

THE ARROW MAKER #1: LISA BLACKMAN (2015)

A Few Notes on Automaticity

Automatisms are defined as those 'actions that are so remarkably divorced from a feeling of doing' (Ansfield and Wegner, 1996: 483), that they are often attributed to supernatural forces. People often feel as if they are directed by someone or something else; actions or feelings are not experienced as phenomenologically willed. They do not have a conscious sense of acting; this experience of a conscious sense of acting is what Daniel Wagner (the Harvard scientist) and others have termed the 'phenomenal will'. Automaticity is a concept and area of research that I have become fascinated by as it suggests that we can be moved by objects, artifacts, devices, technologies and apparatuses (which involve human and non-human actors and agencies), that we become connected to. The question of what and how we are connected is one that I think remains a mystery, but for many it is via a distinctly physiological body - via our eyes, hands, voices, nervous systems or brain processes, for example.

I want to argue that automaticity is interesting for arts and humanities research and practice, as it not only speaks to some of our current concerns regarding affect and materiality, but also because it foregrounds phenomenology - that is the lived experience of mediation in this context. Within the diverse area of research into automaticity, either subjects feel as if they are consciously acting, when actually they have been made to move by the experimental apparatus, or they feel they have been made to move, when in fact, within the confines of the experiment it can be demonstrated that they haven't. Thus, what is important is not the so-called half second delay between action and thinking - a popular mantra within affect studies (Libert, 1983; Massumi, 2002), but rather the phenomenological experience of will or automaticity and how this might be understood and analysed. This area of research has developed a rather convincing critique of Libert's studies on reaction-time and their validity and reliability, which demands attention. The return of phenomenology to my argument might seem surprising given the turn to affect, which for many presents a 'crisis of the phenomenological, experiencing human subject' (Parikka, 2012: 84). I hope to convince you that this area of study, for me at least, suggests that we have not resolved the relationship between mind and matter by reducing mind to matter, or to the neurophysiological body (what Massumi and many others refer to as the non-cognitive or non-representational), and that the question of mediation and embodiment and how to understand this relationship is still very much at stake.

The phenomenology of automatism is also interesting because it enacts a relationship with the pre-history of psychology, primarily psychic research (specifically research into automatic writing, table turning, tilting and tapping, dowsing or divining). It is also related to 19th century automatism, in the form of contagions which spread throughout populations with a speed and rapidity which appeared to defy the action of rational logic. It also has a rather queer kinship to experiences, which disrupt the borders and boundaries between the inside and outside, voluntary and involuntary, conscious and non-conscious, cognitive and affective, self and other, material and immaterial, past and present, (including hypnotic suggestion, telepathy, facilitated communication). As many have argued, including Elizabeth Valentine (2012) in a recent special issue of *The History of the Human Sciences*, psychology's forgotten relationship to psychic research was forged during the discipline's professionalization throughout the 20th century. Psychic research, entities and practices were either rejected, or entered and took shape within a marginal sub-discipline, para-psychology, or latterly appear as oddities or puzzles in its more respected counter-part, anomalistic psychology.

I am not going to dwell on what automaticity is and how we might explain these feelings as I am primarily drawn to the ambiguities and anomalies in the literature, and what these might suggest for reflecting upon affect, embodiment and mediation. Most if not all scientists who work in this area would argue, they are 'puzzling phenomenon' (Ansfield and Wegner, 1996: 500). As Ansfield and Wegner, argue, 'the automatism include some of the most enigmatic behaviours facing modern psychology' (p. 501). What is also interesting is that this work has emerged from cognitive science and show the limits of cognition for understanding what moves people to act, think and feel within complex processes of co-enaction and co-constitution. As Wegner and Sparrow (2007:17) provocatively ask in relation to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing-; who led and who followed? 'Rogers did everything he did, backwards and in high heels!' What is interesting is that automaticities also speak to many of the phenomena and concepts that humanities scholars are drawing on to imagine, conceptualise and animate affective processes, including contagion, suggestion, priming, and so forth.

One recent book, which explicitly draws on automaticity to explore the virality or viral logic of network culture is a book by the cultural theorist, Tony Sampson (2012). He argues that contagion and theories of contagion are important if we want to understand communication processes, especially within populations who are now networked, that is connected in ways that he suggests intensify the spread of communication. The question for Sampson, as with many others, is exactly what does spread? Clearly not just information as understood within traditional media theory, as what spreads includes political rumours, fads, fashions, trends, gossip, hype, emotions, feelings, affects, sensations and moods, for example; forms of contagious communication that as many people have argued, take us back to

19th century concerns and potentially to those theorists, such as Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon, whose interests in contagion underpinned their own models of sociality. Sampson announces the present as an 'age of contagion' (ibid: 1), and brings the past, primarily Gabriel Tarde's work into dialogue with contemporary neuromarketing, social psychology (particularly the work of Stanley Milgram), and reconfigured through a Deleuzian 'topographical diagrammatics' (ibid: 3) to allow him to grasp what he calls 'contagious relationality' (ibid:3). This is an attempt to grasp the particularity of biopolitical strategies in the present, which he suggests attempt to modulate and exploit emotion and affect, as well as to affectively prime social atmospheres; what he calls a pre-emption tendency 'for increasingly connected populations to pass on and imitate the suggestions of others' (p. 5).

