The Affects of Reading

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ABSTRACT: There has been a renewed interest in methods in literary studies over the past two decades. This article identifies a tendency towards binarism—paranoid vs. reparative, depth vs. surface, close vs. distant, against the grain vs. with the grain, critique vs. description, content vs. form—in literary studies and promotes a non-dualistic approach to reading. Such a reading does not see reading as a matter of "taking sides" or following strictly defined methods; instead, it works toward disentangling established methodological binaries. This reading is speculative and embraces speculative potentials of literary texts without subscribing to a method at the expense of the rest, without limiting itself to pre-defined methodologies. To move beyond such binarism, the article offers an *affective close reading* of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and examines the potentials of bringing together close reading and affects to re-entangle interpretation, description, enchantments, affect, and form.

KEYWORDS: Reading; Affect Theory; Close Reading; Postcritique; Neoliberalism; Ottessa Moshfegh; *Rest and Relaxation*

> What is important now is to recover our senses.
> We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more,
> to *feel* more.
> (Sontag 14)

Introduction: The Affects of Reading

In her essay "Against Interpretation" (1964), Susan Sontag poses a question that is persistently relevant today: "What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts is desirable today?" (12). Since the early twenty-first century, the crisis in the humanities, questions about the merits of literary studies, methodologies, turns and re-turns, the role of the critic, and affects have, once again, occupied scholarship in literary studies. The debates have proven that reiteration of seemingly simple questions, such as Sontag's, fuels heated discussions and requires "big" answers that necessitate a thorough reassessment of what it means to read critically today. My contribution to this conversation is through the lens of affect theory that many consider antithetical to reading critically. Through an evaluation of twenty-first-century debates around reading and affect theory, I ask: How can close reading be thought through the lens of and practiced with the aid of affects? How can reading forms mean reading affects at the same time? What does it mean to read affectively *and* critically? How do affects co-exist with(in) structure and form? What valences does attention to affects in a literary text add to our scholarly readings? To that end, I read Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) in an attempt to find answers to these questions and to show what it might mean to read affectively and critically at the same time.

Offering an *affective close reading* of Moshfegh's novel is a deliberate choice, for it offers the opportunity to showcase the value of bridging various reading methods as well as of recognizing affects as actors at play in literary texts. The novel is set in the late 1990s in New York, and the attacks of 9/11 mark one of the final scenes in the narrative.[1] Moshfegh's unnamed narrator-protagonist, who lost her father to cancer and whose mother died from mixing alcohol with sedatives, is in her twenties, lives in an Upper-East-Side apartment, and is drowning in luxury and despair at the same time. A graduate of Columbia Art History, she works at Ducat, an art gallery in Chelsea, where she takes hour-long naps in the supply closet. She is unhappy, pessimistic, self-centered, traumatized, but hopeful. She desires to sleep herself out of her misery and become a new person. Her hibernation project is a project of numbing and regeneration, suppression and rebirth, drowning and resurgence. Elucidating her reasons to go into hibernation, for instance, the protagonist says: "I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything" (17). She is, as she unashamedly praises herself, "tall and thin and long and pretty and young. Even at [her] worst, [she] knew [she] still looked good" (27). The novel's multilayered engagement with affects through form and content proves to be insightful in tackling the questions of reading and affect together.

With this article, I imagine a mode of reading that embraces the speculative potentials of literary texts that eludes prescribed methodologies. Treating reading as a creative and generative process implies a reading that speculates without reading for a pre-determined methodological scripture. Reading as such allows readers to take unexpected turns, re-turns, and detours. To speculate, I go back to the initial scene of reading wherein the reader encounters the text, the moment shaped by contingencies and charged with affects: the scene before theories and ideologies seep in. I argue that looking at the affective texture of the novel—both on thematic and formal levels—enriches our understanding of the text and increases the potential of close reading. To explore that potential, I first look at current debates on critique and reading, then trace points of connections between affect theory and literary studies to further elaborate on affective close reading as a mode of reading that might help us overcome binarism in the field. As an example, I close read the concept of sleep on the novel's surfaces, in its depths, from its forms, and through its affective intensities. I conclude by identifying three of many possible roles sleep—and hibernation, by proxy—plays throughout the novel: as escape, pursuit of happiness, and a project for a better life.

Methods: In or Out?

While it would be unjust to the long history of literary criticism to claim "method" as the question of today, it would not be wrong to point at the early twenty-first century for the

1 Whereas the novel ends with the attacks of 9/11, the date functions not as a moment of despair, or a start of crisis, but as a moment of personal revelation. The protagonist's apathetic journey towards rejuvenation and affective awakening contrasts the shift in the country's mood through 9/11.

revitalization of the debates by leading scholars of reading in literary studies such as Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Rita Felski. Some methods of reading have been theorized, hailed, and defended, while others have been deemed ineffective, uncritical, and thus discarded. Bruno Latour's reassessment of critique and his laments for its power, in his 2005 essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" published in *Critical Inquiry*, have inspired many scholars to re-think method in literary studies.

There are two dominant tendencies of reading practices in literary criticism today. On the one hand, those who approach text as mystification and argue that the critic must distance herself from it.[2] On the other hand, new formalisms that argue for art's sovereignty and agency, together with postcritical readings that attend to the intimacies, affects, surfaces of texts.[3] Much of the debate about literary studies takes place through binaries—paranoid vs. reparative, depth vs. surface, close vs. distant, against the grain vs. with the grain, critique vs. description, content vs. form. I argue for a shift in perspective to disentangle such binaries from each other: In this article, I make a case for re-entangling interpretation, description, enchantments, affect, and form through affective close reading that moves beyond the binary methods and attends to the act of reading as a whole in itself.

