

## Affect and Promotional Culture

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The role of promotional culture is to focus perceptions around the values associated with consumerism and free market economic ideologies, to shape the world around its own priorities. But there is a disconnect between the critique of promotional culture and its real world consequences. There is a taken-for-granted force that motivates our everyday participation in promotional culture. There has to be something that inspires us to continually consume the commodities promoted, there has to be something about promotional culture that draw us in, captivates our attention successfully, and maintains it. Otherwise why would we buy the products and participate in the lifestyles promoted when we ultimately know how constructed they are. Affect plays a determining role in our relationship with promotional culture, the connection the envelops us into promotional culture in a way that supersedes our rational mind.

What, then, is affect? The easiest way to begin to understand affect is to separate it from its typical partner, effect. Effects are reactions, consequences, and results. Affects are actions. Affecting something is to act on something, to compel an impression onto something or someone that results in a shift. One affect causes another affect and then another in an endless chain. Affect theory is about exploring and understanding these chains. It is in a sense a really basic concept: there are things that affect you, that both subtly and overtly change and shape your perceptions and consequently your actions. Your actions in turn affect both other people's affects, and your own future affects.

The concept of affect comes from Baruch Spinoza, a seventeenth-century philosopher who wrote that affect involves: "The affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections . . . . The human body can undergo many changes and nevertheless retain impressions or traces of objects and consequently the same images of things."<sup>1</sup>

So affects to Spinoza involve feelings that actually impact you at a visceral level. You feel affects, and the awareness of this feeling shapes your perception. It can enhance or impede your intended perspective, since it is embodied it is so convincing that it can overwhelm rational thought. Affect connects mind and body. The mind creates an affective reaction that is realized within the body

Affect is a pre-cognitive function that shapes perception at a fundamental level. It is created in everything we experience in day-to-day life, established and encouraged through familiarity and convention. Affects are described in terms of resonance, an affect resonates with someone when it causes a reaction. Another way of describing affect is through intensity. When an affect resonates it does so with a certain intensity. Affects are incessantly trying to attract our attention, and those that do instantaneously evoke a reaction. Individual affects occur in circuits, from the moment of recognition, through to the expression. So we only know that affect is occurring in the moment, at the end of its circuit. Each affect is a unique instance with its own particular reaction. They can never be copied or re-created, they are ephemeral moments. Once

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), p. 104.

the moment has passed, another affect begins. But past affects are not forgotten, they aggregate and combine as a means of mediating future affects.

When an affect resonates, it instantaneously connects the embodied feeling with an index of memories and vestiges of previous affects. This part of the mind is referred to as the 'affective register'. Each of us has a collection of previous memories and affects that are specific to our lives and experiences. When an affect captivates our attention, instantaneously it triggers the affective register, which focuses the constitution of the affective expression. The register sorts through all of our previous experiences, both lived and consumed virtually, through stories, media and other outside sources. It distills all of this into one specific reaction, which is the affect. The register is always fluid, always changing as new affects influence it. Affects shape the affective register, which then in turn shapes future affects.

Promotional discourse is encountered continuously across daily life, promotional signs at every turn trying capture your attention, engage your affect. To spark a reaction, affects must get through, engage and attract. So if an affect is not really an affect until it has been perceived, connected, and finally acted upon, then promotional culture can first shape affect by sparking it.

But the most prominent space where promotional culture impacts affect is in the affective register. Since this register is made up of memories that are both experienced and mediated, promotional culture has been able to play a determining role in giving it shape. Previous experiences that were mediated through promotional culture are apart of the affective register, but are not necessarily recognized as such. Advertisers and their brands continually endeavour to create affective affiliations in our everyday lives, to become part of our ordinary or memorable experiences and to integrate themselves into as many important moments as possible. Brands show up at our concerts, sporting events, our streets, our kitchens. It could be argued that promotional culture constitutes a huge portion of the affective register that is build from our participation in consumption, but it is by no means limited to this. Promotional culture cannot guarantee affective resonance, but the symbolic universe of promotional culture, the aggregate of all the various types of promotional culture that we experience in our lives, combine to condition out perception around the values espoused by promotional culture.

