

Ethnography and the Choices Posed by the ‘Affective Turn’

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Affect is at the centre of exciting attempts to renew ethnography.¹ This essay aims to disentangle the implications of some central programmatic components of affect theory for ethnographers and to crystallise key choices embedded in calls for an ‘affective turn’. It asks: what does the ‘affective turn’ lead us *towards*, and what does it lead us *away from*?

The tension, the tension...

Obrana i zaštita (*A stranger*), a 2013 film directed by Bobo Jelčić, deals with a day in the life of an elderly couple, Milena and Slavko, in contemporary Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina, BiH). When a family friend Đulaga dies, Milena matter-of-factly prepares for them to attend his funeral. Their friend Milan could give them a ride. Slavko is not sure they should go. He is preoccupied with what seems to be something else entirely: he is waiting for a call from a certain Dragan. Later, in a conversation in the photocopier room of a public institution, we find out that his attempts to get hold of Dragan and his dilemma about the funeral are intimately related. Agitated, Slavko tells a friend that Dragan has promised him to take care of something but has not called since. Should he contact Dragan himself? Or would that be counterproductive? ‘Do you know ... what tortures me most?’, Slavko asks, ‘I’m afraid someone said something to him about me ... something against me.’ A man

called Srećko, he adds, recently said: 'Slavko, you're more on their side than on our side'. The scene is abruptly cut. *Obrana i zaštita* never spells out Slavko's predicament. Yet, as we shall see, to an audience familiar with contemporary Mostar – and only to them – the link between his dilemma about Đulaga's funeral, his issue with Dragan and something referred to as 'sides' is now clear.

Having bought a bottle of whiskey from a black market trader, Slavko asks for a meeting with Dragan at another public institution. A range of details, including the contrasting bodily demeanour of Slavko and the secretary, embed the scene in the political-economic dynamics of contemporary BiH. Slavko eventually establishes that Dragan is in a hotel for lunch but his subsequent search there is unsuccessful too. In fact, we never meet Dragan, but he hovers over the story as a person of influence – probably a politician. We know he has a potential hold over Slavko. And Slavko, rightly or wrongly (we'll never know), connects this with the issue of 'sides'.

His dilemma regarding Đulaga's funeral lasts. Milan visits to cancel his offer for a lift because his wife is ill. He apologises profusely and offers to drive them a little later. The conversation turns ugly – Slavko's behaviour verges on the rude. He exclaims he doesn't know if they'll go at all. Viewers are again left in doubt. Is Milan's unavailability genuine or is he reluctant to drive them? Is this a problem for Slavko or a welcome way out? Milena suggests they go by foot. Slavko still hovers: 'Listen... In this situation in which I find myself now, I don't know whether it would be smart to go to the funeral. While Dragan is taking care of this, you understand?' In a highly gendered set-up, Milena quietly persists, continuously invoking moral duty and reciprocity: 'They came first when my old man died, they are like family to me'. While Milena prepares a salad, a tormented Slavko steps of the balcony. The screen goes dark.

In the next scene Slavko and Milena make their way to Đulaga's house. Slavko insists they take backstreets and paths, lamenting that Dragan has not contacted him. He has forgotten his mobile phone in the flat. Throughout the gathering in Đulaga's house and at the cemetery, Slavko acts very ill at ease. Afterwards, Đulaga's daughter Zehra offers them a lift. A tense altercation follows – mirroring the earlier conversation with Milan. Eventually Zehra drives them to their flat. Yet on the way, she breaks down in tears, stops the car and gets out. Milena tries to console

her. Slavko buys water for her from a kiosk and, crossing the street, is hit by a truck. The screen goes dark again.

Upon returning to their flat, Slavko sees Dragan has still not called. Exasperated, Slavko repeats his suspicions about Srećko, who, like Dragan, does not make an appearance in the film. After a lengthy silent refusal, Milena now criticises Slavko for moral failure. His initial reluctance to attend the funeral, as well as his 'sitting on needles' at Đulaga's house, she tells him, is due to his fear that Dragan would find out about his attending. Slavko puts up a vehement but unconvincing defence, blaming his 'situation'. In response to Milena's moral arguments, he too emphasises his closeness to Đulaga's family. In unexpectedly rude terms she tells him she is fed up. Slavko sweeps up the tablecloth and scatters the contents on the floor. He goes to the bathroom and collapses. The neighbours are called and he soon recovers.

Throughout the film, it is clear that Slavko's 'situation' draws on a more encompassing 'situation' in contemporary Mostar. *Obrana i zaštita* offers only a few hints of such historicisation. Twice, radio and TV voices in the background obliquely refer to a 'divided city', to 'insecurity', to 'the recent past' and to the 'national division of the city created in the 1990s'. A few enunciations by the protagonists themselves also gesture towards a 'situation'. For example, on the way back from the funeral, Milena breaks the silence in Zehra's car, sighing:

Everything has somehow changed [long silence] I don't know ...
There are no people anymore ... There's no life here anymore ...
Whoever can do so, it's best they escape.

There is no reaction to this. Slavko mostly simply laments his fate. 'I don't know who I am, or where I am', he exclaims. When he hints at the more encompassing 'situation', he never completes his sentences. This is particularly striking in a scene when he awaits his son Krešo, visiting from Croatia, at the bus stop and steers him into a park. A long, almost frantic monologue follows.