That literary studies needs a way out is no secret. The methods and calls for reform in the way we do literary studies are nothing but signals of this sore need. This "out" might entail, for example, re-imagining the role of the critic, for it is she who does the work of criticism. Yet, to be able to re-imagine that role, we might first re-consider the object of study and our relationship to it. The critic must unlearn and re-learn how to read and why, unlearn the methods literary scholarship has developed, advanced, and concocted. In the following, I ask to read *closely* and *affectively*. In doing so, the readerly relationship to the text is re-imagined as one of circularity informed by affects.

My aim in this article is not to lay out a brand-new critical approach to be added to the genealogy of critique, to renounce a method and denounce others, neither is it to turn against turns. Instead, my intention is to delineate what it might mean to slide out of the binarism imposed by the various methods and find a way out by focusing on the text and its qualities themselves. I rethink the moment of reading by looking at the text as well as our scholarly

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[2] See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970); Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1983); Althusser's *Reading Capital* (1965); Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (Routledge, 1975); as well as the introduction to this special issue.

[3] Some of the scholarship that have been influential and informative are Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's special issue of *Representations*, "The Way We Read Now" (2009); Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn" (2010); Wiegman, Robyn. "The Times We're in: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'Turn'" (2014); Timothy Bewes, "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism" (2010). In addition, Rita Felski's "trilogy" have been influential in re-thinking literary studies in the face of affective turn: *The Uses of Literature* (2008), *The Limits of Critique* (2015), *Hooked* (2020); Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski's *Critique and Postcritique* (2017). One could also look at the scholarship offered by Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature" (2010) as well as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence* (2003) for accounts that seek to move beyond interpretation.

encounter and affective engagement with it. Re-entangling the messy edges of reading urges me to consider the importance of a methodologically non-restricted, relational, and critical reading. My reading thus considers affects as a matter of the work, form, as well as that what saturates the encounter between the reader and the work.

Affective Close Reading

While proponents of postcritique ask crucial questions about the merits of literary studies today, the resultant tendency is to cast away close reading in favor of affects and attachments, precisely what binary thinking requires us to do. To move away from reading through binarism, and thus to re-entangle, I bring affects and close reading into conversation with one another. Re-appreciation of close reading with an acknowledgment of affects' undeniable role and value in narrative assemblages might offer a new mode of thinking about texts, the figure of the reader as well as reading as a practice. Increased interest in affects and emotions since the 1990s, mostly described as "the affective turn" or the "turn to affect," has largely influenced the humanities and social sciences. From varying reading practices to configurations of affective narratology, affect theory has been productively included in conversations about literature by and large; as Claudia Breger rightly points out, "[a]ffect is anything but new to narrative theory" (228). Just as Sontag's question, there are persistent questions pertaining affect theory and its practice, too. Patricia Ticineto Clough, one of the leading scholars of affect theory, asks "what are affects good for" (222) in her assessment of the future of affect studies.[4] This article takes up Clough's question and asks *what are affects good for in literary studies*, and how do they help shape, and re-shape, our understanding of what literature, or more particularly, what reading is. While asking this question demands a definition, the theorization of affect as "unqualified" and "not ownable or recognizable" and "thus resistant to critique" makes it difficult to do so (Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect" 88). This article recognizes affects are "free radicals" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 62) and they are "sticky" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 4). Underlining the dynamism of affective life, Sedgwick argues that "[a]ffects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 19). Affects are not of a specific discourse or a domain of life, but they "cut across the separate domains we habitually organise the world into" (Anderson 6). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed aims to "track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they 'stick' as well as move" (4). Stickiness, for Ahmed, is an effect of the "*histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*"; it emerges from repeated impressions (90).[5] One's affective response to a piece of writing is not because that

4 Though Clough's article is framed around body studies, the questions she addresses concerning affect studies' future by and large are invaluable to think with.

5 Impressions are made, according to Ahmed, when one 'surface' comes into contact with another within, what Deleuze and Guattari call, a "zone of proximity" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 293, 306). Repetitions of such

particular affect resides within the text or us, but it arises from the contact between the reader and the given text; affective texts are generative. Ahmed is not interested in finding an answer to what emotions *are* but rather in what emotions *do*. This is what Sedgwick set out to do in her move away from the hermeneutics of suspicion towards what *knowledge* does (124). The orientation towards the potentiality of affects, and their circulation between objects, opens an epistemological space to interrogate how affects circulate between, and "attach" and "stick" to texts and readers, as well as how perception changes the meaning of reading as an affective act.[6]

To trace the work affects do, it is important that we go back to the scene of reading, the encounter with texts, as well as the moments of critical reading. Affects are at work even before the act of reading takes place. A text's materiality constitutes one of our initial encounters with a work of literature. Its visual, formal, and aesthetic qualities impose affective signals onto us. If we look at the paratexts of the novel, we will see that Moshfegh's carefully curated covers, for example, will foreshadow the ennui, the humor, and the contradictions that fill the novel. The UK paperback edition features a collage of the painting, "The Portrait of a Young Woman in White," c. 1798, displaying a young woman who is likely to be a member of the higher class; in white, a flowy night dress exposing her breasts; sitting on a chair with an impression on her face that reveals precisely the boredom, blankness, and affect-less state of the protagonist.[7] While the use of an eighteenth-century painting goes against the logics of social media marketing that dominates the publishing industry, the design compensates this risk with bold and flashy pink lettering that is distinctly twenty-first century. Such a play through the pairing of differences not only imitates and foreshadows, but it also intrigues, manipulates, and affects.