There are, to this point, two main schools of thought regarding affect theory, the psychoanalytic school, which is rooted in the work of Sylvan Tomkins is the first. Tomkins was an American psychologist who developed a notion of affect theory that was based in categorizing affects. He felt that affective reactions could be broken down into nine, and only nine categories. They are: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, and fear-terror, shame-humiliation, distaste/dissmell (reaction to bad taste/smell) and disgust.

There is a fundamental problem with Tomkins' conception of affect that makes it both limited, and limiting. Affects are far too complex and personal to be contained with such categories. So by squeezing affects into the categories, one is not actually quantifying them, but simply changing them to suit these predetermined concepts. The implication then is that the process of quantification poisons the well of affect, it only reproduces affects that suit its own purpose. Moreover, the process of categorization also does something much more insidious to affect: it reappropriates it into the logic of science.

One of the most important consideration surrounding affect is that it can't be captured or contained by science, technology and rational thought, though this does not stop them from trying to impose themselves upon affect.<sup>2</sup> As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: "Everything has the clarity of the microscope. We think we have understood everything, and draw conclusions. We are the new knights; we even have a mission." (ATP 228) This makes affect ultimately contested ground, where different priorities from different disciplines are trying to discursively give shape to affect.

The Frankfurt School's critique of science is that it is fundamentally aligned with capitalism. Science is a corollary of capitalism, it is the means of deriving value from nature, of creating new commodities. Herbert Marcuse explains that: "Nature, scientifically comprehended and mastered, reappears in the technical apparatus of production and destruction which sustains and improves the life of the individuals while subordinating them to the masters of the apparatus."<sup>3</sup> ( ODM 166) Modernity has linked science, capitalism and progress, and everything it comes into contact with it attempts to draw into this logic, which works as follows: Categorization leads to instrumentalization which leads to administration which leads to domination. For affect it means that the categories allow affect to be used by people for whatever reason they want, typically to serve an instrumental purpose, to accomplish a specific task. When the instrumental task is applied to other people or things, it begins to categorize and instrumentalize them, which is administration. Finally, when all of these systems and structures are thrust upon people, they result in a form of domination.

So science has a direct relationship with promotional culture in that it is responsible for both the products to be promoted, and the means of promotion. Affect comes into play as the connection between the person, and the promotion. An ad is developed that attempts to achieve a certain affect: joy, sadness, envy, fear, or any of the aforementioned Tomkins categories. If it resonates with people—for whatever reason—then it is used again and again, other ads are made similar to it, saturating the advertising landscape. The affective connection made in the ad is seemingly normalized, and its repetitive imposition is a form of administration. The encroachment of promotional culture on more than our consciousness, but on the very structures of our society, both physical and otherwise, emerges as domination. This is the process that quantification attempts to pull affect into. Ultimately what quantification does is attempt to impose structure onto affect. This type of affect is rooted in the legacy of structuralism: the idea that everything in our universe has a structure that given it order. Thus, the psychoanalytic version of affect, also referred to as 'categorical affect', is at best misleading, and at worst potentially dangerous.

The second way of thinking about affect is improperly but most easily referred to as the French post-structural school of affect. It was initially theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and developed further by Brian Massumi. This conceptualization of affect is based in a primary notion of "becoming." Affects are becomings. If affects are only known once recognized

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 166.

by their outward expression, the action is the becoming. The notion of becoming is a curious one, but it shouldn't be too tough to wrap your mind around. Becoming is all about the process, the movement between thought and body, from captivated imagination to physical expression.