Krešo, I came to pick you up just to tell you a few things on our own. The situation is difficult. Difficult, by god. Everything's finished, but this is not it. It's still not known here what could be. Nothing is known. Everything here is in some tension. One thing

is said and another thing is done. I don't see a solution. Not at all. Not me, nobody does. Everything is fine between people but it only requires ... for it to explode. There you go, that is why I don't like you to come too often. Well ... Zehra asked about you. I don't know. I wouldn't meddle in that. Sit down with her for a bit. She's alone. Her husband is an idiot, she's not with him anymore. I'd ask you that you be ... What do I know, maybe it's nothing, but fuck it, you understand what I'm saying. On the other hand, Zehra's alright. Normal. Correct. She drove us home after the funeral. Kind. She hugged and kissed me. She's beautiful, I can tell you. But, well, there you go, you see about it. I think it's not for you. Now, I don't know what you, with her, did you do anything. I won't meddle. But I think, well, there you go, I told you what, you see about it. I'm more or less fine. Sometimes urinary tracts, sometimes my kidney, and then that lumbago when this weather changes, Well all that's normal. The rest is okay. Years, you know, so it's ever more difficult when a man every day ..., well, it'll be clear to you when you reach my age. There's no more, it's not ... No no! Ah yes, well, my stool gives me trouble, big trouble. I went to the doctor's, he said don't worry. If it's not every day, he says, it's normal, at your age. But somehow I'm not at peace with that so they gave me aloe vera to drink. And, you know, it helps. Every morning I drink a glass on an empty stomach. But fuck it, then I need the loo straight away ...

Krešo, who smoked and looked away throughout, now sharply turns to his father: 'Right, old man, are you aware that every time I come here you tell me the same things?' Slavko, surprised, tries to establish some intimacy but his son angrily pushes him away, telling him in exactly the same crude terms as his mother Milena that he's fed up with him.

Later they have the black market trader (Krešo's friend), Milan and his partner over for a meal in their flat. Alcohol flows. We don't follow any one of the crosscutting conversations. The camera mainly focuses on Slavko, who hardly participates. He self-consciously puts his arm around his son's shoulders. The phone rings. Milena answers. It's Dragan. He is available now. Slavko immediately returns to the public institution and in a long silent scene he sits in the waiting room, holding his bottle of whiskey in a plastic bag. The film ends.

Affect theory – the autonomy of affect

Obrana i zaštita blew me away. To me it brilliantly renders some key dimensions of contemporary life in BiH. I watched it in Sarajevo with friends who felt the same. Its great quality, to us, lay in the way it brought across a particular atmosphere. In our conversations the term we used most commonly to describe this atmosphere was *napetost*, i.e. a continuous tension. Not much happens in *Obrana i zaštita*. The scenario is sparse. Dialogue is limited. A few heated conversations are as spectacular as it gets. There is no plot, no surprise. There is no sequence of actions by the protagonists that increases or decreases the tension. It is simply there, palpable in every scene. Almost unbearable at times. Although the above conversations do provide some entries into it, to us it was above all the photography, the sound and the central performances by two well-known actors that made this work. Shaky, handheld close-up camerawork often approaches the protagonists from indirect angles, which makes for claustrophobic viewing. Clearly, in this essay, much of this is lost. All in all, no explanations of the tension are identified – Slavko's concrete 'situation' and the 'situation' in Mostar are never specified – but we all agreed the film powerfully evoked them.

Coincidentally, at the time of our conversations about *Obrana i zaštita*, I was reading some writings in the field of 'affect theory'. While it is hard to find definitions of 'affect' in such work (and harder still to find one that is shared across different writings), all authors seem to agree that affect is about 'intensity'. For some it is intensity (Massumi 1995: 88), whereas for others it is 'a nonconscious *experience of* intensity' (Shouse 2005, my emphasis). Some speak of 'affect' and others of 'affects'. The most common reference is to Spinoza, who wrote of 'the capacity to affect and be affected'. Yet rather than identifying specific 'affects' – as Spinoza does in his references to hate, envy, anger, etc. (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 26) – in this recent work affect appears as an unspecified 'something', proclaimed to be very important. 'Affect', we are told, is not feeling or emotion. Instead, it is 'pre-personal' (Shouse 2005). It is 'asocial, but not presocial' (Massumi 1995: 91). Crucially, according to these theorists, affect cannot be signified: it is resistant to language and remains in excess to it (Blackman and Venn 2010: 9; Massumi 1995: 96; Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1–2; Shouse 2005). Affect, it is said, can only be experienced and evoked.

Reading such work, it struck me that its register closely dovetailed with my Sarajevo conversations about *Obrana i zaštita*. As we saw, we felt it was permeated by and brilliantly brought across a continuous tension – an intensity – relying much less on signification than on evocation. Intrigued, I delved deeper into affect theory. I found that, broadly speaking, two key sources of inspiration are experimental neurosciences and Spinozian–Deleuzian philosophy. Yet despite its central place in some of the work they cite, many authors who embrace affect theory do not refer to the first at all.² Leaving brain processes aside, much affect theory is written in a programmatic fashion, converging around two postulates: (a) affect should be a key matter of concern because it is of crucial importance in the world, and (b) affect *theory* provides the only or the best framework to produce the new forms of research, writing and politics that this requires. In both cases there is an insistence on departure from existing work: a call for an ‘affective turn’ (Clough and Halley 2007).

