

# Mediated habits: images, networked affect and social change

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**Abstract** While many people remain hopeful that particular images of injustice will have the power to catalyse progressive transformation, there is also widespread belief in the inevitability of ‘compassion fatigue’. Bringing philosophers of habit into conversation with contemporary scholars of affect, visual culture and digital media, this article argues for a more nuanced understanding of the links between images and change—one in which political feeling and political action are complexly intertwined and repeated sensation does not necessarily lead to disaffection. When affect acts as a ‘binding technique’ compelling us to inhabit our sensorial responses to images, I suggest, we may become better attuned to everyday patterns of seeing, feeling, thinking and interacting—and hence to the possibility of change at the level of habit. This article thus contends that thinking affect and habit together as imbricated may enable us to better understand the dynamics of both individual and socio-political change today.

**Keywords** Affect · Habit · Images · Digital media · Political feeling · Social change

Despite powerful critiques of ‘media effects’ logic and longstanding critical analysis of the politics of representation, many of us living in relative comfort in the Global North retain a persistent (if fraught) investment in the power of exceptional images to catalyse progressive social change. When we find ourselves moved by a particularly disturbing or revelatory image, we often assume that other people will be too—we hope that the image (and what it reveals about wider socio-political conditions, inequalities and forms of violence) will affectively ignite people, jolting

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them out of complacency and towards action that may ultimately work to engender greater social justice.

In 2015, in the midst of the ongoing European refugee crisis, it was the heartbreaking photograph of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian refugee whose small body washed up on the shores of Bodrum, Turkey, that awakened with powerful force such affective hopes and responses. Global media outlets had, for months, been covering the harrowing attempts of Syrians (among millions of other refugees internationally) to leave their country, as well as the horrific suffering faced by many of those who remained. Yet it was *this* shocking photograph, printed across the front pages of hundreds of newspapers worldwide on 1st September 2015 and shared exponentially on social media in the days and weeks that followed, that elicited an unprecedented transnational outpouring of outrage, sadness, grief and compassion, inciting widespread demands for political action and change.

As Robert Fisk, the *Independent's* Middle Eastern correspondent, suggests, the force of public response to this particular image, taken by Nilüfer Demir for the Turkish agency DHA, was not unrelated to the fact that Alan was 'dressed like a little European boy, and [was] white rather than brown-skinned'. Indeed, what was masked by the emotional torrent that Alan Kurdi's image elicited was the fact that he was just one of tens of thousands 'whose remains lie today on the sea bed of the Mediterranean, forever unrecorded and unfiled' (Fisk 2016). Nonetheless, the photograph travelled far and wide, transforming and amplifying its affective impact as it became the subject of myriad tweets, comment-pieces, digital memes, campaigns and art interventions. Researchers at the University of Sheffield estimated that 53,000 tweets per hour were sent at the height of the image's circulation and that it reached 20 million people transnationally over the course of 12 days (Ratnam 2016). In the months that followed, graffiti artists Oğuz Şen and Justus Becker created a giant mural of Kurdi on the bank of river Main in Frankfurt, Germany, intended 'as both a memorial and a call to action' (Bowden 2016). Moreover, in a particularly high-profile and controversial piece, the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei recreated the photograph of Kurdi by lying face-down on a beach on the Greek island of Lesbos as part of a series of projects designed to draw attention to the growing scale and human toll of the international refugee crises (Tan 2016). This image had, as Fisk notes, reached a status 'beyond the "iconic"' (2016).

Two days after Kurdi's death, Germany agreed to admit thousands of refugees previously stranded in Hungary, which encouraged political leaders in central and eastern Europe to establish a humanitarian corridor stretching from northern Greece to southern Bavaria while Canada committed to resettling 25,000 Syrians. Although in the UK David Cameron agreed to accept only 4000 refugees a year until 2020, this was far more than he had previously been willing to offer (Kingsley 2016). In the longer term, the audience intelligence firm Pulsar claims, based on analysis of digital analytics, that the photograph's global circulation may have been responsible for a wide-scale public uptake of the term 'refugee' (rather than 'migrant'), thus signalling 'a significant shift of perception around the humanitarian crisis and migration in general' (D'Orazio 2016). Yet, by mid-2016 European leaders had abandoned their earlier humanitarian approach, as right-wing populisms rose across Europe and North America, perniciously reinforcing the perceived 'connection



between migration and terrorism’ (Kingsley 2016). A year after the release of Kurdi’s image, the number of refugees who had died at sea had increased by more than a fifth (D’Orazio 2016) and forecasts by the International Organisation of Migration indicated that refugee fatalities would pass the landmark figure of 10,000 in 2016 (Townsend and McVeigh 2016). In this context, Fisk worries that little of significance has changed with respect to how we treat refugees internationally and that the image of Alan Kurdi ‘obscured a host of lessons which we ignored—and continue to disregard—at our peril’ (2016).

This example, and the hopes we pin on arresting or revelatory images more generally, are linked to wider investments in affect, emotion and feeling as vehicles for progressive social change. In the context of the ‘turn to affect’, we have increasingly focused on how ‘being moved’ might lead to meaningful self and social transformation. Whether via the shock of unwilling empathy, the burning sensation of accumulated indignation or the disorientation of undefined affective intensity, the promise of affect is that it will engender forms of knowing that ‘transform the self who knows’ (Bartky 1996, p. 179). Through being made to feel deep empathy, for example, the hope is that subjects will never be the same again; their views of the world will be radically transformed, as will their behaviours and actions, in the interests of greater social justice (Pedwell 2014, 2016). Or, in a more Deleuzian vein, the wager is that a direct connection with sensation may engender what Brian Massumi (2002) refers to as ‘a shock to thought’: an affective jolt that works less to reveal truth as it does to ‘thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry’ (Bennett 2005, p. 11). Such narratives of ‘affective revolution’ are often inspiring and compelling. My point, however, is that they usually do not focus on what happens *after* the event of being moved. Feelings are often fluid, fleeting and hard to control. Indeed, this is one key way in which affect has been understood in critical scholarship: as linked to sensations which are temporary or ephemeral. And yet, when affective responses are sustained or repeated over time, they may lose their radical edge, as we find ourselves compulsively engaging in potentially stultifying practices of ‘affective citation’ (Wetherall 2012). What is it, then, that enables meaningful cognitive, psychic and embodied change catalysed (or signalled) by affect to *take shape and endure* rather than simply peak and collapse or become quickly re-assimilated into ‘business as usual’? In other words, how might we better understand the *materialisation of affect* in this context?

