



Sympathetic Sentiments: Affect, Emotion and Spectacle in the Modern World *and* Sensational Subjects: The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World¹

by Ruth Griffin

It is important to note at the outset that *Sympathetic Sentiments* and *Sensational Subjects* form two parts of a whole. As the author explains, although the books,

each stands on its own, and can be read independently, it will be apparent that there are significant links and overlaps. Indeed, they started off as one project, only gradually being separated as it became clear that two strands are being conflated, pointing to two distinct discourses and modes of embodiment that have been central to the relations between mind, body and culture (especially mediated culture) in the world of Western modernity. (2015a: 4)

The resulting volumes achieve an impressively panoramic and discursive methodological and thematic sweep revolving around sensation and sensibility, which fluently encompass cultural and theoretical material from the eighteenth century to the present day, resulting in “a multi-layered cultural history of modern feeling” (2015a: 8) from the perspective of both text and spectator. The books seamlessly range from cultural/aesthetic theory and philosophy through to media/film studies, applying theory to literature, media and film texts, paintings, poems and a range of cultural artefacts along the way. As a result, their readership might feasibly range from final year undergraduate students to academic specialists within a range of disciplinary fields (though some of the analysis would certainly challenge students and non-specialists). Given the texts’ scope, then, the reader may well cherry-pick the relevant chapters without *necessarily* doing an injustice to the work as a whole (though the two volumes are certainly sufficiently engaging to command the reader’s full attention despite their occasional, and understandable, tendency towards repetition).

¹Jervis, J. (2015) *Sympathetic Sentiments: Affect, Emotion and Spectacle in the Modern World* and *Sensational Subjects: The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World*. London: Bloomsbury. ISBN: 978-1-4725-3560-3 & 978-1-4725-3559-7



Be that as it may, it is impossible to do justice to the richness and complexity of the books' arguments here. Very broadly speaking, though, *Sympathetic Sentiments* (treated by me as the first volume) traces the "spectacle of sympathy" to its pre-Enlightenment roots, arguing for example, that, "there is a sense in which sympathy was, even in the eighteenth century, *already* implicated in spectacle" (2015a: 7). Meanwhile, *Sensational Subjects* tackles the associated topic of sensationalism in terms of the nineteenth century's prurient and sensationalist treatment of, for example, murder stories and the potentially disturbing implications this has for audience response still very much in evidence today:

We are continually confronted, in the media, with assorted disasters, traumas and forms of suffering, both personal and collective, and these are always liable to engage our emotions, just as we may also try to defend ourselves and block off these responses. But we may also seek out a vicarious engagement with such experiences, as in film or the novel... Such vicarious involvement can raise the disturbing possibility that we could take pleasure in suffering—even, conceivably, our own—or that at any rate we could become inured to it. (2015a: 1)

Notwithstanding their commanding scope, however, many of the author's claims can be seen to stem from one organising principle, namely, the inferior status still endured by emotion (and, correspondingly, the body) in a contemporary world which paradoxically continues to privilege reason over emotion, despite greater emphasis placed upon emotion than ever before in both the public and private spheres, from celebrity culture and journalism through to the spectacular excesses of cinema and television. Furthermore, "Feeling is often bracketed with emotion, and thought with reason. The implicit or explicit dualism here has been central to the Western tradition since the eighteenth century" (2015a: 10) and this is just one of the perspectives that the volumes aim to explore.

Where does this purported relegation of emotion leave notions of contemporary identity formation, of the self, given that emotion and associated phenomena such as imagination are arguably key to what makes us human? The Introduction to *Sympathetic Sentiments* suggests that:

the orthodox view downplays the relation between emotion, imagination and judgement in our responses to the suffering of others, the way these involve a distinctive culture of the self as an imaginative construct that is both internal yet also manifest in those public dimensions of gesture and narrative that have come to constitute selfhood *as* a relation to the other in the modern world'. (2015a: 1)

In *Sensational Subjects*, meanwhile, Jervis proposes that the inferior status of emotion continues to be reflected in theoretical and historical histories of modern culture as well as accounts of modernity and the self, all of which can be seen to display a "combination of rationalist distrust of the body and intellectual distrust of popular culture", (2015b: 49).

Certainly these volumes work as a bracing corrective to such tendencies by drawing attention to the significance of the emotional, sensitive, imaginative self within the cultural realm, situating them firmly within contemporary lived experience. Indeed, one gets the sense, rightly or wrongly, that the author has little time for so-called "rationality", (however one might wish to define it), an attitude reminiscent, dare one say it, of David Hume's assertion that



“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (1988: 415).

Be that as it may, it is somewhat difficult to convincingly counter Jervis’s underlying view that emotion has had short shrift in disciplines such as philosophy which have, in Jean Grimshaw’s words, “been based on male experience of the world...male created and male dominated its concerns and theories have therefore reflected a male view of the world” (1986: 35). With such assumptions in mind, the books aim to offer an alternative, emotionally inflected view of the theoretical and everyday world, while at the same time devoting a perhaps surprising number of pages to what might be termed traditional (white male) theorists, ranging from Immanuel Kant to Brian Massumi, in addition to an eclectic range of sources and thinkers, evidenced by extensive and informative endnotes.

