Figure 1. Ronald Ophuis, *Untitled,* 2007. Oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm. Collection of the artist.

Affective operations of art and literature

ERNST VAN ALPHEN

> Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind.
>
> —*Silvan Tomkins,* Affect, Imagery, Consciousness

Talking about changes in the art world in the early 1990s, the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres noticed that there had been a shift away from the "sloganeering" art that appropriated the media, exemplified by the work of Barbara Kruger, toward a more personal voice. According to Gonzales-Torres, a more personal voice was necessary because the recent historical situation required new modes of contestation. His description of an artwork by the American artist Roni Horn is exemplary for this new kind of art and for the way it relates to the viewer:

> The Gold Field. How can I deal with the *Gold Field*? I don't quite know. But the *Gold Field* was there. Ross and I entered the Museum of Contemporary Art, and without knowing the work of Roni Horn we were blown away by the heroic, gentle and horizontal presence of this gift. There it was, in a white room, all by itself, it didn't need company, it didn't need anything. Sitting on the floor, ever so lightly. A new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty. Waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved to a place of the imagination. This piece is nothing more than a thin layer of gold. It is everything a good poem by Wallace Stevens is: precise with no baggage, nothing extra. A poem that feels secure and dares to unravel itself, to become naked, to be enjoyed in a tactile manner, but beyond that, in an intellectual way too. Ross and I were lifted. That gesture was all we needed to rest, to think about the possibility of change. This showed the innate ability of an artist proposing to make this place a better place. How truly revolutionary. . . . A place to dream, to regain energy, to dare. Ross and I always talked about this work, how much it affected us.[1]

Gonzalez-Torres's description of *The Gold Field* (which dates from 1980–1981) deals neither with signification, the meaning of the work, nor does it articulate the work within a discursive framework. What it describes, instead, is how this artwork affected him, the viewer. He and his partner enjoyed it initially in a tactile manner. It lifted them. Next, it made them think about the possibility of change, which is why they call it "truly revolutionary." "Change" and "revolution," however, were not the only thoughts they were stimulated to have. Change and revolution also characterized their response to the artwork. They were affected by it in such a way that they were "shocked to thought."[2]

In another text, Gonzalez-Torres dwells on the recent sociohistorical situation, which necessitated a "more personal voice" for works of art. Characterizing this situation tersely, he writes that: "Right now we have an *explosion* of information, but an *implosion* of meaning."[3] Here he refers to the situation in which people are bombarded by information that concerns them personally, but, strangely, this information does not transform into meaning in their daily lives.

Understanding affect: Why?

The diagnoses of culture since the 1980s and 1990s by Gonzalez-Torres imply the urgency to better understand what affect is and how it works. It is clear that several disciplines in the humanities are trying to do precisely that. "Affect" has recently become a much-discussed topic and concept: the term is used abundantly in important as well as vague and suggestive ways. But as usually happens when a scholarly term or issue becomes fashionable, it has lost its meaning. The term is used more and more without any ramifications. It is often used in such a way that it means something general like "personal" or "subjective." But, as I will argue, affect is the opposite of personal: it is social.

Gonzalez-Torres's claim—that artistic strategies consist increasingly of the use of a more personal voice—can be articulated more precisely. The new modes of contestation consist of affective—rather than assertive or didactic—modes of communication. The cultural and social effect of these emerging forms is itself often a function of their capacity to generate and transmit affect

1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "The Gold Field" (1990) in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres,* ed. Julie Ault (New York, Steidlangin Publishers, 2006), p. 150, originally published in *Earths Grow Thick: Works after Emily Dickenson by Roni Horn* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1996).

2. The expression "shocked to thought" refers to the title of a book on expression and affect in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, edited by Brian Massumi, and entitled *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari* (London, Routledge, 2002).

3. Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (see note 1), pp. 39–51, especially p. 44.

or to engage a viewer in a particular, transformative way. Thus the politics of art and literature since the 1980s and 1990s can no longer be understood simply in terms of programmatic meaning or message. The new modes of contestation require an "affective approach" in order to understand how many recent artworks "work." The implosion of meaning, which Gonzalez-Torres notices in the larger sociopolitical domain, is, I contend, also at stake in the artistic and literary domain. But this does not imply that recent art and literature have lost political impact. Their political impact is established instead by means of powerful transactions of affect.

