

Heike Paul, Sarah Pritz (eds.)

SENTIMENTAL STATE(S)

Affective Politics of Order and Belonging



[transcript] Global Sentimentality

Heike Paul, Sarah Pritz (eds.)
Sentimental State(s)

Editorial

The **Global Sentimentality** series conceives of the sentimental as a distinctive code to be examined in literature, popular culture, political rhetoric, and cultural practices of all kinds. The book series offers a platform for reflection on the sentimental – both in terms of its cultural specificity and its transcultural adaptations on a global scale. Located in cultural studies, the series simultaneously invites an interdisciplinary engagement with the sentimental at the intersection of literary, cultural, and social studies. The series will include volumes of essays and survey works on the sentimental as well as monographs.

The series is edited by Heike Paul.

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Introduction

Heike Paul and Sarah Pritz

Sentimental Politics and the Politics of Sentimentality

In a time marked by escalating political polarization and acute social upheaval, the emotional dynamics of contemporary politics have taken center stage. Departing from the double meaning of the word “state”—signifying both a condition and a political entity—this volume focuses on affective politics of order and belonging. “Sentimental State(s)” explores the intricate interplay between sentimentality and politics across diverse global settings, highlighting how political leaders and movements from all sides of the political spectrum alike harness the sentimental to create compelling narratives and thus aim at fostering a sense of community.

Moving away from normative notions of the sentimental (e.g. heavily gendered or trivializing everyday conceptualizations), we conceive of the sentimental as a communicative and relational code which can draw on emotional knowledge and activate empathy. In a nutshell, the sentimental code operates at the intersection of emotional interpellation and responsiveness. Sentimentalism, as Joanne Dobson puts it, “envisions the self-in-relation” (267). It promotes a mutual recognition of emotions—or more precisely, the socioculturally mediated human ability to affect and be affected (Ahmed 2004a)—thereby (potentially) cultivating a sense of belonging and community. The sentimental code manifests itself in a multitude of forms and functions across time and cultures, rendering it a rich subject for scholarly inquiry across diverse academic fields. Its multifaceted nature invites investigation within literary, cultural, and media studies, as well as historical, social, and political sciences—disciplines that are all represented in this volume. Accordingly, the sentimental can be explored in diverse domains of symbolic interaction. It can be examined within literary frameworks, where it also originated in its Western variant in 18th-century Europe (Chandler; Howard) and quickly

permeated a wide array of aesthetic forms. The history of modern mass media—especially cinema (Kappelhoff)—is fundamentally intertwined with the significant influence of the aesthetics and affective economies (Ahmed 2004b) of the sentimental. At the same time, sentimentalism is (and always has been) more than a genre (Gerund/Paul)—whether it be the “sentimental novel” (Rivero) or the “melodrama” (Paul et al.)—as its registers and repertoires can be identified in practices and discourses throughout modern societies (e.g. Illouz 2003; McCarthy).

This volume traces the sentimental code within the realm of political culture as an “intimate public sphere” (Berlant 1997, 1), interconnected through a “sentimental contract” (Bargetz). It illustrates that sentimental politics, as well as the politics of sentimentality, take on numerous forms and functions, widely visible across a broad variety of political contexts. Indeed, *state-building* inherently requires the (twofold) cultivation of *sentimental states*. Sociologist Eva Illouz characterizes early Western nation-states as “communities of hope” (2024, 50, translation H. P./S. P.), which were orientated towards both Enlightenment political doctrines of freedom and equality and capitalist notions of market-driven growth. In Illouz’s interpretation of modernity, this hope intensified and sentimentalized people’s expectations for a good life, embedding the conviction in everyday consciousness that a better existence could be achieved through human action and social institutions. Similarly, Hans Joas discusses the emergence of human rights and the concept of universal human dignity since the 18th century as a process of “the sacralization of the individual” (204, translation H. P./S. P.). Although not the explicit focus of Joas’ historical sociological analysis, sentimental discourses and practices that expose and scandalize injustices and brutalities while articulating experiences of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ against the backdrop of other traditional hierarchies can be seen to have played a crucial role in this process (cf. in particular 108–46). In other words, the sacralization of the individual was inextricably accompanied by its sentimentalization. As Joas himself notes, values require not only argumentation and rational justification but must also resonate affectively and evoke a sense of subjective evidence (251). Focusing more directly on the sentimental aspect of state-building, historian Elizabeth Garner Masarik demonstrates how white and Black women reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used sentimentality to mobilize political action in the development of the American welfare state. She argues that sentimentalism “gave middle-class women the language to demand protections of the mother and child connection, particularly

when it came to issues of infant and maternal mortality or the sexual ‘fall’ of girls and women” (2).

Furthermore, the sentimental frequently appears on the political stage as a strategy of *crisis management*. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide launched vaccination campaign videos that heavily relied on sentimental communication.¹ Set to emotionally charged songs like *Hello Again* by Howard Carpendale or *Freedom* by Pharell Williams, these clips depicted heartfelt scenes of friends, lovers, and families reuniting, as well as joyous gatherings at birthday parties, live concerts, and football stadiums, all aimed at mobilizing emotions and encouraging vaccination as a means to halt and overcome the pandemic. However, these official videos were subsequently satirized and parodied by critics of the health measures implemented to combat the virus. Sentimentalization was—as is often the case—met with “countersentimental narratives” (Berlant 2011, 55), which, in the context of COVID-19 protests, shifted the focus away from the suffering caused by the virus itself to the suffering resulting from the measures implemented to fight it. These countersentimental narratives—frequently intertwined with conspiracy theories or right-wing ideologies—framed the restrictions of public health policies as a significant source of pain and hardship, arguing that the emotional and economical toll of lockdowns, social distancing, and other regulations were themselves forms of injustice. By foregrounding freedoms and the impacts of governmental interventions, these narratives sought to challenge the prevailing sentimental discourse centered on the collective suffering *from* the virus. This dynamic illustrates how competing sentimental frameworks and affective economies of “grievability” (Butler) can emerge in public discourse, as different groups attempt to articulate their experiences and grievances in ways that resonate with broader societal sentiments, ultimately shaping debates around responsibility, sacrifice, and the nature of societal welfare during crisis situations.

These examples clearly demonstrate the political dynamism (and dynamite) of sentimentality and already suggest that the sentimental code is not only employed top-down but also plays a crucial role in *articulating protest and resistance*. Social movements of various kinds and political affiliations employ “sentimental political storytelling” (Wanzo) to address pressing issues, aiming

1 For an overview of a wide range of sentimentally charged vaccination campaign videos worldwide, see <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/werbung-fuer-die-corona-impfung-deutschland-singt-hello-again-a-cb2909d0-2308-4504-80a5-1b6c1204bd2e>.

at mobilizing support for political change. According to Rebecca Wanzo, “sentimental political storytelling” refers to “the narrativization of sympathy for purposes of political mobilization” (3) and is essential for fostering “affective agency” (ibid.) in the political sphere. By crafting sentimental narratives that resonate emotionally and often build on scenes of suffering (and emancipation) or invoke affectively charged values such as freedom or justice, social movements seek to inspire action and cultivate a collective commitment to their causes. These narratives not only aim to engage individuals on an emotional level but also instill a sense of urgency, compelling audiences to respond and participate in the pursuit of social change. In recent years, this has been particularly striking in climate activism: Sociologists Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren have demonstrated that climate activists—especially those from the Global North—harness fear to emphasize the dangers of climate catastrophe. However, they also mitigate the paralyzing potential of this fear by pairing it with narratives of hope, effectively motivating individuals to take action.

Political communication represents another vital domain within the political sphere where emotional appeals and sentimental codes are prominently utilized. This encompasses a broad array of activities, including political speeches, national festivities, commemorative events, public rituals, election campaigns, and, increasingly important, the social media channels of diverse political actors. In the United States, the use of sentimental codes in political communication (Berlant 2008; Paul 2021) and the role of “civil religion” (Bellah) in shaping American political culture and public life has been noted for some time, with its origins traced back to the very foundation of the nation. These discourses and practices that elevate the nation to a deeply sentimental and almost sacred status continue to persist today, exemplified by the frequent appeals to the Declaration of Independence (Barnes), reflecting the enduring significance of foundational texts in shaping national identity. However, this phenomenon is not unique to the U.S.; other countries also exhibit a similar affection for their constitutions. Historian Ute Frevert, in her recent book *Verfassungsgefühle*, explores this sentiment in the German context, highlighting the emotional connections that individuals and societies forge with their foundational legal documents. Such sentimental attachments underscore how constitutions serve as enduring symbols of national identity and collective values.

Political communication, alongside national commemoration (Ladino) and the narration of “cultural trauma” (Alexander), draws upon and emotion-

ally appeals to specific societal core values, as well as imaginaries of order and belonging, often reflecting notions about inclusion and exclusion, about hegemony and marginalization within the political and social community. By employing sentimental symbols, narratives, and rhetoric that evoke feelings of unity or division, political communication, memory politics, and the cultural narration of trauma seek to construct a shared identity among certain groups while reinforcing boundaries that delineate “us” from “them.” In this context, Heike Paul distinguishes between two forms of sentimentalism, both historical and contemporary: While “civil sentimentalism” (Paul 2018; 2021) refers to political frameworks and emotional repertoires that foster inclusive civic identity and community among citizens, “*Volkskörper*-sentimentalism” (Paul 2019) emphasizes exclusive national or ethnic identities drawing on the imaginary of the nation as a supposedly cohesive and organic entity.

Finally, the sentimental code unfolds its political power not only within the confines of the political system but also extends beyond it, exerting influence through various cultural and artistic domains. Cultural products and aesthetic expressions in the sentimental vein, such as literature, films, and music, can serve as “powerful interventions into social, cultural, and political discourses” (Gerund/Paul 17). These forms of art reflect societal values, beliefs, and aspirations, often acting as a mirror to the political landscape, while simultaneously (re)shaping public sentiment and identity. As argued by Jane Tompkins, such—often popular—cultural outputs perform essential “cultural work” and significantly contribute to public negotiating processes in nuanced ways.

To more accurately capture the cultural work of the sentimental in the political sphere, we propose analytically distinguishing between two fundamental forms, which will also serve as the two main sections of this volume: *sentimental leadership* and *the people’s feelings*. As already indicated in the examples above, the sentimental can act both as a technology of statecraft and as a vehicle to express protest and resistance (Paul 2021, 10). In other words, it functions as a means of political interpellation as well as mobilization, reflecting both top-down and bottom-up perspectives on the role of sentimentality within political culture.

Sentimental Leadership

Sentimental leadership encompasses various affective modes of governance and orchestrations of power. At its core, it refers to the strategic employment

of sentimental registers and repertoires from the top down. In this context, the sentimental code is deliberately utilized to promote particular political objectives, aiming to engage citizens on an affective level and consequently strengthening their ties to the political community, whether that be a political party, certain institutions, or the nation as a whole. By invoking shared values, aspirational goals, or collective experiences and memories infused with emotion, political actors seek to both cultivate and reinforce a sense of order and belonging. This analytical framework invites exploration into how political actors attempt to shape and affectively appeal to what Deborah Gould describes as a “*political horizon*” (3)—the collective understanding of what is “politically possible, desirable, and necessary” (ibid.).

For instance, election slogans such as “Yes We Can,” used during Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, and “Make America Great Again,” employed in Donald Trump’s 2016 and 2024 campaigns, encapsulate sharply contrasting visions of the past, present, and future, each aligned with divergent political agendas. These slogans are not merely catchy phrases; they are made to evoke powerful emotional responses and reflect distinct interpretations of history and aspiration. Obama’s slogan encourages feelings of optimism, solidarity, and collective agency, aligning with a broader narrative of social progress and democratic participation. In contrast, Trump’s slogan elicits a sense of nostalgia, grievances, and a yearning to return to a perceived past greatness. Each campaign resonates not only with different “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1979) but also with a unique “emotional habitus,” i.e., “a social grouping’s collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, member’s embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting” (Gould 32).²

2 The recent success of U.S. ultra-conservatism can partly be understood through sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild’s concept of the “deep story” of its supporters (2016, 2024). In that narrative, hardworking citizens were struggling to make ends meet while feeling exploited by a greedy federal government. They were pressured to empathize with those seen as taking advantage of the American Dream and were looked down upon as “white trash” or “rednecks” if they failed to do so. Both Donald Trump and right-wing media outlets have adeptly knitted and articulated this narrative, often by eschewing expressions of empathy for immigrants and marginalized individuals. Instead, they position white working-class men as victims of liberal policies and misguided feeling rules, providing an alternate resolution to the prevailing “deep story” by pledging to “Make America Great Again.”

Although sentimental leadership is frequently personified in the figure of a charismatic leader, as described by Max Weber, it is by no means confined to individual personalities. Instead, it should be understood as existing within broader dispositifs or assemblages and constellations of power. This perspective encompasses not only ruling elites but also oppositional groups, diverse media, aesthetic and material contexts, and even those iconic figures or institutions whose power is predominantly symbolic in nature.

Furthermore, as already illustrated by the examples above, sentimental leadership is not restricted to a specific political ideology or order. It is therefore neither inherently 'good' nor 'bad', 'progressive' nor 'conservative', 'populist' nor 'anti-populist', 'liberal' nor 'authoritarian', etc. Instead, it can be found on all sides of the political spectrum and has been described as an integral component of both autocracies and democracies. For instance, through his concept of the "sentimental citizen," George E. Marcus emphasizes the significance of recognizing the emotional foundations of democratic citizenship. In doing so, he challenges a widely held assumption in both democratic theory and the public sphere that emotions are inherently antagonistic to reason and consequently detrimental to the success of democratic processes. By contrast, Thomas Demmelhuber and Antonia Thies explore the role of sentimentality in autocratic regimes, using the Gulf monarchies as a case study. They define sentimentality as a "top-down initiated storytelling about the nation" (1004) and highlight how autocratic governments employ sentimentality to facilitate collective meaning-making, ultimately reinforcing their power and consolidating their authority.

Although sentimental leadership implies a top-down-scenario, it does not and cannot function in a solely uni-directional manner. In other words, its potential and power can only unfold if it is met with a corresponding response from the public: *the people's feelings*.

The People's Feelings

Benedict Anderson has famously described the nation as an "imagined community" and as a "horizontal comradeship" (7) whose bond has often legitimated the highest sacrifice possible and thus has come at the ultimate cost—that of life itself. Patriotism—in affirmative or critical idioms—is the expression of sentimental fellow feeling within the nation, and often this feeling is strategically inculcated by the state and its institutions in order to

interpellate citizens as feeling subjects sharing the same, often implicit “state fantasy” (Pease 5). In times of crisis, contingency management around the supremacy of national belonging can take various shapes and often draws on the sentimental to do cultural and political work. Elisabeth Anker has identified a rhetoric of “political melodrama” in post 9/11 discourses in the U.S. that sought to close ranks in the spirit of national mourning but also to mobilize against the enemy from outside and to punish his violation of what has been construed as American innocence. Till Werkmeister similarly has pointed to the site of the domestic as a prime locus for negotiating the people’s feelings in literature in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and for producing a “moral legibility” (Brooks 52) for individuals as members of families. A particular vulnerability is ceded to children as sentimentalized stand-ins and allegories for the innocence of the nation under attack. However, expressions of the people’s feelings in a sentimental mode can also create counterpublics (Warner) seeking to contest the nation or at least some of its violent manifestations in the name of social justice. Such forms of contestation and solidarity are symbolized and evoked in civil rights discourses and movements such as *Black Lives Matter*. Here, the sentimentality of mourning does not produce an allegory of the innocent nation so much as it addresses a nation guilty of not protecting its citizens leading to “premature black death” (Gilmore; Sharpe) and the loss of black lives in numerous episodes of state-sanctioned police violence. It is the mothers of dead black children and teenagers who—as Hortense Spillers has it—form a “sor(ri)ority” of sorts, a community of sentimental maternal suffering (see also Paul 2021). The individual and systemic failure to adequately address black children *as* children—and not as adults—is a misconception that Habiba Ibrahim sees connected to a foundational anti-blackness in the U.S. and that points to the limits of the sentimental as a communicative code in reliably producing fellow feeling across the color line, protectively wrapped around white, black, and brown children. Whereas the white child is legible as a sentimental object orphaned by the violence of 9/11-terrorism and slipping into an allegorical trope in symbolizations of white innocence, the black child is neither sentimentalizable nor allegorizable in a comparable fashion in the hegemonic symbolic order and becomes the object of sentimental mourning only after death, a death that is tragic, yet often rendered casual or accidental.

The “people’s feelings” express, amplify, and reflect on cultural moods; yet they are often quite ambiguous and characterized by “affective dissonances” of various kinds (Ladino; Wanzo). More specifically, they can feel along hegemonic protocols or they may resist interpellation of “the people,”

an instrumentalization prominently employed in recent authoritarian populist rhetoric (Weale). Apart from mobilizing ambiguously feeling along, the sentimental code can also help give expression to and make intelligible ‘other’ people’s feelings. The contested and somewhat controversial function of the sentimental in global imaginaries of humanitarianism (Boltanski) has been evidenced in a broad spectrum of popular art, ranging from Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man”-exhibition to Steve McCurry’s 1984-photograph of Sharbat Gula, titled “Afghan girl.” Scholars—from James Baldwin to Paul Bloom—have pointed to the failure of the sentimental to adequately address otherness, while scholars such as Martha Nussbaum and George E. Marcus have repeatedly argued the opposite.

Even though many of the examples singled out here are manifestations of the sentimental in U.S. political and popular culture, such dynamics are by no means limited to this particular cultural context. In recent zones of conflict and crisis scenarios, similar patterns can be observed, and contributions in this volume speak to such strategies and effects in Thailand, China, the Middle East, Britain, and Germany.

Separating sentimental leadership from the people’s feelings is a merely heuristic distinction and does not imply a simplistic, dichotomous relation of the two. Rather, we assume an interdependence between top-down-scenarios and bottom-up uses of the sentimental (also including the possibility of a horizontal bonding). All of those do not and cannot function in a solely unidirectional manner. In other words, the potential and power of the sentimental as a collective experience and as a force of mobilization can only unfold in reciprocal relationships. This underscores the complex role of the sentimental in political communication: While leaders may try to evoke certain affects and emotions, the effectiveness of their appeals hinges on the acceptance and active engagement by ‘the people.’ Sentimental leadership promotes certain culture-specific imaginaries of order and belonging, which must still be (at least selectively) embraced and actively adopted by the citizenry in order to be effective. Often, they are also rejected and countered by different and diverging emotional responses to a problem or a crisis. This interdependence creates a dynamic interplay between leadership figures and the public and also among different groups in civil society, constantly shaping and redefining adequate emotional responses to any given situation and political agenda.

The Contributions in this Volume

This volume comprises fifteen original essays that cover a diverse range of geographical contexts, including Thailand, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the U.S., Argentina, Venezuela, England, and Germany. They illuminate a broad spectrum of symbolic interactions, ranging from sentimental crisis management to political communication and state-orchestrated festivities. With their varying focus on films and TV series, music, artworks, speeches, photographs, videos, and more, the essays also provide a media-specific and cross-media analysis of how the sentimental code is employed in each case. One of the overarching aims of this volume is also the theorizing of the sentimental, i.e., how it has been and how it can be conceptualized in a wide field of theoretical paradigms ranging from literary studies to feminist theory, from pragmatist thought to media studies, from historical reconstruction to performance studies, from cultural studies to sociology. We are aware that these different (often specifically disciplinary) perspectives cannot be simply added up and that they cannot be seamlessly translated back and forth, but that they need to be examined with an eye to the specific contexts out of which they emerge and with regard to the phenomena they describe and analyze. Clearly, the sentimental code comes in many different idioms and variations.

The first section on **sentimental leadership** opens with an essay by **Julian Müller**, who examines new forms of sentimental leadership in German politics. Observing a tension between passion and dispassion—between appearing both professional and approachable—he explores the characteristics and potential causes of this new political tone. Alongside portraying former German Green Party leader and former vice-chancellor Robert Habeck as a symptomatic figure of this new form of sentimental leadership, Müller also explores the role of new media in this development. This includes selfies and videos on social media, new television formats, and podcasts, all of which emphasize the visible, personal aspect of the leader and convey a sense of immediacy. **Harald Zapf's** contribution critically engages with the office and the institution of the U.S. poet laureate in the context of U.S. democracy, past and present. Taking the examples of Amanda Gorman (National Youth Poet Laureate, 2017) and Juan Felipe Herrera (Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, 2015–2017), the essay identifies a somewhat paradoxical tension inhabited by the respective office holder, that between serving America, on the one hand, and serving poetry, on the other. The sentimental may function as a code to

transcend this contradiction but does so at a prize: Through its “sentimental authority,” the office of the PLOTUS actually serves to compartmentalize and minimize poetry’s power, a power that becomes merely symbolic. **Carmen Birkle** turns to U.S. political culture and the role of sentimentality in public appearances. She identifies somewhat of a gender gap in the public display of feeling and illustrates this by referring to appearances of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and, as part of the cultural imaginary, also to fictional characters from prestige television. Shedding tears may be one of the most intense—and spontaneous—forms of public feeling—yet, its dramatic appeal for political communication varies quite fundamentally. **Jan-Henrik Witthaus’** contribution critically examines the balustrade as a dispositif of political power. Balancing both proximity and distance, balcony scenes literally serve as ‘exposed’ examples of sentimental political communication, where leaders bridge the gap to ‘their people’ through emotionally charged speeches and rituals. Analyzing two case studies—the 1951 re-election campaign of Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina and Hugo Chávez’s 2012 presidential campaign—Witthaus explores how the balcony, as an assemblage, stages the union between ruler and people within populist and neo-populist contexts. He highlights how evolving forms of mass media have reshaped this form of political communication over time, demonstrating that while the crowd-leader dynamic is central to the spectacle, the collective emotional experience cannot be fully transmitted via electronic media. **Antonia Thies** explores the sentimental politics employed by the Saudi government to consolidate its authority. Drawing on official documents, state-affiliated media, and speeches by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, she examines government-led narratives about national identity, shared belonging, and cultural heritage. By identifying sentimental codes and narratives crafted to resonate with the public, her analysis situates these efforts within the broader historical development of the Saudi state, showing how past events are leveraged to foster collective meaning through strategies of sentimental leadership. **Saowanee T. Alexander’s** and **Duncan McCargo’s** contribution illustrates a case of attempted sentimental leadership gone wrong. They examine the use of impolite and emotive language in response to a 2023 election campaign video from the ultra-conservative party Ruam Thai Sang Chat (United Thai Nation Party). This video not only ignited a significant number of political responses but also predicted the election outcomes, as the preferred party Move Forward achieved victory, while the beleaguered United Thai Nation Party struggled. Alexander and McCargo use this case as a valuable opportunity to analyze

public sentiment and the underlying imaginaries of order and belonging in contemporary Thailand.

In the second section on the **people's feelings**, **Christian Krug** identifies and analyzes three sentimental states of the nation in the U.K. as symptomatic of discourses of national belonging and affective community building that all involve the monarchy: First, he looks at representations of Diana's funeral and of a 'nation in mourning' on television and in print (the mass media that dominated the news at the time) in 1997. Second, the essay zooms in on representations of Diana, still a sentimental icon, at the 20th anniversary of her death in 2017. Beyond a brief comparison of these two historical moments, Krug closes by taking a detour and going back 400 years: 1597 saw the publication of the first Quarto of Shakespeare's *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*. In all these scenarios, the author identifies sentimental strategies that correlate seemingly personal emotions with the circulation of public feelings.

Elaine Roth examines Ava DuVernay's award-winning film *Selma* (2014) and its representation of the 1960's civil rights movement's initiative in Selma, Alabama. In both content and form, Roth argues, the film foregrounds the sentimental politics and appeal of the movement and contextualizes Martin Luther King's activism within a broader network of *women* civil rights activists. In her choice of mise-en-scene/dramaturgy, casting, and music, DuVernay has her film linger on moments of care and affection, giving visibility to the affective connections to community, shared values, and camaraderie, i.e., the kind of civil sentimentalism that largely defined the civil rights movement.

Charleena Schweda analyzes Gerard Johnstone's *M3GAN* (2022) as a maternal horror film, exploring how it negotiates motherhood, the mother-daughter relationship, and childcare through various female characters in a sentimental mode. While the film satirizes sentimental tropes, it simultaneously reinforces the emotional significance of the (surrogate) mother-child bond, ultimately sentimentalizing motherhood as a core value.

Sarah Marak and **Heike Paul** discuss the yearly "National Christmas Tree Lighting"-ceremony in front of the White House in Washington, D.C. as part of a larger narrative about Christmas in America. The roughly one-hundred-year-long history of this particular ceremony at the seat of executive power highlights conflicts over religiosity, patriotism, and environmentalism. At the same time, it is a spectacle of public feeling, where pop culture, civil religion, sentimentalism, consumerism, and patriotism intersect.

Anna Corrigan discusses the work of Argentinian visual artist Lucila Quieto, whose father disappeared before her birth in 1976, along

with thousands of individuals who were kidnapped, detained, and executed by the Argentinian military dictatorship and remain unaccounted for. Quieto uses the medium of photography, and especially the genre of the family album, to imagine and interrogate the possibility of forging relationships between the children of the disappeared and their absent parents. This contribution analyzes Quieto's family album-art as a visual form for performing sentimental and genealogical attachments that imply a process of societal and interpersonal repair in the wake of state violence and mass disappearance. **Vincent Steinbach** explores the role of sentimental communication in the negotiation of COVID-19 as a political and medical crisis, comparing the staging strategies of German YouTube creators Oliver Janich and MaiLab. While MaiLab employs staged anger and humor to reinforce trust in science—ultimately allowing for doubt and ambivalence—Janich harnesses resentment and anger to construct a quasi-religious, unambiguous truth, portraying himself as a tragic hero. His sentimental narrative fosters a sense of collective grievance, aligning with broader right-wing populist strategies. The study highlights how sentimental codes shape different modes of knowledge production, audience engagement, and political mobilization. **Thomas Demmelhuber** examines the role of music in Egyptian politics since 1952, highlighting its function in shaping collective identities under autocratic regimes. The essay explores how sentimentally coded music has been used both to support and contest political power, focusing on two key periods: the Nasser era, where Umm Kulthum's songs symbolized national unity and Pan-Arabism, and the 2011 revolution, where Egyptian hip-hop voiced societal change and resistance. His analysis underscores the fusion of traditional and modern musical forms in the Middle East and North Africa, illustrating how music and its sentimental ties between the past and the present continuously reshape national identity, serving as a tool both for regime consolidation and as a medium for protest. **Marc Andre Matten** analyzes the funeral rites surrounding the death of Mao Zedong in the fall of 1976 as a rare occasion where tears were allowed to be shed in public as numerous iconic sources show. At the same time, the expression of grief shared by millions of people in the country was channeled—following the official motto of “turning grief into strength”—into a sense of gratefulness for the achievements of the leader and a commitment to continue the work of the revolution. Today, Zedong's political legacy is once again sentimentalized in similar ways in Chinese political propaganda. **Sarah Pritz** offers a cultural sociological perspective on the sentimental, developing it both theoretically and empirically through the example of so-called ‘lost places.’ She proposes

conceptualizing the sentimental as a set of social practices focused on the (re-)production of sentimental experiences and their material or symbolic ‘objectifications’ (such as narratives, cultural artifacts, and spaces). Integrating insights from spatial sociology, she analyzes lost places as sentimental spaces, demonstrating how their complex spatiotemporal figurations invite a sentimental mode of feeling by making absence and historical ruptures tangible. In conclusion, her contribution positions lost places—and their aestheticization—as key to understanding how late modern societies engage with loss, decay, and the material manifestations of social change.

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I. Sentimental Leadership

“I was honestly just speaking as Robert”

New Forms of Sentimental Leadership in Contemporary German Politics

Julian Müller

Introduction

Only a few years ago, it was common in the social science debate on politics to assume a high degree of dispassion in modern, bureaucratically organized democracies (the classic reference until today is Weber 1978). The habitus of the modern politician was considered to be primarily characterized by emotional control, perseverance, the ability to role-play, and a rather impersonal style of self-presentation. Max Weber’s phrase from his lecture “Politics as a Vocation” according to which politics is “a strong and slow boring of hard boards” (Weber 1970, 128) has become famous: Passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion are, in Weber’s view, the three decisive qualities for every politician, whereby passion is explicitly defined by him as “passion in the sense of matter-of-factness” (Weber 1970, 115).

This model of politics based on matter-of-factness is currently coming under pressure from various directions—not only in the form of vulgar populist hostility but also from the media, the public, and even academia. The ideal of political office characterized by a detachment from one’s own person, has recently been confronted with broad criticism in representative democracies, lamenting the lack of passion on the part of political personnel and the lack of responsiveness on the part of governments (Mair). Political actors are increasingly being accused of acting too factually and being too emotionally aloof. In the course of the so-called *affective turn* in the cultural and social sciences, not only has the scholarly marginalization of political emotions been lamented, but the need for affective political narratives has also been repeatedly stated (e.g. Mouffe).

This article deals with the tension between passion and dispassion in today's politics, taking Germany as an example. Politics as a profession, with its demands for professionalism and detachment on the one hand, increasingly collides with expectations of intimacy and attentiveness on the other. The display of sentiments by political staff that can currently be observed in various places and in various forms seems to be related to this development. The focus is therefore not on specific individual feelings of political personnel but on the display of feelings in public, and subsequently the politicians' public image. In what follows, the question will be addressed what problems the use of sentimentality in political communication can solve and what opportunities and risks are associated with it. A few selected case studies from contemporary German politics are used to shed light on the relationship between sentimentality and political communication in order to ask about the causes of a new political tone that can currently be observed.

A New Form of Political Passion From Matter-of-Factness to Exposing One's Own Inner Struggles

The following remarks concentrate on examples from German politics and focus exclusively on members of the former German governing parties. This restriction is by no means accidental. When German voters elected a new federal government in September 2021, the newly formed so-called "traffic light" coalition of (red) social democrats, (yellow) liberals and the Greens enthusiastically proclaimed itself a coalition for progress. This was clearly not intended to refer only to the level of political content; rather, it was also associated with the hope for a different style of politics, a different working atmosphere, and a new form of political address. The intent was clearly to strike a political tone unmistakably different from that of the previous governments and, above all, from that which can currently be heard from the populist parties' camp. Whether these hopes have been fulfilled in hindsight is another matter, but said coalition had started with the expressed aim of working together in a more progressive and modern way. Its members wanted to listen carefully to each other; they wanted to do without long nighttime meetings that make family life impossible; and it wanted to present itself to the public in a different way.

A somewhat marginal, yet particularly vivid example might illustrate this desire for a different political tone and a different manner. In April 2023, the weekly *ZEIT Magazine* asked some celebrities to take a selfie. Alongside actors,

musicians, and athletes, one of them was Lars Klingbeil, chairman of the German Social Democratic Party. He looks a little tired in the photo (figure 1), wearing a grey sweatshirt and a green parka. The image creates the impression of maximum nonchalance but is of course highly staged. However, the point here is not to accuse him of staging but to ask about the intention behind the staging and what it draws our attention to. Here, Lars Klingbeil's selfie reveals an interesting shift that tells us a lot about the political moment. It is also worth reading the short text that Klingbeil added to his selfie: "When I look in the mirror, I see all the worries we have had as a country over the past year. I see the responsibility that politics bears and the billions that we have set in motion to keep people's lives affordable. When I look into the mirror, I can see that the year has left its mark."

Figure 1: Selfie of Lars Klingbeil



ZEIT Magazine 04/2023

Klingbeil not only presents himself to us as a human being, he also provides us—which, of course, is due to the magazine's assignment, as this is no ordinary Instagram post—with a commentary on his own selfie. In this statement, there is a remarkable interweaving of the efforts of the political community

and the suffering of the politician in power. Klingbeil lets us know that he can read the efforts and worries of the whole country in his face. Politics obviously leaves its mark, and you do not even need professional photographers to document it. Today, politicians themselves reveal their own feelings, their fears, their vulnerability, and fatigue to the public.

This brief example is intended to illustrate what will be discussed below: More and more often, we encounter politicians as emotional and sensible individuals—and they, in return, exhibit this sensibility as an essential part of their politics. There are currently numerous examples of politicians admitting to being overworked, complaining about pressure, emphasizing self-doubt, expressing their own vulnerability, or openly admitting mistakes. This certainly is related to the change of expectations in politics and in politicians, and it has to do with changes in the media and political landscape. Whether in very personal interviews in podcasts, in long documentaries, or in politicians' self-portrayals on their social media channels, we get unvarnished insights into the political backstage and the dark side of everyday political life. This not only reflects *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas), this development also requires us to rethink classic concepts of political theory such as office, power, and representation.

Robert Habeck: A Symptomatic Figure of Sentimental Leadership in German Politics

There is probably no other figure in contemporary German politics who demonstrates this effort to find a new tonality and a new form of self-presentation as clearly as the former Green German Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck (Müller/Séville 2022a). Prior to his political career, he had studied philosophy and literature, obtained a doctorate in philosophy, and worked as a writer and translator. Like no German politician before him, Habeck openly describes in both his books and his public appearances his personal struggle to find the right words and the right tone. Habeck is very aware of the performative power of speech—it is no co-incidence that he also authored a book about language use in democratic societies, which contains an introduction to political speech act theory (Habeck 2018). He very consciously employs this knowledge in his talks and writings, always trying to combine the very big with the very small, the political with the personal, an exaggeratedly statesmanlike tone

with a certain brashness. One particular formulation describing his politics is revealing in this context: In his book *Von hier an anders* (*Different from here on*), he describes his political style as "self-critical fighting" (Habeck 2021, 64). This formulation is also notable in that it combines opposites that are usually kept apart in politics and political theory. On the one hand, there is the idea of politics as a fight, the Schmittian decisionist model, so to speak; on the other hand, there is an emphasis on communication and on constant self-criticism, the Habermasian deliberative model.

Habeck reconciles these opposites, which becomes the trademark of a new model of sentimental leadership. He presents himself as a politician caught up in permanent self-reflection and he uses precisely this reflexivity in the political battle. In doing so, instead of hiding his own insecurities, his doubts, and his inner struggles with respect to certain positions, he reveals all of this and proves himself to be a "homo sentimentalis" (Illouz 11–92). In late modernity, reflecting on one's own sentiments not only seems to have become a general requirement for the individual, but also a decisive political virtue. That these feelings inevitably expose the person behind the office holder is beyond question for Habeck. He is aware of the danger of showing himself openly and thereby making himself vulnerable, and yet he deliberately tries to undermine the strict separation of a politician in the public eye on the one hand and a real person on the other. His public appearance as a "real human being" is not due to any private preference but rather arises from a "political analysis," as he himself emphasizes in an interview:

And I dare to go further—and this is not a private decision because I like to be such a blabbermouth, but a political analysis—further than many other colleagues, because I believe that this admission of understanding how politics works and how people in politics are doing is very, very important, so that people are seen, even in their limitations, but not in their nakedness, so to speak.¹

Such a new form of self-aware, self-critical, yes, *sentimental* leadership, as Habeck has in mind, prefers not to hide its own insecurities and struggles. Instead, it even consciously uses them in order to reveal its own constraints and dilemmas and thus to convince others. In this light, open self-criticism

1 Robert Habeck in the podcast *Alles gesagt?*, April 23, 2018 (at minute 1:10:27, translation J. M.).

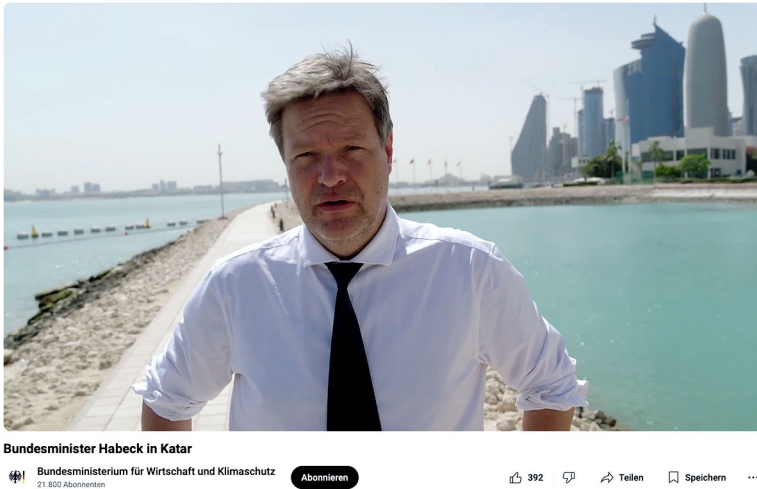
becomes an effective instrument of political persuasion that is associated with specific *validity claims*. This can be illustrated by the following video message. In March 2022, Habeck traveled to Qatar to negotiate the supply of liquid gas to Germany with the emir of Qatar in the wake of the beginning of the war in Ukraine. On the Instagram account of his ministry, Habeck shared a selfie video in which he tried to explain this step that was viewed very critically by the German public. In the video (figure 2), Habeck is wearing a white shirt with sleeves rolled up and a black tie and is standing in the sunshine against a blue sky and the skyline of Doha. Already the first sentence of the video is remarkable: “I am now here in Doha, on the second day of a trip that is somehow totally strange. People are dying in Ukraine, and here—you can see for yourselves—that’s what the skyline’s like. But it is the Ukraine crisis that has brought me here.”

Habeck addresses us directly and uses the informal second-person form of address “Du”, which in Germany is unusual in politics, to tell us where he is speaking from and what he has done that day. At the same time, however, he provides his own commentary on his video. Habeck knows only too well about the political power of images. He also knows that the images of sunshine and the sea in the background may seem “strange” in times of war and immediately addresses that strangeness himself. In the course of the video, Habeck has to visibly strain himself both physically and rhetorically, almost as if he were speaking with two bodies and two voices. On the one hand, the current minister Dr. Habeck who has to concern himself with the energy security of his country; on the other hand, the Green politician Robert from Flensburg who is aware of the concerns and sensitivities of his party and its milieu in matters of environmental protection and human rights.

