Texts, Affects and Teenagers: (im)Material Transmissions Across France and Ireland

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Abstract

This article examines the circulation of texts between people, spaces and cultural perspectives, addressing disparate mediums from virtual transmission, including social media channels; to physical or material transmission in public space(s). Central to the internationalised transmission of texts, the recent emergence and popularity of channels such as TikTok and Instagram have allowed for more innovative, creative and collaborative literary practices. Focusing on young publics in particular, we interrogate how "viral" transmissive practices can work to re-produce, re-appropriate, and re-interpret literary texts. This article also focuses on the affective experience of these transmissive textual practices, and how the (non-)human interactions can provoke affective and emotional reactions of those involved. It relies on affect theory and the concept of "networked affect" proposed by Paasonen, Hillis and Petit in an attempt to shed light on what may emerge between youth groups who engage with sharing and circulating texts. We investigate this concept using a case study of an international project carried out with young people in Rennes (FR) and Cork (IRE). It assesses the inter-cultural transmission of creative literary texts between two groups of teenagers, and the networked affects which emerge from it.

Keywords

Texts, Youth, Cross-cultural, Affect, Performance

In *Uses of Literature* (2008), literary critic Rita Felski argues that "reading is far from being a one-way street; while we cannot help but impose ourselves on literary texts, we are also, inevitably, exposed to them."[1] In this cat-and-mouse game of being-exposed-to and imposing-oneself-on a text, it seems that we are inevitably entangled with the texts that we read, write and engage with; whether we like it, or not.

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[1] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 3.

If we send, circulate or transmit a text, we are deeply and intricately involved in the material process itself. Our own agency, as humans, becomes entangled with that of others: firstly, with that of the text itself; and secondly, with that of the technical means we use to transmit or send said text. The human body, the non-human computer and the material text all become suddenly and inescapably linked. This same cyclical process repeats itself every time we send an email, a WhatsApp or a Facebook message; yet equally so when we share a literary text within a local book club, for example, or when we share a scientific article with an academic colleague. These stories, chats, essays, reviews, critiques and links all become interconnected, through the human and the non-human networks that we foster and fuel during this transmissive process. And as Felski underlines: as humans, we have both an effect *on* and are affected *by* these texts and their circulation, in whatever form this might take.

This may be a material paper form such as handwritten texts, or works that are typed and printed out, for instance. Or also in the immaterial form of electronic media, with texts on screens: Word documents, messages posted on social media platforms, emails, and so on. In this article, we differentiate between these two distinct forms of materiality, paying attention to the shift that can take place when moving from one to the other. So – we move texts, and texts move us. What kind of affective impact happens, then, when we circulate (im)material texts? What kind of emotional or physical state does one's body experience?

Tracing back to the etymology of the noun itself, "transmission," means "conveyance from one place to another," stemming from the Latin *trans* + *mittere,* meaning "send over or across."[2] This article seeks to examine the circulation (or sending across) of texts between people, spaces and cultural perspectives – and more specifically, within a Franco-Irish context. Drawing on affect theory, this article considers the affective impact of this very circulation. We shall approach this more specifically from a digital perspective, focusing on the notion of "networked affect" developed by scholars Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit in their 2015 book of the same name.[3]

The affective impact will be examined through the angle of my own doctoral research project: a participatory and cross-cultural exchange

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[2] "Transmission: Etymology, Origin and Meaning", Etymonline, acc. 21 April 2024, www.etymonline.com/word/transmission.

[3] Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit, eds., *Networked Affect* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015).

between young people, aged 15-18, living in France and Ireland. The ongoing project involves the virtual transmission of co-created literary texts and artistic works that selected groups of teenagers work on collectively, across the twinned Celtic cities of Rennes (Brittany) and Cork (Munster). This transmission takes place collaboratively, through both digital and in-person creative workshops, within an inner-city public high school in Rennes and a youth theatre organisation in Cork, *Graffiti Theatre Company*.[4] The project fosters an environment for co-creation between adolescents and assesses how two diverse groups can find common ground through shared artistic practices, based on common topics. Such practices include (but are not limited to) creative writing, theatre, and performance.

From the vantage point of affect theory, this article examines the types of transmission (material or immaterial) that can take place in this kind of creative research project. Rather than offering a mere analysis of the medium of exchange (or *how* texts are circulated between participating groups), this article instead draws on key ideas outlined by new materialists – allowing us to instead enter the realm of the "immaterial" transmission of the affect involved in these types of hands-on projects. The parameters of the new materialists' work remain rather wide, but the core idea lies in the paradigm shift toward a more material(ist) understanding of social and cultural life.[5] According to Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, the new materialisms are a form of "new metaphysics"[6] giving way to new resonances between old and new readings and engagements with academic texts and ideas. The new materialisms seek renewed, creative alternatives to critique, all while paying attention to the material world. It is within this theoretical framework that this article considers the affective impact of the (im)material transmission of texts, taking the Rennes-Cork exchange project as a case study.