I use the term ‘affect’ in this paper to encompass a varied collection of sensorial processes, relations and experiences—ranging from individual expressions of feeling to the production of sensation within human-technology assemblages. It is important to acknowledge that the diverse scholars I cite in my discussion do not share a common or coherent approach to affect. The ‘turn to affect’ more broadly has been animated by ongoing debates regarding how best to define, and distinguish between, terms such as ‘affect’, ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’.<sup>1</sup> My view is that it is sometimes useful to make contingent analytical distinctions between these concepts, without suggesting that they are wholly discrete or that they necessarily ‘pertain to

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<sup>1</sup> See Massumi (2002), Hemmings (2005), Blackman and Venn (2010), Gregg and Siegworth (2010), Blackman (2012, 2013), Pedwell and Whitehead (2012), Wetherell (2012), Pedwell (2014).



different orders' (Massumi 2002, p. 26). If, for instance, we are referring to emerging and shifting intensities rather than named discursive entities, then we might use 'affect' instead of 'emotion'. In employing a purposefully broad concept of affect here, however, I seek to acknowledge how embodied sensations and psychic and cognitive experiences are constitutively *intertwined* in complex ways (Ahmed 2004)—while also recognising that processes of affecting and being affected always exceed the boundaries of human subjectivity and consciousness (Clough and Halley 2007; Blackman 2012). Indeed, affect is, in my view, an inherently *relational* term—it signifies emergent interactions of human and non- or more-than human actors which are productive of different kinds of sensation and becoming (Pedwell, 2014; Ash 2015). As such, affect is not a thing, or a property, but rather a form of sensorial relationality—as well as an interpretive approach and critical field of study.

Elsewhere, I have argued that paying closer attention to habit may help us to better grapple with the dynamics, potentials and limits of 'progressive' social change—and, more specifically, to gain a richer understanding of how, and under what conditions, affective transformation is materialised (Pedwell 2016). Over the past decade, an emergent critical return to the notions of habit and habituation has been gaining momentum across a range of fields, with scholars engaging the work of American pragmatism, continental philosophy, classical sociological theory, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and neuroscience, among other fields, to rethink the contemporary workings of social life—from the unconscious habits of white privilege (Sullivan 2006, 2015), to the patterned dynamics of biopolitical governance (Bennett et al. 2013; Bennett 2015; Blackman 2013), to the digital routines and possibilities of algorithmic life (Chun 2016).<sup>2</sup> Habit is a particularly fruitful concept within discussions of social change, I want suggest, because of its double nature: it attunes us simultaneously to the powerful automated processes and mechanisms underlying the tendency for patterns of oppression and inequality to persist *and* the necessary, yet counterintuitive, role of habituation in enabling meaningful and enduring forms of socio-political transformation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while the automatic force of habit can compel us to repeat previous modes of action again and again, it is nonetheless only through material processes of habituation that *new* tendencies may be created which are deeply rooted and robust enough to endure. Habit formation and modification, then, are vital to individual and social transformation—affect may offer the spark that catalyses embodied transformation, yet without some form of habituation, enduring change may fail to take shape.

In bringing literatures and debates about affect and habit *together*, this article thus seeks to complicate influential frameworks that would figure their logics, temporalities and implications as unrelated or discrete. In doing so, I draw on and extend earlier vital scholarship in affect and emotion studies.<sup>4</sup> In her analysis of

<sup>2</sup> See Sullivan (2006, 2015), Shilling (2008), Carlisle and Sinclair (2008), Malabou (2008), Weiss (2008), Bennett et al. (2013), Bennett (2013, 2015), Blackman (2013), Grosz (2013), Sparrow and Hutchinson (2013), Carlisle (2014), Coleman (2014), Fraser et al. (2014), Dewsbury and Bissell (2015), Chun (2016), Pedwell (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Malabou (2008), Blackman (2013), Grosz (2013), Pedwell (2016).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Ahmed (2004), Berlant (2011), Blackman (2012, 2013), Wetherell (2012), Grosz (2013).



‘affective practice’, for example, Margaret Wetherell explores how affect is inextricably linked with ‘the study of pattern’ (2012, p. 16). Affective life, she argues, is not only or primarily about ‘extraordinary, spontaneous and one-off’ activities; rather, it takes shape largely through processes of emotional regulation and the sedimentation of affective patterns. As such, thinking through affective practice ‘pushes more towards habit than the uncanny’ (23). Nonetheless, from Wetherell’s perspective, the dynamics of affective patterns also offer *potential*—that is, the possibility for embodied relations and experience to be ‘otherwise’ (4). Relatedly, Lisa Blackman examines how, through its role in affect modulation, habit assumes a paradoxical position: it plays a role in ‘regulation (in the form of discipline)’, but also enables ‘the body’s potential for engaging the new, change and creativity’ (2013, p. 186). In her genealogical analysis of some of the founding concepts and debates in social psychology, Blackman seeks to complicate contemporary associations of both habit and affect with non-intentionality and (an overly mechanical view of) automatism—highlighting the ways in which affect–habit interactions can produce ‘movement and stasis, being and becoming and process and fixity’ (186; see also Blackman 2012; Grosz 2013). In this vein, my discussion aims to illustrate that processes of affecting and being affected and of habituation and re-habituation interact with one another in complex ways and it is this *interaction* that is significant to the workings of individual and collective transformation.

In order to flesh out these arguments, I explore the particular relations among affect, habit, visual images and media technologies. My rationale for this focus is twofold: firstly, visual culture plays a key role in the mediation of embodied habits of perception, feeling and conduct, and secondly, as I have suggested, images have long been central to how the logics and possibilities of social transformation have been understood. In the first section, I outline how nineteenth and early twentieth-century European and American philosophers, such as Felix Ravaisson, William James and John Dewey, understood the significance of habituation and re-habituation to social life, focusing on their analyses of the links between habit, affect and change. Here I pay particular attention to what Ravaisson ([1838]2008) called the ‘double law of habit’: the tendency for repeated action to gain strength and precision over time and for repeated feeling, by contrast, to wither and become passive. Drawing on Susan Sontag’s pivotal text, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the second section discusses how the power of shocking images to catalyse meaningful transformation has been understood as tempered by the phenomenon of affective habituation—or, as Sontag puts it, echoing Ravaisson’s analysis, by the tendency for shock to ‘wear off’ through repetition.