Habeck thus maneuvers discursively between references to the constraints and necessities created by the war in Ukraine and his own self-imposed standards for his actions. It is notable that, even in times of war, Habeck offers a critical commentary on his politics. In reference to Ernst Kantorowicz, Habeck deliberately exposes the two bodies of the minister: the acting and powerful *body politic* and the experiencing and suffering *body natural* (Kantorowicz). It is precisely this role conflict between the two bodies that we, as viewers, are supposed to perceive (Schönberger). It is an open question as to how long the reference to self-criticism and self-reflexivity can serve as a basis for one’s political actions. What is certain, however, is that Habeck has tried out a new form of political address that does not ignore political dilemmas or resolve them in

terms of power politics but rather openly communicates them to voters as a challenge and makes precisely this the core of his brand.

Figure 2: Robert Habeck via the YouTube channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7zvJ3oaQnI>

Yet, this is not only about Robert Habeck as a person. Rather, the analysis of his communication indicates a certain *political form of talk*² that reflects developments within current politics, of which Habeck represents just one particularly striking case among many others. These developments need to be observed very closely if we want to understand the challenges within current politics: When political actors today increasingly attempt to communicate as a “whole person,” which means that they make the simultaneity of the two bodies visible, this goes beyond the diagnoses of a personalization of politics (Karvonen; Adam/Maier; Stanyer). Here, the political is articulated anew, be it through the disclosure of one’s own doubts, constraints, and worries, be it through the positive use of one’s own vulnerability, or through the conscious

2 Cf. Astrid Séville and Julian Müller’s 2024 book *Politische Redeweisen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), the title of which refers to Erving Goffman’s *Forms of Talk*.

and sometimes strategic use of authenticity³ (Luebke). There are, of course, many reasons for the emergence of such a sentimental leadership, some of which will be discussed in more detail below. For the specific case of Germany, it must at least be mentioned that there has been an unmistakable fatigue both with the very masculine and heroic appearance as, for example, practiced by former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, but also with the bureaucratic and post-heroic appearance of Angela Merkel. Robert Habeck's sentimental leadership, however, is neither heroic nor postheroic (Bröckling). To a certain extent it eludes this distinction. It would be more accurate to speak of a *post-postheroic* style of leadership that combines strength and perseverance with self-criticism and sentimentality.

New Media of Sentimental Leadership

It is impossible to talk about the change in political communication and new forms of sentimental leadership without also mentioning the media involved in this change. That the documents discussed so far in this article were a selfie and a video message is no coincidence. As much as the selfie may resemble the classic professionally taken photograph of a politician, it also markedly differs from it; just as the video message, which we, until recently, have only known as a format from Christmas or New Year's speeches, differs from a televised political speech on a political stage (Klein). As marginal as these differences may seem at first glance, they are crucial to understanding the challenges to political communication under current media conditions and to analyzing what the characteristics of sentimental leadership are.

Habeck's video message from Doha is by no means the only one of its kind. He uses this format like no other German politician before him, and he uses it for his own agenda. Shortly after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, he recorded a video (figure 3) in which he expressed his condolences to the families of the victims and his solidarity with Israel.⁴

3 For a comprehensive overview of changes in emotional culture in late modernity, the emergence of the "emotional self" (Lupton) and the associated reevaluation of authenticity, see Pritz.

4 Via the channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdZvkkpJaVI>

Figure 3: Robert Habeck via the YouTube channel of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action.



Robert Habeck on Israel and Antisemitism



Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz
21.900 Abonnenten

Abonnieren

6284



Teilen



Speichern



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdZvkkpJaVI>

With his detailed and very specific statement, he got ahead of both Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. In this video, Habeck speaks directly to the camera and consequently also directly to us as viewers. Since the video was recorded in an official room and also distributed via his ministry's channel, provided with English, Hebrew, and Arabic subtitles, we must assume that a ruling minister is speaking to us here—Habeck is wearing a suit and tie. What is even more interesting is Habeck's own assessment, which he gave when asked about this video in an interview: "And I didn't feel like a Green at all when I recorded these videos, I was honestly just speaking as Robert."⁵

This is in no way intended as an exposure or mockery. Habeck's statement is highly interesting in that it actually reveals how difficult it is today to decide who is actually speaking to us. Is the tired face that Lars Klingbeil is pho-

5 Habeck in the podcast *Machtwechsel*, May 16, 2024 (at minute 47:18): "Ich hab mich auch gar nicht als Grüner gefühlt, als ich da diese Videos aufgenommen habe, sondern nur eigentlich ehrlicherweise als Robert gesprochen" (<https://podtail.com/podcast/machtwechsel/habecks-sondervermogen-das-war-eine-spontane-situa/>).

tographing for us in his private clothes with his mobile phone his own or that of the Social Democratic Party leader? Is the deep sadness that Robert Habeck very credibly assures us of in his video message his own or that of an elected and governing minister? These questions are anything but trivial—and in times of mobile phones, Instagram accounts, Netflix documentaries, and podcasts, they arise with such urgency that it is currently impossible to avoid looking at these types of medial representations if we want to understand contemporary politics. That is what the following will be about.

New Television Formats and the Focus on the Self-Expressive Face

With regard to the questions addressed here, it is worth mentioning recent television formats in which a slightly different way of presenting politics and a different portrayal of political figures has been explored. For example, the journalist Markus Feldenkirchen, who became known for a long and detailed reportage on the German politician Martin Schulz,⁶ has been presenting the television program *Konfrontation* for some time now. In it, Feldenkirchen sits at a table with a politician—among them Armin Laschet, former CDU candidate for chancellor, Karl Lauterbach, former Federal Minister of Health, Sahra Wagenknecht, former left-wing politician and founder of her own party, and

6 Feldenkirchen wrote a feature on the 2017 German election campaign of SPD politician Martin Schulz, in which we can observe the politician again and again in moments of despair and weakness. This journalistic project was criticized from various directions. Feldenkirchen justified himself in response. His feature was never about voyeurism or exposure but about a different portrayal of politics that was intended to paint a more vivid picture of real people in politics and thus generate empathy among voters. Feldenkirchen's statement in his defense is quite remarkable: "The humanness of a politician seems to be one of those things. There are 'faults' that citizens can live with: Edgy, cheeky, uncomfortable, stubborn, a bit eccentric, perhaps even rude, politicians are allowed, indeed expected, to be all of these things, and authenticity even has a positive effect on them. But things get tricky when signs of weakness become apparent. It is true that we should rightly expect top politicians to be strong in their decision-making. But where does it say that politicians have no doubts and that these must never become visible? Anyone who expects this is forcing politicians to hide part of their personality. Now that this experiment [the coverage of Martin Schulz; JM] is over, I still believe that politics would benefit from a greater degree of transparency, especially in times of growing contempt for politicians and democracy. However, I have also come to realize this in the months I have been with them: Allowing transparency requires as much courage as strength." (Feldenkirchen 305)

Robert Habeck. Together with Feldenkirchen, all of these guests watched a documentary about themselves. In contrast to the usual talk shows, the invited politicians are not confronted with hard questions but with television images of themselves. As viewers, we are able to observe them in dealing with their own media image. Similar to the many reaction videos on the internet, the way they react becomes the decisive political message and "facework" becomes the necessary tool for it (Goffman 1955; cf. Dekavalla).

One can clearly observe different tempers and also different styles of dealing with the politicians' medial self in this program, however, this is about much more than just a matter of style. From media theory's perspective, the format of this show is interesting because it takes a certain form of representation of politics to extremes. We encounter politicians as experiencing subjects, and the self-expressive face becomes crucial information and the most important instrument of sentimental leadership. *The Presentation of Self* (Goffman 1959) increasingly includes a presentation of the reacting self. It cannot be overstated that in times of ever faster media observation, commentary, and evaluation, the control of one's own reactions is obviously becoming a decisive element of political *phronesis*.

In one of the most interesting passages in his work, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann pointed out that one must always distinguish very precisely between experience (*Erleben*) and action (*Handeln*). In his view, modern society is characterized by the fact that the attribution of experience and action typically takes place differently in different social spheres (Luhmann 83–84). In the case of politics, the attribution is usually exclusively to action. The action of one person is supposed to trigger the action of another, which usually happens with the help of political power. Whether the current political situation is still well described by this is an open question. Of course, action has to be taken in politics, decisions have to be made, and yet, it is striking how often one's own experience is incorporated into the communication of political decisions as a new strategy of political persuasion. Politicians today are by no means only people who hold the reins of power. More and more frequently, we encounter them as experiencing subjects—and they present this experience as an essential part of their politics.

This shift can also be seen in other TV formats. One particularly impressive example of this is a documentary about Kevin Kühnert—*Kevin Kühnert und die SPD*—that was broadcast on German television. In it, the young and aspiring politician of the German Social Democrats was accompanied by a camera over a long period of time, from the rebellious chairman of the party's youth or-

ganization, who stirred up trouble against established politicians, to the 2021 federal elections, when he took the important office of Secretary General. This documentary is not only interesting because it provides unusual and unvarnished insights into the everyday life of political Berlin, into the dreary offices and corridors of the party headquarters, and thus also capturing the dullness of politics, but above all because we can watch a politician constantly reacting in it—be it while being advised, listening to the speeches of others, or nervously awaiting election results. The self-expressive face in close-up, to which we are accustomed from sports, cinema, religion, or even pornography, is an integral part of this documentary. It adds something decisive to the action which results in a strange detachment of the face from the body and from the action (Deleuze/Guattari 176). As viewers, we are challenged to observe it as a separate screen with its own plot. For the viewers, this inevitably leads to a shift from understanding political messages to empathizing with the political protagonist. This is a development that can hardly be overestimated and which is by no means only visible in the exhibition of the self-expressive face. The following section will therefore focus on the spoken word and the immediacy of the voice, which has gained importance in the last few years due to the rise of podcasts.

Podcasts and the Suggestion of Immediacy

Podcasts as an information and entertainment medium have become significantly more important in the last few years and have spread accordingly. In Germany, 71% of the population over the age of 14 regularly listened to podcasts in 2023 (OAM 2023). It is therefore no longer a niche offering to be neglected but an essential part of the current media infrastructure (Spinelli/Dann). While research has already claimed that traditional radio has not only initiated a democratization but also an intimization of public speaking (Goodman 72), this development has intensified even further in recent years. Completely new forms of consumption can also be observed. In particular, the feeling of being isolated from the outside world induced by headphones with simultaneous freedom of movement and the strong focus on the voice has resulted in a reception that is perceived as particularly intimate and private (Lieberman/Schroeder/Amir; Rae). This gives listeners the feeling of being in an “intimate soundscape of their own choosing” (Lacey, 120).

These preliminary remarks are important because this perceived intimacy does indeed have an influence on political content and certainly has a new qual-

ity in the context of political information (MacDougal). The two podcasts *Alles gesagt?* and *Hotel Matze* are of particular relevance. Both formats are among the 25 most listened to podcasts in Germany in 2024 and are characterized by the fact that they cultivate a very personal way of speaking, for which the term "deep talk" has not coincidentally become established. In the *Hotel Matze* format, for example, all guests—even former Chancellor Olaf Scholz—are programmatically on a first-name basis and involved in a conversation situation that is reminiscent of either a therapeutic or a friendly conversation. In the *Alles gesagt?* format, on the other hand, food and drink are programmatically served during the conversation, which is deliberately intended to create an informal atmosphere. In addition, there are no length limits for the recordings; the end is determined by the guest's own choice of final words. This means that individual programs can be found in which politicians talk for a very long time—sometimes even for over six hours—about personal and biographical matters in addition to questions about realpolitik. We learn about our political personnel's favorite music, their favorite books, everyday family life, and last holiday.

Even the questions that politicians are confronted with in these podcast formats and to which they have to respond indicate changing expectations of political professionalism: "Do you allow yourself to do things like come home and moan?" (to Robert Habeck), "Who takes care of you?" (to former Federal Minister for Family Affairs Franziska Giffey), "What makes you happy?" (to former Minister of Health Jens Spahn) "Who was your first great love? (to the leader of the Green Party Ricarda Lang), "Why are you doing this to yourself?" (to Olaf Scholz). The special setting of podcasts makes it difficult for guests in these formats to escape such personal expectations and almost forces them to let their own person come to the fore. And it is precisely the reflection of one's own personal feelings that is almost expected in these special settings.

Moreover, politicians are by no means only appearing as guests in these formats. More and more politicians are now hosting their own formats: Angela Merkel, for example, launched the podcast *Angela Merkel – Die Kanzlerin direkt* during her time in office, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder launched the podcast *Die Agenda* long after his time in office, and Barack Obama recorded eight episodes of the *Renegades: Born in the USA* format together with Bruce Springsteen after his presidency. From the former German government, the above-mentioned Lars Klingbeil and Kevin Kühnert with their joint podcast (*Die K-Frage*) and the former Federal Minister of Finance Christian Lindner (*CL+*) should be mentioned.

The latter deserves special attention, as it features a then-serving minister leading a format in which he does not provide answers, as we are used to, but instead asks questions and responds to the answers of others (Müller/Séville 2022b). In his podcast, Lindner does not appear as an all-knowing expert but as an approachable questioner who is interested in an exchange with his guests from different areas of society. The conversation is intimate and the tone is personal and calm. Lindner follows up, asks attentive questions, and remembers what has been said. The very first question Lindner asked in the very first episode of his podcast was not by chance: “How do you see Germany? What do you feel when you tap into German society?”

It is precisely in such formats that new forms of sentimental leadership are emerging. Here, a new way of political communication is clearly being experimented with, in which a federal minister suddenly appears as a questioner and as a responder, interested in the answers of others. A willingness to react empathetically suddenly becomes more important than the ability to act—and is exhibited as such. There is no question that this is all well-calculated and staged accordingly. For our purposes, however, it is important to see what the staging draws attention to. And here, politicians increasingly appear as figures who are to a certain extent exposed to world events themselves, who have questions for others, who listen attentively, and who are sometimes at a loss themselves.

Show Your Wounds: Social Media Apostasy as a Political Statement

This shift from political action to political experience can only be hinted at here and needs to be investigated further. However, it is quite apparent that politicians are currently revealing their own felt experience more and more frequently and are making it an issue in the first place. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the numerous complaints about the loss of respect for political staff and about the sharp deterioration of manners, particularly in social media. A whole series of well-known politicians have therefore recently decided to turn their backs on social media. One of the first among these was Robert Habeck, who became a Twitter defector with a long statement on his own homepage with great publicity and aplomb. Habeck was devastated to discover changes in his behavior and communication that—as he felt—urgently needed to be addressed. Not only had Twitter left him increasingly disoriented and unfocused. What is more, it had awakened base instincts in him that fundamentally contradicted his political self-image. The medium’s technical nature encourages a certain “loudness” and a form of communicative

escalation that even if one would like to avoid it, is extremely difficult to escape in practical use:

Twitter, like no other digital medium, is so aggressive and in no other medium is there so much hatred, malice, and agitation. Apparently, Twitter triggers something in me: to be more aggressive, louder, more polemical and more pointed—and all this at a speed that makes it hard to leave room for reflection. Apparently, I am not immune to it. Yet politically, this is not my thing, more like the exact opposite. (Habeck 2019, translation J. M.)

Habeck was not the only one to withdraw from Twitter—other politicians such as Kevin Kühnert, Jens Spahn, or Saskia Esken or media professionals such as Ulf Poschardt or Jakob Augstein followed him shortly afterwards.⁷ All of the publicly stated explanations given for this step emphasized the deformations caused by the medium. Obviously, there has been criticism of the media from politicians before; however, the current stories of retreat from social media take on a decidedly different form. They are formulated less generally and instead highlight the negative transformations of the users themselves caused by the medium. Ferocity and harshness are not abstract phenomena but rather very concrete changes in behavior the politicians were shocked to notice in themselves. These public statements are especially interesting because they are not primarily a criticism of the circumstances but a publicly presented form of self-criticism. In my opinion, this clearly demonstrates a new form of sentimental leadership.

Everyday political work is no longer portrayed as rosy and politicians have long since ceased to present themselves mainly as energetic and self-confident but rather as vulnerable. Anyone who takes careful note of the many podcasts, documentaries, and self-reports will encounter actors who no longer conceal exhausting working conditions and their personal struggles. When Kevin Kühnert describes his work schedule to the host of the *Hotel Matze* podcast and talks about short nights, being tired and bullied by schedules, he feels the need to clarify that these are all self-imposed burdens difficult to reconcile with buzz-words such as self-care or work-life balance:

7 Not all of them kept up their Twitter withdrawal and are now active again. This even includes Robert Habeck, who announced his return to Twitter, now X, in November 2024 with the statement "back for good" and shared a video that demonstrates sentimental leadership in an almost exaggerated way.

This is, of course, a completely prehistoric and archaic idea of how to deal with human resources. Of course, this also ensures that a certain type of person who is more careful with himself or herself may not even consider getting involved in politics at this level; there are also those, however, who go into politics with noble aspirations and want to be very careful with themselves and then at some point change their nature and say, okay, I can now choose between either taking on more political responsibility and treating myself differently, more ruthlessly, or maintaining my standards towards myself, my family, and my friends but then also having less political influence because there is a glass ceiling that I simply can't get through. So, when it gets to the level of ministerial posts or similar positions, then we are talking about this kind of absorption of everything, yes, this culture of official travel in the international arena at the moment, where you fly through the night and then you are at the state reception at eight in the morning, and then you go back the next night. This is incompatible with notions of self-care. [Host: But that is total shit!] Yes, it is.⁸

In the course of the conversation, Kühnert describes political work as an activity that absorbs everything private that, at a certain level, one cannot escape. Kühnert, but also other politicians, paint a picture of *politics as a tough vocation*. All of this should not be too easily dismissed as whining and lamentation;⁹ rather, it is important and an urgent task for the social sciences to scrutinize the causes and perhaps also the necessity of such public appearances.

Conclusion

The display of one's sentiments, to sum up, is connected to a central tension in contemporary politics. Political actors themselves strive to live up to the expectations of being both factual, distanced professionals and at the same time close and approachable human beings. It is precisely this simultaneity of expectations that is problematized in many of the examples given. All this not only changes the appearance of politics at present, it also has serious consequences for our idea of political representation: Representation is increasingly

8 Kevin Kühnert in the podcast *Hotel Matze*, April 6, 2022 (at minute 1:19:10, translation J. M.).

9 It is worth mentioning that Kevin Kühnert announced his retirement from politics after this text was written—for health reasons.

coming into focus as the actions and experiences of individual, emotional, and vulnerable individuals. The display of one's sentiments seems to respond to the demands of political representation under the conditions of social media, of permanent communication, and permanent commentary. The image of the unempathetic professional politician, removed from the problems of everyday life, is increasingly countered with sentimental expressions of one's own personal vulnerability. This appeal to a general sense of humanity could also provide an antidote to the widely proclaimed hatred of politics (Hay).

It should not go unmentioned here that this revelation of one's own sentiments comes at a price. As progressive as it may seem to be allowed to be human in office, being human does not only involve a lot of work, it also entails some risks. It is important to remember that the impersonal office has always served as a form of protection of the individual. Politicians today, however, may even need to be reminded of the necessity and the benefits of the *body politic*. Quite tellingly for the proposition of this article, the abovementioned podcast with Kevin Kühnert ended as follows, which clearly should give us food for thought.

Host: "Kevin, thank you very much for your visit. I was very, very pleased that you were here. And I had the feeling that it was not a politician sitting here."

Kühnert: "Oh, how nice. That's a lovely compliment."¹⁰

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Sentimental Authority

America's National Poets Laureate

Harald Zapf

“The idea of democracy corresponds to the absence of leadership,” Hans Kelsen writes in his *Essence and Value of Democracy* (87). “Yet,” he concedes, “the democratic freedom ideal, the absence of rule and, hence, of leadership, cannot be realized even approximately; social reality is rule and leadership” (87–8). The U.S., it seems, did not want to settle for this social reality and therefore created an office that is more in accordance with the idea of democracy, a high position analogous to the presidency but also somewhat different. Signifying similarity and difference, the acronyms POTUS and PLOTUS highlight that these effulgent posts mutually add luster to each other: the qualities of leadership and authority, respectively. POTUS, the President of the United States, is a powerful leader; PLOTUS, the Poet Laureate of the United States, is a respected authority partly conceptualized after America's leader. Following Hannah Arendt, one could say that leadership rules on the basis of power, whereas authority metaphorically rules on the basis of recognition. “When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power,’” Arendt writes in her seminal text *On Violence*, “we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes” (1969, 44). A leader leads in the name of his people and depends on their existence; an authority does not necessarily act in the name of a group but depends on people's recognition. “To remain in authority,” Arendt says, “requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter” (45). In reality, there are no clear-cut distinctions between the two, Arendt admits: “Thus institutionalized power in organized communities often appears in the guise of authority, demanding instant, unquestioning recognition; no so-

ciety could function without it” (46). In this blurry societal sphere, we also find America’s national poets laureate, who are authorities rather than leaders.

In this contribution, I am not going to say much about U.S. poets laureate on subnational levels, such as U.S. state, county, or civic poets laureate. I will focus on the positions National Youth Poet Laureate and Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, and I will, from an inter-American perspective, zoom in on two poets who held these positions, two firsts: Amanda Gorman, who was named the first National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017, and Juan Felipe Herrera, the first Latinx PLOTUS, who served two terms from 2015 to 2017. Further, I will question whether poet laureate positions were a desideratum when the first of these national offices was established in the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century, and I will argue that the American attempt to dignify poetry with a national office devalues the office of the poet. Finally, I will take an asentimental but not entirely unpassionate look at the democratic system of literature and its power in general.

The U.S. poet laureate positions run on emotion. Clearly, they were not primarily established for practical but for sentimental reasons: They can be seen as exaggerated manifestations of prevalent sentiments, of opinions about or feelings toward poetry, feelings of sadness and nostalgia in the 20th and 21st centuries in America, sadness about the alleged unimportance of poets and poetry, and nostalgia for a time when “everyone” purportedly “recognized the value of poetry,” when poets supposedly mattered and were still revered as eminent public voices (Lipking 1050). Charging poetry with emotion, the U.S. poet laureateships are founded on, and inflate, sentimental feelings and ideas about tradition, usefulness, and authority.

Located in the hybrid realm where the political arena overlaps the poetic field, the positions are rooted in nostalgic internationalism, Anglo-American national conservatism (the belief in national independence and national institutions), as well as vague notions of the Great American Empire. Derived from the Latin *poeta laureatus*, but not only etymologically linked to the Roman Empire, the U.S. poet laureateships recover, mildly modernize, preserve, and continue traditions that go back to ancient Greece and Rome, to Francesco Petrarca, who was crowned poet laureate in 1342, and to the royal office of poet laureate in England, which dates from the appointment of John Dryden in 1668. In the U.S., we learn in the History-of-the-Position section of the website of the Library of Congress, whose Librarian annually appoints the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, the position of PLOTUS has existed under two sepa-

rate honorific titles: from 1937 to 1986 as “Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress,” and from 1986 to present as “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry.”

In the U.K., the post of official poet sentimentalizes poets and poetry to a much lesser degree than the American positions do. The Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom is one of Her/His Majesty’s craftspeople, approved by the Queen or the King acting on the advice of Her/His Majesty’s Government. Some of these craftsmen are manufacturers of waterproof and protective clothing, like Barbour, some are bootmakers, such as John Lobb, and others, like Simon Armitage, are makers of poems, of poems with a Royal Warrant, so to speak. In the U.K., the poet laureate is—and I will get back to this distinction below—*artifex*, not, as the poet laureate in the U.S., *auctor*. In the U.K., poet laureate is a more understated, less pretentious position than in the United States. The incumbent is “simply” a purveyor of poetic goods, a wordsmith by the grace of Her/His Majesty, not the Queen or King of Poetry, whereas in the U.S., poet laureate is a more modern but also more pompous job, trying to seem more important than it really is: Romanticized and glorified as PLOTUS, the U.S. poet laureate is the Poetry President of America. Recently, things have changed a bit. The Library of Congress might have become aware of the pomposity and no longer foregrounds the POTUS/PLOTUS analogy, but the acronym is still implied and continues to be meaningful. PLOTUS, the unofficial abbreviation for Poet Laureate of the United States, is analogous to POTUS, but other than the President of the United States, the U.S. poet laureate is not really in a powerful position of authority. Poets laureate might be considered leading authorities in the field of literature, but they are not leaders, they are not given real authority over anything or anyone, they do not have the authority of a censor, for example, or the authority to enforce rules. They have to exercise their authority in other ways. They also exercise, I argue, a different kind of authority, which could be called sentimental authority. Endowed with this special power, these poets are sometimes patronizingly brought together with more powerful people. Amanda Gorman, for example, “introduced secretary Hillary Clinton at the 2017 Global Leadership Awards, was celebrated by First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House, and performed at the Library of Congress with U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’ (Urban Word). But compared to powerful positions in national politics or the country’s economy, compared with POTUS or with CEOs of the giant tech companies, for example, American poets laureate are powerless dwarfs.

Virtually powerless, but recognized as the experts and public intellectuals that they are, poets laureate are also expected to serve a useful function

and to contribute something to society. The National Youth Poet Laureate Program—an initiative of Urban Word, a youth literary arts organization collaborating with local arts and literary organizations, Arts Councils, and library systems—celebrates “youth poets who are committed to” more than just poetry (Urban Word). On the Urban Word website we read that “judges for the annual competition follow a rubric to guide their selection of a National Youth Poet Laureate” that not only “exemplifies literary excellence,” but “civic engagement, and social impact, demonstrated by a poetry portfolio, a civic engagement brag sheet where finalists explain the nature and impact of their civic slash community work, and two short essays.” So “[a]ll of the poets” are “judged on their artistic excellence, as well as their commitment to civic engagement, youth leadership and social impact” (Urban Word). In April 2017, when “nineteen-year-old Amanda Gorman of Los Angeles was named” the “country’s inaugural National Youth Poet Laureate,” she was not only presented as a poet, but as a speaker and community leader, who “worked with the LA commission on Human Relations to develop youth programs” and to “conduct a county-wide library tour” (Urban Word). Gorman is also “the founder and executive director of the organization One Pen One Page, which promotes literacy among youth through creative writing programming, an online magazine, and advocacy initiatives” (Urban Word).

Today, we can only imagine what the 19th-century American aestheticist, poet-critic, and writer of prose fiction Edgar Allan Poe would have said about all this: “heresy of *The Didactic*,” I think, would not have been his surliest response and most unfavorable or disparaging comment (Poe 75). Poet Walt Whitman, however, probably would have approved and would have considered all that an affirmation of his belief that poets are of use. Whitman charged usefulness with emotion, for example in his extremely enthusiastic poem “I Hear America Singing,” which was first published, as No. 20 of “Chants Democratic,” in the 1860-edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In a historical moment of crisis, when the War Between the States was imminent, Whitman—an impassioned and radiant poet of excitement, to whom flat and blunted affect, *Cool Conduct* or the *Culture of Distance* in Lethen’s sense, were alien—strengthened the Union through the image of workmen and workwomen building America and so being of use. By emphasizing usefulness, Whitman demonstrated that he was a poet in the Platonic tradition, which is very strong in the U.S. Following its common thread, usefulness, one can trace it from early American writing to contemporary American literature, from the 18th to the 21st century, as the following four examples, one per century, show. In 1782, in his pamphlet “Infor-

mation to *Those Who Would Remove to America*,” Benjamin Franklin counts “strangers, possessing talents in the belles-lettres, fine arts, etc.” as “improper persons” and discourages them from trying to become citizens of the new republic by telling them that almost no one there needed or could pay for their products: “paintings, statues, architecture, and the other works of art, that are more curious than useful” (456–7). Walt Whitman, as if he had to justify himself to Franklin, claims in his 1855-preface to *Leaves of Grass* that poets “are of use” (Whitman 2005, 19). With his 1965-poem “Black Art,” LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka implicitly counters Franklin and supports his great 19th-century precursor, Walt Whitman, in his view that poets and poems “are useful” (116). Alluding to the 19th-century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson with her essay “The American Scholar Now,” Marilynne Robinson, in 2018, succinctly describes the old problem with the Platonic tradition: “The arts have been under attack since Plato at least, on the grounds that they had no useful role in society” (92–3). The tremendous force of this utilitarian ideology can be experienced in Rebecca Solnit’s book about *Orwell’s Roses*, where she defends the arts against this attack but succumbs to the Platonic pull herself when she foregrounds the compensatory function of art (cf. 91ff). The U.S. poet laureate positions are also deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition. They participate in and continue the dominant tradition of American poetry: the Emersonian-Whitmanian one, which is in the tradition of *poésie engagée*. Think of the National Youth Poet Laureate Program’s focus on engagement, for example! As follows up to Whitman and his romanticized depiction of usefulness, the U.S. poets laureate glorify usefulness. The American laureate positions are to uphold Whitman’s Platonic belief that the poet is of use. “As the nation’s official poet,” we read on the Library of Congress website, “the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry.” What we can see here is that the position of poet laureate may push poets “toward the ‘practical,’ narrowly conceived: the instrumental, the utilitarian” (Deresiewicz 2022, 87), but it seems to do so for poetry’s sake.

The U.S. poet laureateship is a paradoxical institution: It makes, to a certain extent, poetry and the poet heteronomous again while trying to conserve the modern idea of artistic autonomy, an idea recently summarized quite well by William Deresiewicz:

art as an autonomous realm of meaning making, not subordinate to the old powers of church and king or the new powers of politics and the market, be-

holden to no authority, no ideology, and no master. I mean the notion that the artist's job is not to entertain the audience or flatter its beliefs, not to praise the Lord, the group, or the sports drink, but to speak a new truth. (Deresiewicz 2020, 10)

The strong feeling—originated in Europe at the end of the 18th century, arguably on the wane now but still prevalent—that modern art and artists are supposed to be free is not to be hurt by the U.S. poet laureate. As far as this sentiment is concerned, the American public is not supposed to suffer any serious harm. America is supposed to have an affective experience of sympathy and patriotism when it comes to its national poet, and the poet laureate should not suffer major restrictions or have to work under constraint. Therefore, the U.S. poet laureateship affirms the traditional American ideals of independence and freedom.

This is arguably the major reason why the work of poets laureate in the U.S. is less service-, event-, and occasion-oriented than that of the U.K. poet laureate, for example, which, as a position or office, is not as modern as the one in America. In the U.K., it is not unusual that the poet laureate produces occasional poems, as Simon Armitage did on September 13, 2022, when he published a poem marking the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In the U.S., however, occasional poems by an incumbent or by a former poet laureate, such as Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, are the exception rather than the rule; in fact, Amanda Gorman, whose presence and performance graced the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president, was only the second former national poet laureate ever to assume the role of inaugural poet. The first one, Robert Frost, was also former, not incumbent poet laureate when he acted as John F. Kennedy's inaugural poet on January 20, 1961, exactly 60 years before Gorman. Only two former national poets laureate have ever been inaugural poets, and no incumbent U.S. poet laureate has ever performed this role, neither Richard Eberhart, Mona Van Duyn, Robert Hass, Kay Ryan, Natasha Trethewey, Joy Harjo, nor Meera Dasgupta, to name only those who were in office when the inaugural poems were performed by other poets. The fact that there have only been six inaugural poets (Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams, Elizabeth Alexander, Richard Franco, Amanda Gorman) for four Democratic Presidents (Kennedy, Clinton, Obama, Biden) in all of U.S. history, and that all of them, except Frost, performed their "useful" function in the last 30 years, shows us that the country does not really have a long-standing, strong tradition of this type of occasional poem, which works, by

the way, primarily because of its particular occasion; especially so on January 20, 2021, when we saw, heard, and listened to Amanda Gorman, a veritable *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which perfectly fit, with its wonderful synthesis of artistic and non-artistic features, the occasion on that particular day in U.S. history, after the January 6 Capitol riot and after Trump had lost the presidential election to Biden. The fact remains that the U.S. poet laureate's duties do not include writing occasional poems.

On its website, the Library of Congress emphasizes that it “keeps to a minimum the specific duties of the poet laureate in order to afford incumbents maximum freedom to work on their own projects while at the Library.” In the History-of-the-Position section we read that “[t]he original duties of the consultant in poetry differed greatly from the current duties of the poet laureate. [...] Over the years, the position gradually placed less emphasis on developing the Library’s collections and more on organizing local poetry readings, lectures, conferences, and outreach programs. The poet laureate,” it says on the website, “gives an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry at the Library of Congress.” When it mentions that “[e]ach poet laureate brings a different emphasis to the position,” the Library of Congress highlights individuality without encouraging deviancy.

It is not completely unthinkable but highly unlikely that a chosen national poet, such as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry or the National Youth Poet Laureate, will ever be a total outsider, a completely disturbing and disquieting poet, a real *poète maudit*, an ostracized poet, one of those who are always at odds or in trouble with Power and Society, as Alfred de Vigny’s character Stello describes it: “of the three forms of Power, the first is afraid of us, the second scorns us as useless, the third one hates us and tries to pull us down [...] Are we, then, the eternal Pariahs of society?” (193) American poets laureate are meant to be different. They are supposed to be of use to the U.S. It is expected that they are good poets for the common good. They should definitely *not* do more harm than good, as Amiri Baraka did in 2002, when he attacked America from the subnational position of Poet Laureate of New Jersey, a post abolished in 2003 because of Baraka, who evinced and created destructive emotions, and, of course, because of his incendiary 9/11 poem that supposedly reeks of harmfulness, badness, ugliness, and falsehood. There is probably an unwritten rule in official verse culture that authors of such poems must never become U.S. poet laureate. The honorary title of national poet laureate implicitly commits the incumbent to the three “supreme kinds of value,” to beauty, truth, and good (Tatarkiewicz 1), especially the public good, thereby eclipsing the fact that art

can also be, or is essentially, amoral. The position of poet laureate reductively glorifies a specific image and social role of the poet. The U.S. poet laureate is an amalgam of artist and sage, of civil servant and civil seer, a citizen-prophet, “a person gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression,” maybe even someone “who speaks by divine inspiration” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, “prophet”).

A national poet laureateship is arguably the highest honor official American Verse Culture can bestow upon an individual poet, who is given sentimental authority over nothing in particular, in nostalgic remembrance of the archetypal lauded poet of an idealized past, when poets supposedly still mattered. U.S. poets laureate are incumbent beacons in “sad” modern times of poetry’s alleged unimportance and disappreciation. They might even be considered priceless, not least because of their sentimental value, but also because they support what John Agresto recently called “the two most important parts of American life—the growth of ourselves as individuals and the betterment of our country” (xiii). Both parts were charmingly played by Juan Felipe Herrera.

In 2015, the bilingual Latino poet, performance artist, and activist became the first Latinx PLOTUS. The appointment of Juan Felipe Herrera as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry turned this post into a truly transnational position that subverted narrow chauvinistic notions of the U.S. and reflected the “plural cultural-political matrix” of the Americas (Feinsod 9). Herrera—the son of migrant Mexican farmworkers, born in Fowler, California, educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Stanford University, and the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop—was named California’s poet laureate in 2012 and then served as U.S. poet laureate. Herrera rose from subnational to national authority, from a respected authority rooted in a particular minority verse culture to the representative authority of official American verse culture.

In 2018, in a patriotic children’s book titled after its refrain, *Imagine*, Herrera depicts his ascending career path—from humble nonnational origins to a high national position of authority—as an American success story of upward mobility, as a hopeful tale of achievement meant to inspire kids, a story that climaxes with the following passage, which unsurprisingly comes toward the end of the unpaginated picture book:

If I stood up
wearing a robe
in front of my familia and many more
on the high steps

of the Library of Congress
 in Washington, D.C., and
 read out loud and signed
 my poetry book
 like this —
 Poet Laureate of the United States of America

The office of official U.S. poet has obviously shaped Herrera, but apparently without obliterating his moderately insurgent feelings and counterdiscursive habitus: Deliberately targeting or unintentionally undermining the political discourse of the 2018-POTUS, he integrated the Spanish word “familia” into the English text so that it almost naturally fits in with its environment, like other Spanish-American elements naturally fit into the U.S., the text subtly implies. Right next to this text in verse, on the facing page, one of Lauren Castillo’s less realistic than idealizing illustrations shows Juan Felipe Herrera in an elevated position, surrounded by a halo of light, dressed in a robe, standing behind a lectern, beside the U.S. flag, addressing an audience with his hands raised like a priest in a place of worship. The young reader then turns the page and is uplifted by the book’s final words: “imagine what you could do” (Herrera 2018).

What we get here is the poet as authorized presenter and useful speaker of particular myths, ideologies, and discourses that have achieved the status of official lies, which is a negative—Greek, or Platonic—aspect of authority. In his book *The Hatred of Literature*, William Marx reminds us that not all poets were considered harmful to Plato’s republic:

Socrates admits that a certain kind of poetry is useful: [...] one authorized by the state [...]. What is at issue here is strictly power and authority: the lies of poetry are dangerous not because every lie is dangerous, but because every lie is dangerous when it is not told by the state. [...] Significantly, it is not poetry itself that is condemned, but the poets, who are criticized for a lack of authority, in the strongest sense of the term: they are not authorized to lie [...]. (Marx 33)

With the ex-PLOTUS’s authority to “lie” Herrera presents his motivational narrative in *Imagine*, this realization-of-the-American-Dream story, as only a humble example for almost unimaginable possibilities. His career development from simple farmhand to supreme poet reminds us of Walt Whitman, whom Harold Bloom called “our national poet” (5). The foregrounding of

Herrera's humble background evokes Whitman's preface to the 1855-edition of *Leaves of Grass*, where the author romantically says that "the genius of the United States is [...] always most in the common people" (Whitman 2005, 6). Whitman's U.S. poet much less resembles a monotheistic ruler than one of the Roman gods, who, as Hannah Arendt wrote in her essay on authority, "have authority among, rather than power over, men" (2006, 123). Whitman had what Hannah Arendt called the "awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power," and he established the American poet as the nation's most important authority (141).

