“Take This! Don’t Eat My Blood!”

Michael Taussig and Affect

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Introduction

The word affect, with its stressed first syllable, does not appear very often (or possibly at all), in the work of Michael Taussig. But even if he does not employ the same terminology as other affect theorists of recent years, or necessarily engage with many of the same foundational texts that have been very influential since the onset of the “affective turn” in the social sciences, nevertheless I believe that Taussig contributes powerful ethnographic and theoretical support to the broader and influential concept of affect. I am obviously not alone in this belief; he is often cited by key affect theorists, especially on considerations of terror and politicized violence and their relations to affect.

Even so, with affect as with other ideas, Taussig cuts a difficult path to follow. Reading his work, one finds a notion of affect that at times can be hazy, hallucinogenic, mimetic, and intensely political, to list just a few qualities. One finds every degree of implied and explicit affects, soft and subtle or sharp and screaming and many points in between. Importantly, one finds a notion of affect that is presented affectively — Taussig’s work in and of itself affects the reader, bringing terror, mimesis, magic, and hallucinations to life from the printed page.

In order to unwind some of the complexity of Taussig’s affective view of affect, I intend to examine some of the key and influential texts from Taussig’s oeuvre and consider how affect is presented, how it fits with other texts that more explicitly address affect theory, and some of the sorts of contributions to the larger body of theory that I believe we can draw from him. In order to do so, I will begin by assembling an overview of various key texts on affect, endeavouring to paint a picture of some of the important points of consideration for recent affect theory. Next I will dig more deeply into several of Taussig’s works, with an emphasis on his 1987 landmark book Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man, but with attention to several
others as well, examining salient themes and considering their connections with and
ccontributions to affect theory. This effort will be by no means comprehensive, but I hope that in
doing so I can host an interesting conversation here between Taussig and key affect theorists.

**Affect on the Plane of Immanence**

Contemporary affect theory follows in the footsteps of *The Ethics* by Baruch de Spinoza. This work, posthumously published in 1677, outlines an immanent theory of the origin of emotions, executed analytically and with an eye toward geometry rather than mystery. Beginning in the preface, Spinoza establishes his intention to take humankind as part of nature rather than above or separate from it, in contrast to the view that he attributes to his contemporaries, that humankind is a “kingdom within a kingdom,” and that a human being “disturbs rather than follows nature's order, that he has absolute control over his actions, and that he is determined solely by himself” (Spinoza 1951:48). In contrast to this Cartesian view that “the mind has absolute power over its actions” (1951:48), Spinoza instead demonstrates that the “passions” result from nature and have causes that can be explored and identified.

In order to investigate these causes, Spinoza elicits the key idea that bodies act upon other bodies and in doing so have the ability to either increase or decrease that body’s capacity to act. He establishes the notion of adequate and inadequate causes in his initial set of definitions: the former is one that can be understood through its effects and allows a person to act, and the latter cannot be understood (or can only be partially understood) through its effects and leaves a person in a passive state (1951:48). Tied into this, Spinoza defines affects here as bodily modifications that either enhance or weaken the body’s ability to act. These essential characteristics underpin not only his theory of affect, to be elaborated, but will also appear again centuries later as key tenets for many of his successors.
Moving forward, a central idea is Spinoza’s proposition (II) that the body cannot move the mind, and the mind cannot move the body, but rather they are one and the same and are affected, that is, both moved and made passive, by other bodies. This establishes a relational nature between bodies on what Deleuze calls a “plane of immanence” (1988:122), upon which affects between bodies take place, and is meant to stand against the idea that actions arise autonomously in the mind, which controls the body, and which has complete, independent control over an individual being. Each body is constantly affected by other bodies, in ways that may be difficult to see or understand, and which may have unpredictable results; as Spinoza says, the true limits and capabilities of the body are not completely understood (1951:51). Rather than being closed and bounded systems, bodies are open, giving and receiving affects, influencing feelings and actions, with no neat dividing lines or separations in between.

Gilles Deleuze explains one of the key consequences of Spinoza’s notion of affects:

“Concretely, if you define bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected, many things change. You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable.”(Deleuze 1988:124)

Importantly, as Deleuze states here, a “body” will not necessarily have to be a human being in order to have an affect on another body. Indeed, a body will not even be defined as a subject, which opens up the possibility of addressing non-biological entities as capable of affect. Indeed, on the following page Deleuze states, “So an animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world” (1988:125). While it may be difficult to conceive of two non-biological entities having the capability to affect each other (that is, either increase or decrease that body’s capacity to act, or engage with each other reciprocally), it is clear that an object, or a place, or a spirit, or a narrative, or an image, can have an affect on an animal or human being, and this affect is materially expressed in the body. Indeed, as I will discuss later, these types of affects are key in
the work of Taussig; from the jungles of southwestern Columbia to the silver mines of Bolivia, places in particular are powerfully defined by their affects, and narratives and images are central players in the development of history.