The third section turns to the realm of digital media to consider how debates about visual culture and the promise of change have played out within ever-shifting virtual networks in which images are always connected to other images. While some scholars view digital image-based technologies as offering transformative opportunities for affecting and being affected that ‘cannot be reduced to cognitive saturation, distraction or disaffection’ (Ash 2015, p. 121; Rentschler and Thrift 2015a, b), others perceive the affective intensities of online visual culture as antithetical to meaningful socio-political change. In the realm of social media, these



latter theorists suggest that our habitual search for ‘affective jolts’ entraps us within the circuits of neoliberal communicative capitalism—a process that continuously replaces political action with political feeling, forever turning activity into passivity (Dean 2015; Paasonen 2015). In the fourth section, however, I return to Ravaissón’s double law of habit to re-think this opposition of political feeling and political action, and the concomitant equation of repeated affect with de-sensitisation and passivity. As I discuss, the fact that sensing can be *turned into an activity* indicates how habituated affect can ‘engender a heightening of experience’ rather than its diminution (Carlisle 2014, p. 82). Linking back to my primary concern regarding the relationships between visual images and social transformation, I suggest that while our affective responses to images can produce a powerful spark that moves us (at least temporarily), affect can also work as a ‘binding technique’ (Dean 2015) that protracts our relationship with an image (or visual environment), compelling us to *inhabit* the sensorial intensity of our encounter and its critical implications. When this happens, feeling can be made active in a way that engages the possibility of transformation at the level of habit—alerting us to the blips and gaps in habitual perception and conduct that may act as ‘actionable spaces’ for material change (Bennett 2013, 2015).

This paper’s central argument, then, is that understanding the role of visual images and media technologies in processes of social change requires a perspective that thinks affect and habit, feeling and action, passivity and activity together as imbricated within the non-linear temporalities of material life.

In this view, political feeling and political action are not as distinct as they may appear; rather, they are intimately intertwined. Moreover, feeling is not inevitably short-lived and affective habituation is not always de-sensitising or reproductive of the status quo. Yet, as I suggest in the last section, this critical endeavour also requires that we re-approach the meaning and dynamics of ‘social change’ itself. What analysis of the affective habits of visual digital culture underscores most suggestively is how meaningful forms of socio-political transformation may emerge not (or not only) through ‘affective revolutions’, but rather (or also) through the accumulation and reverberation of seemingly minor affective responses, interactions, gestures and habits.

## Habit, affect and social change

Engagement with habit has a long history in philosophy and social theory—from Aristotle’s vision of the ‘moral person’ as produced through the repetition of moral acts, to Immanuel Kant’s condemnation of habit as that which stifles creativity and deadens the human spirit, to Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of socio-economic class and habitus.<sup>5</sup> In the tradition of Descartes and Kant, habituation has widely been associated with forms of mindless repetition that keep us tied to the status quo.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For interdisciplinary accounts of the history of habit, see Camic (1986), Carlisle and Sinclair (2008), Bennett et al. (2013), Sparrow and Hutchinson (2013), Carlisle (2014), Dewsbury and Bissell (2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Malabou (2008), Carlisle (2014).



Nineteenth and early twentieth-century philosophers such as Felix Ravaisson, William James, and John Dewey, however, explored how habit formation and modification are central to the workings of individual and social ‘progress’ and change. For the American pragmatist philosopher, James, who was trained as a medical doctor and psychologist, habit<sup>7</sup> is key to material transformation because it embodies the ‘plasticity’ of living organisms and social systems. Plasticity, from his perspective, refers to the ‘possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once’ ([1914]2004, p. 5). In other words, the material malleability of human (and other) bodies—their capacity to be made and re-made through habituation—is central to the possibility of engaging enduring forms of change over time.

Similarly, for the French philosopher and archaeologist Ravaisson, habit is the essence of being and becoming—that is, processes of habituation are central to the transformation of ‘a *power* of moving or of acting into a *tendency* to move or act in a particular way’ (Carlisle and Sinclair 2008, p. 13, original italics). Pre-figuring the more recent interventions of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson in his book *Of Habit* ([1838]2008), Ravaisson describes habituation as involving a repetition, but a repetition that produces a difference, that is, ‘an aptitude for change’ (Malabou 2008, p. ix).<sup>8</sup> As the philosopher Catherine Malabou puts it, in transforming a potentiality into a tendency through the work of repetition, habit illustrates powerfully that ‘if a being was able to change once, in the manner of contracting a habit, it can change again. It is available for a change to come’ (2008, p. viii). From this standpoint, ‘freedom and power are found in and through the constitution of habits, not through their elimination’ (Sullivan 2006, p. 24). It is thus through the *creation of habits*, rather than their cessation, that more progressive and enduring forms social transformation might be activated.

Although not their specific focus, these thinkers each had thought-provoking things to say about the relationship between affect, habit and social transformation. For Dewey, an American pragmatist philosopher and educational reformer, the problem with modes of social reform that depend predominantly on the production of certain feelings (i.e. the generation of empathy, compassion or moral indignation) is that they tend to remove thought from embodied action and the individual from their environment. That is, he contends in *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* ([1922]2012), such strategies assume that exposure to new affective knowledge is enough to instigate and implement ‘ethical’

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<sup>7</sup> For James, a habit is defined by two key criteria: firstly, it simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, whilst also making them more accurate and diminishing fatigue ([1914]2004, p. 26). For example, ‘a lock works better after being used for some time; at the outset more force was required to overcome a certain roughness in its mechanism’ (7). Secondly, a habit diminishes the conscious attention with which acts are performed’ (31). See also Dewey ([1922]2012, p. 19).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, for Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition* ([1968]2011)—a key text for the renewed interest in habit in critical theory and continental philosophy - the fundamental intertwining of repetition with singularity and the production of difference means that ‘habit never gives rise to true repetition: sometimes the action changes and is perfected while the intention remains constant; sometimes the action remains the same in different contexts and with different intentions’ (5).



or ‘progressive’ change, without attending to the imbricated embodied and environmental factors that work powerfully to support and perpetuate existing patterns of behaviour. Dewey offers a useful analogy here: ‘A man who does not stand properly forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit [...] conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist’ (15). Any effective approach to individual or social change, then, needs to account for those material processes that underlie everyday actions or tendencies. Moreover, given that many of the mechanisms that enable and perpetuate behaviour operate below the level of consciousness—and indeed, most habitual gestures are powerful precisely because they have become automatic at an unconscious level—methods of transformative intervention that appeal exclusively rational thought or critical reflexivity often miss the mark.

More broadly, Dewey acknowledges the potential of feeling to spark cognitive and embodied transformation, yet he is suspicious of the capacity for such change to be anything other than transitory: ‘impulse burns itself up. Emotion cannot be kept at its full tide’ ([1922]2012, p. 101). Ravaissou similarly addresses this tendency for affect to weaken over time in his discussion of the ‘double law of habit’ in which *sensation*, once repeated or sustained, dulls and loses force whereas repeated or sustained *action* gains in strength and momentum. As he puts it:

The continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured ([1838]2008, p. 49).