In his first term as U.S. poet laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera used his authority to create "*La Casa de Colores* [...], a [...] project he described as 'a house for all voices,'" the Library of Congress's website tells us in its Poet-Laureate-Projects section. One of the features of Herrera's inclusion-oriented project was "*La Familia* (The Family)." In "*La Familia*," he evinced a patriarchal authority, invited guests to his online-house, and encouraged them to write poems about specific topics. Here, Herrera openly exercised his authority, "authority" in the sense of Hannah Arendt. I think that Arendt's lucid explanations perfectly capture the social situation of Herrera's poet laureate project. Here is Arendt:

Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (92–3) [...] Authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom [...]. (Arendt 2006, 105)

The contributors to Herrera's project were neither coerced nor persuaded to participate. They were free to follow his commands with the obedience that the authority of the U.S. poet laureate demanded. The project initiated by the authority is more important than the product crafted by the contributors. The "author," as Hannah Arendt defines the word in the Roman sense, is in the foreground. "In order to understand more concretely what it meant to be in authority," Arendt writes,

it may be useful to notice that the word *auctores* can be used as the very opposite of the *artifices*, the actual builders and makers, and this is precisely when the word *auctor* signifies the same thing as our “author.” [...] The author in this case is not the builder but the one who inspired the whole enterprise and whose spirit, therefore, much more than the spirit of the actual builder, is represented in the building itself. In distinction to the *artifex*, “who only made it, he is the actual ‘author’ of the building, namely its founder; with it he has become an ‘augmenter’ of the city. (122) [...] It is in this context that word and concept of authority originally appeared. The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, ‘augment,’ and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation. (121)

The 21st poet laureate of the United States of America was the “author”—*auctor*, “the one who inspired the whole enterprise,” not *artifex*—of the building he founded in 2015 and named *La Casa de Colores* (122); “with it he” (122)—who “stood up,” as he says in his children’s book *Imagine*, “on the high steps / of the Library of Congress / in Washington, D.C.” (Herrera 2018)—“has become an ‘augmenter’ of the city,” the capital that synecdochically stands for the nation and the American Empire (Arendt 2006, 122); “with it he” has also become an augmenter by placing the United States within the wider context of the hemisphere and beyond (122); and with his “house for all voices,” he has also asserted his authority by augmenting the Whitmanian foundation (Library of Congress, n.d.). Herrera’s initiative, this “house,” is a truly Whitmanian project in the line of tradition of the foundational American poet’s preface to *Leaves of Grass* and his poem “I Hear America Singing.” In both Whitman’s poem and Herrera’s project, the authority figure of the author is primarily a perceiver of colorful poetic utterance by the American people. But the speaker of Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” only talks about “the varied carols I hear” and lists their singers (Whitman 2002, 12), whereas Herrera’s project really presents their “songs.” Herrera’s “La Familia” looks like the realization of a project for which he might have drawn inspiration from Walt Whitman’s foundational American *Naissance* poem.

Poet laureate in the U.S. is a *Re-Naissance* post, based on the sentimental myth of a Golden Age and on a significant revival of ancient Greece and Rome. The sentimental authority of the U.S. poet laureate has, one could say, a Roman (up)side and a Greek (down)side. Advocates of literary autonomy and a free Republic of Letters are probably prone to subscribe to Hannah Arendt, who not only writes that “the concept of authority [...] is exclusively Roman,” but also

adds: “at least in its positive aspect” (2006, 106). One may consider the Roman kind of authority we detect in the position of the poet laureate of the United States not only as an unproblematic but even as a positive feature, whereas one might see the Greek features—poetry and poets are supposed to be useful, the authorized poet in the republic has to be a state poet—as less positive and more problematic. Both sides were already there in the depiction of the poet by the foundational U.S.-American writer Walt Whitman, who founded, or at least cofounded, the democratic tradition of poetry in the U.S., a tradition that still dominates contemporary American verse. As I showed above, authority does not only have a dark, Greek side but also a light, Roman side. Some, myself included, certainly think that the Greek side predominates here and that the Roman merits do not outweigh the Greek disadvantages. Others might assess the combination of factors differently or make a considered judgment about the two sides without seeing any demerits at all.

In conclusion, I strike a less ambivalent and decidedly more negative note by looking at America’s national poets laureate from two different aspects, democracy and power, with reference to the social system of literature in general. It is interesting to see that there is a noticeably large number of democratic countries without a poet laureate position, in fact most of them do not have such a position. This is not particularly astonishing, because a non-elected pseudopresidential office holder is an anomaly in democratic nations. The “adult” U.S. poet laureate is an anachronism in this day and age. With its sentimental, nostalgic value, the office of U.S. poet laureate is a relic of the non-democratic past that does not fit into a democracy and that does not really have a rightful place in the democratic institution of literature either, an institution ruled by what Jacques Derrida called *tout dire*, the principle that everything and anything can be said, “with a sense of exhausting a totality” and “without constraints on what one may say,” an institution without the need for pseudopresidents or pseudopresidential power (36). America’s national poet laureate offices, youth and “adult,” these comparatively unimportant jobs, these positions endowed, at best, with symbolic power, disguise and minimize literature’s true power and importance. By trying to make poetry great again, by trying to make poetry matter more now, the national poet laureate sentimentalizes the transnational social system of literature, a system that, in reality, has always been synchronically dominated by its environment, by more powerful social systems in our societies, such as politics and law. Whether sentimentalization leads to a significant increase in poetry’s power, importance, and value is debatable and doubtful, though. It is also question-

able, if such an increase via sentimentalization is necessary at all. Because as long as individual texts are not erased, as long as the symbolic systems of literature survive their own time of production as well as subsequent acts of being banned, blacklisted, censored, “ameliorated,” etc., and as long as the archive remains intact over time, literature wins anyway, hands down, so to speak. The power and importance of the social system of literature increases with time, which can be demonstrated by referring to the centenary of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 2022. The legal and socio-political issues that led to a ban on the book, even before it was published in 1922, and the fact that this literary milestone was once suppressed by court order are only of historical relevance today. That “a panel of three judges,” “[f]ollowing a complaint by the secretary of the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice,”—Catherine Flynn writes in her introduction to *The Cambridge Centenary Ulysses*—“ruled that the novel was obscene according to the Hicklin test,” that it supposedly “had the tendency ‘to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences,’” and that ten years later, in 1932, the official order was “a ban only in name in the United States” are historically interesting pieces of information (4–5), but also just details of yet another case that can be filed away under the pleonastic rubric *Ridiculous Censorship*. Diachronically seen, more than one hundred years later, this classic case of censorship shows us that literature is generally more powerful and important than the social systems of law and politics, which is unintentionally made so opaque by the U.S. poet laureate offices as to be difficult to perceive or understand. The social system of literature does not really need poets laureate, but some nations obviously continue to believe that a poet laureate is more than a nice-to-have and that they serve a useful purpose, which, as far as the U.S. are concerned, cannot be completely dismissed. The office of poet laureate may contribute to the United States’ greater glory, but it does not, one could argue, do the same for poetry. Instead of achieving its intended effect, instead of elevating the image of poets and poetry, the office belittles them by forcing the hierarchical structure of other social systems on them, which makes poets look weak, in comparison to real leaders, national political leaders, for example, such as the U.S. president. The offices Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry and National Youth Poet Laureate create delusions of grandeur that blur the real power of poetry: its diachronic power, which is a big asset of literature in general. Synchronically, literature often loses, but diachronically, chances are, it will emerge victorious.

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The Function of Tears in U.S. Politics

Fact and Fiction

Carmen Birkle

Introducing Tears

Tears are a manifestation of human emotions and express sadness, mourning and despair, anger and rage, happiness and joy, envy and jealousy. They represent both pain and pleasure. They usually roll down people's faces spontaneously and can often hardly be controlled. They seem to suggest weakness as well as relief. However, they can also be produced deliberately and used to manipulate others, because tears are often taken to be authentic, are likely to arouse sympathy in the observer, and can motivate listeners to more easily accept and follow the tear producer's aims. In politics, in particular, shedding tears falls into the category of what Heike Paul (2021) calls "civil sentimentalism" because, like the tears in the early 19th-century sentimental novel, they may have—or be intended to have—a political effect. Moreover, crying is considered to be gendered; as the common saying goes, "boys don't cry" but girls—and women—seem to do so easily. However, as I will show, this engendering of tears is hardly ever as clear-cut and binary as it may traditionally seem. Tears that are shed in the political arena by politicians or those in the political limelight take on a number of functions that range from emotional bonding via the creation of authenticity to manipulation and more. My selection criteria for the following examples are that in the chosen instances the crying happens in public and is noticeable by everyone present and that the person who cries is an obviously public figure with a leadership position in politics. In addition, all events that I will analyze include in some way or other elements of mourning.

In the following, I will start out by briefly discussing the philosophy, literature, and language of tears. I will then first move on to an analysis of Hillary

Clinton's concession speech and her reference to her dead mother; my second example will be Barack Obama's crying after a high-school massacre mourning the many dead children, and third, and finally, a fictional politician's publicly tearing up at a funeral, namely Claire Underwood in the Netflix series *House of Cards* (2013–18), will conclude my analysis of tears in U.S. politics. I will discuss their crying in public as a political tool alongside its effects on their respective audiences. I will use some concepts taken from visual culture studies, affect theory, and Michel Foucault's theory of power to discuss what political tears and "political emotions" (Nussbaum) tell us about the relationship between gender, power, and the state to figure out the work that they do (see Ahmed 14).

The Philosophy and Literature of Tears

As Tom Lutz argues in his popular book *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (2001), "until recently tears have been remarkably neglected as a subject of investigation. No lamentology or lacrimology has developed, no academic fields devoted to their study, no science of tears" (18–19). Yet, while tears are academically under-researched, moments of crying are paramount in, as Lutz shows, "poetic, fictional, dramatic, and cinematic representations of the human proclivity to weep" (19). Tears can be taken as visible and tangible signs of strong feelings that can be provoked by a variety of causes. The question is how we, as listeners, on-lookers, or bystanders, read the tears that are shed, since they, at least for a moment, suspend words. Moreover, which effect do they have on us? The decoding can never be done other than from the decoders' positions and, thus, with their respective backgrounds in mind (see Hall). As Lutz concludes, "no simple translation of the language of tears is ever possible" (25). Also, tears do not mean the same things at all times. They are culturally contingent, and their effects and meanings, at least to some extent, change over time as well as across cultures.¹

1 David A. Bell maintains, when discussing charisma as one form of emotion, that "[i]t is important to emphasize here that emotions, like everything else, have a history. They obviously have a physiological basis as well, but culture shapes the way people understand, process, and control their emotional reactions, including how they come to consider some reactions natural and legitimate and others shameful or harmful. Historians and psychologists even speak of different 'emotional regimes,' which can succeed one another in historical time" (16). Because of the emotions' history, it is important to

Moreover, the reading of tears depends very much on the understanding and perception of gender in a specific society. If sex is understood as a binary system, in the sense of Thomas Laqueur's "two-sex model" with assumed essential biological differences, then gender, as a socio-cultural construction, often, and still today, wrongfully based on the biological male-female dichotomy, depicts specific feminine and masculine qualities that are attributed to gender's sexual counterparts. In spite of a diversity of genders in the 21st century, masculinity defined as representing strength and control of emotions and femininity associated with weakness and a pronounced emotionality still often prescribe how people are expected to behave in private and in public. As a result, tears in public are usually understood as signs of weakness; therefore, men should not cry, and if they do, they are considered effeminate and weak. Do women cry as an expression of weakness and powerlessness? Tears seem to indicate a contrast to reason and rationality, a cool mind always in control. Tears reflect emotionality, spontaneity, and, seemingly, a loss of control.

There appears to be a shift from the Age of Sensibility in England, which followed and in part ran parallel to the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, where men and women seemed to be allowed to cry in public to express true virtue,² to a situation with clear-cut gender binaries and gender-specific imaginaries that emerged in the course of the 19th century, beginning with American sentimental fiction that addressed mostly women. This shift shows how important it is to contextualize a reading of tears, whether shed in public or depicted in literature, such as, toward the end of the century, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which depicts a woman with a strong imagination and her husband, a doctor, who is afraid of emotions, fancy, and anything that cannot be touched and controlled. Yet, before this shift took center stage, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, as early as 1789, reflected on sympathy and sentiment as even leading to incest. As Jay Fliegelman explains,

contextualize crying in public and show that it is very different according to its cultural contexts but that it also has structural similarities.

- 2 See Samuel Richardson's sentimental fiction, *Pamela* (1740) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54), and, above all, Henry Mackenzie's most influential novel of sentiment *The Man of Feeling* (1771), a deliberately fragmented series of loosely connected episodes, in which the protagonist Harley demonstrates benevolence and often tearful sensibility; see also Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) with the narrator Parson Yorick often being moved to tears.

[d]isease, according to Dr. Benjamin Rush, was less a matter of internal malfunction than it was of external interference. Sympathy made man vulnerable not only to the misrepresentations of fraudulent beggars and petitioners playing on the automatic moral sense, but to the tyrannical “disease” of draining excitations and constant feeling and sensation. By making the heart sensitive, it had become as vulnerable as the impressionable mind to the enthrallments of the world. Like laughter or yawning, sympathy and compassion were seen as “contagious.” (Fliegelman 232)

Charles Dickens frequently had his characters weep in his novels. It is only in the late 19th and 20th centuries that tears became suspicious (Paul 2021, 17).

Viewers and listeners do not only bring their own perspectives to what is regarded as a performance; they are also potentially drawn into this spectacle and may begin to share the weeper’s emotions. The performative quality of publicly shedding tears can be likened to a theater performance. As Erika Fischer-Lichte claims, such a performance assumes “the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” (164). I extend this claim of co-presence to the realm of audio-visual transmissions of such events so that viewers are co-present with the weeper but “behind the scenes” and literally in front of the screen. An analysis of what can be seen on the screen is an analysis of visual culture, which is, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues, “the visual construction of the social” (170). And yet, co-presence takes on different qualities. Tears can be—but often are not—part of a prepared script. Being moved to tears by someone else’s tears establishes a close connection between “actor” and audience which comes across as an embodied act, yet removed from the immediate scene. This particular moment does create a unique and jointly experienced presence which ultimately may leave a strong impact on everyone involved.

The Language of Tears

In his analysis of tears, Tom Lutz refers to psychotherapist Jeffrey A. Kottler, who, in his book *The Language of Tears* (1996), depicts tears as a language system that can be decoded because they seem to be an outer manifestation of the emotions within a human body. As Sara Ahmed explains, “[o]nce what is inside has got out, when I have expressed my feelings in this way, then my feelings also become yours, and you may respond to them. If you sympathize, then we might have ‘fellow-feeling’” (8), which establishes a temporary bond. The one

who weeps may or may not be aware of this bond or has invited it on purpose. The status of both is clearly very different, and the encoding and decoding positions may or may not overlap. The weeper creates an illusion of understanding in the recipient—intentionally or not—that may be used for political purposes. This also shows in what Sara Ahmed calls “the ‘sociality’ of emotion” (8), in which emotions circulate and do not reside in humans or objects but are triggered to be manifested, and then perceived and decoded to be manifested again in the recipient, and this is potentially ongoing. Ahmed calls this process “the ‘inside out’ model of emotions” (9). As she argues with reference to Émile Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1966), “emotion is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together” (9). This bonding can be instrumentalized toward political ends, as “cultural politics or world making” (Ahmed 12).

Tom Lutz, however, calls tears at best a “gestural” language (198) that is “much more open to interpretation than verbal language” (298) and often represents an emotion that, quoting Marcus, “arises from hidden and uncertain causes” (21). While this is certainly true, it seems that Lutz does not take the next step to approach tears as a culture-contingent semiotic system, a sign system that offers markers with which to decode its message—whether produced intentionally or not. Obviously, both processes of encoding and decoding, to use Stuart Hall’s terminology, depend on their respective contexts, the situation of production and reproduction, and, when we refer to media, also on the technical infrastructure. The receiver will always attempt to decode the message to know what it means and, thus, a reaction is produced. We know from literary analysis and New Criticism that there can be intentional fallacy at work here. And a fallacy it may very well be, if tears are produced deliberately in order to work on the receiver. While U.S.-American writer Edgar Allan Poe called the effect his poems and short stories should have on the reader, the “single” or “preconceived effect” (446), with horror being the most frequent one to be achieved, Sara Ahmed puts this effect into the context of her own affect theory³ and asks: “What do emotions do?” (4). In this sense, I suggest that any public weeping is a form of communication that has social and political effects which remain vague because unspoken. Seeing someone cry is, first of

3 More generally, affect, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, is a “[f]eeling or emotion, and the expression of feeling or emotion in the face and body. [...] the outward physical expression of inner feelings through facial expressions and gestures, and as the interpretation of our expressions and gestures by others” (431).

all, a visual image that can become “a tool for manipulation” (Mitchell 175) and is, therefore, part of “social transactions” (ibid.). However, tears are often also connected to verbal language and, thus, to cognition. Sara Ahmed sees a “re-lation between emotions, bodily sensation and cognition” (5). In my examples, tears are a bodily expression of an outside event internalized, turned into an emotion, and then externalized⁴ and, according to Paul, activating as well as affirming but also enacting cultural scripts of grief and mourning (Paul 2021, 21). In the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, the visualization of tears is both “the social construction of vision” and “the visual construction of the social” (179), and I would add the political to the social.

Hillary Rodham Clinton’s Triumph Turned Concession

In 2016, after a tiring campaign, the Democrats’ candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton lost the presidential election against her Republican competitor Donald Trump in spite of receiving almost three million popular votes more than the incoming president. Many people were shocked by this unexpected outcome, and scholars, politicians, and Hillary Clinton herself began to search for reasons for this loss. In 2017, Clinton published *What Happened* in an attempt to convey where things had gone wrong. In *What Happened*, Clinton depicts her own emotional reactions, her disappointment, her frustration, her despair, her sadness, and people’s tears. She quotes from letters that describe how people cried after the results had come in; how women had felt a sense of “powerlessness” (24); how women had cried and cried but then had stood up and decided to work for change: “*And eventually, eventually one of us will crash through that highest, hardest glass ceiling*” (24; italics in original). As is usual for competitors in an election, Clinton had prepared both a winner’s and a concession speech although none of her followers had ever really believed that this would be necessary. Yet it was. In *What Happened*, she shares parts of the speech she would have delivered had she won, and she explains: “With help from the poet Jorie

4 Although Sara Ahmed sees a risk in talking about “emotional contagion” because it might transform “emotion into a property, as something that one has, and can then pass on” (10), tears have to be contagious in order to be used strategically and politically and attach observers to the nation. Ahmed argues that emotion is “a form of cultural politics or world making” (12). I would like to emphasize that tears as such are not an emotion but the material and bodily manifestation of emotions.

Graham, we had written a closing riff for the speech that made me tear up every time I read it. I want to share it here because, as you know, I never got a chance to deliver it that night” (382). The excerpt addresses her mother Dorothy, who had already died in November 2011, as if she were still alive and ready to receive her daughter’s promises of becoming the most powerful woman in the world:

Look at me. Listen to me. You will survive [...]. And as hard as it might be to imagine, your daughter will grow up and become the President of the United States [...]. America is the greatest country in the world. And from tonight, going forward together, we will make America even greater than it has ever been—for each and everyone of us. (Clinton 383)

Five years later, in 2021, Clinton teaches a MasterClass on resilience and reads this part of the speech from her book.⁵ She combines her love for her mother, her ambition, and her patriotism and cannot contain her tears. Her voice breaks, and she can hardly finish the reading. She comes across as authentic, as deeply mourning her mother but also regretting missing the chance she had to become the first female president of the United States. Everyone who campaigned with her, fought with her, and hoped with her probably shed tears when watching the scene. This very personal moment is available online and turns into a strong political and community-building statement (see Anderson). To make America greater than it has ever been, puns on Trump’s slogan and is not backward- but forward-looking, yet mourning the lost opportunity. It is a promise for the future because it does not try to go back to some undefined and illusive moment in the past. She evokes the ideology of American exceptionalism as the nation’s founding ideology, U.S.-American democracy, which she considers in shambles at this particular moment, and her idea that the United States is simply different from all other nations. Whatever else “greater” means, this reference remains as enigmatic and fuzzy as the term “American exceptionalism” itself (see Paul 2014, 14–18).

In contrast to this emotional expression in her book (2017) and in the MasterClass (2021), in 2016, Clinton’s actual concession speech as a ritualistic event needed her to be strong and resilient, to encourage her own staff, supporters,

5 MasterClass is a streaming platform, which features videos with well-known people who speak about specific topics of interest, mostly moral in nature.

and voters to continue the work they had done and not to despair.⁶ Clinton's proclaimed love of America and of its people is the leitmotif in her concession. Her running mate, the senator of Virginia, Tim Kaine, speaks first, and he is full of praise for Clinton's democratic values of justice and equality for all. His emotional speech is followed by Clinton's appearance together with Bill Clinton, daughter Chelsea, and son-in-law Marc Mezvinsky. In her speech, she admits the pain but does not want young women in particular to stop aspiring to the breaking of the glass ceiling. She does not shed tears, but her audience does because they have fallen from high hopes and expectations down to a never expected loss and now fear what the future will bring to their nation. As Clinton assures them, "this is painful, and will be for a long time. [...] We have seen that our nation is more deeply divided than we thought. But I still believe in America, and I always will" (8:22–8:53).

"Achieving their dreams" is another one of the central tenets of her speech and refers to the notion of the American Dream. During the long enthusiastic cheering, the camera shows individuals in the audience who are shedding tears. When Clinton finally tells her audience about her pain and that "this loss hurts, but please never stop believing that fighting for what's right is worth it" (15:10–15:18), she begins to lose some of her composure; the strain begins to show, but she does not weep. She finally addresses all women: "I know that we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but some day someone will and, hopefully sooner than we might think right now" (16:35–16:42). She finally tells all the little girls that they should never forget that they are powerful and encourages them to pursue their own dreams. This is the moment when *abc News* shows girls and young women in the audience crying. They are deeply moved by Clinton's words. She ends her speech on the work that still needs to be done and says: "May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America." One of the commentators mentions the "raw emotions" in the room while the female commentator maintains that Bill Clinton was angry and Tim Kaine near tears. Another commentator refers to Hillary Clinton's cracking voice. Although the moment of this concession speech is highly emotional, Clinton herself never loses her composure but seems to find hope in her words. Clinton's speech comes across as a pep talk for young women who, in the Clintons' walk through the crowd, become part

6 Clinton, Hillary. 2016. "Hillary Clinton's Concession Speech: Full Transcript." *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/hillary-clinton-concession-speech-full-transcript>. Accessed October 12, 2017.

of the Clintons' extended political family. The spontaneous tears of some in the audience in the room may be joined or rejected by those of the viewers behind screens. But Hillary Clinton herself does not cry and comes across as someone who knows how to lose—even if grudgingly and with some bitter feelings. Hillary Clinton is a professional politician, and what she shows on screen and live to the audience in the room is a political performance, in part scripted by her advisors, in part shaped by the expectations of the people present who need to hear from her that they will continue fighting and eventually, perhaps, break through the glass ceiling. The careful staging reveals that it is a performance, but one that is necessary (and expected) in this particular moment, a political ritual. Whether we take Clinton's words at face value depends on what we as listeners and viewers expect and want to hear. In any case, it is important that she comes across as a strong and resilient woman who knows how to gracefully lose an election.

Barack Obama's Empathy, Love, and Grief

A *BBC News* article claimed on January 11, 2017, that Barack Obama publicly cried seven times during his eight-year presidency. Some of the events were funerals, as the one of his grandmother, but the one moment that sticks out is when he cried after the Sandy Hook school massacre in 2012.⁷ At the school, twenty children, aged between five and ten, and six teachers were shot dead on December 14, 2012. During his speech on the day of the shooting, Obama “engages in American civil sentimentalism as a symbolic code” (Paul 2021, 41, translation C. B.) in order to call upon the American people as an (imagined) community which jointly suffers and mourns (*ibid.*). He tells his audience that he does not react as a president but as a parent, evoking his own family ties. He emphasizes that America has seen such scenes too often and offers his help to the survivors, to the families of the victims, and the governor of the state of Connecticut. While speaking, he constantly wipes away tears from his eyes, first from one, then from the other, but his voice tries to remain even. He speaks staccato-like as if trying to suppress his emotions of sadness, grief, and anger

7 Obama, Barack. 2012. “President Obama Makes a Statement on the Shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.” *WhiteHouse.gov*, December 14, 2012. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/12/14/president-obama-speaks-shooting-connecticut>. Accessed October 28, 2022.

about the tragic deaths of so many children and adults. In his speech, he addresses all parents in America: “As a country, we have been through this too many times.” And he demands that everyone “come together to prevent this regardless of the politics.” He ends by asking in the words of the Scripture to “heal the broken-hearted and bind up their wounds.” In this moment, Obama comes across—albeit in a “mediated authenticity” (Enli 1)—as someone who cares about people, as a family man, as a human being who is approachable and who is deeply touched by the tragedy of the shooting. Authenticity is the congruence of what human beings do and what they represent, and, more importantly, it is what those addressed see and believe the person stands for. Intentionally produced or not, his tears seek to persuade an audience with fellow-feelings to support his political program of stricter gun laws. Every time school shootings or similar massacres in other places occur, the Democrats, and Barack Obama in particular, attempt to use the momentum to enforce new regulations for gun ownership. He is careful not to deny the Second Amendment with its stipulation of the right to bear arms and to defend one’s self, but he argues that there should be more severe background checks, a limitation on the ammunitions-magazines sold to one person, and more. He appeals to all Americans, regardless of their political affiliations, to work together to prevent another massacre like this from happening. Obama’s appeal creates a form of an imagined community. People, inside and outside of the United States, watched his speech on TV or online, thus mediated by cameras creating various perspectives from which to view, but mostly focusing directly on Obama in a close-up. Viewers watching his tears are likely to be affected by this situation, maybe even cry with him, and become, at least for this very moment, part of the community of the American people. Yet, the NRA (National Rifle Association) has proven to be a strong lobby, and the Republicans seem to be unwilling to cooperate, not even when the lives of their own children are at stake. Those who share Obama’s political views will see him as a “nurturing” (Lakoff 33) father or parent of the nation, who is honest and eager to make a difference and make America a safer place.

Having looked at both Obama and Clinton, it is striking to notice that Obama did not hide his tears on various occasions when speaking in public, while Hillary Clinton shed tears only after her loss of the election and at the imagined reading to her mother. For quite some time, Clinton did not fashion herself primarily as a family person and did not show emotions publicly. Rather, her alleged coldness and emphasis on rationality were in the foreground. For many, therefore, she came across as “too masculine.”

Yet, the American presidency has been a male prerogative ever since George Washington, who, as first president, was called the father of the nation. Subsequently, “the national leader is a man with ‘manly’ characteristics” (272), as Karen S. Hoffman points out. Therefore, by appearing masculine, would Clinton not have been closer to the “manly” system and to fulfilling “the masculinist expectations of presidential leadership” (Vaughn/Michaelson 155)? As Justin Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson also notice, Clinton might have tried, in 2008, “to outmasculine Barack Obama” (155). Obama, however, does not come across as weak when he sheds tears: He expresses empathy and a readiness to do everything in his power to help. Women, however, as it seems, still need to avoid being nurturing in politics, while appearing masculine is not a successful strategy either. Clinton writes about women in *What Happened*: “If we’re too tough, we’re unlikable. If we’re too soft, we’re not cut out for the big leagues” (119). Her concession speech puts her into the big league; her “resilience reading” does not, and does not have to. Obama’s tears make him a nurturing father; Clinton’s tears turn her into a loving daughter; in politics, the absence of her tears renders her a strong leader. In all scenes, emotions are present, just not always explicitly expressed via the same pathos formulas (Warburg).

Claire Underwood’s Gender Seesaw

In turning now to a fictional piece, my aim is to show how tears (and generally emotions) are used for the manipulation of citizens and how the viewers are privy to the conversations between Claire and Frank Underwood and thus understand this scheme. In the TV series *House of Cards* (2013–18), two presidents, one male, one female, run the country, and it seems that Claire Underwood, after her husband’s resignation, has ultimately broken through the glass ceiling. *House of Cards* presents viewers with the absolutely brutal political life at the fictional White House, dominated by corruption, manipulation, violence, and, sometimes, even murder. Frank becomes president through violent illegal means and runs his presidency in the same way, more or less killing off all opponents. His wife Claire eventually follows him as president and can be labeled as a ‘worthy’ successor in all respects. The scene to be discussed in the following is part of a larger process of staging a terrorist threat, which the presidential couple promises to contain and take revenge for after the decapitation of a member of the military. In season 5, episode 1, Claire Underwood actually

sheds tears when she and her husband attend the funeral of this member Jim Miller who got killed in the ICO (Islamic Caliphate Organization) hostage crisis. In the evening, Claire regrets having cried, and the following conversation between her and her husband reveals the politics of tears: “Francis, I shouldn’t have cried at the funeral.” Frank’s answer is: “No, it played beautifully.” Claire responds: “Not for me” (season 5, episode 1).

At the military funeral, Jim Miller’s wife speaks, sobs, and deeply mourns her husband, whose throat was cut by two members of the ICO when Frank refused to exchange him for an Islamist terrorist. Jim’s wife cries because of her terrible loss, and while most people in the audience are affected, no one seems to cry except for Claire. She audibly cries out for a short moment and wants to conceal her wet eyes by donning dark spectacles. Frank, however, prevents her from doing so. Jim Miller’s daughter blames Frank for her father’s execution and says so to everyone. Frank’s brief whispered conversation with her reveals that she wants him dead and Claire to be president, which is what he tells his wife in the evening. While he remains calm and keeps a poker face at the funeral, he forcefully takes the stage in the preceding scene in the House of Representatives and demands a declaration of war against terrorism and the ICO. Both scenes are the results of strategic planning because both Claire and Frank try to sow fear in people in order to then appear as successful crisis managers in whom people can trust. When Claire regrets her crying, Frank takes her outside to watch the people demonstrating in front of the White House and explains to her that they want to see the president and his wife as the “nurturing parents” a nation in crisis needs. And tears demonstrate empathy. With her tears at the funeral, Claire becomes such a nurturing mother. Claire adds the human touch to Frank’s unempathic presidency. But she does not take out a handkerchief from her bag, as we would expect, but glasses. The expected gesture would have drawn people’s attention to her even more, and Frank’s hand on hers and the glasses can be read as a comforting gesture, which, too, literally plays into his hands. Even intradiegetically, her tears are polysemic: They surprise the mourners, establish a bond with some, but are also viewed critically by others as simply being staged. Which perception individuals have of her depends on how well they know her and on how much they are willing to accept as authentic what they see.

Next to a wife who sheds tears over a dead man, Frank comes across as masculine and strong while she seems to be weak and emotional. For Frank, this simultaneous construction of empathy and strength is the powerful and productive image of the first couple. He is the strong leader, and through his

wife, he is also associated with the more feminine and human parental side of life. Frank's response that "it played beautifully" emphasizes the performance character of the scene. For Claire, however, as she suspects, this scene weakens her chances of being perceived as strong enough for leadership. She reveals that she has her own ambitions and could be, as Elisabeth Bronfen has argued, the Lady Macbeth of the 21st century. Bronfen claims that Claire seems to be undecided as to whether she wants to be Macbeth or rather Lady Macbeth (85). Like Lady Macbeth, she supports her husband's bid for power, here: the presidency, but unlike Lady Macbeth, she, too, eventually wants the power, i.e., the highest office for herself and is ready to kill for it—and actually does so. Shedding tears relates her more closely to Lady Macbeth's final madness and troubled death than to the presidency of the United States. Yet, this combination connects to what Frank says in one of his many metalepses⁸ when he visits his father's grave: "I have to do these sort [sic] of things now. Makes me seem more human, and you have to be a little human when you're the president" (season 3, episode 1). As George E. Marcus maintains and Frank's behavior confirms, "[p]olitics seems to be more and more a drama of manipulation by those capable of framing the issues to their advantage, to elicit the desired emotional response" (2). Everything Frank and Claire do is strategically performed. With Claire, however, there are frequent moments of emotional breakdowns (Gardt 189), which might render her a little too human. For Frank everything is power; even weakness as a sign of human feeling can strengthen his power since he is in control and can direct the performance. As viewers of both TV series and actual politics in the United States, we might wonder whether Claire could be Hillary Clinton's fictional counterpart who rarely breaks down emotionally, and when she does, regrets it? Is this what people see? Or is even the breakdown

8 Frank's frequent metalepses establish a close connection between him and his audience outside the fictional world and show him in control of the action since he openly discusses his strategies and crimes. As Karin Kukkonen explains, "[m]etalepsis occurs when an author enters or addresses the fictional world he or she created, and when characters [such as Frank] leave their fictional world or address their author and their readers [or viewers]" (1). Frank crosses the boundaries of the fictional world but is still confined to the frames of the TV set or the computer. While the use of metalepsis creates an intimacy between Frank and the viewer, Frank still remains in the fictional world or in a liminal space between fiction and reality. He easily navigates between these spaces and controls them powerfully. When Claire finally breaks the fourth wall, as metalepsis is also called, the audience realizes that the transfer of power has taken place.

a strategy? As Governor Conway and his wife at Miller's funeral conclude, "This morning, everything is about politics." This is pure conjecture, but the TV series was at the pulse of political developments until 2018⁹ and was highly popular in terms of the cultural work it did for U.S. audiences and viewers abroad. Thus, it may not be too far-fetched to consider that viewers might draw conclusions about women in politics from having watched Claire Underwood act in *House of Cards*. After all, the impact of television series, and popular television shows in particular, on people's understanding of how the world is run, has been discussed for decades (see Hoewe/Sherrill; Phalen/Kim/Osellame).

Conclusion: "Tears! Tears! Tears!"

Tears are the manifestation of emotions turned into "the unloosen'd ocean, / of tears! tears! tears!" (216), as U.S.-American poet Walt Whitman writes in his poem "Tears."¹⁰ Tears in politics, as we have seen, create an emotional bond between people, whether of joy or grief. It seems that emotions are at the center of U.S.-American political culture, both real and imagined, and that politics have never been an entirely rational affair. Politicians often express and also resort to emotions, and tears as their strongest manifestation, to connect to their base, their supporters, their voters. They come across as human beings when they mourn—properly measured—the loss of their mothers, fathers, and grandparents, which puts family at the center of American political culture, or reconnect to the tradition of the elegy, as in Walt Whitman's threnody "Memo-

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- 9 Frank Underwood did not reappear in the final season because the actor Kevin Spacey had been accused of sexual assault in a number of cases and Netflix ended its contract with him. However, as of November 2024, all allegations seem to have been dropped and have not resulted in any conviction.
- 10 Alfred Lord Tennyson's elegy "Tears, Idle Tears" brings these emotions to a more individual level when the speaker cries out: "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean, / Tears from the depth of some divine despair / Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes, / In looking on the happy Autumn-fields, / And thinking of the days that are no more" (132). In Tennyson, "the days that are no more" reference both the speaker's own mourning of time passed as well as of the death of a beloved person. And although he reveals these reasons for the tears, he still claims that "I know not what they mean." The origin of tears remains a mystery for him but they are the manifestations of some great emotions that are triggered when observing nature in a happy state.

ries of President Lincoln¹¹ or the American Jeremiad.¹² Whitman's poetic tears connect to political culture and bridge the gap from poetry to politicians' tears, which are political because they shape how the audience perceives those who shed them. The tears oscillate between expressing weakness or power, between feminine and masculine attributes, between authenticity and strategy, and yet, they hardly ever manifest in such clear-cut binary ways. Ultimately, the three politicians, the real Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and the fictional Claire Underwood, shed deeply political American tears because they participate in what Heike Paul calls the public display of mourning as part of American civil religion (Paul 2021, 7). In Obama's case, tears are used as a form of communication, as an impulse for social changes, and as a means of crisis management, as Heike Paul also argues (*ibid.* 8). In Claire's fictional case, tears may not reveal her humanity but are certainly exploited by her husband toward his own political ends. Tears, therefore, become a tool for the performance of power rather than a sign of weakness. In all my examples, tears create a powerful political community in familial terms, even if these bonds are merely imagined (*ibid.* 22).

The real-life politicians Clinton and Obama and the fictional Underwood have all become part of a cultural iconography; often, fact and fiction merge.¹³ Looking at powerful people when they cry or are deeply moved, potentially establishes a bond between the one on stage and the one watching. It is not by chance that during Clinton's concession speech or at the fictional Jim Miller's funeral, the camera frequently shifts toward crying people in the audience in close-ups or, in the latter case, to members in the congregation, such as the governor, who looks at Claire in surprise, trying to figure out the meaning of her tears. All of these images "serve a multitude of purposes [...] and mean

11 Similar poems by Whitman are "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "O Captain! My Captain!," and "Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day."

12 The American Jeremiad is closely connected to American Puritanism and was used for lamentations about an upcoming doom. It expressed grief, sorrow, and complaint, mostly about devastating societal developments such as a bad harvest. It also became a literary device, as in Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), and warns American people of what will happen unless they change their behavior.

13 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright define visual culture as "the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities" (3).

different things to different people” (Sturken/Cartwright 9); yet, the tears unite both sides through a set of allegedly shared values, such as, for example, empathy. But in politics, the opposite can also be true. Some reviewers on YouTube make extremely derogatory remarks about Hillary Clinton’s reading at the MasterClass. All are engaged in what Stuart Hall calls the decoding process, and they do this in three ways: in a “[d]ominant-hegemonic reading”; a “[n]egotiated reading”; and an “[o]ppositional reading” (qtd. in Sturken/Cartwright 73). According to Stuart Hall, when we cry with who we see on the screen, we engage in the dominant reading; commentators and critics negotiate what they see, depending on their respective political affiliations; oppositional readings are done by those on the other side of the political spectrum. My decoding is certainly shaped by presuppositions I have about the people I view on screen. But in all cases, tears bring strong emotions onto the political stage and affect viewers’ perceptions of and attitudes toward politics and politicians, who, as shown, engage in a form of sentimentalism which directly reaches out to those who listen to or view these performances.