Affect has political dimensions. Given that, according to Spinoza, affects either increase or decrease the body’s capacity to act, it follows that affects will be central to relations of power, which involve bodies attempting to make other bodies either act or not act. Jonathan Beasley-Murray translates the affective theories of Spinoza and Deleuze into more starkly political terms:

Affect, then, is more than simply an index of the immanent, corporeal power of bodies whose definition mutates according to their state of affection; it is also what underpins the incorporeal or “quasi-corporeal” power of the sovereign whose empirical body, in Reagan’s case, crumbles before our eyes. (Beasley-Murray 2010:129)

He reminds us that the disembodied power of the state depends on real bodies; in this particular example that Beasley-Murray channels from Massumi, that body (and the related power of affect) belongs to Ronald Reagan. Thus affect, which according to Spinoza and Deleuze occurs on the plane of immanence, works to uphold and advance transcendent state power. As Beasley-Murray states, “Like labor power, it is a potential that can be abstracted and put to use” (2010:129). Indeed, he suggests that affect and politics are inseparable, and conceiving of them separately serves only to becloud them both (2010:130).

As the state claims transcendent power, so does it use its power to try and capture affect, put it to its own use through transformation, and deny its power everywhere else (Beasley-Murray 2010:138, 142). Importantly (and bound to return in my examination of Taussig’s work) is that transcendent state power uses “a series of exclusions as well as categorizations” to “purge civil(ized) society of affect” (2010:142). This effort to control affect determines who belongs and who does not. Anyone who does not conform to the defined ideal is subjected either to containment or is made into an “other,” the most radical form of which is death. Beasley-Murray
identifies colonialism as “the most significant modern politics of absolute othering,” (2010:142), where “affects banished from modern societies” were ascribed to the encountered and conquered peoples of colonized areas. That which was repressed at home was projected on peoples abroad. As Taussig will show us, that which was projected and reflected in colonial areas subsequently had a powerful affect of its own.

While affect, and the attempt to control it, is central to the project of the state, Beasley-Murray reminds us that any capture of affect by the state will always be incomplete and contingent. This opens avenues for resistance, once again because of the immanence of affect, through “experimentation in novel modes of being” (2010:144). If, as Spinoza told us, we can never be certain of what a body is capable, then neither can the state be so certain, and if it cannot be so certain, perhaps it follows that it cannot achieve total containment of the body’s affective power. In other words, Beasley-Murray argues, the very immanence that underwrites the transcendent nature of the state undermines it too.

This is well-illustrated when the state confronts terror, a battle that takes place through affects and the attempt to capture and control them. Beasley-Murray calls terror “radical immanence” and “affect at fever pitch” (2010:150-151). To illustrate how much of an affective force terror has, he describes how, much like affect itself, terror “explodes the border between inside and outside,” unifying people with each other and with the terrorist even while piercing them with mutual suspicion (2010:154-155). The shock of terror itself is such that narrative and language give way in that moment to pure affect, to bodily shock and paralysis. For the state, ultimately “Terror sets up a spiral of immanentization in which origins and causes become increasingly blurred: the state ends up chasing its own tail, frustrated at its inevitable failure to delimit even its own boundaries” (2010:160). Again, the immanent nature of terror, and the
state’s engagement with it on the plane of immanence, undermines the state’s claimed
transcendent power, even as it is trying to use it to combat (or wage) terror.

Terror has its role to play on behalf of the state, though, and this provides an opportunity
to further explore the ways that affects can be deployed in political ways. Brian Massumi
discusses how threats are mobilized by the state and subsequently how the state modulates the
affect of fear. He starts with a discussion of threat’s temporal nature, that it emerges from the
future and is always rising, just over the horizon, projecting itself backward in time strongly
enough to cause an affect but never actually arriving, or at least never arriving with any
finality—there will always be a future threat (Massumi 2010:53). This is crucial because this
gives threat its affective power; as Massumi says, “Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence.
It is superlatively real, because of it” (2010:53). It is real because, even though it is always
emerging but never fully emerged, it produces fear felt in the present, fear that gives truth to the
future, never-emerging threat, fear that has a real affective power. In Massumi’s words, “Fear is
the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future” (2010:54).

This emergent nature of threat and its affective power, Massumi argues, are what
give “pre-emptive logic,” such as that underlying the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, its curious
ability to always be correct, no matter the changing circumstances or new facts that come to
light. Since the threat is always out there in the future and feels real, even (or especially) if it
never fully emerges, any action taken to pre-emptively eliminate that threat will be justified. If
that action taken exacerbates the threat or makes it truly emerge into a violent reality, then that
will just serve to further justify the pre-emptive action (2010:56). Most importantly, it is the
affect of threat that imbues it with this power and supports pre-emptive logic. Thus affect serves
as a powerful ally to states seeking an excuse for violence.
But we have seen from Beasley-Murray already that affect and its immanent nature can also serve to undermine the self-claimed transcendence of the state, even when it also supports it. In fact, Massumi discusses the ways that the state attempts to “modulate” affect and bring it into closer control, in an effort to abstract affect and mobilize it at the service of the state, although the very example he selects to illustrate this also demonstrates that any such effort will likely meet its limits at some point, at least in a particular configuration.\footnote{I say this because on 20 April 2011 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security released a statement announcing that it was discontinuing the colour-coded terror alerts in favour of the simpler “National Terrorism Advisory System.” This new system does not rely on constant background threat assessments denoted by colours but rather issues alerts regarding allegedly specific threat situations. As of 27 March 2012 no alerts had been issued under this new system.}

Discussing the US government’s colour coded terror alert system, instituted after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, Massumi describes it as a sort of affective modulator, designed to “raise [fear] a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response” (Massumi 2005:32). The result of this was that “The whole population became a networked jumpiness, a distributed neuronal network registering en masse quantum shifts in the nation’s global state of discomfiture in rhythm with leaps between color levels” (2005:32). Much like an act of terror, the colour coding itself brought people together into a collective defined by a common affect. And also much like terror, the colour coding had an affective power that the government exercised outside of narrative or discourse that allowed it to sidestep engagement with ideas and beliefs and instead tend toward direct activation of the populace (2005:34).