The call for an ‘affective turn’ emerged within broader posthumanist developments in knowledge production. Affect theory shares many affinities with actor-network theory, which rejects the ‘sociology of the social’ (its own term) in favour of a greater focus on non-human actants, such as objects, with whom humans are said to be always-already entangled in a ‘flat’ social (Latour 2005). Affect theory also strongly resonates with anthropological work that rejects an ‘epistemological’ approach (its own term) in favour of an ‘ontological’ one (e.g. Henare et al. 2007). We thus see a convergence of three self-proclaimed ‘turns’ – the turn to objects, the ontological turn and the affective turn.

In this scholarly landscape, affect theory turns away from something labelled with many terms, such as language, reason, cognition, meaning, signification, discourse, positions, identities, structures, subjectivity or representation. Instead, since affect is ‘irreducibly bodily and autonomic’ (Massumi 2002: 28), ‘always prior to and/or outside consciousness’ (Shouse 2005), a focus on affect as a matter of concern is said to draw attention to immanence, to bodies, to their attunement to each other and to objects, which are considered to function prior to all of the above. With regard to affect *theory* as a framework with which to approach this matter of concern, we find a call for turning away from ‘paranoid theory’ (Sedgwick 2003), ‘critical thinking’ (Massumi 2002), ‘studies of representation’ (Thrift 2004) or ‘representational thinking and

evaluative critique' (Stewart 2007). Readers are mostly left to join in the dots themselves. In my reading, this usually implies poststructuralist cultural studies, performativity theory and/or psychoanalysis. Yet it has more encompassing ramifications.

To grasp these ramifications for anthropology, it is important to note that affect theorists seek to overcome what they consider deficiencies of two related approaches that have long been central to this discipline. Firstly, the 'affective turn' looks beyond social constructivism. Here social constructivist approaches are identified with hermeneutic attempts to analyse meaning (as we saw, sometimes glossed as e.g., 'representation' or 'signification'). While problematic,³ for reasons of argument I will adopt Stewart's term 'representational thinking' to refer to this. Secondly, affect theorists find fault with 'critical' approaches. By this they seem to mean efforts to detect patterns that are not immediately visible (sometimes 'structures') in order to gain insight and, potentially, to inform action. This is related to generalisation. Think for example of attempts to identify historical patterns of class, gender or other inequalities that are understood to also function on a scale beyond the immediate setting under study. The 'affective turn' and its sister 'turns' emphasise the limits of such efforts to engage in 'evaluative critique'.

How then should scholars go about implementing this 'affective turn'? What should they turn *to*? Affect theorists call for a different sensitivity, different modes of attention, different ways of being attuned to what happens around us, 'different forms of knowing that disclose the tangle of connections that exert a pull on us and that can be felt' (Blackman and Venn 2010: 11). I did not find methodological guidelines. Instead, there is a promise, which exists in diverging incarnations (see Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 5–9). At one end, the promise remains largely implicit and is exemplified in a shift of emphasis or a broadening to incorporate hitherto understudied domains of experience (e.g. Berlant 2001). At the other end, there is an explicit dismissal of any 'enlightening' aspirations of hermeneutical and/or critical scholarship (e.g. Massumi 2002). What allows us to detect a call for an 'affective turn' in these diverging writings is the exhortation to consider a new matter of concern (affect) and a new way to study it (affect theory). Whether authorised by neuroscientific experiments or not, affect is invariably postulated as worth increased attention. And since it is said to be resistant to signification, analysing it in terms of 'representational thinking' is considered limited

at best and futile at worst. Moreover, notwithstanding its aspirations, it is argued, 'evaluative critique' inevitably ends up placing what it records in pre-existing frames and thereby closing off emergent 'potential'. It is therefore believed to be politically ineffective at best and detrimental at worst. Instead we are called upon to refuse any 'capture and closure on the plane of signification' (Massumi 2002: 263; see also 1995: 96).

In its more strident versions, affect theory takes a vanguard position. A detailed dissection of the writings of Massumi and Sedgwick, two of the most-cited affect theorists, shows how they 'emphasize the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraint' (Hemmings 2005: 550; see also Irni 2013). At this, the sharpest end, affect theory stages a call for a farewell to the old 'representational', 'critical' ways, which are presented as limited, boring, flat, cold, determinist, generalising, oppressive, arrogant and elitist. Such existing approaches are said to instil pessimism because they inevitably 'close off' their matters of concern. Making the 'affective turn', it is promised, allows one to be part of a new way that is more encompassing, exciting, multidimensional, warm, open-ended, attuned to singularities, liberating, humble and democratic. It offers optimism because it is oriented at 'opening up'. While not all affect theorists position themselves in such terms, a common denominator remains: an emphasis on the limits of current scholarship – portrayed as hopelessly caught in attempts to hermeneutically trace meanings ('representational thinking') and to critically bring to light patterns ('evaluative critique') – and a call to go beyond it. We have a serious challenge here.