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Balcony Scenes

The Balustrade as a Dispositif of Political Power

Jan-Henrik Witthaus

Después, el discurso de rigor, pronunciado desde el balcón de Palacio.¹
Alejo Carpentier, El recurso del método

Introduction

Considering the title of this article, an initial quotation of the Ecuadorian ex-president José María Velasco Ibarra seems quite expectable. “Give me a balcony and I will become president,” this politician is supposed to have said on one or several occasions (Knight). Velasco, who was ultimately removed from office in 1971, represents a late example of an authoritarian leader. He exercised his power within a framework of traditional political propaganda or, to be more precise, within the framework of “classical representation” (Schneider 544, 547). This included elements such as monuments, portraits in governmental offices, (military) parades, speeches, etc. Within this overall framework, the balcony plays a fundamental role in political staging with its elements of “static representation”—the kind we find in images, rituals, architecture, and media. However, it is difficult to state exactly, when the balcony began to function as a political dispositif of power, as this architectural element had already been an integral part of the premodern royal or aristocratic architecture: “[a]loof yet highly visible, the balcony has enduring associations with royal prerogative” (Avermaete 1075).

Furthermore, it is also questionable whether it is still an effective domination or indoctrination technique today. What we do know, though, is that the

1 In English: “Afterwards, the usual speech, delivered from the balcony of the Palace.” (Translation J-H. W.).

balustrade has functioned as a communication platform for and with crowds even in times of crises since the premodern age. The Spanish King Charles III, for example, appeared on the balcony of the Royal Palace during the Madrilenian Esquilache Riots in 1766 in order to calm down the masses (Sarrailh 583). In modern times, balconies were used to proclaim republics, as in the case of the Weimar Republic in Germany (1918). However, the balcony had already been included in the canon of bourgeois urban architecture by the 19th century, “once reserved for aristocratic and regal architecture, [it] becomes part of the world of the rising bourgeoisie and the buildings associated with it” (Avermaete 1121). Since then, this architectural element has no longer had an exclusively representational function but has formed a transitional space between the public and private spheres. As we will see, it is precisely this transitional character of the balcony as an interface between the private and the public that has an effect on the political-representative space of (symbolic) action and leads to the imprinting of further registers of expression. In the political context, the palace opens its doors via the balcony and reveals its interior as if through a crack, and the same may be said for the personality of the leader: The political performance on the balcony offers the opportunity to simulate closeness to the people, although this does not actually correspond physically with the architectural element as the balcony itself is distant and high. Nevertheless, the simulacrum succeeds through a leeway below the purely representative level, in which the mostly calculated disclosure of feelings or their exchange becomes possible.

Within the history of political communication, the capture of the city Fiume—today Rijeka in Croatia—in 1920 by Gabriele D’Annunzio and his warriors can be considered the beginning of a new paradigm (Simonelli). His regime marks a starting point of a series of new balcony scenes, arranged as an interaction between the political leader and his audience in order to represent or rather simulate social hegemonies. Here—to a nearly grotesque extent—D’Annunzio displays a set of theatrical rituals which contain, among other elements, certain definite gestures, patterns of gathering people, choirs, symbols, uniforms, etc.

In Fiume, extending the arm became a celebratory moment binding together the leader with the people in a new political model: the *Arengo*—the national council. This was the magical and symbolic space where the mystical union of leader and masses occurred, outdating parliamentary representation in favour of an authority that worked through assemblies

in which decisions were made by acclamation. (Serventi Longhi 38, cf. Simonelli 258)

These practices of political stage-management had an enormous impact on the representations of leadership during Italian and German fascism. These forms of communication with the crowds could certainly be discussed in more detail, calling to mind Walter Benjamin's expression of the "*aestheticizing of politics*" (Benjamin 42, italics in the original) or the term "ornament of the masses" as conceived by Siegfried Kracauer (cf. the end of his well-known essay, Kracauer 86, and Witte 345). Here, I follow some of Elias Canetti's theories about crowds.

According to Elias Canetti, a gathering of people is a catalyst for affects that goes beyond the emotional world of individuals, which civil society had kept separate and dispersed.

Soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count, not even that of sex. The man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body. (Canetti 15–16)

The experience of the crowd can be shaped through the collective performance of dances, movements, gestures, shouts, or songs. "Every part of a man which can move gains a life of its own and acts as if independent, but the movements are all parallel, the limbs appearing superimposed on each other" (Canetti 32). The eye-catcher of a political meeting is the gallery or balcony, through which the views are directed towards a political leader. The latter then has the opportunity to guide and encourage the movements of the people and weld them together through synchronous rituals. As far as can be reconstructed, D'Annunzio opened up this new field of political performance, which Canetti describes eloquently as follows: "In the end, there appears to be a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose" (Canetti 32). The crowd expresses violent affects; it is interpellated as choir, performs specific kinds of choreographies or the joint shouting of slogans. This, together, can lead to a climax of the mass experience (Canetti 38).

Mussolini was not the first to convert the balcony into a political stage which had the function of stimulating emotional eruptions in the crowds

since D'Annunzio, as in so many other respects, had done decisive preparatory work here. However, it was Mussolini who revived a medieval tradition by turning the balconies of sacred buildings—*arengario*—, from which sermons could be delivered, into communication platforms for the fascist movement (Avermaete 1144). “Throughout Italy, from the appropriation of the balcony of Palazzo Venezia to the erection of temporary platforms for speeches, [the *arengario*] was used to stage the Duce–popolo (people) relationship in its most dramatic, imaginative and enduring manner” (Pooley 218). Precisely these “temporary platforms” not only contributed to a ubiquity of ruling power, they also brought about a mobility of the balcony as a political stage. Movable and height-adjustable platforms, furthermore, had already been devised for Lenin, making them adaptable to various locations and occasions (Avermaete 1141).

The fascist modelling of the interplay between an authoritarian leader and his masses was translated into the Spanish context of the 1930s, when the Spanish party Falange adopted it to strengthen its identity politics and to stabilize the unity of its members by initiating the political fight against the Republicans. Still, the later performances of Francisco Franco on the balcony of the abovementioned Royal Palace at the Plaza de Oriente in the 1970s were also influenced by the symbolic language of Italian fascism. The dictatorship of Franco, in turn, doubtlessly served as a sinister model for Latin American authoritarian regimes, including the one of Juan Perón in Argentina.

In the following paragraphs, a few conceptual considerations will be presented. Afterwards, a series of examples will be commented on, first from the reelection campaign of Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina and secondly from the Venezuelan election campaign of 2012. The intention is to highlight the transformation of the forms of political communication in the changing contexts of mass media development. One guiding question will be how the political stage-management changes when the images of the rulers are transmitted by electronic visual media. A further point of focus will be the question of how self-affection and display of emotions in the realm of civil sentimentalism become part of the political staging in this context.

Conceptual Considerations

The balcony combines various forms of communication that serve different emotional registers and can mix and mingle. It can become a theater in which

the emotional worlds of the middle classes' social strata and their traditional forms of identification dominate. In the theater the "equality of the spectators really consists only in the fact that they are all exposed to the same performance" (Canetti 36). As an example, in the Latin American context, reference can be made here to the aesthetic forms of melodrama, which have been transferred to other media forms such as soap operas on the radio or later television (Michael 96–100).

Unlike the proscenium stage and its auditorium, the structure of a balcony and a square is more open and the interaction between politicians and the crowd more spontaneous. The passive reception of watching and listening to the political leader can change at any time into participative forms of applause or contradiction as well as into the sharing of common rituals or forms of expression. However:

Rehearsed and regularly repeated shouts are no proof that the crowd has achieved a life of its own. They may lead to it, but they may also be only external, like the drill of a military unit. Contrasted with them, the spontaneous and never quite predictable outcry of a crowd is unmistakable, and its effect enormous. (Canetti 35)

Therefore, the interaction of political leaders and the crowds implicates numerous factors of contingency. In this light, the balcony provides an arrangement which serves the reduction of complexity. Most importantly, it is a manifestation of what Canetti described as the ruler's fear of being touched. Thus, the position of the political leader is the counterpart of the crowd, in which, as we have seen, the fear of being touched is dispelled.

Access to him is made difficult, palaces with more and more rooms being built round him. Each gate and each door is heavily guarded so that it is impossible to intrude on him against his will. He, from his remote security, can have anyone seized wherever he may be. But how is anyone to seize him, protected as he is by his hundredfold separation? (Canetti 207)

This panic of being reached out to is not limited to the fear of assassination attempts or of viruses, as could be concluded from the long conference table Vladimir Putin used to receive European politicians in the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Certainly, every ruler who accesses a public stage always runs the risk of being assassinated, and indeed, leaders have been assas-

sinated on balconies—it is a quite exposed position. Keeping the bigger picture in mind, this aspect eclipses what fear of being touched really means. In a broader sense, this type of anxiety corresponds to the limitation of public access and interaction. The fear of being touched is a fear of being in touch. The affect mentioned above indicates the desire for control and distance to assure the functioning of the “impression management” (Goffman 132). The ruler needs the balcony as an arrangement for staging and at the same time to regulate and control reactions and emotions in the best possible way.

In this sense, the balcony not only creates distance and hierarchy, it makes it more difficult to access the “backstage,” as Ervin Goffman (69, 70) would call it. Despite this, though, this distance between the ruler and the audience somehow has to be overcome. Therefore, the political speech, as well as other forms of communication and rituals, often serves to create an emotional bond which can evoke a spectrum of well-known feelings such as joy, sadness, or fear on the subjective, individual level. However, violent emotions and collective affects can also be aroused and can possibly lead to ecstatic states through ready-made forms of gestures, expression, and political shibboleths. The architectural position of the balcony may be helpful, but it can by no means be considered a guarantee for retaining control over what is happening. The objective in this case is to reduce the distance between the crowd and the political leader while also eliminating the fear of physical contact as well as the ruler’s panic of being assassinated. In other words: Regarding security and sensibility, an economy of proximity and distance must be balanced.

The reflections up to this point lead to the conclusion that the balcony can be described as a *dispositif* of power which regulates representations, interactions, feelings, and affects. Here, I am alluding to the Deleuzian adaption of a concept that was first conceived by Michel Foucault:

Apparatuses are therefore composed of lines of visibility, utterance, lines of force, lines of subjectivation, lines of cracking, breaking and ruptures that all intertwine and mix together and where some augment the others or elicit others through variations and even mutations of the assemblage. (Deleuze n.p.)

The balcony enables certain forms of political visibility, allows for emotions, identifications, affects and their control, and is connected to discourses that are based not only on linguistic codes but also include other communicative forms. Thus, it implies an emotional interaction with the audience. The rela-

tionality of all these elements creates political agencies or, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, “lines of subjectivation,” as well as the dissolution of subjectivities.

Besides, the balcony is not a stable or fixed form that repeats itself in always the same way. As an “apparatus,” it is like a set of relationships between elements that can have a wide range of possible variations: “[...] mutations of the assemblage” (Deleuze), as it were. The balustrade, for instance, is not necessarily an architectural element; it can also be a rostrum or stage. As mentioned earlier, movable stages have been used since the 1920s. However, any suitable object could and can be used. For instance, it can be a tank as in the case of Boris Jelzin who climbed it to mobilize the resistance against the military coup d’état in 1991, creating a sort of stand-up act which certainly changed the whole apparatus considerably. Nevertheless, a balcony, in order to operate as part of an early form of mass media, needs a square and a space where crowds are able to gather.

Yet, one might wonder if the terms “political theater,” “staging,” and “stage-management” really are suitable descriptions. Consulting the works of media scholar Vilém Flusser (19–95), we find some reflections concerning different forms of discourses. In this context, the “theater discourse” presupposes the existence of one source of information with a protected background. Messages are sent to a semicircle of present listeners and spectators who theoretically have the opportunity to respond (Flusser 21–22). Bearing in mind this definition, one might wonder whether the messages are really sent to a present audience in the case of the balcony dispositif. What substantial messages are truly transmitted? And finally: Does not the audience itself form an essential part of the stage-management as it conveys support for the speaker in relation to other spectators who, today, are connected to it via electronic or digital mass media? Hence, the entire balustrade image—ruler and crowd—is a form of political representation that is broadcasted in every direction to a wider public. This wider public may not be able to respond but they are meant to be touched by an impressive media spectacle. Thus, this “assemblage” rather corresponds to what Flusser describes as the “amphitheater discourse” (26–28), and, maybe, this constellation leads to an adaption of the dispositif: The wider audience, which is only reached via television sets, is not able to participate directly in the political event and to share the experiences of the crowd. In the mind of the ruler on the balcony, however, this wider audience must always also be considered and addressed. In addition to arousing strong emotions and mobilizing the masses, it becomes elementary to reach the people who are isolated in the television experience through identification and empathy. The more the bal-

cony dispositif moves towards an amphitheatrical constellation, the more we leave the paradigm of classical or static political representation and communication.

First Example: Eva Perón²

As Ursula Prutsch (2015, 2016) has vividly shown, Juan Perón's wife, Eva María Duarte de Perón, was a central player in the power structure of a political movement that has been called Peronism both inside and outside of Argentina. A discussion about the political classification of Peronism brings to light different views, e.g. also with regard to the question of whether it reactivated and adapted the politics or aesthetics of European fascism (Payne 340–49; Prutsch 2015, 28–33; Schembs). This cannot and should not be decided here, although this question is highly relevant with regard to the tradition of “the political balcony” as a dispositif of power.

Still, Peronism is undoubtedly one of the first populist regimes in mid-century Latin America (Werz), and it was precisely at the interface between the leading figure (Juan Perón) and his lines of connection to broad segments of the population (working class, the women, etc.) that Eva Perón held a key strategic function, based on the historical circumstances and the individual conditions of all the actors involved (Sarlo 91). This may have to do with the fact that her social gender—a woman in Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s—enabled her to enact a wider range of emotional expressions in her role as leader and with that, as a former actress (especially as a radio play voice), she ideally complemented and completed the communicative registers of Perón.

It is indisputable that in this context the balcony underwent a renaissance as a dispositif of propaganda and was also used by Juan and Eva Perón as a stage in the sense mentioned above (Prutsch 2016, 239). The most relevant example refers to the appearance of Juan Perón on the balcony of the presidential palace Casa Rosada—on October 17, 1945 (Prutsch 2015, 50–51), a place which has become one of the best-known memory spaces for Peronism. After Perón's arrest, carried out by his political rivals, a vast multitude of workers and farm workers (the so called “cabecitas negras,” “black heads,” a term related to their mostly mestizo or indigenous origin) entered the bourgeois urban space of Buenos Aires and occupied the Plaza de Mayo, the square in front of the palace. This

2 The following comments refer to videos 1 and 2 as listed in the references.

social pressure led to Peron's release, after which he showed himself on the balcony and calmed down the people by engaging in dialogue with them.

This political event can be considered as a touchstone for Eva Perón's famous political intervention on August 22, 1952, in which her possible candidacy for the vice presidency in the context of the upcoming election campaign figured as the background. The General Confederation of Labor had called for a rally on that day, in the course of which the Perón-Perón duo was to be proclaimed. The expression "*Cabildo abierto*," which had been circulated for the occasion, referred to another place of memory that commemorated the proclamation of an Argentinian nation and the deposition of the Viceroy in 1810. A large stage had been set up at the front of the Ministry of Labor where representatives of the Confederation, ministers, Juan Perón, and Eva Perón appeared and spoke. In the course of her appearance, Eva Perón, who by this time was already seriously ill, suffering from cancer, raised doubts about her candidacy, engaging in a direct interaction with the assembled crowds. She kept everyone present in suspense and asked for a postponement of the decision until she finally declared the renunciation of her candidacy via a historic radio address on August 31, 1952 (Prutsch 2016, 249–50, cf. video 2: 11:24).

In her speech contributions, Eva Perón emphasizes her willingness to continue the struggle for Peronism wholeheartedly and sacrificially. As is characteristic of populist movements, political opponents who had already stirred up opposition to her possible candidacy in advance were defamed by Eva Perón as representatives of the political establishment: "mediocre figures," or "traitors to the fatherland" (video 2: 03:45, 08:20). Simultaneously, there is the exaltation of the political leader Perón and the evocation of all those gathered as a community. This did not only include the shirtless (*descamisados*)—workers and poor people—but in a broader framework all citizens. In the foreground, however, the first and foremost happening was the conveyance of emotion as a common bond to all those present, regardless of the communicative content, of course.

Certainly, what was happening on the balcony was not mere acting, even if "self-affection" (Kremer) may clearly have played a role in the performance. Rather, emotions were part of the political publicity and, thus, part of the political business. Despite the poignant circumstances, the fact that Eva had previously practiced and internalized her political stage presence as an actress and speaker in radio plays cannot be completely ignored here. This becomes clear in the moment when the president's wife, bearing the marks of her illness, overwhelmed by her feelings, throws herself into her husband's arms (cf. video 2, initial image), presenting herself and President Perón as being in a familial or

intimate relationship. Here, the podium is turned into a stage on which the mutual feelings of the leaders are communicated. Later on, she distances herself from the office of vice president, which would be associated with honor and dignity (cf. video 2: 05:00). In this way, she makes it easier for a wider audience to identify with her, and she enables them to sympathize with her personal situation. This observation also applies in a broader sense. In the words of the political leaders, Perón, his wife, and their followers are united by love and affection (“*carriño*”, video 2: 05:12, 07:14, 08:36), almost like a family.

In addition, she describes herself at the outset as a “bridge” between the president and the citizens (Vassallo 2; Sarlo 91). She thus places herself at the service of the Peronist cause. In fact, however, due to her gendered role of the wife, she functions as an “emotional bridge”—i.e., as what has been attributed in the rhetorical tradition to the arousal of affect—not least through the techniques of self-affection. These enable the speaker, qua emotional attunement, to transmit emotional states to an auditorium. One could say: Eva mediates and transports the self-affection of Peronism. The First Lady, as a sort of “natural” and simultaneously “political” body (Kantorowicz 7; Sarlo 92),³ adds the affective and passionate components, framed and reterritorialized by a civic-bourgeois imaging, to its communicative registers and, in her gestures of sacrifice and self-consumption, she herself becomes a cipher of passion (Sarlo 25–28). She thus forms a counterweight to the mainstream of Peronism, a movement with revolutionary potential that deliberately instrumentalized a mobilization of the masses, undermining the self-image of the bourgeois classes. Conversely, the latter began to redefine themselves against the backdrop of Peronism (Adamovsky).

It is important to emphasize that the assembled audience is part of the performance, creating a political event that is disseminated to a wider public via visual and audio media. The registers of empathic emotions were amplified in a sort of transmission that reached out to a greater audience via mass media. The whole campaign event was recorded and documented on film. The message that is transported is that of a political community that constitutes itself through a dialogue between the speaker on the podium and the crowd standing below. Vertical differences in height, behavior, language, and the play with emotions thus become an open arrangement in which distance and closeness must be balanced.

3 Beatriz Sarlo (92) points out that “the material body of Eva produces her body politic.”

The dialogue between Eva Perón and the crowd is provided for and stimulated by the pauses that structure the speeches. In this way, an almost intimate emotionality is transmitted even when the crowd implores Eva Perón to confirm her candidacy instantaneously, although she had called it into doubt by statements like the following one: “Colleagues, do you think that if the post of vice-president were a burden and I were a solution, I would not have already said yes?” (quoted after Vassallo 6).⁴

Later on, the following dialogue takes place (quoted after Vassallo 6).⁵

Evita: “No, no, comrades. I accept the word of comrade Espejo [i.e., José Espejo, General Secretary of the General Confederation of Labour] and tomorrow, at 12 noon...”

Audience: “No! No! No! No!”

Evita: “I ask for a few hours. If tomorrow...”

Audience: “No! No! No! No!”

Evita: “Comrades, comrades: I ask you only one thing: When has Evita let you down? [Cf. video 2: 09:00] When has Evita not done what you want? But don't you realize that this moment for a woman, as for any citizen, is very transcendental? And that the least she needs is a few hours of time. Nothing more.”

Audience: “Now! Now! Now! Now!”

The observation that melodrama informs the political communication here and is acted out within the framework of bourgeois emotional repertoires does not contradict the findings that this situation may have gotten out of

4 Translation J.-H. W., in the original: “compañeros: ¿ustedes creen que si el puesto de vicepresidente fuera una carga y yo fuera una solución, no hubiera ya contestado que sí?”

5 Translation J.-H. W., in the original: Evita: “No, no, compañeros. Yo acepto la palabra del compañero Espejo y mañana, a las 12 del día...” / Público: “¡No! ¡no! ¡no!” / Evita: “Yo pido unas horas. Si mañana...” / Público: “¡No! ¡no! ¡no!” / Evita: “Compañeros, compañeros: yo les pido una sola cosa. ¿Cuándo Evita los ha defraudado? ¿Cuándo Evita no ha hecho lo que ustedes quieren? Pero, ¿no se dan cuenta de que este momento para una mujer, como para cualquier ciudadano es muy trascendental? Y que lo que menos que necesita son unas horas de tiempo. Nada más.” / Público: “¡Ahora! ¡ahora! ¡ahora!”

hand and that the president's wife temporarily lost her discursive sovereignty. With her persona, which is publicly declared to be private, Eva Perón embodies care and self-sacrifice to the crowd present, a crowd, guided by her husband President Juan Perón. However, according to the film sources available,⁶ the identification with her seems to have been momentarily derailed by an emotionally charged disagreement strongly articulated by the people as feeling and sympathy turn into collectively shared affect.

In view of the cinematic testimonies available today, however, one will state that this loss of control is reterritorialized through montages and commentaries, turning the *Cabildo abierto* as a media event into a myth and place of memory in the realm of the Peronist imaginary. Going back to the year of 1952, one may hypothesize that the First Lady returns to the ultimate medium of the amphitheater structure—the radio—and monopolizes the discourse. This, however, does not change the overall design of the message as seen from today, which is intended to convey familiarity and emotional unity still in dissent.

Second Example: Hugo Chávez⁷

In order to supplement the previous remarks, comments on a few examples of videos taken from the presidential election campaign in Venezuela in 2012 are in order. This campaign was won by Hugo Chávez, who then took over the presidency for the fourth time. As we will see, the balcony is still a highly relevant dispositif of propaganda, even in the political world of our time.

Chávez's regime can be considered an example of Latin American leftwing neo-populism (Werz). In my opinion, the evaluation of his government should also take into consideration a larger perspective on Venezuelan history, including the former epochs going back to the middle of the 20th century, which saw massive social and economic inequalities and rioting.

Even though Chávez came to power through general elections in 1998, it is noteworthy that he intended to introduce fundamental changes in the political system of Venezuela; changes that he apostrophized as the Bolivarian Revolution (Peters 2020). It is true that, particularly in the first phase of his government, some remarkable successes in the field of social policy (so called

6 Cf. as an historical source video 1.

7 The following comments refer to videos 3, 4 and 5 as listed in the references.

Social Missions) can be identified and some developments in the creation of direct democratic institutions (introduction of Communal Councils) took place. At the same time, it is also necessary to point to his disdain for representative democracy. This is evident in incidences such as his former attempts at military coups, substantial modifications of the constitution, the polarization of the political landscape, governance per decree, and the centralization of the executive power. However, it was the attempted coup of 2002 against Chávez that contributed to the radicalization of his regime and certain political measures that included repression of the opposition or freedom of speech (Kitzberger 2010, 16). Last but not least, accusations of nepotism and a political self-fashioning as the typical Latin American caudillo should be mentioned. Chávez denoted his own political role frequently as messianic and described his mandate as having directly emanated from the Venezuelan people (Welsch). As the head of a so-called rentier state (Peters 2017) that deals mainly with petroleum, he did not succeed in reducing the social inequality significantly. This stands in contrast to other Latin American countries that followed these strategies during the epoch of neo-extractivism in the first decade of the 21st century. His promise to diversify the oil-centered economy remained unfulfilled, which led to extreme economic and social crises after the fall of the oil price and, later on, after his death (Peters 2020).

The presidential election campaign of 2012 was burdened by the office-holding regime's intimidation and hindrance of the opposition. Furthermore, crimes of violence were committed. At the same time, the president's illness also cast a shadow over his campaign. Chávez had fallen ill with cancer already in 2010. In July 2012, the president declared his complete recovery, which helped his approval ratings immediately. After his reelection in October, he suffered a relapse in December and, in March of 2013, his death was announced by Vice President Nicolás Maduro.

The following analysis is based on scenes of videos taken at political rallies during the presidential election campaign of 2012 (see references). However, they should also be regarded in the broader context of Hugo Chávez's media policy. Already in 1999, he introduced a weekly television show (*Aló presidente*) to address the Venezuelan people; but also, to make occasional political decisions during the broadcasting of this television live format. In this context, it is necessary to emphasize his crucial role in the development of what the French journalist Christian Salmon has analyzed as "political storytelling." This form of storytelling moves away from classic forms of instilling adoration in the audience in order to create the charismatic authority of the ruler. Instead,

it tends to be nourished by softer emotions such as sympathy or empathy. Indeed, populist rulers often undermine the separation of public-political and private spheres in their self-representation. They belabor the paradox of having to substantiate their singular claim to power on the one hand, while on the other being not so singular but merely one among many others without unique qualities to begin with (*primus inter pares*, cf. Freud 102; Laclau 59). *Aló Presidente* corresponds quite precisely to such a model of self-dramatization (and its contradictions). It was just the right format “to bring the leader into his followers’ households, to promote his iconography, to inform the public about his achievements, and generally to solidify emotional ties with his supporters” (Frajman 525). Furthermore, Chávez initiated the foundation of the national TV station TeleSur, a project realized to counterbalance the hegemony of traditional media groups or the dominance of U.S.TV stations such as CNN, for instance. Besides, the Chávez regime urgently needed new platforms to present its programs and protagonists. As Kitzberger (2012, 125) indicates, the traditional media groups in some Latin American countries as in Venezuela “structure a public sphere in which the interests and experiences of subaltern classes and groups are less visible and legitimate.” What was initially conceptualized as an attempt to diversify political reporting in Venezuela turned out to be a valuable propaganda instrument of the Chávez regime, which, after 2002, increasingly attempted to monopolize the public sphere. Although the following examples were also broadcasted by TeleSur, I will mainly refer to videos broadcasted live by Cadena Nacional or Venezolana Televisión due to reasons of accessibility.⁸

The Announcement of the Election Victory of 2012⁹

I would like to begin with the announcement of Chávez’s election victory, on October 7, 2012, where Chávez appeared with his entourage on the balcony of the Presidential Palace Miraflores in Caracas. At this point, it is highly relevant to comment on the historical significance of the monument the balcony is part of, for Miraflores does not only represent a historical building. Chávez’s political movement interprets this location as a place of memory that reminds the

8 The source is YouTube. The excerpts from TeleSur that the author of this article had consulted are no longer accessible on YouTube. The other videos provide more material and give a more complete impression of the campaign rallies.

9 Cf. video 3 as listed in the references.

Venezuelan people of the failed coup d'état of 1992, in which the renegade military squads tried in vain to occupy the Presidential Palace. Chávez was one of the commanders who had orchestrated the conspiracy. This defeat was also the beginning of his political career, as Chávez—in a public statement and wearing a uniform and a red beret—took all responsibility and, to avoid greater damages, ordered his troops to stand down and to hand over their weapons.¹⁰ Again, in certain political contexts, a balcony is not only a neutral architectural element.¹¹

After his victory is confirmed, Hugo Chávez enters the balcony and appears in his typical outfit, a red tracksuit. Doubtlessly the red color refers to the socialist movement, which Chávez baptized as the Socialism of the 21st century. In the beginning, Chavez's use of a tracksuit was a kind of homage to Fidel Castro who preferred and cultivated this sportive dressing style after his retreat from politics. However, the Venezuelan ruler introduced a new design with the colors of the national flag. Later on, Nicolás Maduro wore this garment on the occasion of the funeral procession of the deceased president (Williams). This was certainly an homage to Chávez on Maduro's side, but it could also be understood as an unorthodox investiture of the successor.

The speech from the balcony of the Presidential Palace should be perceived as the visual and acoustic affirmation of political power: its representation after he won the election. This is a rather common ritual that corresponds with the political customs in other countries, even though there are other procedures of inauguration in Germany or in the U.S. In addition to that, Chávez uses his appearance on the balcony to stage his reunion with the Venezuelan people. In this sense, the sportive jacket indicates a casual style that suits a president well who intends to present himself as a man of the people. It is noteworthy here that the political staging should not only be described as a theater but, in analogy to the case of Juan and Eva Perón as analyzed above, as

10 Therefore, the broadcasting of TeleSur inserts the live pictures of the Mountain Barracks 4F. The letter and the digit are fixed on the roof of this building, they refer to February 4, 1992, the date on which the rebellion took place and which was the starting point of the “commandant Chávez” myth that, on his part, alludes of course to another legend: the commandant Ché Guevara.

11 That is to say that the balcony participates in historical representations that are connected to one or more buildings and places as a whole. For instance, when, in 2019, Matteo Salvini used the balcony of the Communal Palace in Forlì for a political speech, it was a clear reference to Benito Mussolini who in the same place sentenced four captured partisans to death in 1944 (La Repubblica 2019).

an amphitheater—a dispositif which is formed by several elements such as architecture, memory space, clothing, the elected president himself, the crowds, etc. However, within the framework of an amphitheater structure, it is crucial that the whole event is broadcasted by TeleSur or other television stations. Having in mind this organizational form, two kinds of separateness have to be overcome simultaneously: the distance between the elected president and his people but also the distance between the entire meeting and the television spectators.

In order to cross the emotional thresholds, the president does not concretize any political content or plans. He prefers to address the people by naming and embracing their heterogeneity: women and men, workers, the old and young, indigenous people, etc. He expresses his gratitude to them—even invites the opposition to participate in his political project. Finally, Chávez takes out the sword of Bolívar—it is difficult to verify whether it is a replica or the original—and so unites the masses under the central symbol of the Bolivarian Revolution (cf. video 3: 35:11). The aim of placing the event in the context of a political tradition is to give both those present and those watching via television the feeling that they are witnessing something important, that they themselves are part of history in the making. With regard to its traditional meaning within the code of political symbolism, the sword stands for the possession of the state authority and the monopolization of power. So, calling into mind the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the meeting of the ruler and his people communicates the message that the Venezuelan people and their head Chávez have once again conquered the sphere of political power.

The central role of the “assemblage” (Deleuze) is incorporated by Chávez. He is the center of attention and merely lends his voice to pronounce the victory of the people. In the emotional interplay between the ruler and his audience, the self-affection of the former—as an emotional “bridge” to the auditorium—appears to be crucial. This affection expresses itself through language and voice. From this point of view, the medium seems to be the message. The reunion of the populist politician and the crowd as a metonymy of the people or the nation is sustained by the presence of the political voice as the most important medium of interaction between leader and auditorium. Populist regimes weaken and destabilize the actually democratically secured procedures by taking (over) power through such balcony appearances. Therefore—quoting Mladen Dolar—the voice represents

[...] the source of authority against the letter, or the voice not supplementing but supplanting the letter. Most tellingly, all phenomena of totalitarianism tend to overbearingly hinge on the voice, the voice which in a quid pro quo tends to replace the authority of the letter, or seriously put into question its validity. The voice which appears limitless and unbound, i.e., not bound by the letter. (Dolar)

Thus, Chavez' appearance, as he celebrates his election victory on the balcony, can be considered a lesson in the art of an affectively-charged self-dramatization of populist rulers. In this context, the election and its legitimacy themselves are called into question—a paradoxical tendency that can also be noted in context of the right-wing populism we are currently witnessing.

With respect to political speech, Chávez developed his very own form of declamation, which was almost more relevant for the rhetorical effect of his speeches than the political agenda conveyed. On a linguistic level, we can observe a language that, apart from apostrophes and several figures of speech for repetition, manifests the master trope of climax: He combines simple or paratactic sequences that lead to a culminating point in which the audience takes over to cheer, to applaud, or to answer with chants. Here, Chávez as an orator demonstrates a real intuitive capacity of creating a call-and-response rhythm in which the pauses of the ruler's speech are a highly relevant part of the exchange. However, even though the whole scene does not adopt the character of a dialogue between political leader and audience, as in the cases of the classical Peronism discussed above, the crowd undoubtedly plays its part. Within the amphitheater-structure, it has the role of the claqueurs in the common sense of an affirmative audience but possibly also in the sense of Goffman (91): "A shill is someone who acts as though he were an ordinary member of the audience but is in fact in league with the performers." This way, the auditorium invites the greater public of television spectators to join the party by social imitation, sympathy, and approval.

The Campaign and the Mobile Balcony¹²

Finally, I would like to offer a few comments on several rallies held during Chavez's election campaign. The center of this "assemblage" is the rostrum, which can be characterized as a sort of mobile balcony. It is a stand-up stage

12 See videos 4 and 5 as listed in the references.

that the candidate takes with him or her on his campaign tour, during which he tries to bond with the crowds he encounters by making specific references to their regional or communal particularities. At the occasion of the *Cabildo abierto*, relating to the vice-presidency of Eva Perón, the rostrum was added to the front of the Ministry of Labor. In any case, the mobile balcony usually is the stage of the candidates, whereas the balcony belongs to the representation of leaders that are already in possession of political power.

In this context, a few comments need to be made on Chávez's campaign rally in Barcelona, on July 12, 2012. Barcelona is the capital of the Venezuelan state Anzoátegui. Here, the president appears on stage wearing clothes in the national colors: a blue tracksuit, a red beret, and a yellow scarf. The red beret refers to the moment in above-mentioned attempt of rebellion in 1992 when the commandant presented himself in a television broadcast to declare the failure of the coup and to take all responsibility. At the beginning of the meeting, the candidate starts singing the national anthem and alternates verses with the audience present (cf. video 4: 03:34). So, the speaker faces a crowd which is entirely ready to contribute to the emotional setting of the situation. He then takes his time to greet the assembly, addressing himself especially to the workers, the women, and the young people, and dedicating particular attention to the host city and its different parts (cf. video 4: 05:39). Afterwards, he recounts personal episodes from his life that are related to Barcelona and the region. As in the television program *Aló Presidente*, the political observer is able to notice "Chávez's facility with the spotlight, his 'gift of the gab,' his extensive knowledge of Venezuelan folk culture, songs and food" (Frajman 504) in the election campaign.

What he delivers is not just a speech, it is a civil religious sermon. On a performative level, it is Chávez's typical intonation, as commented on above, and the prayer-like chanting of paratactic sequences that already convey this impression. With regard to the contents of his discourse, he conveys the central points of his political program. Moreover, he talks about love as the main principle that connects all individuals and that also has the power to animate and move forward the national project. The campaign runs under the slogan "Corazón de mi Patria"—"Heart of my Fatherland"—which expresses not only patriotism but also a strategy to highlight the candidate's willingness to take care of the emotional well-being of the Venezuelan nation. "Love" and "heart" are the signifiers that reunite bourgeois emotions and patriotic feelings (cf. video 4: 09:20). The so-called Bolivarian Revolution can certainly be understood as an attempt to bring together the groups worst off in society. The represen-

tatives of these groups are addressed metonymically at the beginning of the speech in order to unite them in the sense of an emotional civic community. However, the Chavismo of 2012 also struck conciliatory tones and, especially after the election victory of October of that year, signals a willingness to cooperate with the opposition.

This speech nevertheless culminates in an uncanny declaration of “l’État, c’est moi,” now expressed in its neopopulist version: “Chávez, ya tú no eres Chávez. Tú eres un pueblo. Chávez se hizo pueblo” (video 4: 10:06). That is to say, as if speaking to himself he states: “You are not Chávez, you are the people. Chávez has become one with his people.” By using these words, the candidate quotes the Columbian leftwing politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who lived in the first half of the 20th century and whose assassination in 1948 led to the “Bogotazo.” This popular expression was applied to the riots, massive street fights, and civil war in the aftermath of the murder. Chávez borrows Gaitán’s words to reactivate the populist phantasm of the union between leader and people. He then turns and addresses himself once again to the Venezuelan people in a generic second-person singular: the woman, the man, the worker, the girl, the boy. They all are Chávez, so the president says, each one is Chávez. Once again, the political observer is reminded of the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, in which the sovereign is represented as the composition of many small individuals.

The second rally I would like to mention took place on September 16, 2012, in San Fernando, the capital of the State of Apure. Here, we can observe the same aspects of political stage-management. However, in the course of this reunion, one cannot help but notice the even stronger presence of emotions, conceived as a political communication strategy. Chavez reveals that he is not yet in full possession of his strength due to his illness and physical limitations. Then he begs God to grant him his last dream (cf. video 5: 04:29); that is to say, a complete recovery and to win the upcoming election. In fact, the president seems to allude to his illness that has recently been cured (or so it seemed), and he shows himself highly emotionalized, using a silken red handkerchief to dry his tears, which provides a good contrast to his white and blue tracksuit (cf. video 5: 08:18), before he starts performing regional songs with the popular singer Cristóbal Jiménez (cf. video 5: 09:09). As in the case of the election campaign of Juan and Eva Perón, the personal illness and the attached emotions of the candidate become part of political communication. The political and natural bodies of the president remain indistinguishable (Kantorowicz).

Conclusion

In the context of populism and neopopulism, the balcony is part of an “assemblage” which permits the ruler to stage his union with the people. Since terms such as “the people” are deceptive universals, they lend themselves well for political instrumentalization. The balcony dispositif fulfills exactly this purpose of staging political power, by showing the unity of the political leader on a balustrade and the crowds gathered below.

