Senses of Affective Worldmaking

Affective Assemblages: Queer Worldmaking as Critically Reparative Reading

Claudia Breger

In their 1998 article "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe "queer culture" as "a world-making project," with the emphasis that "'world,' like 'public,' differs from community or group" in that it "includes more people" and spaces "than can be identified," and "modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright" (558). Thus, they introduce the concept of worldmaking to outline a process of countercultural agency in an asymmetrical public sphere, in which the "taken-for-granted" institutions, narratives, and feelings of heteronormative culture "share an appearance of plenitude" generally unavailable to the more "fragile and ephemeral" expressions of queer culture (558–559; 561). With reference to phenomenological social theory, Berlant and Warner map queer worldmaking as a mobile "space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines" and "projected horizons" that fails to congeal into "community or identity" but aims to provide "[n]onstandard intimacies" with a "less fleeting" existence: "public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (559; 562). Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (1999) uses the notion of worldmaking—here with reference to Nelson Goodman's constructivist classic *Ways of Worldmaking*—to highlight the "ability" of minoritarian performances "to establish" counterpublics as "alternate views of the world" (195). Even in *de*constructing majoritarian culture, these performances "build an alternative reality" and accomplish "nothing short of the actual making of worlds" (196; 200).

From my perspective, it is this intertwining of constructivist *and* ontological, experiential *and* agential emphases that makes the concept so promising for cultural and aesthetic theory. To be sure, worldmaking's increasing rise to prominence in literary, media, and cultural theory over the past couple of decades has been very heterogeneous, with diverging philosophical roots and many politically less-than-exciting applications. However, connecting productive impulses from different traditions has allowed me to develop a syncretic model that, I argue, unfolds worldmaking's queer (and more generally counterhegemonic) potential for the context of aesthetic worldmaking practices in different media environments. My own work on the topic to date has, with some specificity, mostly focused on literature and cinema and aimed to attend to their medial affordances (see Breger 2017; 2018; 2020). However, the model as such can be adapted to other media environments, perhaps with the caveat that it underlines the political potential of complex and detailed engagements and thus more smoothly resonates with the extensive forms, for example, of serial TV or theater performance than with those of individual Twitter posts. But perhaps we could also rethink larger social media streams and networks in resonant ways?

One of the underlying key ideas of my syncretic conceptualization can be highlighted by spelling the concept with a set of brackets: *world(mak)ing*. The backdrop here is that, in film studies and literary narrative theory, notions of world*mak*ing have been most influentially delineated by cognitive theorists. Their uses of the concept tend to privilege presumably "classical" forms of narrative with coherent plots and stable, goal-oriented characters. For cognitivists, affect mostly comes into play in the form of clear-cut, evaluatively grounded emotions and corresponding audience engagements of empathy, sympathy, or antipathy, which are ideally rewarded by straightforward narrative resolutions (e.g., Herman; Petterson; Plantinga). But these are forms that do not leave much room for the dynamic, tenuous, counterhegemonic assertions pursued by Berlant, Warner, and Muñoz. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, many queer theorists remain skeptical of narrative as such, citing its supposed linearity, teleology, and heteronormativity (see Warhol and Lanser 8). My solution to this conundrum is to infuse

the concept of worldmaking with the nonlinear "worlding" energies that have been foregrounded in Deleuzian affect studies. Rather than clear-cut emotions, Deleuzian scholars have underlined the ways in which affective "intensity" disrupts narrative and sociolinguistic codings (Massumi, *Parables* 28)." Instead of storyworlds populated and generated by individuals with intentions, they are interested in affective flows as bodily processes of "*becoming*" or (often with reference to Spinozist philosophy) *worlding*, unfolding in unstable fields of "transindividual entanglement" that precede or exceed seemingly autonomous individuals.[1]