The "Something Else Behind": Affect

Let us start by returning to the very action of transmission itself. Though tempting, we must refrain from sticking to the purely technical conditions of

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[4] "Graffiti – Every young person deserves to reach their full creative potential," Graffiti Theatre Company, acc. 6 February 2024, www.graffiti.ie/.

[5] Liedeke Plate, "New Materialisms," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature,* 31 March 2020, acc. 23 September 2024, www.oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1013.

[6] Rick Dolphjin and Iris Van der Tuin, "Introduction: What May I Hope For?" in *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies,* ed. Iris Van der Tuin and Rick Dolphjin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 13.

circulating texts, such as the what, how, where and when of these actions. As writers and readers, we often have a sense that there is something else *behind* these technical connections; yet it is somewhat tricky to express it with language. I instead try to offer a new approach here to the notion of literary transmission and delve further into the "something else behind": affect.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb "affect" as having an effect on something or someone, be it materially or emotionally.[7] The noun, also "affect," refers instead to a "feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus."[8] In critical scholarship, the affective turn emerged in the mid-1990s, following a growing interest in emotion and affect. It served as a means of counteracting – and also supplementing – the linguistic turn, in a bid to show that humans were more than semiotic beings.[9]

In line with Spinozian thought, affect is the body's capacity to affect and to be affected. In their seminal collection *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth argue that while it is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition, affect "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon."[10] Susanna Paasonen proposes that affect consists of the "intensities, sensations, and impressions created in encounters between and among people, online platforms, images, texts and computer technologies."[11] Likewise, Gregg and Seigworth state that "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds."[12]

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[7] "Affect (v.2), sense II.5", Oxford English Dictionary, acc. 12 September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3828633175.

[8] "Affect (*n.*), sense II.7", Oxford English Dictionary, acc. 12 September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4700697837.

[9] Two publications in particular paved the way for the affective turn: Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" (1995) – largely influenced by Spinoza's and Deleuze & Guattari's earlier work – and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick & Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" (1995), inspired by psychologist Tomkins' work.

[10] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

[11] Susanna Paasonen, "A Midsummer's Bonfire: Affective Intensities of Online Debate," in *Networked Affect,* ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015), 28.

[12] Gregg and Seigworth, 1.

In an analysis of the "pitfalls and potential"[13] of affect theory, Imogen Tyler describes affect as "by definition, unanalysable,"[14] attesting to its intangibility and immaterial nature. Other theorists have debated over the difference between affect and emotion. Relying on the earlier work of Massumi,[15] Tyler summarises the distinction between feeling, emotion and affect: "In short, feeling and emotion require a subject, and affect does not – it exceeds and disrupts the realm of subjective experience."[16] She also draws on the work of Eric Shouse,[17] who argued his case against this neat distinction, affirming instead that the very power of affect itself "lies in the fact of its unformed and unpredictable excess."[18]

Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed sees affect as a means of taking us "beyond conscious knowing,"[19] as she notes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004, 2014). She further describes it as a "matter of how we come into contact with objects and others."[20] It is worth noting that Ahmed's work, however, dates from 2004 (and 2014, 2nd edition), meaning this particular vision of affect predates the technological developments that continue to shape digital platforms today. We acknowledge this and wish to re-apply Ahmed's arguments to today's context (2024), by retaining Ahmed's idea of "coming into contact with" and addressing how this might take shape against the enriched digital landscape that now exists today. This idea of "coming into contact" might be with other individuals, with texts, or even with immaterial objects (such as virtual social platforms).

Literary attachments

From a literary perspective, affect undeniably connects us to the texts that we choose to read and engage with. As we come into contact with diverse genres

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[13] Imogen Tyler, "Methodological Fatigue and the Politics of the Affective Turn," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 88.

[14] Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis and Michael Petit, "Networks of Transmission: Intensity, Sensation, Value," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015), 5.

[15] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[16] Tyler, 88.

[17] Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," *Media/Culture Journal* 8, no. 6 (2005), https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443.

[18] Tyler, 88.

[19] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004; 2nd ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 207.