As explained earlier, affect is a process that takes place in the movement from attraction to expression, with the affective register mediating in between. So once the initial allure of the affect has captivated a person's attention, the affective register gives it form and thus expression. This form is mimetic, it is a copy of an ideal put forth by the affective register. Remember that the affective register distills all the previous memories and affects into a single reaction. The reaction it attempts to produce is based then on the ideal put forth in the immediacy of the moment. But the process cannot produce an exact copy of the ideal, so it is actually an original act in and of itself. This act is a becoming, and the affective expression reveals the direction.

Becomings are affects, meaning they are unique to each individual and each instance, they cannot be stopped, only shifted. There are untold and unending factors that contextualize and contribute to a becoming, so it exists only in that particular moment. So the idea of fixing becomings through categorization is just not possible. The process of quantification only shapes the becomings around the criteria imposed. They will become whatever the categorizer intends them to be, not what they truly are.

Becomings are not controllable, but they are conditionable, massagable. Imposing order onto becomings shapes the becomings to fit that order. Massumi wrote the following: "Becoming-other is directional . . . but not directed . . . . It leaves a specific orbit but has no predestined end point. For that reason, it cannot be exhaustively described. If it could, it would already be what it is becoming, in which it wouldn't be a becoming at all."<sup>4</sup>

So affects are becomings, affects spark the process of becoming, and then the becoming of something else, and then the becoming of something else in an unending chain. Understanding ourselves as becoming reconnects our perspective with natural selves. We're always in the process of becoming, it never stops. All of nature is becoming: the sun rises and sets, plants, animals, land and people, all of us become together. Rational thought is an imposition, a perception that has been forced upon us and which we actively manufacture. Affect can disrupt the process of rationalization because affects are more pure, they put us in touch with our animal selves.

So the most basic form of becoming is becoming-animal, according to Deleuze and Guattari. We become animal when the primal-quality of affect overwhelms our minds and bodies and forces us into action. This is a way of understanding the pre-cognitive function of affect. If affect occurs before rational thought then can be seen as animalistic, as putting us in touch with the irrational aspects of our consciousness. But this animal instinct that affect connects with us has been hijacked at the level of perception by our desire for promotional culture and the products for sale. The animal instinct has been mystified, redirected by false consciousness to focus on priorities dictated by the pursuit of fetishized commodities. Becoming-animal is only one type of becoming, people can become anything, the mimetic function of becoming can be directed towards anything found in the affective register. Since the affective register is

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham:Duke University Press, 2002), p. 103.

constructed partially through promotional culture, promotional culture make the most resonant connections through becoming. What are brands offering if not becomings?

When you buy an Apple you become-creative. When you drive a Mercedes you become-prestigious. When you buy overpriced ‘craft’ beer you become-authentic. When you wear Nike you become-athletic. When you do yoga you become-in touch with yourself. When purchase a pair of Toms shoes knowing you are also buying another pair for someone less fortunate, you become-conscious. Brands can offer the means for becoming-masculine and becoming-feminine. Since becomings never end the promotional signs offered as ideals never have to either.

This is the promise of brands and this is the affective connection they work so hard to achieve and cultivate. So if the brand is worth 70% of the value of the firm that owns it, it’s not the actually brand that’s worth 70%<sup>5</sup> but rather its affective potential. Once the affective connection is made, rationality is left behind, so the ability to cultivate an enticing becoming is what separates successful brands from failures.