But in general, one may claim that much could be gained by thinking through the affective operations of art in cultural theory. As Brian Massumi has claimed, our cultural-theoretical-political vocabulary offers few possibilities that deal with affect. Our entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification. These theories and approaches "are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination) as a Symbolic. What they lose, precisely, is the expression *event*—in favor of structure."[4] In her book on trauma and art, Jill Bennett argues something similar. Not all art is representational, and even if art is representational many aspects of it are not, operating on the basis of nonrepresentational strategies. Ultimately, art is ill-served by a theoretical framework "that privileges *meaning* (that is, the object of representation, outside art) over *form* (the inherent qualities or modus operandi of art)."[5]

This plea for more attention to the affective operations of art does not at all imply, however, a privileging of a more formalistic approach to art. On the contrary, as already pointed out in the example of Gonzalez-Torres responding to *The Gold Field,* the transmission of affect "shocks him to thought." This expression, "shock to thought," is Deleuzian and Deleuze has another expression that indicates this intimate relationship between affect and thought, namely "the encountered sign." He introduced the phrase in his book *Proust and Signs.* The encountered sign is felt rather than recognized, or perceived through cognition, or through familiarity with the "code." But the sensation of the encountered sign is not an end in itself. For Deleuze, this sensation is a catalyst for critical inquiry or thought. For him, an affect is a more effective trigger for profound thought than rational inquiry because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily: "More important than thought there is 'what leads to thought' . . . impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think."[6]

Deleuze quotes Proust himself to illustrate the nature of the encountered sign:

> The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less *necessary* about them than those which life has communicated to us *in spite of ourselves* in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses.[7]

As Bennett explains, in this Proustian and Deleuzian view, art and literature are seen as the embodiment of sensation that stimulates thought.[8] Art does not illustrate or embody a proposition, but it embodies sensations or affects that stimulate thought. It is the affective encounter through which thought proceeds and moves toward deeper truth. By means of this affective view of art and literature, Deleuze deconstructs the conventional opposition between philosophy and art, or between thought and sensation. For him, both are modes of thinking. But whereas philosophers think in concepts, artists think by means of sensation. "Sensation is generated through the artist's engagement with the medium, through color and line in the case of the painter, so that it is not the residue of self-expression, or a property of some prior self, but emerges in the present, as it attaches to figures in the image."[9]

As modes of thinking, art and literature vie with philosophy. Deleuze seems to agree with Proust's critique of philosophy. The truths formulated by or within a philosophical discourse remain arbitrary and abstract, so long as they are based on the good will of thinking. Philosophy is based on the conventional. It is

> ignorant of the dark regions in which are elaborated the effective forces which act on thought, the determinations which *force* us to think. . . . Minds communicate to each other only the conventional; the mind engenders only the

4. Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader,* ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 217–239, especially p. 220.

5. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 4.

6. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 161; quoted by Bennett (ibid.), p. 7.

7. Proust, quoted by Deleuze (ibid.), p. 161.

8. Bennett (see note 5), p. 8.

9. Ibid., p. 37.

> possible. The truths of philosophy are lacking in necessity, and the mark of necessity.[10]

Deleuze quotes Proust again to explain the shortcomings of philosophy: "The ideas formed by pure intelligence have only a logical truth, a possible truth, their choice is arbitrary."[11]

In his book on the painter Francis Bacon, Deleuze explains how sensations are the means of the artist's way of thinking:

> Sensation is what is being painted; what is being painted on the canvas is the body. Not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation.[12]

It is this sustaining of sensation that thrusts viewers into thinking and into an encountered or embodied mode of critical inquiry. The thought activated by the encountered, sensuous sign is truly critical and creative (instead of conventional or arbitrary), for, Deleuze argues, "it does us violence: it mobilizes the memory, it sets the soul in motion; but the soul in its turn excites thought, transmits to it the constraint of the sensibility, forces it to conceive essence, as the only thing which must be conceived."[13]

What is affect and how does it operate?