I reconceptualize narrative world(mak)ing, then, as a performative process of affective encounter and *multidimensional, 'multivectoral' assemblage*. This emphatically includes the non-linear forms associated with modernism and postmodernism into the domain of narrative, along with genres and modes of spectacular, theatrical, or bodily "excess"—musical, melodrama, camp, splatter…—and contemporary forms such as Berlant's "situation" that respond to the "waning" of more traditional genres (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 5–6). Simultaneously, my definition of world(mak)ing underlines how even the composition and reception of comparatively "straightforward" stories proceed through multivectoral processes of affective association: as I write, read, act, direct, or watch, my narratives are co-composed by the affective charges and (personal and public) memory and fantasy snippets that attach to words, images, gestures, or sounds. In short, affective narrative worldmaking assemblages configure the heterogeneous stuff of affects, associations, experiences, evaluations, forms, intertextual links, matter, perspectives, perceptions, sensations, interpretations,

1 Seigworth and Gregg 3; their emphasis; Massumi, *The Power* 14, see also 107–108 on worlding. Seigworth and Gregg reference Spinoza in this context for his discussion of the "affectual composition of a world" (always in the singular) in the "force-relations" between bodies (3; their emphasis). Massumi underlines that, for Spinoza, affects are basically "ways of connecting," indicating "embeddedness in a larger field of life" (110).

topoi, and tropes in and through different media. In the realms of aesthetic worldmaking—be it literature, film, or live performance—these processes of narrative assemblage are firmly anchored in the rhetorical loops of composition (or production) and reading (or spectatorship).

The Deleuzian notion of assemblage is helpful to me in that it designates processes of complex, multiple connections between radically heterogeneous but always already entangled elements, including "bodies" and "utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs" (Deleuze 177). The latter is important in that some of Deleuze's other work and its reception in affect studies have been marked by very oppositional mappings of 'bodies/affect vs. signification,' or ontology and rhetoric (see, e.g., Massumi, *Parables* 27–28; *The Power*, 105). This, however, undertheorizes affect's own socio-symbolic entanglements, for example, the ways in which even inchoate surges of anxiety (or joy) or unintentional bodily gestures of shame can be shaped by heteronormative culture. Thus, with respect to aesthetic texts, speaking of assemblages helps me to theorize the ways in which (such) affects attach to words in literary texts—and vice versa, socio-semiotic meanings to audiovisual spectacle or bodily performance.

In the context of gender and queer studies, my use of the concept also follows Jasbir Puar's critique of the static metaphor of intersectionality and call to supplement it with assemblage's ability to foreground instability, process, and change ("Queer Times;" "I Would"). My model of affective narrative assemblages thus makes conceptual room for the complexity and instability of identification and affective response and the ways in which literary texts, films, or other aesthetic texts reconfigure hegemonic structures of feeling by unfolding incongruous, layered, conflicting, and unexpected feelings. For example, sudden bursts, or slivers, of affect at odds with positionality-based alignments or dominant narrative invitations to empathize can open up different forms of belonging. As indicated, however, productive instability does not equal the complete absence of narrative. If Deleuzian approaches to affect have often emphasized affect's potential of disruption

over everything else,[2] I underline the concept of worlding also for its counter-emphasis: as a process of "linking things" by "sensing them out" (Stewart 342). In worlding, affect's "interrupting" force simultaneously induces a "rebeginning of the world" (Massumi, *The Power*, 107–108). I argue that we can productively link worlding's multivectoral interplay of disruption and (temporal) connection to queer studies' discussions about nonlinear, layered temporalities. For example, it resonates with Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of "form" as "that" which "turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways" to seemingly "banal" forms of "being" (Freeman xiii). Or, returning to Muñoz's more programmatic conceptualization, the temporal as well as spatial multivectorality of narrative world(mak)ing might facilitate the counterhegemonic "work" of "looking beyond" our "toxic" present and reimaging "collective futurity," not least in drawing on a "queer past" (Muñoz, *Cruising* 27–28).