Anthropology meets the 'affective turn'

How can we investigate affective dimensions of life ethnographically? How can we produce texts that successfully render them in anthropologically interesting ways? These questions have been at the heart of my academic endeavours for years, although I wasn't familiar with affect theory. Upon reading such writings, it seemed to me that 'affect' – or at least a term derived from that root – allowed me to grasp not just the appeal of *Obrana i zaštita* to my Sarajevo friends and myself, but also a larger concern. For years now, when people ask me why I prefer to spend

so much time in the Balkans, I have been telling them – grappling for words – that this is because of a certain 'intensity' I experience in life in this part of the world. Unwittingly, then, I have been using the register of affect theory and my (largely unarticulated) sense has long been that this 'intensity' is indeed 'prepersonal' and that it cannot be fully grasped in signification. It also became a core concern in my anthropological work in which I try to grapple with 'intensities' of lives in the post-Yugoslav states, time and again seeking to provide insight into dimensions of a certain 'shared historical sense' (Berlant 2001: 3). For example, I have investigated the pressure to identify ethnationally; nostalgia for a past future; people's sense of home after displacement; the unease of crossing borders; the everyday geopolitics of people's sense of entrapment. Much of this came together in a recent book on yearnings for 'normal lives' amongst people in a Sarajevo apartment complex, focusing on their sense of abandonment and spatiotemporal entrapment (Jansen 2015).

A question that emerges for me is then: if I consider issues that could be grouped under the label of 'affect' to be at the centre of my research, should I therefore take the 'affective turn'? Would my specifically anthropological interest in issues of affect be best served by the programmatic orientations promoted by affect *theory*? In what follows I try to disentangle some key choices anthropologists face when considering such an 'affective turn'. What are the parameters at stake – implicitly or explicitly – when weighing the promise offered by affect theorists?

In the spirit of scholarly debate, I address these questions in dialogue with the work of Kathleen Stewart, a contributor to this volume and a participant at the workshop that preceded it. With her ground-breaking book *Ordinary Affects* (2007) Stewart established herself as the best-known anthropological proponent of the 'affective turn'. Written as an experiment to devise a new anthropological mode of writing, *Ordinary Affects* consists of a short programmatic introduction followed by a series of descriptions of 'scenes' in the US in different places and at different times. These are interspersed with other sections (see below).

Let us first look closely at how Stewart herself positions her work. What are ordinary affects? Stewart's many redescriptions function mainly through metaphor or illustration. For example, ordinary affects are 'public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of' (Stewart 2007: 2); they are 'an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and

disjunctures' (ibid. 3); they are 'the scene of an encounter we can barely get our eyes around, a cluster of non-coherent attachments and impacts' (Stewart in Fannin et al. 2010: 929).

How then can anthropologists ethnographically study ordinary affects and write about them? Stewart has called her book

an experiment in ethnography. It is ethnography as a form of haptically mapping what's happening. A vague and inarticulate analytical work ... Here, ethnography is a sustained, sensory practice of attending to the material and affective emergence of things that come together as shared sensibilities or fall apart, perhaps leaving traces or dormant trajectories. It is an attunement to potential modes of existence resonating in immanent events and in the lived rhythms and refrains (that is forms, genres, habits) that circulate, accrue, underscore attachments and detachments, and form modes of inhabitation. (Stewart in Fannin et al. 2010: 930)

As a reader I mainly encountered the innovative impulse of *Ordinary Affects* as a new way of *writing*. This is also how Stewart herself positions the book. Aiming to develop an experimental 'form of address' (Stewart 2007: 4), she has said she wants

to incite new forms of writing and reading, new approaches to analytic objects, and new forms of attention and attachment to the intensities and sensibilities now taking place in the various situations of the ordinary. (Stewart in Fannin 2010: 928)

Experimentation, speculation and attunement to 'potential' are promulgated as key aims. Stewart says: 'Something throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation: a something both animated and inhabitable' (Stewart 2007: 1). As is common in affect theory (e.g. Massumi 1995: 96), she frequently reaches for words that start with 'some-' and remain unqualified, thus purposefully maintaining indeterminacy. Her book, she says,

tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally

hit us or exert a pull on us. My effort is not to finally 'know' them – to collect them into a good enough story of what's going on – but to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form. To find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate. (Stewart 2007: 5)

'Slowing the quick jump' could suggest that 'representational thinking and evaluative critique' are not rejected but postponed. I am left unsure whether Stewart finds this worth pursuing or not. Yet readers familiar with contemporary social theory are given some clarification on her position. And this too is in line with most writing in affect theory: the author tells us what her aim is *not*. So, the 'somewhere' she writes from is

Not the kind of somewhere that is easily reducible to subject positions or to the effects of underlying structures but one dispersed across social and cultural fields and gathered into singularities and resonant forces. (Stewart in Fannin et al. 2010: 928)

Stewart is *not* committed, she says, 'to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world' (Stewart 2007: 1). She continues:

the terms neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization that index this emergent present, and the five or seven or ten characteristics used to summarize and define it in shorthand, do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world. (Ibid. 1)

With *Ordinary Affects*, then, Stewart aims to develop an ethnographic mode of address that avoids unwelcome forms of closure that she associates with representational thinking and evaluative critique – reduction,

demystification, totalisation. She does not reference which approaches manifest those problems. But since the author positions herself as an anthropologist and her book as ethnography, I assume that this portrayal is meant to include at least some anthropologists and their ethnographic writings. Perhaps it remains unspecified because she believes such problems are so widespread in anthropology as to obviate the need for specification?