In stark contrast to the aforementioned grand theorists, however, the author prefers a tentative approach and inconclusive conclusions, and so isn’t afraid to present counter-views even at the risk of overturning his own, clearly cherished, assumptions (an approach which those who seek certainties might well find frustrating, as I go on to suggest later). Despite his initial contention that the role and significance of emotion has been significantly overlooked in theoretical work, for example, the end of *The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World* acknowledges that “the affective turn” has enjoyed something of an awakening in recent humanities scholarship, developing as it has from “a growing interest in embodiment and sensory experience...the idea that affect connects us with currents and energies that circulate beyond and outside the human, as well as inside it” (2015b: 141). Jervis provides ample evidence of this “turn”, not least via six pages of in-depth discussion concerning contemporary philosopher Massumi’s account of the relationship between sensation, affect and the virtual (2015b: 142-148)!

Meanwhile, the books’ emphasis upon the lowly status of sensation and sentiment implies that the issue of gender is rarely far from their writer’s thoughts. As he puts it on one occasion, “Let us indeed linger with gender for a moment” (2015a: 27), and gender issues have the potential to surface in relation to the most diverse of topics, be they nineteenth century psychics, the Princess Diana media phenomenon or even George W Bush’s overt sentimentality characteristic, apparently, of “elite male bonding” rituals (2015a: 27), itself calling to mind former US President Ronald Reagan’s abundant tearful displays, (though whether these are more actorly than indicative of “elite male bonding” lies outside the scope of this review).

Of course, the books are much more than merely a cultural study of the potentially gendered nature of emotion, significant though such issues undoubtedly are to their overall concerns. Instead, they revolve around two broad theoretico-cultural configurations:

the spectacle of sympathy and the circuit of sensation. ‘Sensation’ suggests the more overtly physical side of feeling, and the links between this and the ‘sensational’, as it comes to feature in media ‘sensationalism’, are the central topic of the other volume...it is argued there that the two senses of the term ‘sensation’—embodied feeling and dramatic media event—are interlinked from early on in the history of the modern’. (2015a: 4)

It is therefore inevitable that the obviously interconnected nature of these two “configurations” results in a degree of overlap between the two volumes originating from the



initial points of reference as Jervis points out: “‘sympathy’ and ‘sentiment’ seemed to point one way, and ‘sensation’ and...‘affect’ seemed to point the other” (2015a: 4).

These distinctions are not clear-cut, of course. Sensation does tend to relate to the physical realm as Jervis assumes, but potential pitfalls loom. For instance, might not one equally experience what *seems* to be a purely mental sensation, at the same time hesitating to form such a judgement, mindful that to distinguish between the mental and physical realms risks that dualism which Gilbert Ryle famously referred to as René Descartes’s “dogma of the Ghost in the Machine” (2009: 140)? Even Descartes demonstrates his awareness that the so-called mind/body problem isn’t as simple as all that, though: “the mind and the body interact in an intimate way; the mind is not to the body simply as the captain is to her ship” (1988: 128). He also highlights the difficulties involved in distinguishing sensations and feelings from cognitive processes: “it is very certain that it seems to me that I see light, hear a noise and feel heat; and this is properly what in me is called perceiving and this...is nothing other than thinking” (1988: 107). But is it indeed certain? Can the physical and mental realms be effectively delineated, as Jervis appears to suppose?

Contentious distinctions such as these have the potential to open age-old philosophical cans of worms that can’t be fully accommodated in the present works, then. At the same time, it is not the author’s intention to “do” philosophy, instead deploying philosophers and philosophy where relevant as part of his inter-disciplinary method. Be that as it may, though, such indistinct distinctions lead to fuzzy boundaries between the two volumes, but this doesn’t ultimately detract from the books’ central thrust, instead enhancing the intentionally subjective tone of works which seek to muddy previously “rational” waters, thereby reflecting the messiness of everyday life in the face of philosophy’s attempts to rationalise it, just as emotions threaten to muddy Reason’s limpid pools.

Sympathetic Sentiments and *Sensational Subjects* are interdisciplinary in nature, then, and discursive and multi-layered in their approach. Certainly they offer an object lesson in boundary blurring between elite and popular cultural texts in Žižekian fashion (see *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2012) for example), while managing at the same time to remain theoretically committed, no easy feat though one that is increasingly attempted in the field of cultural studies. Much of the books’ content is devoted to highly theoretical discussion, which is then applied to specific examples, not necessarily to prove or even demonstrate a contention, but rather to illustrate the point being made. As such, the volumes’ modest approach, the author as guide rather than mentor, shies away from presuming to tell the reader what to think or pointing to the supposed “truth of the matter”. This might well frustrate those more accustomed to being told what the author thinks in no uncertain terms.

As the writer tentatively suggests in his (inevitably inconclusive) concluding remarks to *Sensational Subjects*, “we can still encounter moments of intensity, and visions of compassion, in the infinite scatter of the world” (2015b: 182), and that is really as far as he is prepared to commit himself. The rest remains implicit, appearing to suggest that what we glean from the books’ pages is, and indeed ought to be, subjective, personal to us, as befits their subject matter. Similarly, the overall arguments might prove ultimately persuasive, but that certainly isn’t the aim of the books, which seek to challenge the received wisdom that comprehension is the proper outcome of critical enquiry.



It makes sense to argue that Jervis's assessment of his own achievement is overly modest considering the ambitious range of material that ultimately extends to two volumes worth of discussion, scarcely a matter for modesty, perhaps. That said, this subjective and contemplative approach can be seen as an ideal fit for books that, after all, set out to explore the ultimate in subjective and deeply personal states, be these emotion, sensation, feeling or sensibility. And crucially, it does so *with feeling*.

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