Another important aspect of my syncretic model of affective worldmaking assemblages is that it clears a path between intentionalist (cognitive and rhetorical) models, on the one hand, and the "non-subject-oriented politics" (Puar, "I would" 50) of Deleuzian and other posthumanist approaches, on the other hand. Drawing on Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, along with contemporary feminist and queer phenomenologies, I argue that affective worldmaking is always undertaken *collectively* by *nonsovereign* actors. On one level, the emphasis on collectivity aims to give significance to the empirical plurality of human participants involved not only in the making of a film or performance, but even the composition, distribution, and reception of "single-authored" pieces of literature or art, from agents and editors to various lay and professional audiences. On another level, the involvement of the collective designates how each individual participant's actions are (in Latour's catchy wordings) "*overtaken*" or "*other-taken*" rather than sovereign in the sense of autonomous or free from external control (Latour, *Reassembling* 45; his emphases). While Latour's theory of non-sovereign action can be located in a long lineage

2 See e.g. Massumi, *Parables*, 28; 2015; see critically Brinkema vii.

of subject-critical interventions from psychoanalysis and modernist sociology to Deleuzian posthumanism, his emphasis on the networks entangling humans with other humans as well as "nonhuman" actors is helpful for spelling out the complexity of the processes at stake. The networked character of action entails the interfaces between human, keyboard, camera, microphones, and other technology that have been underlined by Latourian media theory, but also, again, the variously non- or partially conscious assemblages of affects, memories, fantasies, and discourse elements circulating through the bodies and brains of authors, directors, and audiences. It further encompasses the constraints and affordances of the market, financing, genre norms, circulation contexts, and audience expectations; and finally, it allows us to give weight to characters and narrative agents as significant nodes of (overtaken) action (see, e.g., Felski).

My model does not take this emphasis on non-sovereignty in a radically posthumanist direction. In the assemblages of divergent desires and normativities, non-sovereign affective worldmaking processes regularly operate below the individual's full consciousness and beyond their control, but this does not mean that we ought to bypass the sensations, experiences, and active responses of these human actors. Feminist and queer phenomenologies have been crucial in orienting us towards the ways in which transindividual affective circulations shape individual and collective perceptions, alignments, and identifications.[3] In attending to these processes, we can acknowledge non-sovereign agency as embodied and affective as well as political and (more or less) ethical (see also Butler 47–48). Latour himself underlines a resonant methodological orientation in the call to "follow the actors" and deploy their "own world-making abilities," for example, by "listening to what people are saying" about "why they are deeply *attached, moved, affected* by the works of arts which 'make them' feel things."[4]

3 See Sedgwick; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; *Queer Phenomenology*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

4 Latour, *Reassembling*, 12, 161, 236 (Latour's emphasis). For a resonant reading of Latour see, in particular, Felski.

As indicated by these quotes, the commitment to tracing non-sovereign agency intersects with broader reorientations towards reparative and "postcritical" reading methodologies in the humanities. Encouraging us to shed the "intellectual baggage" of the prevailing "hermeneutics of suspicion" and its "paranoid" reading practices, Eve Sedgwick introduced the notion of reparative reading as a (carefully phenomenological) methodology of "imaginative close reading," unpacking "local, contingent relations" between knowledge fragments and narrative contexts (145, 124).[5] The reparative position, Sedgwick spells out, is grounded in negative feelings or the full acknowledgment of negative world realities, but its orientation is "to assemble or 'repair'" in a spirit of "love," of the "*seeking of pleasure,*" self-care, empathy and/or ethical recognition of the other as "once good" (128, 137; Sedgwick's emphasis). Drawing on Sedgwick as well as Latour's forceful criticism of scholarly critique, Ann Cvetkovich, Rita Felski, Heather Love, and others have since similarly urged us to reflexively ground our reading practices in a full spectrum of (negative and positive) affects, in close attention to textual detail and complexity, as well as respect for other voices.[6] Others, to be sure, have objected, insisting on the importance of forceful critique precisely in our moment of increasingly less egalitarian neoliberalism and the rise of new fascisms (e.g., Harcourt). As I write at the end of 2020, postcritical insistences on generosity and love may, in fact, strain many of our queer, feminist, anti-racist, political sensitivities more than a few years ago. How on earth should or could we rely on tracing others' worldmaking processes with patience and empathy in the face of intensified asymmetrical precarity and raging culture wars of today's heightened racisms, interarticulated with renewed violent transphobia, sexually repressive agendas, and the right's absurd "anti-genderist" crusades?

5 Sedgwick cites Paul Ricoeur's notion of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and develops the concept of the reparative from Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis.

6 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", Cvetkovich; Felski,*The Limits; Anker and Felski, eds.*; Love.