[20] Ahmed, 208.

and forms of texts, we are affected in a multitude of ways. Let us take the example of my own research project with young people in Cork and Rennes, whereby we see this affective impact first-hand during fieldwork. In our creative workshops, for instance, the facilitators and the young people may decide on using theatre as their chosen artistic medium for a given theme. The facilitators might propose a selection of theatrical works, in French and/ or English, as inspiration for the groups to begin working, before they move on to co-creating a piece of their own afterwards. In this kind of scenario, the participating teenagers might be particularly drawn to one script on which they might work, paying special attention to it; but they may equally be able to fully distance themselves from another, and visibly demonstrate no real attachment to it, losing interest in the task at hand. It often depends on the themes emerging from said texts; the particular style of writing used; or quite simply, the young people's mood that day, and whatever else may be going on outside of the workshop context. In *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski summarises our textual engagements, as in this workshop example, as "extraordinarily varied, complex, and often unpredictable in kind."[21] These engagements may indeed change, depending on if we are the readers or writers; but they also evolve over time, as we build personal relationships with the texts themselves.

In *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Felski further explores these very personal links that we may have towards various cultural phenomena. She states that "attachments involve thought as well as feeling, values and judgments as well as gut response," and that they are "made and unmade over time, intensify or fade away, are oriented to the future as well as the past, can assume new forms and point in surprising directions."[22] British novelist Zadie Smith appropriates the same concept, which she calls "attunement,"[23] referring to texts to which we may become increasingly attuned over time, or, perhaps, less so. Smith applies this concept to music, too, as she relates her affective attachment to the melodies and lyrics of Joni Mitchell, of whom she was not a fan in her childhood, but whose music Smith would grow to become very fond of in her twenties. She entangles Mitchell's music with her own personal and emotional experiences, as well as with certain landscapes and specific moments in time.[24] On a similar note – though not referring directly to music – Sara Ahmed also alludes to the emotionality

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[21] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 8.

[22] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), ix.

[23] Zadie Smith, "Some Notes on Attunement", in *Feel Free* (London: Penguin, 2018), 100-117.

[24] Smith, "Some Notes on Attunement."

of texts, arguing that this is a "way of describing how texts are 'moving,' or how they generate effects"[25] on us.

Writing affect

Many theorists acknowledge the entrenched difficulties that exist in grasping the right language for writing about affect, too. I am referring here to two broader frameworks: in writing about personal experiences (i.e. through prose or poetry, for instance), and in academic writing (e.g. in scientific articles, or when documenting practice-led research, for example). Theorist Niklaus Largier says that "words *go around* physical sensations and practices,"[26] suggesting that, as humans, we can never accurately or fully articulate the affects that we experience. How might we, as researchers, write about affect that emerges within a more traditional academic context? Scholar Bernd Herzogenrath ponders this question in his article "Et in Academia Ego: Affect and Academic Writing,"[27] referring to it as "affective academic writing." He insists on the difficulty in mastering this, particularly as we battle with expectations of objectivity and neutrality in research. And how does one quantify or register affect within creative or participatory research, for example? Or if we consider the virtual transmission of texts between groups of adolescents, such as through social networks: how can we register the affect that exists there, in this somewhat unknown, unfamiliar, in-between virtual space?

Networked Communications and Affective Encounters

In *Networked Affect* (2015), Paasonen, Hillis and Petit state that "networked communications involve the circulation of data and information, but they equally entail a panoply of affective attachments."[28] Young people can be more affectively attached to their smartphones and social networks than to their school textbooks or novels. Recent statistics demonstrate that in France, in 2023, 95% of young people aged 16-25 had a YouTube account, as did 90%

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[25] Ahmed, 13.

[26] Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal,* trans. Graham Harman (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2007), 14.

[27] Bernd Herzogenrath, "Et in Academia Ego: Affect and Academic Writing", in *How to Do Things with Affects. Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices,* ed. Ernst van Alphen and Tomas Jirsa (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2019), 216-234.

[28] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 1.

for Instagram, and 80% for Snapchat.[29] These affective attachments with their technological devices are firmly rooted in their (in)direct engagement with other individuals online. Using Facebook as an example, Paasonen, Hillis and Petit speak of the platform's "circulation of links, images, videos and pieces of text [which] are driven by individuals" interest in and quest for affective encounters with others, and for waves of amusement and curiosity."[30] In both Ireland and France, as a digital generation, the young people of today (early 2020s) have now spent most of their lives this way. Back in 1999, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff began calling them "screenagers."[31] Twenty-five years later, and the digital landscape has advanced even further – allowing Rushkoff's term to now take on new and extended meanings, as social media platforms have since proliferated.

Whether they acknowledge it openly or not, these young people now spend significant amounts of time glued to their smartphones – in quests for these affective encounters – in what Paasonen, Hillis and Petit describe as "near-constant prosthetic connections to information [and] communication."[32] Many teenagers are so adept at using smartphones that these connections are very much "near-constant", and are almost considered as a bodily "prosthetic" in a constant and hyper-connected way, as a mechanical extension of the human body itself. The haptic qualities of smartphones are also crucial – consistent use of touch screens, and the vibrations from message notifications, serve to intensify the somatic connection between the human individual and the phone itself. In *Texter, Publier, Scroller* (2024), Emmanuelle Parent ties this somatic connection in with the bespoke designs that social network companies have spent years carefully curating. As networks have now developed their own applications for use on smartphones, Parent outlines how their ergonomic designs are carefully structured to hold their users' attention.[33] This includes use of the colour red for notifications (colour to which the human eye is most likely

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[29] Diploméo. "Réseaux sociaux : les 16-25 ans abandonnent Facebook pour TikTok", last modified 19 October 2023, acc. 4 September 2024. www.diplomeo.com/actualite-sondage_reseaux_sociaux_jeunes_2022.