James’s analysis resonates with and extends this framework: The repetition of feelings that routinely fail to be translated into action, he suggests, frequently leads to affective inertia: ‘The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages of the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale’ ([1914]2004, p. 63). Although I will later complicate the divide between ‘feeling’ and ‘action’ on which these thinkers rely, their observations highlight the limits of models of progressive social change premised exclusively on affective rupture or revolution.

While affect may act as a trigger that drives forward embodied and material change, or signals when existing habits have become disrupted, it cannot participate in enduring processes of transformation without some degree of habituation or automation. Yet, the risk is that when particular affective responses become routine, they can lose their force and may actually prevent meaningful action and change. What is required, therefore, is a mode of critical intervention that addresses the complex interaction of affect *and* habit within ongoing material processes of transformation (Blackman 2012, 2013; Wetherell 2012; Grosz 2013). Keeping these philosophical ideas in mind, the next sections consider how social and cultural theorists have understood some of the ways in which visual images and representations might ‘move’ us towards change (or not), and the embodied and ethical implications of such processes.





## Images and the power of being moved

Susan Sontag memorably opens *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), her poignant mediation on human suffering and the meanings and uses of images, with a discussion of Virginia Woolf's reaction to the horrific images emerging from the Spanish civil war in the late 1930s. Released by the Spanish government twice a week, these were the first photographs of the war's civilian victims to be published in international newspapers—and therefore wholly shocking to many, including Woolf, who offers a disturbing description of their content in *Three Guineas* (1938):

This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room... (Woolf 1938 cited in Sontag 2003).

From Woolf's perspective, as Sontag paraphrases, 'the shock of such pictures cannot fail to unite people of good will' (2003, p. 6). The images were so arresting, so appalling, that, having seen them, Woolf implored, British people, and particularly the 'educated classes', could surely no longer remain passive or complicit. Indeed, for Woolf, Sontag suggests, 'Not to be pained by these pictures, not to recoil from them, not to strive to abolish what causes this havoc, this carnage ... would be the reactions of a moral monster' (6). In Sontag's view, then, Woolf's mediations offer a vivid illustration of the hopes we have pinned on the power of shocking images to move us towards progressive social and political change.

We could draw parallels between these photographs and other harrowing representations: shocking images of the human carnage of the Vietnam war, the starvation of Ethiopian children, the torture and humiliation of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, the human and environmental devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and, most recently, the relentless bombing of Aleppo, Syria. While emerging from very different geo-political contexts and circumstances, images connected with each of these examples have been invested by various commentators and publics with the power to radically affect; to wrench us away from the status quo and propel us towards socio-political transformation. Indeed, by 'making "real" (or "more real") matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore' (Sontag, 2003, p. 6), such arresting images, it has often been thought, could not help but move people towards a recognition of the suffering of others (and their own potential complicity in it), and hence towards organising for change.<sup>9</sup> Of course, all of such images did (and do) affect different people in many important ways. However, as the history of critical engagement with the politics and possibilities of representation has illustrated, the reality of *what images do* is much more

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<sup>9</sup> There are some resonances between claims regarding the power of revelatory images to catalyse change and modernist investments in the transformative capacity of 'defamiliarisation' (Shklovsky 1914) in literature and the arts. For example, in making social processes and routines seem unfamiliar rather than automatic, the defamiliarising effect of particular aesthetic images was interpreted by modernists as having the capacity to bring about changes in habits of perception and behaviour.



complicated and less predictable than our enduring investment in their powers conveys.

Much has been written about the complexity of our affective responses to visual representations. Photographs of violence or injustice, scholars suggest, can produce a wide array of reactions among different viewers in different contexts, from empathy and compassion, to horror and fear, to indifference and irritation, and even perverse pleasure or enjoyment (Sontag 2003; Carby 2004; Chouliaraki 2006). Furthermore, even if particular images of suffering do elicit empathetic or compassionate responses, there is no guarantee that the implications of such affective reactions will be progressive. As Lauren Berlant argues, '*compassion* carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege' (original italics, 2004, p. 1). Decisions on the part of privileged subjects concerning whether or not to extend compassion or empathy to less privileged 'others' frequently function to shore up (rather than disrupt) existing social and geo-political boundaries and hierarchies (Pedwell 2014). The question of who constitutes 'the "we" to whom such shock-pictures are aimed' thus remains crucial (Sontag 2003, p. 6). Scholars have also paid careful attention to the political uses and misuses of images—how images are selected, framed and combined with other media by governmental, media, corporate and other political actors to modulate affect in particular ways, with a range of ideological and ethical consequences (Hall 1997; Mirzoeff 2006; Zeilezer 2010). As much of this work has illustrated, affecting images function just as often to preserve the status quo as they do to ignite affirmative change.

My specific concerns here, however, are somewhat different: Even if we accept, for a moment, that particular affective reactions to visual representations may be conducive to catalysing 'progressive' responses to injustice among some people, how do we understand the *workings* of such material and socio-political process? How do images *move us* (or not) and how does this resultant sensation drive forward wider forms of personal or social transformation? In other words, how can we understand the relations among images, affect, habit and change? As such, my primary concern in this paper is less to do with 'the politics of representation' (though analysis of such dynamics remain vital) than it is with the role of images in material processes of affective, perceptual and behavioural habituation and re-habituation.

As Woolf's discussion in *Three Guineas* suggests, our investment in the capacity of images to ignite change is linked to expectations of what will happen when realities of suffering are made 'real' to people, when we become aware in visceral clarity of horrifying or tragic situations of which we may have previously been ignorant. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, however, Sontag was concerned that the relentless onslaught of mediated images of death and disaster had produced a confusing blurring of representation and reality: 'The problem is not that people remember through photographs', she famously argued, 'but that they remember *only* through photographs' (italics mine, 2003, p. 78). In this context, 'a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation' (19). Rather than forcing more privileged groups to confront the reality of others' pain, omnipresent images of suffering may thus function to further distance people from 'the real' and



‘the material’—to make us feel as if representation or simulation are all there is. Furthermore, in a culture of consumption which employs shock as ‘a leading stimulus’ and ‘source of value’, Sontag suggests we risk becoming habituated to the stream of ever more dramatic or disturbing photos (20).<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, instead of producing a ‘shock to thought’ (Massumi 2002) that propels us into critical inquiry or action, ubiquitous images of suffering may simply elicit ‘the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen’ (Sontag 2003, p. 11).

