

TRANSFERENTIAL MOMENTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ADAM FRANK

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Belin | [« Revue française d'études américaines »](#)

2021/3 N° 168 | pages 97 à 106

ISSN 0397-7870

ISBN 9782410022728

DOI 10.3917/rfea.168.0097

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2021-3-page-97.htm>

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Transferential Moments: an Interview with Adam Frank

NICHOLAS MANNING

Adam Frank is Professor in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* (Fordham University Press, 2015), co-author (with Elizabeth Wilson) of *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), and co-editor (with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) of *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Duke University Press, 1995). His essays have appeared in *ELH*, *Criticism*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Science in Context*, and elsewhere. He recently completed a sabbatical year fellowship at the Paris Institute for Advanced Study (2018-2019) where he pursued the *Radio Free Stein* critical sound project (www.radiofreestein.com).

Nicholas Manning: Your work has been intimately associated with the emergence of affect theory since at least your influential 1995 essay with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins.” Given the variant traditions they represent, and often profound disagreements they express, does Tomkins’ use of a singularized “affect theory” still make sense today, or should we be moving toward a spectrum of pluralized approaches, reflected in a pluralized term?

Adam Frank: I’m not sure what you mean by “singularized” affect theory. Even in Tomkins there is no one affect theory; rather, he proposes that we all carry around multiple, at times contradictory affect theories that guide or govern us in day-to-day life. Take fear theories, for example. I may have a weak fear theory that effectively helps me to cross a busy street, a somewhat stronger fear-shame theory that both interferes with and enhances my sexual desire, and a very strong fear theory that prohibits me from boarding an airplane. The affect of fear is involved in each of these kinds of experiences but plays distinct roles because it is differently co-assembled with other psychic and drive states. In this sense we

are made up of many tacit affect theories, of varying strengths, that structure and organize distinct domains of experience.

But, of course, the sense of *affect theory* you are asking about is a conceptualization of affect itself, an explicit attempt to understand what affect is or does and its more general roles in our psyches or worlds. So we have Tomkins's theory of affect, but also Spinoza's, Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments, the Singer-Schachter or two-factor theory of emotion, Paul Ekman's account of the Basic Emotions, and so on (and on and on). Perhaps your question about "singularized" theory is really about the supposedly universalizing aspects of Tomkins's understanding of affect and whether it is compatible with other approaches. If so, I would say that most theories of affect have universalizing tendencies—

that's part of what it means to be a strong theory, one that claims to organize a large domain. Tomkins's affect theory strikes me as neither more nor less universalizing than most of the others on the table.

At the same time, the idea of a range of strong and weak affect theories makes it possible to think about Tomkins's account as compatible (or not incompatible) with other approaches to affect, as Elizabeth Wilson and I suggest in the introduction to *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook*: "we find Tomkins's account of weak theory a helpful reminder of the importance of a methodological ecology that can support many, differently powerful ways of thinking about affect: not just Deleuzian or Tomkinsian but also psychoanalytic, phenomenological, Aristotelian, empirical, biochemical, and, of course, the myriad traditions of thinking about emotion beyond the West (in India, China, and North American indigenous cultures, for example)" (8). Our tacit, everyday affect theories, those that comprise our psyches, are surprisingly continuous with the ways that we wish to conceptualize affect itself explicitly. So there may not be as much of a difference as some scholars might hope between these different senses of theory.

NM: Regarding these theoretical lineages, does the internal scission that has recently been suggested between an "Affective Science"—more closely related to cognitivism and social psychology—and an "Affect Theory"—closer to critical theory and cultural studies—seem viable to you, or on the contrary the type of detrimental demarcation that we should strive to avoid?