According to Canetti’s theory, the individual’s fear of contact is eliminated in the mass experience.¹³ The distance between the leader, who is not part of the crowd, and ‘his people’ has to be overcome by the excitement of emotions and affects which are expressed by speeches, rhetorical techniques, rhythms, rituals, and music. Such spectacles can trigger ecstatic states in groups of people that go beyond the realm of distinct individual emotions. In this sense, I would distinguish between individual emotions on the one hand and collective affects that are generated as part of a mass experience. The site of emotional expression is the theater. In the age of electronic mass media, it is the amphitheater (Flusser). In order to amplify the effect, electronic visual media devices and networks are crucial.

The balcony scenes in question, which took place in the context of left-wing populist movements, but which have also emerged on the opposite extreme side of the political spectrum, show very clearly that mobilizing the masses was no longer sufficient in the age of television. There are two heuristic aspects to both Eva Perón’s and Hugo Chávez’s appearances: First, the crowd and its interaction with the political leader become part of the spectacle. Second, affects evoked in a mass experience cannot be transmitted electronically. Therefore, the historically older form of displaying emotions is used to reach a wide audience consisting of individuals and to appeal to them through sentimental emotions such as empathy and sympathy.

In an attempt at theoretical localization, I would like to conclude by proposing the thesis that the success of populism is neither plausible exclusively through theories which are ultimately based on psychoanalytic theorems (Laclau 69–71, 133), nor through theories that assume power and domination beyond political representation and describe it exclusively as “an affective

13 Canetti’s theory has an anthropological foundation and claims almost universal validity. In contrast, I see the need to historicize his thesis and locate it in the context of bourgeois modernity.

relation, or as habit” (Beasley-Murray 27). Rather, the exercise of political power as well as the populist impression and stage-management should be addressed as an intertwining of the aforementioned aspects on the basis of “assemblages,” as a multitude and structural relationship of representations, architectures, media, registers, codes, agencies, affects, and (!) emotions.

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Back to the Future

State Transformation and Sentimental Repertoires of Belonging in Saudi Arabia

Antonia Thies

ذاري وَسِرُّ الهوى الباقي وَأوطاني يا طيبة الثور يا زوجي وَوجداني

“My home and the secret of the lasting fondness and my homeland. Oh goodness of light, oh my soul and my sentiment”

Abdus-Salam Hafeth 592: “The Nostalgia, Oh my Home”

Introduction

For centuries, Arabic poetry has been a venue of negotiation for questions of identity, social order, and belonging. Passed down orally from generation to generation, it still plays a significant role in processes of collective identity formation today. Saudi Arabia’s literary scene has evolved over time and with the recent cultural opening, arts and poetry are experiencing a revival, even appearing in official government documents. Saudi poet Abdus-Salam Hafeth is one of the most significant writers of the 20th century on a Saudi renewed thought of (national) belonging (Dahāmi 151). In his poem “The Nostalgia, Oh my Home” (1993), the longing for his homeland becomes tangible, as it shapes him as an individual and thus becomes the touchpoint for his self-expression. Through his feelings towards it, his homeland becomes one with his very existence. The *sentiment*¹ he feels allows him to view himself in line with those who

1 The term “وجدان” (root “وجد”) contains many meanings which span from “strong emotion,” “passion,” “ecstasy,” “physical arousal” or “violent joy” to “sentiment” (Wehr 1003). Moreover, it is one of the myriad words for “passionate love” in classical Arabic poetry. In each way, it always contains a fundamental affective connotation.

came before him. These ancestors become symbolic “mirrors” (مِرَائِي) of himself, to which he remains bound as they “stay locked inside him by bonds of feeling” (Hafeth 592).² Consequently, he understands his own individual belonging in relation to a social group that he perceives anchored in a Saudi nation state to which he remains connected through emotional ties.

Indeed, at the heart of how people perceive themselves individually and collectively lies their emotional conditioning. Emotional and affective encounters throughout life form the very social fabric that individuals rely upon to make sense of the world—both as individual beings and as political subjects (Edkins). Discussing the works of affect theorists Brian Massumi and John Protevi, Jan Slaby (2017, 134) posits that affects are inherently political in nature, as they are responsible for the formation of political subjects and the shaping of their attitudes, perceptions, and habits. In addition, political leaders often seek to appeal to *the people's feelings*, employing various strategies of *sentimental leadership*—an approach exemplified early on by Max Weber's concept of “charismatic authority.” These observations on the relationship between affects and politics raise questions about the genesis of nation-states and the stability and transformative power of social and political orders. While much of the research so far focuses on liberal democracies, the same questions apply to autocratic regimes as well. Since the affective turn in the 1990s (Clough), scholars have observed that autocrats increasingly strengthen societal bonds among their populations by modes of active mobilization and emotional engagement (Greene/Robertson; Pearlman), occasionally through references to the past (Demmelhuber/Thies). In the case of the Gulf monarchies, sentimentality becomes a tool of social engineering by fostering feelings of belonging to sustain political orders. This leads to the question of how ruling elites use sentimentality in their rhetoric to build collective identities during recent periods of autocratic transformation.

The Gulf monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia can be considered outstanding examples of how a governing elite employs a specific kind of sentimental leadership. On the onset of the post-oil era, Saudi Arabia moved down a difficult path of renegotiating state-society relations without being able to

2 “أَجْفَانٌ:” (Hafeth 592). “أَيْنَ الْمِرَائِي يَأْتِي كُنَّا نُعَايِنُهَا وَتَحْتَوِينَا بِأَحْسَاسٍ وَأَجْفَانٌ؟” [...] “وَتَحْتَوِينَا [...]” (literally “contain us with eyelids”) in light of the common use of physiognomies in contemporary Arabic poetry is thus translated as “being locked within.” “مِرَائِي” is translated as mirrors but could also relate to “appearances” (translation A.T.)

fall back on previous legitimation strategies that fed on oil revenues. The kingdom now finds itself in the latest period of social and political transformation in light of the upcoming post-oil era. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated a high degree of adaptability in the past.³ Since the last decade, a new nationalism has been employed that aims at the elevation of affective ties connecting the populace with its leadership. In 2022, a new “Founding Day” was introduced, which is celebrated on February 22 and serves to shape a collective memory and reinterpretation of the ruling family as the founding fathers of the Saudi state. Under the slogan “The Day We Started,” the regime re-contextualizes key socio-historical elements of a pre-oil era and bridges them with current political strategies of its “Vision 2030” (Saudi Vision 2030). The role of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is of exceptional importance in this context. His reinterpretation and staging, including a quite theatrical self-dramatization, in the light of his ancestors with reference to their relevance and successes in pre-oil times, aligns with the current economic diversification strategies and policy ambitions of a post-oil era envisioned under his leadership. The strategic harnessing of past events as sources of identification (repertoires of the past) and their re-contextualization for current restructuring processes primarily targets the generation that will shape the country in the future.

This contribution illustrates how the Saudi government seeks to consolidate its power in a future political order given the kingdom’s recent period of transformation. Based on a data set comprising official documents, regime-affiliated newspapers, and MBS’s official speeches and interviews this contribution reconstructs the top-down initiated storytelling about a nation, notions of collective belonging and heritage, and the role of sentiments therein. In doing so, sentimental codes and narratives have been identified that aim to appeal to the population on an affective level. This examination is embedded in the larger historical formation of the Saudi state in order to identify those past events that are now employed to foster collective meaning-making through sentimental practices.

3 For an exceptionally fine-grained analysis on the transformations of state and society in the Gulf, cf. Al-Naqeeb.

Investigating Sentimentality A Necessarily Interdisciplinary Field

Political science has only recently begun to address the concept of sentimentality, building on the findings of anthropological and ethnological research (Marcus; Bens/Zenker). Concurrently, the discipline incorporates extensive debates on related terms concerning emotions and affects in the political sphere (Arendt; Nussbaum). In other disciplines, sentimentality has already been established as a concept. Literary studies in particular have long dealt with the sentimental (Bell; Zumbusch). Tracing the term from 18th century anglophone literature from where it found its way into other languages (“sentimental” in DWDS), literary studies reveal the origins, underlying concepts, but also—over the course of time—devaluation of the term “sentimentality.” In the wake of these dynamics, sentimentality frequently acquired pejorative connotations that tend to still mark colloquial semantics today (Zumbusch 570). Yet, the above-mentioned works demonstrate how reductionist interpretations in 19th century sentimentalism, like understanding sentimentality as gendered and as using it to describe ‘female’ sensations, have long dismissed scholarly debates about the clearly more complex dynamics of sentimentality in the emotional cultures of modernity (Mendelman).

From a cultural studies perspective, Lauren Berlant established a groundbreaking foundation of a new understanding of *national sentimentality*, interpreting the political sphere of the U.S. as an affective space. In their literary critical analysis, they examine the emergence of the first mass-mediated *intimate public sphere* not only successfully addressing affect-based processes of collective consolidation but also their impact on meaning-making within political spheres (Berlant 1991; 1997; 2008). Apart from the aforementioned publications, American studies further published a significant body of work inherently essential to sentimentalism. Most notable are Anker’s examination of political melodrama as sentimental politics of order (Anker) and the concept of civil sentimentalism (Paul). Finally, sociological and philosophical research provides knowledge on the affective level of human existence that is essential for investigating sentimentality in its ontological dimension. Especially the sociologies of emotion (Illouz 2004; 2018), affect theories (Massumi 1995, 2002; Peters), and social cohesion theories (Durkheim 1984; 1992) provide necessary parameters for understanding affective relationships and the constitution of social and political orders. Overall, the research field on sentimentality draws particular derivations from moral sense philosophy (Erämetsä 17). The majority

of these concepts originated and are located in the anglophone world. However, in view of the enormous interdependencies and mutual influences in a history of ideas across various geographical areas, it is long overdue to begin a scholarly conversation on the sentimental in Middle Eastern studies.

Political philosophy in the Near and Middle East has produced as rich a body of work on affective dispositions, moral feelings, and the general role of emotions in politics as its occidental counterpart (Mian). To be historically correct, both have massively influenced one another.⁴ With regard to the research subject of sentimentality, Al-Farabi's political theory is of utmost significance. By seeking to reconcile reason and affect, he offers sociolinguistic groundings for arrangements of meaning in social and political orders and provides insights into early understandings of modes of affect. For example, he argues that meaning-making in the socio-political realm is rooted in the interplay of affect, cognition, and sensory perception, shaped by the physical and psychological dispositions of human bodies. He emphasizes that language emerges through emotional and intellectual engagement with the world, grounding understanding and communication in lived, bodily experiences (Mian 54). Sociologist Ibn Khaldun's notion of social cohesion (*aşabiyya*) resembles Durkheim's later theory of collective consciousness and his understanding of mechanical and organic solidarity (Gellner 205). In general, all great Peripatetic philosophers reflect on the role of affect and emotion and the resulting respective modalities of perception which are able to influence social structures and understandings of *ruling and being ruled*. Their works in sociology, philosophy, and theology are still studied today in the region or in *niche*-disciplines of so-called 'Islamic' philosophy. Moreover, they have found their way into Arabic, Turkish, and Persian poetry and literature. While enriching Western debates, these perspectives offer insights into regional self-perceptions over time, yet they are often overlooked. Ernest Gellner's work illustrates the advantages of a combined reading of Durkheim's and Ibn Khaldun's works for a better understanding of social orders. Consequently, interdisciplinary Middle Eastern studies has not only earned a seat at the table of affect and sentimentality studies; its inclusion is long overdue.

4 E.g. Al-Farabi's influence on Leo Strauss' classical political philosophy (Tamer), Ibn Rush and Ibn Sina's commentaries on Aristotle underpinned Thomas Aquinas' own Aristotelian understanding (Borrowman) or Wittgenstein's influence on Jordanian philosopher Sahban Khuleifat in shaping his ideas of moral sense philosophy (Jarrar).

In this contribution, I follow a notion of sentimentality that understands the concept in terms of its mobilizing effect, as an enticing instrument for political actors. Thus, sentimentality allows for a construction of a unifying narrative, the sharing of common feelings and memories, and for using them as a means to foster a sense of belonging within a collective identity (Demmelhuber/Thies 1008). It has the potential to shape and transform state-society relations. How people interpret a situation and thus express (affective) reactions towards it, is shaped by their socially and culturally conditioned bodies of knowledge, so-called emotion repertoires. When having emotional experiences, people draw on these repertoires to respond to affective encounters (Poser et al. 241). The arising sentiments then shape how people feel about the *meaning* of a situation and therefore influence how they make sense of the world around them and their own positionality in it (Bens/Zenker 97). In the long-run, this creates relational spheres of belonging by either enacting or severing affectional bonds with one another, depending on the intensity and nature of individual and collective experiences (ibid.; Slaby 2014, 42).

Following Bens and Zenker, sentiments “connect cognitive processes of forming opinions and judgments with affective and emotional dynamics” (96). Sentiments prove to be decisive in such processes, as they outlast the incidents in which they are produced (Bens 209). Hence, they offer a bridge from past events to the present for the sake of meaning-making on an individual as well as collective level (Demmelhuber/Thies 1007). In applying and disseminating sentimental repertoires, reciprocal relationships are constructed between the sending and receiving end of such sentimental rhetoric, e.g. between ruling elite and populace (ibid.). Political action is thus not solely the domain of the sending actors but also a place of reception and judgment (Slaby 2017, 140, referencing Judith Mohrmann’s stage model). From the perspective of political science research, this requires a certain responsiveness in order to analyze the emergent dynamics of affect and the making of effective sentiments.

Through sentimental codes, political actors are able to affectively charge and validate ideas of order (Paul). In doing so, sentimental knowledge stocks of the past, e.g. historical junctures, sorrows, hardships, or traumatic experiences can serve as sources that can be utilized in the present to ensure the survival of political orders. In the face of shattering and traumatic experiences, people are reliant upon a shared language and/or knowledge stocks in order to share and make sense of their experiences (Hutchison 10). Thus, whose experiences are processed and remembered (e.g. marginalized groups or an entire nation) becomes a decisive factor for its utilization. These knowledge stocks

are then enacted in a manner that is both, social and political (ibid.). As a result, they become a key feature of a group attribution and—when played out politically—are continuously made available for future generations. Enactments like these are achieved through material and non-material (e.g. rhetorical) practices across socio-cultural and political fields, while targeting different audiences (Demmelhuber/Thies 1007).

Transforming the State The Evolution of a Kingdom

Saudi Arabia is definitely considered to be “a country with a present—synonymous with the global oil economy” (Bsheer 7). At the same time, the kingdom is not seldom denied a meaningful history beyond its enormous relevance of being the birthplace of the first Muslim community (ibid.). The success of the founding of the state, as it now stands, is often linked to the infamous alliance of the Al-Saud family with the religious reform movement of Ibn Al-Wahab in 1744. However, the formative processes that constitute today’s Saudi state are not only partly located further in the past, they are also considerably more complex.

The history of the formation of the Saudi state tells a story of unification and fragmentation, opposition and—contrary to common scholarly belief (Al-Naqeeb; for a critique cf. Derbal)—responsiveness to the civilian population. Despite being an absolute monarchy, the kingdom has seen broader civil participation through advisory councils, religious authorities, and tribal allegiances, all influencing its governance. Thus, transformation and various forms of participation have been recurring themes in Saudi Arabia’s development. While at first sight this might seem contradictory to the linear, unilateral story of the making of the Saudi State as it is fostered right now in Saudi Arabia’s latest transformation period, it actually fits quite well into the picture of a state and society that proved to be impressively adaptable throughout its history. As Proctor and Al-Senussi describe it, the Saudi State went “from openness to closure and isolation followed by a dynamic burst of movement at breakneck speed” (16).

The founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 by Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, first King of the state (1932–1953), sparked a period of regional debates on identity, particularly visible in the artistic as well as cultural sector, with the construction of heritage sites. The discovery of oil

in the late 1930s revolutionized Saudi society, leading to urbanization, cultural growth, and a modern economy. Simultaneously, these dynamics led to opposition from conservative and anti-imperialist groups against this new metropolitan consumerism (Proctor/Al-Senussi 17). At the same time, Ibn Saud's reign and that of his heir Saud ibn Abd Al Aziz (1953–1964) coincided with a phase of anti-imperialist Arab Nationalism as well as secular leftist movements in the region. In order to stabilize his reign in the light of these regional processes, Saud adopted more progressive policies while trying to contain opposition from conservative forces within the ruling family (Bsheer 10).

Leaders like King Saud and King Faisal, who were quite popular among Saudi nationals, navigated regional dynamics, such as Arab nationalism and leftist movements, by balancing conservative views with more progressive policies. Faisal, known for his Pan-Islamism and pro-Palestinian stance, made strides like abolishing slavery and leading the 1973 oil boycott, while also strengthening the state's control over religious institutions (Proctor/Al-Senussi 26; Bsheer 11). Additionally, he offered refuge to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood members who fled from the threat of being executed by Nasser in an attempt to balance out Wahabi clerical interest groups, thus weakening religious conservative institutions (Bsheer 8). During this time, a first centralized narrative promoting the State under Saudi rule was created, alongside institutionalized forms of nationalism (e.g. through centralized education and unifying school curricula, Bsheer 11) and thus the solidification of a new status quo. In general, the period of the 1930s to the late 1960s is, according to scholarly literature, considered to be more liberal, modern, and progressive, with many different forms of civic engagement. State-society relations in the kingdom were far from one-sided or coercive, while Wahabi Islam was present, though more moderate (Proctor/Al-Senussi 26). However, this was supposed to change in the late 1970s.

The oil wealth and Saudi Arabia's entanglement with geopolitical issues led to a rupture, i.e. to a "period of cataclysmic change" (Proctor/Al-Senussi 24) in the Saudi society and government. The 1979 Kaaba revolt pushed the kingdom toward stricter conservatism. Although the Saudi ruling family contained the situation, the shock waves of this act changed the sociopolitical map of Saudi Arabia in a lasting manner. Determined to prevent similar incidents, the Saudi government became more conservative and repressive in its policies (*ibid.*). Hence, the following decades saw increased social conservatism, the shutting down of entertainment venues, the enforcing of gender segregation, and the

stifling of cultural expression overall.⁵ An entire generation of Saudis had just begun to experience and collectively shape emerging scenes of culture and entertainment, which became new pillars of a Saudi national identity. The following two decades of uncompromising social and religious conservatism brought these dynamics to a halt. However, it did not eliminate political participation as society continued to engage in shaping the nation's cultural and political identity, albeit under the radar of state politics (Proctor/Al-Senussi 28; Thies, forthcoming 2025a).

The already challenging economic and socio-political situation worsened during the 1990/91 Gulf War, which marked a turning point for the Kingdom. This period saw a shift from “religious time” to “historical time” (Bsheer 19), with the introduction of satellite television breaking the religious establishment’s monopoly. Thus, public support for the religious establishment began to wane (*ibid.*; Proctor/Al-Senussi 32). A cautious effort took shape to create commemorative spaces—*lieux de mémoire* (Nora)—of a past heritage that offered a state narrative as an alternative to the one focusing solely on religious roots. Some scholars, such as Rebecca A. Proctor and Alia Al-Senussi, attribute these changes to regional and global transformation processes. Others, like Rosie Bsheer, view it as an attempt to secure the permanence of the Al Saud dynasty in order to keep the regime stable via a built environment (Bsheer 131). Either way, the Saudi government used its petro-wealth to invest into neglected memorial sites whose preservation was considered heretical by some religious actors and institutions. Indeed, several conservative groups tried to sabotage the construction sites and prevent national and regional heritage projects, such as the National Museum or the heritage site of Dir’iyya (*ibid.* 131). However, the heritage boom could not be stopped. Today, Dir’iyya marks the place of origin of a new Founding Day story.

When King Abdullah passed away in January 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became king and his son, MBS, crown prince, thus bypassing the original line of succession. With MBS came the vision of a grand transformation of state and society (Proctor/Al-Senussi 38). He took office at a time when oil revenues were at an all-time low, which underlines his ambition, as his vision

5 The fateful year 1979 also witnessed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both triggering a second oil shock and fuel shortages affecting Saudi state revenues. Additionally, the Camp David Accords, Zia ul-Haq’s Islamization of Pakistan, and heightened Cold War tensions, affected the Saudi Kingdom (Proctor Al-Senussi 24).

was primarily aimed at reducing dependence on oil and thus diversifying the economy. The crown prince's recipe for success is above all his popularity with the young population, whose participation he demands. He himself is part of exactly that generation which witnessed the early 1990s media revival and the identity crisis that grew out of the first and second Gulf war.⁶ This also includes the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, which led to a shake-up of national identity for many Saudis due to Saudi Arabia's links to this event (Proctor/Al-Senussi 38). As a result, this new nationalism seeks to come to terms with these events and creates a new idea of a common belonging and identity. Although this massive transformation started with the crown prince, his person and his actions are embedded in his father's governing efforts, which lasted over three decades (Bsheer 215).

The New Founding Day and MBS' Vision of Order, Belonging, and Civil Engagement

Narratives imbued with sentimentality about the pre-oil era, which draw on historical reference points to achieve current policy goals, are a recurring theme in the agendas of the Gulf monarchies (Demmelhuber/Thies). The Saudi state and society are particularly interesting in that regard. The Grand Strategy of the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 focuses on major transformation efforts in the light of the founding father and takes especially social and cultural scenes as venues of change. Yet again, the Vision focuses and strongly depends on the participation of its citizens, especially young people. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is quite a young kingdom. First, because its establishment dates back only three centuries. Hence, as Mark Thompson argues, whilst "Saudi Arabia is recognizably a state; it is not yet a nation" (Thompson 17). Secondly, the majority of citizens is under the age of 30 (GASTAT). On the one hand, these young adults have already experienced many transformation processes and political changes over the last two to three decades. On the other hand, however, they also seem to reminisce sentimentally about times in the past that they did

6 Both, among other things, linked to the abolition of the media monopoly 1990/91. On the one hand, movies and sitcoms shaped the cultural understanding of a young population, including the Crown Prince himself, who was six years old at the time. On the other hand, Iraq-hostile media coverage challenged the idea of a regional Gulf identity (Proctor/Al-Senussi 32).

not experience themselves (Demmelhuber/Thies 1009). In doing so, the Gulf youth supposedly draws on a collective memory, trans-generationally transmitted, as Assmann describes it in a different context, probably due to shared sentiments that are induced and kept alive by its political leaders. Hence, it is exactly this generation that is the most important target group of the crown prince's vision of "participatory nature" of the Saudi youth (Diwan 16).

The New Founding Day explicitly draws attention to the first three Saudi States⁷ and intends to draw a direct line of continuity ever since. It seeks to celebrate the historical foundation of the Saudi state on February 2, 1727 by Imam Muhammad bin Saud when he became ruler of the Diriyah emirate (MoFA). The holiday was established in 2022 by royal decree (A/371) and differs from the National Day on September 23 insofar as the latter commemorates the founding of the state by Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1932. Setting the historic foundations of the Saudi state on that day further invalidates the role of the alliance with Ibn Al-Wahab twenty-two years later.

In that respect, the aim of this Founding Day on behalf of the Saudi government is to "reconstruct history in a way that is closer to accuracy and objectivity" (Al-Otaibi) and thus the Founding Day becomes "a very important event not only in correcting history, but also in dealing with reality and building the future." (ibid.). In fact, scholars interpret the recent introduction of this national holiday as a "correction" to Saudi history, one that coincides with the end of religious legitimacy in the kingdom that had prevailed for the past three centuries (Alamer). Overall, the Saudi leadership's main objectives of celebrating the Founding Day according to the Ministry of Foreign affairs of Saudi Arabia is to:

Encourage Saudi citizens to cherish the solid roots of the Saudi State, cherish the close bonds between themselves and their leaders, appreciate the cohesiveness, stability and security established by the Saudi State, appreciate the resilience of the First Saudi State and its defense against enemies and appreciate the continuity of the Saudi State, as a reflection of the strength of its leaders and its deep roots. As well as cherish the national unity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia established by King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al-Faisal Al Saud. (MoFA)

7 First Saudi State (1727–1818), Second Saudi State (1824–1891), Third Saudi State (1902–present) (MoC 2023c).

In sum, the message conveys that people should be proud of the achievements of the Kings of Saudi Arabia in building the country and strengthening its national cohesiveness and prosperity, as a member of the royal family and governor of the Qassim Province argues:

Restoring memories of happy and pivotal events in human life is an important way to consolidate the positive feelings associated with this event, and the importance of consolidating these feelings increases when it comes to the homeland. (Bin Saud bin Abdulaziz; translation A. T.)

There is no doubt that this royal order will have the greatest impact in strengthening national belonging, so that the anniversary of the founding becomes a day of witness for the Saudis, aware of the authenticity of the history of their country and its historical depth, and this history will become linked to memory, and a catalyst to serve the country by all means. (ibid.)

The strategy becomes clear and transparent. According to the Brand Guide Book published by the Ministry of Culture, its aim is to be “reminiscent of the past in order to transport the viewer back in time” (MoC 2023b, 30).

Sentimentality in Saudi Narratives

Linking Leadership, Historical Pride, and State-Society Relations

The Saudi leadership builds and structures its storytelling—the national story—along narratives of *wise leadership* of the ruling family of Al Saud in its historical continuity. A steady line of great leadership is outlined, spanning from the founding fathers in the past to the Saudi government in the present, with the crown prince at its head. This continuity of political rule is stressed not only narratively but also linguistically. In that respect, the term “Muhammedan” (محمدان, Arab. the two Muhammeds) is frequently used. The suffix of -ان (-an) signals duality in Arabic. Thus, the government chooses to bridge the continuity of the state from the founder of the Saudi state, Imam Muhammad bin Saud, in the past to the crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, in the present and future. Wise leadership is thus frequently communicated as a sacrifice made by leaders. However, the sentimental feature of such narratives is not just given by offering a bridge between the past and the present, and hence drawing on (emotional) knowledge stocks of the citizens.

The narration of the Saudi national story is sentimental in so far as it places a social emotion at its center—collective pride—which already determines how the national story is to be understood: We take “great pride in the wise leaders of a sublime homeland rooted in the depths of history since it was ruled by Mohammed bin Saud and the foundations of the Saudi state, which lasted for another three centuries until today” (Sabq, translation A. T.). These sentimental narratives ultimately lead to the idea of the ruling elite about state-society relations. Here, in accordance with the notion of the scholarly debate, the government indeed directly addresses its population. Hence, it stresses the demand and obligation of the population to actively participate in the transformation of the Saudi state. Thus, phrases are circulating such as the cultural heritage being in “the hands of all of us, and we live in it strengthened and honored” (Al-Hoseini, translation A. T.). Maha bint Said Al-Yazidi argues: “The citizen is supposed to know the historical and cultural heritage of his country. Be proud of it and be aware of the sacrifices made by the governments and its citizens of this state in its three phases of the state, and still adhere to the principles of this state.” (Al-Yazidi, translation A. T.)

Prime examples of sentimentality in the Saudi rhetoric include the oscillation between the present and the past, as well as pointing to the ongoing significance of past events, as they should be experienced in the exact emotional manner in which the leadership portrays them. They specify the respective social emotions, most commonly pride and love, that are normatively assessed as appropriate in the cultural and socio-political context of the kingdom:

[...] in our sublime homeland these days, the first anniversary of the Founding Day and its essential contents and historical meanings, for the glories made by our ancestors and inherited by our parents to be honored by the grandchildren citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And remember the history of the entity of their blessed state with pride and pride in the legacy of the past, the renaissance of the present and the aspirations of the future. (Al-Kahmous, translation A. T.)

The Founding Day is a glorious and immortal day in the memory of the sons of the Kingdom who commit to it to express the extent of their love, loyalty, and historical connection to the richness of this dear country. And the extent of their connection with its honorable rulers, after the Kingdom before the establishment was scattered and rival emirates and desertions invaded each other. [...] and in the environs of its rulers from the House of Saud, a unified

and interconnected state characterized by love, brotherhood and national cohesion among its sons. (Qaradi, translation A. T.)

Symbolism and Sentiment

The Role of Tribal Heritage in Saudi Arabia's Founding Story

The Al-Saud dynasty has deliberately built its rule on a coalition of influential stakeholders with often-conflicting interests, making elite cohesion crucial for short-term stability. These stakeholders include tribes, clerics, merchants, technocrats, and the (extended) royal family (Rundell 18). Among them, Saudi Arabia's relationship with regional tribes is particularly significant. Tribes have shaped the political order in the Arabian Peninsula long before modern nation-states and played a key role in identity politics, though their influence is fluctuating (Thies, forthcoming 2025b). King Abdulaziz's strategy of dismantling tribal autonomy while using their structures to centralize power proved highly effective and remains relevant today (Rundell 83). Yet again, tribal history serves as a political pawn, central to sentimental rhetoric and symbolism, and is reflected in the nation's founding documents.

Sentiments can be understood as trans-situational and occur through affective responses to certain discursive and non-discursive symbols (Scheve/Berg 32). Consequently, symbols act as visual markers (Vergani/Zuev 91) that potentially evoke emotional and affective reactions. The five main symbols of the new "Founding Day" are considered to be a "representation of the Saudi State's main values and figures" (MoC 2023c, 14) and are crucial elements of "vital heritage and persistent cultural themes" (ibid.). The symbols include the Saudi flag, the palm tree, the falcon, the Arabian horse, and the market (*souq*). Each has inscribed a symbolic meaning that is shared via official government documents (MoC 2023b; MoC 2023c, 14) as well as communicated in newspapers close to the regime (Al-Hosseini). The story traces the narrative of the 18th century Saudi territory with immense attention to detail using the symbols mentioned. Here, primarily socio-historical terminology is used that might resonate with the collective memory of the target group. The fact that the different target groups and audiences are taken into account is also evident in the differences between the English and Arabic versions. Whereas the example of the date as a symbol in the Arabic version of the Founding Book focuses on linguistic cultural assets and their enrichment for Saudi Arabian societies over time, the English version speaks of the hardships that the early Saudi people

had to endure, e.g. references to the unbearable heat of the date harvest (MoC 2023a; MoC 2023c, 15). In addition to the council (*maǧlis*), which symbolizes political participation, the symbol of the horse stands out in particular. It supposedly represents the story and heroism of the Saudi people. This not only refers to the initial role of tribesmen and their cultural practices, in fact, an entire founding myth was built around the Arabian horse. According to this, the first domestication of horses is said to have begun 9000 years ago in what is now southern Riyadh, which has led to a series of archaeological efforts by the Saudi state (MoC 2023c, 16). The story is strongly challenged by the archaeological scientific community (Schiettecatte/Zouache 3). In sum, the sentimental code contained in these symbols as well as their accompanying explanations lies, on the one hand, in the harnessing of cultural, supposedly historical bodies of knowledge, appealed to in an affective way. On the other hand, it lies in the linguistic devices used.

Linguistic Devices

Collective Affiliation and Historical Continuity in Sentimental Political Rhetoric

Linguistic devices serve as a tool to ensure discursive goals such as producing, preserving, transforming, and destroying in- and out-groups. Thus, they hint at group affiliations in their social and historical contextualization, painting a picture of a constructed national identity (De Cillia et al.; Reisigl). The most common linguistic devices in “Founding Day” storytelling are deictics, either personal (*we*, *our*, *them*) or temporal (*back then*, *tomorrow*). While deictics are standard in language for referring to people, objects, and times, their specific use here is notable. Personal deictics like *we* and *us* emphasize collective belonging, often referring to the Saudi state, nation, or ancestors. Temporal deictics link past events to present or future situations, highlighting the bridging function of sentimental political rhetoric. Both types often point to imagined spaces through linguistic referencing (*Zeigefunktionen*).

In Diriyah, the capital of the First Saudi State and the symbol of its successive future glories, the palm tree's dignity, charity, and diversity of all forms are acknowledged. Here we find Khudari, Makfazi, and Nabtat Sayf dates. (MoC 2023c, 15, translation A. T.)

One linguistic tool stands out in particular. Especially evident in the founding book launched by the ministry of culture, acts of shifting the recipient into the “realm of absent memory or even constructed imagination” (Bühler 22) are frequently employed. This type of *Deixis am phantasma*, a term coined by Karl Bühler, which has since been adopted in studies on cultural memory (West), is activated by recognition of a stimulus of or within immediate spatial-temporal context:

If we go northwest from Diriyah toward Al-Qassim, we find the generous palm trees showering us with all kinds of delicious fruits, such as Rashoudi and Qattaar dates, famous for their sweetness and tastiness. (MoC 2023c, 15, translation A. T.)

This observation leads back to the beginning of this contribution. The observation that young people in particular seem to be affected by sentimental codes of a shared past, crisis resilience, and collective belonging, even though they have not actively experienced certain historical stages themselves, raises questions about the trans-generational potential of narratives. With regard to the linguistic devices at hand, we can assume that another dimension of this phenomenon lies in the linguistic work of sentimental codes. Thus, such linguistic devices create retrospective memories while providing information about the emotive power of memory practices (West 28) that might be able to shape peoples understanding about “their” history and their own positionality in it.

Conclusion

The formation of modern states is “actively amnesiac” (Bsheer 34), as it relies on the erasure of some pasts in favor of others in order to create a national story that fulfills the pursuit or “(re-)uniting” of an imagined nation (Anderson). More critically, Bsheer problematizes submitting to one historical narrative that is written by the victors of history, in this case the family of Al-Saud. This goes along with the fabrication of a linear narrative leading to the current nation state. For example, the Founding Book stresses that the role of state leaders and deep national solidarity and strength were a reason for the continuation of the Saudi state ever since 1727.

In the case of the Saudi Founding Day, the regime indeed uses repertoires of the past and builds bridges into the present via a supposed continuity of

state and political rule. In order to create an offer of a new political order the government thus tries to appeal to the population on an affective level through emotion-bound signifiers and concepts. They appeal to the population to become part of ongoing social and political transformation processes. The findings prove the government's intention to communicate a participatory nature of this kind of nationalism that the scholarly debates lately assumed to be there, but had difficulties to prove empirically until now. Thus, sentimental political rhetoric using the example of the Saudi Founding Day is revealed in linguistic devices, symbolism, as well as narratives that bridge the past and the present. It not only provides an offer of orientation but also a clear interpellation of its citizens as to how they ought to commemorate the foundation of the state and make sense of it with a view to a national identity, belonging, and heritage in the present. This confirms Thompson's evaluation that coherent communities exist as a result of these shared perceptions of "the past, present, and future events [...] linking their lives to those of their predecessors and their successors in a meaningful way" (17). MBS's policy is partly similar in its ambition to the one prior to 1979, which is why re-staging himself in the light of those statesmen seems to be fruitful. The decisive element for his success points to his invocation of sentimentally coded political rhetoric.

Many scholars have argued that this latest transformation, culminating in the ascension of the crown prince and his Vision 2030, signals an end to the conservative religious foundation of the kingdom. This is particularly evident in the use of art and poetry, which leads back to Hafeth's poem at the beginning. The official government documents for this new holiday feature poems as well as artworks by local artists. The Founding Book (MoC 2023b, 45), for example, includes a picture of the state founder. It is a comic-style drawing by an unnamed Saudi artist. After 1979, such depictions would have been considered heretical and, as mentioned, were forbidden at the end of the 20th century. Now, it is the government itself that is opening up the venues and spaces for the artistic scene. It is an ultimate example of the new shift away from the religious establishment in the kingdom. The poem by Hafeth can likewise be understood in the context of its time. It symbolizes the literary and artistic, as well as, social and political transformation of a country that continuously reinvents itself. Yet, it also represents the power of sentimentality in creating meaning and fostering a sense of belonging. Hafeth later writes that he will return to his home. Whether this return is literal or metaphorical remains unclear. For the study of sentimentality, this distinction is irrelevant, as his sentiments regarding his

homeland have already shaped his self-understanding in a lasting manner and thus influences his past, present, and his future.

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Impolite, Emotive Language and the Making of *Us vs. Them*

Responses to a United Thai Nation Party 2023 Election Campaign Video

Saowanee T. Alexander and Duncan McCargo

Introduction

Politics can get very emotional in Thailand, a country where intense political contestation has been going on for the past two decades. Although Siam's absolute monarchy ended in 1932, the past ninety years have seen the country set world records for both the number of military coups staged and the number of new constitutions promulgated. Since the 1970s, Thailand has also seen numerous mass demonstrations, a number of which ended in bloody violence. Politically, normalcy has been the exception rather than the rule, and deep polarization has fueled strong emotions on all sides.

One cause of this permanent state of conflict was the now-defunct People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), whose supporters were largely middle-class conservatives from Bangkok and southern provinces, who staged massive protests in 2006 to force then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from office—accusing him of corruption and disrespecting the monarchy. These protesters wore yellow shirts to profess their loyalty to the king and the monarchy, which to them symbolized the country's peace and harmony. Thaksin became the target of political attacks on all fronts—legal, popular, and bureaucratic.

When he refused to go quietly, the military staged the September 2006 coup, which aimed to remove Thaksin and his political allies from Thai politics at all costs. As a two-time winner of the elections in 2001 and 2005, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party had created a stronghold of supporters in the North and Northeast. When the party was dissolved, these supporters continued to vote

for its subsequent reincarnations. In 2007, Thaksin's new People's Power Party (PPP) won the post-coup general elections.

About the same time, the Thaksin-aligned Redshirt movement started to take shape, vowing to put a stop to military coups. The movement was spearheaded by a political organization called the United Front for Democracy (UDD), which was the major force behind street protests and media campaigns. The UDD had close ties with Thaksin and his allies. A number of UDD leaders later became MPs or associates of pro-Thaksin parties.

The electoral victory of the People's Power Party was short-lived: Following further rounds of mass protest, the PPP was again dissolved by the Constitutional Court and ousted from power through an entirely undemocratic elite backroom deal. The Redshirt movement that backed the pro-Thaksin parties did not enjoy a positive image, especially in the eyes of the Bangkok middle classes who comprise the leaders who shape public opinion. From the beginning, the movement was criticized for being nothing but a puppet manipulated by Thaksin (see Alexander/McCargo 90–113 for more on this point). Protesters were also accused of joining Redshirt demonstrations in exchange for money, that they were uneducated, vote-selling people from rural areas, dubbed *khwai daeng* (red water buffalos). The metaphor of *khwai dang* portrayed them as gullible and ignorant, very much like “donkeys” in English. Those sympathizing with the Redshirts for fighting for their citizens' rights were reluctant fully to endorse or openly show their support for fear of being associated with “corrupt politicians” like Thaksin. This did not stop the Redshirt movement from growing in size. Thabchumpon and McCargo's survey found that a large majority of their supporters were from provinces in the North and Northeast who did support policies by Thaksin's government and saw that what happened to the former prime minister was unfair. Even though there were other allies in the movement besides the UDD itself, these allies including progressive intellectuals did not dominate the movement.