It is this activation, in fact, that Massumi argues constitutes the reality of the situation causing the fear. He states, “The experience is in the fear, in its ingathering of action, rather than the fear being the content of an experience” (2005:37, emphasis in the original). The experience of threat is the fear itself, rather than the fear being part of what fills the threat experience. And
only later does reflection allow one to negotiate the experience and place fear within the 
experience, rather than the experience within the fear (2005:38).

The ultimate point of this is that the body comes to anticipate the emotion of fear before a 
threatening situation even takes place, and this anticipation itself brings on the fear. At this point, 
fear becomes self-causing without any outside trigger; threat is no longer even necessary to 
instigate fear. Massumi writes, “Without ceasing to be an emotion, [fear] has become the 
affective surround of existence, its in-which. Self-caused and all-around: at once the ground and 
background of the experience it now tends to take over” (2005:41). Thus the body is 
continuously affected by fear, which to Spinoza was an “inconstant pain” arising from 
uncertainty related to the past or future, and as such was apt to reduce the capacity of the body to 
act (Spinoza 1951:75). Thus, taking a Spinozan view, the political dimension of this constant 
(yet paradoxically inconstant in nature) fear becomes abundantly clear: its affect keeps the 
populace disempowered, restrained, and reactive. Thus the colour alert system becomes a tool of 
“incalculable power” as it allows the state to “exploit and foster the varieties of fear while 
expanding on their ontogenetic powers” (Massumi 2005:45).

Even so, Susan McManus reminds us that “Affects always circulate in a wider agential 
field, and that field demands consideration” (McManus 2011). Indeed, agency and affect are 
closely related; channeling Spinoza, she writes, “Human agency is by no means a property of an 
individual body or consciousness; the capacity for acting, rather, emerges from compositions or 
'assemblages' that are coextensive, however disjunctively, with affective series” (2011). But 
affect is not the sole determinant of individual agency, and therefore to McManus one cannot 
draw a neat causative line between an affect, such as fear, and a diminishment in the body’s 
“agential capacity.” McManus’s focus, then, is on what she calls “affective ambivalence,” in an
effort to identify the “wriggle room” (a term she borrows from Massumi), or space left by the flexibility of the relationship between affect and agency. She writes, “Such ‘wriggle room’ can be elicited to critically interrupt an affective determinism in which hope is presumed to shape subversive agency while fear renders subjects complicit and governable” (2011). In order to complicate these neat definitions and presumed mutual opposition of the affects of hope and fear, she goes back to Spinoza’s definitions of both hope and fear as affects that hold certain parallels: they are both defined by inconstancy and uncertainty, are intimately entangled with each other, and do not necessarily lead to either joy nor sadness (McManus 2011; Spinoza 1951:75-76).

Ultimately, a key point is that the endeavour toward a politics of affective agency will inevitably entangle with hope and fear, as “the future needs to be made out of matter that is available in the present, out of the same crises, but with different trajectories” (2011) – fear can be disrupted, but not effaced, and it will be a part of the critical agency of utopian hope as it “works through immanent historical processes that remain open and undetermined” (2011).

Given such wriggle room, what can people accomplish when they take it into their hands to mobilize affectively against the state? To Gordillo, a key power of affect lies in resonance, a physical and material power spatially deployed through bodies (Gordillo 2011). Resonance is where bodies meet the state and immanently confront it with the power to transform “physical and political landscapes at multiple spatial scales” (2011). Immediately, resonance manifests between bodies in a single place and its close surroundings; as a starting point Gordillo uses the Egyptian uprising centred in Tahrir Square in Cairo, which he identifies as a node, or localized centre of affective power, rhizomically affected by and affecting other nodes. But this Egyptian uprising is affectively related to other nodes at broader spatial scales as well, from Tunis to Paris and later even to New York City and Oakland. Nodes of resonance, in other words, exist in open,
unbounded, Spinozan relationships with one another, and the immanence of resonance is
nevertheless capable of carrying far beyond the final reach of sound waves. But even taking
these broader scales into account, and the rhizomic connections through the media or the Internet
that transmit affects over distance, for Gordillo resonance still originates at the immanent affects
of bodies on each other in proximate space, whether the streets of Cairo in an effort to topple a
regime, or within a religious ceremony, a musical performance, or any other places where bodily
assemblages produce affects. The political power of resonance is clear enough that the state’s
response is to disassemble, bound, and isolate bodies from each other in an effort to prevent
resonance from forming (Gordillo 2011).

