

Affective arrangement

Jan Slaby

“Affective arrangement” is a philosophical concept that describes the in each case unique constellation of a particular affect-intensive site of social life. An affective arrangement comprises an array of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into a coordinated formation of mutual *affecting and being-affected*. While its composite materials are heterogeneous, an affective arrangement is characteristically social. As such, it usually brings multiple human actors into a conjunction, so that these actors’ reciprocal affecting and being-affected is the central dimension of the arrangement. The concept thus pertains to the mutually formative combination of socio-material settings and local – as well as non-local (i.e., mediatized) – affective relations. As part of an affective arrangement, affective relations are channeled and modulated in recurrent ways that can be charted by researchers.

As a working concept, “affective arrangement” – and the methodological perspective it anchors – can help researchers come to terms with ongoing affective relationality in various settings, in particular where actors with different positions, roles, histories, dispositions, or habits engage and interact. Affective arrangements are regularly found, for instance, in corporate offices, in public arenas of sports or entertainment, at the sites of religious or ceremonial rituals, at the sites of social and political gatherings of various sorts, but also in the private setting of the family home or in the interactive spaces of contemporary media. The concept facilitates micro-analyses of such settings as it furthers both an understanding of the entities that coalesce locally to engender relational affect, and also the overall affective tonality or → *atmosphere* that prevails in these locales.

The concept is inspired by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s influential notion of *agencement* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986, 1980/1987; see also Buchanan, 2015; Nail, 2017). Another precursor is Foucault’s concept of a “dispositif of power” (Foucault, 1977/1980), which stresses materiality, historicity, and visibility in the study of power relations but does not place particular emphasis on affect. Deleuze’s and Guattari’s *agencement* refers to local concatenations of diverse materials that actively run through a characteristic routine. Thus, the

concept invokes a notion of distributed *agency* in the sense of a performative sequence jointly enacted by the contributing elements. Affective arrangements likewise comprise agency – both human and non-human – in inextricable entanglement with relations of affecting and being affected among its various elements.

An affective arrangement is a fragmentary formation – a tangle of pieces, where the pieces in question keep their distinctness and individuality no matter how densely they are enmeshed. Yet there is a characteristic mode of relatedness that holds the elements together, a specific mode of affecting and being affected. In such a dynamic interplay, the elements sustain a local sphere of affective intensity and thereby both initiate and give shape to characteristic affective relations and agentive routines.

In view of their dynamic openness and heterogeneity, affective arrangements resist attempts to sharply demarcate them. Yet often, there will be a sensible difference between inside and outside, marked by thresholds of intensity. Affective arrangements are *performatively open-ended*, capable of expanding into their surroundings by incorporating new elements. From the point of view of individual actors, affective arrangements often exert an active allure, drawing actors in by offering occasions for → *immersion* within a sphere of → *affective resonance*, thereby potentially giving rise to longer lasting → *attachment*, or even, at times, to forms of behavioral addiction (cf. Schüll, 2014).

Arrangement thinking: key dimensions

Affective relations unfold as part of a local formation of elements, involving actors, materials, and their environmental contexts and conditions, whose characteristics and potentials enter into and shape the affective relations in question. Thus, where affect is at issue, there is always more going on than merely the affectedness or affective experience of an individual actor or an interacting dyad viewed in isolation. The point of the concept “affective arrangement” is to bring the contributing elements and dimensions into focus in their specificity and with regard to their local mode of composition. Ideally, this enables an understanding of a multiplicity of elements in terms of how they coalesce locally into a concise formation of affecting and being affected (→ *Pathosformel*).

There is much leeway as to the forms affective arrangements may take, with regard to the elements that might figure in them and as to the types of relatedness holding them together. However, there are recurrent dimensions that have proven useful for elucidating concrete cases. Among these are the aspect of *heterogeneous composition* (i.e., a non-unifying adherence of self-standing elements), the idea of a *polycentric tangle of relations* that nevertheless gives an impression of *a characteristic mode of relatedness*, the idea of *shifting thresholds of intensity* that provisionally demarcate the arrangement from its surroundings, and – slightly less centrally – the sense of an often (but not always)

pleasurable absorption, captivation or immersion that an affective arrangement affords to individuals that are about to get involved with it, with potential for longer-lasting → *attachment*. In terms of dynamics, an affective arrangement is usually beset by two counteracting tendencies: one toward its consolidation into a relatively permanent pattern, the other, opposing the first, toward transformation or even dissolution. Often, phases of relative dominance of either tendency can be observed (i.e., relatively stable arrangements vs. relatively more fleeting ones). As temporally stabilized agglomerations of materials and expressions, affective arrangements function as repositories of the past, which points to their complex, multi-scale *historicity* (→ *affective disposition*).