Then again, careful attention to detail, nuance, layers, and the attempt to make sense of people's anxiety, anger, and hate may simultaneously be more needed than ever. Even as we need radical change or revolution, Cvetkovich emphasizes, an orientation at affective worldmaking processes does not deliver "magic bullet solutions, … just the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation" (2). Already in the 2000s, Muñoz underlined that queer worldmaking entails "both a critique and" a "reparative gesture" (*Cruising* 118). In facilitating layered readings of specific worldmaking practices, my own methodology aims to finetune situational imbrications of such critical and reparative modes in sorting through complex, often incongruous, and almost always unstable assemblages, for example, of anger, anxiety, hate, despair, longing, and optimism. In political orientation, this implies, among other things, that I harbor few illusions about the productivity of (naïve) dialogue with the proponents of right-wing ideology while I do put some faith in the slow work of trying to make sense of the worldmaking orientations even of Trump or *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) voters.

In the realm of literature, this work turns to and lets itself be inspired by novels such as Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), with its haunting direct address to the narrator's (traumatized, abusive) "monster" mother (13) and its powerful exploration of the protagonist's layered (desiring, painful, angry, tender, violent) relationship with Trevor, a white, "redneck" (155) kid living amidst addiction in a trailer home. A reparative perspective, Cvetkovich underlines, "embraces conflict rather than separating out right from wrong" in such "generational, racial" and "sexual" mesh-ups, displacing the critical rush to "metacommentary" with "new forms of description that are more textured, more localized, and also less predictably foregone in their conclusions" (10–12). In tracing how affect momentarily dissolves but also turns into identity ("two complete bodies without subjects;" "you are the hunted, a hurt he can't refuse," 156, see also 122), Vuong's narrator fears that they are "not telling you a story as much as a shipwreck" (190). But, as I have argued in this piece, the aesthetic and political power of queer worldmaking assemblages may be, precisely

in their ability and commitment to make visible and take time for these "pieces" of "floating" experience (190), imaginatively deploying the pressure they exert on hegemonic identities in carefully mapping, vividly imagining, and forcefully giving weight to alternative worlds of queer, anti-racist coalition building and solidarity.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.

——. *Queer Phenomenology*. Duke UP, 2006.

Anker, Elizabeth S. and Rita Felski, editors. *Critique and Postcritique*. Duke UP, 2017.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

——, and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547–566.

Breger, Claudia. "Affects in Configuration: A New Approach to Narrative Worldmaking." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 227–251.

——. "Cosmopolitanism, Controversy, and Collectivity: Zadie Smith's Networked Narration." *Edinburgh Companion to Narrative Theories*, edited by Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol. Edinburgh UP, 2018, pp. 83–98.

——. *Making Worlds: Affect and Collectivity in Contemporary European Cinema*. Columbia UP, 2020.

Butler, Judith. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard UP, 2015.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke UP, 2012.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Eight Years Later: 1980 Interview." *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, edited by David Lapoujade. Translated by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina. Semiotext(e), 2006, pp. 175–180.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010.

Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett, 1978.

Harcourt, Bernard E., and Didier Fassin, editors. *A Time for Critique*. Columbia UP, 2019.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Latour, Bruno. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Harvard UP, 1999.

——. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.

——. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30 no.2, 2004, pp. 225–248.

Love, Heather. "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 371–391.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke UP, 2002.

——. *The Power at the End of the Economy*. Duke UP, 2015.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

——. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2009.

Pettersson, Bo. *How Literary Worlds Are Shaped: A Comparative Poetics of Literary Imagination*. de Gruyter, 2018.

Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. The University of California Press, 2009.

Puar, Jasbir. "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1 2012, pp. 49–66.

——. "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages." *Social Text*, vol. 23, no. 3–4, 2005, pp. 121–139.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke UP, 2003.

Seigworth, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Duke UP, 2010, pp. 1–25.

Stewart, Kathleen. "Afterword: Worlding Refrains." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth pp. 339–353.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Penguin Press, 2019.

Warhol, Robyn and Susan S. Lanser. Introduction. *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, edited by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser. The Ohio State UP, 2015, pp. 1–20.