The Redshirts regularly held counter-demonstrations against the Yellow-shirts in 2009 and 2010. At the peak of their Bangkok protests in 2010, they called on Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve parliament and call for a new general election. Between March and May 2010, the Redshirts blocked intersections at the heart of Bangkok's upscale shopping district, set up a protest stage, and camped out there for two months.¹ The protests looked very

1 This section draws on the first author's contemporary field notes based on her own participant-observation in the 2010 protests.

much like community fairs, with stalls selling foods and protest souvenirs, such as headbands, T-shirts, and bandanas featuring stenciled images of Redshirt leaders and protest slogans. The protest sites were lined with signs and posters featuring cartoon paintings mocking anti-Redshirt politicians and PAD leaders. Every day on the stage, speakers took turns giving 5 to 10-minute rally speeches criticizing the government and political actors seen as their enemies. They mentioned how those individuals destroyed the will of the people by destroying parties winning all elections since 2006 and how the military was colluding with other powerful forces to destroy democracy. These rally speeches were emotionally intense and aroused strong reactions among the crowds. Two of the most common themes in the speeches were the Redshirts' resentment towards repeated acts of political injustice and their collective pride in their Redshirt identity. These speeches generally intensified in degree from dusk to midnight, when key UDD leader orators gave longer speeches. This happened every day, nurturing the sentimental dimension of the movement, which in many ways was fraught with dangerous threats by authorities and other opposing political forces.

Well into the first month of the protest, on the night of April 10, armed army troops encroached onto one of the protest sites and started using force against the protesters. Clashes and chaos ensued, initially resulting in at least 15 deaths (Doherty). On that very night, when the commotion stopped, the bodies of the deceased protesters were placed on the stage as leaders addressed the weeping crowd of thousands, and emotions were again running high. Much like the nightly rally speeches, this incident became a poignant display of the crowd's political unity, forged through the violence inflicted upon them. It was a deeply sentimental moment. That night prefigured the fatal military crackdown on the protest just a month later that killed over 90 people and injured nearly 2000. Scores of Redshirts were later arrested, charged, and imprisoned for both criminal and civil offenses. The loss of many lives was the terrible price the Redshirts paid for demanding an election. Those who survived the crackdown continued to call for justice for the victims. Despite harsh suppressions immediately after the crackdown, some resorted to symbolic acts of protest to let out their anger and frustrations. Road signs were vandalized like the one shown in figure 1 in places in the Northeast—home of the Redshirts: “90 dead bodies” referred to the reported death toll in the May 2010 crackdown.

Figure 1: Crackdown-related Vandalized Traffic Sign in a Northeastern Province



Photograph by Saowanee T. Alexander

The violent crackdown on the Redshirt movement in 2010 did not end Thailand's vicious cycle of contentious politics. When another pro-Thaksin government took office in 2011, this time led by the former prime minister's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, the stage was set for another massive showdown. In late 2013, a new movement emerged, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which echoed many of the same talking points as the PAD, and mobilized huge numbers of protestors in an attempt to bring down the Yingluck government. That administration finally fell following the May 2014 military coup, which ushered in the nine-year premiership of arch-royalist army commander General Prayuth Chan-ocha.

Following a highly contentious general election in 2019, Prayuth was able to retain the position of prime minister. But by this time, new forces were ranged against the Thai conservative establishment: Along with a resurgent PheuThai Party, there was also the upstart, youth-oriented, and progressive Future Forward Party (cf. McCargo/Anyarat). When this very popular new party was in turn dissolved by the Constitutional Court in February 2020, the stage was set

for a massive showdown. Hundreds of protests were staged all over the country in the latter half of 2020, led mainly by student activists (McCargo 2021). Future Forward re-emerged as the new Move Forward Party, which embraced the student movement and tacitly endorsed its iconoclastic calls for a reform of Thailand's monarchy system.

In recent years, social media rather than physical space has served as a most important political arena, especially during the pro-democracy youth movement uprising in 2020, in which street protests were mobilized via social media (cf. Thaitrakulpanich). Protesters also use hashtags associated with the Free Youth Movement, not only to share information about protests but also to express their grievances prompting them to join protests (cf. Sinpeng). Social media has also become an election campaigning tool.

To the surprise of most observers, the Move Forward Party (MFP) emerged as the single largest party in the 2023 general elections, largely due to young people's canvassing strategies on social media platforms, especially on Tiktok (cf. Nethipo et al.). Yet it is also in the realm of social media that criminal charges, harassments, and various forms of persecution have emerged against pro-democracy activists. What anti-establishment political activists post online leaves traces and clues that come back to haunt them as legal charges and threats of imprisonment. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, a non-government organization supporting democracy in Thailand, reported that between January 2014 and November 2023, as many as 13 individuals were charged with the notorious Computer Crimes Act, one of the main legal tools used to silence activists (cf. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2024b). Despite political repercussions, Thais continue to use social media to do their everyday politics with language. Given the importance of the sentimental, as shown earlier in the display of affective politics of order and belonging in Thai political movements, this paper explores how ordinary Thais express their political identity of *us*, by constructing *them* by using impolite and emotive language in responses to a 2023 election campaign video by the ultra-conservative political party *Ruam Thai Sang Chat* (United Thai Nation Party), henceforth UTNP. UTNP was closely associated with coup leader turned prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, and supported his 2023 bid to be returned to power. Because this video provoked a plethora of political responses, it allowed us to examine public sentiment, and how Thais gave vent to their thoughts and views through linguistic impoliteness.

Linguistic Impoliteness

To understand impoliteness, it is helpful to understand what it is not: politeness. In sociolinguistics, politeness is one of the most examined language features. Much research has grown out of the classic work by Brown and Levinson, who created an influential politeness model. According to this model, politeness serves to minimize conflict and restore social equilibrium and is based on the notion of *face* (Goffman). Face is a social image of self that each individual has as a member of society. An individual has two types of face wants: a positive face want (the desire to be well accepted by others) and a negative face want (the desire to be left unbothered by others). Brown and Levinson argue that in everyday interactions, humans commit face-threatening acts (FTAs), actions that threaten the hearer's or the speaker's own face. We give compliments, express agreement, tell jokes, criticize someone, ask directions, show sympathy, or ask a favor: These are just some examples of FTAs in our daily life activities. There are four strategies for performing an FTA: going bald or on-record, using positive politeness, using negative politeness, and off-record politeness strategies. Additionally, withholding an FTA altogether is considered a strategy to maintain the face of those involved. Which strategies are used depends on different factors including age, gender, and social distance of the speaker and hearer. A mother may go bald on record when asking her children to do the dishes or scolding them, without any mitigating strategies. But for fear of losing their own face, a speaker may use off-record (indirect) strategies when attempting to borrow a car from an acquaintance.

Using Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as a springboard, models of linguistic politeness were developed. One of the most widely adopted is that developed by Jonathan Culpeper (1996, revised in 2005). The 1996 model recognizes Brown and Levinson's five politeness (super)strategies above and claims that each of them has its opposite impoliteness strategy with the (opposite goal) of attacking face (cf. *ibid.* 356). These opposite impoliteness strategies are: bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm (or mock politeness, and withholding politeness (Culpeper 1996). Culpeper also extensively discusses a list of verbal and non-verbal strategies for performing impoliteness. He notes that this list is not exhaustive and is also context-dependent (cf. *ibid.* 357). In terms of actual output strategies, Culpeper discusses two main strategies based on the hearer's face. The first is "positive impoliteness output strategies" (*ibid.* 357). They are used when the hearer's positive face is threatened. These strategies are used in actions that

make the hearer feel not accepted or liked. Culpeper gives the following strategies as examples: ignoring the hearer, excluding the hearer from an activity, using inappropriate identity markers, using obscure language, seeking disagreement, using taboo words or profane language, and calling the hearer names (cf. *ibid.* 357–58). Negative impoliteness output strategies, on the other hand, address the hearer's negative face. They aim to attack the hearer's sense of personal space, privacy, and security. They are, for example, frightening, condescending, ridiculing, and invading the hearer's space literally or metaphorically (cf. *ibid.* 358). Culpeper's (2005) revised model explicitly addresses issues with the definition of impoliteness, redefining it as: "Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)" (Culpeper 2005, 38).

In his subsequent works, Culpeper (2011 and with Hardaker 2017) proposes the analysis of linguistic impoliteness in terms of conventionalized, formulaic expressions. An analysis of linguistic forms conventionally accepted as "impolite" by respective linguistic communities of practice proves to be helpful in making observations about this phenomenon without constantly relying on empirical evidence on hearers' perception. Based on his long-term research of data from the British context, Culpeper (2011) identifies nine formula types: insults, pointed criticisms or complaints, challenging or giving unpalatable questions/presuppositions, condescension, message enforcers, dismissals, silencers, threats, and curses/ill-wishes (cf. *ibid.* 135–36). Culpeper (2011) further distinguishes four ways of giving insults: personalized negative vocatives, personalized negative assertion, personalized negative references, and personalized third-person negative references in the hearing of the targeted hearer. However, Culpeper (2017) cautions that some forms are more likely to generate intended impoliteness in certain contexts even though there is no guarantee that would always happen. He goes on to stress the importance of context in the realizations of impoliteness.

Impoliteness, Emotive Language, and Political Discourse

In political discourse, emotions are common. Emotions, such as love, compassion, and empathy foster solidarity among people and can be categorized as sentimental, whereas emotions like anger or rage signify divisiveness and hostility. While both types are equally interesting because they show relation-

ships among political stakeholders, a bulk of language-based research has been conducted on the role of emotive language in political expression. It has been found that in recent years, political discourse has become more and more emotionally charged, as politicians utilize emotive language to serve a range of purposes including to maximize the severity of face attacks on their political opponents (cf. Ardila; Schubert), or even to reprimand the public, in the case of China (cf. Kádár et al.). Harris analyzed the UK's Prime Minister's Question Time, a weekly parliamentary session held in the House of Commons, in which the Prime Minister answers questions from the Leader of the Opposition. She found different types of verbal attacks on the prime minister. She observes that this adversarial practice is not only accepted in the parliamentary process but also praised, stating: "Members of parliament as a community of practice, clearly perceive that the main role of the political opposition is to oppose, i.e. mainly to criticize, challenge, ridicule, subvert, etc. the policies and positions of the government" (Harris 466). In another study, Osnabrügge, Hobolt, and Rodon analyzed one million speeches delivered by members of the UK and Irish parliaments for political sentiments. The authors coded instances of emotive language regardless of whether they suggest negative or positive attributes. Examples of lexical items coded for emotive language included *appalling*, *endured*, *despicable*, *anguish*, *inspiring*, and *empathy* (cf. Osnabrügge et al. 891). They found that there was a greater degree of emotive language use in higher-profile parliamentary debates. The authors characterized this phenomenon as parliamentarians' attempt to appeal to voters, rather than their fellow members of parliament.

Wodak (2015) extensively discusses how right-wing populist parties use language and other communicative tools to create fear, which in turn helps to normalize undemocratic values including xenophobia, antisemitism, racism, and sexism, which have gained more political ground in recent years in so-called democratic countries the EU member states and the United States. Wodak, Culpeper, and Semino adopted Culpeper's (2011) model of impoliteness to show that former U.S. President Donald Trump and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi unapologetically used elements of impolite language including racist and misogynist remarks in their formal press conferences. In particular, they focused on what Culpeper (2011) calls *impoliteness formulae*, which are conventionalized strategies found in a wide range of contexts of verbal interaction and are thus also high-frequency items, suggesting a great degree of acceptance by those who share the same norms about polite and impolite language use. To complement their analysis, they examined the

first 100 responses to the YouTube videos featuring the press conferences under study. While negative reactions existed, which is to be expected, the authors found that quite a substantial number of reactions were positive towards the leaders. Some hailed Berlusconi as *Grande Silvio* (Brilliant Silvio) (cf. Wodak et al. 382) and gave Trump such positive comments as *Lmao?, man i love this guy Trump* (cf. *ibid.* 385). This led the authors to conclude that the two leaders had support for their far-right way of doing politics. The authors argue that what these politicians did was consistent with Wodak's (2011) *shameless normalization*.

Key stakeholders in the news media have also been examined for their use of language in political communication. Sobieraj and Berry examined outrage incidents occurring in internet political blogs, cable TV news commentary shows, radio talk shows, and newspaper columns available in 2009 in the United States. They found that insulting language (coded under a different category from belittling and name-calling) was highly common among both conservative and liberal-leaning figures. These strategies were also combined, resulting in even more outrage in their political expressions. The authors observe:

Obama supporters were called names such as 'Obamabots' (Michelle Malkin, March 24, 2009) and 'Obamatards' (Wonkette, February 9, 2009). Sometimes insulting language and name calling are strung together for maximum effect, as was the case when TV host Keith Olbermann referred to the Tea Party protesters as 'a bunch of greedy, water-carrying corporate-slave hypocrites' (April 15, 2009) or when blogger Digby described the defenders of torture practices as 'illogical, sadistic scumbags' (April 17, 2009). (Sobieraj/Berry 30)

In Asia, transnational political movements such as the Milk Tea Alliance, which originated in response to the Chinese government's suppression of dissidents, became possible in 2020 partly because of both online repression on the part of the authorities and online mobilization on the part of the protesters (cf. Kreutz/Makrogianni). Ordinary people also use social media for political discussions. The language used in political discussions on social media has also become a source of research into such negative social phenomena as cyberbullying, hate speech, and other forms of verbal abuse (cf. Kienpointner). These findings are evidence for relationships between emotionally charged language and its impact, perceived or actual, on stakeholders. Sometimes their targets are politicians or political figures. Even in a liberal democracy like Switzerland,

female politicians are faced with verbal abuse on social media that raises concerns for their safety. As quoted in the news, online comments like, “whore” and “stupid immigrant” are explicit verbal attacks against one female politician (Matamoros).

Language use such as this has at the very least psychological impact on hearers at whom the attack is directed. Hua, Ristenpart, and Naaman analyzed a large corpus of 1.7 million tweets containing interactions deemed adversarial between ordinary users and candidates during the run-up to the U.S. midterm elections in 2018. They found that abusive name-calling to be one of the most frequent adversarial moves used against the candidates, giving the following examples: “@RepMcCaul Stop using so much water you ass clown. We’re having a water crisis” and “@VoteRob-Davidson You are a joke. #RadicalRob” (ibid. 279). Threats of violence such as rape and physical attacks against the candidates were also common. Lorenzo-Dus, Blitvich, and Bou-Franch examined the Obama Reggaeton campaign video released during the democratic primaries because of the politically polarized and impolite responses it attracted. These responses were not only about the video or Barack Obama himself but also to other commenters. They found that commenters expressed their social identity through creating the sense of *us vs them* with “the ‘them’ group, in turn, is likely to be explicitly associated with negative aspects” (ibid. 2591). The authors observed that they did so by relying on positive impoliteness strategies, such as calling the others names.

Taken together, previous research has shown that political stakeholders around the world in different capacities make use of emotional expressions not only in establishing their political identities and group associations but also in distinguishing themselves from their oppositions.

The Study

In this study, we explore YouTube comments posted about a politically controversial election campaign video launched by UTNP, a conservative party founded not long before the 2023 election (cf. Setboonsarng). We chose this party because of its association with former junta leader-turned Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha. General Prayut’s path to political power was marred by controversies. It was under his executive involvement with the military-led command center when the Redshirt protesters were dispersed violently in 2009 and fatally in 2010. It was he who led the military to seize power and

overthrow the Pheu Thai-led government in 2014 and became a junta-installed prime minister for a full term. As a result of some highly questionable developments, his military-backed Palang Pracharath controversially formed the new government, despite coming second to victor Pheu Thai in the 2019 election (cf. McCargo/Alexander). After a falling out with Palang Pracharath, he joined the newly established UTNP, which promptly nominated him as a PM candidate in the 2023 election. But when UTNP failed spectacularly, gaining only 36 out of 500 MP seats, Prayut announced his retirement from politics and was appointed a Privy Councillor four months later (Bangkok Post). He has kept a politically low profile since. Taken together, Prayut's past and present associations reflect his strong support for Thai conservatism.

UTNP Election Campaign Video: Politics of Fear

The UTNP video is directly focused on the phrase 'not the same as before,' which was a campaign slogan adopted by the Move Forward Party during the 2023 election campaign.² In other words, the video does not offer positive messages about the policies or promises of UTNP: It is an attack ad that aims to debunk the notion that Thailand needs to confront the necessity for whole-sale change. 'Not the same as before' was apparently coined by former Future Forward spokesperson Pannika Wanich and was designed to capture popular aspirations for a radically different kind of Thailand.³ At the same time, the phrase was deliberately vague: It did not single out the military, the monarchy, or monopoly capitalists for criticism, for example, although for many voters it appeared to make reference to these controversial actors.

The video features six vignettes depicting hypothetical situations that would occur should voters decide to vote for a Thailand that was no longer the same as before. The video was posted on YouTube.com on May 7, 2023, only one week before the election day on May 14 (United Thai Nation Party). This suggests that the party hoped to use the message in the video to put the seal on its election campaign. This intention is clearly shown in our translation of the video caption, as follows:

2 For a detailed discussion of the context and content of the UTNP video see McCargo (2025).

3 Personal interview with Pannika Wanich, 15 June 2024.

The United Thai Nation Party asks you Thai people if you would really like Thailand not to remain the same, in this video titled 'Not the same Thailand' many scenes in the video were events that actually happened while many would be highly likely to occur.

The people's decision on May 14 will determine whether Thailand will continue moving forward in a secure and united way, as it has been in the past 8 years, or it will be dragged into a black hole of conflict, subversion, and eradication of our society's culture, tradition, and great values when Thailand is no longer the same. (United Thai Nation Party, translation S. T. A./D. M.)

The caption assumes that Thailand over the previous eight years had been in a good condition. The adjectives "secure" and "united," in the party's view, are descriptors of what a desirable polity should be. The period of eight years was crucial to the party's rhetoric. But as mentioned before, Prayut came to power through a military coup, ruled the country as a junta leader for four years, and then remained in power for another four years as a prime minister who had been notionally appointed by parliament. The harsh suppression of student protests in 2020 and 2021 occurred during his tenure.

The reference to "eight years" in the video reflects UTNP's conservative narrative. The key message in the video is thus that this eight-year period occurred when Thailand was saved by the military and placed in the good hands of Prayut and his associates. The final reference to the word "the same" in the caption at the ending suggests that "remaining the same" would be positive/desirable. What the viewers will see in the video, be they events that had happened before or future events, are thus "new and not good." The caption is essentially a prelude to things that would threaten the "glorious sameness" under Prayut's administration. Overall, the video paints a picture of a divide between the "old" and the "new."

The title itself opens with the rhetorical question "Do you really want Thailand to no longer be the same?" This is a direct response to the Move Forward Party slogan. Each of the six vignettes contains snapshots of a dystopian future should Move Forward win the election. Each vignette is introduced by a caption displayed on a black screen. There were six vignette introductory statements altogether, as shown in Table 1 below.

Note that the language used in all captions is emotive, formal, and polite. Emotive language is seen in the use of such words and phrase as *beng ban* ('flourish'), *uat* ('flaunt'), *dueat ron* ('suffer'), *nai sai ta khon thang lok* ('in the eyes of the world') as well as ones circulating in the discourses of pro-democracy

supporters including *khwam thao thiam* ('equality'), *sitthi* ('rights'), and *seriphap* ('freedoms').

Table 1: Introductory captions to vignettes and their associated stories

Introductory Caption	Story
A country where retired government officials can still make easy money to earn a living.	An elderly beggar sitting beside a walkway, with a bowl next to him with a sign that reads, "Please support retired government officials."
A country where art flourishes and flaunts itself in the eyes of the world.	Graffiti and vandalized objects and government offices during political protests, footage of riot police marching in with the noise of shattering glass in the background.
A country where equality reaches every household.	A teenage son chastising his mother at the dining table asking why the family did not vote for what dish to have.
A country where nobody will suffer from military conscription.	An elderly grandmother asking her young grandson why there were no soldiers left to protect the country, upon seeing news of unknown armed forces invading the border areas. The grandson explains that conscription has been abolished.
A country with rights and freedoms with which you can do anything.	A middle-aged mother being distraught upon hearing a confirmation from her own daughter that she was proudly making money from sex videos.
A country where ...	An elderly woman praying to an empty shelf, leaving the viewers to fill in what they think should have been on the shelf. (In Thailand, this kind of shelf is often used to hold objects or images of something revered or worshipped, such as Buddha images or royal pictures.) Ending—shows question "Would you like Thailand to no longer be the same, really?"

According to the video, the “new” Thailand would leave government officials behind, would have no peace and order, would be overly obsessed with rights issues, would have no military to protect the country, would approve of women exploiting their sexuality for money, and finally would be without what is traditionally venerable. There may be other possible interpretations based on individual viewers’ background knowledge and bias, which may assign slightly different readings of the vignettes. This is because the video does not name names or explicitly criticize Thais of younger generations or the values or actions implicitly associated with them.

The mood that the video creates contains elements of the sentimental, both in terms of its formal characteristics as well as regarding its topical arrangements: music, family/kinship constellations, scenes of suffering, etc.

Throughout the video, older characters are placed on the opposite side to younger characters. Older people—fathers, mothers, grandparents—are portrayed as guardians of traditional Thai values, being soft-spoken, calm, and polite, while young ones—children, and grandchildren—are painted as noisy, angry, disrespectful, and overly preoccupied with rights and freedoms. The video draws heavily on family scenarios and creates dialogues showing emotional tensions between family members. For instance, in the vignette about a family having a meal, the teenage son angrily raises his voice at his mother, saying: “Why didn’t we get to vote? I didn’t choose *phalo* [‘stewed meat’]. I haven’t exercised my right. A civilized, democratic society has to start at this table this very second!”

It may sound odd to an average person to hear someone protesting and demanding a voting right on what to eat for dinner or breakfast in such a serious manner, using expressions not normally associated with a discussion at a family dining table as shown above. Yet in some ways, this is not surprising, as familial relationships have become increasingly fraught since the 2020 youth-led political movement against Prayut’s government. News of family members cutting ties with young political activists has become common since the protests erupted in mid-2020 (NHK World). The video reinforces the idea of the family divided along generational lines.

In addition to this, civil servants and members of the armed forces are shown as being under threat in the video. This suggests that the party prioritizes these groups of stakeholders. Given the content of the video, it was unusually bold for a political party to align itself with older generations and government officials and try to pit these groups of people (or voters to be exact) against younger generations who wanted to see Thailand “no longer the

same.” The video thus aimed to create fear among its support base and among those who were conservative-leaning but wavering in terms of voting choices. At the same time, it was not explicitly linked to support for UTNP and made no attempt to differentiate the party from other conservative parties. The whole thrust of the video was negative.

In her seminal work on the politics of emotion, Sara Ahmed regards fear as being mediated by association. To her, an object of fear does not inherently contain something fearful, but rather it is perceived as fearsome because the perceiver associates it with something else—the past histories of contact (cf. *ibid.* 7). The histories of contact are stored in the memory to which the perceiver reacts when encountering the object of “fear.” In the video, the object of fear is the youth. It portrays the youth as associated with the destruction of Thailand’s good old days, which were about to be gone should Thai voters decide to “change” the country. Past histories of contact were protests and defiance by youth activists, even after they were arrested and charged with a series of serious criminal offenses including *lèse-majesté* (Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2024a). But it is not just past histories, but also young people’s “future associations” that help to create the fear.

The strong determination of many youth activists and the popularity of the party they supported strengthen the association between the younger generations and the fear they have created in the minds of UTNP and its supporters. With the final caption, UTNP essentially urges its supporters to take action to stop the country from “changing” before it is too late, that is, to vote for UTNP. What UTNP does in the video, despite its lack of overt impolite or rude language, is that it creates a sense of *us vs them*, by singling out the youth and associating them with negative attributes and a desire to “change” the country to become something radically different and thus un-Thai. UTNP urged its supporters to vote primarily out of fear that the other would otherwise win. This nostalgic rhetoric involves the sentimental in that voting for the party would be an act of identifying with the restoration of Thailand’s “good old days.”

The Responses

At the time of the data collection in mid-October 2023, the video had attracted 10,959 comments since its launch on the official UTNP YouTube channel in May 2023. Of these, 8607 were primary comments responding directly to the video. Replies and rejoinders were excluded because many of the comments diverged from the original video content. A crude overall sentiment analysis further di-

vided the corpus of primary comments into those containing positive, negative, mixed, and irrelevant views. This took into account the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse features of the comment texts but did not examine them further for sentimentality. An overwhelming 93.44 percent of comments offered negative views of the content, while only 4.91 percent contained positive views. To examine how emotions were encoded linguistically, we randomly selected 4600 of the primary comments in order to gain a robust amount of text and analyzed it for the presence and absence of emotive language. We found that 91.85 percent of the comments contained emotive language; 7.85 percent showed no linguistically observable emotion; and 0.3 percent were indecipherable. The emotive language showed a mix of both positive and negative emotions, although it mostly signaled contempt and disapproval of the video. This shows that these online political comments were filled with negative reactions that were also emotionally charged. The main complaints against the video referred directly to the Move Forward Party (MFP) (whose campaign color is orange, so often referred to as the orange party), which is extremely popular among younger voters. Abolishing involuntary military conscription, legalizing sex work, and promoting human rights are some of the policies and ideologies associated with the party. This is probably why MFP supporters became upset and argued in defense of the party in their responses, accusing UThNP of spreading lies.

Direct quotes and references to scenes in the vignettes clearly show that not only did the commenters disagree with the video, but they were also so upset that they used impolite language in this online public sphere where surface anonymity may not protect them, given the fact that online behavior is subject to long-term storage on the Internet (see Graham on the issue of longevity).

Table 2 below shows examples of our attempt to use Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness formulas to code the impolite comments. This was done with our recognition that the model was designed for interpersonal, face-to-face communication, not for computer-mediated communication. As it turns out, the biggest challenge is to deal with the fact that Thai is highly discourse-oriented. That is, certain linguistic categories can and are often dropped, subjecting utterances to interpretations of discourse participants. This poses a challenge in applying this English-based model to a discourse-based language like Thai. Given this challenge, we particularly struggled with the coding of different types of insults. We therefore decided to consider our coding of different insult formulas as tentative and focus more on identifying whether

the expressions in question are insults, who the intended targets are, and how impolite and emotionally charged they are, given the Thai political context.

Table 2: Conventionalized impoliteness formula types in the comments

Impoliteness formula type	Examples of negative comments from those ...	
	... disagreeing with the video content	... agreeing with the video content
Insult (personalized negative vocatives)	<i>ngo</i> ('stupid/ignorant') <i>dainosao</i> ('dinosaur') <i>ai khwai</i> ('buffalo')	<i>phuak sam kip</i> ('Them/you the Three Hoofed')
Insult (personalized negative assertions)	<i>koen yiaoya chingching phuak mueng</i> . ('You all really are beyond any help.')	—
Insult (personalized negative references)	<i>seo samong tai naenae</i> ('[Your] brain cells must be dead.')	<i>phuak prachathippatai chomplom</i> ('Them/you fake democracy')
Insult (personalized third-person negative references in the hearing of the target)	<i>khon tham klip mai sangsan chomti prak trongkham thi dai rap khwamniyom mak kwa krai du laew chuea tam nai khlip bok fam luan mai phasom wua loei</i> ('Whoever making this video clip is not constructive. They attack the opposite party, which is more popular. Whoever believes what's in the video clip, (you) are a buffalo [misspelled], with no mix of a cow.')	<i>sut yot krap, kip din tem pai mot</i> ('Excellent. The Hoofs are twisting in anger everywhere.')

Impoliteness formula type	Examples of negative comments from those ...	
	... disagreeing with the video content	... agreeing with the video content
Pointed criticisms/complaints	<p><i>an ni di mak krap sadaeng thueng khwam ngongao khong ruamthais-angchat dai di mak mak loei krap thuk chai</i> ('This is very good. It does a very good job in showing UNTP's stupidity. I like it.')</p>	<p><i>da khao ma 8 pi. khao ngiap. phaw khao tham klip awk ma, din pen ma don namron luak kan loei. kham chingching yomrap khwamching mai dai kaw tong din.</i> ('You scolded them for 8 years. They were silent. But then when they made this video clip as a response, you are twisting your bodies like a dog scalded by hot water. Really funny. You can't accept the truth, so you are now throwing a tantrum.')</p>
Challenging or unpalatable questions and/or pre-suppositions	<p><i>mueng ti khwam prathet pen baep ni roe wa</i> ('Did you understand our country to be this way?')</p> <p><i>khit dai khae ni roe?</i> ('Is that all you can think of?')</p>	—
Condescensions	<p><i>tha mi samong ko hat chai bang na</i> ('If you have a brain, use it.')</p> <p><i>tham arai hai man du chalat khoen noi kho la</i> ('Do something that makes you look more intelligent. I beg.')</p>	—

Impoliteness formula type	Examples of negative comments from those ...	
	... disagreeing with the video content	... agreeing with the video content
Message enforcers	<p><i>muk ma kae sat klon pai si. laew suakchai dai phon kap knon gen deo kha cha bok hai. chai khuak ku yak hai prathet mai muean doem 😊</i></p> <p>(‘An old dog’s strategy: smearing mud and painting with lies. But it freaking works with people of the same gen(eration). Sigh. Let me tell you this. Yes, we want our country not to remain the same 😊’)</p>	—
Dismissals	<p><i>phuak kaekae yang phak baep khun, ya ma chut khwam charoen prathetthai ik loei. pai.</i> (‘Old people like members of your party, please don’t hold Thailand back anymore. Go away.’)</p> <p><i>mut tho suam ok pai dai loei krap</i> (‘Go ahead and dive your way out through a toilet.’)</p>	—
Silencers	<p><i>yut phoechoe cha</i> (‘Stop talking nonsense.’)</p>	—
Threats	<p><i>ku cha lod clip wai ploi na anakhot wa adit koei mi khon ngo khanat ni luea yu nai yuk nan. 😊😊😊</i> (‘I will download the video clip and repost it in the future to show there were still people this stupid back in the days. 😊😊😊’)</p>	—
Curses and ill-wishes	<p><i>ruam thai sang chat kho hai mai dai so so sak khon. sop tok 100% laen-salait</i> (‘UTNP, I hope you don’t get any MPs and have a 100 percent landslide failure in the election.’)</p>	—

Impolite, Emotive Language in Context

Consistent with previous studies on adversarial political discourse, insults in the form of explicit name-calling were rare. Insults existed in the forms of a single letter *๑*, single words, or they were embedded in a stretch of utterances. However, Thai is a pro-drop language and relies on context to derive referents of the omitted elements (cf. Rutherford). Furthermore, finite verbs are not inflected; tense and aspect is generally marked with lexical items or discourse particles. Therefore, we find it challenging to distinguish some linguistic forms of insults based on Culpeper's model when examining them at a word level where the absence of pronouns renders the utterances ambiguous as to who exactly the insults are directed towards. In some cases, context and what Culpeper's (2011) calls co-text of the target forms helps to determine the addressee. For the purpose of our analysis of how impoliteness is marked with emotion, we would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that insults are situated in the cultural, political, and textual context. Consider the pro- and anti-video comments below:

- a) *ban mueng kin phalo tong wot rue ai kwai*
 'Do you vote on eating phalo at home, **you water buffalo?**' (against video)
- b) *phuak sawa sam kip ok ma din khan yai loei wa*
 '**Them three-hoofed scum** are squirming in anger'
 (pro-video)

When being verbally abusive, both sides called each other names. Animal-based names are common. As mentioned before, the word *kwai* (water buffalo) is a classic ubiquitous metaphor describing a person's ignorance or stupidity and can be used in a variety of communicative contexts. Recall that the Red-shirts were called *khwai daeng*. This is specific to Thai culture as those from other cultural backgrounds may not perceive water buffalos as associated with these negative attributes. The label *sam kip* in the phrase *phuak sawa sam kip*, on the contrary, was coined by right-wing conservatives about 4 years ago after the youth movement uprising. This was when protesters continued their three-finger salute tradition, first adopted by the 2014 coup protesters after the movie *The Hunger Games* (cf. Alexander/McCargo 2019). *Sam* means three, and *kip* means an animal's hoof, most likely that of a buffalo. Therefore, both sides call each other stupid, using a metaphor based on Thais' negative perception of water buffalos. These insults appear with co-textual elements that

either specify or elaborate on their remarks. For instance, *ai* in the phrase *ai khwai*, is an impolite titular male, second- or third-person marker. In this case, together with the remaining texts of the comment (see example [a] above), it helps to identify the phrase as addressing the party as the second person being called this abusive name. But the word *sam kip* will likely make little or no sense to Thais who are not interested in politics. Therefore, prior knowledge about politics is also a key to understanding what the term means.

As shown in Table 2 above, other formulas existed in the corpus, but our interest does not lie in their presence or how often each of them appears. Interestingly, they appeared alongside other formulas. Sometimes, there is even a mix of polite and impolite language but with context, it is clear that impolite language does not occur in a vacuum. It is always situated in what has happened before, what is happening now, and what might happen in the future according to the views of language users. Consider the following examples:

- c) *da khao ma 8 pi. khao ngiap. phaw khao tham klip awk ma, din pen ma don nam-ron luak kan loei. kham chingching yomrap khwamching mai dai kaw tong din.*

You scolded them for 8 years. They were silent. But then when they made this video clip as a response, you are now squirming like **dogs** being scalded by hot water. Really funny. You squirm because you can't accept **the truth.**'

- d) *klip ni phayayam chomti nayobai kaoklai. ditsi tikhai hai du leo. nung du chon chop thaep kwan ok hu. . .*

'This video clip tries to attack **Move Forward's policies**, painting them as bad. I sat through it with anger, almost burning smoke out of my ears. . .'

Examples (c) and (d) show that commenters used their own background knowledge to interpret the video. The interpretation then served as a basis of their responses. In (c) the commenter supported the video and assumed that readers understood what is meant by "8 years," a reference to the 8 years under Prayut. Interestingly, there were no subjects for any of the sentences in the comments because, as mentioned before, Thai grammar allows omission of subjects. So, pragmatically speaking, the comment got to criticize "someone" harshly comparing them to "dogs being scalded by hot water," a traditional idiomatic expression denoting extreme uneasiness or distress, all the while not referring specifically to any names or entities. This is quite common in adversarial exchanges in social media among Thais: When harsh words are used but there is no direct reference to any individuals, no specific individual's positive face is threatened. This is called the act of *phut loi loi* ('speaking vaguely'), leaving

hints and clues working in a similar way as *innuendos*. The example in (d), however, explicitly mentions *kaoklai*, which is the name in Thai of the Move Forward Party. Even though the take is opposite, this response resembles (c) in that it shows how the comment-poster used previous beliefs and assumptions to evaluate the video before expressing their anger as a kind of metaphorical fire.

We would like to draw the reader's attention to the importance of co-texts surrounding the formulas used. These comments are not just blatant outbursts of emotions. Consider the following example taken from a comment in its entirety:

- e) *Prathet thi phunam bok wa prongsai tae mai hai truatsoop.*
*Prathet thi fainueng samat **chomti satklon** ikfai fai baep **thuret sutsut tae mai samat ao phit rue thamarai dai.***
*Prathet thi mi phunam **marayat tumsam** koei kratom mae yon plueakkluai sai prachachon.*
Prathet thi prachachon tong phueng tuaeng thangmot mai samat fak arai wai kap ratthaban dai loei
Prathet thi mi ratthaban yuet amnat prachachon tae thuang bunkhun chak prachachon.
 ‘*A country where a leader claims to be honest but doesn't allow auditing.’
 ‘*A country where one side freely attacks and defames the other in an extremely disgusting manner and still is not found guilty.’
 ‘*A country where a leader is so ill-mannered that they throw a banana peel at the people.’
 ‘*A country where the people have to depend on themselves; counting on the government is impossible.’
 ‘*A country where the government comes from a coup, taking powers from the people, yet demands gratitude from the people.’

The only impoliteness formula identified in this long comment is a negative criticism using an evaluative adjective *thuret* ('disgusting'), modified by the adverb *sutsut* ('extremely'). This is to attack the positive face of the addressee. However, the formula is embedded in a much larger stretch of texts containing pieces of information. Before we proceed to argue about co-texts of the formula (other texts that co-occur with the text in question), it is important to recognize certain grammatical characteristics of the Thai language that pose challenges to our analysis. The language rarely marks definiteness. When it does so ex-

plicitly, demonstrative adjectives or lexical items are used. Definiteness, as well as tense, aspect, and plurality are not always marked. Again, context helps to derive interpretation (as misinterpretation) for the most part. In the example above, the comment contains an intertextual reference to the exact same text from the video, beginning each sentence with *prathet thi* ('A country where...') to contrast the future situations projected by the video and the images visualized in the comments. The challenge is this: The comment text is not marked for tense and aspect. Nor are there any time-specific references projecting into the future or past. Readers can thus interpret it as referring to something that has already happened or will happen in the future. But all actions are specific in terms of content (for example, throwing a banana peel). They are common criticisms that people had about Prayut's regime with the main theme being the lack of respect for democracy.

Note that the phrase "the people" is used repeatedly. Taking into consideration both the grammar and the content, translating the actions using the past tense would have biased the interpretation with our own assumption that the comment refers to Thailand under Prayut. We thus made a decision to translate it using the present tense. The generic "they" in the English translation is used instead of "he" or "she" to avoid bias—and reflecting the fact that the third person pronoun in Thai is not usually gendered and makes no distinction between singular and plural.