Priming is a key technique within automaticity research and one that is seen to connect up different scales of automaticity or what we might call levels of co-enaction, which might include mimicry, physically coupled action, through to participating in complex connective networks which afford the spread of particular contagions; think of the 2012 Gangnam Style meme and all its imitative copies, for example. In this sense, priming is seen to refer to the processes which produce a failure in the phenomenology of will to recognise one's entanglement within processes of willing action. However, the question of what spreads and why is still a complex and vexed question that remains within this work and invites new forms of empirical research. The invocation of priming, contagion and automaticity, although undermining the doctrine that we always know what we are doing, think and feel (a doctrine attributed in the past to those who were considered overly susceptible and suggestible, especially within histories of media studies research as Valerie Walkerdine and myself explore in our book, *Mass Hysteria*), does raise important questions about those resonances and reverberations which are as much part of contagious communications as are ideas, images and beliefs. However, unlike Sampson I am wary of invoking a 'neurological unconscious' to explain this, as this does not take into account the anomalies, ambiguities and controversies in the contemporary automaticity literature, which are striking and important to open up.

This takes me to the archive I am interested in, and my own particular approach to affect, embodiment and mediation, which I have started to explore in my recent book, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (2012). I call this a subliminal archive, which brought together artists, scientists, philosophers, writers, lawyers and doctors, who were all interested in experiences which appeared to breach the boundaries between the self and other, inside and out, material and immaterial and even the dead or alive. In the book I explore some early experiments on automaticity which took place at William James Harvard Psychological laboratory, under the tutelage of Hugo Munsterberg (famous in media studies for his early book on film, called *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*). What I became

interested in within this archive of practices, entities, agencies and forms of experimentation was the approach to automacity being enacted. This was a more performative analytics of experimentation, devising experiments which attempted to become-sensitive to what the experimental apparatus might produce. This included attending to particular thresholds of training, discipline and choreography. The experimental apparatus remained undecided about the ontological status of the phenomenon that were produced – which included automatic writing, for example. The phenomena under question were approached more as threshold experiences to be mediated (and on this basis what it might be possible to produce), rather than processes which could be measured, quantified, and explained through particular neuro-psychological concepts and entities. Of course the traces of this positivist tradition were taking form, but there were more fluid boundaries between philosophy, art, literature, science and psychic research, and arguably there was more attention paid to the invention and creativity of experimentation as a particular staging of events within a temporal and spatial location. Arguably the approach was more machinic and this has been charted by Schmidgen (2005) in relation to neurophysiological experimentation, and Sofie Lachapelle (2011) in relation to the histories of psychical research from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

The focus on the experimental apparatus as a form of staging, and the forms of creative experimentation that were developed, act as an interesting precursor to some of the more performative approaches to matter and experimentation that we find in the work of the queer theorist and quantum physicist, Karen Barad, for example. The term subliminal, which was often used to describe the phenomenon that were produced also opened up to the assumption that experiences could be produced and transmitted across space and time, and I still want to hold that fascinating assumption open. To that instance I am currently playing with the term *transliminal* to describe my approach to affect, which moves affect away ultimately from being registered or grounded within a neurophysiological body. The use of the term subliminal in much work on affect is used to refer to the non-representational processes which operate below the threshold of conscious attention and awareness. The problem for me with this concept is it still grounds affect ultimately within a highly specific and culturally contingent specification of the human subject - one with a fairly unified and distinct nervous system and brain, which is distinguished often by differentiations made between the intentional and the non-intentional, reproducing splits or dualisms between affect and cognition, for example. The concept of the transliminal is interesting because it refuses these distinctions and assumes that brains, nervous systems, pasts and presents can be shared across both space *and* time. As I argue in my book, this presumption is very much part of neuroscience's forgotten history and one that I try to resurrect by engaging work on the double brain and bicameral consciousness. We can be both 'one yet many' and how this is enacted, performed,

lived and experienced is still a fascinating question that demands interdisciplinary engagement across the arts, sciences and humanities. It also leads us towards 'meaning beyond words' and the role that writing as an experimental practice might play in helping to shape and extend our understanding of what counts as empirical, perhaps by performing, enacting, shaping and intervening in all those liminal processes and states which automaticities disclose.

Bibliography

Ansfield, M.E and Wegner, D (1996) 'The Feeling of Doing' in P. M. Gollwitzer and J. A. Bargh (eds) *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behaviour*. New York and London: Routledge.

Lachapelle, S (2011) *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metapsychics in France, 1853-1931*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Libert, B et al (1983) 'Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activity (readiness potential). The unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act'. *Brain* 106(3): 623.

Massumi, Brian (2002) *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.

Parikka, J (2012) *What is Media Archaeology?* Cambridge, Polity Press.

Sampson, T (2012) *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Minneapolis: The Minnesota Press.

Schmidgen, Henning (2005) 'The Donders Machine: Matter, Signs and Time in a Physiological Experiment, 1865', *Configurations* 13(2): 211-256.

Valentine, Elizabeth (2012) 'Editorial'. Special Issue on the Relations between Psychical Research and Academic Psychology in Europe, the USA and Japan. *History of the Human Sciences* 25(2).

Wegner, D. M., & Sparrow, B. (2007). The puzzle of coaction. In D. Ross, D. Spurrett, H. Kincaid, & L. Stephens (Eds.), *Distributed cognition and the will* (pp. 17-38). Cambridge, MA : MIT Press.