While not all images inevitably lose their ability to shock, to enrage or to elicit compassion, Sontag argues the point is that such affective responses, on their own, are not equal to substantive change. Echoing the philosophers of habit discussed earlier, as well as more recent analysis of ‘compassion fatigue’ (Moeller 1998), Sontag describes compassion as an ‘unstable emotion’ that ‘needs to be translated into action’ if it is not to ‘wither’ (90). Similar to Ravaissin in his double law of habit ([1838]2008), her comments imply a theory of habituation in which affective responses tend to lose their force through repetition, whereas repeated actions continuously gain in power and efficacy. While images of pain may continue to produce compassion, Sontag argues, repeated compassionate responses can become no more than an affective script, an emotional short-hand that modulates one’s feelings in familiar ways but does little to change one’s everyday habits of social interaction and political engagement.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, like James’ ([1914]2004) discussion of the frequent gap between ethical feelings and ethical actions, Sontag suggests that ultimately it is action that matters—without meaningful action, feeling flounders. Indeed, while Woolf professed to believe that ‘if the horror could be made vivid enough most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war’ (Sontag 2003, p. 12), it was only 1 year after the publication of *Three Guineas* that Britain itself would go to war against Germany. Although images of war’s horrific human toll do move us, and the affect they ignite can be potent, none of this was enough, Sontag suggests, to disable the industrial war machine, to uproot or redirect the automated habits of violence and destruction central to world systems in the twentieth century and beyond.

Sontag’s work has been highly influential in both cultural theory and popular culture and is indicative of a prominent strand of work on images, sensation and habit that persists today, despite notable transformations in media cultures and technologies. Yet, for Sontag, it would seem, habituation is framed solely in the negative: Habit is what dulls affect’s force and makes it ineffectual, rather than what might make action more graceful and precise or what might enable change to become rooted enough to endure. As such, we might say that *Regarding the Pain of Others* tells only half of habit’s story—an elision with significant implications for how we understand the links between images and social change. Writing at the

<sup>10</sup> See also Sontag (1977).

<sup>11</sup> In this vein, Anna Gibbs argues that human perception is mediated by both learnt ‘affective scripts’ and popular media genres, which render scenes ‘that would otherwise require time for close inspection quickly intelligible’ (2007, p. 127). This means that when ‘real-life’ images are viewed through, for example, the genre of ‘horror’ (as epitomised by the ‘horror film’), their effects (and affects) depend ‘as much on familiarity and photographic convention’ as they do ‘on shock’ (127).



beginning of the new millennium, Sontag was also not yet in a position to confront what the rise of social media would mean for the affective workings of images—their networked nature and their rapid circulation and reconfiguration online. Consequently, her analysis cannot fully confront the ways in which visual digital media become folded into our embodied habits and modes of perception—or how, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun puts it, ‘through habits users become their machines’ (2016, p. 1). These various issues and complexities will be addressed in the following sections through attending to more recent scholarship on digital media, visual culture and affect.

## Affective mediation and networked affect

If, in the late 1930s, Woolf was confronted with harrowing photographs from the Spanish civil war in her morning newspaper a few times a week and found herself in the frustrating position of spectator, we now conduct our lives in and through an endless stream of mediated images and have the ability to produce, remediate and distribute them online through a host of digital technologies and applications. From the perspective of some scholars, such techno-cultural developments have enabled new and distinctive forms of affective mediation with potentially significant material and socio-political implications. In their introduction to the collection *Networked Affect*, for example, Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit argue that online affect ‘can be a mediating and mobilising force that has the capacity to stir social action’ thus constituting ‘a potential channel for political agency’ (2015, p. 3). Similarly, Carrie Rentshler and Samantha Thrift explore, in their introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Theory* on digital culture and politics, how feminists ‘strategically deploy social media tactics as powerful tools of community building and political mobilisation’ (2015a, p. 240). Through the use of visual memes, they argue, activists employ humour and other forms of sensorial resonance ‘to move feminism, not only technologically ... but also emotionally and affectively’ (240). Central to such claims is not only the observation that digital technologies connect people across social and geographical boundaries in ways that can enhance political consciousness-raising and organising, but also that the technological capacities of online visual media may have the power to *move us* in novel and salient ways.

The promise of such technological capacities is brought to life by James Ash in his contribution to *Networked Affect*, which offers a cogent analysis of the affective workings of Graphic Interchange Format files (GIFs). A GIF can generate ‘novel forms of affect’, he argues, not only due to its visual or discursive content, but also because its particularities as file type enable it to ‘frame and organize the types of sensation transmitted within it’ (2015, p. 120). While Sontag was concerned that our ubiquitous exposure to disturbing images could desensitise us to their affective power (as well as their wider meanings and implications), Ash insists that GIFs do not necessarily produce ‘a mindless form of disaffection’. Indeed, it is precisely *because of their repetitive and automated qualities* that GIFs have the capacity to ‘amplify the potential for affect’ (121):



In the same way that repeatedly speaking a word causes it to sound strange and foreign, because it is uttered outside the context of familiar use, constantly looping GIF images alter the images into new rhythms of sensation. The reorganization of movement and color, and the introduction of repetition, give the GIF a different capacity to affect compared to its source material (129).

Ash thus understands our relationship with GIFs as primarily *affective* in nature; images modulated in this format can move us in highly embodied ways: Their ‘constant looping’ motion can, for instance, induce responses of ‘grip’ and ‘grab’, causing viewers to contract their muscles as they ‘try to examine, grasp and visually immobilize the organized sensation of the constantly repeating image’ (130). Expanding on Ash’s analysis, we might be tempted to invest GIFs with an intensified power to affect—to reach into bodies and move us (literally) at a material level that is effective because, following Dewey ([1922]2012), it is working largely below realm of active consciousness at the incremental level of embodied sensation, reflex and habit.

Importantly, however, for Ash, Hillis et al. and others working in the Deleuzian tradition, affect cannot be understood as a human experience alone; rather, it is produced in and through hybrid networks within which sensation travels ‘via human, technical and non-human means’ (Ash 2015, p. 131; see also Ash 2012). In figuring our affective interaction with digital images as produced through assemblages in which multiple ‘actors are in a state of constant interaction, learning and becoming’ (Hillis et al. 2015, p. 10), these analyses resonate with recent critical work on ‘media ecologies’ (Fuller 2005), ‘media ethologies’ (Parikka 2015) and ‘media habitus’ (Papacharissi and Easton 2013). Central to this emerging body of analysis are the imperatives, firstly, to address current media landscapes and their implications through a focus on complex *networks* or *assemblages* (rather than figuring particular media forms or technologies in isolation), and secondly, to understand mediation as a process that is neither bounded or linear, but rather, *ontological* and *relational*—and one with ongoing embodied and material implications. While writing nearly a century earlier, Dewey’s work resounds with these approaches in his guiding principle that gestures, affects and habits are always produced through the ‘cooperation of an organism and an environment’ ([1922]2012, p. 10). Embodied habits, Dewey suggests, work by *adapting to* a given environment (and taking aspects of it in), but they also function to *affect and reconfigure* environments—and because ‘environment’ is always multiple, embodied habitus too ‘is plural’ (24).<sup>12</sup> For our current purposes, what emerges clearly from these various perspectives, as Rebecca Coleman’s (2009, 2013) work has incisively illustrated, is that bodies and images are not separate; rather bodies *become* through images (a relational and ongoing process of mediation), and images are always connected to other images.