When rationality is passed over through affect, there has to be a replacement. Here affect offers itself up as seemingly logical. Affective resonance doesn’t have a fixed time-frame through which it occurs. It can last a quick instant, or it can stretch out over an extended period of time. As instances of affective intensity are linked together, they begin to form their own reasoning and rationality. Affective logic follows along with consensual logic, often working to reinforce consensual logic, camouflaging itself in consensual logic. But at certain junctures affective logic arises from its latent position and engulfs rational logic, effectively situating itself as logical. At this point affect takes over, as Massumi (2010) explained:

An operative logic is a productive process that inhabits a shared environment, or field of exteriority, with other processes and logics. It figures in that field as a formative movement: a tendency towards the iterative production of its own variety of constituted fact. The forms of determination it brings into being as fact have an inborn tendency towards proliferation by virtue of the self-causative powers of their formative processes.<sup>6</sup>

The operative logic of affect is a self-perpetuating force that continually uses affect to attempt and prioritize itself. Since affects are so deeply trusted, affect can disguise itself as logical, as rational. In constantly trying to shape perception through affect, promotional culture is attempting to situate itself as rational. Conditioning affects to appear as rational shapes our whole perception around the universe constructed through promotional culture, and the embodied character of the experience makes it even more convincing. This is how promotional culture can maintain its prominence despite the alienation it produces, it uses affect to shape our logic around its priorities.

Each of us has an affective register, unique to us and our experiences. But though the

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Arvidsson, “Brands,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(2): 2005, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 62–63.

experiences are individuated, many of them are experienced collectively, or different people have experienced similar versions of certain affects. Especially when it comes to promotional culture, we all are exposed to the same content, we've all seen the same advertising, TV shows, news movies, etc... This means that affects are socially constructed and negotiated. Different affects resonate differently with different people, but the very fact that the affect resonates with a person means that it almost certainly resonates with others. That said, just because an affect resonates with one person, does not mean it will resonate with everyone, though it does mean it will resonate with more than one person.

When it comes to groups of people affect is itself affective. Since they are socially constructed there is some measure of commonality in each individual reaction, and when one person notices others becoming in a similar fashion, it enhances their own intensity. This aspect of affect is described as 'contagion'. Affective contagion behaves like any viral contagion in that it will spread to others, but exactly who is unknown, though some may be more susceptible than others. Contagion to Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi goes back to the notion of becoming-animal. Deleuze and Guattari wrote the following: "Affect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel."<sup>7</sup> Animals always travel in packs, herds, flocks, and these packs move and shift, they become, based on contagion. One animal pulls in a direction, another sees them and follows, then another, then another. Pretty soon the whole pack follows until something else captures the attention of another animal, and the pack reforms in a new direction. There's no rhyme or reason, no structure, just affects inspiring new becomings from the old ones.

Contagion is the immediate process of getting caught up in a shared affective moment. It is a body's submission to a collective that is an intrinsic part of affect. One person is affected by another in a process of becoming, which affectively sparks in them a similar becoming, which others see and mimic. Spontaneously each person becomes, in their own way, their ideal version of the now-forming collective. Contagion is itself affective, since the affect of the process of contagion, the gathering of people, raises the intensity of the collective, which inspires more people to join in.

The problem with contagion is that once sparked, one never knows exactly which direction the pack is going to go, it can't be completely controlled, one can only wait for it to subside. In the meantime there may be all sorts of occurrences that are justified because they went on "in the heat of the moment," an acknowledgement of affect after the fact. For example, the streets of Vancouver erupted with elation following Olympic gold medal victories by the Canadian Men's and Women's teams on the same day. Fans in 2010 flooded the downtown core to joyously celebrate, hugs and high-fives everywhere. The entire mass of people were swept up, enraptured with endless iterations of elation. Just over a year later the streets erupted again, as the local professional team, the Vancouver Canucks, lost the NHL championship tournament in the final round. This time though, those involved were rioting, destroying the exact same streets and everything on or around them. Masses of people stood by bewildered, as more and more of them decided to jump into the fray. Undoubtedly, a considerable number of the same people would have been found at both.

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 240.

Now that the two most prominent conceptualizations of affect have been outlined, I want to introduce a third version, one that combines the notion of affect developed by Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi, with foundational ideas from the Frankfurt School.