Affects' interstitial presence and the work they do *in* and *for* the work—take, for example, the textual and marketing work mentioned above—are often overlooked within the discourse of "critical reading." Hence, attending to the works of affects prompts us, at the same time, to ask what it means to read critically. As many critics of our century express discontent about critique and offer alternatives, they either completely discard methodologies of traditional critical reading (see Moretti) or follow an implied sequencing, ordering in the way we read. In his article "Uncritical Reading" (2004), Michael Warner depicts academic reading as a trained, professionalized way of reading; "the pious labor of a historically unusual sort of person" (36). Felski's neophenomenology, in contrast, problematizes academic literary criticism's favoring

impressions is "accumulation of affective value" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 92), which, in other words, is stickiness.

6 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*, in particular Chapter 7 "Percept, Affect and Concept," for an elaboration on the distinction between percept, perception, and affect in the way I also contextualize them here. Brian Massumi's works can also act as a reference point as he further builds on these distinctions.

7 For more information on the painting, see the Art History Project website: arthistoryproject.com/artists/jacques-louis-david/portrait-of-a-young-woman-in-white/.

of detachments, distance, and suspicion, and propounds reading that enchants. While Felski's and Warner's alternatives seem to play into a view of either/or between critical and uncritical readings, to use Warner's terminology, some other scholars tend to suggest an ordering principle between them (see Edmundson). In these views, a first reading of literary texts must be devoid of ideologies and their terminologies. The first focus must be on the text, the diegetic world, and critical—or professional—reading can come after that. Neither the either/or nor the sequencing model speak fully to the potentialities of reading. Employing either of these models runs the risk of erasing one element or another that constitutes the scene of reading—the reader, the author, the text, the profession, the affects. Is there a singular model or a method of reading that *can* speak fully to the potentiality of texts?

To understand the potentiality of texts, their plurality must be embraced in place of singularity. Thus, texts can be imagined as reservoirs of potentials in constant re-generation through the act of reading. These potentials could take the form of an ideology represented in literary texts, exemplarity, meaning, knowledge, setting, relations, affects, etc. While it would be self-deception, and perhaps against the very nature of such a concept, to think that one could "read," "describe," or "pin down" texts' potentials, it is inherent in the experience of reading to "unlock" or "release" some potentials of a text, and of reading. When reading is formally defined by prefigured methods and approaches, texts are also prefigured as of certain knowledges, producing certain meanings, forming certain relations, composing specific moods, arousing distinct affects, and tapping into a text's potentials is foreclosed.

Reading, however, is an affective and creative process; it is a speculative act of exploring a text's potentialities. When we read Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* without diagnosis as our objective, or a certain method of critical or uncritical reading as our one true guide, the novel reveals more of its potentials than it would otherwise. Through the lens of feminist theory and a reparative reading, the protagonist can be identified as a feminist killjoy who, by not adhering to the norms and refusing "to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (Ahmed, *The Promise* 65), spoils the happiness of others. She embraces disaffection and is cold in a world where women are allowed to be anything but cold. Or alternatively, she might be described as a prime example of a privileged neoliberal woman who despises anything below her quality standards and labels them as fake, cheap, and knock-off and criticizes her best and only friend's attempts to climb up the social ladder to live her own American dream. Is she a feminist hero who refuses to play the roles assigned to women or a satire of privileged white women? Is this a trauma novel or a post-9/11 novel? A novel about class and labor? While there are other possible readings of the novel one could end up with, the situation begs an acknowledgment of the limitations resulting from a reading that subscribes to an ideology criticism, method, or model. What happens when we say *neither/nor* to a tradition that asks us to choose *either/or* is to acknowledge the unbounded potentials of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and the contingency of our readings, as critical or uncritical as they might be.

What connects, imbues, and touches on these potentials all at once are the affects as they saturate the text both in depth and on the surface. On the surfaces of the text, affects are narrated as the characters' qualities as well as valuable assets for a person to have and manage. The protagonist's negotiation of affects is spelled out in the novel's commenting on emotions and feelings:[8]

> I could *think* of feelings, emotions, but I couldn't bring them up in me. I couldn't even locate where my emotions came from. My brain? It made no sense. Irritation was what I knew best—a heaviness on my chest, a vibration in my neck like my head was revving up before it would rocket off my body. But that seems directly tied to my nervous system—a physiological response. Was sadness the same kind of thing? Was joy? Was longing? Was love? (137; emphasis added)

The protagonist's capacity to *think* of feelings but not to *feel* them is demonstrated throughout the narrative in her incapacity to feel and share grief and to feel simple desires. From this affective surface, the attentive and sensuous reader will close read the affects and the way they act as connecting tissue in the narrative. Unlike many trauma novels, where trauma surfaces through flashbacks, repetitions, and narrative gaps and is detected by the trained eyes of the reader, Moshfegh writes her protagonist's trauma onto the surface of the text. Sleep becomes an act of and a space for working through trauma while grief prevails in the background as they co-constitute the atmosphere of the novel.

When mood and atmosphere are considered to be the starting point at which narrative begins its course, the linearity of reading comes into question. This may be best illustrated by Selin, Elif Batuman's protagonist in *The Idiot* (2017), who ruminates on what it means to write and where the narrative starts from: "I thought that was the point of writing stories," she says, "to make up a chain of events that would somehow account for a certain mood—for how it came about and for what it led to" (57). This "certain mood" is theorized by Sianne Ngai in her study of "tone" through which Ngai builds a bridge between literary form, reading, and affects.[9] Ngai finds the study of tone important and points to the danger that "purely subjective or personal experience turns artworks into [what Adorno calls] 'containers for the psychology of the spectator'" (29). By "tone," Ngai means "a global and hyper-relational concept of *feeling* that

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8 While my study here is of affects, the scholarship I refer to uses feelings, affect, and emotion often times interchangeably, and if not by clearly abstaining from making such distinctions. For an account of such an attitude, see Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), specifically pp. 27-28. Eugenie Brinkema, in contrast, draws references to Deleuze's account of affects that are "not feelings, emotions, or moods but autonomous potentialities, pure 'possibles'" (*The Forms of the Affects* 24). See also, Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), particularly page 27; Mary Zournazi, "Navigating Movements," in *Politics of Affect*, ed Brian Massumi (2015) pp. 1–46; as well as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) for different conceptualizations of affect(s).