In any case, in this essay I try to disentangle the challenge posed here to ethnographers. Given the variety of uses of the terminology of 'affect', I must state upfront that this essay is not a review of a body of ethnographic studies that take issues of affect as their matter of concern. Most of them, namely, share with affect theorists an interest in affective dimensions of life, yet they do *not* make the 'affective turn'. Many both evoke affect *and* seek to analyse it in hermeneutical and critical ways that are not radically different from how they proceed with other matters (see e.g. Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012; Millar 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2012). I will not dwell on this common ground between affect theory and such anthropological studies of questions of affect. Instead, this essay focuses on the call for an 'affective turn'. I attempt to formulate as precisely as possible some key choices it entails for ethnographers. I do this in direct dialogue with *Ordinary Affects* because I consider it the strongest book-length work by an anthropologist to embrace the 'affective turn'. While she does not mention this 'turn', Kathleen Stewart, in my reading, has devised the most consistently followed-through experiment to develop an ethnographic form of address that eschews both (social constructivist) hermeneutics and critique. Steadfast in its attempts to be true to the implications of the 'affective turn', her book therefore allows identification of breaking points where affect theory's specificities can be seen at work in their clearest form.

When ethnographically writing about issues of affect, which possibilities does the 'affective turn' offer and which ones does it put out of reach? I will organise my reflections in three central (interdependent) either/or choices.⁴ The first choice concerns the reach of evocation we aspire to: who do we evoke *for*? The second one revolves around aspirations we may have *beyond* evocation. The third choice concerns the grounds on which we are prepared to be held accountable as authors.

Three key choices for anthropologists interested in questions of affect

Do we aspire to evocation across boundaries of familiarity?

For anthropologists, a first choice regarding the 'affective turn' concerns evocation itself. It revolves around questions of audiences, familiarity and historicisation. Who do we evoke *for*?

To crystallise this, let us first return to *Obrana i zaštita*. If this film evoked a certain form of affect so well for my Sarajevo circles, how would it fare for other audiences? A friend of mine fought to earn it a special mention as a jury member at a foreign film festival. She failed. 'They didn't get it', she said. The success with which we felt the film brought across an intensity to us relied on *our own* hermeneutic work of framing, based on pre-existing knowledge of certain meanings and patterns. We framed the tension in the film through historicisation. We knew Mostar was violently 'unmixed' during the 1992–1995 war, largely along ethnonational lines. From the outset, through names that we could identify in ethnonational terms, we assumed that Đulaga and Zehra live in the east of Mostar and Slavko, Milena, Srećko, Dragan and Milan in the west. An awareness of possible exceptions did not remove this assumption: we knew about Mostar's patterns of segregation; its 'sides'. We knew some of Mostar's streets and their location. We suspected right away that Slavko's dilemma about attending the funeral was related to the city's ethnonational division. And note that it is not that he, a man with a Croatian name living in West Mostar,⁵ is nervous about attending a funeral of a man with a Bosniak name in East Mostar per se. Clearly, as Srećko's accusation implies, Slavko spends much time on the 'other side'. His main worry is what Dragan – on his 'own' side – will think of that and how this will impact on his life. That too we 'got'.⁶

While *Obrana i zaštita* could have explained all this, to us, its evocation of tension was all the more successful because nothing was spelled out. These meaning(ful practice)s and patterns do not need to be specified outside the cinema in BiH either. They usually aren't. Hence, while pre-existing knowledge was crucial to the film's appeal to us, much of its particular power relied on *resonance*. To different degrees, we were familiar with dealings with ethnonational issues in roundabout ways; but also with the difficulty to find solid ground for moral personhood

in this historical conjuncture in BiH; with living in waiting; with the importance of some 'Dragan', to be 'chased' with a bottle of whiskey; with the difficulty to assess the genuineness of stated intentions, worries and excuses. We were not estranged by Slavko's despair at his own doubts; by his demeanour in the secretary's office; by his switching back and forth between unfinished sentences about the 'situation' and about his health; by Krešo's exasperation with his father's anxiety; by Milena's insistence on moral duty and reciprocity, her silent disapproval and her eventual outburst – embedded in the couple's gendered interactions. Even the furniture in their flat is familiar to us. I suspect that most viewers in or from BiH, and perhaps others in or from the post-Yugoslav states, will, perhaps regretfully, find it resonates with dynamics they know or imagine in some household around them. Through this resonance, *Obrana i zaštita* evokes familiar affects from a familiar world. I think it does so brilliantly, partly because it offers so little historicisation. For viewers who already have the tools to hermeneutically frame this, this works.

