

## **Porous Skins and Sensible Bodies: Juxtaposition of the Sentimental and Affective Theories of the Subject**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Roberto Garzelli's 2011 film *The Sentiment of the Flesh*, a female student of anatomical design, Helena, meets Benoît, a radiologist in a local clinic, and the two start a passionate affair. Helena radically redefines their space of sexual intimacy by drawing Benoît deeper into her body, not only through penetration of her bodily orifices, but also through the use of imagining technologies to subject her organs, muscles and bones to his desiring gaze. "You are so used to x-rays, you've forgotten what they mean," she says to Benoît, "It is a privilege to see inside of someone, isn't it?" The obsession with cutaneous openings and permeability to access a secret that in Helena's body contain/is, frames corporeality as a site of sentiment, where the distinction between the subject's interiority and her various ecologies breaks down, and reveals a relation of mutuality and inter-penetrability.

This paper takes *The Sentiment of the Flesh* as an illustration and a starting-point for a conceptual inquiry into the theory of the subject articulated within the sentiment tradition and the so-called "affective turn" in theoretical humanities. The juxtaposition of affect and sentiment reveals very different historical and philosophical trajectories within their respective taxonomies of feeling. However, in regard to their imagery of the embodied subject, both affect and sentiment repudiate the idea of the self-contained, bounded subject, and of emotional endogeneity. More specifically, I argue that affect theory has produced (and perhaps iconicized) the image of a "permeable subject," constituted through processes of physical and social transmission. In turn, the sentiment tradition is underwritten by medical and physiological discourses of the sensible, irritable and enervated body. The material-vitalist notion of corporeality elaborated by the eighteenth-century medical scholars, including Albrecht von Haller, Georg Ernst Stahl, Robert Whytt, and the *montpelliérains* (and irrespectively of the significant differences between them), unfolds thus an imaginary of the subject that opposes both Cartesianism and anthropic mechanism. Given their historical positionality and their conceptual intricacies, I argue not that the affective and sentimental theories of the subject are analogous, but, rather, that they can both be mobilized in the critique of autonomous subjectivity, and that, in their distinctive ways, they both collapse the subject/environment dichotomy.