AF: Well, what is the effect of such a demarcation? It clearly serves disciplinary purposes which may be useful in some institutional contexts (say, when a graduate student in a literature department needs to develop a comprehensive exam list). The demarcation may also usefully capture the significant differences in methods and what counts as evidence in, say, psychology, neuroscience, and literary studies. But affect is fundamentally

and confusingly a trans- and cross-disciplinary object and this is part of what makes it exciting to me. I'm a science studies person, so I try to find or create circumstances in which it is possible for scholars trained as humanists and those trained as scientists to have mutually intelligible conversations. Unfortunately, I have not yet found it particularly rewarding to have conversations about affect and emotion with psychologists and neuroscientists. But I am perpetually, foolishly looking for those chances, even if I'm inevitably disappointed.

NM: You have written of a certain uniformity in the way theory has often been conducted in the modern academy, especially in the wake of the various Structuralisms of the post-war. It may sometimes even appear as though, in disciplines across the humanities, we have merely been reiterating and rehashing an array of theoretical tropes: opposing scientific reductionism, rejecting biological determinisms, prioritizing language as the preeminent way to know the world, dismantling binary models, etc. Do you think that much has changed since this critique was first formulated in the mid-1990s, or are we still experiencing a similar conceptual homogeneity?

AF: Quite a lot has changed since the mid-90s when Sedgwick and I intervened in then-contemporary theoretical debates between, say, constructionism and essentialism. Elizabeth Wilson and I try to unfold some of those differences in our introduction to *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook* where we discuss the changing roles for biology and cognitive science in the theoretical humanities, the shifts away from language as the only or primary model for understanding representation, and the concomitant shift away from the deconstruction of binary pairs in literary studies. I don't see conceptual homogeneity today, quite the opposite: there are so many methods and critical practices to choose from with distinct yet overlapping histories. The field is quite open and it can be exciting to discover and think about placing one's own work in relation to various histories of criticism. And so much literary criticism is solidly grounded in baseline skills associated with reading, interpretation, contextualization, a kind of "normal science" (to use a Kuhnian phrase) that can be very gratifying to see and participate in.

At the same time, I see a lot of repetition and moralism that stem (often enough) from a presentist, too-easy rejection of, for example, the wide variety of structuralisms and what followed during the long post-war moment. I suspect that this presentism is a consequence of a near-irresistible professionalizing pressure, really an institutional and generic requirement to amplify a polemic in order to render one's critical work highly legible. So, it's not enough to make a contribution to knowledge,

we feel required to innovate, reconceptualize, transform basic assumptions, and so on. But not every publication needs to be, or can be, a revolutionary intervention in the field (despite book blurb claims). Making an actual contribution to knowledge is hard enough.

NM: You have just published, with Elizabeth A. Wilson, the long-awaited and invaluable *Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*. To what may we attribute the fact that Tomkins' work has remained less well-known than that of other theorists, and even than your own writing on his thought? Is this primarily due to Tomkins' famed "difficulty", or rather to the fact that his work explores a range of ideas—such as the potential existence of "hard-wired" affective systems—that are simply not germane to much modern theory across literary and cultural studies?

AF: Tomkins is well-enough known in psychology, social psychology, and in some clinical contexts as an influential early thinker on emotion and the face, on personality and script theory. I think you're asking about the uptake of his affect theory in the humanities. The particular difficulty of Tomkins's thinking for readers versed in what is called post-structuralism lies in its connections with mid-century cybernetics and systems theory, or put another way, American structuralism. We're used to thinking of structuralism in the European context but work on the history of cybernetics (e.g. Liu, Geogheghan, Lafontaine, Johnson) demonstrates the importance of concepts from cybernetics to French theory. It's no accident that the publication of Tomkins's earliest formulation of his affect theory was in a 1956 anthology edited by Lacan. If contemporary readers are wary of Tomkins's emphasis on (supposedly totalizing) systems, this misunderstands the ongoing importance of the system concept for so many thinkers and the afterlives of cybernetic concepts across theory; it also fails to recognize how Tomkins emphasizes the necessary gaps in and between systems, the fragmentary nature of the assemblages he theorizes.

