

THE PRODUCTION OF AFFECT

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH BUTLER

BY JAIME DEL VAL

In May 2000 the journal Reverso, edited by Jaime del Val, issued its first volume with an inaugural Spanish translation of an essay by Judith Butler, who is member of the editorial board of the journal. Eight years later Butler and del Val met in the context of a group of seminars given by Butler at CENDEAC, in Murcia, Spain. The following interview was conducted on 28 May 2008 at CENDEAC before the 3rd seminar, "Critique, discrepancy, violence." The interview was transcribed from the audio and video recording by Jaime del Val. We thank CENDEAC for the generous support.

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Jaime del Val: First of all, thank you very much for accepting this invitation. I was very interested in focusing this conversation on questions around the production of affect. I could see this theme structured around three main parts: how can we articulate critical frameworks for how bodies are produced in terms of affect? How are these frameworks crucial for understanding power in late capitalism? And lastly, what horizons of political agency might we design through this kind of framework?

I was particularly affected, so to speak, yesterday [during the seminar] by your allusion to the notion of relational body, or of the body as a relational and affective body because this relates to what I'm working on at the moment also.

So, in particular, I wonder how far we can actually understand the body as this multiplicity of affective relationalities while it is uncertain where we can draw the frontier between the I and the other. Right now, for example, as I am projecting myself towards you and towards other uncertain directions through my sounds, my gestures, my affective vectors, where is the body? Is it only in that [intensity] that goes in your direction or in other directions, or is it in the exchange itself, the ways in which you are also embodying it? Is the body in the process by which these affective vectors are embodied reciprocally in a productive manner, such that you produce new kinds of affective coordinates when you perceive my gestures, my sounds? Where would the body be? Is it in-between, in the feedback of relations? And if so, then maybe we can see any frontier of an I, of a you, as a discrete territorialization of that process, but perhaps the process exceeds such territorialisation at every moment. Would you be able to relate to this account that I'm giving?

Judith Butler: At a certain level, yes, of course I relate to what you are describing, and I can affirm it. But it does make me pause and think about the place of abstraction in our descriptions of bodily encounter, territory, exchange and the rest. For instance, I

probably seek recourse more to Merleau-Ponty than to Deleuze on these matters, although I have some questions with both of their positions. I'm not sure we can begin full phenomenological descriptions of the body, boundaries, and territory outside matrices of power, outside questions of gender, outside situated placements in cultural and economic worlds. So, it may be that under certain conditions the body exceeds its territorial boundary all the time, but it also may be that we have to think about ways in which that territorial boundary is regulated under certain conditions, such that the exceeding of oneself becomes more difficult to do. I worry that if we describe bodily territories and excesses at a purely structural or purely abstract level, we can't begin to look at situations of restriction, coercion, greater agency or lesser agency, and relationalities that have differing degrees of reciprocity, subjugation, and asymmetry. All these issues involve some recourse to power and to power differentials as they're being worked out at the boundary of the body -- on that boundary, and through that boundary.

J.d.V.: Yes, I think I have the same problem with some of Deleuze's discourse, the degree of abstraction. So I totally agree on that. We maybe also agree that the body somehow exceeds the very power matrixes with which it is entangled. This is something which you mention in some of your texts. I remember a passage in *Excitable Speech*, where you say that the body rhetorically exceeds every speech act it also performs. I always relate that, for instance, to studies in non-verbal communication, to how far all my gestures and sounds exceed any bounded or normative meaning production. How much do my affective vectors defy the frameworks of interpretation and meaning, and where are these vectors then going? Are they just lines of escape, or are they producing other kinds of stratifications? Perhaps that would be my next question. Because I have a background in multidisciplinary arts practices – I'm a musician, a performer and movement artist, a visual artist, and I also produce theory, though not based in the academy...

J.B.: Good.

J.d.V.: (Laughs) Because of this, I often relate to different embodied forms of thinking. I wonder about the ways that a musician may think, or a dancer, or a painter. What kind of thinking of the body is going on there that radically defies reduction to the parameters of verbal language? I don't think that one can reduce the way dance works or the way music works to the ways we analyse verbal language.