With the concept “affective arrangement” comes a particular style of thought and methodological orientation – *arrangement thinking*, one might call it – that lets theorists and researchers approach affective relations in a specific way. Over and above a general orientation toward the *situatedness* of affect, emphasis is placed on local meshworks, apparatuses, and relational configurations, and one reckons with surprising combinations of elements in one’s attempt to situate a given instance of affect within a particular “intensive milieu” of formative relations. The theoretical optic engendered by this concept is one that seeks out fragmentary complexes, and invokes an ecological perspective critical of individualism and mentalism. This style of thought can be glossed as a form of materialism, but it is a *vital* materialism that foregrounds the dynamics, liveliness, and intrinsic performativity of matter (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; see Ahmed, 2008, for critical remarks on this trend).

Background and related concepts

As the invocation of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Foucault indicates, the idea of an affective arrangement is inspired by influential conceptual lineages in continental thought, with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as early instigators. What these precursors have in common is a broadly materialist and social-realist allegiance pitted against the idealism of bourgeois culture, and at least Nietzsche and Marx share a tacit focus on performativity and agency as opposed to representation, and a form of subject-thinking that emphasizes formative relations to the environment, to ambient culture, or socio-industrial complexes. Marx’ fragment on machines and his thoughts on commodity fetishism (Marx, 1973), Nietzsche’s naturalistic yet constructivist and affect-oriented construal of the subject (Nietzsche, 1886/2002), and also Freud’s concept of the “complex” as an idiosyncratic psychic constellation all prefigure certain aspects of what will later become, in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, the *agencement*.

The successive stages of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s collaborative work are the main attractor for the different phases and facets of arrangement thinking. An early seminal articulation is in the *Anti-Oedipus*, a book that commences with the re-coding of the Freudian complex into the “desiring machine”

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1983). This move frees the *agencement* (the French translation of Freud's "complex") from both its psychic interiority and its confinement within a stuffy family setting – the Oedipal triangle. Instead, the *agencement* gets relocated within a plurality of socio-material constellations, object relations, and machinic concatenations, fueled by a notion of desire centered on the polyvalence and productivity of attachment. Around the same time, Deleuze and Guattari identify Kafka as the virtuoso of the *agencement machinique* and the modern novel as its aesthetic format of choice, while they also point to literary writing in general as a practice of crafting energetic complexes of affect that might stick and prevail (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986) (→ *writing affect*).

With its productivity, dynamism, and polyvalence, the *agencement machinique* was supposed to counter the strictures of structuralism while preserving its insights into the formative workings of cultural formations, rituals, sign systems, or other codified practices (cf. Schmidgen, 1997). In its more developed phase in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/1987), Deleuze's and Guattari's approach takes the guise of an encompassing dynamic-materialist ontology reaching from the microscopic to the cosmic scale.

On a parallel track, mid-20th century theorizing in Western Marxism began to champion a notion of "apparatus" as a device of power-inflected, often repressive subject-formation, with Althusser's *ideological state apparatuses* as a central articulation (Althusser, 1970). In critical distinction to Althusser and his deterministic leanings, Foucault settled on the subtler notion of a "dispositif" or "dispositif of power" (a term that initially got translated into English as "apparatus," whereby its distinctness was lost). In Foucault's work, the "dispositif" replaces his earlier notion of a "discursive formation," emphasizing the role of non-discursive materials and arrangements in the production and maintenance of power relations. The concept anchors both a perspective on power as productive, distributed, and polycentric and an understanding of the subject as in part shaped and molded by socio-material configurations, where Foucault stresses the heterogeneity of these formations as well as their strategic character. Given the productivity of the concept, it is understandable that there are attempts to accommodate the *dispositif* directly to affect theory with the term "affectif" (Seyfert, 2012). While this proposal overlaps to some degree with the present account, it is preferable to speak of an affective *micro-dispositif* in the context of affective arrangements (Mühlhoff & Slaby, 2018; see also Anderson, 2014).