9 It must be noted here that the textual "atmosphere" of texts is theorized through various different but interrelated concepts. For instance, Ngai's theorization of "tone" is influenced by Heidegger's "mood" and Felski, to highlight postcritique's power beyond methodology, defines postcritique as a "mood and method" (*Limits* 1).

encompasses attitude: a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world" (43). Or, more clearly, she writes:

> the formal aspect of a work that has made it possible for critics of all affiliations […] to describe a work or class of works as "paranoid" […], "euphoric" […], or "melancholic" […]; and, much more importantly, the formal aspect that enables these affective values to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations. (43)

Ngai looks at the way a work's tone is defined and how the reader gets there through emotions. Tone cannot be defined purely through textual evidence, nor can it be solely a matter of a reader's subjective response; it is the outcome of the culmination of the two. Ngai's description of tone through the aesthetic theory of projection illustrates this relationship even more clearly: tone, thought this way, is the response a text inspires in you, which, in return, you place back onto the text. This line of thinking highlights the impossibility of drawing a linear and sequential line between form and affect, objectivity and subjectivity. It also allows us to move away from the questions and possible dangers of reader-response theory and join critical readings with those of affective ones.

Affects' radical mobility and their transmission between bodies—human and nonhuman—necessitate a closer look at how affects move around, but more particularly, in relation to texts. Also essential is the way formal narrative structures amplify the affectivity of the reading experience. Affects have been commonly positioned as pre-linguistic and that which resists structure, form, and signification.[10] However, as Eugenie Brinkema aptly argues, "[a]ffect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed" (*The Forms of the Affects* xiv). On the contrary, the decoupling of affect from form limits the text's potentiality and obfuscates its particularity. Affects do not work against form but with it; they are part of a text's content, structure, and encounters with other objects and living beings. Texts are imbued with affects and have the potentiality to affect and be affected.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, we see examples of how formal strategies work with affects and how they co-constitute each other. Switching between predominantly paratactic and hypotactic sentence structures, Moshfegh controls, manipulates, or surges affects.

> I was going to sleep now, I hoped. I tried to surrender. But I would not sleep. My body refused. My heart shuddered. My breath caught. Maybe now is the moment, I thought: I could drop dead right now. Or now. Now. But my heart kept up its dull bang bang, thudding against my chest like Reva banging on my door. I gasped. I breathed. I'm here, I thought. I'm awake. I thought I heard something, a scratching sound at the door. Then an echo. Then an echo of that echo. I sat up. (229)

10 For a discussion on affect and language, see Brian Massumi, "Affect and Immediation," interview by Jacob Ferrington et al.

Here, for instance, the reader reads through the desperation, panic, and rush the protagonist experiences, and the sentence structures charge the reading experience with similar affects; our eyes rush through the sentences, we are inclined to read the whole passage in one breath and feel the anxiety. This pseudo-phenomenological experience is augmented by the excessive use of the first-person pronoun, often repeated one after the other, which signals a self-involved character, almost irritatingly so, especially when this happens in moments where she is expected to be considerate of other people, such as Reva on the day of her mother's funeral. Upon realizing that she sleep-decided and sleep-traveled to the funeral, the protagonist thinks:

> [Reva] was going to be annoying. *I* could tell. She'd expect *me* to say comforting things, to put an arm around her shoulders while she sobbed at the funeral. *I* was trapped. The day would be hell. *I* would suffer. *I* felt *I* might not survive. *I* needed a dark, quiet room, *my* videos, *my* bed, *my* pills. *I* hadn't been this far from home in many months. *I* was frightened. (123; emphases added)

Similarly, the generous use of repetitions and enumerations pulls the reader into the mind space of the protagonist, who is also the internal focalizer. There is a blankness, an emptiness in the way the protagonist perceives the world around her. As she goes through her hibernation, the associations her mind makes in her "awakenings" are narrated in such a manner:

> In the shower, I read the shampoo label and got stuck on the words "sodium lauryl sulfate." Each word carried with it a seemingly endless string of associations. "Sodium": salt, white, clouds, gauze, silt, sand, sky, lark, string, kitten, claws, wound, iron, omega.
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> The fourth awakening, the words fixated me again. "Lauryl": Shakespeare, Ophelia, Millais, pain, stained glass, rectory, butt plug, feelings, pigpen, snake eyes, hot poker. I shut the water off, did my due diligence with the laundry, et cetera, took an Infermiterol, and lay back down on the mattress. "Sulfate": Satan, acid, Lyme, dunes, dwellings, hunchbacks, hybrids, samurais, suffragettes, mazes. (269)

What do we gain from such attention to language? To "linger with the formal languages of any given text" requires close reading, according to Brinkema (*Life Destroying Diagrams* 23). Brinkema's aim to rehabilitate the generalizability of theory within the affective turn, which she sees in danger of being lost, materializes in her theorization of radical formalism. "The point of radical formalism," Brinkema argues, "is not merely to displace contextualist readings, but to activate and launch the speculative potential of texts, one only available through readings that proceed without guarantee" (259-60). Here, affects stop being the-thing-you-feel-on-the-skin and become a matter of form and structure. Reading without guarantee is accepting the potentiality of texts and the processual nature of reading. Brinkema's insistence on not divorcing affects from form is significant: "I do not merely mean that we need a return to reading for form in the midst of the ongoing turning toward affect; —I am claiming that we require a return to form precisely because of the turn to affect, to keep its wonderments in revolution, to keep going" (xvi). The return to affects' noticeable interest in affects'

functionality demands a reassessment of affects' role in literary texts that goes beyond the content and subjective borders of reader-response theory.