If so, however, that doesn't mean that music and dance, and so on, are not regulated or are not generating specific kinds of stratifications, or if we want to use the Deleuzian term, territorialisations. But what kind of territorialisations are they producing? My question, then, would be: apart from there being modes of affect that exceed territorialisation, what different modes of territorialisations are there that are not necessarily reducible to discursive frameworks, even to performativity, for example? And how can that help us understand how power works through sounds, images or gestures, as they proliferate in late capitalist contexts? How are we invaded by gestures, videos, music videos or videogames, by all these non-verbal forms? What is their logic, would be my question. Are they operating according to discursive

frameworks, as in the performativity of language, or are they working according to a different logic?

J.B.: Well, I have to say, you're working within a specific framework and you're working it out in some interesting ways. And in a way, your questions are asking me to enter your frame, and I'm learning about your frame as you pose your questions. So I'm trying to figure out where to enter exactly. I mean, your project is your project, and it seems like it's an important one.

Let me just take a couple of steps back. I'm not sure I can be useful here, but I think that affects are always interpreted bits of experience. I think Nietzsche actually says this in *The Will to Power*, where he writes that affect is a bit of experience that's already been worked over, it's already been worked on by genealogies of interpretation. In other words, if I feel rage, or grief, or desire, or envy – any number of things we might understand as affect, or even emotional energies that are less identifiable than that – they come to me already formed and framed in certain ways. Now, the forming and the framing don't have to take place through discourse, if we understand discourse to be verbal language. But I think we ought not to understand discourse solely as verbal language. I'm using the term "modes of interpretation" here to leave open whether it happens through written/spoken language or through language systems and discursive histories that are not reducible to any of their spoken or written instances. We could talk, for example, about sign systems that would include choreography or music. But I'm using the term "modes of interpretation" in order to avoid a commitment to the primacy of language.

I do think that we have to think very carefully about the different senses and different motilities; for instance, sound and smell and touch have different histories than movement, or even verbal movement, so that would be important to distinguish. But my sense is that, yes, affects do come to us as worked over bits of experience, but they're also being worked over and reworked as we live them in the present. I don't think any of us can be purely voluntaristic in relationship to the affects we undergo. Very often affect can impose limits on the sense of being a deciding or willing I, an I who decides. I don't decide my affect. I'll never decide my affect, though I may make decisions in the midst of affect, and those decisions may well help to reshape whatever affect I undergo. Let's say we are in a political movement and we have shared rage against a given injustice. We are going to be interpreting our rage in the conversations we have, we are going to be focusing our rage as we decide to take certain actions, we might, then, after certain actions have been completed, go party and dance, and that would signal a certain change or complexity in the affective situation, one that is the direct result of an interpretation and practice.

I don't know about the terms 'invasion,' 'being invaded...'

J.d.V.: Yes, I was using them in a rather loose way...

J.B.: No, it's OK, it gives me a chance to think. I do think there are ways in which we are impinged upon by affects that are already in the works, that others have and, even unknowingly, communicate; we find ourselves in the grip of an affect that someone has had before us, or that's being transitively communicated to us. So perhaps there's something about that experience we could call invasion or impingement, or maybe a

kind of transitivity, where I'm acted upon by someone else's emotional world. But I think it's another question altogether to think about how markets do that, or how the world of advertising does that, or how visual and aural environments are organized to maximize consumer seduction. We can talk about that if you want.

J.d.V.: Yes, certainly that's one of the issues. I appreciated your comment on the senses and their architectures, their given architectures, genealogies and histories. Would you say that there are no universal sensory organizations but that they relate to certain anatomies, cartographies or territorialisations of the body that have built disciplinary landscapes?