More recently, "apparatus" has resurfaced in the work of feminist philosopher of science Karen Barad, who continues an earlier line of non-dualistic feminist thought on the material-discursive practices of science initiated, among others, by Donna Haraway, whose "apparatus of bodily production" also belongs in the conceptual lineage tracked here (see Haraway, 1988, p. 595). In Barad's (2007) relational ontology centered on "entanglements" and "intra-action," with a stress on material agency and post-human

performativity, the apparatus is the main arena of distributed agency. Like the *agencement* before it and the affective arrangement on the present account, Barad's apparatus is not merely an assortment of stuff at a place, but a lively unit comprised of different elements that operate together dynamically, a site where things unfold in a more or less regular way, without an instance of top-down control. Barad's quantum-physics-derived notion of "entanglement" signals the non-separability of intra-acting parts within such relational meshworks and allows a focus on variably drawn and re-drawn boundaries among and within phenomena. The term "entanglement" has been employed productively in recent years within cultural analysis, for instance in feminist approaches to the biosciences (Wilson, 2015) and in media theory (e.g., Chow, 2012). Much recent work on networked media and emerging social media practices can be considered as informed by arrangement thinking, as the focus in media theory has shifted from separate devices to dispersed media environments and overlapping practices of mediation, with multiple formats, technologies, and temporalities coalescing into multisensorial complexes and "intensive milieus" (Angerer, 2017).

Other recent articulations in the *agencement* lineage are the varieties of *assemblage theory* in the social sciences. Besides Bruno Latour's widely received actor-network theory that draws variously on a flattened notion of *assemblage* (Latour, 2005), Manuel DeLanda's (2006) social ontological approach is noteworthy. In keeping with Deleuze's and Guattari's groundwork, DeLanda understands "assemblage" – until recently the standard translation of the French *agencement* – as a non-organic totality whose parts are self-subsistent and autonomous in relation to the whole. Likewise, his topological perspective foregrounds the specificity and historical contingency of an assemblage, opposing essentialism and archetypical thinking. DeLanda's approach synthesizes Deleuze's and Guattari's metaphysics with complexity theory, network science, and innovative strands of organization theory, showcasing the potentials and range of application of assemblage-style thought. On the flip side, his work has been criticized as too rigid in its bottom-up logic, as unclear with regard to key notions (such as "scale") and as not receptive enough to the heterogeneity, non-linearity and "crankiness" of real-life assemblages (cf. Buchanan, 2015).¹

In order to enable it to function as a focal concept for the study of affect, and especially as a notion capable of bringing out the specificity of situated *affective relations*, it is important to construe "affective arrangement" in a sufficiently open-textured manner. Accordingly, we advise against adherence to

1 Limits of space prevent an exploration of the resonances between the conceptual lineage charted here and approaches in microsociology. Erving Goffman's work on interaction rituals and their settings, situations, and frames is highly instructive, in part also because Goffman often speaks of "arrangements" himself (see, e.g., Goffman, 1983); a key articulation of microsociological emotion theory is Collins (2004).

one particular school of thought to the exclusion of other approaches, and suggest a more free-floating usage.

Examples from research

To heed this directive, this section presents examples from recent work on affect in which the concept and the thought style of arrangement thinking have found application. The cases are such that a particular domain of study has inspired further conceptual development at the ground level of research. Each example will emphasize a dimension of affective arrangements, but it is not assumed that all of its dimensions will ever appear together in a single case.

An intuitive example is contemporary work environments such as open-floor corporate offices with their communication and interaction routines among co-workers in a spatial set-up, wired-up by networked media and interactive workflow technologies (cf. Slaby, Mühlhoff, & Wüschner, 2017). Crucial in modern office workplaces is both the creation of a working atmosphere – an affective style of moment-to-moment interaction and engagement among the co-workers – and the longer-term habituation and cultivation of affective dispositions and agentive routines. The affective arrangement is a dynamic formation that modulates individual dispositions and harnesses energies and potentialities to the benefit of the overall set-up (i.e., that of the company or organization). There is an element of self-organization as local interaction patterns and intra-active routines emerge in part spontaneously, but also a dimension of design and deliberate affect engineering that draws its techniques from the legacies of group dynamics research, organizational psychology, ergonomics, or human factors research (among much else). Conceptual elaboration in these settings might suggest further notions capable of characterizing the dense mutual modulation of affectivity, behavior, and habit in close-knit workplace interaction, for instance concepts such as “affective resonance” or “immersive power” (cf. Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2017; Mühlhoff & Slaby, 2018).