I have now created a small assemblage of writings on affect. I have called them together
in order to carry them forward into a discussion on Michael Taussig and the notion of affect in
his work. Some of these literatures engage with Taussig to varying degrees, but he does not
engage directly with any of them (which is unsurprising, as nearly all of these writings, with the
exception of Spinoza, were published after the Taussig works that I am about to consider).
Nevertheless, it is my assertion that Taussig is a powerful affect theorist and that key ideas from
this assemblage will be found supported and elaborated on in Taussig’s work. I intend, then, to
hold a discussion between some of Taussig’s key themes from several books and this assemblage
to see what he supports, what he elaborates, and what he adds to the body of affect theory. It will
be my challenge to form the discussion into sentences and paragraphs without emptying it of the
affect that Taussig’s own work has on the reader. Perhaps there will be some appropriate
moment to capture this, but the haze and murk and hallucinogenesis are strong in Taussig’s
work. There will be no penetrating them fully.
“Mouth to Mouth…Page to Page…Image to Body”

Taussig is a theorist and a painter of terror. Terror speaks across the centuries in his work. It roils in the epistemic murk of southwestern Colombia and the spasms and lurches of late 19th century colonial genocide and exploitation (1987). It lurks in the jungles and the newspapers and the bodies of Colombia during the late 20th century territorial, ideological, and affective struggle for power (1992). It enters the author’s body and his pen and the body of the reader. It speaks through images. It speaks through affects. It is flexed by different agents. It is mired in confusion. It hides in shadows but lashes out with violent visibility. It is an ambient feeling but at times it originates in particular places. And it is always political.

I will begin with this political dimension of terror as a theme that runs through Taussig’s work and ties it to the broader discussion of the political dimension of affect. Like aforementioned theorists, Taussig shows how terror is deployed as a powerful affect of the state. For example, in *The Nervous System* (a title that in itself suggests the state’s affective dimensions and its Spinozan unboundedness as a giver and receiver of affects), Taussig discusses terror as a quotidian reality of life in Colombia. Drawing on Edmund Burke, he establishes the immanent bodily and discursive dimension of terror: “What mattered for terror was how it was passed from mouth to mouth across a nation, from page to page, from image to body” (Taussig 1992:2). In this brief quote, Taussig indicates that even as he is interested in discourses and images of terror, these are tied to the body and its parts (in this example the “mouth”) and thus, implied, is a certain immanence and inseparability from the body. Likewise, in the same chapter Taussig talks about the “physiognomic power” of images to “disturb the (collective) body” as a point of examination for his landmark book *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1992:8). He is
interested in images that “disturb” bodies; in other words, in parallel with Deleuze, to Taussig images have affective power that can be explored.

These affects are politically wielded, but this is not a smooth and even process. Rather, Taussig argues, they have a complex emergence: the Colombian state and its armed quasigovernmental allies cloak their activities in a discourse of protecting public order, even while they are at the heart of disorder and violence. Taussig argues that in their own service they deploy “the strategic use of uncertainty and mystery around which stalks terror’s talk and to which it always returns” (Taussig 1992:16). It is an affective discourse designed to both maintain what Taussig calls “terror as usual” and position the state as the people’s saviour. It is a destabilized stability that contributes to the following complex interrelation of affects:

I am referring to a state of doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said—something that even while it requires the normal in order to make an impact, destroys it...people like you and me close their eyes to it, in a manner of speaking, but suddenly an unanticipated event occurs, perhaps a dramatic or poignant or ugly one, and the normality of the abnormal is shown for what it is. Then it passes away, terror as usual, in a staggering of position that lends itself to survival as well as despair and macabre humor. (Taussig 1992:18)

Terror, then, is ambient noise that can suddenly burst into an overwhelming roar. But as Massumi argues, when the state mobilizes the affect of terror, it makes an effort to modulate it (recalling George Bush’s colour coding system) in order to control it and prevent it from losing its potency through the fear fatigue of the public(Massumi 2005). For Taussig, the Colombian state and its allies deploy violence in conjunction with these discourses of public order as a form of affective modulation. He gives the example of the mass urban violence in the southern city of Cali, the limpieza that resulted in the deaths of countless people who had been identified as undesirable in the type of exclusion that Beasley-Murray identified as part of state efforts to
control affect (Beasley-Murray 2010). This violence was supported by a fantasy world created by the media in Cali of a vast and powerful organized crime underworld that was responsible for every instance of petty theft in the city (Taussig 1992:25). Even though such an organization did not exist, the picture this painted helped create the real organized violence of the *limpieza*, the massive acts of violent exclusion that cost so many Caleños their lives. Taussig argues that these media fantasies “were designed to create and reproduce a tropical version of the Hobbesian world, nasty, brutish, and short…and thus create a city of the swamp shrouded in a nebulous atmosphere of insecurity, truly a state of emergency” (Taussig 1992:25).