For instance, in the transmedia contexts in which I work, I produce interactive systems that generate specific new relations between the aural, the visual, gestures and so on. These relations are some of the key issues in various media arts as well as in Human Computer Interaction (HCI), which is one of the big industries currently working on formalizing the body and producing parameters for analysing our non-verbal continuum in very discrete terms. In such a context, my experience is that it's possible to reconfigure sensory anatomy. There are many studies at work now that deepen our understanding of the ways in which perception is always cross-modal. It's never just about seeing; when you see you also associate hearing, etc. So I think there are very interesting ways in which one can question a given sensory anatomy. The problem is, of course, that it's not easy, because you have to confront the whole political economy of the dominant anatomy.

So yes, the issue of the market and how it works was what I was addressing yesterday with my question in the seminar: the issue of deregulated zones in which markets operate. What I meant was that we have very few critical frameworks to identify the flow of visual, aural, gestural forms that we embody all the time. And yet, the market works very much through this proliferation of forms, which I see as distinct from ideas, ideologies, or whatever constitutes a subject. So on the one hand, we have what I would call almost a fiction of the State, the Subject, the Citizen, Democracy, and so on, all of which give us the impression that we really are minds that work solely through ideas. Then, underneath that, there is a whole process of embodiment of forms and gestures, and we have no defense against that process because we are unconscious of how that operates. It's an extremely implicit process, in the sense of implicit censorship, as you've written about, or of implicit power, as conceived by Foucault. It's about entirely new mechanisms of implicit power that we are unconscious of because we believe that it is only through ideas, physical manipulation or torture that we can be influenced. But that's another realm we have not yet critically categorized. I don't know if I'm being very clear about what I mean.

J.B.: Let me suggest something. Of course you're right that there's a building up of affect or, as you put it, a building up of a certain architectural discipline of the senses that happens in very different ways culturally. There's no universal logic here, I'm quite sure. And yet it seems to me that if we talk about an unconscious formation, or a way in which, broadly speaking, a culture or different disciplinary apparatuses work upon us unconsciously, then I'm not sure we can say we have no defenses against that. In a way, the conscious 'I' is a defense against it, in the sense of refusal. Defense is an

interesting term because to be defended against the unconscious world is precisely what the ego does. The ego is defined by its defenses against the unconscious.

At the same time, I want to suggest that what we call unconscious does come through; it has indirect ways of being expressed, as a kind of refraction, in a refractive form. We find ourselves acting in certain ways, and we do not know precisely why. We are aware of limits to our self-understanding, but to be aware of that is to be aware that one is constituted by something that precedes us, that is greater than us. But it also means that in certain kinds of movement -- dreams and sounds, the song I find myself singing, the way I find myself walking, the means through which I dance or hold still -- one is aware of something working on oneself that emerges neither from a conscious experience nor is quite understood by a conscious reflection. That does not mean that what is working on me comes from "an unconscious self" but only that I have been affected in ways that I could not and do not fully understand. What it is I have taken in, what it is I have absorbed, or what has impinged upon me in ways are not fully chosen. And it's only because I act them out in some way, or because I find myself acting out something that affects, possesses or seizes me, that I become aware of this process and can start to work with it in some way. But to work with it is not the same as overcoming its opacity once and for all.

We can consider improvisation here. Where does it come from? Why do I respond in one way rather than another? What do I find myself doing in that situation? All of those scenes where we act, knowing or not knowing that the conscious 'I' is not fully the ground of that action, are moments where we are working with the material that works upon us. And that's a different kind of agency. It's not the agency of the conscious 'I,' but we might understand it as a threshold where an unconscious and a conscious work together. This is why I resist the idea that there is a conscious 'I' that is somehow cut off from an unconscious one. I think it is precisely those moments of finding oneself seized by a set of cultural signifiers and moving, acting, in some way to rework them that the notion of agency crosses the unconscious and the conscious.

J.d.V: What troubles me in relation to agency and the nonconscious operation of power is the way in which I find myself or other bodies reproducing these forms without much awareness of the fact that they are not innocent. I mean, no technology is innocent; we can, for example, trace the genealogy of every component of this microphone and work out its lineage according to certain market driven forces. We can do the same with any video, music, and choreography that we see and hear in the streets. What also troubles me is the way that these technologies are given to us. Specific ways of generating public space through commercial music, videos or ubiquitous publicity is intensively market driven; it's produced in a very specific way, of which I don't think we are always aware. So what troubles me is how far that unawareness goes, how far a façade of democracy or of neoliberal "freedom" hides this process of assimilation in market driven processes.