Reconfiguring Affects

Conversation between literary scholarship and affects is scarce partly because attending to the affects, by default, meant a lack of critical distance, and thereby failure in contextualizing a text (Felski, *Uses* 57). Affects' theorization as pre- or infra-linguistic, one that often insists on the divide between emotion and affect, where affect is the anti-narrative intensity that is "resistant to critique" (Massumi, *Parables* 28) corroborated the stance against affect in literary scholarship. Affects' definition as formless, unstructured intensities that "cannot be fully realised in language" and as "always prior to and/or outside consciousness" ties affects to a nonrepresentational ontology and precludes the possibility of dialogue with narrative theories that, essentially, take interpretation and representation at their core (Shouse).[11] I ask, then, how can something so formless and unnarratable such as affect be read in and in connection with the forms of literature? Where are speculative potentials of texts to be found?

Attending to affects in a text does not obliterate the questions of politics, narrative, and form; it amplifies them. Affects are not divorced from politics. In Moshfegh's above-mentioned repetitions, for example, affects' work is not only to immerse the reader in the narrative, but they also make implications to the politics of the time and place the narrative is set in. The narrative, when the protagonist goes through her best friend's bathroom cabinet to rescue her drugs hidden there, mimics the non-stop, rush, continuous nature of consumerism. The endless number of items, doubles, the obsession with being thin, the increase in the use of drugs—all are narrated through a combination of hypotactic and paratactic sentences that, once put next to one another, amplify one another's affect:[12]

> The bathroom looked like it belonged to a pair of adolescent twins preparing for a beauty pageant. […] On the shelf, there were two hair dryers, a curling iron, a flat iron, a bowl of bejeweled barrettes and plastic headbands. Cutouts from fashion magazines were taped to the edges of the mirror over the low vanity and sink: Claudia Schiffer's Guess Jeans ad. Kate Moss in her Calvins. Runway stick figures. Linda Evangelista. Kate Moss. Kate Moss. Kate Moss. […] Next to the cup that must have held a dozen toothbrushes, each head of bristles yellowed and frayed, a prescription bottle of Vicodin. Vicodin! From the dentist. There were twelve pills left in the bottle. I took one

11 It must be noted here that Eric Schouse's discussion of affect is highly influenced by that of Brian Massumi. To read more on the anti-narrativity and pre- and infra-linguistic nature of affects, see Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002).

12 Consistent with neoliberal politics, the 1990s have witnessed an increase in the consumption of psycho-pharmaceuticals and the cultivation of self-help culture, and hence self-help industry. As Greenwald Smith observes, "the therapeutic model that dominated much of the twentieth century is increasingly replaced with the fantasy that individuals, armed with a pop-scientific knowledge of the brain, a Prozac prescription, and a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps attitude, might take full personal control of their emotional lives" (7). See also Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005), p. 6.

> and pocketed the rest. I found more pills under the sink in a wicker box with a pink ribbon tying the lid shut—an Easter relic, I guessed. Maybe when Reva bought it, it was full of chocolate eggs. Clearance sale. Inside: Diurex, ibuprofen, Mylanta, Dulcolax, Dexatrim, Midol, aspirin, fen-phen. A Victoria's Secret gift bag was tucked into the back corner of the cabinet. Inside, glory! My Ambien, my Rozerem, my Ativan, my Xanax, my trazodone, my lithium. Seroquel, Lunesta. Valium. I laughed. I teared up. Finally, my heart slowed. My hands started trembling a little, or maybe they'd been trembling all along. "Thank God," I said aloud. The draft sucked the bathroom door shut with a celebratory bang. (250-251)

Affects sticking to narrative structures and formal strategies in a text can make visible the questions of economic and political systems. Reading *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, we discern the work affects do in narrating the way neoliberalism has invaded the everyday, and how global capitalism, with its 24/7 working machine, has blurred the divisions between rest and work, day and night. Its demands for non-stop production, consumption, and labor have invaded every corner of our lives, even as we sleep.

Sleep, in Moshfegh's novel, is a nodal point around which the narrative is assembled. Another person who tackles the question of sleep, albeit not in fiction but in criticism, is Jonathan Crary in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013). According to Crary, sleep, in the age of neoliberalism and late capitalism, has been interpreted as a mode of resistance from which "nothing of value can be extracted" (11). Against the always-awake global system that demands 24/7 active participation, sleep "can stand for the durability of the social" (25) while at the same time acknowledging that "[t]ime for human rest and regeneration is now simply too expensive to be structurally possible within contemporary capitalism" (15). As if taken out of Crary's account of sleep, Moshfegh's protagonist designs her hibernation project, where she aggressively finds ways and spaces to sleep in and forces her own material conditions to achieve a longer, uninterrupted experience of sleep. As opposed to Crary's quite realistic judgment of sleep as an unaffordable act today, Moshfegh's protagonist, with her inheritance, savings account, and high-limit Visa card, has no reason to worry about money (*Rest and Relaxation* 3). Most importantly, she *does* plan to extract value from her hibernation; after all, what is uninterrupted rest and relaxation with the hope of regeneration in the age of neoliberalism if not one of the utmost values one can extract? In other words, in Moshfegh's diegetic world, value is extractable even from sleep. Instead of sleep, however, what demarcates sleep and non-sleep are affectivity and non-affectivity, respectively.