[30] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 2.

[31] Douglas Rushkoff, *Playing the Future: What We Can Learn from Digital Kids* (New York: Riverhead Trade Press, 1999).

[32] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 2.

[33] Emmanuelle Parent, *Texter, publier, scroller* (Montréal: Les Éditions Ecosociété, 2024), 39. Translation my own.

drawn,)[34] and placing the "Like" button purposely near the bottom of the screen, closest to where one's thumb would be positioned.[35]

Affective encounters: Instagram

These digital affective encounters can be illustrated within my doctoral research project, which takes place with young people largely in virtual space. It fosters a connection between two groups of participants, aged 15-18, with approximately twenty individuals per group. Each group is based in the urban areas of Rennes and Cork, in a public high school and a cultural organisation *Graffiti Theatre Company*, respectively. The exchange was first initiated by myself in 2021 in collaboration with five adult facilitators, comprising high-school English teachers, youth theatre facilitators and creative writing mentors. The youth groups took part in virtual and in-person workshops: either joint (online via Zoom) or asynchronous (taking place in their respective institutions). On average, workshops ran approximately once a month over the course of the school year. Participating groups would rotate each year, to allow a maximum of young people in Cork and Rennes to be part of the exchange. Workshops were centred around common topics on which each group would work, then sharing their creative pieces with the partner group and opening up space for wider group discussion and interaction. A variety of activities were offered, such as creative writing exercises and devising short pieces of theatre together. A few examples of common themes included hope, transformation, and the power of words.

In the first cycle of workshops (2021-22), all communication between the students involved would first pass directly through the adult facilitators. After an initial few sessions of sharing creative work virtually, the Rennes-based group inquired as to whether they could obtain the Instagram usernames of the teenagers in Cork. They were simply eager to extend their conversations and talk virtually, outside of the workshop framework, and to bond with the other young people via social media in their own free time. This is where affect started to creep in: the French group demonstrated a "wave of curiosity," as well as an "interest in and quest for affective encounters with others,"[36] whom they had not yet even met in person, and who simply remained as digital avatars on screens.

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[34] Parent, 40. Translation my own.

[35] Parent, 41. Translation my own.

[36] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 2.

Although this Instagram username-exchange could have been the starting point for laying down firm foundations of "networked affect,"[37] the French group's request was unfortunately brought to a halt. Due to the ethical constraints of working with minors in contemporary Ireland especially, the legal GDPR restrictions[38] operating in the youth theatre organisation meant that the adult Irish facilitators were unable to transmit such sensitive, personal data to anyone outside of the designated youth theatre group. While the implementation of GDPR is an EU-wide initiative, it has taken on particular importance in Ireland; it ties in directly with other protective legislations and measures recently implemented in a bid to better protect young people, especially following the history of abuse of minors within local Catholic institutions. Additionally, the apprehension surrounding the sharing of personal data relates also to ongoing issues of false representation and identity fraud on social media, particularly in regard to the grooming of young people online.

These legal measures reflect an attempt to renew the ethical commitments of safer practices of working with young people, often referred to in Ireland as "vulnerable publics." Defined by the National Vetting Bureau (Children & Vulnerable Persons) Act of 2012,[39] the Irish authorities employ the term "vulnerable" to refer to anyone under the age of 18, as well as to any adult "restricted in capacity to guard themselves against harm or exploitation, as a result of a physical or intellectual impairment."[40] Protective legislations – such as the Children First Act (2015), or GDPR restrictions (2018) – continue to consequently shape any contemporary social research involving direct engagement with vulnerable publics. As a direct consequence of these protective measures and ethical concerns, the Instagram exchange for the Rennes-Cork project had to be halted. The potential for such rich, affective online encounters between our teenage participants became rather stilted

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[37] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 1.

[38] General Data Protection Regulations, brought into effect on 25 May 2018 by the European Union. Further information can be found at: "What is GDPR, the EU's new data protection law?," General Data Protection Regulation, European Union, acc. 2 May 2024, www.gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/.

[39] "National Vetting Bureau (Children & Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 Revised," No. 47 of 2012, Law Reform Ireland, acc. 30 March 2024, www.lawreform.ie/_fileupload/RevisedActs/WithAnnotations/HTML/en_act_2012_0047.htm.