J.B.: Yes. I'm sure you are right that under conditions of neoliberalism and liberal democracy we are treated generally as if our desires simply emerge with ourselves, even our freedom, and that the market simply appeals to those pre-given wishes and choices: this is your desire, this is your style, this is your individuality, here buy this product, or live in this home, or conform to this profile of the consuming subject. I

mean, there's no question: we don't have an adequate framework for understanding how desires are formed and, particularly, for how desire is formed on the model of consumption. It's a very interesting and problematic issue. I'm sure you're right that we are very much unaware of the ways in which markets act on us to produce and craft both desire and aversion in different ways. But it would also be interesting to know when the market misses its mark, when desire takes a direction that no marketer planned.

So yes, one needs a criticism of that. But my worry is that we ought not to think that we can make all of the unconscious conscious, and I don't want to think that the market alone is what is acting on us, because that would give the market a monolithic agency. I agree that the market has enormous power to craft desire, but interestingly, the market sometimes contradicts itself. And capitalism does because it works both by augmenting our desires for things and for specific kinds of things, but it also works to restrict our desires and even to restrict the imaginary of our desires.

So, it may be that there are a lot of mixed messages in what we are calling the unconscious domain, and it may be, too, that the strategies that seek to illuminate the problem of the market at the level of crafting unconscious desire would have to see what is incoherent in the market itself. Does the market produce conflicting or incoherent desires? Does it actually make us uniform, or does it fail to make us uniform? Where does it fail in its processes of interpellation?

J.d.V.: And where does it succeed?... We don't have a lot of time left, so let's move on to the issue of what kinds of political agency we could come up with through articulating these kinds of frameworks. Firstly and briefly: you have often addressed questions of the matter of bodies and how it is that that matter comes to be constituted. Matter can be analyzed in terms of a surface effect and sedimented strata of relations and affects, but at the same time, as a territorialisation effect, as an effect of certain technologies of representation, of which the camera is a key. From the XVth century, since the *camera obscura*, the camera has become the paradigm for objectivity and representation. How have we embodied that technology, how do we see the world through the camera, the photographic camera, the video camera, etc.? And how has that become the paradigm to produce the anatomy of the body and an effect of bounded surface and fixed materiality?

J.B.: I guess there are two things I would say. Yes, the body is produced as an effect; sometimes it's a surface effect and sometimes it's the effect of depth. However, if we think about how cameras are used now internally – to probe for cancers, or to check your heart-valves, or to see what your fetus is like – then there are some ways in which technology involves the body in questions of depth, interiority and surface in new ways. And I think that's also important for thinking about sexuality, since sexuality rarely takes place only on the surface. I mean, it really does involve the question of what is and isn't surface; it negotiates the boundary between what is surface and what is depth, what is exteriority and what is interiority.

The body can be an effect of the processes that you describe but it is also effecting, it is also actively reworking. The body works over the way in which it has been worked over. So what I would want to ask you back is, where, or what, is the active dimension of the body? I oppose the more deterministic accounts that

understand the body to be produced by social processes that are part of the unconscious and that claim it is nothing but the effect of those processes. The body is an effect that is itself effecting, and that hiatus, that interval between being acted on and acting on something, is extremely important for the thinking of agency or the thinking of freedom.

J.d.V.: Yes, when speaking about the body, I was referring more specifically to the materiality of bodies.

J.B.: Yes, but even materiality – the matter of the body – is in my view a process of materialisation, and that process does not come to an end in matter. It takes place through time; we can't actually think matter without thinking about temporality and without thinking about matter as that which is instated again and again, as that which continues to be made over time, at the level of biology – even the regeneration of cells – as well as at the level of signification, which is bound up with the reproduction of the body's matter – the process of materialization. So, for me, it's not the case that these processes of materialisation end in producing matter as an effect. It is rather the case that matter as an effect has to reconstitute itself, and it affects other kinds of matters; and in that dynamic process is the process of materialisation. Matter is a nodal point in the midst of materialisation.