In order to better understand the affective operations of art and literature, I will first take a momentary step backward, and try to assess more thoroughly what affect is and how it works. How does it relate to notions with which it is so often confused, like feeling and emotion? And where do affects originate, just in human beings or also in objects, such as artworks or texts?[14]

The term "affect" comes from the Latin *affectus,* which means passion or emotion. Affects have an energetic dimension: They are, in Deleuze's words, "intensities." According to Deleuze, affect is an intensity embodied in autonomic reactions on the surface of the body as it interacts with other entities. It precedes its expression in words and operates independently. According to Silvan Tomkins, psychologist and one of the most important theoreticians of affect, affect extends beyond individuals, and it does not pursue the same goals as either drives or cognitive systems. Yet affect is the essential amplifier of other drives "because without its amplification nothing else matters and with its amplification anything else can matter."[15]

The transmission of such intensities has a physiological impact. Affects can arise within a person but they also come from without. They can be transmitted by the presence of another person, but also by an artwork or a (literary) text. They come from an interaction with objects, an environment, or other people. Because of its origin in interaction, one can say that the transmission of affect is social in origin, but biological and physical in effect.[16] The experience of affect is usually seen as a kind of judgment. The person who receives the affect has to do something with it. It will be projected outwards or it will be introjected. The projection or introjection of a judgment is the moment when the transmission takes place.

Cultural analyst Teresa Brennan argues that whereas the idea of the transmission of affect was well accepted until the seventeenth century, it faded away during the Enlightenment because of the rise of individualism. When the notion of the individual gained strength, "it was assumed more and more that emotions and energies are naturally contained, going no further than the skin."[17] Individualism has made it unthinkable that our emotions are not altogether our own, that some of our emotions have been transmitted to us and that they come from an external source. The belief that emotions are our own and come from within could be sustained because unwanted affects can always be projected onto somebody else. Affects are, however, not necessarily our own because they may have been transmitted by somebody else or by an object or environment. We are then "possessed" by emotions that have their origin elsewhere or in somebody else.

Affects are judgments in the sense that they are the physiological shifts accompanying a judgment. The physiological shift takes place as a result of the evaluative, positive or negative, orientation toward an object or other person.[18] This notion of affect as

10. Deleuze (see note 6), p. 160, emphasis in the original.
11. Ibid., p. 162.
12. Deleuze, quoted in Bennett (see note 5), p. 37.
13 Deleuze (see note 6), p. 166.
14. For this discussion, I rely on the work of Silvan Tomkins, Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), and Jill Bennett's book (see note 5).
15. Silvan Tomkins and Elaine Virginia Demos, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 355–356.
16. Brennan (see note 14), p. 3.
17. Ibid., p. 2.
18. Ibid., p. 5.

physiological shift implies that affects are not the same as feelings. Feelings include something more than a physiological shift or sensory stimulation. They suppose a unified interpretation of that shift or stimulation. For that reason, Brennan defines feelings as "sensations that have found the right match in words."[19] Similarly, Bennett defines feeling as "the moment of awareness of affect through which the self is experienced—experienced as deformation of itself."[20] This distinction between affects and feelings implies that affects as such have no particular content or meaning. In themselves they are just energetic intensities.

There are other psychological notions that are often conflated with affect—emotion for instance. Yet, affects and emotions follow a different logic and pertain to different orders. Emotions are more or less synonymous with feeling, although in some theories emotions consist of a more complex organization of affect than feeling. In the words of Massumi (who, in the wake of Deleuze, uses "intensity" as exchangeable with "affect"):

> An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.[21]

In the affect theory of Tomkins, the crucial notion is not "intensity" but the more scientific sounding notion of "density of neural firing." He distinguishes a diverse range of basic affects on the basis of three variants of density of neural firing:

> I would account for the difference in affect activation by three variants of a single principle—the density of neural firing. By density I mean the frequency of neural firing per unit of time. My theory posits three discrete classes of activators of affect, each of which further amplifies the sources which activate them. These are stimulation increase, stimulation level, and stimulation decrease.
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> Thus any stimulus with a relatively sudden onset and a steep increase in the rate of neural firing will innately activate a startle response. . . . [I]f the rate of neural firing increases less rapidly, fear is activated, and if still less rapidly, then interest is innately activated. In contrast, any sustained increase in the level of neural firing, as with a continued loud noise, would innately activate the anger response. Finally, any sudden decrease in stimulation that reduced the rate of neural firing, as in the sudden redaction of excessive noise, would innately activate the rewarding smile of enjoyment.[22]

What the Deleuzian affect theorists have in common with Tomkins is a notion of affect in terms of an energetic "stream," which they call "intensity" (and Tomkins calls it "neural firing"). However, in the Deleuzian notion, affect as such has no content or meaning, although it produces feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Tomkins, in contrast, develops a taxonomy of affects. Depending on density and temporal length of the neural firing, it results in, for example, startle, fear, interest, anger, distress, or shame. It is precisely in this respect that "affect theories" can be quite confusing. The kind of distinction that Brennan, Bennett, and Massumi propose, between affect and feeling on the one hand and affect and emotion on the other, is not made in many other theories. For example, in his book *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects,* Charles Altieri uses the term "affect" as an umbrella term for four different psychological states: feeling, mood, emotion, and passion. He defines feelings as elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation. Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation. Emotions are affects involving the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative and generate some kind of action or identification. Finally, passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible.[23]