Another important parameter for the lack of uptake is the stringent anti-psychologism in the theoretical humanities of the last thirty or forty years and, more recently, a steep decline in the prestige of psychoanalysis in North American contexts (for good reasons and bad). Tomkins is in dialogue with Freud, more specifically with the reception of Freud in American academic psychology, an important context that Liz Wilson and I try to make available in our book in a chapter on the Harvard Psychological Clinic. In the European context it has been less easy to recognize the ongoing role for physiological psychology in the Jamesian, pragmatist tradition that Tomkins is part of, his commitment to varieties of radical and speculative empiricism that take into account affective,

physiological experience in the formulation of knowledge. The non-reductive materialism that Tomkins espouses gets lost in the invidious contrast between Deleuze and Tomkins—this contrast makes no sense once you begin to think about the importance of Spinoza for the American pragmatists and psychologists who were Tomkins’s teachers.

In other words, where and how does the bodily fit into affect theory? Surely any persuasive contemporary account of affect will want to think about biology and evolution. We address the role of evolution in Tomkins’s thinking in our book by unfolding his nuanced relation to Darwin’s thinking. This is a large topic, but suffice it to say that Tomkins would not accept the reductive neo-Darwinism of contemporary discourse, even in the affective neurosciences (Panskepp). I hear in your reference to “hard-wired” or innate affects the evocation of what the historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller calls “the mirage of a space between nature and nurture.” Tomkins’s mode of thought has no use for this mirage.

NM: Tomkins resists what has now become a commonly deployed distinction between affect and emotion, outlined notably in the work of theorists such as Brian Massumi. Why do you think that it may be critical to move beyond the affect/emotion binary, forging models that do not codify this distinction?

AF: Tomkins doesn’t resist the affect/emotion binary, he simply approaches it very differently from the way Massumi does. I’ve pointed out (in an early footnote in *Transferential Poetics*) that Massumi’s way of distinguishing affect from emotion by way of the category of the discursive (emotion as what is captured by language, by ideology, by the subject while affect as physiological, pre-discursive, non-subjective) reintroduces a mind/body binary (although one that reverses the conventional values associated with this binary) that I find particularly unhelpful for critical and political purposes. I just don’t think that we should be looking for what is *beyond* or *before* subjectivity to ground our politics or criticism. If we need to choose a prepositional relation to characterize this domain, I would follow Eve Sedgwick’s emphasis on *between* (she writes about this in the introduction to *Touching Feeling*). Language, feeling, and politics are too intricately and unpredictably bound up for us to have any confidence in asserting the affect/emotion distinction along the lines that Massumi proposes, and *subjectivity* is as good a word as any to name this muddled space.

Tomkins’s differentiated account of the affects lets us begin to conceptualize the affect/emotion distinction by analogy with the atom/molecule distinction: the primary affects (enjoyment-joy, anger-rage, and so on) are like the atomic elements of the periodic table which combine with one another as well as with other cognitive, drive, and perceptual states

to become the huge variety of molecular emotions that make up our psychic lives. In this way Tomkins's account resembles Spinoza's detailed analysis of how joy, sadness, and desire are the fundamental bases for myriad other affective or emotional states. What Tomkins and Spinoza both offer are vocabularies and analytic tools for helping us to understand affect dynamics as they govern our thinking, feeling, and behaviour. There is a fundamental critical-therapeutic value to these accounts of affect that I simply don't see following from Massumi's too-neat distinction. Really, it comes down to what account you want to have of ideology and what is the role in that account for affect and emotion.

NM: Continuing for a moment with questions of denomination: Tomkins provides far clearer "definitions", or at least conceptual models, of what affects in fact "are" than many other theorists. While this approach has clear advantages in terms of clarity and pragmatics, affect's intentional indetermination—I'm thinking of the use, in a more Deleuzian tradition, of terms such as "intensity" or "force"—has been viewed by others as a paradoxical strength: a way to resist the reductive semantics of other overarching critical theories. Is there indeed a danger in defining affects more directly—especially if, according to some models, it is precisely because they escape full semantic designation that they may be so compelling?