[40] "Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy," Governance Policies, Fighting Words, acc. 7 September 2024, www.fightingwords.ie/about/governance-policies/child-and-vulnerable-adult-protection-policy.

from thereon, and in turn, this only reinforced the physical and material distances between the participating youth groups.

Temporality, distance and instantaneity

Paasonen, Hillis and Petit claim that these kinds of "fluctuating [...] dynamics of affect" can actually "give shape to online connections and dis-connections, to proximities and distances."[41] And although affect was well-anchored into the Rennes-Cork project's transmission, it also presided over all creative choices taking place across participating groups. A further example lies in a creative workshop in which the groups partook in 2022-23, in an "exquisite corpse" exercise (*le cadavre exquis*). The game dates back to the Surrealist movement of the early 1920s, whereby visual artists used it as a technique to develop collaborative artistic compositions. It typically involves each person taking turns to draw or write on a piece of paper, then concealing their contribution before passing it on to the next participant, for them to continue on with the creation. More broadly, the exercise also conveys a form of creative dialogue, in which several participants each contribute towards a collective artwork or text, building directly on to what the previous person will have contributed – whether it be hidden or not.

In said workshop, with the help of the facilitators, the Rennes group invented a scenario for an improvised theatre sketch and filmed their performances. They subsequently sent the video files to the Cork group, who were then invited to respond and continue building onto the next chapter of the scenario, as a creative prompt. The chosen scenario focused on misunderstandings in parent-teenager relationships and emerged as a result of a collective brainstorming session. It thus acted as a sort of affective common ground between groups. They chose to broach the subject of romantic love as a teenager and how one might talk to their parent or guardian about having a new partner, and the misunderstandings that might arise in this kind of awkward conversation. It was a topic on which all of the young people had something to say, and with which some had already had first-hand experience.

In terms of creative outcomes, similar degrees of intensive emotion were illustrated in very different ways. The Rennes group, for instance, used physical mime and no speech in their sketches; they preferred to use their bodies and facial expressions to attempt to illustrate the scenario. The Cork group responded with their vision of the next "chapter," but this time with spoken improvisation, drawing heavily on comedy in dialogues. Both groups

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[41] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 1.

were fascinated by the others' responses, and eager to keep going. Temporality, distance and affect played key roles in the back-and-forth creative exercise of transmitting immaterial videos between Cork and Rennes. Whilst each group waited for the other to respond, they were openly expressive about their impatience to receive feedback. This also hints at a sense of networked urgency in which young people today regularly partake, as they demonstrate addictive behaviour regarding the instantaneity of virtual platforms.

Networked urgency is closely linked to the notion of immediacy. This can refer to the instantaneity arising from social networks, for instance, in a time when virtual discussions, digital connections and online sharing of information are all very immediate. Sociologist Jocelyn Lachance reflects on the psychological reasonings behind an addiction to instantaneity in his essay "Tentations et limites de l'instantanéité."[42] He speaks of how it "reigns"[43] in adolescence especially, and how young people's expectations of immediate replies actually stem from the construction of personal identity in adolescence. As adolescents attempt to make sense of the world around them, they experiment with different appearances, styles of speech and postures,[44] then seeking validation from peers on social media by posting photos, messages, or videos. Thanks to the instantaneous nature of social networks, Lachance states young people are now able to "play out these representations at any moment, no matter where they are," and subsequently can "seek an external view or perspective, any time and any place."[45] Reducing the waiting time for response or validation to a minimum thus becomes a force of habit. Lachance concludes that this urgency essentially acts as a form of reassurance for doubts which young people might be having on their lives and their identities.[46]

Intensity, Sensation and Value

Aside from instantaneity and networked urgency, the Rennes-Cork workshop examples mentioned earlier also illustrate two of three key terms used in *Networked Affect*: "intensity" and "value." A third key term,

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[42] Jocelyn Lachance, "Tentations et limites de l'instantanéité" in "La règne de l'instantanéité," in *Éducation au numérique : restons connectés,* ed. Thomas Rohmer (Paris: Les Presses d'Ile-de-France, 2020). Translation my own.

[43] Lachance, 31. Translation my own.

[44] Lachance, 32. Translation my own.

[45] Lachance, 33. Translation my own.

[46] Lachance, 33. Translation my own.