Anthropological writings embracing the 'affective turn' invest heavily in evocation and reviews show that the reception of *Ordinary Affects* too relies to a large degree on familiarity (e.g. Highmore 2010; Pelkmans 2013). The 'scenes' that make up much of the book are short descriptive pieces that reverberate. I was struck by the beauty of much of the writing. Given Stewart's focus on particular US worlds, this resonated to me with work by some of my favourite artists: Tom Waits, say, or Lorrie Moore, or Raymond Carver. As in their work, and as in *Obrana i zaštita*, I felt some 'scenes' were affectively very powerful. Yet, as we saw, the evocation of affect in *Obrana i zaštita* would not work, even for people in BiH, without playing on people's names or without any reference to Mostar's 'sides'. Significantly, to explain its affective power to a broader audience in this essay I had to spell out some meanings and patterns that remain unspoken in the film.⁷ In contrast, the 'affective turn' calls on us to 'perform' affect and to refrain from hermeneutic attempts to historicise it: the autonomy of affect, its theorists say, places it beyond interpretation. Instead of aiming for such 'closure', we should retain singularities at all times. *Ordinary Affects* does indeed refrain from such 'representational thinking'. It evokes-in-singularity. It seems that the 'scenes' in Stewart's book do for some readers what *Obrana i zaštita* does for some viewers: they evoke 'intensities'. In some cases this worked for me too, brilliantly so. In other 'scenes' it didn't, possibly because I lack familiarity with

the various US worlds Stewart is travelling through. Having taken the 'affective turn', the author did not give me a hand through historicisation. As a result, some 'scenes' simply slid off me, not 'attuning' me to anything. And some filled me with unease when, rather than allowing attunement, the reading experience felt closer to voyeurism (see Breen 2009: 94). Stewart's empathy is obvious throughout the book, yet a refusal to historicise risks such reader responses.

Much anthropological work on affect takes an alternative route. Most explicitly, in her work on the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (2012), Navaro-Yashin aims to capitalise on the strengths of affect theory without embracing the 'turn' it promotes. She calls for reconciliation, exploring dynamics of affect *and* of subjectivity, of human *and* of non-human agency, and valuing evocation *and* signification. Navaro-Yashin identifies and names certain forms of affect, qualifying them and embedding them in configurations that she knows are unfamiliar to many of her readers. Her evocations often work through emic terms in the Turkish language, which she explains. Indeed, she emphasises the need to historicise forms of affect, framing them hermeneutically in constellations of meanings specific to the setting.

I suggest that the choice anthropologists face here is whether in our ethnographic writing we aspire to evoke certain forms of affect *across boundaries of familiarity*, or not.⁸ If we do aspire to this, historicisation is crucial for that evocation to work. I think *Obrana i zaštita* draws part of its great evocative power for audiences in BiH from the decision to provide only minimal historicisation. The price paid for that choice is that this evocation falters for other audiences. Inspired by affect theory, anthropologists can make the same choice and may proportionally gain in evocative power. Or they can try to introduce audiences to unfamiliar worlds from the perspective of people who inhabit them – and thereby defamiliarise familiar ones. Making the 'affective turn' means choosing to let go of the most important tools we have to fulfil this aspiration.

Do we aspire to go beyond evocation?

A second choice that comes with considering the 'affective turn' concerns the refusal of 'closure' associated with hermeneutical and/or critical analysis. Affect theory, as we saw, warns that affect can only be experienced and evoked. Stewart has said that 'ordinary affects can only be approached awkwardly, described around, repeated as a refrain, scored

over and underscored' (Stewart in Fannin et al. 2010: 929). We may then ask: is there any value in attempts to trace the embeddings of certain forms of affect, to interpret them, to conceptualise them, to build coherent arguments about them?

Affect theory does sometimes gesture beyond evocation. In fact, Stewart's experiment includes an attempt to reconfigure conceptualisation itself:

Ordinary Affects tries to produce a different kind of concept. Not one that can be cut out of scenes and situations to be laid on the table for academic debate but one that builds by attaching itself to the living out of what is singular and proliferative in a scene or moment, to what is accrued, sloughed off, realized, imagined, enjoyed, hated, brought to bear or just born in a compositional present. (Stewart in Fannin et al. 2010: 930–931)

Also, in her introduction, Stewart explains that her book *performs* 'some intensity and texture' of ordinary affects by *mapping* 'connections between a series of singularities' (Stewart 2007: 5). Perhaps we can read this second part as going beyond evocation. In this light it is notable that the 'scenes' in the book are interspersed with short sections of a different type, difficult to render other than by citation. For example, a part of the section under the heading 'The politics of the ordinary' says:

Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take place. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of a hat. But it's ordinary affects that give things the quality of a something to inhabit and animate. Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving. Step one in thinking about the force of things is the open question of what counts as an event, a movement, an impact, a reason to react. (Ibid. 15–16)

The style of these sections remains tentative, speculative. Yet in addition to evocation, we encounter propositions here. These are themselves purposively vague and inconclusive. If *Ordinary Affects* 'is written as an assemblage of disparate scenes that pull the course of the book into a

tangle of trajectories, connections and disjunctures' (ibid. 5), Stewart's 'mapping' does not spell out how connections, trajectories and disjunctures are formed in particular social configurations. No 'patterns' are identified in ordinary affects and their operation beyond the singularity of any scene. The 'tangle' is not mapped out in an explicit, coherent manner that I can recognise as mapping. In fact, not one particular affect is named in the book. As in other work written in line with the 'affective turn', what I can recognise as a form of conceptualisation here does *itself* occur through evocation, particularly through gestures to particular unnamed but identifiable scholarly traditions, as flagged by terms such as 'forces', 'event', 'intensities', 'trajectories', 'circuits', 'flows', 'potential', etc. Like Slavko, in his monologue in *Obrana i zaštita*, Stewart avoids closure. In the process, unanalysable per se or unanalysed by choice, affect remains a 'something'.