Significant political events and movements might be approached through the lens of the affective arrangement. Recent ethnographic work on the street protests during the revolutionary uprisings in Egypt in 2011 make use of the concept to bring the particular affective atmosphere, texture, and temporality – and their various enabling conditions – of the movement into focus. The protests at issue are those on the Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo on 18 memorable days of the square’s occupation in 2011 (cf. Ayata & Harders, 2018). In interviews, activists speak of a palpable intensity and energy unfolding during the protests, and many consider their time on the square as life-changing. Approaching the dynamics on the square as a complex of interlocking arrangements – rather than a matter of collective emotions such as anger, fear, or enthusiasm – provides a fruitful angle on the heterogeneity of contributing factors (material, architectural, practical, discursive, medial, etc.), on the

uniqueness of certain transformative moments, but also on the tensions and differences among participants and participant factions. Arrangement thinking lets researchers look at Tahrir Square as a material-discursive site imbued with the traces of previous struggles, movements, epochs, and balances of power that weigh into the particular affective texture of the 2011 uprisings. As a conceptual guide for qualitative research, the optic of arrangement thinking is capable of combining – not merging – individual perspectives, gleaned from narrative interviews with activists, with fine-grained descriptions of the affective dynamics on the square. A socio-political event on the world-historical scale is thereby dissected into a confluence of enabling and contributing factors without imposing a reductive explanation. It is noteworthy that the political event itself can become the focus of arrangement thinking, as epitomized in the concept “Midān moment,” coined to bring to attention the exceptional temporality of an ongoing situation of protest, including its manifest transformative force (Ayata & Harders, 2018) (→ *Midān moments*).

The ethnographic study of rituals is another domain where the concept of an affective arrangement has proven useful. In his work on religious performances at saints’ shrines in Sehwan, Pakistan, the anthropologist Omar Kasmani brings to bear an arrangement optic to focus on the multilayered temporality of practices of devotion at holy sites, with emphasis on the complex soundscapes, on the “sonic *mise-en-scène* of affect” (Kasmani, 2017). By foregrounding the local arrangement of sound, the thick sensuality and complex historicity of the audible comes into view as a powerful conveyor of affect. Practices of devotion are seen as multiply layered soundscapes in which a panoply of tendencies, temporal dimensions, participant orientations, tensions, and contestations coalesce at a historically charged site into a unique sonic formation:

[T]he ordinary tinkering of tea-sellers, the guttural roar of motor-cycle rickshaws, the five calls to prayer, the daily bustle of surrounding markets as well as the occasional fights, brawls and conflicts on site are as much part of an emergent yet already drifting sonic-scene as are dissonances triggered by ritual performances themselves.

(Kasmani, 2017)

Arrangement thinking here entails a sensibility for the time- and site-specific complexities and ambivalences that inhere practices of worship at tension-riddled sites. This prevents a monothematic approach that would foreground a focus on transcendence and view participants mainly in their role as devotees with few other stakes in their practice. Countering such readings, Kasmani emphasizes the political dimension audible at Pakistani shrines, lending an ear to other vital concerns besides religious ones, and discerning stirrings of political agency on part of those engaged in the rituals: “in publicly sounding allegiance to Shia figures, events and temporalities, pilgrims

long for other histories, they insist on other futures. They voice a historical-emotional consciousness that critiques, interrupts, and refuses a for-granted continuity of the present” (Kasmani, 2017).

Conclusion: two methodological orientations

Implicit in the preceding exposition of the concept “affective arrangement” are two distinct methodological orientations. Taken in its full complexity, “affective arrangement” is a philosophical concept that aims at elucidating the *unique* constellation of a particular affect-intensive site of social life. It drives toward disclosing the operative essentials of a social site in terms of a unique local patterning of relational affect, giving shape to a potentially idiosyncratic affective texture or formation inherent in a specific place at a time. The methodology associated with this employment of the concept is qualitative, interpretive, and constructivist, as a given site or domain will be described from a unique and potentially personal angle. Such descriptions are crafted with the help of various aesthetic and stylistic means, as deemed appropriate to the case at hand. It will be hard – if not impossible – to separate this sort of work with the concept from an educated perspective and capacity for judgment of an individual scholar, stemming from an individual learning history and experiential trajectory. This is more than the global orientation of arrangement thinking, which is a perspective comprising relatively clear-cut principles (as described above). What is required, over and above this general orientation, is a unique “take” or imprint on part of the individual scholar or researcher. Moreover, their trained power of judgment (*Urteilskraft*) will not only be applied as such, but has to effectively coalesce with whatever is currently under study, forming an affective arrangement in its own right between scholarly orientation and domain of inquiry. A central role then inevitably accrues to skilled academic writing, as the unique affective *Gestalt* of a given arrangement requires the right words in a nuanced textual arrangement adequate to the scene under study. At issue is an involved, potentially immersive style of approaching and then writing about one’s subject matter.