Taussig also argues that the Colombian state deploys silencing as a power that I would qualify as affective. Not only is it a matter of the state and its allies keeping their own aforementioned silence about the truth of their activities of terror. It is also the affect produced by this terror that results in the broader silence of the population, a silence induced by fear (1992:26-27). Taussig argues that this general silencing about the terror of the state creates a new affect, borne out in the memory of terror of the individual. He writes, “The point is to drive the memory deep within the fastness of the individual so as to create more fear and uncertainty in which dream and reality commingle” (1992:27). The memory of the individual becomes an affective weapon for the state. And silence is also deployed against resonance among the ghosts of the disappeared and the victims of violence who haunt the “space of death,” resonance that ties them to the “masses of people, mainly poor, [who] come to pray for the lost souls of purgatory” in the Central Cemetery of Bogotá and thus “achieve magical relief from the problems of unemployment, poverty, failed love, and sorcery” (1992:27). Taussig argues that these ghosts have a “magical power” that can be drawn upon to “relocate memory in the contested public sphere” and thus out of the aforementioned silent mind of fear and uncertainty.
Applying Gordillo (2011), then, one can see why the state responds with further efforts to silence those who would seek communion with such power, those who would gather in cemeteries or otherwise speak of the dead and collect them to resonate with the living. Terror and silence are the affective tools to the state uses to attempt to contain such resonance, which can threaten the state’s stranglehold on the masses. But such containment of the power of affect is never complete.

We have seen that the state and its allies consciously deploy affect as a weapon to terrorize and silence the population in war-torn late 20th and early 21st century Colombia. But if we follow Taussig into the epistemic murk of the jungle, the phrase “consciously deploy” starts to lose sharpness and focus and finally drops from view. Indeed, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987) calls into question what is conscious, what is unconscious, what is deliberate, what is haphazard, and if any boundaries at all can be established between these different states in the darkness of terror. The human body in *Shamanism* is, as Spinoza asserts, unbounded and receptive, affected and affecting. But Taussig adds another important dimension here: it is mimetic. Through *Shamanism*, as well as 1993’s *Mimesis and Alterity*, Taussig explores this relationship between mimesis, otherness, violence, terror, and colonialism, and in doing so he paints a potent and affective picture of the power of affects from bodies, narratives, and images.

**“Their Imagination was Diseased”**

Focusing on the violence and terror in the Putumayo region of southwestern Colombia and northern Peru in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Taussig examines possible economically rationalized explanations for the mayhem and massacres at the hands of rubber traders that were raised by observers from the time. In his report back to British Parliament on
the activities of the rubber company, for example, Roger Casement identified a rational interest for terrorizing the local people: labour was scarce, willingness to work even scarcer, and in response the white traders used violence to coerce Indians into bringing back the dispersed rubber from the darkness of the jungle (Taussig 1987:53). The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a debate over the best way to manage the Indian labour force in Colombia: some, like Casement, argued that colonial benevolence would be most effective for winning over the hearts and loyalty of the local people, while others, like the Barbadian overseer Edward Crichlow, asserted that violence was the only way to get Indians to work (1987:56, 60).

For Taussig, any such rational explanations of the violence and the terror dissolve in the “wantonness of the sport and in the sheerness of the brutality” that took place at the hands of the rubber traders and their cruel underlings and “undermine[d] the very separation of reasonable torture from the unreasonable” (1987:52). In place of such explanations is epistemic murk, an affectively laden pit of excessive meaning from which torture, cruelty, and colonial violence spring. In this epistemic murk, violence may ostensibly serve the political and economic interests of the rubber traders to a certain extent, but ultimately the entire rubber gathering project, and its profits, drown in bloodshed and terror; as Casement observed, nearly all of the rubber stations in the area were losing money under the management of men who had become “beasts of prey” focused more on killing than profit (1987:49). In light of this, then, Taussig says, “To claim the rationality of business for this is unwittingly to claim and sustain an illusory rationality, obscuring our understandings of the way business can transform terror from a means to an end in itself. This sort of rationality is hallucinatory…” (1987:53). Rationality obscures how the affect of terror acts between the bodies of the Indians and the colonists and how terror becomes pervasive, powerful, and self-caused. This echoes the way that Massumi discusses the fear
response to threat: the affective power of fear is not dependent on the reality of the threat or the likelihood of its emergence, but rather fear can become self-causing, fear begetting fear, with fear of fear itself as the most powerful affect of all (2005). It defies rationality; it even calls the very nature of rationality into question.

From where, then, did terror spring in the Putumayo? By now it should be clear that Taussig will not allow us to elicit a clear, singular explanation, but let us start first with the affect that the jungle had for the colonists. As Taussig phrases it, for outsiders the jungle was a place of contagious savagery. This view was aptly summarized by the turn-of-the-century Colombian wanderer Joaquin Rocha; speaking on his visit to the Putumayo region, he said:

There the person in perpetual contact with this savage wilderness becomes just as savage. Far from moral and social sanctions, humanity succumbs to the empire of the passions which in their overflowing are no less formidable than those of death and extermination (quoted in Taussig 1987:76-77).