Again, other anthropological work takes a different route. Navaro-Yashin's study (2012) explicitly names particular forms of affect (e.g. 'melancholia', 'abjection', 'spatial confinement'), historicises them and maps them and their resonance, particularly with regard to the politics of sovereignty in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (e.g. practices of bordering, administration, mapping, documentation etc.), refracted against global state-making dynamics. Like many other ethnographic studies,⁹ in addition to hermeneutic framing, which renders evocation effective for readers unfamiliar with the setting, Navaro-Yashin thus seeks to uncover patterns in the operation of forms of affect. She conceptualises this in generalising terms through the systematic tracing of singular forms of affect and their resonance. In my own writings on post-Yugoslav lives I too seek to identify widely resonant patterns in the work of certain forms of affect and to map them, for example, in postwar, post-cold war developments. And let me not shy away from it: this can have a somewhat disenchanting effect. Trying to analyse how certain forms of affect operate is a bit like explaining a joke. Yet much as I like a good joke, a key anthropological objective for me is to try and understand the work of certain forms of affect in their historical conjuncture. As an ethnographer I partly try to do this on the basis of how people themselves try to make sense of it. All this, of course, is incompatible with a turn away from 'signification'. Yet, like Navaro-Yashin, I found that the people I work with *themselves* historicise affect and that there is much 'signification' going on in relation to the forms of affect we study.

If affect theory emphasises affect's 'autonomy', we may thus ask if, for anthropologists, it could not be of interest 'precisely to the extent that it is *not* 'autonomous' (Hemmings 2005: 565, my emphasis).

In the final section of *Ordinary Affects*, entitled 'Beginnings', Stewart writes that her book:

doesn't mean to come to a finish. It wants to spread out into too many possible scenes with too many real links between them. It leaves me – my experiment – with a sense of force and texture and the sure knowledge that every scene I can spy has tendrils stretching into things I can barely, or not quite, imagine. But I already knew that. (Stewart 2007: 128)

I am not sure if I understand this correctly, but as a reader I think I too can spy many of these tendrils. And this is a testament to the remarkable success of Stewart's experiment. In contrast, my own fraught, far less original attempts to write anthropologically about affect – mostly without calling it that – have indeed struggled with a frustrating slide towards totalising closure of the kind that Stewart seems to warn us against in her introduction. But a question then emerges: what price are we prepared to pay for such success?

Is our only protection against 'asserting a flat and finished truth' (Stewart 2007: 5) a refusal to even *try* to develop analytical approaches that go beyond evocation through hermeneutics, conceptualisation and critical argument? Must, as affect theorists imply, such attempts inevitably assume determination by certain 'underlying structures' and necessarily fetishise particular terms (e.g. neoliberalism)? Can we not explore *to what extent* such 'structures' – or whatever we call them – may have explanatory value and *to what extent* particular terms can be of use? These are things we do *not* know yet when we start our investigations and I think many anthropologists invest much work in such explorations, precisely because ethnography allows us to 'slow the quick jump' to hasty answers. Should such questions be discarded or are they worth asking? If worth asking, I suggest, this allows us to formulate a second key choice regarding calls on anthropologists for an 'affective turn'. Quite regardless of the question whether a rhetorical commitment to 'openness' actually does avoid closure,¹⁰ we may ask: is it our main aspiration to maintain the *principle* of open-ness (to singularities, lines

of flight, becoming, indeterminacy, potential and so on) against the closures of others? Or do we attempt to move towards (self-consciously hesitant, modest, tentative) closures ourselves through careful analysis and argument beyond evocation?

On which grounds are we prepared to be held accountable?

A third choice following the call for an 'affective turn', firmly embedded in the previous two, concerns authorial accountability. As we have seen, affect theory often entails a self-conscious abstention from any truth claims underpinned by recognisable argumentation. This is implicitly or explicitly presented as an emancipatory move. Such an aesthetic and ethic of abstention has important implications for the positioning of the author. Stewart states she does 'not write as a trusted guide carefully laying out the lines between theoretical categories and the real world' (ibid. 5). This positioning is one of the grounds on which *Ordinary Affects* has been praised for 'join[ing] other recent attempts to render cultural life in more fragmentary, less arrogant ways' (Fannin et al. 2010: 923) and falls in line with a general self-presentation by affect theorists as a humble alternative to the pretence of enlightening omniscience detected in 'representational thinking and evaluative critique'.