I will not follow Altieri in his way of defining affect.[24] For my purpose—to grasp how inanimate objects

19. Ibid.

20. Jill Bennett, " A Feeling of Insincerity: Politics, Ventriloquy and the Dialectics of Gesture" (in press).

21. Massumi (see note 4), p. 221.

22. Silvan Tomkins, "The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (1981):306–329, especially p. 317.

23 Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetic of the Affects* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 2.

24. Another aesthetic theory that has at first sight a lot in common with my conceptualization of affect is Susan Langer's, as outlined in her book *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953). The centrality of a notion of "feeling" in her aesthetic theory has, however, little to do with the affective operations I am talking about. She defines artworks as the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling (ibid., p. 40). Artworks *contain feelings,* not expressively, but in symbolic form. A subject does not express those feelings; they are objectively there. Art is for her neither the stimulation of feeling, nor the expression

are able to convey affect—the idea that affects are psychological states is not helpful. This is important, because the notion of affect as a psychological state makes it impossible to consider that objects, such as artworks or literary texts, are transmitting affects. To ascribe psychological states to objects makes little sense. Although a novel can make the reader feel depressed or angry, that does not mean that the novel itself is depressed. But to consider objects as the origins of affects, as agents that have transmitted certain affects, is of crucial importance for an understanding of affective operations.[25] Therefore, I will join the theorists mentioned earlier in arguing that affects can lead to all kinds of psychological states, but they are themselves not of a psychological nature.

This brings us back to the issue of meaning in relation to affect. When the person to whom the affect is transmitted does not "project" the affect outward, but "discerns" it, at that moment the affect is given content. The affect then feels like depression, anger, or anxiety. But the way a transmitted affect is signified differs from person to person. The same affect can be given a completely different content by another person. Although affects are social, that is, they are the result of an interactive process from without, the linguistic or visual contents or thoughts attached to that affect belong to the person to whom the affect is transmitted.

Since the same affect can evoke very different feelings or thoughts in different people, the thoughts, feelings, or images evoked by affects are not necessarily tied to the affects they appear to evoke. A transmission of affect between two persons can result in the two people becoming alike; for example, someone's depression is transmitted to someone else who will then feel depressed as a result. This form of transmission is usually called *entrainment*.[26] But it can also happen that as a result of such a transmission people take up opposing or different positions in relation to a common affective trend. This is the case when, for example, somebody's depression gives rise to feelings of anger in the person to whom the affect was transmitted, or when somebody's hyperactivity makes another person feel depressed.

These examples of transmitted affects all concern transmissions between human subjects. Although these transmissions also imply that our emotions are not necessarily our own, this is even more difficult to acknowledge when the transmitting agent is not a human subject, but a text, a film, or a painting. For us, it has become difficult to see objects as active agents, because humanism has led to the idea that everything outside human subjectivity is passive, unconscious, and material. This idea is the result of the following mode of thinking.

> [S]ubjective activity takes the definition of itself as the center of all definition and defines all "activity" as having its own character. It labels "passive" everything that is not active in its own way and which it is able to *bend its will*, passive if it does not assert itself against the subject. The objects making up the environment are seen as passive because they do not carry out intentions of their own. To be active is to carry out an individual intention. . . . The passive/active dichotomy, as consciousness understands it, is thus a product of the sense of self that divides itself from the rest of the world on the grounds of its difference. Its understanding of activity is synonymous with the idea of individual intentionality.[27]

Yet the so-called passivity of objects and of matter does not lie in a lack of action, but in a lack of free will or intentional agency. Active matter is passive in that it is not individual. But if we reject individual intentionality as the criterion for activity (that is, if we recognize the ideological nature of that criterion), then there is no reason not to acknowledge matter and objects as possibly active.[28] The transmission of affects by texts, films, or paintings is then no longer an imprecise, metaphorical way of speaking of our admiration for, or dislike of, these cultural objects. On the contrary, it is an adequate way of describing what cultural objects can do to us, and of how they are active agents in the cultural and social world. It is precisely because of the activity of matter and objects that literature and art can be affective, and that we can speak of the affective operations of art.