We must, then, once again, (re)turn to the affects. Rachel Greenwald Smith, in *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), argues that emotions are "increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage, rather than instances of authentic experience that fall outside rational control" (6). Therefore, in the neoliberal context, "recognizing the presence of emotions, in art, in other people, and in the self, does not challenge market-oriented thinking. Instead, feelings frequently become yet another material foundation for market-oriented behavior: emotions are acquired, invested, traded, speculated upon" (6). To fight against the market-oriented neoliberal model, Smith argues for

the importance of what she calls "impersonal feelings," feelings that "often go unrecognized on an intuitive level and become visible only when traced in particular formal gestures" (18). While these feelings continue to act as feelings, they do so by challenging neoliberal ideals by moving the reading experience away from one that is of recognition, empathy, self-identification, and individualization.

Moshfegh's nameless protagonist's venture into a year of rest and relaxation, one that will not be available to most of its readers, breaks off the possibility of recognition and self-identification. Of course, the novel's treatment of neoliberalism through the concept of sleep might take us to different paths of speculation. For instance, taken together with Crary's consideration of sleep as a form of resistance through an interruption of time, abstraction from the mechanic workings of capitalism, the desire of Moshfegh's protagonist to rest and relax can be interpreted as a form of resistance in the face of neoliberalism. My aim here is not to prove this otherwise, even though I have my disagreements; on the contrary, my aim is to consider what happens when we look at sleep not with the intention of diagnosis but with the curiosity to what it *does* in the narrative. Sleep and affects are written into each other in the novel. The many speculative potentials of texts, as Brinkema aptly writes, are "only available through readings that proceed without guarantee" (260) and when proceeded without guarantee, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* stops being the telltale story of neoliberalism set pre-9/11. The novel, then, is an assemblage, an open world, and reading a structuring force. Affects' power rests in reconfiguration; they are part of the assemblages, and they constantly re-orient, move, join and rejoin different ones. For Breger, narrative configuration is an affective assemblage that is possible by ongoing "(re-)configuration" of affects.[13] Deleuzian assemblages include "'states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodges,' but also 'utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs'" (Deleuze qtd. in Breger 232); they are unstable. Building upon these premises, I argue for a reading that moves away from ideology critique and embraces openness and instability rather than a view of the world and objects as fixed and stable entities; a reading that treats texts as open-ended gatherings. Re-entangling reading, then, might also mean assembling and reconfiguring it.

The Good American Sleep

To reconfigure reading, we must unlearn the way(s) we are taught and re-learn them with a renewed attention to texts, affects, and forms. Only in continuously attaining a text and proceeding without guarantee are we able to engage with the potentials of a text. To give

[13] Turning the Deleuzian notion of worlding against "the anti-narrative bent of Massumi's approach," Breger defines narrative worldmaking as "*a performative process of configuring affects, associations, attention, experiences, evaluations, forms, matter, perspectives, perceptions, senses, sense, topoi, and tropes in and through specific media, including mental operations as well as graphic notations, words and gestures, images and sounds*" (231; original emphasis).

literary texts the generosity they deserve in our readings, we must embody an understanding of reading that is not diagnostic but curious, not suspicious but inquisitive, and not closed but close. Reading *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* with such an understanding of reading allows us to see connections between seemingly irrelevant details; it amplifies the works of affects, and tells many stories within stories.

Let us look in detail, read *closely and affectively*, what stories sleep tells in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. "I was more of a somniac. A somnophile. I'd always loved sleeping," confesses the narrator, and adds that "it was the one thing [her] mother and [she] had enjoyed doing together" (46). As a child, tells the narrator, she "accumulated thirty-seven tardies and twenty-four absences" (46) in the year she was let to sleep in her parents' bed with her mom, due to an "unspoken conflict" her mother had with her father. Learned or not, the protagonist instrumentalizes sleep as a way of avoidance and satisfies her desire for sleep by taking every possible occasion to sleep or by taking sleeping pills—Ambien, Rozerem, Ativan, Xanax, trazodone, lithium. Seroquel, Lunesta, Valium, and the fictional drug Infermiterol. Rachel Greenwald Smith makes a telling argument that informs my reading. Via the personalization of emotional life in neoliberalism, Smith argues that "unhappiness and other emotional difficulties, regardless of their causes or contexts, are seen as evidence of an irresponsible abdication of responsibility for the self" (7). This could be what the protagonist is trying to correct by taking the responsibility to come up with a plan and by seeing it through. She is trying to adapt to the workings and systems of neoliberalism.

As Crary's critical account of capitalism and sleep reminds us, the non-stop productivity and consumption demands of global capitalism blur the lines between wake consciousness and sleep. There is a similar line in the protagonist's excessive sleeping habits where reality folds into sleep-land. She does "sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating […] sleepshopping on the computer and bodega […] sleepordered Chinese delivery. [She's] sleep smoked. [She'd] sleeptexted and sleeptelephoned" (115). The repeated use of compound words that follow each other reflects the blurred lines between her reality and sleep as well as day and night. Sleeping offers her a new reality or replaces her own with a "less certain reality […] Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one gray, monotonous plane ride through the clouds. […] I grew less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream" (84). Sleep stops being a natural everyday cycle of the individual and becomes one of the many neoliberal projects of self-improvement and optimization—the new American Dream in the age of neoliberalism.[14] In the following, I read sleep from affects; first I look at how, for the protagonist, sleep functions as a non-spatial space to escape (to) and work through the affects

14 *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* can be considered as an addition to the American literary history of sleep. For example, Rip Van Winkle's return from sleep, only to find that during his twenty years of sleep everything has changed around him while he has remained the same contrasts Moshfegh's protagonist's deliberate project of changing the self to adapt into the environment she lives in. Similarly, her sleep-activities bring to mind Edgar Huntly's sleepwalking due to emotional duress.

of trauma; second, I trace the protagonist's objectives for this project; third and lastly, I look in closer detail at how sleep, in this novel, is in fact a project for a better life, a possibility for regaining the capacity to affect and be affected. Reading sleep means reading affects in the novel.