AF: Well, if you can read Tomkins and tell me what his definition of affect is, that would be most helpful! In fact he offers several overlapping ways of approaching affects and the affect system at the levels of neurology, physiology, and aesthetic experience. But the "intentional indetermination" you identify does not disappear and remains an important part of Tomkins's speculative enterprise. He is hardly the kind of hard-nosed empiricist we would contrast with more speculative thinkers such as Deleuze. (For that contrast, the psychologist Paul Ekman, who advocates for the idea of Basic Emotions, would be the much better choice.) But I think what you are referring to is Tomkins's insistence on a differentiated account of the affects, that anger is different from joy is different from disgust and so on, his clear demarcations between what he calls the primary affects. You, Nicholas, like many others in affect studies, are somehow resistant to a qualitative specification of the affects for reasons that are not at all clear to me. Of course, it can be difficult to identify specific feelings or affects (the famous "ineffability" of affect) but this difficulty can often be used as an excuse not to analyze or think about the affects in their particular qualities, roles, and effects. And if we don't think about them, they tend to retain their hold on us, for better and for worse.

Let me approach this from another angle. For Tomkins (as for Spinoza), the force of the affects lies in their capacity to motivate (along with the drives). But motivation is only one kind of force, and by no means is it the only kind. I have recently re-read Derrida's essay "Force and Signification" where he insists on the importance of supplementing structuralism's focus on form with the concept of force. Do we want to say that the kind of force he is describing is the same as affective force? I would not. What is the relation between affective force as motivation and certain kinds of physical force? Or between these and what J.L. Austin calls illocutionary force? I am currently co-teaching a course on performativity (with Ori Simchen, a philosopher of language) that returns to Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* and it has become clear that the force of a performative utterance is not at all the same as affective force (which Austin characterizes in terms of the perlocutionary). I worry that "affect" has come to be a catch-all name for "force" and that this simplifies and impoverishes both concepts unnecessarily. As for intensities, that's yet another matter.

NM: The concepts of theatricality and performativity are key in much of your work, nowhere more so than in your recent *Transfereential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol*. Do you conceive of theatricality as primarily an enlightening metaphor for certain affective processes, or rather as a veritable systemic model for the way emotionality functions, which goes far beyond mere analogy?

AF: Both metaphor and more than metaphor, like all technology... In *Transfereential Poetics* I approached the concept of theatricality in two related ways. First, I wanted to track the metaphor of the "scene" or "stage" in Derrida's essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing." My argument, which was perhaps too convoluted, was that despite his (high modernist) rejection of affectivity, Derrida needs some version of the concept to conceptualize the relation between writing and the psyche. Derrida rethinks presence/absence in terms of a highly mobile relation between what is on and off stage: the analog relation between the stage and the theater as a whole is key to his account of the temporal dynamics of writing (spacing, deferral), and we can think of this analog relation as, in part, affectively structured. Second, I brought in Gregory Bateson's concept of metacommunication and the frame of play, and suggested that it is specifically affect that frames verbal communications (and vice versa). I used these two ideas to propose a historical argument: that those graphic technologies that emerged in the 19th-century that dissociated the affective mediums of face and voice from physiology (telegraphy, photography, phonography) were fundamentally theatricalizing technologies that re-framed affect in perception.

Now, theatricality as a concept is a can of worms inside a can of worms, and all the worms are having a very nice time putting on a show for each other. Once you throw Austin's concept of performativity in there, it all becomes rather excitingly confusing. The seminar on performativity I am co-teaching is an attempt to suss out the relation between performative utterances and theatricality. Austin famously brackets theater (as well as poetry) in his account, and yet it shows up fairly consistently in his examples and footnotes. Clearly, he cannot get rid of it, but I don't think it is only the persistent question of citationality or iterability that is at issue here, as Derrida proposes in "Signature Event Context." Something less general is at stake, and my current project thinks through these questions by way of Gertrude Stein's early plays and their theatricality. In a chapter I am writing I observe that the term *performative* has now entered popular discourse: to call an utterance performative means "merely going through the motions" or "saying but not meaning it"—i.e. unconvincing theater. This is what Austin would label a special kind of "abuse" of performative utterances (insincerity) that renders these utterances hollow (but not void). What is the relation between the potential hollowness of some performative utterances and the more structural hollowness of theater, as Samuel Weber has understood it along Derridean lines? My sense is that Stein's plays are a generative site for thinking about affect as it resonates in-between, as a crucial medium of both linguistic performativity and theatricality.