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of feelings that beset the artist. Artworks are, however, the symbolic expression of the forms of sentience as the artist understands them. The affect theory I am defending here refrains from ascribing psychological states to artworks or texts.

25. This "aesthetics of affects" does not deal with the affective operations of art and literature, but with the way certain artworks or literary texts *dramatize* affective processes in and between human beings because they are embodied in the artist's rendering of those images or texts.

26. Brennan (see note 14), p. 9.

27. Ibid., p. 93.

28. To acknowledge matter and objects as possibly active does not, however, imply an animist worldview. The agency that is assigned to matter and objects as a result of affective transmissions is ultimately relational. The intensity of affect arises between an object, let's say, an artwork, and a viewer. Animism here, however, is not relational: it attributes the existence of souls or spiritual beings to natural objects.

Affective operations of art and literature

In the pages that follow I will describe some of the characteristics of affective art and literature. Conversely, my argument can be formulated in the form of a question: Can we talk of conditions of literature and art as being affective and transmitting affect to viewer or reader? My discussion of those conditions will be far from exhaustive; it will consist instead of some examples. The transmission of affect also depends on the sensibility of the viewer and reader. This sensibility is by definition shaped historically. The affective conditions of art and literature should not be seen as formal conditions either, although in many cases formal features of works can trigger affects. The fact that affects should be seen as energetic intensities implies that they are *relational* and that they are always the result of an interaction between a work and its beholder. It is within this relationship that the intensity comes about.

As a starting point for answering this question I will take Derek Attridge's discussion of J. M. Coetzee's novels in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). Although Attridge's interpretation of Coetzee is not informed by affectivity and the term "affect" is not part of his critical vocabulary, his "resistance" to what he calls allegoric reading results in a mode of reading that is sensitive to what I would like to call "the affective operations of art and literature." Attridge's notion of allegory and allegorical reading is rather general: An allegorical reading looks for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance, which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming.[29]

Allegorical reading is much more common than we might think. Fredric Jameson has even argued that interpretation as such is essentially an allegorical act, for interpreting a text or a work of art implies saying what the work is "about."[30] In his *Anatomy of Criticism,* Northrop Fry has made a similar, albeit slightly more modest claim. For Fry, "all commentary of a traditional kind" is in a sense allegorical, because it attaches ideas to the images and events it encounters in the text. In the case of Coetzee's work, this interpretative practice leads to allegorical interpretations according to which his work is "about" universal truths like "the human condition"; global truths like "conflicts and abuses that characterize the modern world"; or more local truths concerning South Africa, like "the historical situation of that country and the suffering of the majority of its people."

Coetzee himself is also critical about reading his novels in such an allegorical way; not because it is inappropriate for *his* work, but because it is reductive for storytelling as such. In his essay "The Novel Today," he writes:

> No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering.[31]

Although an allegorical reading is possible, the reader may have missed "everything" by reading allegorically. The question remains: What does "everything" consist of?

"Everything" here implies the ideas and meanings into which works are being transformed in reading and looking that should be resisted or kept at bay in what Attridge calls "literal reading." The phrase "literal reading" is not really appropriate to describe the alternative mode of reading Attridge is advocating. For literal reading can be invested with meanings and ideas as much as figurative or allegorical reading. In the case of literal reading, the meaning is "reached" in a slightly different way—that is, not through a transposition of terms. But what Attridge calls "literal reading" is the interpretation of the text that is grounded in the experience of reading as an event. The text is not treated as an object whose significance has to be divined. Attridge explains:

> I treat it [the text] as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. And this is to say that I do not treat it as "something" at all; rather, I have an experience that I call *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Life &Times of Michael K.* It is an experience I can repeat, though each repetition turns out to be a different experience and therefore, a new singularity, as well.[32]

29. Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 32.

30. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 10.

31. From J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today," p. 4, quoted in Attridge (see note 29), p. 37.

32. Attridge (see note 29), pp. 39–40.

Such a "literal" reading, or what I would like to call affective reading, not only deals with the text (or the image) in a different way, but also deals with more textual elements. One of the problems of allegorical reading is that it needs only a limited part of the text for its transformation into allegorical meaning. It ignores, in fact, major components and aspects of the text or the image because they are not needed for the signifying transaction to take place. Allegorical reading, or reading for meaning, has to leave out a lot in order to be efficient. Its economy is highly selective. But texts and images are full of details in excess of any allegorical reading.

