

Structures of Feeling and the Popular

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My interest here lies in how the popular constitutes structures of feeling, a concept developed by Raymond Williams but never fully developed. I believe a lot can be gained by reading structures of feeling into recent developments in affect theory, a field that has emerged after Williams wrote his article on structures of feeling and after he passed away. I will first elucidate what structures of feeling are, in particular in relation to affect theory, before I turn to what structures of feeling can tell us about the popular. This discussion of the popular as structures of feeling attempts to suggest the complexity of the popular, its constantly changeable nature, as well as the tension between the popular and what I will designate the elite. I finish off with some thoughts on further avenues of research.

Considering Williams' general preference for specificity, his concept of structures of feeling stands out as a strangely vague and ambiguous term. At the same time, it is a term he uses across a number of works. Most clearly engaged with in his *Marxism and Literature*, Williams suggests the word experience as a substitute for feeling, yet chooses not to change the phrase, because experience suggests “pastness” which goes against Williams' express argument that structures of feeling are “lived and felt” (132). Using another set of terms developed by Williams, we can say that structures of feeling are emergent, rather than dominant or residual.

Another way of trying to understand Williams, is to divide the concept, which is a compound, into its two nouns: ‘structures’ and ‘feeling’. Williams proposal that we are dealing with “impulse, restraint and tone” (132) suggests to me that structures are internal to

texts. That is to say, structures are a matter of narrative form, syntax, diction and so forth. As Williams himself makes clear, structures of feeling are to be found in and across texts and artistic expressions. While on the surface there appears to be a degree of overlap between structures of feeling and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, they are in fact opposites in the sense that habitus and cultural capital are external to texts, while structures of feeling are internal, ways of engaging with something intangible and emergent.

So, let us turn to Williams' concept of feeling, which is related to experience but not identical because feeling is open and emergent. Williams points out that feeling is a matter of “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132). That Williams urges us to consider the affective dimensions of literature in 1977 (and technically earlier, since structures of feeling stems back from the late 1950s) is quite remarkable, since one of the most influential schools of criticism at the time, the New Critics, had denounced a reader's emotional response to a text in Wimsatt and Beardsley's “The Affective Fallacy”. Williams in no way fits into the two main divergent strands from New Criticism (structuralism and reader-response), which is why it is so interesting that he opens up for an affective approach. It might also begin to explain why he struggles to define and articulate the concept more clearly -- the vocabulary did not exist.

If we look at affect theory as it exists now, the cultural-philosophical version is generally defined as a pre-subjective, bodily response that is autonomous, outside of our conscious control. To say that affect is autonomous is not to say it is outside experience, but rather that affect feedforwards to our conscious experience. In the words of William Connolly, affect colors our perception. Because affect is pre-subjective or pre-personal, it is often also regarded as collective rather than individual. In other words, affect describes how atmospheres or cultural moods emerge on a pre-reflective level that has relatively little to do with meaning but everything to do with how it feels to be alive.

Understood in this way, structures of feeling are atmospheres or cultural moods that

circulate in a given era and are primarily accessible, or what we might call palpable, through art.

Hence, we need to look at art internally rather than solely externally. Aesthetic changes register cultural changes before we are fully cognizant of them.

Significantly, feelings and affects matter mostly in what they do, rather than what they are. In fact, we can argue that the predominant trait of affects and feelings is that they are actions and that we must pay more attention to their performativity than their ontology. Williams remains helpful and clarifies that structures of feeling “exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action” (132). In a way, this is a surprising statement, since we might wonder how literature and other arts can both put pressures on us and limit our very experience.

Turning to later developments in affect theory makes Williams’ argument clearer. Let us divide the issue into two: palpable pressures and limits to experience and action. If we rephrase palpable pressures to argue that literature touches us, provokes feelings in us, then Williams’ argument appears more straightforward. Surely we all have affective responses to art. Some sentences are simply beautifully phrased. I am myself partial to the following sentence: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (Gibson 9). I have no capacity to visualize this striking image, yet the apocalyptic tone alongside the confluence of natural and technological objects resonate with me and remains one of the few opening lines of a novel that I remember. Another, more nostalgic, example would be “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (Tolkien 1). Admittedly, this sentence resonates largely because of the larger world suggested by this sentence and so works on a cognitive level as much as on an affective level. Be that as it may, I think we can all find sentences that resonate with us and as a consequence intuitively recognize that art does indeed touch us, i.e. exert palpable pressures on us. Williams in no way indicates that these pressures are negative by definition; they might as easily be pleasurable like a massage.