In approaching networked affect, then, we are, of course, never addressing the potential effects of *one* image, *one* GIF or *one* video in isolation, but rather, the *affective relations* among multiple, changing digital files and configurations.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Latour (2005), Shilling (2008), Grosz (2013), Coleman (2014).



Rentschler and Thrift (2015b) reflect on the implications of such dynamics in their analysis of feminist digital memes. Focusing on the evolving network of satiric responses that erupted online following Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's 'binders full of women' gaffe in 2012<sup>13</sup>, they suggest that the affective power and political efficacy of visual memes is enabled by the linked dynamics of *amplification* and *participation*. Memes are, by their very nature, propagative: it is in making some small, yet notable, modification to a previous visual contribution that each new contribution keeps the meme alive while simultaneously engendering politically salient humour. For instance, in the minutes and hours following Romney's comments, parodic responses in the form of a Tumbler, a Facebook Page and mock customer reviews for three-ring binders sold on Amazon.com emerged online. Image-macros bearing photos of Romney with witty captions such as 'Binder? I just met her!' were circulated rapidly across these sites, alongside a host of other contributions, from a picture of Patrick Swayze with the caption 'No one puts baby in a binder' to an image of Beyonce captioned with the phrase 'Better put three rings on it' (Rentschler and Thrift 2015b). Such digital resonances and reverberations among images, digital platforms and users, Rentschler and Thrift argue, work to *amplify affect*—in this case laughter that highlights the inadequacy of Republican responses to gender inequality in income and political governance.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as I will discuss later on, the creative and participatory elements of memes move a range of digital subjects beyond the position of spectator by engaging them in the political arts of 'crafting' and 'making'. Enabled, in part, by the technological capacities of social media, the dynamics of political memes could thus be seen (similar to Ash's analysis of GIFs) to work against the passive affective habituation which Sontag described as negating meaningful personal or social transformation.

Despite their focus on the links between images, affect and social change, what such vital contributions do not really address, however, are the material logics and mechanisms by which the 'intense', 'novel' or 'amplified' forms of affect produced within contemporary digital networks might be translated (or not) into more *enduring* capacities or forms of social transformation. In other words, at a material level, what does being repeatedly stimulated, moved or affected via images, GIFs or memes *do* and why does it matter? What kinds of wider embodied and socio-political changes might such everyday forms of affective mediation engender? More specifically, while Rentschler and Thrift argue that the propagative and participatory nature of memes increases their affective purchase, can this amplification lead to the development of new collective routines or tendencies—or do online 'flames' rise high only to quickly fizzle out (Paasonen 2015), leaving little meaningful material

<sup>13</sup> As Rentschler and Thrift note, 'On 16 October 2012, the Internet exploded with humorous visual image macros in response to Republican US presidential candidate Mitt Romney's answer to voter Katherine Fenton's question regarding women's pay inequity during the televised presidential debate. Romney replied, "I went to a number of women's groups and said: Can you help me find folks", and they brought us whole binders full of women"' (2015b, p. 330).

<sup>14</sup> For more on affective amplification in digital environments, see Ash (2012), who explores how videogame creators employ principles of 'affective design' involving techniques of 'amplification and modulation' to capture gamers' attention in particular ways.



or political trace? These questions seem important given the earlier warnings of thinkers such as Ravaissou, James and Dewey that enduring forms of personal or collective change are not likely to emerge through the charge of affect alone; indeed, unless the complex and deep-seated habits underlying embodied and socio-political patterns and tendencies are identified—and *affirmatively refigured*—transformation is likely to be both superficial and fleeting. Particular technological and social aspects of contemporary digital culture may well mitigate against cognitive disaffection—the ‘wearing off’ of shock in relation to images that Sontag discussed. At the same time, a critical concern remains: what *new habits* are being engendered through our everyday engagement with the visual affectivities of social media, and how might such processes relate to the desires for ‘progressive’ social change in which many on the political left remain invested?

In this vein, it seems significant that, instead of connecting the novelty or intensity of digital affect to the promise of progressive social transformation, other contributions to *Networked Affect* associate it with experiences of entrapment and the reproduction of the neoliberal status quo. For Susanna Paasonen, our habitual social media use is primarily driven by a search for affective intensity. However, this promise of intensity is rarely delivered and thus ‘the search for thrills, shocks and jolts continues despite, or perhaps because of, the boredom involved in browsing from one page to another’ (2015, p. 30). Like Paasonen, Jodi Dean understands digital affect as ‘a binding technique’; it fuels our compulsive attachment to social media platforms like ‘Facebook, Memegenerator, Tumbler, [and] Twitter’ (2015, p. 90). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic notions of ‘drive’, she contends that this repetitive process of seeking affective satisfaction online and ‘not reaching it’, produces a certain kind of pleasure: ‘the subject enjoys through repetition’ (2015, p. 90). Yet, crucially, it is this enjoyment—‘every tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition’—that *entraps* contemporary subjects within the affective logics of neoliberalism (90). Indeed, in Dean’s view, it is precisely when we think that we are pursuing progressive social change through our digital affective labour that we are actually providing the fuel that drives communicative capitalism.

While our ongoing search for affective sparks keeps us habitually glued to various digital platforms and threads, it does not, these scholars argue, engender robust habits of political engagement, solidarity and action. As Dean contends, our affective attachments to digital media do not produce actual political communities, but rather only ‘*feelings of community*’ (original italics, 91). Through our repetitive affective engagement online, she suggests, we are ultimately ‘*captured in our passivity*, or more precisely, by the reversion of our active engagements and interventions into passive forms of “being made aware” or “having been stated”’ (italics mine, 99). Channelling Ravaissou’s double law of habit, Dean makes a clear distinction between repeated feeling and repeated action—belying our compulsive desire to seek yet another affective spark, she contends, our digital interactions routinely ‘turn our activity into passivity’ (90). Thus, while those invested in the political promise of empathy argue that, through its affective charge, empathy can induce psychic or embodied transformation with the potential to spur action in the interest of social justice, Dean contends that the affective rhythms of contemporary



digital communication in fact *perpetually defer action*, keeping us trapped within the affective feedback loops of global capitalism. And for Dean, like Sontag, it is ultimately action, not feeling, that matters to projects of social justice.