The selective economy of allegorical signification entails that many contingent details of text or image have to be ignored. Attridge mentions some textual aspects that are superfluous for allegorical reading, primarily narrative, temporality, and succession. Whereas the pace with which an event or history is being presented has a crucial impact on the reading experience, this aspect "evaporates" when it is dealt with as no more than signs on the basis of which one has to reconstruct a plot or to construct meaning. When the narrator takes ten pages to tell us about an event that takes place in a few seconds, as the narrator of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* regularly does, it leads to a fundamentally different reading experience than if he would have done it in one or two sentences. And when the narrator recounts this event not once but several times, each time slightly differently, again, it has enormous impact on how readers respond. An allegorical reading that searches for the plot in order to move to parallels outside the world of the book has, however, great difficulty with incorporating these modes of narration. The temporality of narration is then irrelevant. But it is especially the mode and temporality of narration that are responsible for how the reader will relate to the narrated events. The events as such do not necessarily affect us. The mode and temporality of narration produce the intensity that constitute affect.

These are, of course, very basic narratological insights. The reading experience of the "common" reader will easily be reflected in it. Moreover, to claim that literary criticism neglects narrative temporality is historically shortsighted, since structuralist narratology and criticism have produced many detailed analyses of precisely those narrative mechanisms in literary texts. Structuralism did not analyze those mechanisms as affective operations, however, but as "objective" textual structures. In addition, the decline of structuralism in the humanities after the rise of reception theory, new historicism, gender studies, and postcolonial studies has often led to a "return" to reading for (historical) meaning. Nowadays we no longer believe in the neopositivist claims of most structuralist analyses; nevertheless, as Attridge's examples suggest, it would be valuable to bring structuralism back to life in order to better understand not how they are objectively structured but where and how literary texts produce affects. This reactivation of structuralist narratology is necessary because present professional literary commentary has paradoxically much more difficulty in understanding and acknowledging the affective aspect of the reading experience than the common reader has in experiencing it.

Another textual aspect that is usually neglected in the pursuit of allegorical meaning is "powerful physical depictions."[33] Elaborate descriptions enable the reader to visualize a text while reading. These visualizations can have an especially strong, affective impact on readers. Evocative descriptions that result in visualization can ultimately have the same function and affective impacts as material images. That is why in order to explain this affective role of powerful visual description I can best use the example of a material image (instead of visualized text). In a discussion about contemporary visual culture, the Dutch artist Ronald Ophuis resists the tendency of one of his discussants to reduce the function of images to the information they provide. Ophuis proposes to approach the image from a psychological point of view. He tells an anecdote. When he was three years old, his brother died. Later, this was for him a completely abstract event. He did not have any mental images of it. He had never known his brother. So, he made up some images of the death of his brother by means of which he could evoke some form of grief. Those images were fictional and they did not contain much information, but they were able to trigger feelings of sorrow. Even at moments when he did not want to be sad, the mere sight of these images could make him feel sad (fig. 1).[34]

This example suggests, first of all, that visual images not only function as providers of content or messages, but also are indispensable in raising feelings and working through them. When images function in this way, they are active agents, transmitting affects to the viewer or reader. Images are able to do this because they possess a concreteness that knowledge or propositional content do not have. The latter aspects are rather abstract or general.

33. Ibid., p. 48.

34. Bartomei Mari, Henk Oosterling, Ronald Ophuis, Anna Tilroe, "Traagheid van de verbeelding: Over schilderkunst," *Interakta* 3 (2001):21.

But there is more to conclude from this example. Ophuis had lost his brother and, according to conventional morality, to lose a family member is "sad." The moral conclusion implied by the narrative event, is, however, of little weight when this morality is not accompanied by feeling; when it is not *felt*. When the moral conclusion is only produced by a conventional logic, it is emptied out at the same moment that it is reached.

According to Ophuis's example, one needs the concreteness of images in order to feel and substantiate moral conclusions. This emotional substantiation is the result of affects transmitted by the concrete, visual quality of the image. This visual quality does not have to be literal visuality. It can be the kind of imagined visuality that comes about in the reading of literary texts when they have strong, powerful descriptions. Later in the discussion, Ophuis stresses the importance of visualization also in the context of reading literary and other kind of texts. For him, texts only really become significant when he imagines visual images on the basis of these texts. With the text he reads, he must see images. It is only after visualizing the texts that they can really affect him. Without visualization, the text will have meaning, of course, but that meaning is not really embodied.[35] The affect of visualization is needed in order to engage meaning.

