because it can convincingly be applied to material historical phenomena, but because it reflects the feeling of impotence felt by many at the power of systems, driven by seemingly intangible, interdependent forces, to direct the course of their lives.

Pioneered in the late 1990s by Paul Marsden and promoted between 1998 and 2005 through *The Journal of Memetics*, the memetic paradigm enjoyed a scientific popularity which peaked in 2002 (Edmonds 1) but has since declined due to the difficulty of scientifically demonstrating an analogy between social behaviour and that of genes. However, the absence of a demonstrable empirical relationship between phenomena linking physical science to social behaviour should not undermine their value as sociological heuristics. Ideas and beliefs, like genes, are in a constant state of tension with each other as they compete for power. Like epidemics, cultural, ethnic and religious conflicts, having seemed through the centuries to have been definitively eliminated, re-ignite themselves with devastating effect years later as if by spontaneous combustion. The twin viruses of religion and nationalism in Ireland, Kosovo and the Indian sub-continent are intriguing cases in point.

A number of conclusions and recommendations for the future of cultural literacy research can be drawn from this brief consideration of the relationship between affect, social contagion, discourse and the exercise of corporate power. The first is that analogies with the past should not be overlooked. It is not the first time that mass movements grounded in an appeal to collective sentiment have changed the course of history, nor that the relationship between sense impression, feeling, rational thought, religious belief and political radicalism has been comprehensively explored at key moments in the development of western civilisation. The mobilisation of popular sentiment changed history in Europe during the period leading up to the French Revolution of 1789-95, as it did in the rise of fascism in the 1930s and the unflinching resistance of the Russian people to the German invasion of 1941-44. The same applies to the link between feeling, aesthetic sensibility (*Einfühlung*), imitation and the spread of the romantic movement. A second conclusion is that the role of literature and the arts as cultural determinants of public sentiment should not be underestimated in comparison with its present-day cultural manifestations. At least three classic examples of sentimental contagion unrelated to totalitarian propaganda feature in the publications reviewed for this paper: Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (Marsden), Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Marsden), and Sewell's *Black Beauty* (Małecki), not to mention the outputs of other usual suspects from the late 18th and early to mid-19th centuries such as Hugo, Dickens and Rousseau (Harrison).

As far as the future of research into cultural literacy is concerned, the first, perhaps obvious, point is that public insight into cultural process and the acquisition of knowledge as information should be seen as interdependent. In short, a balance has to be struck by researchers between identifying the processes through which media condition social attitudes and defining the knowledge and skills required for a group adequately to understand its own cultural background and that of other groups. To view cultural literacy

in terms of a specific body of knowledge applicable to a given community whether at local, national or international level cannot be an appropriate means of achieving such a balance. The cultural diversity of western societies makes prescription a breeding ground for nationalism, indoctrination and ill-informed prejudice. At the same time, as Fukuyama points out, reluctance to commit to a set of educational principles, and, by extension to make difficult decisions relating to curricula and access to education, is to leave the field open to powerful or potentially subversive interests: political, corporate and religious.

Research into cultural literacy necessarily entails a moral and political dimension which has to be explored through analyses of cultural practices and their outcomes. It is clearly misplaced to recommend actions which are believed to be socially beneficial without knowing in detail the facts on the ground. These are only adequately accessible through a mixed-method approach involving a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis accompanied by ethnographic engagement with the social groups concerned. Affect theory clearly offers an essential reference point in case studies which illustrate the real-life impact of cultural initiatives, but it comes with the safety-warning, if any were needed, that affect alone cannot compensate for overriding social and economic factors and may well detract from political action with greater transformative powers.

In this essay, I have sought to advance the increasingly widely-held hypothesis that the generalised appeal to emotions inherent in much media reporting and online political discourse is undermining public understanding, threatening democratic processes and promoting cultural contagion. In 2018, this is hardly an original position. In addition to the thinkers already referred to, condemnation of emotional manipulation has become the watchword of many authors of fiction such as the Booker prize-winner Howard Jakobson. Like other practising writers and artists, Jakobson has repeatedly demonstrated through close textual analysis why and how the humanities and the arts offer a viable antidote to the long-term impact of social media. However, before taking up this challenge, further verification of what we can call "the emotional contagion hypothesis" is needed (cf. Avidsson). Advanced methods of big data analysis accompanied by ethnographic study of individual communities make this possible, bringing together expertise drawn from the fields of cultural and media studies, computing, sociology and linguistics. The pioneering work of Massumi and Manning offers exciting models for exploring the psychological experience of collective attitudinal change. Further research is needed for the real-life social impact of these to be more closely examined. This demands that representative populations and appropriate contexts be accurately identified and critically analysed, such as the fifty examples of radical social intervention jointly funded in the UK by the NESTA programme and *The Observer* newspaper (*The New Review*, 16 September 2018, 14-19). Rigorous systems of analysis using the most up to date tools applied to data obtained through co-participation arising from projects such as these offer the opportunity to identify the factors most likely to lead to lasting change. It is only on the back of empirical, data-based research such as this that adequate programmes designed to promote cultural literacy can be satisfactorily developed.

If Jakobson's analysis and that of this essay are shown to be well-founded, it remains important for researchers as much as for policymakers to build on existing insights into the role played by the arts in the process of social and economic regeneration. Their aim should be to promote critical understanding of the relationship between different forms of symbolic representation and material well-being in society and the potential for their wider application: what Jacques Rancière 66-73 describes as a participation at all levels of democratic society in a balanced combination of the "memetic" (*viz*. materially grounded) and "aesthetic" aspects of culture. Without such information, it is difficult to formulate appropriate agendas for the institutions and domestic settings through which cultural literacy is propagated: schools, universities, museums, colleges of further education, art, music and drama and local centres designed to promote the integration of arts and crafts. Here again, empirical case studies can and should form the backbone of cultural literacy research. In the UK, much work of this kind has already taken place. Their scope is described in the comprehensive report by the Arts and Humanities Research Council for England and Wales (AHRC) *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture* (Crossick and Kaszynska) which offers an overview of cultural initiatives funded through *The AHRC Cultural Value Project* and by its more recent update *The Cultural Value Scoping Project* (Kaszynska), leading to the establishment in 2018 of a *Collaborative Centre for the Study of Cultural Value*.

Ultimately, cultural literacy is the capacity of human beings to understand or "read" the fabric of social realities through different forms of symbolic and material representations and further to incorporate their insights into their everyday lives. It follows that the responsibility of research in the field is to identify the knowledge and skills required to make that possible and to investigate the extent to which they are applied in practice. The knowledge and skills will inevitably vary according to the particular reality, past or present, under review, but whatever this may be and without minimising the passion brought to the act of analysis, judgement, information, education and experience rather than emotion will be the primary qualities called for. The co-founder of Twitter, Ev Williams, has claimed (cit. Weaver) that the reliance of social media on short-term emotional impact and the media's concomitant material dependence on advertising is already "dumbing down" world populations. The critical challenge facing researchers in cultural literacy is to determine how and to what extent this is, in fact, the case and to link the study of history and the arts to a comparative understanding of the processes of mediation through which the latest developments in communication influence public behaviour.

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