How exactly is this positioning of humility constructed? We saw that Stewart rejects providing concepts 'cut out of scenes and situations to be laid on the table for academic debate'. I suggest this entails a much further-going pre-emptive neutralisation of *any* debate. The propositions in the sections that intersperse the 'scenes' in *Ordinary Affects* are submerged in unqualified ontological statements and non-committal speculations. One reviewer has called this an 'authorial shrugging of the shoulders' (Jackson 2008: 273). Stewart thus effectively renders irrelevant in advance any engagement in terms of (dis)agreement or refinement. Readers-colleagues, i.e. academics, cannot talk back to the book on the basis of its contents or on the basis of insights external to it. Nor can those readers who appear on its pages as its subjects. While posited against closure, in this way the authorial voice of the affect theorist is actually made unassailable. Whether intended or not, such an approach shelters an author from *any* critical reasoned argument, academic or otherwise. One cannot agree or disagree with a 'refrain'. One can sing along with it or not, and as for appraisal, only aesthetic criteria can be applied. The reactions to *Ordinary Affects*, often glowing, are indicative in this respect:

they praise it for being touching, beautiful, powerful, deep and elegant. As we saw, for some readers this may resonate more, and for others less. As in *Obrana i zaštita*.

I, for one, would be delighted if someone said that my anthropological writing achieves similar effects to a great feature film. Or rather, if someone said that it *also* did that. Here we are dealing with modes of expression and their institutional conditions of existence. Because in leading us away from 'representational thinking and evaluative critique', much work inscribed in the 'affective turn' also leads us *towards* something else. And that something else is not entirely new: it strongly resonates with established styles in artistic production. Faced with a call for an 'affective turn', I suggest ethnographers must consider what kind of authorship they aspire to. Is it a different kind of authorship from that of novelists or feature film-makers? In practice, it certainly involves different forms of accountability. Of course, such differences are not internal to our work itself, but a product of the historical development of scholarship and of art, their institutional frameworks, publishing venues, audiences, rewards, pressures, and so on. Arguments can be and have been made against this division of labour. Yet in the current configuration of academic and artistic production, these differences *do* exist and I suspect that very few anthropologists can afford to ignore them. For most of us, the criteria by which our work will be appraised differ from those that artists will encounter. Anthropologists can decide to evoke certain forms of affect. Many do so, without making the 'affective turn': they *also* decide to historicise specific forms of affect, to detect patterns in their operation and to conceptualise them in referenced dialogue with other scholarly work. Of course, like novelists and feature film-makers they necessarily do this in a stylised, selective manner. They 'edit' their products.

Yet should they aspire to exactly the same goals? Is your list of favourite anthropology books or course reading pack assembled on the same grounds as that of your favourite novels, songs or feature films? Should it be? Is a commission to allocate doctoral research funding in anthropology governed by the same criteria as those of a film festival jury? Should it be? Or should anthropologists, in contrast, be vulnerable to critique based on reasoned argumentation? If so, this means we must write in ways that allow our readers, including the people we write about, to talk back to our work on the basis of evidence or experience, or in terms of the coherence of our arguments. Going beyond evocation, trying to

earn some trust as 'guides' means readers can hold us accountable. In the terms of anthropological knowledge production as an institutionalised field today, the call for an 'affective turn' presents a choice between an authorial self-positioning that is vulnerable through such aspirations and one that is unassailable because it abstains from them.

To end, a reminder. The key decisions for anthropologists when considering the 'affective turn' are not decisions about whether we believe the work of affect is important or not; whether we study it or not; whether we evoke it or not; whether we place it centrally in our writing or not. Writing as someone whose answer to all these questions is a hearty 'yes', in this essay I have tried to crystallise three choices concerning the question of *how* ethnography can best contribute to this.

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Notes

- 1 Reflecting my primary academic biotope, I shall refer to 'anthropology' and 'anthropologists' throughout. Yet my argument does not focus on disciplinary tradition but on the specificities of the *ethnographic* study of affect. I therefore believe that colleagues who (also) self-identify as ethnologists may find that it resonates with their concerns too.
- 2 And those who do, do so at a price. Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003) have been criticised for decontextualising the disputed results of a specific set of neuroscientific experiments, transferring them into the humanities and seeking to render them authoritative through repetitive citation (e.g. Hemmings 2005; Leys 2011; Papoulias and Callard 2010).
- 3 For a critical discussion of the use of the term 'representation' in affect theory, see Leys 2011: 458–459, n43.
- 4 Elsewhere (Jansen 2013) I have addressed a fourth choice, concerning how we render the communicative moment of our ethnographic methodology in our writing about affect and non-human entities.
- 5 Or rather: 'Slavko' is *not* a name anyone in BiH will categorise as Bosniak.
- 6 For an ethnographic study of border-crossing in Mostar that may help readers to 'get it' too, see Palmberger 2013.
- 7 Perhaps we can detect a certain hierarchy of places in anthropology here too, whereby they are considered to be in need of different degrees of framing. Would Duke University Press,

- the home of much affect theory work, publish a book by an anthropologist on BiH that would refrain from a minimum of historicisation? Should they?
- 8 These boundaries should not be a priori equated with boundaries of 'national culture'.
 - 9 An interesting branch consists of ethnographic studies of forms of affect (without necessarily calling them so) in relation to the politics of sovereignty. See e.g. on borders, Demetriou 2007; Löfgren 1999; Povrzanović Frykman 2001; Reeves 2011.
 - 10 For reasons of space I will leave the political positionings of affect theorists aside here, although this is where many of them predominantly pitch their commitment to 'openness'. This tends to be concentrated in the omnipresent word 'potential' (unqualified).

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