Yet this does not explain how art limits our experience and action. First of all, if we

concede that experience is the basis for action, we can reduce the question to a matter of how experience is constrained, since we cannot act without experience. On an immediate level, then, we can argue that since we are not in control of our affective responses but are instead the result of them, the exertion of one feeling over another constitutes in and of itself a limitation to experience. Simply put, if a novel makes us feel elated, we do not feel melancholy, for instance, or anger or any other feeling. I know this is a gross simplification since any novel is a cluster of feelings and we inevitably feel more than one thing from reading a novel. Yet the argument still holds in the way a novel elicits one range of feelings rather than other ranges. Of course, any given range of feelings is simply what we expect to find when reading literature, and cannot truly be said to constitute a problematic limitation to experience.

What is far more disconcerting is the idea that literature and art can somehow restrict experience. Again, we should keep in mind that Williams speaks of feeling as collective, rather than individual. What literature does is thus to give a voice to certain issues, concerns, and affects and not others. In this way, our collective experience is limited because some issues are simply not articulated in cultural forms.

But there is also the possibility that a given period's structures of feeling simply do not express the concerns of a given collective and that they either feel overlooked and misrepresented, or have to produce their own form of literature, in order to produce structures of feeling that resonate for them. Any number of marginalized groups may thus feel "out of sync" with the emerging structures of feeling, because they are not part of those structures. African-American experience is one example that springs easily to mind and a whole range of artistic movements and forms can be viewed as ways of producing structures of feeling that register their experience.

However, for now I wish to limit myself to issues of the popular and it seems clear to me that Williams employs structures of feeling to suggest the not-yet-named shifts and transitions within a given period, locating it in a feeling that remains systematic and given

material form as recognizable structures. There are of course multiple, competing, and complementary structures of feeling during any given period and there are also texts that express more clearly and pertinently what issues are at stake. Williams does not address that issue at all in his “Structures of Feeling” article, yet he does address issues of relevance, literary tradition and the difference between symptom and new literary formations.

In what is essentially a review of a novel, Williams discusses the purpose of practical criticism and the importance of distinguishing between works that are symptomatic of a given period and those that break new ground. He states that

We look, in each generation, not only for those works of original thought or imagination by which our immediate literary tradition will be formed, but also for works of an inferior kind which by their very lack of individual quality are in a sense characteristic: novels which consolidate an achieved territory or exploit a registered feeling; general works which represent the impact, on an ordinary articulate mind, of the medley of contemporary voices. (Williams, “The New Party Line?” cited in Matthews 187)

Now, I really do not like this quote, although I recognize its significance. I do not appreciate Williams’ term “inferior” since it brings in the supposed superiority of one kind of writing over another. I also dislike his phrase “lack of individual quality” since so much literary fiction, contemporary or otherwise, appears incredibly generic to me. I do like his argument that these works are characteristic of a given period or generation, alongside the way these works consolidate achieved territory or exploit registered feelings. So I am going to push aside any evaluation of whether works are superior or inferior, have individual qualities or not, and instead focus on the far more interesting aspect of works consolidating and registering feelings.

From this perspective, we can argue that some works are formative and groundbreaking because they attempt to articulate pre-emergent feelings. These works

become canonical because they are the first works to articulate new sensibilities. These works become significant and exemplary of a given period in the way that they are before their times. To some extent, they may also participate in the production of a given period's structures of feeling, simply because they become trailblazers. These works that articulate new sensibilities might very well make a splash and be hugely talked about, but it is very often part of their characteristic that they are more talked about than engaged with. They are important, influential, but not popular.

I propose that we may call this form of cultural expression elite culture. Such elite culture carries plenty of cultural capital and symbolic power, particularly the ability to actually sense and understand the emergent structures of feeling. Although I earlier argued that Bourdieu's field of cultural production is not to be confused with structures of feeling, since the field is external to works while structures are internal, we should recognize that sensibilities are molded within a given habitus and that some elite works may make little sense to people who have not learned how to articulate and sense such works properly. Also, the use of the word elite here should not be understood to map exactly on to other conceptions of the elite, as in the wealthiest parts of society. Instead, I mean to invoke someone highly specialized.

What we also look for, as Williams argues, are works that are characteristic of a period, works that consolidate and exploit a registered feeling. Whether or not these works are inferior or not, they differ in the way they do not participate in producing new structures of feeling but rather reinforce registered feelings. The popular, then, is that which expresses and renders visible registered structures of feeling. Not necessarily only the dominant feelings but all the feelings that have been articulated. The popular is therefore not necessarily popular in the sense of being enjoyed by many. The popular is, however, of the collective and for the people.