### **Affective inhabitation: the activity of sensing**

Yet, are political feeling and political action as opposed as these scholars suggest? Is habitual affect always deadening of radical political force? In order to deepen our understanding of the links between visual images, media technologies and social change, we need to think more carefully about the relations between affect and habit, and the attendant states of passivity and activity. To do so, it is pertinent at this stage to explore the logics of the ‘double law of habit’ in greater detail.

While Ravaissou’s analysis, as I have described it so far, would appear to provide strong theoretical underpinning for the equation of repeated sensation with increasing passivity, the workings of habit and affect are actually more complicated than this. As Clare Carlisle notes, the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler, writing before Ravaissou in his 1736 text *The Analogy of Religion*, had already noted that ‘repetition has contrasting effects on actions and movements on the one hand, and sensations and feeling on the other’ (Carlisle 2014, p. 27). He argues, however, that in particular circumstances, feeling or sensing can be ‘turned into an activity’ which can ‘engender a heightening of experience rather than a diminution of feeling’ (2014, p. 82). From this perspective, feeling and action are not as distinct or oppositional as they may first appear; in fact, they are intimately intertwined. Ravaissou’s *Of Habit* ([1838]2008) illustrates this point through a comparison between the ‘drunkard’ and the connoisseur: While the drunkard ‘tastes his wine less and less as he continues to drink’, the ‘connoisseur develops a refined palate that makes him increasingly discerning’ (Carlisle 2014, p. 81)—his taste ‘becomes more and more delicate and subtle’ (Ravaissou, [1838]2008, p. 49). That is, through his attentiveness, the connoisseur transforms the effects of affective repetition so that they intensify, rather than diminish, his sensorial experience. Significantly, this kind of example does not invalidate the double law of habit; instead, it indicates that sensing has been made into an activity, ‘so that the law of active habit has greater effect than the law of passive habituation’ (Carlisle 2014, p. 81). In complicating presumed link between feeling and inaction, Butler’s and Ravaissou’s interventions resonate with the continental philosophy of Spinoza and Deleuze ([1968]2011), for whom affect is indicative of constant movement, flow and transformation in a universe where nothing ever truly repeats.

These philosophical mediations on affect and habituation raise wider critical questions about how we currently understand socio-political activity, progress and change—what we think counts as transformative ‘political action’ as well as how, and why, we routinely interpret passivity as that which simply reifies the status quo. If, as scholars of digital culture have argued, affect functions not only as a jolt or spark that might move us (at least temporarily), but also a ‘*binding technique*’ (Dean 2015) that keeps us attached or ‘stuck’ to a particular image, meme or digital platform, how, I want to ask, might we consider some of the more potentially





productive implications of such affective attachment? More specifically, when might the ‘stickiness’ of visual images or digital environments generate not (or not only) neoliberal entrapment, but rather (or also) more affirmative forms of political inhabitation or ‘staying with’? And how, in turn, might such immersive affective experiences engender forms of attentiveness, care and connection that transform sensing ‘into an activity’ with a range of political and ethical implications? My primary concern in this final section, then, is what happens when we re-read affective entrapment as *affective inhabitation*?

Such questions are engaged suggestively by Jill Bennet in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*. Here, Bennett explores the capacity of our affective engagement with ‘non-representational’ art to transform habitual modes of perception in ways that may be conducive to critical ethics and politics. Crucially, however, she stresses, drawing on the work of Deleuze and Massumi, that there is an important difference between images that are simply shocking and those which function as a ‘shock to thought’. Beyond the ‘the activation of an affective trigger’, genuinely transformative engagement with visual art requires the development of an ‘affective connection’ that sustains sensation to enable different forms of affective inhabitation (2005, p. 5). In other words, while affect can provide a jolt that thrusts us involuntarily into critical inquiry, it can also work as a binding technique that protracts our relationship with an image even after we physically turn away, compelling us to *inhabit*—to notice, attend to and reflect on—the sensorial intensity our encounter and its critical implications.

When this happens, I want to suggest, sensing can be ‘turned into an activity’ that engages the possibility of transformation at the level of habit—calling our attention to, as Tony Bennett puts it, the emergence of ‘gaps, intervals and blips’ in patterned perception which may ‘afford the opportunity for new forms of practice to be improvised’ (2013, pp. 126, 125).

Indeed, if perception is continually mediated by ‘affective scripts’ that have become habitual (Sontag 2003; Gibbs 2007), the very fact that such scripts are reproduced through the force of habit means that they are open to the possibility of modification. It is when we are made consciously aware of such patterns of seeing, through a sense that they have been disrupted, that we become attuned to the surfacing of ‘actionable spaces’ (Bennett 2013, 2015) for material transformation: for the re-making of dominant habits of perception, thought and conduct. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it in her discussion of habit and the senses, ‘sensations are the mark of the emergence of unpredictability, a delay or gap between stimulus and response ... They are antidotes to automatism and provocations to the generation of new actions’ (2013, p. 225). Conditions of viewing, however, are vital to such processes. As Jill Bennett argues, the repeated reincorporation of affect back into dominant scripts (through, for example, the emergence of ‘compassion fatigue’) is a result of ‘viewing disturbing images under conditions that precisely *don’t* compel one’s continued involvement’ (original italics, 2005, p. 64). Under what environmental and material circumstances sensing prompted by images might become an activity that enables intervention in everyday conduct to re-make existing habits of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting, then, remains an important open question. Yet what is clear from the above analysis is that meaningful and enduring forms of



transformation require the ongoing interaction of ‘the affective’ and ‘the habitual’—a relational dynamic central to processes of affective inhabitation.

Thinking further about how our engagement with visual images might imbricate affect and habit in transformative ways, I want to return now to the realm of digital media and culture. Recall that in Rentschler and Thrift’s (2015b) analysis of feminist online activism, the political efficacy of visual memes depends on *both* affective amplification and creative participation. In other words, in political practices of meme-making, feeling and action (or affect and habit) are never separate, but rather, always materially bound up together. Memes like ‘Binders Full of Women’ propagate, in large part, because of the affective jolts and sensations they engender (i.e. a burst of politically salient laughter, the powerful sense of inhabiting an ad hoc feminist community). At the same time, the very fact that memes require imaginative forms of re-mixing and re-purposing in order to *be* memes, points to the *active* forms of digital practice they entail. Importantly, as Rentschler and Thrift underscore, such collective and relational forms of crafting (which frequently blur the divide between online and offline activity) work to constitute vital feminist *techné*—the embodied skills, techniques and habits of ‘doing feminism’ online (2015a). As such, meme-making is, for these authors, not only about creating ‘feelings of community’ (as Dean would have it), but also about cultivating an ‘embodied relationship to technology, a learned and *socially habituated* way of doing things with machines, tools, interfaces, instruments, and media’ (italics mine, 2015a, p. 242). Thus, rather than constituting a passive form of digital entrapment, memes offer a powerful ‘medium of action’, a practice ‘that transforms the very material of culture’ (2015b, p. 341)—and, I would add, the very material of bodies.