Taussig goes on to characterize Rocha’s writings about intra-colonial violence in the jungle, mainly personal conflicts over rubber or money that spilled into assaults and murders. It is here that the jungle clearly becomes an actor, urging in its dark voice for the colonists to trade blows and bullets in the “atmosphere of brooding suspicion that hung as heavily over human affairs as did the jungle itself” (1987:77). This led figures of the period to describe the jungle in remarkably human terms, as “malevolent,” “evil-disposed,” “silent,” and “cynical” (1987:78). Viewed as a conscious, agential entity, the jungle thus had affective power on the colonists that threatened their very status as (self-perceived) civilized beings, or as Taussig quotes the Catholic priest Francisco de Vilanova, the jungle is an “irrational fact, enslaving those who go into it – a whirlwind of savage passions conquering the civilized person possessed with too much self-confidence” (1987:82). To the colonists, then, the affective power of the jungle seemed to be irresistible. But to Taussig “it is not the jungle but the sentiments colonizing men project onto it
that are decisive in filling their hearts with savagery” (1987:82). To him, then, the affective power of the jungle itself came not from its inherent qualities but rather from what the colonizers brought with them and projected upon it. And as the colonizers saw the savagery that they projected on the jungle, so they began to respond to that savagery, replicating it in ways that perpetuated that very perceived savagery, moving it into the self-causing realm of terror that Massumi discusses (2005) in relation to the imagined future threat, only in this case the mimesis of terror and savagery caused it to be all too real, even if elements of it were constantly lurking over the horizon as well.

The colonists did not only impute an air of savagery and brutality upon the jungle. It followed that they also did so on the jungle’s inhabitants as well, who also happened to be the labour force that they were attempting to indenture at the service of rubber collection. To a degree, there was a deliberate strategic aspect to the deployment of discourses of savagery and cannibalism among the local Indians: the rubber company wanted to maintain its stranglehold over the territory by frightening away outsiders with such stories of terror, or at least, so it was asserted (1987:83). Outside travelers to the region produced a plethora of contradictory reports on the supposed savagery of the locals, with Roger Casement characterizing them as full-grown children and utterly harmless, while other observers were certain of their cruel nature (1987:88). To Taussig these sharply contradictory narratives form a “surfeit of ambiguous images” that is “no less indebted to the surreality of the colonial unconscious with its phantoms of various shapes and guises stalking each other in the thicket of their differences” (1987:91). Even with all of the contradictions, these differing opinions had in common the projection from the colonist to the colonized, a projection that imbued the bodies of the Indians with an affective power that worked in similar ways to that reflected off of the jungle.
This affective power was dramatically illustrated in the figure of the *auca*, or wild man, a figure that Taussig argues carries a “dialectic of sentiments” that is “enshrouded in magic composed of both fear and contempt” (1987:99). This *auca* figure then has a powerful affect for the colonists, but again it is clear that the affective power comes from what the colonists project upon the *auca*, and not from any inherent quality which would be, in any case, obscured in the mystery and darkness from which the colonists view the figure. This wild man, assumed to be a cannibal and a ruthless killer, figured strongly into fears about Indian rebellion, a constant threat hanging over the colonists, a future event that always made its reality known, as Massumi (2010) describes, in the present, no matter the actual likelihood of rebellion or if the Indians truly were willing to cannibalize the colonists. Taussig summarizes the relation of the threat of rebellion to colonial efforts to quantify the scale of such events:

> No matter how partial, the effect of Indian revolts on the consciousness of the overseers in the camps in the jungle was not an effect that could be gauged by facts clear and simple. The effects on consciousness of this atmosphere of uncertainty obeyed forces other than statistical ones of general or partial. (1987:103).

The affective power of Indian rebellions had only loose relation to the reality of such events and the scale of the events when they did happen. Rather, uncertainty was the ruling affective fact: uncertainty over whether the Indians would continue to acquiesce to their servitude, or if they would flee, or fight, or butcher the colonists in their sleep.

This ties closely in, then, with what Taussig calls “the colonial mirror,” which will lead us to his key idea of mimesis and how it relates, in this case, to terror as a powerful self-producing affect. As I noted in the earlier discussion of Spinoza and Deleuze, affects manifest materially in the body. Affects are not metaphorical but physical. It follows, then, that the affects working on the colonists, resulting from the projected savagery of the jungle and the local people, the perceived threat of rebellion, and the spectre of cannibalism, led to physical and often
violent actions. This is not to imply a simple causal relationship; causation, like so many things, was lost in the epistemic murk of the jungle, and nothing should be construed to absolve the colonists of moral responsibility for their violent actions. But affect nevertheless was powerful:
as Taussig quotes the judge Rómulo Paredes, speaking in 1911 about the rubber trading colonists, “Their imagination was diseased…and they saw everywhere attacks by Indians, conspiracies, uprisings, treachery etc.; and in order to save themselves from these fancied perils…they killed, and killed without compassion” (1987:121). The colonists see terror everywhere, and thus, in an act of mimesis, they bring terror to life. They are the source of terror that they see reflected and upon which they subsequently act. This reflection is perceived in the “colonial mirror of production” that Taussig sees as capturing the complex and horrifying relationship between the colonizers and colonized:

In the colonial mode of production of reality, as in the Putumayo, such mimesis occurs by a colonial mirroring of otherness that reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize. The power of this colonial mirror is ensured by the way it is dialogically constructed through storytelling…And what is put into discourse through the artful storytelling of the colonists is the same as what they practiced on the bodies of Indians. (1987:134)

The bodies of Indians, then, are where storytelling and its terror meet. In a spiral of affective production, the terror continues to be inflicted by the colonists on both the Indians and on themselves, as the colonists fear their own brutality will inspire rebellion that they must, therefore, stave off with more terror. Like the pre-emptive logic identified by Massumi (2010) as practiced by the Bush regime in the 21st century, to the colonists in the Putumayo violence will always seem to be the correct response, because any dead Indian would have killed (or cannibalized) a colonist if he could have. This grotesque “logic,” then, feeds continuous terror.