The two bodies of thought combine at the point of becoming. Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi see becoming as the realization of affect based in an animalistic quality, and this connects their ideas with the work of Georg Lukács, whose work was of primary influence to the Frankfurt School. Lukács came up with the notion of the natural world as in becoming, writing: “Becoming now appears as the truth of Being, and process as the truth about things, then this means that the *developing tendencies of history constitute a higher reality than the empirical facts*’.<sup>8</sup> (HC 181) Understanding the universe in becoming means understanding it as always in-process. But while Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi would argue that this process has no shape, that it moves in every and all directions, Lukács introduces form to the notion of becoming, which he felt moved according to dialectical tensions.

Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi abhorred dialectics, they saw them as limiting the directions and possibilities of motion for becoming. But affect itself has an undeniably dialectic character. Affect unifies the mind and body as the circuit moves from the affective register through to the physical articulation. Affects are fleeting yet situated, a priori and a posteriori at the same time. Affects are mimetic yet original, though they are eternal ephemeral.... Affects operate in chains where one affect is influenced by previous affects, but always ends up as a unique expression itself. Though they are not themselves material, affects only exist in the material world. Affect bridges subject and object, the universal and the particular, the social and the personal.

To Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, affect is a natural impulse that has been commandeered by the false consciousness. The primacy of affect within cognition is rooted in a basic survival mechanism, a function of the human condition that is rooted in people's most natural state of existence. But our relationship reified commodity shifts perspective to such an extent that its goals appear as essential, confusing people's priority at an underlying level. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote the following:

If all affects are of equal value, then self-preservation, which dominates the form of the system in any case, seems to offer the most plausible maxims for action . . . . With the development of the economic system in which the control of the economic apparatus by private groups creates a division between human beings, self-preservation, although treated by reason as identical, had become the reified drive of each individual citizen and proved to be a destructive natural force no longer distinguishable from destruction.<sup>9</sup>

Here Adorno and Horkheimer are outlining the process by which mystified affective logic overwhelms rationality. Self-preservation is warped under the impositions of promotional culture

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<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 71.

and the free-market logic it celebrates. It is reified as individual, which is destructive to both the individual and the collective. False divisions are affectively reinforced to the point that we're not only subverting ourselves and each other but devastating everything around us in the course of our own self-harm. Mystified affect isn't just an abstract notion, it is at the root of many of the harmful and seemingly irresolvable predicaments we find ourselves in.

Understanding affect as dialectical reveals a fundamental truth: that they can either compel a mystifying disposition, they can help us escape the clutches of false consciousness. In terms of promotional culture: affect can draw us in deeper, but it can also remind us of the world beyond promotional culture. In this way affect offers a tool to disrupt and overturn the power of promotional culture.

Affect and mystification share one essential quality: both occur in the immediate. For false consciousness to continually perpetuate, there is one absolutely necessary contingency: immediacy. Perception must be kept in the here and now, not thinking back to what happened before, not reflecting on other factors or perspectives, but narrowly focused on the immediate. This is where affect is such a powerful force for mystification, since affect always occurs in the immediate as well. Mystification is the active consequence of promotional culture. When people engage promotional culture they become mystified by it. Not all affects are mystifying, but both affect and mystification occupy the same space in terms of perception.

The battleground for affect then is immediacy, the here and now of the moment. Becomings are always immediate, but the endless motion from becoming to becoming, the eternal becoming of the universe means everything can always be considered immediate in the instance which it occurs. Understanding the universe in becoming considers the larger context that surrounds immediacy.

The easiest way to understand immediacy in the context of consumer culture is to think of it as endless instant gratification. Promotional culture has created the notion of instant gratification as an a constant process of becoming inside immediate affect. Poor decisions as consumers, as elsewhere, are made when a person is caught up in the moment and can only be avoided if the person takes time to think things through; but it is the affect, the resonance of that particular becoming, that prevents this thinking from occurring. We are also rational human beings and can think through this, but it takes a conscious effort not to get caught up.