"sensation," is also evoked in the book, though it is deemed less relevant to our particular case study. Intensity here is seen to refer to the "oscillations, reverberations and resonances of affective intensity, and the connections and dis-connections that such intensity brings forth in online exchanges."[47] The very nature of these back-and-forth exchanges in the exquisite corpse exercise, for instance, is indicative of the creative oscillations taking place between the youth groups. The notion of intensity also materialised through the temporality of the creations that were made. The participating groups worked extremely quickly (i.e. within the weekly workshop hour), intensely and collaboratively, in order to rapidly conjure up an artistic response to transmit to the partner group. A balanced and steady momentum thus played a central role in this co-creative context, and it likewise echoes the near-instantaneous responses that are now expected in online communication, as Lachance had outlined. He further describes this instantaneity as a sort of unspoken "pact"[48] by and between smartphone users which relies on being accessible at all times. "Any form of detox," Lachance notes, "switching-off, de-synchronisations, or waiting for 'too long,' is seen to contravene what is socially expected,"[49] in the 2020s especially.

Paasonen, Hillis and Petit's second key term, "value," takes a different approach. They refer to these "networked communications" as

> sites of immaterial and affective labour, analysing the creation and accumulation of value, and the complex ways by which affective value ties in with the political economy, human agency, and the networked technologies with which many of us now engage daily.[50]

The notion of immaterial labour was first coined by sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato in his 1996 essay of the same name.[51] He defines it as "labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity,"[52] such as

> activities that are not normally recognised as "work" – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic

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[47] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 14.

[48] Lachance, 34. Translation my own.

[49] Lachance, 34. Translation my own.

[50] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 14.

[51] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 132-146.

[52] Lazzarato, 132.

> standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.[53]

Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labour also reverberates within the Rennes-Cork exchange. Philosopher Michael Hardt describes it as a new form of (creative) production that "engages at once with the rational intelligence and with the passions of feeling."[54] This was demonstrated by the affects of the young people shown in the workshop examples outlined earlier. Immaterial labour does not allude to tangible objects; rather, it is the kind of labour or work that "generates services, information, text, sounds, and images,"[55] as is the case for the creative productions emerging from the Rennes-Cork group collaborations. As Paasonen, Hillis and Petit underline, immaterial labour can essentially be whittled down to the idea of "producing and manipulating affects, social networks and forms of community."[56] The co-creative productions that emerged during the Rennes-Cork exchange are representative of this kind of labour – on behalf of the youth groups and the workshop facilitators involved, too.

With the recent and ongoing evolution of artificial intelligence, Hillis, Paasonen and Petit's use of the particular term "generate" is especially poignant. The term itself has become very charged and is swiftly associated with computer software able to generate or produce text for humans at incredibly fast speeds, such as ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer).[57] Such software relies on models of human behaviour as they input data, which the machine then learns to imitate and generate similar versions of afterwards. Although this article does not address the issues at stake with these types of generative software (nor did the Rennes-Cork project), it is important nevertheless to take into consideration how these might shape our vision of immaterial labour in the near future.

Antonio A. Cassili also addresses the question of affective immaterial labour, seeing affect as a form of energy or resource for the capitalism of digital platforms.[58] He describes affect as above all a "social relationship,"

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[53] Lazzarato, 132.

[54] Michael Hardt, "What Affects Are Good For," in *The Affective Turn: Theorising the Social*, ed. Patricia T. Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xi.

[55] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 7.

[56] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 7.

[57] "ChatGPT," OpenAI, acc. 17 September 2024, www.openai.com/about/.

[58] Antonio A. Cassili. "Digital Affective Labour : les affects comme ressorts du capitalisme des plateformes," in *Le web affectif : une économie numérique des émotions,* ed. Camille Alloing and Julien Pierre (Paris: INA Éditions, 2017), 5. Translation my own.

meaning to "have an effect on someone, incite them, move them, and encroach on their reality."[59] Cassili offers an astute overview of the commodification of our engagement with digital platforms – and social networks in particular – and where affect lies within this. He affirms that digital platforms now carry out "affective outsourcing," whereby they "rely on distinctive design: interfaces, buttons, rules and emotional scoring systems," which now "manage and govern the attention and engagement of users of connected devices."[60] Cassili likens these "linkages (of bodies, values, social relations)" as akin to "chains of subordination,"[61] whereby users supply attention and emotional engagement, symbolically manifested by reactions such as emojis or "likes." In this sense, affect becomes almost a binding technique, allowing in turn the user's engagement to be commodified and exploited. This takes us back to the very basics of the Lazzarato's meaning of labour, as physical or mental expenditure. And indeed, the immateriality of affect (of network users) materialises here into financial capital for the platforms themselves.

Immaterial Labour and Affect in Covid-19 Times

The notions of immaterial labour and affective digital labour were also at play within the wider institutional framework of the participating youth group in Cork. This became particularly visible during the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, a short while before the Rennes-Cork project began. The participant group itself is based at *Graffiti Theatre Company*, a popular and highly sought-after cultural institution in Cork, renowned for its work with young people and advocating for inclusive creativity for all, through the medium of youth theatre. *Graffiti Theatre* offers drama workshops and creative projects for young people in and out of schools across County Cork and was first established in 1984 by Emilie Fitzgibbon. The youth theatre groups are composed of young people from the ages of 8-18, who join as fee-paying members on a school-yearly basis as an extra-curricular activity.[62]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, and prior to the beginnings of the Rennes-Cork project, *Graffiti Theatre* became a local pioneer in maintaining a sense of

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[59] Cassili. 6. Translation my own.