Having dealt with issues regarding interpretation and translation, we are now left with two contrasting sets of images of Thailand to compare—one in the UTNP video and one arising from the comment section. Recall that the video paints a picture of Thailand as being un-Thai, by virtue of an unreasonable preoccupation with progressive values. The image depicted in the comments shows Thailand as being devoid of democracy because the rulers have violated the people's rights. These views reflect a common aspect of the country's entrenched political conflict in recent years—a struggle between conservative and progressive ideologies (cf. Luxmiwattana; Sombatpoonsiri). This comment is one among many others that reflect a display of social, cultural, and political identity. The YouTube comments are thus another way for ordinary people to express *us vs them* stances, based on their background knowledge and experiences, intensified by their emotional engagement with the video's subject matter.

Conclusion

Like many people around the world, Thais often present their political stance through interventions on social media. Their casual, yet hostile political expressions in response to an election campaign by the conservative party UTNP foretold the election outcomes when their preferred party Move Forward won the election and the embattled UTNP did poorly. In this study, we have examined comments on a UTNP election campaign video posted on YouTube shortly before the 2023 election and found that a large majority of the comments contained linguistic expressions indicating negative views towards not only the direct content of the video but also political values perceived by the viewers as being represented in the video. As we have shown earlier, these negative views oftentimes were marked by emotionally charged, impolite language directed at the party. Unsurprisingly, we did not find any impolite language associated with the sentimental. It was likely due to the fact that our corpus came from comments on video content regarded by many as politically controversial. We further found that hurling verbal insults at political enemies or describing them in a bad light were ways of practicing ‘othering.’ But harsh words filled with negative emotions are also accompanied by pieces of information reflecting the commenters’ prior experiences, political knowledge, worldviews, and stances. Thus, the act of othering was not done in a void. We have also found that emotions, feelings, and associated language use are thus contextualized, understood, and shared in the cultural and political context of Thailand.

However, we recognize several limitations on how we coded impoliteness formulas, largely due to the fact that the Thai grammatical system is highly discourse-oriented and can allow for different interpretations in online discourses, where other pragmatic tools are not readily available, unlike in face-to-face communication. Therefore, much more empirical research and development of coding schemes suitable for context-dependent languages like Thai in political discourse is needed to engage more effectively with a discursive realm where facts, opinions, emotions, and feelings are embedded and signaled not just in what is stated but in what is left unsaid and felt. What we have attempted to accomplish here is only a small step toward a better understanding of the sentimental in the Thai context. The corpus of comments we have examined in many respects captures and exemplifies the recent legacy of intense political polarization in Thailand.

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II. The People's Feelings

Sentimental States of the Nation

Remembering Diana, Princess of Wales (and Shakespeare's Richard II)

Christian Krug

A 'Moment in History'

The sixth and final season of *The Crown* (2016–2023), Netflix's popular streaming series which dramatized the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, deals in large part with the repercussions of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997. The first episode opens on a Parisian street at night with a pedestrian walking his dog. A car, pursued by motorcycles, drives by at high speed; it enters a tunnel, and the scene ends with an apparent car crash off-screen. At this point, the audience realizes what it is (not) witnessing: A 'moment in history,' the fatal crash that killed Diana and her companion Dodi Fayed in August 1997. The episode then cuts back to Diana and Fayed's first meeting, and the audience, which has made its own way back into its collective memory of the past, realizes that *The Crown* will work its way towards that crash—the audience's memory and the show's storytelling are on a collision course and will eventually converge during the season. *The Crown* works by anticipating a future that is already past—often in a self-reflexive fashion.

Diana's fatal car crash will remain off-screen. It serves as the season's fetishist anchor that organizes the libidinal investment with the show, its phantasmatic kernel that seems to defy representation. Contemporary representations of Diana work as much by inclusion as by exclusion, and in the case of *The Crown*, excluding the accident can double as an ethical decision and an attempt to raise the show's cultural prestige: Ostensibly, *The Crown* is not exploitative and too tasteful for such representations. This allows the show to disavow a fundamental aspect of current representations that revisit Diana's death and mourning, in which *The Crown* nevertheless participates: They

cater to a kind of 'trauma nostalgia,' where a "collective trauma" (Alexander) is repeatedly re-experienced in medialized form, and (other people's) grief can become an object of consumption.

Not showing the fatal car crash on screen is just one of several significant exclusions in *The Crown*. Another is Diana's funeral service in Westminster Abbey, an event televised across the globe. For U.K. audiences especially, these images are deeply ingrained in their collective memory; they 'know' and perhaps even expect them: Prime Minister Tony Blair's reading, Elton John revisiting his pop song about Marilyn Monroe, "Candle in the Wind," Earl Spencer, Diana's brother, holding an incendiary speech which draws applause first from the crowds outside the Abbey, then from the attendants in the church itself (including a twelve-year-old Prince Harry). *The Crown* shows the Royal Family making its way to the church, just as it showed Diana's car make its way into the tunnel in Paris—but then it also cuts away, omitting the actual ceremony. Representations of excessive mass media mourning seem to be just as problematic as the accident that triggered them.

This essay will consider such moments of inclusion and exclusion, remembering and forgetting as part of sentimental strategies—that is, ideological strategies that work by eliciting sympathy and fostering a sense of community by affectively tying ideological norms and values to (seemingly personal) feelings and (social) emotions, specifically sadness and grief, and then circulating them publicly. Diana continues to serve as a sentimental icon in the U.K., and representations of her death and mourning can be analyzed symptomatically, as a gauge to assess Britain's affective relationship with itself, at specific moments of time. This essay looks at three sentimental states of the nation: The first, in 1997, involves representations of Diana's funeral and of a 'nation in mourning' on television and in print (the mass media that dominated the news at the time). While these have already been extensively researched (e.g. Davies; Kear/Steinberg 1999b; Merck; Richards/Wilson/Woodhead; Seidler; Taylor 2000; Thomas), the second focus will be on representations that have not yet received the same critical attention—those of Diana at the 20th anniversary of her death in 2017. Several TV documentaries set out to re-evaluate her iconicity and the sentimental attachments to her. They frequently invite a second-order observation which may actualize a reflexive potential inherent in the sentimental itself. Such documentaries often also affectively re-sentimentalize their subject (effectively sentimentalizing an older sentimentality), which points towards the fact that 'the sentimental' should not so much be considered a code as a *coding*—a performative act whose hegemonic power needs

to be consistently re-established. Most importantly, however, reconsidering sentimental strategies twenty years later will allow us to speculate on the temporality of the sentimental and related concepts such as nostalgia. Finally, in a brief coda, this essay will take a detour and go back 400 years: 1597 saw the publication of the first Quarto of Shakespeare's *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*, and I will briefly discuss Shakespeare's Richard II in relation to Diana, as a proto-sentimental hero(ine).

1997

Diana, Princess of Wales died in a car crash in Paris shortly after midnight on August 31, 1997. Her funeral service in Westminster Abbey took place one week later, on September 6. In the span of seven days, Diana was transformed from a media celebrity to a sentimental icon and a civil Saint in the symbolic economy of the U.K.'s popular politics. Even before her death, however, she had been the subject of sentimental (self-)fashionings—both as a willing participant and agent, but also as a sentimental 'subject' in quite another sense: she had been subjected to sentimental interpellations, including highly deceptive and manipulative ones.

Diana's sentimental fashionings took several forms. In the last few years before her death, media coverage increasingly framed her in the narrative mode of soap operas, which allowed for an open-ended narrative form, a set of staple characters, and an incessant talk about private feelings (cf. Geraghty). A melodramatic mode provided models of the victimized and persecuted heroine and an affective logic of excess. Diana herself strategically employed sentimental codes and repertoires, including the registers of psychotherapy and self-help literature, to help mold her public image after she separated from her husband, Prince Charles (cf. Hermes/Noordhuizen; Geraghty 78). She promoted talking about both public and private feelings—not just her compassion and sympathy for the suffering of others (e.g. with HIV patients or the victims of landmines), but also, most notably in a high-profile television interview for the BBC in 1995, her own suffering in an unhappy marriage, her struggles with eating disorders, and thoughts of suicide. By doing so, her intimate sphere supposedly became a legitimate subject of public discourse. And she also adopted pathos formulas and developed a physical repertoire of gestures with which she could communicate sympathy and suffering, including a Virgin-Mary-like lowering of her head and a downcast gaze which

became part of her unique iconography. Prime Minister Tony Blair referenced such gestures in his address to the nation on the day of her death:

How many times shall we remember her, in how many different ways, with the sick, the dying, with children, with the needy, when, with just a look or a gesture that spoke so much more than words, she would reveal to all of us the depth of her compassion and humanity. (Blair 140)

In a thoughtful contribution to one of the earliest academic studies of her death, Mandy Merck's *After Diana: Irreverent Elegies* (1998), Homi Bhabha remarked that during the last years of her life, Diana turned herself into a figure of speech, a representation. This allowed her to serve as a screen onto which the public could project their own meanings of Diana (as the quote by Blair arguably also shows). Diana's own self-fashionings were hence both personal and deeply political: According to Bhabha, "[i]n defining a role for herself, Diana had to create a constituency and appeal to a sector of the nation's 'imagined community'—a people—who, like her, were struggling to find a representative and *representational* image for themselves, a 'sign' of public belonging, as well as an insignia of authority" (ibid. 106). For Diana, this came with a hefty price, as she was "symbolized and sentimentalized out of existence" (ibid.). And not all of her own sentimental self-fashionings were fully voluntary, as her now-infamous interview for BBC1's documentary series *Panorama* in 1995 demonstrates. An independent inquiry found in 2021 that the journalist who interviewed her, Martin Bashir, had deceived Diana by means of forged bank statements (Dyson), and in 2022 the BBC paid substantial damages to her nanny: In order to entice her to participate in the interview, Diana may have been presented with a false abortion notice meant to further isolate her from her then-husband, Prince Charles, now King Charles III (Landler). While the BBC has since permanently retracted the interview, it has by no means disappeared. It has merely suffered a generic sea-change and continues to live on in docu-fiction—on TV and in movies and streams.

After Diana's death, a popular myth of a nation united in mourning (Thomas 2, 7–44) helped turn her into a sentimental icon and worked towards her sacralization as a civil Saint ("Born a Lady, Became a Princess, Died a Saint," the *Mirror* titled on September 1, 1997; Thomas 45). Her apotheosis as 'Saint Diana' was helped by the fact that the media superimposed her death with that of Mother Teresa (now Saint Teresa of Calcutta) just a few days later. Systematic studies of newspaper coverage in the U.K. have shown how

immediately after her death, Diana's sentimentalization became a dominant model and almost completely replaced the previously ambivalent and critical reporting about her: In the U.K. press, key words to describe Diana were now "humanitarian", "real", "vulnerable", "nice", "sincere", "people's princess", "mother" (to all children), and "most hunted woman in history" (Hermes/Noordhuizen). Diana became "the epitome of human kindness, warmth and caring"—and the only person who can suffer with everyone else *and* alleviate their suffering at the same time (ibid. 86). In death, however, she was mourned not just for who she was or what she did but for what she could not be or do any more—for a lost personal future and also a history unfulfilled. This, according to Lauren Berlant (160), links her to other icons of liberal democracy such as John F. Kennedy, Jr.

The days following Diana's death saw a blanket mass media coverage of seemingly unprecedented expressions of grief and mourning in London. Such scenes were not, in fact, unprecedented, as Esther Schor has shown in her analysis of the reaction to Princess Charlotte's death in 1817; Schor's distinction between individual grief and collective mourning, "the social diffusion of grief through sympathy" and "a force that constitutes communities and makes it possible to conceptualize history" (a fundamentally 'sentimental' definition in that it is grounded in moral sentimentalism) underlies this essay (Schor 4). The scenes were also less widespread and much more heterogeneous than reported on TV and in the press, as mass observation studies have shown (Thomas). Still, a popular myth of a 'nation united in mourning' quickly developed its own iconography: the sea of flowers in front of Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace, Diana's residence; the flag pole on top of Buckingham Palace, first conspicuously empty and then flying the Union flag at half-mast; the young princes, William and Harry, walking behind the cortège of her mother at the funeral procession to Westminster Abbey; finally, the funeral service itself. These images (all, in fact, tied to the metropolis, London, rather than the country at large or a 'nation') also circulated globally, proving that the sentimental codes and registers surrounding her were easily translated and appropriated. They elevated Diana's status as an iconic figure with a transnational appeal that could be appropriated locally in very different ways (Taylor 2003). A white upper-class heterosexual English woman, Raka Shome has observed, through multiple mediations, was both "hypernationalized and transnationalized" and was able to secure affective attachments from people—"white and not white, Western and not Western" (Shome 1).

As a sentimental icon, Diana was an affective figure that allowed for a range of identifications, enabling communities to symbolically incorporate otherwise irreconcilable values, norms, or subjectivities. She was an establishment figure that could also be perceived to be anti-establishment, a champion of conservative gender roles and a progressive femininity, of heterofamilial norms and of sexual liberation, of heterosexual desire and desirability and of queer subject positions (“Diana was a gay man,” Richard Coles memorably commented in 1998). As ‘England’s rose’ (a frequent moniker of hers and also the first line of Bernie Taupin’s rewritten lyrics for Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind”), Diana embodied a traditional form of Englishness, but she simultaneously functioned as a global celebrity and icon of transethnic multiculturalism (Lomax). In this, sentimental codes and registers circulating in the media had the effect of simultaneously limiting and de-limiting national identity. They were also able to connect various public spheres and to bridge the metropolitan, the national, and the transnational.

In the U.K., Diana’s sentimentalizations were also deeply political in a more specific sense. Diana’s death came at a time of political upheaval, a few months after Tony Blair, the first Labour Prime Minister after 18 years of Conservative governments, took office. Blair’s address to the nation, a few hours after her death, set an example of how Diana was to be remembered: As “the People’s Princess”—a style which echoed one of Diana’s self-representations; she had referred to herself as the “Queen of Hearts” in the *Panorama* interview in November 1995 (“I’d like to be a queen of people’s hearts, in people’s hearts,” Bashir). Both styles position her in a new, informal relationship to the ‘monarchy’ and the ‘nation.’

As an informal “People’s Princess” and a “Queen of Hearts,” Diana competed with the formal institution of the Royal Family—at least in some respects. This (equally iconic) institution has, since the 19th century, functioned as a media monarchy (Plunkett); while it retains some residual direct political influence and a lot of wealth, its main power continues to be symbolic. The Royal Family spotlights questions of belonging and exclusion. It does so intrinsically, by defining who is part of it and who is not (questions that arose not just with Diana but also with Camilla Parker Bowles, now Queen Camilla, and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle). It also does so vicariously, by allowing the British public to gauge its affective relationship with itself. Diana’s relationship to the Royal Family was significant not just in terms of whether she personally was included or excluded. Diana became associated with individualistic identity positions which seemed to fundamentally threaten a dominant myth of the Royal

Family that had, since the reign of Queen Victoria in the 19th century, been constructed around middle-class, heterofamilial ideals of the domestic nuclear family (Homans). After her death, the Royal Family found itself on the front pages of the tabloid newspapers. The tabloids accused the Queen of not sharing the ‘feelings of the nation’: On September 4, for example, they prompted her to “Show us you care—Mourners call on the Queen to lead our grief” (*The Express*) and to “Speak to us, Ma’am—Your people are suffering” (*The Mirror*). The *Daily Mail* asked, “Has the House of Windsor got a heart?,” while *The Sun* “[spoke] its mind: Where is our Queen? Where is her flag?” Elizabeth II was, symbolically as well as geographically, not currently in the ‘heart’ of the nation—that is, central London; she was in Balmoral, Scotland. It is interesting to note that performances of grief for the Queen of Hearts were, despite being broadcast to the whole of the U.K. and indeed the world, not just empirically a metropolitan affair, they were *expected* to occur in the metaphorical heart of the nation.

The tension between the expectations of the (tabloid’s) public and the actions of the Royal Family has been interpreted as a symptom of competing emotional regimes, specifically ‘private’ and ‘expressive’ grief (Biddle/Walter; Thomas 88–91). An older regime called for grief to be experienced in private, and public displays of emotion had to be carefully controlled. This seemed to accord with stereotypical notions of an English ‘national character’ dominant in the mid-20th century (Dixon 2015), when controlled emotionality (‘stiff upper lip’) was, moreover, a marker of class. After Diana’s fatal accident, the Royal Family may have adopted this model, as it had done in previous decades. However, a newer emotional regime of expressive mourning increasingly pathologized a ‘bottling up’ of emotions as unhealthy and demanded the therapeutic acting out of grief as public feeling. This had to be communicated and needed to be ‘affirmed’ or ‘validated’ as ‘proper’ grief. The Royal Family arguably navigated between such emotional regimes. On September 5, in what was sometimes referred to as “the floral revolution” (Greenhalgh), the Queen bowed to media pressure and returned to Buckingham Palace. She incorporated (albeit carefully selected) elements of expressive grief when she inspected the sea of flowers that had been placed in front of the palace, and, in an unprecedented concession, she also had the Union Flag on Buckingham Palace raised to half-mast: According to Richard Coles (171–2), the Union flag now symbolized “the identification of being British with having the correct feeling”: It had become “the Standard of National Emotion.”

This mass (media) phenomenon of widespread mourning for a sentimentalized civil Saint Diana was immediately understood—and politicized—as a

symptom of deeper changes to concepts of the nation, national identity, and a 'national character.' In life and in death, Diana became the object of negotiations about the values and the very identity of the nation. On the one hand, images of Britons finally 'embracing their feelings' were celebrated as evidence of a new British society, neatly coinciding with Labour's 'New Britain,' which now defined itself as a "nation of broken hearts" through a shared emotional experience (Tony Blair talked about Britain as a nation in "a state of shock, in mourning, in grief"). Writing in 1999, Valerie Hey argued that the intense reactions to Diana's death "occurred in part because 'Diana' was caught up in and positioned by some New-Labour/New-Britain political themes but also because she, literally and in fantasy, personified certain 'outlawed' emotions—of expressivity, compassion and caring" (60). Diana, in short, became the focal point for affective political movements pushing for a 'stakeholding' society in which, after eighteen years of Tory governments led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major, "margins would be rearticulated to the centre, wealth redistributed, services saved, rights (re)asserted, and society restored" (Kear/Steinberg 1999a, 4). She seemed to be able to forge sentimental networks and expand the boundaries of effective (and affective) citizenship: Her compassion for refugees and the poor, as well as her 'touching' concern for AIDS sufferers, had brought previously marginalized groups into the political discourse (Johnson 1999, 32–3). In death, they now seemed to be fully included via a shared sense of loss—most visibly when some 500 members of her charities walked after her funeral cortège.

On the other hand, however, an excessive mourning for Diana was rejected as a symptom of a progressive sentimentalization (now used in the pejorative sense) of Britain. In his column in *The Daily Telegraph* on September 3, 1997, future Prime Minister Boris Johnson, at that time still a political columnist, claimed that England was "undergoing a Latin American carnival of grief" (Johnson 1997, 22). He compared Diana to another self-proclaimed 'Queen of Hearts,' Eva Perón, and wondered: "Where is this—Argentina?" (ibid). In April 1998, public scenes of mourning for Diana served as a prominent example in *Faking It: The Sentimentalisation of Modern Society*, a widely circulated publication of a conservative think tank, the Social Affairs Unit. It warned against 'sentimentality' encroaching all aspects of social life (the book includes chapters on the sentimentalization of social policy, childcare, education, institutionalized religion, medicine, literature, music and media, even eating habits). Mourning for Diana seemed to bring such tendencies into sharp relief (cf. Anderson/Mullen 18), and quite appropriately, when it was reprinted as a Penguin paperback, the cover showed a tribute to Diana as "Queen of Hearts"

left amongst the flowers in front of one of the palaces. In his chapter on Diana, philosopher Anthony O'Hear pits Rousseau against Edmund Burke to describe Diana's own sentimentalization before her death with an improper indulgence of 'feeling' and the neglect of 'reason' and 'duty.' The public reaction towards her death (which he mainly accepts as genuine and unmediated) likewise stood for a national "elevation of feeling, image and spontaneity over reason, reality and restraint" (184). O'Hear's "New Britain" (which he frames against the Britain of World War II and the 1950s) is defined by a "modern sentimentality" where political correctness has taken the form of emotional correctness (188), 'shared feelings' are, first and foremost, an "emotional lowest common denominator" (186), victimhood has become indiscriminate and helps mask the nakedness of arbitrary power (186–7), well-meant 'caring,' if it focuses on symptoms and eschews addressing structural reasons, threatens to become a form of "intellectual or emotional imperialism" (188). (O'Hear discusses Diana's care for AIDS patients, and he himself only hints at what is supposedly eschewed by it, some "underlying activities which bring AIDS about," 188).

The Social Affairs Unit publication, as well as many other conservative positions, usually also attest to the affective pull of sentimentality, and they often interpret its mechanisms in similar ways to liberal-leaning academics. They mainly differ, however, in their political, moral, and ideological evaluation of it, and they place much more emphasis on sentimentality as a unilateral means of deception or control (a 'top down' model of communication), and far less in terms of any agency that the use of sentimental codes and registers may offer. This they share with 'republican' and 'leftist' positions. *Diana: The Mourning After*, Christopher Hitchens's television documentary broadcast one year after her death, is a good example. For Hitchens, the week after Diana's fatal accident represents a medialized "orgy of sentimentality [that] was nauseating to behold—a complete suspension of reality." Hitchens' documentary focuses on the role of television and the tabloids in crafting a representation which for him was essentially false but which proved highly successful in interpellating audiences. In one of the interviews featured in the documentary, the mass media coverage of Diana's death and her mourning is described in terms of a sentimental fascism; the interviewee, Mark Thomas, evokes Stalinism, Naziism, and Italian Fascism in short order: "It was almost like a Soviet leader had died, and they put on the martial music—except it was images of Diana and her children"; "It had the logic of a Disney production and the enforcement of a Nazi state"; if "Disney makes the Blackshirts" of Italian fascism, the result would likewise be a "sentimental: You *must cry!*". Both the contributors to *Faking It* and

Hitchens analyze many of the same aspects of Diana's iconicity and the public myth of a shared national mourning that liberal academia had also raised. In the hands of Hitchens, they now become instruments of vitriolic critique: When he revisits her cultural iconicity, 'Saint Diana' becomes 'Our Lady of the Versace.' As TV critics noted at the time, it is ironic that Hitchens's documentary, which advocates for rationalism to dispel the manipulative effect of sentimentality, tends to increasingly rely on emotional interpellation itself, swapping one "hysteria" for another (Barber). Released just one year after Diana's funeral, these examples already anticipate some of the revisions that occur at the 10th anniversary of her death in 2007, and the 20th in 2017.

2017

The plethora of films and documentaries released on the 20th anniversary of Diana's death enabled a U.K. audience to revisit, perhaps even to re-experience their personal and collective sentimental attachments. The 'affective documentaries' and TV movies I will discuss in this section present a variety of options to do so. These range from the vicarious consumption of (other people's) grief—the affective and emotional surplus attached to the sensational aspects of Diana's deaths—in what I have called 'trauma nostalgia' earlier, to a more reflexive engagement with (one's own) former affective investments—which is what most documentaries promise to facilitate. The documentaries also frequently re-sentimentalize Diana for new social, political, and cultural contexts. The two TV movies in turn illustrate (and explore) Diana's sentimental iconicity as a codified *cultural myth* which is often disavowed but continues to do cultural work. Diana remains a haunting presence in these movies. The first, a melodrama, has been chosen because it highlights the affective pull of that myth (*Diana and I*). In the second, the adaptation of a political play, its manipulative effect, and the political consequences take center stage (*King Charles III*).

Affective Documentaries

In late 2017, all major U.K. channels carried television documentaries on Diana which hovered uneasily between detachment and re-involvement. They offered historicized representations of a recent past *and* an emotionally charged re-presentation that sought to make that past *present* again. This resulted in

a spectral presence of Diana, who seemed to be at the same time dead and alive—or rather, had to be brought back to life only to be killed again. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the ethical paradox involved in such affective re-presentations—the need to (re)produce the very traumatic events for which one elicits sympathy—has a parallel in the sentimental novels of the 18th and 19th century: In order to evoke sympathy by showcasing the plight of others, these novels needed to fictionally invent that very plight (Wood 12–18), so that the moral sentiments of sentimental novels frequently come with their shadowy other: Evoking compassion relied on representations of cruelty, showcasing chastity on depictions of forceful seduction and rape, the bourgeois nuclear family raised the spectre of incest (Fluck 63–4; Pollak). In 2017, making an audience ‘feel’ also means having to make Diana die and ‘the nation’ suffer again and again.

‘Affective documentaries’ frequently conjure up the spectre of Diana. First, as a voice: A National Geographic documentary, *Diana: In Her Own Words*, was entirely narrated using secret audio recordings made by her close friend, James Colthurst, in 1991–92. These clandestine recordings had been smuggled out of Diana’s home at Kensington Palace and passed on to Andrew Morton; they formed the basis for his best-selling biography, *Diana: Her True Story* (1992). Morton’s publisher, Michael O’Mara, published a new “anniversary edition” of the biography in June 2017. It also opens with 84 pages of “Diana’s own words” taken from these audio recordings. (While the publication was clearly marketed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of her death, it was ‘tastefully’ advertised as honoring the 25th anniversary of the biography’s first publication instead). Second, Diana was brought back to life on video: A different program sharing the same title, *Diana: In Her Own Words* (Channel 4, August 6, 2017), showed, for the first time in the U.K., video tapes of Diana made by her voice coach in 1992–93. (Parts of both recordings of Diana had previously been shown by NBC in the U.S. as *Princess Diana: The Secret Tapes* in 2004.) In these programs, Diana speaks from beyond her grave (or rather, is made to speak in acts of ventriloquism given that her voice is combined and intercut with archival footage). She also returns as an actual ghost in the TV adaptation of Mike Bartlett’s play *King Charles III* (2017)—a history play about an imagined future which will be considered in more detail later. In conceptual terms, such ghostly re-presentations of Diana may partake in an ongoing “hauntology of performance” (Taylor 2003, esp. 134–6, 141, 157), in which the ritualized performance of mourning, with its own, seemingly universal repertoires, conjures up the ghost of Diana once more so that she can be re-sentimentalized and her death made mean-

ingful in new contexts, twenty years onwards. If in 1997 the myth of communal mourning was used in the construction of Labour's 'New Britain,' Diana's anniversary in 2017 occurred on the cusp of a 'new' Britain as well—a post-Brexit U.K. In March, Tory Prime Minister Theresa May had triggered the formal withdrawal process by invoking article 50 of the treaty of the EU. The nostalgic myth of a 'nation united in mourning' in 1997 gained new currency in 2017 as Britain continued to be torn between proponents of the 'leave' and 'remain' campaigns, and Scotland was renewing its push for devolution, which had been narrowly rejected in 2014 (for Brexit and nostalgia cf. Henneböhl, ch. 7). Even Diana's ghost was instrumentalized in these debates: *The Daily Mail*, a newspaper which had heavily advocated Brexit, reported that her spectral presence had contacted an old friend to say that she supports Brexit, effectively drawing a line in the sand between the unsuccessful 'remainers,' now frequently ridiculed as 'remoaners,' and Diana's remourners whom the *Daily Mail* firmly associated with the 'leave' campaign.

Affective documentaries frequently anchor their sentimental strategies by employing a 'factual' historical frame, resulting in a peculiar affective-reflexive form. *Diana: Seven Days That Shook the Windsors* (Channel 5, 30 May 2017) is one of several documentaries that use the seven days from Diana's death to her funeral as a narrative pattern. This also provides a mythological and biblical framework which helps inscribe the story of Diana into Christian providential narratives, including those of sin, suffering, and redemption. ITV's *Diana: The Day Britain Cried* (August 29, 2017, expectably retitled for international release *Diana: The Day the World Cried*), likewise provides a chronological record of the day of the funeral, with a focus on the decisions made in the organization of the event. It competed with two documentaries produced in conjunction with Diana's sons, Princes William and Harry: *Diana: Seven Days* (BBC One, August 27, 2017) employs the familiar chronicle pattern again. Their first documentary, however, the hagiographic *Diana, Our Mother: Her Life and Legacy* (ITV, July 24, 2017), inverts this principle and uses an overtly sentimental frame to chronicle Diana's "life and legacy." It is structured around Diana's family and friends sharing "their most intimate memories" while looking through "recently discovered" family photos and private home movies. The audience is invited to join this group. It would be reductive to argue that the documentary simply makes William and Harry's "personal psychological and emotional work available to the public" and shows them mourning vicariously "on behalf of the nation" (Jordan/Polland 12–13). Rather, its overall theme is "sharing memories," and a complex configuration of sentimental remembering and self-reflexive

medialization is at work—in short, a complex form of *nostalgia* that plays out in “the uncertain zone between memory and history” (Walder 2). This nostalgia extends beyond the sentimental object, Diana; the documentary nostalgically revisits sentimental strategies used in representing Diana and the nation in 1997. For example, it foregoes the framework of historical documentation and foregrounds affective moments of communal sharing, a crucial part of the myth of a nation united in mourning. This is imagined on and through television, which in 2017 had itself acquired the status of a ‘traditional’ medium. Diana also mainly features as a silent visual icon again, and not, in a revisionist sense, as ‘her own voice.’ Using her recently discovered family photos further curtails her agency since, as one of the princes observes, while she took most of the photos, the ones featured in the documentary are mainly those that portray her instead. The documentary is thus nostalgic in the very sentimental strategies it employs, but in doing so it paradoxically brackets off Diana historically—her “life and legacy” may live on in the memories the audience shares, but the documentary turns Diana very specifically into a medialized object of the past: dated family photos and home movies.

‘Affective documentaries’ about Diana thus seem to fall into two categories—those that foreground historiography to stage sentimentality and those that employ sentimental strategies to effect processes of historicization and memorialization. A similar bifurcation may be observed in the TV movies I will consider in more detail in the remainder of this section—a melodrama that imagines how ‘ordinary people’ were affected by Diana’s death (*Diana and I*) and a play adaptation that employs an alternate history to imagine Diana’s past in the future (*King Charles III*).

A Melodrama of Ordinary Lives: *Diana and I* (BBC Two, September 4, 2017)

In 2017, *Diana and I*’s director Peter Cattaneo was still best-known for his film *The Full Monty* (1997). First released in the U.K. two days before Diana died in Paris, *The Full Monty* provided the emotional flip side to the Blairite myth of a ‘nation in mourning.’ Whether the remarkable commercial success of this comedy may have been helped by the ‘tragedy’ unfolding in the media or not, the film provided a space for a shared reaction to the vestiges of neo-liberal Thatcherite policies—only not, in the Blairite sense, by shared tears but by laughter. Its picaresque plot revolves around working class men putting on a striptease show in a working men’s club to cope with rising unemployment—and by extension, with larger social changes the U.K. faced since the

1980s, such as industry being supplanted by the financial and service sectors and an erosion of the manufacturing base (Walkerdine 103–4; Feldmann/Krug 212–15).

Twenty years later, *Diana and I* was heavily advertised as being by the director of *The Full Monty*, not least because of its focus on ‘ordinary’ people again (although as with *The Full Monty*, what constitutes such ordinariness is carefully selected). According to the BBC’s press releases, the TV movie was supposed to shine a spotlight on the “Princess’s people” rather than the “People’s Princess”—a revisionist focus that the BBC had already used on Diana’s first anniversary in 1998: *The Princess’s People* was a vox populi documentary based on discarded crowd interviews from the first week of September 1997 (McGuigan 35). *Diana and I* likewise features an ensemble cast to show how, according to the BBC, “ordinary people were affected by Diana’s death.” Spanning the seven days from the first media reports about Diana’s accident once more, it comprises four plots that eventually intersect at her funeral: in London, a teenager whose mother dies the same night as Diana comes out as gay to his family (including his dead mother); a junior journalist on his honeymoon in Paris covers the reactions to her death; a young Asian mother in Bradford finds the courage to leave her arranged marriage and embarks with her daughter on a journey of self-discovery; and a middle-aged florist from Glasgow travels to London to sell flowers to people mourning Diana but ends up placing them in front of Kensington Palace. These ‘ordinary’ people represent various parts of the United Kingdom (with England being subdivided into the North and South), different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, a range of age groups, middle- and working-class settings, and various professional occupations. However, the film does not originate with ordinary people. Rather, Diana’s iconicity provides a lens to construct that very ordinariness: Her championing sexual rights has brought forth the gay teenager, the flowers placed in front of the Palaces have produced the florist, her story of female liberation prompts the unhappy mother who flees an arranged marriage, and the journalists accused of hunting Diana down are embodied in the junior journalist. The Diana myth has “people[d] this little world”; conjured them up in a manner similar to Shakespeare’s King Richard II who imagines his subjects while he is in prison (V.v.9, more on this later).

The myth of Diana also determines the roles they play, as the first plot demonstrates. It keeps sliding back and forth between Diana and her paradigmatical substitute, the teenager’s mother. When Jack loses her to cancer, news of Diana’s death plays on the television in the hospital; to commemorate her, he constructs a religious shrine out of mementos of his mother around a TV set

showing live coverage of Diana; at the end, he will have her funeral service at the time of Diana's (according to Jack, "[t]hey died together are going to heaven together"). For the service, he places a photo of Diana in his mother's hand. While only briefly visible, the photo is iconic: It shows Diana shaking hands with the resident of an AIDS hospice in October 1991. The use of this photo in the TV movie conflates AIDS and sexual orientation: Over his mother's (and in extension, Diana's) dead body, Jack finds the courage to come out as gay to his parents. In such moments the film traverses melodrama and soap opera, emulating the modes in which Diana was herself represented in the media.

Finally, the Diana myth also impacts the moral evaluation of characters and their actions. In *Diana and I*, everybody finds love except for the journalist, who loses it—his new wife leaves him on his honeymoon when he chooses to hunt down stories rather than stay with her. Once the Scottish florist has learned that flowers for Diana must not be sold for profit but need to be donated, given from the heart, she is compensated with a new husband. Yasmin, the young Asian mother who leaves her husband, discovers her independence; she stumbles into a karaoke bar and manages to impress a hen party by singing, first timidly but then with increasing confidence, Des'ree's "You Got to be" (1994), having dedicated the song to Princess Diana. At the end of the film, she is symbolically inscribed into the British national family when she joins her uncle Zaheer and his wife Rachel in a London suburb. Zaheer is a Muslim immigrant who is portrayed as a stereotypical Englishman, including faithfully serving cups of tea to people in distress. His role is to evaluate the feelings of the nation—or rather, remind the latter of the *correct* feelings. Zaheer represents melodrama's *tout dire*, its tendency to unequivocally 'say all'; he frequently speaks in moral *sententiae* ("I myself am a devout Muslim, married an atheist—but the heart follows no creed") and also frames the national meaning of Diana's death: "This beautiful country is kinder now than I have seen it in all my days as an Englishman." At the end, a suburban Muslim immigrant and his Anglo-Saxon atheist wife will be the substitute family for Yasmin, the young Asian woman and her child, in what is the film's vision of the modern British nation.

The film's final montage has all the characters' narratives intersect in London. *Diana and I* thus highlights the metropolitan dimension of the myth of mourning for Diana: There is a centripetal movement to London where the film's 'nation' unites—in front of a video wall in Hyde Park and outside Kensington Palace to place flowers. This unity is achieved in a formal sense by voice-over media coverage playing across all segments of the montage: first

the Queen's speech to the nation, next, Earl Spencer's speech in Westminster Abbey, and finally, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's musical rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" (1993). Only in very rare instances, and mainly towards the end, does *Diana and I* conflate historical TV footage with the film's diegesis, and the characters seem to inhabit documentary TV images. As the final credits start rolling, however, the film fully transitions from fiction to 'faction' and incorporates vox-pop-segments of mourners in 1997—the film's melodramatic types are translated into historical people, and melodrama has been validated as (media) history.

Diana and I self-reflexively foregrounds Diana as a medialized simulacrum. Television sets, radios, and newspapers provide a constant stream of news in the background. The focus, however, is on media consumption, and throughout the film, there are only fleeting glimpses of Diana herself. In fictional films, the myth of Diana is now so powerful that it hardly needs any visual references to function any more—her 'iconic' imagery has long been medialized into the public consciousness. Diana is also conspicuously absent throughout the entire run of Channel 4's outrageous sitcom *The Windsors*, the abject companion piece to *The Crown*—both were in their second seasons in 2017. In *King Charles III*, the 2017 film adaptation of Mike Bartlett's acclaimed play (2014b), she again makes only fleeting appearances as well—but her (ghostly) presence is felt throughout.

Future Pasts: *King Charles III* (BBC Two, May 10, 2017)

King Charles III is an investigation into the social and political role of the modern British monarchy, its constitutional and symbolic power. It imagines a future in which Queen Elizabeth has died and Charles has succeeded her to the throne. He now needs to find his role in a political system that expects his limited constitutional powers to be purely ceremonial. When he exercises them politically, by refusing to give his approval to a bill and by using his Royal prerogative to dissolve Parliament, a constitutional crisis ensues that spills out into the streets, and the King is finally forced to abdicate in favor of his son, King William V, and his daughter-in-law Queen Catherine III.

King Charles III is also a modern re-imagining of a Shakespearean history play. Written mostly in blank verse and iambic pentameter, it features soliloquies addressed directly to the camera and an ambivalent ghost whose predictions prove a hermeneutical challenge to the people it visits. Diana is this ghost—she appears to both King Charles and to Prince William—, but *King*

Charles III is also haunted by the ghost of Shakespeare, as references to canonical Shakespeare plays abound (Morra 216–18; Ward 117–26). Diana's spectre evokes the ghosts of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*—and the deceptive nature of her predictions is reminiscent of the three witches, the sisters of fate, in *Macbeth* (a major reference for Bartlett).