Sleep is a safe space where thoughts, worries, and anxieties reside in their corners, and encounters with other people are no longer a concern. The escape sleep offers the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* has a double function—an escape from the trauma of losing both her parents and from the unbearable vibrant life charged with affects. The search for an affect-less space in sleep reverberates in the frequent attribute to nothingness and the desire to be surrounded by it. Moshfegh's protagonist is not dull. She knows very well that life could not go on like this, without forming affective connections with other people, without actually living. She wants to take action and change, but first to indulge as much as possible in the "existential wormhole" (156) she is wandering in. Dr. Tuttle, the protagonist's therapist, "a whore who feed[s] [her] lullabies" (156), becomes a caricature of Sartre for a moment:

> Mind over matter, people say. But what *is* matter, anyway? When you look at it under a microscope, it's just tiny bits of stuff. Atomic particles. Subatomic particles. Look deeper and deeper and eventually you'll find nothing. We're mostly empty space. We're mostly nothing. *Tra-la-la*. And we're all the *same* nothingness. You and me, just filling the space with nothingness. (75)

The supply closet at Ducat, for example, is where she "went into black emptiness, and infinite space of nothingness," she was "neither scared nor elated in that space" (39). No thoughts, interactions, conversations, just existing—*being by itself*. For her, "it was peaceful" (39). Waking, what Crary sees as the potential of revolution and resistance, is a moment of relieving the pain for her as her life is flashing before her eyes and her "mind filling itself with all [her] lame memories" (40). She cried only when she "was pulled out of that nothingness" (40) and "[t]he goal for most days was to get to a point where [she] could drift off easily, and come to without being startled. [Her] thoughts were banal. [Her] pulse was casual" (71). Her only desire is not to desire, and "Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring [her] such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of [her] waking consciousness" (46).

The protagonist's desire for detachment from the rest of the world, sleep, and affective apathy seem to be her coping mechanisms. More often than not, the protagonist ignores her friend Reva's personal issues, discounts her pain, mistreats her, and remains non-responsive when Reva shares her problems.

> Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine. Reva was like the pills I took. They turned everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away. And that was exactly what I wanted—my emotions passing like headlights that shine softly through a window, sweep past me, illuminate something vaguely familiar, then fade and leave me in the dark again. (166)

She instrumentalizes Reva in order to manage her own pain, even if that means treating it as an abject matter: Reva "both delighted and disgusted" her. The protagonist works through her pain and trauma through approximation. With Reva, witnessing her process her own trauma, seeing "her repression, her transparent denial, her futile attempts to tap into the pain" satisfies the protagonist. Reva, she says, "scratched at an itch that, on my own, I couldn't reach" (166).

Affects' sociality and stickiness are seen in the way Reva's pain and loss of her mother is a reminder of the protagonist's own losses and the pain she had been trying to bury. Reva's loss of her mother acts as a catalyst to her own trauma and feelings of loss, which she tries to drown in sleep. She recognizes herself in Reva's "misery," "the particular sadness of a young woman who has lost her mother—complex and angry and soft, yet oddly hopeful" (134). While there are several moments of recognition, the protagonist does not "feel it inside of [her]" (134). Reva's house was the exact opposite of the protagonist's parents' house upstate (127-128); Reva's mom was everything the protagonist's mom wasn't: "someone who cooked and cleaned, kissed [her] on the forehead and put Band-Aids on [her] knees, read [her] books at night, held and rocked her when [she] cried" (135). The protagonist was the daughter of a mother who despised anything motherly, rejected domesticity, an alcoholic who "mostly watched TV and smoked in bed all day" (136).

Through sudden flashbacks resulting from the protagonist's visit to the funeral of Reva's mother, the narrative reveals the protagonist's loveless childhood filled with memories of a detached father with cancer, and a dysfunctional mother, whose favorite activity with her child is to pop in sleeping pills and sleep for days. When the protagonist cries after having lost her father to cancer, it is condemned by the mother:

> Well, Goddamnit, if you insist on getting weepy . . . You know, when you were a baby, I crushed Valium into your bottle? You had colic and cried for hours and hours, inconsolable and for no good reason. And change your shirt. I can see the sweat under your arms. I'm going to bed. (69)

The desire for detachment from her environment is spelled out by the protagonist as a desire for self-protection. She neither wants to "relate to anybody too keenly" (93), nor does she want anything to do with anything that has the potential to remind her of the past. On her way to get her daily "fix of coffee" on Christmas Day, "she kept her head down" as she "didn't want to be reminded of Christmases past. No associations, no heartstrings snagged on a tree in a window, no memories" (103). She decides not to delete the voice messages so that nobody can leave her any voice mails (112). When asleep, "[she] had no nightmares, no passions, no desires, no great pains" (84).

Grief and trauma act as affective glues of the narrative, connecting the seemingly irrelevant textures of the novel. Moshfegh's writing is generous. She lays out her cards open and allows the reader to make those connections as the story develops. One needs no master codes to dig up hidden meanings and uncover the ostensibly true message of the novel. Though, what Moshfegh does best is, instead of writing a text to be deciphered by the professional reader,

explicitly arouse disgust and affection, love and repellence, irritation, and pity simultaneously. Exemplarity does not concern Moshfegh as an author; she does not write a character for the reader to fully immerse themselves in, identify with, or recognize themselves in. Even if the reader is able to form affective connections, these connections are constantly interrupted. Take trauma as an example; in trauma's literary depictions, empathy is aroused involuntarily. Yet, in Moshfegh's frame, the empathy and affective closeness one feels for the protagonist is revoked by Moshfegh's brash and cruel style in no time. After all, it is as easy to empathize with and feel close to a character working through a family trauma as it is to be irritated by the very same character's indifference to the pain and suffering of others. In Moshfegh's literary style, waves of affective responses are not simply thematic matters of narrative but *also* of form and composition. In other words, reading affects is refusing to choose an either/or; it re-contextualizes affects as being the problematic of form and style as much as being the problematic of narrative and the subjects (of character, of author, or of reader).