NM: Much current interest in art's emotional "power" or "impact" may strike us as involved in covert, or even explicit efforts to justify its supposedly endangered status in the context of neoliberal economies. I wonder the extent to which you think affect theories are similarly involved in this quest to locate new ways to justify literary and aesthetic worth. Moreover, should they be involved in such a project? Or should we precisely resist these calls to prove "why the humanities matter", at the risk of falling into a reductive utilitarianism? More broadly, is this question of art and literature's present cultural legitimacy something that informs your own critical and theoretical practice?

AF: No, not really. I just can't seem to get interested in the supposedly waning moral authority of Art or Literature or Culture. I don't have much time for those official discourses anyway, although of course that's where the money is. But I do find thinking necessary, and the forms of thinking that take place in and around literary texts and other aesthetic compositions is essential to me. I emphasize this in my teaching as well as in my encounters with those curious or skeptical about what it is that critics do, such as some scientists or philosophers. Perhaps, then, to answer your question, when I try to authorize the work of criticism it is

by way of arguing for the value of thinking about feeling or fantasy, as well as thinking about how feeling in part comprises thinking.

NM: In a related interrogation, Tomkins’s thinking in particular is highly applicable to transdisciplinary contexts, especially the contrasting epistemologies of the humanities and so-called “hard” sciences. Your own criticism and creative work—I’m thinking notably of your *Radio Free Stein* project, your work on affect and technology, or your recent entry “Literature and Science after Klein and Tomkins” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science*—is resolutely intermedial. How does your work on affect inform your thinking about the challenges of transdisciplinary enterprises?

AF: I think of what I do as a kind of mad science (the tentative title of my next project after *Radio Free Stein* is “Mad Science, or a Survey of Motives for Criticism”). Our feelings are a kind of evidence, aren’t they? But how do critics use them as evidence, how reliable are they, what theories underlie their use? Freud and his successors, especially in the Kleinian and post-Kleinian schools of object-relations theory, have offered rigorous ways to approach affect, the transference and counter-transference, as material for interpretation. Where do these approaches live now in our critical methods? As I mentioned above, I think it’s crucial to try to make it possible for scientists and humanists to be mutually intelligible to one another, and yet because our methods and what counts as evidence seem to be so different, such cross- or transdisciplinary discussion is rarely productive. I am perpetually buoyed by the futile hope that affect can serve as the kind of transdisciplinary object that Isabelle Stengers and Léon Chertok described many decades ago in their book on hypnosis (*A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*), that it can offer an unsettling, shifting ground for collaboration.

NM: You also write in *Transferential Poetics* of your effort to resist “applying” affect theory to aesthetic works and objects. Bearing in mind the ever-present historical precedents of an imperious and domineering Theory—in the wake too of Rita Felski’s “post-critique”—do you feel that there are specific ways, in our critical methodologies, to preserve the autonomy of works of art from the “application” of such overbearing superstructures?

AF: Instead of Felski, I would rather point to Shoshana Felman’s observations on the necessary interimplications of literature and psychoanalysis (and, by implication, Theory in general) in “To Open the Question” and remind us that we already have very sophisticated methodologies. Perhaps these can be repurposed in and for our present moment, productively weakened rather than strengthened, in Tomkins’s

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sense of weak and strong theory, that is, we can tweak them and limit their domains of application. I take it to be a methodological premise that literary texts and other aesthetic compositions themselves propose theories, that they are theoretical agents, and that my work as a critic is to try to make these proposed theories explicit. When I read a literary text (or watch a film or television show, or otherwise encounter some composition) and I feel that it recognizes or knows me—that is a transferential moment of significant force. And that is a moment from which to begin to engage in criticism.