I am not implying here that visual images, whether imagined or material, are always producers of affect, as opposed to narratives of events. Many images fail to engage us on the affective level. Many images are completely conventionalized or have become part of our habitual visual culture. Those images have usually lost their affective power—if they ever possessed it. Nor am I restricting this argument to figurative images. Figurative images can be affective on the basis of their visual qualities, but also because of their subject matter (for example, violence, sex). But again, this is not necessarily or automatically so. Moreover, abstract images can be just as affectively powerful. Instead, my argument concerning the affective power of material images and of visualized texts should be seen in contrast to the conceptual nature of language. This aspect of language lacks the kind of concreteness and particularity that images can have. This does not mean, however, that the linguistic medium itself is not affective. On the contrary. Especially, but not exclusively, when linguistic expressions have been defamiliarized (as in most literary texts, but also in commercials), language can be highly affective.

The concreteness in which visualization results can be reached by other means—namely by the psychic process of identification. The kind of concreteness in which identification results does not approach the quasi materiality of visualization or the materiality of images. But identification makes reading (or looking) concrete, in the sense that reading is no longer a matter of signifying transactions but of an event that one experiences directly and even bodily. Similar to visualization, the affective process of identification can hardly be dealt with in allegorical reading.

But here another distinction needs to be made, because identifications are not always (and not by definition) equally strong; some forms of identification are affectively more powerful than others. Kaja Silverman has argued that identification takes one of two forms. One form involves taking the other into the self on the basis of a (projected) likeness, so that the other "becomes" or "becomes like" the self. Features that are similar are enhanced in the process; features that remain irreducibly other are cast aside or ignored. This form of identification is called idiopathic identification. The other form is heteropathic. Here, the self doing the identification takes the risk of—temporarily and partially—"becoming" (like) the other. This is both exciting and risky, enriching and dangerous, but at any rate, affectively powerful.[36]

It is especially heteropathic identification that is affectively powerful. To reduce the other to oneself, as happens in idiopathic identification, leads to little intensity (excitement or anxiety). The cancellation of difference in which this kind of identification results takes away intensity and possible tension. It reassures one's own sense of self at the expense of difference. To raise the possibility of identification with the "other," that is, with those who differ from us in one way or another, is, in fact, to appeal to heteropathic identification. The aspect of art that is commonly referred to as "fiction" lends itself particularly well to this psychic action (on the condition, however, that this aspect be not misunderstood to consist of a move away from reality).

On the contrary, fictionality is the invocation—in images or in descriptive or narrative language—of worlds of possibility, partly overlapping with the real world we know (or think we know). The images Ophuis

35. Ibid., p. 24. On the visual substance of literature, see Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

36. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

made "about" the death of his brother to help him grieve were not descriptions of what "really" happened or of how his brother really looked, but images that evoked and invoked affect related to that death. Because of their fictional aspect, art and literature have been excluded from philosophical theories of reality as "not serious." Instead, as Derrida has first argued, literature is the kind of writing that demonstrates the flaws in the categorization that excludes it.[37]

In the wake of this discussion, others have argued that precisely because artworks and literary texts are not "serious," they are able to provide access to what otherwise remains unseen or forgotten. In other words, it is *because* they are fictional that they are so eminently suitable to solicit such heteropathic identification; the otherness of others can be experimented with outside of the reality check of politeness, discretion, ignorance, and modesty. And to be sure, we discover the power of fiction when we consider the traditional properties of literature—for example, this access and the opportunities for identification it promotes. Attridge mentions the intimate experience of an individual's inner states and the passing, but not resolving, of delicate ethical dilemmas as textual elements that are superfluous to allegorical reading. Precisely these textual elements, among others, make identification possible. And importantly for my discussion here, when we identify with the inner states or ethical dilemmas of a narrator or character, we are no longer reading signs to which we have to attribute meaning but we are living and experiencing them. We go through them: they are no longer just someone else's inner struggles read at a distance.

If heteropathic identification leads to a production and transmission of affect, then the reader can reject the affect, project it elsewhere, or accept or "absorb" it. In other words, it can lead to unwanted or wanted affects. In the first case, the reader will, for instance, develop an ambivalent relationship with the narrator or character he identifies with. He will hate him and blame him for what he thinks or does (or does not do). Our propensity for affective investment as a result of identification allows us to oscillate between good and evil. We feel different possibilities. But whatever the possibilities are, the reading experience is one of continuous engagement instead of distanced signification. Coetzee's works yield more richly to this kind of reading than most.