In Mimesis and Alterity(1993), Taussig shows us this colonial mirror at work in the mimesis generated during a colonial encounter in Tierra del Fuego as well, in a way that at least
initially demonstrates some of the other affects that are possible through mimesis. Although Europeans had passed through the Strait of Magellan in previous centuries, when the English ship the *Beagle*, bearing its famous passenger Charles Darwin, landed in Tierra del Fuego in 1832, the local people, referred to as Fuegians, had experienced little contact with such long-distance travelers. From the ship’s party’s initial encounter with the Fuegians, Darwin produced a rich description of how the local people closely and accurately imitated the actions and words of the Europeans. Likewise, Captain Fitz Roy describes how a British sailor managed to entertain the Fuegians by his own practice of mimesis. Thus, mimesis had the immediate effect of creating positive feelings during a colonial encounter. Taussig emphasizes the sensuous nature of mimesis, focusing on the sounds, sights, the feelings, of the actual act of copying another, an act through which he says “civilization takes measure of its difference through its reflection in primitives” (Taussig 1993:79). The affect of mimesis through the colonial encounter manifests in this sensuousness; the feelings imbued are generated through these comical and startling attempts to copy the other.

The end result of colonial encounters with the people of Tierra del Fuego, though, came some decades later, when, much as in the Putumayo, the colonists mimicked the savagery that they projected onto the local people and subsequently visited terror upon them to wrest away their land. The colonists deployed mimicry in deliberate ways in order to create the affect of terror, including camouflage (mimicking the terrain) and mounting false riders onto horses (mimicking cavalry), in an action that Taussig characterizes as a “channeling of the mimetic faculty by ‘civilization’ so as to simulate an imagined savagery in order to dominate or destroy it…” (1993:87).
We see from Taussig’s work, then, that mimesis is intricately wrapped up with affect. To mimic creates affect, while at the same time, to be influenced by affects may lead to further affect-producing mimicry that can be reflected and received in a spiral of terror and violence. Bodies that mimic are open and unbounded; they respond to the affects of other bodies by mimicking and drawing on their affective power. Bodies that mimic can also project affects onto other bodies and receive them back, imputing onto those bodies that which was never there but responding to them as though it really was. These complex affective interrelations between bodies are also found in rituals, and it is to this topic that I now turn, returning to *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* for a consideration of healing rituals involving yagé while also considering *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980) for examples of rituals that are intricately related to the affective power of both fetishism and place. I will also consider the resonance between bodies in rituals of healing and the ultimate physicality of such rituals that seek to remove evil from the body.

“*Take This! Don’t Eat My Blood!*”

In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980), Taussig suggests that the abstraction of social relations themselves through the imposition of capitalism on a non-capitalist place can have powerful affects. Specifically, he focuses on commodity fetishism and its relationship with devil imagery amongst peasant populations in parts of Colombia and Bolivia. Taussig identifies different feelings that result from this abstraction of social relations in places that had never previously experienced anything similar, including the “feeling of atomization and bondage” that accompanies the market system, and the “disenchantment” and “deeply alienated spirit” that capitalism foists upon local people (Taussig 1980:11, 27). Although Taussig dabbles in somewhat essentialized notions of culture in this discussion, notions that are notably (and
thankfully) absent from his later works, I nevertheless want to point toward his identification of commodity fetishism and abstracted social relations as a source of affects in themselves.

This leads, then, to a powerful example of how fetishism gets intricately wrapped up with the affects of spirits, place, and ritual deep in the darkness of a Bolivian tin mine. To Taussig, it is clear that the mines of Oruro have a powerful affect upon the miners, who both fear and revere it and who also fetishize the actual space of the mine. Of this fetishism, Taussig says that the miners “attribute organic and spiritual life to the mine. They have to understand the metabolism of this life and work with it, and to do this, they must above all exchange with it” (1980:145). This life of the mine is embodied in the figure of the Tío, a devil who controls access to the minerals and holds the power of life and death over the miners who work in his grip underground. The Tío is represented in every mine by a figure, the body of which is sculpted out of the very minerals of the mine, which are also fetishized as “alive, resplendent with movement, color, and sound” (1980:147). Taussig writes that the affect of the space of the mine itself is projected onto the Tío by the miners; for example, when they are frightened by something that occurs in the mine, such as a cave in, they respond with a question directed to the devil figure: “What are you doing, Tío?” Likewise, they attribute any death in the mine to the Tío’s thirst for blood; after one particular accident that resulted in multiple fatalities, Taussig describes how a sacrifice of llamas was offered to the Tío in an effort to stave off further bloodlust with the words “Take this! Don’t eat my blood!” (1980:149). The fetishized figure of the Tío, then, is intimately wrapped up with the affects of working in the dark space of the mine, from the fear of injury and death to the joy of striking a rich vein of mineral, for which the Tío must be thanked.