Mystification requires perception to remain in the immediate because it is false. For this reason maintaining immediacy demands non-stop upkeep, it needs to be reinforced again and again. Fissures in the facade quickly form from the contradictions that arise within reified rationality, and they need attending to, the logic doesn't work, so there needs to be a trick to hide the irrationality. That trick is perpetuating a perception that only focuses on the immediate. Immediacy is an example of the particular being misrepresented for the universal, it fragmentizes becomings and disregards what has come before the ongoing moment. Mystification's flaws are susceptible to a historical critique, and patching up the consequences of past or ongoing contradictions ranges from cumbersome to impossible, so the most efficient strategy is to actively work to limit perspectives that include any sort of context.

Affects are disposed to either compelling a mystifying disposition that promotes formal logic, or to offer the potential to cultivate a de-mystifying reflexivity. So promotional culture mystifies purpose, it confuses and misdirects us away from our full potential as social beings and



focuses us towards other purposes defined through commodity exchange. While affect can be mystifying, affect is also the means by which we re-orient ourselves with a higher purpose than the one presented by promotional culture. Affect can draw us into promotional culture, but it also reveals the limits of promotional culture, that it even has limits, it demarcates them so we can avoid and move past them. This means that affect is political, that it is contested ground; this isn't just about making you want products you don't need, affect is about the large scale conditioning and manipulation of populations. But at the same time, it is a space that offers vast potential as an alternative to reified rationality.

Affect represents a battleground for the hearts and minds of people. When mystified and mediated by promotional culture, affect is manipulated to provoke dangerous behaviours and dispositions throughout the contemporary West. Affect is used to stoke panic, suspicion, contempt and malice, manufacturing new social divisions while re-establishing age-old ones. In a broader sense, our own affects are being harnessed and used against us to promote self-governance as a means of domination. Affect is being used to construct and reinforce a mystified perception, its embodied quality makes these feelings undeniable, unavoidable, and unstoppable.

Contesting the mystified perception constructed through promotional culture involves developing one's own reflexivity, expanding perception through the act of stepping outside oneself to look back upon how the self is formed and continually transformed. Reflexivity is an implicit function within the circuit of affective resonance, becoming involves affecting and being affected in order to become something else. Though affective intensity exists in the immediate, it is rooted in a body's affective register, which is structured through an actively-reflexive process.

Affects automatically reflect on themselves, since within the process of becoming they simultaneously find inspiration from, and act upon, a person's affective register. Noticing expressions as affective, then reflecting on them, disarms their immediacy. Becomings can take any shape, so why not attempt to cultivate a becoming-reflexive? Challenging immediacy on its own terms through affective-reflexivity turns affect into a proactive force in de-reification, of challenging the universe constructed through promotional culture. As you become more aware of attempts by promotional culture to evoke your affects, not only will they lose resonance, but the promotions will have the opposite effect of their intent. They will teach you more about yourself and your relationship with affect, while the intended messaging will be marginalized.

Affective-reflexivity disrupts immediacy, it forces you to consider the immediate moment in a larger context. This gives you agency, and the empowerment is itself affective. Actively working to reflexively challenge false consciousness is its own reward. That affective-reflexivity occurs at the level of perception, that it involves our most primary experience with the world, makes affect decisive territory on which to reshape perception in order to establish the terms of commitment to a better world. Reflexivity, when engaged continually over time, develops into a de-reifying perception that runs alongside the immediacy of one's reified perspective. Everything you come across in life is understood as mystified, and affect becomes the lens by which you demystify what you come across. Basically, affect can help you develop a better bullshit detector.

So affect is contested ground that has life and death consequences everyday. In a universe constructed through promotional culture, affect is the tie that binds us to the commodity form, that draws us in and keeps us coming back. But affect exists above and beyond the capabilities of rationality, it offers us a connection to our unalienated selves, meaning it provides a means of

escaping the confinement of a world constructed around the mystified world presented by promotional culture.