Affective reading versus reading for meaning?

These examples of affective operations of art suggest, perhaps, that allegorical reading or reading for meaning is opposed to (or in serious tension with) affective reading. Indeed, Attridge's account of allegorical reading frequently gives this impression. He concludes, for instance, the following about Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*:

> The significance of *Age of Iron* . . . seems to me much less a portrayal of the 1980s in South Africa than as an invitation to participate in, and be moved by, a very specific narrative: if we learn from it, what we learn is not about South Africa (or, to take the opposite kind of allegorical interpretation, about death and love and commitment), it's not a "what" at all, it's a how: how a person with a particular background might experience terminal illness, violent political oppression, the embrace of someone who is entirely other.[38]

Attridge's emphasis on "how" instead of "what" not only separates the two from each other, but also creates a clear hierarchy between them. The political situation of South Africa is only a context within which a singular life is experienced in a very particular way. We do not learn anything about South Africa but about how somebody lives her life in South Africa. Insofar as we learn anything about South Africa, it is of secondary importance. Attridge makes this explicit in his reading of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*:

> *Disgrace*, to take another example, was immediately read as a depiction of, and bleak comment on, post-apartheid South Africa; but this, to me, is an allegorical reading that must remain secondary to the singular evocation of the peculiar mental and emotional world of an individual undergoing a traumatic episode in his life, challenging us to loosen our own habitual frameworks and ways of reading and judging.[39]

Here, it is especially the separation and the imposition of hierarchical evaluation on affective reading and reading for meaning that troubles me. First of all, we can doubt the possibility of not reading for meaning. Meaning (in its opposition to experience) is unavoidable because experience always has an object. And in the case of reading and looking, the object of experience is, or at least includes, meaning. Ultimately, Attridge

37. These few sentences hark back to a long and intricate discussion on speech act theory where the main players are John Austin, John Searle, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. A succinct and clear explanation of this theory is offered by Jonathan Culler in his "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 3 (2000):48–67.

38. Attridge (see note 29), p. 63.

39. Ibid.

himself is not able to refrain from reading for meaning, or allegorical reading, to use his own terms. Instead, the difference between the kind of reading he privileges and the one he discredits is between *kinds* of meaning: between singular meanings versus generalized meanings.

I would like to argue that affective (literal) reading and reading for meaning (allegorical reading) should not be seen as separate from each other, let alone opposed and hierarchized, but as an interplay in which one substantiates the other. The affective, experiential dimension of reading is, indeed, of crucial importance. "You will have missed everything," to use Coetzee's own words, when you don't pay attention to it. But without the "allegorical" dimension of meaning, affective reading is not really, or better yet, not "seriously" experienced. As argued earlier, when affects are discerned and processed, they shock to thought. This kind of thought, being the result of affects, is substantiated by what lead to those thoughts, by the expressions that force us to think, by the encounters that force us to interpret. Meaning is the result, not the cause, end, or goal of reading.

The difference between affective reading and reading for meaning is important, but not as a binary opposition. It is important because it differentiates between different phases in the interpretive encounter and process. The recognition of the role of the affective operations forces us to slow down—not shut down—the reading for meaning and our haste to reach that destiny. A hasty flight to (allegorical) meaning can only end up in the already known, in the recognition of conventional meanings, whereas the affective operations and the way they shock to thought are what opens a space for the not yet known.

There is, most importantly, a significant consequence for our social behavior in the way we read. Reading for meaning needs affective investments and an understanding of our affective investments because it is due to this understanding that we can be ethical in our thinking instead of moral. According to Bennett, it is precisely such an understanding that distinguishes ethical from moral art:

> An ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation; that is precisely by not assuming that there is a given outside to thinking. A morality on the other hand, operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be solved.[40]

A hasty reading for meaning announces a moral code, whereas a reading for meaning invested by affects invites an ethical response. This connection between affective reading and ethical response is, I would like to end, another reason to explore seriously the affective operations of art and literature. I began this essay by pointing out that since the 1980s and 1990s there is a historical urgency to do just that. A more general reason, however, is that our critical vocabulary focuses exclusively on meaning and the symbolic, and is rather ineffective in discussing affects. When we agree that affective operations and our discernment of them play a vital role in our negotiations between morality and ethics, then there is an extra reason to consider affects as social—and not as personal; this time not because of how they originate, but because of how they work and what they do.

40. Bennett (see note 5), p. 15.