J.d.V.: When I was saying matter as an effect maybe I was not completely accurate. I was almost wanting to say matter as a kind of fiction. So would you say that we can bypass or even do away with the concept of matter if we attempt to think the body in terms of intensities and affects, or would you say that we need the concept of matter for there to be a "body that *matters*"? I mean, even in the context of contemporary molecular physics there is the question: is it matter or energy, particles or waves, that is underlying our perception of bounded bodies?

J.B.: Well, I think we have to come up with a dynamic conception of matter. For me it's not a question of energy versus matter, but rather: what are the energetics by which matter is replicated and reproduced and how do they open up new possibilities for materialisation? If you say it's a fiction, then I want to know what the opposite of fiction is. Fact? Or truth? Or is the opposite of fiction the loss of possibility? I mean, perhaps to say it's a fiction is not a falsifying move altogether; maybe it's a fiction without which we can't live. Perhaps fictions have something necessary and true about them.

J.d.V.: A political fiction, so to speak, an instrument of specific regimes of power that demand this notion of materiality to operate, to define, to territorialize.

J.B.: Ok, so I'll say that, for me, matter is not a substrate on which power regimes act, nor is it a fictional effect of a set of power regimes. Rather, it is a nodal point, maybe even a kind of provisional moment of *stasis*, in a dynamic process of materialisation. So no matter what relations of power are brought to bear upon it, that power cannot work without that power being materialised through it. That power is actually

dependent on that process of materialisation, and it also can be subverted precisely there. Maybe it's a slightly different view from yours.

J.d.V.: Would you relate materialisation to morphogenesis, to the ongoing emergence of form?

J.B.: Yes, and I'm probably a queer Aristotelian in this way, in the sense that I think that form structures the process of materialisation, that we always get materialisation taking place in and through specific kinds of forms.

J.d.V.: Ok. So, to start wrapping up, we could consider different kinds of political agency by rethinking the body as an affective body. For example, let's consider the system of law: perhaps one could articulate new legal figures through which we analyze the ways in which publicity impacts on our affects and desires and then maybe we can regulate publicity. However, I would not necessarily propose generating a new regime of law. I think you've often addressed the issue of not producing a new regime of exclusion that substitutes the prior regimes of exclusion. But how can we produce a politics of uncertainty? I think you were calling it *politics of discomfort*, or was it Foucault who called it like that?

J.B.: Yes, I cited him.

J.d.V.: So I wonder how far we can or can't use the same "tools" of the system, like producing laws. Not in the sense of producing a new regime, but of destabilising the existing regime.

On the other hand, how far can we go with transforming the technologies of representation, like the camera? How far could one destabilize the actual anatomy of the body, and therefore sex and gender, through perception, through perceiving in new ways, new kinds of body? Again, not in order to produce a new stable, bounded body, a new anatomy, but rather, to consider a kind of anti-anatomy, a kind of fluid form, or rather a formless body that destabilizes the given forms? I'm wondering about possibilities of an open kind of politics, one that is not attempting to reinstate existing regimes by only opening up their circles of exclusion.

J.B.: Well, it's hard for me, you know, because I feel you are...

J.d.V.: I'm driving you into my terrain...

J.B.: Well, it's your programme and so in a way I feel I should be interviewing you, so that you could tell me. I just have a couple of cautionary responses, as much as I really appreciate what you're trying to think through. One is that that I'm not sure that destabilisation is good in itself, and I'm not sure that producing the new is sufficient. I'm not sure that those are strong enough normative aspirations for whatever political project we might be thinking about. And, I guess when I think about the politics of the body I'm aware, for instance, of political debates about whether young girls should be prohibited from wearing the veil in public schools. On the one hand, there is an opposition to what is understood as an obligatory covering of the body, but certainly

the obligatory uncovering of the body in the name of “Western progress” is no less coercive. So I think these kinds of questions are probably at the centre of body politics right now. It’s a very interesting and incendiary issue.