In the novel, sleep is not just the infinite space of nothingness but also a productive *space* and an *act* where "[s]omething was getting sorted out" (51). The protagonist believed that she would be "renewed, reborn […] a whole new person" (51). Sleep as a productive tool offers her regeneration, erasure of her past, and the possibility of starting anew. The qualities of nothingness and productivity attributed to sleep indicate the protagonist's need for a low-stimuli, affect-less experience through which "her past life would be but a dream, and [she] could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that [she] would have accumulated in [her] year of rest and relaxation" (51). She wants to "become immune to painful memories" (137) through sleep, and her hibernation is a "self-preservational" act that she thought "was going to save [her] life" (7). This act of self-preservation first detaches her from the daily cycle of late capitalism and its demands and then, in return, prepares her to be the individual the very same system requires.

The hibernation project does not uphold any visible sociopolitical goal, nor does it stem from larger political motivation. Au contraire, it is a project for self-optimization, because "[she] was afraid things would be like that [as in in her past] forever" (99). Her disaffected self is the cocoon she is trying to come out of—sleep is where her metamorphosis takes place. Symptomatic reading would invite us here to look beyond the already given and scratch the surfaces for hidden meaning underneath. Such a reading will, especially when informed by political and cultural theories, find the hibernation project as emblematic of the pursuit of happiness.

In search of the renewed self, the protagonist's hibernation project mimics neoliberal projects for a better life. The transformation through the project is into a self that feels, connects, functions, is untethered from traumas, and can move forward in life. The desire for a new life is so strongly expressed: "I suppose part of me wished that when I put my key in the door, it would magically open into a different apartment, a different life, a place so bright with joy and excitement that I'd be temporarily blinded when I first saw it" (105-6).

Wandering on the blurry line between the real and the dream, in a "less certain reality" (84), "the sleep was having an effect: [she] was growing less and less attached to life" (84). Detaching herself from life, untethering all attachments, would allow her to "disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was [her] hope. This was the *dream*" (84; emphasis added). While the dream here evokes the notion of the American dream, the protagonist—sitting on her cushion of wealth and privilege—does not need to work for upward mobility or to climb up the social ladder. In the material sense, she *is* the dream. Yet, her incongruous affections necessitate mobility of affects. She enters the "dim state between the real and the dream" (41) to free herself completely of affects only to be able to feel again.

The protagonist's understanding of life is that of a neoliberal life of connections. She reflects on her encounter with the people at the Bodega: "They were all so jovial and relaxed with one another, fraternal even. Maybe I was envious of that. They had lives—that was evident" (98). As Greenwald Smith points out, "[n]eoliberal society requires and encourages engagement with others: it is, after all, under neoliberalism that we see the rise of social media and the premium put on networking and the acquisition of 'friends'" (6). Similarly, living means having connections and the protagonist's idea of a better life is one where she can affect and be affected in that constellation.

Conclusion

The renewed interest in methods might mean prioritizing the methods amongst themselves, picking a winner, or coming up with new, promising ones to replace the old and limping. Yet, what if the answer is *neither/nor; or none and all*? There is only so much the reader might expect from *a single* method, and only so much *one* method can offer. This does not mean losing faith in methods or rejecting them but redirecting our re-evaluating gaze, searching for renewal, refreshment, and perhaps revival. The prefix 're-' here asks us to do it again, to go back, once more, with renewed faith. This is the point where all the difference is made, but the question lingers: where do we go back *to*? Going back to the methods, as we have seen, has not resolved the issue we have turned our faces to. The must-renewed might be, then, more to the root, to the origin. It starts with the text, an open-ended gathering, an assemblage; it ends with the text. What happens in between is speculation, interpretation, zooming in and out, coming close and moving away, reading.

There is no hiding that this article has gestured towards various recognizable modes of reading. For once, it read closely while being wary of getting *too close*. One might wonder, at first glance, about the renewal of practicing this traditional form of reading amidst the so-called "crisis in the humanities" and "method wars," and it would be right to do so, only if one were to overlook *what* is read closely. Close reading here is a wonderment; it is multi-vectoral in the way it *reads* affects and *speculates* on the potentialities of the text. Reading affectively *and* closely does not turn a blind eye to the text's touching points to social and economic systems it is written in or the potentials for a passive rebellion against global capitalism in the

novel; neither does it ask the reader to overlook the "feminist potentials" in the protagonist's refusal. Or, turning to the affects, it does not take the narrative and the feeling subject (the author, the character, the reader) at the center at the expense of forms. Instead, it shows that reading forms is not devoid of affects; rather, affects inhere in forms. Going back to the text means going back to its forms and affects. As exemplified through the concept of sleep in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a mode of close reading that attends to a text's affects, depths, and surfaces, what is said and what might not have been said pushes the limits of what it means to read today.

To fully engage the speculative potentials of literary texts, we must unlearn to seek diagnosis as the ultimate goal of reading and learn to get lost in our journey, to be affected by our encounter, and to embrace the many possibilities a text might have to offer. It is only through learning to be "uncritical" *and* "professional" that the face of reading in American studies might change. My attempt to explore this possibility of reading between binaries is thus paired with Moshfegh's novel, which embraces the potentials of gray zones. With *affective close reading*, I do not offer a new method of reading, but ask us to re-evaluate the modes of reading we champion, and those we cast aside, and our reasons to do so. To look for how limiting it is to subscribe to only one method of reading, as a choice as such means not choosing others.

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