[60] Cassili. 7. Translation my own.

[61] Cassili. 7. Translation my own.

[62] Annual membership costs for *Activate Youth Theatre* groups amount to 175-200€ per child for a full school year (September – May, with occasional summer projects included). Further information can be found on the dedicated section of *Graffiti*'s website: www.graffiti.ie/youth-theatre/activate-pre-seniors/, acc. 12 September 2024.

continuity for their weekly youth theatre workshops online. Their switch to drama workshops on Zoom became the norm, whilst public health restrictions like strict lockdowns and social-distancing were implemented nationwide by the Irish government. The sudden shift from materiality to immateriality was initially perplexing for youth theatre members, but these now entirely networked communications came to provide some much-needed normality for the young people. Immaterial labour is exemplified here by the facilitators, who worked tirelessly out-of-hours to try to sustain what was an already well-established sense of community between members, now re-configured as entirely virtual. The team of adult facilitators worked hard to remain attentive to the teenagers' creative needs during this unsettling time and sought to build solid affective relationships and regular engagement with young people in the local community. The immateriality of these encounters was all-encompassing for the adolescents, in that the personal and material bodies which normally interacted in the workshops were suddenly replaced with online avatars and immaterial bodies, mediated entirely across virtual devices.

Social media and virtual communities

During the pandemic, the sudden loss of access to material public space instead meant that a dense and vast virtual public space was able to unfold, acting as a catalyst for the proliferation of networked affects. This period of time also saw the use of social networks soar, and consequently, the manifestation of virtual communities. As Paasonen, Hillis and Petit suggest, social networks can "produce and circulate affect as a binding technique"[63] – one that was overwhelmingly the case in Ireland, France and the United Kingdom especially. Popular platforms such as TikTok became a springboard for building virtual communities centred around shared themes, such as fashion, home DIY, or even literature. At its peak, the hashtag "#BookTok" – a sub-section of TikTok, accessed directly by searching the designated hashtag – offered thousands of book-themed videos in the usual three-minute format. Most "#BookTok" videos consist of users – mainly teenagers – proposing reviews of recent texts they have read or sharing recommendations to fellow users for future reads. In 2020, videos circulated with reviews of books users had read over lockdown, and at that particular time, the viral-ness of this literary transmission spread swiftly on a global scale. Many teenagers offered first-hand accounts of how they had been

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[63] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 8.

moved by certain texts, expressing a desire to share these experiences with others and to discuss them in the platform's comments section.

Similar virtual and affective engagements with texts also include audiobooks, whose popularity soared during the Covid-19 lockdown too, thanks to the facilitated and direct access of content online. The audiobook has always sought to bring literature "outside" of the material book itself, through an immersive auditory experience, though its affective dimension is worth considering too. Most contemporary audiobooks remain conventional in form: one sole voice that reads the entire text, chapter by chapter, with little variation in intonation or reading rhythm. This, however, is currently being experimented with and re-configured by young people in virtual spaces. Via platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, young literary fans have been re-recording their own versions of popular texts: adding in personalised voice variations for fictional characters or adding layers of background sounds to represent more descriptive passages (to convey specific locations, like a forest or marketplace, for instance). Not only does this generate a more immersive and affective experience, but its very creation is also a means of immaterial labour. Teenagers are re-appropriating the literary texts themselves, transmitting them to others, and thus creating virtual communities that also further channel these networked affects. In turn, their peers and other platform users are able to actively respond to these now public creative outputs, both with affective reactions (likes, emojis, comments…) and with feedback that is instantaneous, of which Lachance and Cassili had highlighted the importance for young people earlier.

Fighting Words and Narrative 4

Posting these "#BookTok" and audiobook videos on TikTok and YouTube have allowed for a worldwide youth literary community to develop and, I would argue, served as a pioneer of networked affects in a time when human connections were sorely-needed. Similar to the "#BookTok" phenomenon, the Irish non-profit organisation *Fighting Words*[64] also flourished virtually during the pandemic. Established in 2009 by Sean Love and Roddy Doyle, *Fighting Words* is a non-governmental organisation which runs creative writing and story-telling workshops in schools and in their numerous centres across the island of Ireland. Irish novelist Doyle, and Love, with his own background working in education, co-founded *Fighting Words* with an intention to "inspire children and young adults who might otherwise be

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[64] "Home | Fighting Words", Fighting Words: The Write to Right, acc. 1 May 2024, www.fightingwords.ie/.

struggling with literacy to write."[65] In the same vein as *Graffiti Theatre,* throughout the 2020 pandemic all workshops took place entirely online, or at least in hybrid mode (i.e. blending in-person and virtual elements), and rather successfully so. With young people as their target audience, *Fighting Words* and *Graffiti Theatre* also both rely significantly on the use of social media in promoting and transmitting their work to the general public.