On the other hand, much in the foregoing has pointed also to aspects of potential empirical research methodologies. For instance, social scientists, ethnographers, or researchers of media who approach a social domain might use “affective arrangement” as an explorative concept that guides their charting of the material layout and functional design of social spaces, domains, or media platforms, focusing on those elements and their structured interplay that are presumably instrumental to the reliable production and/or continued circulation of affect. Here, the concept works as a generative template inspiring hypotheses, research questions, and initial domain descriptions. For example, the ethnographic study of ritual might map out elements of the material propping and staging instrumental to the unfolding of affect during the ritualistic performances – up to the minute drawing of empirically grounded heat maps and

interaction diagrams. In the sociology of organizations, the design of offices and workplaces might be approached with an eye to those factors and local set-ups which likely play a role in realizing the predominant forms of affective interactions or affective atmospheres in these settings.

What these predominantly empirical endeavors have in common is that they do not have to assume the full qualitative notion of the affective arrangement, but can restrict their scope to selected dimensions, or focus on different elements of an arrangement sequentially during the research process. Reckoning with an affective arrangement within empirical research can take the form of an orientating blueprint which might be coarse-grained and selective, with details being filled in as new data emerges. The research process takes the form of moving back and forth between arrangement sketches and their correction and elaboration in the light of new material.

The best-case scenario for the interdisciplinary study of affect is that these two methodological tracks stay closely aligned. Conceptual elucidations of affective arrangements will be more potent when informed by empirical research about the constellations in question and about their various components and modes of composition. Empirical work, in turn, will be less prone to reductionism or simplification when it keeps reckoning with complex and oftentimes unique constellations that may exceed what can, at present, be established by empirical methods – and sometimes also that which “makes sense” in conventional ways. With “affective arrangement” we have a rich conceptual template that has a foot each within the qualitative and the quantitative, without being split-up artificially. This is a key characteristic of what, in the present volume, is glossed as *work on the concept* as a methodology for the study of affect and emotion: the crafting of concepts that provide dual service, that is, they work as heuristics suited for wide-ranging application, but also as generative templates for articulation and explication within ongoing research and academic writing.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2008). Some preliminary remarks on the founding gestures of the “new materialism.” *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(1), 23–39.
- Althusser, L. (1970). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation. In: *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press. (Original work published in 1970.)
- Anderson, B. (2014). *Encountering affect: Capacities, apparatuses, conditions*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Angerer, M.-L. (2017). *Ecology of affect*. Lüneburg: meson press.
- Ayata, B., & Harders, C. (2018). “Midān moments”: Conceptualizing space, affect and political participation on occupied squares. In: B. Röttger-Rössler & J. Slaby (Eds.), *Affect in relation: Families, places, technologies* (pp. 115–133). New York: Routledge.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Buchanan, I. (2015). Assemblage theory and its discontents. *Deleuze Studies*, 9(3), 382–392.
- Chow, R. (2012). *Entanglements, or transmedial thinking about capture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- DeLanda, M. (2006). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1972.)
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1986). *Kafka: Towards a minor literature* (D. Polan, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1975.)
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1980.)
- Foucault, M. (1980). The confession of the flesh. In: C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 194–228). New York: Pantheon Books. (Original work published in 1977.)
- Goffman, E. (1983). The interaction order. *American Sociological Review*, 48(1), 1–17.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Kasmani, O. (2017). Audible spectres: The sticky shia sonics of Sehwan. *History of Emotions – Insights into Research*, October 2017. <https://doi.org/10.14280/08241.54>
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marx, K. (1973). *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy* (M. Nicolaus, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Mühlhoff, R., & Schütz, T. (2017). Verunsichern, Vereinnahmen, Verschmelzen. Eine affekttheoretische Perspektive auf Immersion. *Working Paper SFB 1171 Affective Societies* 05/17. Retrieved from: http://edocs.fu-berlin.de/docs/receive/FUDOCS_series_000000000562
- Mühlhoff, R., & Slaby, J. (2018). Immersion at work: Affect and power in post-Fordist work cultures. In: B. Röttger-Rössler & J. Slaby (Eds.), *Affect in relation: Families, places, technologies* (pp. 155–174). New York: Routledge.
- Nail, T. (2017). What is an assemblage? *SubStance*, 46(1), 21–37.
- Nietzsche, F. (2002). *Beyond good and evil* (J. Norman, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published in 1886.)
- Schmidgen, H. (1997). *Das Unbewusste der Maschinen. Das Maschinenvokabular bei Guattari, Deleuze und Lacan*. München: W. Fink.
- Schüll, N. D. (2014). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Seyfert, R. (2012). Beyond personal feelings and collective emotions: Toward a theory of social affect. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(6), 27–46.
- Slaby, J., Mühlhoff, R., & Wüschner, P. (2017). Affective arrangements. *Emotion Review*. Prepublished October–20–2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073917722214>
- Wilson, E. A. (2015). *Gut feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.