2Having visited the deep interior of working mines in Bolivia on two occasions, I can attest to the powerful affect that the cramped and stiflingly hot underground space had on me. When I participated in rituals of appeasement to the Tío during both of my visits, I am certain that I was viscerally convinced in those moments of the necessity of doing so. Mine tourists such as me bore little risk compared to miners, but it was clear that the miners truly entered the space of death each time they started their shifts; the remnants of previous tunnel collapses were all around us.
In the mines, rituals respond to the affects of the danger of the space, which manifests in the Tío as a fetishized figure of menace who controls access to the minerals and has the power of life and death over all who enter. But Taussig makes clear that the rituals themselves also have a powerful affect; for example, the miners feel much better (even “happy”) after engaging in a ritual to the Tío in response to the injury of a miner (1980:150). In *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Taussig deepens and complicates this depiction of the affect and resonance of ritual by layering it with hallucinogenesis and directly attacking ritual’s supposed integrative and unifying qualities as expressed in the works of those such as Victor Turner (Taussig 1987:442). He describes his own experience taking *yagé*, and in doing so it is clear that the affect of the ritual is inseparable from the physical effects of the drug and the resonance generated by the group of people having the experience together and the uncontained disorder spilling over from and into all of them (1987:406-412).

The affects of the *yagé* ritual are complex and nearly defy description:

Thoughts become feelings and feelings thoughts, not necessarily in the epiphanal instant conceived by the Romantic conception of the image or the symbol, but in a friction-filled rasping of planes of different types of experience grinding on a sort of no-person’s-land where concept and feeling fight it out for priority, leaving a new space where sensation lives in its glowing self. (1987:406)

As the ritual proceeds, though, the bodies of the different participants interact in different ways. They joke with each other, sing, beat each other with stinging nettles, blow healing breathes at their bodies. But in the hallucinogenic haze, they also just *appear* to each other in different ways:

As I looked up at him towering above me and saw in the moving shadows flung by the candle his deeply etched face with its protruding ears and deep furrows around his mouth, I saw instead another form—a mark, like the great-mouthed, dog-toothed, Indian stone-sculptured heads I think I’ve seen in the mountains, tomb covers, a week’s walk from here at San Augustín. (1987:410)
The ritual would not be the same without this affective resonance of hallucinating bodies which affect each other in the mist of the *yagé* experience. As “the world ‘outside’ trembles into life and unison with the world ‘inside’,” the *yagé* participants join each other in this breaking of boundaries and opening of bodies where curing takes place and where manifested evil and envy is finally released from the physical body (1987:406). Even as the *yagé* ritual blurs any boundary between the tangible and the intangible, though, the affective power of healing lends itself to the enduring mystery of the origin of the evil:

> Despite its materiality as compacted force within the interstices of the body, the cause will always remain uncertain. Whose envy? Is it sorcery? Why? In this world of epistemic murk whose effect in the body is so brutally felt, the cure also comes forth as something murky and fragmented, splintering, unbalanced, and left-handed. (1987:412)

Bodies affecting bodies, then, are bound to leave behind mysteries in the hallucinogenic *yagé* ritual. In a world where “there is no way by which shit and holiness can be separated,” the affective nature of the *yagé* ritual reveals once again the immanence of transcendence, manifested physically in an event that leaves a person simultaneously spiritually ascendant and tied, closer than ever, to the physical and affected body (1987:412).

**Conclusion**

Taussig does not talk about “affect,” but he speaks of it on nearly every page. By placing his work into a limited dialogue with other bodies of affect theory, I hope that I have shown some of the ways that his work engages with ideas central to affect, including the openness and unboundedness of the affective body, the nature of threat and its relation to terror, the political deployment of affects as a tool of state power and the attempts by the state to modulate and control them, and the political power of resonance that can be deployed by the masses against state power.
My reading of Taussig leaves me with several salient ideas that I will carry forward in future consideration of the nature of affects. These cannot be easily broken down or separated from the powerful affect of actually reading Taussig’s work, which is constructed in a way that tends to show, rather than tell, and induces in the reader the very feelings that he is discussing. I should be clear that it is not my assertion, necessarily, that these ideas are found in Taussig’s work and nowhere else, nor do I intend to summarize everything worthy of note from the previous discussion, which I hope stands on its own. But I do want to highlight a few items in particular that I will hold onto from this exploration. One is the idea that affected bodies are mimetic and that mimesis is a powerful source of affect. To mimic in itself requires open and unbounded bodies. Relatedly is the dissolution of boundaries and binaries through mimesis and affect; for example, when bodies mimic each other, according to Taussig it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate who is mimicking and who is being mimicked. These occurrences tend to blur any such clear distinctions that could be made. Another important idea is the power of an affective reading of anthropology as a means to sidestep the blindness that a focus on rational explanations can induce, such as in the exploration of the causes of colonial violence and terror in the Putumayo, where Taussig effectively demonstrated why such rational explanations were illusory. Likewise, as violence and terror defy such rational explanations, so does ritual, a meeting of bodies that shows the immanence of transcendence, where Taussig reminds us that the body and all of its pain and even excretions is never left behind. And finally there is the complex relationship between affects and fetishization: that the fetish is both a source of and a result of affects, and that a space or object that has an affect may thus be fetishized (with the resulting fetish, of course, having its own types of affects).
The final lesson, though, may be that in the end, any effort by the observer to pin down an affect or disentangle a ritual or map out a relationship between bodies always risks being lost in the murk.
References