In an article on the Irish folk tradition of story-telling,[66] Marion Bourdeau and Léa Boichard also reflect on this crucial role of digital media in *Fighting Words*, as well as in another organisation, *Narrative 4,* co-founded in 2012 by a group of writers and activists including Irish writer Colum McCann.[67] *Narrative 4* runs story-exchange workshops with teenagers and adults, in both educational and non-educational settings. The story-exchange workshop method comprises a larger group of individuals who pair up into groups of two, each telling the other about a personal experience. A strong emphasis is placed on listening intently to one's partner and fostering empathy.[68] The larger group re-gathers, with each individual being asked to re-tell their partner's story, in a first-person narrative.[69] Though this can be a rather emotional experience, the affect arising here shifted to become more immaterial as workshops expanded into the virtual realm of Zoom in 2020. Participants' very personal and moving stories were soon being transmitted back-and-forth between screens and headsets, across continents and time zones. This not only generates a very different kind of affective experience from the usual in-person workshop, but equally, it becomes somewhat harder to truly measure the affect that emerges here; the presence of an immaterial digital face is entirely different from being physically present with a fellow human participant.

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[65] Elizabeth Day, "Roddy Doyle: The Joy of Teaching Children to Write," *The Guardian*, published 11 March 2012, acc. 13 September 2024, www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/11/roddy-doyle-fighting-words-project.

[66] Léa Boichard and Marion Bourdeau, "Narrative 4 and Fighting Words – The Persistence of the Folk Tradition of Storytelling through Contemporary Irish Writers Colum McCann's and Roddy Doyle's Non-Profit Organisations," *Babel: Mythes et folklores celtiques dans le monde anglophone,* no. 21 (2021): 57-78.

[67] "About N4 – What We Do", Narrative 4 Story Exchange, acc. 5 May 2024, www.narrative4.com/about-n4/.

[68] Mianowski elaborates further on the notion of empathy in her article "Narrative 4 Story Exchanges: Fostering Empathy,", in *New Cartographies, Nomadic Methodologies: Contemporary Arts, Culture and Politics in Ireland*, ed. Anne Goarzin and Maria Parsons *Reimagining Ireland Series,* Vol. 96 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020), 145-156.

[69] "How a Story Exchange Works,", Narrative 4 Story Exchange, acc. 5 May 2024, www.narrative4.com/story-exchange/.

Marie Mianowski also contemplates the central role of empathy in *Narrative 4*'s practice, while Bourdeau and Boichard lead a similar reflexion on *Fighting Words;* combined together, their works demonstrate that empathy is a fundamental aspect of story-telling and human social interaction. This includes making a conscious effort to truly imagine how others feel, temporarily stepping away from what Paasonen, Hillis and Petit deem a "widespread, hyper-individuated culture of *me*."[70] In a society that promotes constant use of individualised technological tools, such as earphones, these discursive and interactive practices push young people especially to actively reflect on and navigate their own emotions, as well as those of others. This echoes Sara Ahmed's ideas on the emotionality of texts; or in *Narrative 4*'s case, the emotionality of stories. We thus see first-hand how texts and stories "move" (both *across* rooms and screens, but also how they move *us* as individuals), and how they can be seen to "generate effects,"[71] as Ahmed states; or rather, generate affects.

To conclude, I argue that the types of networked affects and networked communications outlined in this article are indeed forms of labour; but when examined more closely, they specifically represent Lazzarato's notion of immaterial labour, as referred to by Paasonen, Hillis and Petit in *Networked Affect* (2015). Within this particular research context of working with intercultural youth groups across Ireland and France, this form of labour emerges very clearly, and it could equally be argued that it in fact serves as the underpinning framework for their regular virtual interactions. In the same vein, from a research perspective: being able to analyse this notion of immaterial labour through the transmission of texts, images and videos also serves to justify the pertinence of studying the two groups" interactions. In the case of the Rennes-Cork project, it is not merely a matter of haphazard connections arising between groups of teenagers from two different cities; rather, it is a unique and ever-evolving form of immaterial labour which stems from these creative and discursive practices. And as our digital landscapes continue to evolve also, it remains to be seen how the material and immaterial transmission of texts will take shape in future years – particularly under the influence of diverse modes of artificial intelligence – and the role that (networked) affect may – or may not – continue to play within this.

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[70] Paasonen *et al.*, "Networks of Transmission," 12.

[71] Ahmed, 13.