Secondly, and you’re probably better equipped than I am to talk about them, are law and photography, which are important issues. I tend not to think that the law is a good way of producing new figures for bodily politics. I’m more fearful of the law as a strategic domain for politics because of its regulatory reach and disciplinary potential. I understand that there are many good reasons to use the law, but I’m not sure that it’s a generative or critical matrix for producing new forms of subjectivity. I know that can and does happen, and that it is possible to work with this effectively, even subversively, but I would not celebrate this fact. I’m more fearful of the potential violence of the law, as evidenced by my interest in Benjamin’s “A Critique of Violence,” for instance. I’m interested in what happens to the side of the law, what it is that the law neither prohibits nor allows, what happens to the side of the question of legal normativity.

There are all sorts of really extraordinary dimensions of photography. I think one reason why I’m struggling with Susan Sontag is to try to figure out what her virulent critique of photography was, and also what her continuing attraction to it was. And photography has also been enormously important for social movements, for instance if I think about the history of photography in the history of AIDS. If we consider what people were willing to show or how they could show it, or even what modes of relationality were possible to show. I’m thinking also of some recent photography I saw of a group of disabled people, many of whom had partial limbs or no limbs, in some pretty joyous interaction. And I’m thinking about how a photograph like one we would find in Diane Arbus’s work, say, may be a kind of freak photograph, but how there has also been an appropriation of photography for other purposes, purposes that have allowed for a rethinking of bodies in their relationality and actually challenge basic norms about what a human body ought to be or what ideal morphologies are. So I’m more hopeful about photography than I am about law as a venue for trying to open up less coercive conditions for the thinking of bodies in their relationality.

J.d.V: Would you say that we can have a coherent politics without contradictions, in the sense that we live in very complex circumstances that force us to multiply how we identify ourselves, how we pronounce ourselves, how we speak out in different ways? For example, the question of marriage for gay and lesbian people: is it really possible to have a non-contradictory, single position and say ‘no, I’m against marriage as a bourgeois heteropatriacal institution and therefore I will always state myself to be against marriage’? Or will it be coherent to say ‘yes’ to marriage in some contexts, because that will be more destabilizing for certain binary gender regimes, and in other contexts, to say ‘no’ to marriage for the reasons I previously mentioned?

J.B.: I think that given the terms by which we understand equality and justice, mainly derived from liberal political sources, then yes, why should marriage be an institution reserved exclusively for heterosexuals? That institution ought to be extended, just as a question of inclusiveness, a question of equality. But if we look at the normativity of social relations, we might ask instead: why are we caring about marriage, why should

marriage be the privileged focus of our social-political struggle? What we actually need are alternative views of kinship: we need housing for the elderly, we need different forms of intimacy, we need other notions of sociality that care for people who may well live outside of conjugal arrangements or normative families. Marriage might be one institution that addresses some of those basic needs, but there are many others, so why devote a movement to that, when it could be devoted to questions of health care, legal status or maybe some more urgent and even more visionary issues? Given that we live in a world in which there are established legal principles regarding equality, and we live in a world in which there are highly normative ideals of marriage, we have to do both things at once; it would be incoherent not to do both at once, even if that seems like a logical contradiction, if we take the two propositions separately, if we fail to understand the social and historical conditions under which this question emerges. We would be blinding ourselves to a part of the world if we would take one position at the expense of another. I mean, it's a dilemma for a movement; it's a dilemma, but it's not a contradiction. It's an open-ended dilemma: how do we argue for equality and how do we criticise those social norms that constrain in advance the kinds of equality we can imagine? We must do both, and we have to think together on how to do that.

J.d.V.: Thank you very much.

J.B.: Thank you.

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of numerous books, including *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), *Excitable Speech* (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), *Antigone's Claim* (2000), *Precarious Life* (2004), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Giving An Account of Oneself* (2005), and most recently, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (Seagull, 2007), a conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the state, citizenship and belonging. Her forthcoming book, *Frames of War* (Verso, 2009) continues the discussions on war, representation, and ethics that she began in *Precarious Life* and focuses as well on questions of violence, non-violence, sexual politics, and allied forms of resistance.

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