The popular renders feelings in material forms that allow us to better understand the preoccupations of a given period. That is to say, the popular makes palpable the pressures and

limitations, as well as the resources, that we all have available to us. As opposed to elite culture, then, the popular stands as that which allows us to engage with how we feel. That is to say, the popular is a registered feeling and not an emergent feeling. Rather than give shape to what is to come, the popular engages with what is. No period can be said to be unified in what it is, so a range of registered feelings are always available for consumption. What matters for the popular is that the works produce what Miriam Hansen has called mimetic innervation: “an affectively charged, eccentric perception” (151). Hansen’s argument (which she takes from Walter Benjamin and extends) is twofold. One, that we are engaged bodily with those works. Two, that the feeling is shared with others, that this is not a solitary experience but a collective one.

By its very nature, then, the popular cannot hold any real amount of cultural capital or symbolic power, since everyone has equal access to the popular. In no way should this be taken to mean that the popular is insignificant. Rather, the popular is what ties people together affectively and allows for the building of communities and cultures across and between other formations. Because the popular registers in affective form how things are and how we feel about them, we have an incredible intimacy with those works. They often matter more to us than they “should” given any kind of rational explanation, but they are important because they give expression to how we feel.

Another characteristic of the popular is that as soon as we have registered and engaged with a feeling, we move on to the next. That is to say, the popular moves and adapts quickly, since its purpose is not to produce lasting works of eternal value, whatever that might be. Rather, the popular serves far more immediate concerns and as soon as we tire of one thing, another emerges in the same process. This shifting nature of the popular works through affective swirls that ebb and flow constantly but explain why fads rise and fall quickly: they serve a purpose and when that purpose has been served, they fall away in favor of new fads.

We should be careful here not to confuse individual and collective levels. The popular

works on and for the collective and so we move through cycles and fads constantly. Yet as individuals, we will rarely give up the works that resonate deeply with us, no matter if others find them old-fashioned or banal. Nor do we necessarily respond with equal enthusiasm to all popular cycles but only incorporate those that innervate us. These individual responses are not uninteresting but they are impossible to theorize because they depend too much on biographical information and individual articulation.

What matters for us, here, is how the popular responds to changes in cultural moods. Again, these changes are structures of feeling that are internal to the works in question and so allow us to understand what moves people in a given period. That is to say, whether we look at historical or contemporary works, they provide us with a sense of what was or is important for a particular collective. Popular works, as opposed to other historical sources, provide far more insight into the felt experience of a period. This is not to discount historical work, but simply to argue that the popular allows for particular insights that are difficult to get at in other ways.

So, I have shown how the popular works as structures of registered feelings. Popular works open up avenues into felt and lived experience, in ways that are not otherwise accessible. I have argued that feeling is in part internal to a work and that feelings register collectively, rather than solely individually.

However, there are a number of things that I have not explained. For instance, I have not explained why some people like old popular forms, whether we are talking about the picaresque or hot jazz, Jane Austen or Beethoven. I have no immediate answer and more research is clearly necessary. I would suggest a complex network of nostalgia, being out of sync in a non-pejorative sense, and the process of distinction as being part of the explanation. There is possibly also a degree of resistance or rejection inherent in feeling more connected to previous periods instead of one's own.

Also, no work belongs solely to the popular or the elite, but there is a constant tension and oscillation between the two ends of the same continuum. A given work may change its

position, both within the cultural field but also in terms of how it speaks to people. A local example. Few would argue that Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* is a popular play, but in Denmark it became popular in the 1960s, due to casting a popular actress (Bodil Udsen), who was well-known primarily for popular revues. Another example. On the surface, Jennifer Marie Brissett's *Elysium* is a love story set in a post-apocalyptic world narrated by an artificial intelligence — in other words, standard science fiction fare. Yet the broken sentences that disintegrate into nonsense, the fluid names, identities, and genders of the characters, alongside the Chinese box focalizations make the novel much closer to experimental metafiction. And while Brissett was a finalist for the Locus Award and received a Philip K. Dick Award special citation, this has not catapulted her to the bestseller lists, nor has she received any particular recognition in the wider SF fan community. Simply put, her novel is too complex to be straightforwardly popular, but instead participates in both the popular and the elite.

What this leaves us with is the understanding that the popular is a complex tangle. While there is plenty of room for analyses of how the popular is culturally produced, a different way of viewing the popular is to examine what it articulates. The best way to do that is to look at how the popular shifts and transforms and what concerns the popular articulates. What I am interested in right now are the changing forms of film and media. For that reason, my paper in a week and a half will be an investigation of contemporary found footage laptop-based horror movies and how they articulate issues of privacy, intimacy, and being connected in an age of social media.

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