Crucially, contemplating the interactions of affect and habit through the visual intensities of digital culture also enables us to re-approach the meaning and logics of ‘social change’ itself. I began this article by noting the investment many continue to sustain in the power of visual images to act as turning points for processes of collective and structural transformation. Yet, instead of focusing on major turning points, pivotal political events or revolutionary transformation, Rentschler and Thrift’s analysis of digital memes calls attention to the significance of *linked* moments of affecting and being affected, of making and re-making, that *resound* across time. From this perspective, ‘social change’ is figured not as a dramatic endpoint on the horizon but rather as *alive in the present* in ‘the “reverberation” or “resonance” of feminist energy ... from one event form to another, even when temporally or geographically removed’ (2015a, p. 243). This is a vision of socio-political transformation, then, that eschews teleological narratives of historical progress to approach change as imminent and ongoing—as continually pulsating through emergent affective relations and networks. In this ontology of change, the accumulation and reverberation of micro interactions, gestures, and habits may be just as (or more) significant than ‘revolutionary’ events. Importantly, however, as Dewey ([1922]2012) and other philosophers of habit have argued, the course of ‘progressive’ transformation cannot be plotted deterministically in advance—it may only be possible to discern in retrospect which collective actions or interactions



made a difference in a given context; what peaked and fizzled and what took shape and endured.

Thus, in considering the relationship between visual images and social transformation, we must ask not only *how change works* at a material level but also *what counts as change*. In order to better appreciate what might be unexpectedly politically significant and transformative across time, Rentschler and Thrift shift onto-epistemological registers from ‘the major’ to the ‘minor’. This is, I want to suggest, significant. As the philosopher Erin Manning argues, when we maintain an ‘unwavering belief in the major as the site where events occur’, we not only reify a normative understanding of what counts as change, we also blunt our ability to sense the ‘minoritarian tendencies’ that underlie and pulse through ‘the major’ (2016, p. 1). It is precisely such ‘minor gestures’, Manning contends, that offer the potential for alternative capacities and forms of habituation ‘in germ’ to be activated, for the ‘altering of what that tendency can do’ (x). In turn, I want to argue, it is through inhabiting our ongoing sensorial experience in the present that we can hone our attunement to alternative possibilities for perception and conduct in the making—for the potential for existing habits and tendencies to become otherwise.

## Conclusions

Through an analysis of visual images and media technologies, this article has argued that theorising affect and habit as imbricated may enable us to better appreciate the contemporary dynamics and possibilities of socio-political change. While affective habituation is widely associated with the deadening process of compassion fatigue, our continual becoming through images does not, I have suggested, inevitably lead to desensitisation or disaffection. Rather, when we are compelled to *inhabit* our sensorial responses to visual culture, we may become better attuned to the workings *and potentialities* of everyday habits of seeing, feeling, thinking and interacting. Thus, while affect’s role as a ‘binding technique’ may entrap us within the compulsive circuits of communicative capitalism (Dean 2015), it might also alert us to the *malleability* of our habitual ways of being in the world. As my discussion of digital media, in particular, has sought to illustrate, however, our encounters with images do not act as singular turning points in the production of radical change. Rather, in a context in which images are always connected to other images (as well as bodies, infrastructures and environments) more enduring forms of socio-political transformation may emerge less through ‘affective revolutions’ than they do via the *accumulation, reverberation and reshaping* of seemingly minor affective responses, interactions, gestures and habits.

Returning to the haunting photograph of Alan Kurdi this piece opened with, it is perhaps impossible to say with any certainty what material impact it had or may continue to have over time. The fact that it was *this* image (and not one of the thousands of other photographs of darker-skinned, less ‘European-looking’ refugee children internationally) that elicited such a powerful public response may be interpreted as evidence of deeply rooted habits of racism and ethnocentrism being relentlessly reproduced. Moreover, the watering down or retraction of the



humanitarian policies towards refugees that the photograph initially prompted might be taken as proof of the inevitability of affective desensitisation and the unstoppable force of neoliberal and neocolonial habits of governance. And yet, the complex travels and transformations of the photograph—through print, television, social media, art and activism—generated opportunities for affecting and being affected, habituation and re-habituation, and reflection and reverberation that *exceeded* the contours of its initial reception in unpredictable ways. Having seen the mural of Kurdi in Frankfurt, for example, some asked why it had been painted in Germany and not Syria—a question that prompted wider critical discussions regarding the transnational contours and causes of the European refugee crises, as well as the ethical obligations it entailed (Bill 2016). When the mural was vandalised by suspected far-right nationalists a few months later (who scrawled ‘borders save lives’ across the painting) conversations again erupted across a range of platforms regarding the racialised politics of international border controls. Local citizens subsequently initiated a fundraising campaign to enable the artists to restore the painting, insisting, as Şen puts it, that ‘No human being is illegal’ (Bill 2016).

Furthermore, shortly Kurdi’s photograph was released, the online news site *Buzzfeed* posted a listicle of ‘17 Heartbreaking Cartoons from Artists All Over the World Mourning the Drowned Syrian Boy’ (Broderick 2015). In response, some denounced the ‘memefication’ of the image and queried the ethics of sharing this kind of photograph online. The Australian journalist Chad Parkhill argued, for instance, that such ‘derivative’ images inevitably sap affective ‘power from the original’, abstracting from its singular capacity to reveal a ‘human being whose short life was ended by a catastrophic chain of human failures’ (2015). Yet, for others, it is possible that the creative re-purposing of the image is precisely what sustained and heightened its affective purchase. Importantly, both critical and sympathetic responses to the photograph’s digital propagation signalled forms of affective connection—acts of ‘staying with’ the image and the sensation it engendered. What might emerge as significant about such *linked moments* across time and space, and the resonance of political energy pulsing through them, remains to be known. What seems clear, however, is that the shock of Alan Kurdi’s image functioned not simply as an ‘affective trigger’, but also as a ‘hook’ into ‘more extended form[s] of engagement’ (Bennett 2005, p. 65)—it is through the such processes of affective inhabitation, I have suggested, that our mediated habits might be re-mediated.

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