The first of Diana's spectral appearances occurs after Charles has discussed a controversial new bill that would limit the powers of the press with both the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister. The latter urges him to sign it into law by evoking, in a feeble attempt at manipulation, the death of Diana:

I have to say it does surprise, that with
 The great intrusion they have made into
 Your life, you'd have them left untouched like this.
 What of the pack of wolves that mercilessly
 Did hunt to death your late and much missed wife? [...]
 I would have thought of all the victims,
 You'd feel the strongest something must be done.

Shortly after, King Charles catches a first glimpse of a white-clad Diana at the very end of a long corridor—a spectral apparition accompanied by an extradiegetic song: “I who have died am alive again today.” On her next two appearances, she delivers almost identical prophecies to King Charles and Prince William. Charles's prophecy has been slightly revised in the film to form a perfect couplet (and to be less mocking than in the play): “An indecisive man, and oft so sad, / Will be the greatest king we ever had.” It can be read as a projection of Charles's psyche—a reading Bartlett self-consciously addressed in lines he eventually cut before the first performance of the play: “This is psychology so manifest / If shown upon the stage I would cry out / A fraud. Simplicity! And badly done!” (Bartlett 2014a). Diana makes her second prophecy to William immediately after Kate (clearly channeling Lady Macbeth) has spurned him on to follow his ambitions. This couplet is deceptively simple: “Such pain, my son, such hurt. But now be glad / You'll be the greatest king we ever had.”

Both Charles and William interpret their prophecies in ways that favor them, and Diana is brought up again in a climactic scene when both of their ambitions come to a head. Here, William suddenly appears to his father at night in much the same way Diana did before, so that in terms of mise-en-

scène, he has taken Diana's place. The King immediately seizes on the symbolic implications of this visual substitution:

There's something in your face I recognise.
It was Diana where I saw it last,
And I had hoped that it had died with her.
But here it is, in you, ambition lurks!

Diana's spectral presence thus exceeds her embodiment as a ghost; she lives on in other characters as well: In the play, Charles also first suspects her ghost to be his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, and scholarship has read Kate "as the new Diana" (Wilson). Even her informal style as "Queen of Hearts" functions as a free-floating signifier: Diana is last mentioned in the play when the Leader of the Opposition tells Charles, who has just abdicated, that he will always remain his "king of hearts"—revered but, for all intents and purposes, (politically) dead. Diana's pervasive presence thus holds the play together, but not in terms of any sentimental attachments any more. Bartlett chips away at sentimental strategies until what is exposed are naked ambition and manipulation.

The overt references to Diana we considered so far, as a figure representing a past that keeps its hold on the present, clearly demonstrate how easily she can be inscribed into the generic form of a Shakespearean history play. Bartlett uses the Shakespearean paradigm to investigate the relations between the monarchy, the state, and civil society, and *King Charles III* also includes a (mock-)Shakespearean state-of-the-nation speech. Here, the voice of the common people is not represented by a Gardener (as in *Richard II*) but by a black Kebab shop owner. He is primarily concerned with the new monarch's lack of feelings ("His mother dies, he don't even cry? Now what's that about?"). His extended simile for the nation is a kebab, made up of small, individual pieces of meat held together by a steel skewer. The play and the film differ subtly in their political interpretation of this metaphor—whether the focus is on the cohesion provided by the steel core, the monarch, holding Britain together (this is what the film stresses) or on the forces that cut away the meat from the skewer until "Britain get[s] so cut down, that it's not Britain any more" (III.v.36-7; lines from the play that have been cut in the film). The film more than the play also imagines the nation as a multiracial family in crisis (Green MacDonald 167–73; Pittman 187–90). 'Family' is a flexible concept in *King Charles III* that can be scaled up and down to variously include the nuclear family, the monarchy as an institution, and the nation. In each case, it also involves inclusions and ex-

clusions. Prince Harry's working-class (and prose-speaking) girlfriend Jess is the focal point of such debates. In her first meeting with Harry, she questions his parentage—if his ginger hair was due to the fact that Diana had an affair with her riding instructor James “Hewlitt” (*sic*), “You’d be out of the family.” In the 2017 film, Jess is played by a black actress, Tamara Lawrance, which lends poignancy to her character's own inclusions and exclusions, as did the fact that the actual Prince Harry and his future wife Meghan Markle had gone public with their relationship in November 2016. King Charles first welcomes Jess to “our family,” but his sentimental gesture of holding hands with her and Camilla seems a calculated, manipulative move in his political struggle, and Harry finally excludes her from the coronation of the new King.

Individual textual allusions are neither the only nor perhaps not the most significant aspects of how *King Charles III* links up with Shakespeare. References to the mode of Shakespeare's succession plays, the genre of history plays, and Shakespeare's metatheatricity are important as well. The latter points towards a link between theatricality and statecraft (e.g. Orgel), and according to Irene Morra, the chosen idiom of Bartlett's play likewise reinforces an “idea of empty, conventional state theatre—misunderstood, blindly re-enacted, perpetually fragmenting and socially manipulative” (220). Finally, Diana's presence in *King Charles III* raises more general questions of temporality and history. Diana represents a past that keeps its hold on the present and is cast in the paradigm of a modern Shakespearean chronicle play, and her prophecies—the latent possibilities inherent in the past—are addressed to more than one person and need to be interpreted to forecast, and to fashion, the future. For American audiences, some editions of the play included an explanatory subtitle, “A Future History Play,” to indicate its specific historical perspective, and in even more general terms, Bartlett's play may well highlight the confluence of a mixed temporality of the Early Modern chronicle drama and a new experience of a “fullness of contemporary time” in the twenty-first century, in which different temporalities again interact (Nicosia).

Like Shakespeare's history plays, *King Charles III* is a self-conscious reflection about memory and remembrance in the process of fashioning (a future) history. In the play, Charles believes his story has already been written; he likens himself to a finished script: “I'm like a book myself, stuck on the shelf / For years, ignored and waiting.” (V.i.97-8) William reminds his father that history is malleable, and that Diana's prediction can come true for Charles—but only if Charles submits to William's revised future history:

The greatest king? And so you shall.
 For when they write the history books 'bout this
 They will tell stories crisis-like about
 The stormy days after the Queen had died
 And how for weeks you contemplated hard
 Upon the right and proper thing to do,
 And, in the end, decided for the good of all,
 Your people and their long-term happiness
 You'd selflessly stand aside and pass it on,
 To younger hands, more popular and with
 More time to reign [...].

Again, *King Charles III* clearly evokes Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Like Charles, Richard has to face the ambivalent nature of his symbolic power—while it may ultimately not prove to be a match to Bolingbroke's realities of power, it can nevertheless be used to great effect, albeit only temporarily. Richard II is forced to abdicate, but he turns his self-deposition into a ritualized ceremony and draws it out. At the end of *King Charles III*, Charles takes the crown and holds on to it, until he finally places it on the head of William—choosing the future history William has outlined for him. Charles prolongs his literal grip on power by musing on the crown, and his verses conflate several references to *Richard II*: “[...] from the side, bejewelled, it looks so rich / But turn it thus, and this is what you see / Nothing.” To glimpse the emptiness of “the hollow crown” (*Richard II*, III.ii.160), it needs a specific ‘perspective,’ since looking at it from a distance will only show one of its aspects, its splendor. Only by looking “awry” (II.ii.19), from a different angle, its simultaneous emptiness is revealed as well. In *Richard II*, “perspective” is also the technical term for anamorphic paintings that encode different points of view and temporalities simultaneously (e.g. Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* with its *memento mori*, a skull), and it is also a reflexive metaphor that organizes the historical ‘double vision’ of the play.

Coda: 1597

Bartlett's use of Shakespeare is symptomatic. Shakespeare is frequently referred to in moments of crisis for the monarchy (Wilson), and as modern myths, his plays provide templates to discuss questions of state and nation. As

Christina Wald (9–12) has argued, Shakespeare scholarship has long explored how his plays remain obliquely embedded in contemporary popular culture (at least on the stage, in television, and film) in terms that exceed simple models of a linear intertextual ‘influence’: Such scholarship considers a “Shakespeare rhizome” (Lanier), stages “collaborations” (Henderson) or “creative collisions” (Holderness) between early modern and modern culture, and explores their links by means of “crossmappings” (Bronfen 2018, 2020).

In a coda to this essay, I would like to pick up the spectral presence of Diana in *King Charles III* (which is by no means singular, cf. her ghostly appearances in the sixth season of *The Crown* in 2023), pick up on Bartlett’s frequent echoes of *Richard II*, and sketch the outlines of such a crossmapping—between the sentimental myth of Diana in 1997 and what might be called a proto-sentimental myth of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* in 1597. This is not meant as a formal research design but rather as an informal heuristics. It involves borrowing a specific perspective from the play, its ‘double vision’ (cf. Žižek): Looking “awry” at *Richard II* and Diana—considering them heuristically as part of a similar sentimental ‘scenario’ and gazing obliquely at the one with the other—may help bring similarities as well as differences into focus.

Both Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and Diana are liminal monarchical figures that have been discarded from an official monarchy but seek to reclaim their position by fashioning informal identity positions for themselves: Diana as the “People’s princess,” Richard as the ‘King of Grievs’: “My crown I [resign], but still my griefs are mine. / You may my glories and my state depose, / But not my griefs; still am I king of those.” (IV.i.191–3). Both of these self-fashionings prove to be extremely powerful in informal ways. In Richard’s case, the very act of ‘unkinging’ (cf. IV.i.220) paradoxically grants him performative power—he draws it out in the long deposition scene by improvising his own ceremonies (IV.i.203–221). After their death, mourning *Richard* and *Diana* is hedged in and reinscribed into a commemorative national history, but to some extent both retain their liminal state of inclusive exclusion. As John Joughin has noticed in passing, *Richard* and *Diana* may both represent ‘sacrificial’ national figures whose exemplary status in a “psycho-drama of mourning and melancholia” allows their respective audiences “the opportunity to shape a new politics of communal identity, where the nation is positioned as a form of futural or imagined identity” (Joughin 2006a, 28–9).

This ‘sentimental scenario’ is propelled by grief and mourning. An introspective, self-reflective mourning play, *Richard II* is fundamentally about grief and sorrow. If *Richard* is the ‘King of Grievs’—grieving about himself, shedding

theatrical tears, and devising how he will be mourned even before he is dead (V.i.38–50)—, his wife Isabel is the ‘Queen of Sorrows,’ grieving about a future that for her (but not the audience) is still unknown. Isabel is pregnant with a future history: “methinks, / Some unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune’s womb, / Is coming towards me” (II.ii.9–11). Her sorrow and grief are born out of “nothing”—a term that in this play connotes not so much emptiness as potentiality: “For nothing hath begot my something grief, / Or something hath the nothing that I grieve” (36–37). Richard’s excessively theatricalized performances of grief point towards the histrionic politics of personal grief, of communal mourning practices and official commemoration on the early modern stage—they are both political (in that they draw attention to contested memorial cultures) and meta-theatrical (in that they consistently involve a meditation on the role of acting in the public sphere; Döring 61–66). And they likewise involve the fashioning of a future history: Richard casts himself as the impossible object of his own grief and conceives of his ‘self’ in terms of the very commemorative practices that will canonize his memory (Joughin 2006b, 54).

The curious (proto-)sentimental scenario can best be observed in the character of Richard after he relinquishes the crown. Hugh Grady has argued that Richard’s “disinterpellation” (98), not least the relinquishing of his body politic, opens up the space for an extended enquiry into subjectivity—which for Richard is anchored in an emotional experience (Grady 96, 98), hence the play’s preoccupation with sorrow and grief. (Grady relies on Robert Solomon’s rational understanding of ‘emotion,’ but it also seems possible to use the term in a more specifically modern sense that was only just developing in Shakespeare’s time; cf. Dixon 2003.) Richard does not explore a Rousseauistic, seemingly more ‘authentic,’ interiority, he rather engages in poeticized explorations of more unmoored, distinctly modern subjectivities (Grady 80, 98). These explorations involve playful self-interpellations (“Thus play I in one person many people, / [...] Sometimes am I king; / Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar, / And so I am,” V.v.31–34), most specifically in Pomfret, where Richard’s thoughts “people the little world” of his prison cell (V.v.9). His thoughts conjure up fellow subjects, like the simple-minded beggars which he imagines sitting in stocks (V.v.25–30), and he imagines future subject positions for himself, such as being buried under the King’s highway and trampled on by his former subjects (III.iii.155–159). He offers these subjectivities up for contemplation and to elicit sympathy (Aumerle is promptly moved to tears, 160), only to discard them again (a rhetorical strategy reminiscent of Laurence Sterne’s invention of the very slaves with which he sympathizes, see

above—which in turn may point more fundamentally towards something I cannot explore here, the self-generating aspect of such sentimental scenarios).

It is, of course, not strictly necessary to call this dynamic proto-*sentimental*—but then again, it is quite telling that as soon as modern concepts of a ‘sentimental’ mode become culturally available in the 18th century, they are promptly applied to Richard (cf. Forker 10), and once the term is predominantly used in a pejorative sense in the 19th century, Richard likewise becomes a (mere) “sentimentalist” (ibid. 16) and is styled “the sentimental king” (“In action how impotent; in word how strong!”, Ransome 192). At the end of the 19th century, as Richard’s “sentimental effeminacy” tended to dominate academic criticism of the play (Forker 415), sentimentalization coincides with a feminization. Mid-20th-century scholarship talks of “Richard’s sentimental, magical investment in royal semantics” and his “sentimental verbal kingdoms”—but it also notes Richard’s (meta)theatrical, reflexive use of such sentimentalism (Stirling, Berger), thus already drawing attention to the sentimental as a political strategy that potentially works by *manipulations* of sympathy—a notion that may already be at work, in a latent fashion, in *Richard II* (cf. Meek 2015 & 2023, who argues that “sympathy,” while not yet a moral sentiment, around this time began to gradually attain its modern meaning as a feeling for fellow human beings, rather than just a correspondence of natural phenomena).

After their respective deaths, Richard and Diana prove “a thorn in the side of monumental history” (Joughin 2006a, 29) as the personal grief felt by and for them cannot be completely hedged in by official commemorative practices. This is almost literally the case with Diana: Her monumental grave is located on a secluded island in a private park, but she not only keeps returning to life (to die again) at her anniversaries; her spectre now also marks the affective fault lines between the Royal family and the public, as she continues to be conjured up, for example, in discussions of Meghan Markle. *Richard II* likewise demonstrates the limits of hedging in grief. At the end of the play, Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, attempts to channel Richard’s grief into communal mourning practices. He invites the remaining nobles to “Come, mourn with me for what I do lament, / And put on sullen black incontinent. / [...] March sadly after; grace my mournings here / In weeping after this untimely bier” (V.vi.47–52) and stages a funeral procession to end the play. His final speech also picks up the play’s historical double vision, its writing of a future history, by inscribing the events of the play into what will become a providential (Tudor) historiography of sin and eventual redemption: “To wash this blood off from my guilty hand,”

Henry promises to “make a voyage to the Holy Land” (49–51). His attempt to use an international, religious conflict to patch up national division, however, is ultimately unsuccessful, as the next play in the tetralogy reminds us. The first part of *Henry IV* opens with the same king proclaiming that the situation in Jerusalem has gotten worse, he has not gone on a crusade yet (he never will in Shakespeare), and England is now embroiled in a civil war: Henry’s claim to the throne remains troubled because the symbolism of Richard’s deposition lingers on. Richard’s spectral presence cannot be laid to rest.

Looking “awry” at Richard and Diana can also involve addressing some of the differences in this sentimental scenario, specifically regarding gender and mediality, which in turn may be used to focus on the cultural specificity of both. Scholarship on Diana has long stressed the role assigned to femininity in her sentimental performances. Coincidentally, the year she died, the BBC also aired Fiona Shaw’s ground-breaking performance at the National Theatre in which she played a female (and at times androgynous) Richard II. In an interview, the actress drew a connection to Diana and read her funeral four months later as a spectacular reply to a central idea of the play—that the monarchy needs to serve the people and cannot rely on notions of the divine rights of kings, as Richard did (Shaw 163–4). While the timing was certainly coincidental, the performance did highlight that Richard II’s proto-sentimental performances need also be considered in terms of early modern gender performativity and the way suffering and grief acquire cultural currency. York’s account of Richard being escorted into London after his deposition may serve as an example:

[...] men’s eyes
 Did scowl on Richard. No man cried God save him!
 No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home,
 But dust was thrown upon his sacred head,
 Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off,
 His face still combating with tears and smiles,
 The badges of his grief and patience,
 That had not God for some strong purpose steeled
 The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted
 And barbarism itself have pitied him. (V.ii.27–36)

Richard’s patiently borne suffering, while clearly reminiscent of earlier passion plays (cf. Joughin 2006a, 27–28), also looks forward to a new (and feminine-

connoted) model of heroic behavior. Mary Beth Rose has argued that in the 17th century, a “heroics of endurance,” drawing on conventional models (e.g. stoicism) but also on a new sense of interiority and the re(e)valuation of ‘private’ virtues that were now made to circulate publicly, was increasingly set against a more traditional (and masculine-connoted) “heroics of action” (Rose). The sentimental scenario outlined above could more easily be aligned with the heroics of patience and endurance in the face of suffering, sorrow, and grief. *Richard II* may already anticipate how such heroic models will be negotiated on the stage: While he bears the badge of patience in this scene, he will die by exclaiming “patience is stale,” seize a weapon and attack his guard. The historical Richard suffered a much more ‘sentimental’ fate as he (was?) most likely starved to death in prison.

Finally: mediality. Richard is a character on stage who mourns for himself, Diana is a medialized princess who is being mourned, and as much as Richard is verbose, Diana remains mainly silent in her representations—in late 1997, she circulated as an image rather than voice: “In death, Princess Diana, creature of the modern media, became star of the silent screen,” Jenny Kitzinger commented in 1998 (67). Giving her back her voice on the 20th anniversary of her death (“Diana: In Her Own Words”) only ostensibly grants her agency since her recorded voice had, of course, long become a commodity, and using it just another form of appropriation. In contrast, Richard uses the rhetorical and performative power of the theatre stage, the (predominantly verbal) mass medium of his time, to become the (not so mute) object of grief.

On the other hand, he might just be associated with photography after all, and the truly significant difference between Diana and Richard may be that while she was considered the most photographed woman on the planet (Kitzinger 67), he is the one who takes pictures. Scholars have frequently conceptualized the peculiar temporal aesthetics, the anterior futures and future pasts, of Shakespeare’s history plays with reference to visual models and techniques—especially (as I have done) early modern ones such as anamorphic paintings (e.g. Gilman). Recently, however, Alice Dailey has used Roland Barthes’s phenomenology of the photograph in his *Camera Lucida* (1980) to conceptualize the confluences of temporality in Shakespeare’s history plays and to focus more specifically on the still images (the play’s “little, little grave[s],” III.ii.154) which Richard produces of his past or dead self as sites of aesthetic objectification and scopophilic anticipation (Dailey 17–21). Such a hermeneutic may be appropriately apt because in its contemplation of death, it already connects the different temporalities with sentimentality

and nostalgia: anticipating and recalling death simultaneously. I opened this essay with a look at the sixth season of *The Crown*. Its sentimental mode of storytelling does something remarkably similar. It works towards Diana's crash in scopophilic anticipation (the actual press photo was never printed in the mainstream U.K. papers) and anticipates a future in which her death has already been aesthetically objectified—again and again.

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- Diana: The Day Britain Cried*. 2017. TV documentary (U.K.), dir. Leslie Woodhead, prod. Lorraine McKechnie. Finestripe Productions for ITV and Smithsonian Channel. ITV, Tuesday, August 29, 2017, 8 p.m. 58 mins.
- Diana: In Her Own Words*. 2017a. TV documentary (U.K.), dir. Kevin Sim, prod. Charles Furneaux. Kaboom Film & TV for Channel 4. Channel 4, Sunday, August 6, 2017, 8 p.m. 110 mins.
- Diana: In Her Own Words*. 2017b. TV documentary (U.S.), dir. and prod. Tom Jennings. 1895 Films for National Geographic. August 14, 2017, 9 p.m. ET. 88 mins. DVD: National Geographic, 112 mins.
- Diana: The Mourning After*. 1998. TV documentary (U.K.), wr. and pres. Christopher Hitchens, dir. Mark Soldinger. Just Television for Channel Four Television. Channel 4, Thursday, August 27, 1998, 11.45 p.m. 45 mins.
- Diana, Our Mother: Her Life and Legacy*. 2017. TV documentary (U.K./U.S.), dir. Ashley Gething, prod. Nick Kent. Oxford Films for ITV and HBO. ITV, Monday, July 24, 2017, 9 p.m. 65 mins. DVD: HBO Documentary Films.
- Diana: Seven Days*. 2017. TV documentary (U.K.), dir. Henry Singer, prod. Jenny Saunders. Sandpaper Films for BBC One. BBC One, Sunday, August 27, 2017, 7:30 p.m. 90 mins. DVD: BBC.
- Diana: Seven Days That Shook the Windsors*. 2017. TV documentary (U.K.), dir. Ben Ryder. Blakeway Productions for Channel 5. Channel 5, Tuesday, May 30, 2017, 9 p.m. 90 mins. DVD (as *Diana: Seven Days That Shook the World*): BBC Worldwide.
- King Charles III*. 2017. TV drama (U.K.), wr. Mike Bartlett, dir. Rupert Goold. A Drama Republic Production for BBC and Masterpiece. BBC Two, Wednesday, May 10, 2017, 9 p.m. 89 mins. DVD: Universum Film, 2018.
- Princess Diana: The Secret Tapes*. 2004. Two-part TV documentary (U.S.), dir. and prod. Jason Raff. NBC, Thursdays, March 4 and March 11, 2004, 10 p.m. ET. 90 mins.

- The Princess's People*. 1998. TV documentary (U.K.), dir. Colin Luke, ed. Edward Roberts. Mosaic Films. BBC Two, Sunday, September 6, 1998, 9:30 p.m. 75 mins.
- Richard II*. 1997. TV play, dir. Deborah Warner. National Video Corporation Arts, 1997. BBC2, Saturday, March 22, 1997, 10:15 p.m. DVD: Illuminations, 2018.
- The Windsors*. 2016–2023. TV sitcom, wr. George Jeffrie and Bert Tyler-Moore. Noho Film and Television Channel 4, May 6, 2016–April 30, 2023.

The Power of Sentimental Cinema and Sentimental Politics

Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014)

Elaine Roth

Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* (2014), about the 1960's civil rights movement's initiative in Selma, Alabama, situates Dr. Martin Luther King's activism within a domestic, personal framework. Director DuVernay repeatedly makes aesthetic choices that foreground the emotional power of her film. This particular representation of the Selma voting rights campaign has several significant results. One is to foreground the sentimental appeal of King's activism, giving visibility to the affective connections to community, shared values, and camaraderie. In taking this approach, DuVernay amplifies the sentimental political appeal that King himself pursued. In addition, DuVernay's choice to focus on emotions and sentimentality results in highlighting the roles of women civil rights activists. This paper argues that both DuVernay and King engaged in civil sentimentalism.

As Heike Paul and Ursula Prutsch have argued, civil sentimentalism draws upon "culture-specific imaginaries of order and belonging" (Paul/Prutsch). Throughout the film, DuVernay depicts King staging dramas of activism. King works to intervene in a national imaginary by representing "not belonging." The resulting mass protests of peaceful, impeccably dressed citizens enact visions of communities excluded from political society. In a tour-de-force speech in the film, King forcefully explains to both President Lyndon Johnson and the viewing audience that African American citizens in the pre-civil rights South were at the mercy of racist physical intimidation because they could not serve on juries that would censure the violence against them because they were not registered to vote, a requirement to serve on juries, and why they are protesting in the first place. As historian Lamont Yeakey notes, "Selma was a town of approximately 13,000 white people and 16,000 black people; but

less than 2 percent of the black population was registered to vote" (165).¹ Both King and DuVernay had to consider: How to make disenfranchisement visible, palpable, and affective?

The crowd excluded from the Selma courthouse reveals the issue. Early in the film, King organizes a protest of African American citizens requesting the right to register to vote outside the Selma courthouse that is rebuffed and met with violence by the local police force, helmed by the local sheriff. The assembled crowd includes local civil rights activists, activists like King who have joined them from out of town, and local citizens. The tableau that King dramatizes makes apparent the exclusion these citizens face, as well as the ruthless violence that this demonstration is subjected to. It is a sentimental effort to catalyze spectators and witnesses. Accordingly, DuVernay films this scene in a sweeping long shot that pulls back seamlessly to elevate King and situate him as one among many leaders and protestors, including many women. In addition, if the demonstration reveals inequity and disenfranchisement, it also serves as a testament to belonging; this group shares a common purpose, works together well, and proceeds according to an agreed-upon plan.

The film establishes its sentimentalism from the onset; the opening scene announces its domestic, personal focus. Jeffrey Knapp, in his article, "*Selma* and the Place of Fiction in Historical Films," suggests that the first shots also reflect the film's unstable genre, one that Lamont Yeakey notes has historically had trouble landing with audiences and awards; Knapp claims, "This opening to *Selma* announces the complexity not only of the movie itself but also of the genre to which it belongs—the historical film" (91). In this initial scene, we view King practicing his speech for the acceptance of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The film's foregrounding of revision and repetition immediately undermines the notion of King as an inherent genius, gifted a rhetorician though King was. Instead, we witness King's dissatisfaction with his own words, which signals a behind-the-scenes vantage on this historical figure. In keeping with that perspective, Coretta Scott King is present; she aids King in tying his ascot. King frets about the optics of the event, and the juxtaposition of its opulence with

1 Yeakey goes on: "The social conditions of black people in the rural South were horrendous, and life in the black belt counties of Alabama were especially deplorable. Black people made up approximately 47 percent of Alabama's population, but they had no political power. Over 80 percent of the eligible African Americans were not registered voters" (165).

the income equality he strives to promote. His concern establishes several issues: For one, it is in keeping with the revision of his speech; he is revisiting and re-working his thoughts on the issue, and in fact throughout the film, we witness King re-thinking and re-assessing his approaches to situations, including, later in the film, “Turnaround Tuesday,” his decision to reverse direction during a march on the Edmund Pettis bridge. In addition, King’s invocation of what people might think of his participation at such a fancy event underscores his recognition of his own visibility and the significance of the staging of events. This strategic understanding of the pageantry of politics recurs throughout the film. Meanwhile, the film itself quietly, visually asserts the significance of an African American recipient of the Nobel Prize, given the insistently white setting of Norway, where it was received. These opening moments highlight the intimate but deeply politically aware approach the film will take.

The inclusion of Coretta Scott King in this first scene also indicates the important role that women will play in the film, an effect of DuVernay’s reliance on civil sentimentalism. The politics that DuVernay emphasizes take place in kitchens, bedrooms, and living room couches, domestic settings that traditionally function as women’s arenas, as opposed to boardrooms, or more professional public spaces. As a result, Coretta Scott King, Diane Nash, Amelia Boynton, and Mahalia Jackson are featured, giving visibility to the participation of women in the civil rights movement. As Danyelle Greene asserts, “DuVernay gives particular attention to the influence of the strong, intelligent, patient, and powerful black women who were essential figures in the voting rights movement” (212). This move to include the many women activists broadens the range of representation of the civil rights movement. In his article, “Seen and Heard: Negotiating the Black Female Ethos in *Selma*,” David G. Holmes argues that this inclusion is in fact, “the most significant takeaway from *Selma*: Black female lives matter—in terms of physical safety certainly—but also in terms of Black women speaking up, standing up, and moving forward for social justice” (186). This is a profound claim for a film that centrally features King, one of the best-known figures in the United States. Above and beyond the film’s sympathetic portrayal of King, Holmes argues that it is in fact the representation of the broader community that is its most essential feature. Similarly, academic Periel Joseph, writing for *Newsweek*, applauds the fact that, “The notable presence of black female characters [. . .] offers a corrective to popular depictions of the era as a male-led movement” (Joseph). The film thus advances a vision of culturally specific belonging for Black women as civil rights activists.

Given the large number of historical figures who appear in the film, the strength of its actors, assembled by long-standing Hollywood casting agent Aisha Coley, is worth noting. The range is vast and stellar, from major celebrities like media magnate Oprah Winfrey and the musician Common, to several relative newcomers at the time, who have since launched to major roles in the film industry. Civil rights activist Diane Nash, credited by some for the idea of marching from Selma to Montgomery (cf., e.g. Julian Bond, quoted in Lott 346), is played by Tessa Thompson, whose breakout role as the protagonist of *Dear White People* (2014) occurred the same year as *Selma* (2014), and who has gone on to star in independent films such as *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), as well as blockbusters franchises such as *Thor* (2017–2022), *Avengers* (2019), and *Men in Black* (2019). DuVernay includes Diane Nash in scenes throughout the film, as one of an ensemble of political thinkers and activists. Meanwhile, Selma civil rights activist Richie Jean Jackson is played by Niecy Nash (known for her role on the comedy series *Reno 911!*). Selma civil rights activist Amelia Boynton, a major figure in Selma civil rights and president of the local NAACP branch, is played by Lorraine Toussant, who at the time the film was made was enjoying a star turn in the series *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019). Lakeith Stanfield plays a local victim of police violence, Jimmy Lee Jackson, before advancing to a major career, including Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), the protagonist in Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), and an on-going role in Donald Glover's television series *Atlanta* (2016–2022). Because of the talent assembled, the formidable power of the team that King works with is manifestly apparent in the film. DuVernay has stated that she wanted to present King as working with and on behalf of a community (Shatkin). Casting so deep helps reinforce that principle; Oyelowo's star power as King is matched repeatedly by the actors around him.

In keeping with her civil sentimentalism approach, DuVernay stages a scene in a kitchen in order to give authority to civil rights activist Richie Jean Jackson, who hosts the out-of-town activists when they arrive. The setting of the kitchen gives Jackson's character pre-eminence. If the film had decided to stage the arrival of activists in Selma in an auditorium, a setting used in other scenes, it is unlikely that women characters like Jackson would have featured as centrally, and they definitely would not have been in charge of the situation. Instead, to advance the intimate, personal feel of the film, we view the famous activists enjoying Jackson's cooking, while she presides over her kitchen. Martin Luther King sits to eat, while she remains standing, both working but also enjoying visual dominance in the shot.

Coretta Scott King also plays a larger role in the film than adjusting King's ascot. As well as other moments between the married couple, DuVernay includes a scene of a meeting between Scott King and Malcolm X, which occurs while King is in jail in Selma; Scott King then reports back on his newfound openness to King's focus on voting as a strategy for liberation. This explicitly political scene with Scott King changes her role from supportive wife to activist in her own right, arguing with King about the potential value of including Malcolm X in the movement. (In the end, this potential allegiance is foreclosed upon when Malcolm X is assassinated.)

In addition, Mahalia Jackson plays a small but profound role. Her character further represents one of the film's few invocations of star power (Harry Belafonte is also invoked at the very end of the film, and then appears in the reality footage). Feeling particularly besieged, King calls Jackson late at night, waking her from her bedroom where she is asleep beside her husband, to ask her to sing to him. The interruption of Jackson's sleep and the request for a favor indicate the closeness between the two. It is an intimate moment, revealing two celebrities in private, domestic spaces, one in personal need, the other unquestioningly willing to respond. Jackson answers the phone, leaves her husband's bed, and delivers a spiritual for King to assuage the civil rights leader's frayed nerves.

As moments of care and affection like this demonstrate, the film highlights the pleasure of camaraderie that community affords. In contrast to the first scene of the film, with just King and Scott King, DuVernay largely focuses on the group effort that the civil rights movement relied upon. We witness King as one of several activists, casual, joking, uninhibited, enjoying each other. The affective pleasure of coming together plays a crucial role in the success of a political movement, the film suggests. *New York Times* reviewer A. O. Scott notes that "Dr. King worked in the service of the movement, not the other way around, and Mr. Oyelowo's quiet, attentive, reflective presence upholds this democratic principle by illuminating the contributions of those around him" (Scott). Portrayed as a member of an extensive familial community, Martin Luther King and his voting rights campaign, as represented by DuVernay, reflect the concept of civil sentimentalism. The sentimentality of this comradeship features the pleasure and significance of eating together, which DuVernay highlights in Jackson's home. King is portrayed discussing strategies with friends and colleagues, and meeting with the families of those who have joined his movement, not as an individual genius. Repeatedly, we witness King in domestic, intimate

moments: He lies on the couch; writes in bed; shaves in the bathroom; takes out the trash; tucks his children into bed.

To highlight her sentimental approach, DuVernay repeatedly makes aesthetic choices that foreground emotions. One formal choice is her use of close-ups. Historians such as David Garrow in his book *Protest at Selma* (1978) suggest that Dr. King selected Selma as a useful location to stage the voting rights struggle in part because he knew the racist Sherriff and Chief of Police would respond violently to the initiative and not be restrained by racist Governor George Wallace. As such, part of King's strategy was performative: He needed events to occur on a public stage in order to trigger an empathetic reaction from spectators, spectators produced by news coverage. Citizens were hearing about the struggles of the civil rights movement, and the violent reaction they were facing, but to visually witness these assaults provoked an emotional response in viewers.

In her film, DuVernay re-enacts not just the violence met by the protesters in Selma, but also the campaign to orchestrate these interactions. Once again, in doing so, she is able to amplify the sentimental appeal that King was searching for. She can bring the camera in closer to film specific, individual moments. King was reliant upon news coverage, which generally featured a classic long shot, removed from the interactions, seeking to "objectively" represent reality; this camera distance works both to orient the viewer, as well as to deliberately refrain from an emotional response. At the end of her fictional account, DuVernay includes reality footage from the actual Selma campaign, which for the most part employs the standard visual technique of the long shot. DuVernay also stages similar long shots of the police response to protest on the Edmund Pettis bridge. But she further presents images in a much closer range. So, for instance, when a police officer beats an unarmed woman attempting to register to vote, the impact is much stronger and more horrific (especially when that woman is played by Oprah). DuVernay focuses on close-up images of individual citizens, and also tells the story of a particular historical figure, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young man who died in the violence. In doing so, DuVernay personalizes the otherwise potentially faceless losses suffered by the Black community during the civil rights struggle.

In terms of visuals, an aesthetic commonality between the reality footage and DuVernay's film that probably carries more emotional weight in the 21st century occurs in the realm of costume, in that the protestors in their 1960s garb look much more formal than average citizens of 2014 (or 2024). As a result, the image of 1960s citizens in clothing suitable for a nice occasion being

met with brutal violence possibly resonates more powerfully for a 21st-century spectator.

More profoundly, the affective horror generated by staging the camera closer to the violence is reinforced by sound effects. The original reporting on the civil rights march in Selma and its violent attempted suppression featured a voice-over account from a white male reporter explaining the events, a voice-of-god narration common to documentary filmmaking of the time period. By contrast, DuVernay is able to employ the techniques of musical accompaniment, including synchronized sound effects that correspond to the violence, as well as music that underscores the pathos of the moment. Again, this approach allows DuVernay to powerfully amplify the sentimental project that King originally undertook.

To heighten the melodramatic appeal of her film, DuVernay drew upon famous musicians, John Legend and Common, who also played a small role in the film. Their song “Glory” plays over the film’s credits and won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Its sweeping, stirring appeal helps provide a soundtrack for an emotional request for civil liberties like voting and participation on the justice system, including the ability to serve on juries. These are potentially dry liberties, but accompanied by music, their affective force is powerful.

The centrality of music in the film helps situate it in the realm of melodrama, which draws upon music (melos) to make its appeal. The invocation of melodrama, like sentimentalism, is not meant to disparage the quality of this film; in fact, quite the opposite. Film scholar Linda Williams has suggested that almost every Hollywood film could rightfully be labeled a melodrama (42), given their tendency to rely heavily on film scores to orchestrate audience responses. Film melodrama represents a long tradition that has dramatized the struggles of the disenfranchised, like those engaged in the civil rights movement, and makes those struggles legible and sympathetic to those in power. Some critics, like James Baldwin and Lauren Berlant, have bemoaned the sadism of requiring suffering in order to engender compassion, and argued that the rights of citizenship should not be reliant on sympathy (Baldwin; Berlant). Nonetheless, melodrama, in many ways an auditory accompaniment of a sentimental account, has repeatedly been called upon, particularly in the U.S., to serve as a useful avenue to represent quests for legitimacy.

Another formal decision that DuVernay makes to generate emotion is to reorganize the historical timeline. DuVernay substantially revised the original screenplay written by her (white male) screenwriter to create combinations of

historical moments that she preferred. DuVernay took up the film after Lee Daniels decided to direct *The Butler* (2013) instead of *Selma*. At that point, the screenplay was complete. However, significantly, in the time since the screenplay had originally been written and DuVernay taking on the project, access to King's words had shifted; DuVernay and the film were no longer able to use them, because DreamWorks and Warner Brothers had purchased the copyright in anticipation of the possibility of director Steven Spielberg making a film about the civil rights movement (Hornaday). As a result, DuVernay had to write speeches for King that sounded like his speech and cadences, but were not in fact his exact words. And because the original screenwriter had already been credited for the screenplay, DuVernay was not allowed professional acknowledgement by the Academy of Motion Pictures for substantially revising the screenplay.

Despite the lack of recognition, overhauling the screenplay allowed DuVernay to shape the film according to her own vision, including creating a sentimental approach to the material. One of her approaches was to disrupt a linear chronological account. For example, in the opening scenes, as King delivers his speech in 1964 accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the film visually cross-cuts between him and four girls at a Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, who died as a result of a bombing of their church in 1963. Film critic Delphine LeTort, in an article on *Selma*, notes that while King's acceptance speech was more upbeat, DuVernay, writing in his voice, includes a rumination about the lives lost, which anticipates the lethal violence that the Alabama police force will unleash, as well as reflecting the horrible violence on the screen from events that occurred over a year earlier (198). Rather than focusing on the civil rights movements as a "creative battle," in King's original words, DuVernay has King mourning "our lost ones, whose deaths pave our path" (198). In fact, these are the first lines of the film, delivered in a voice-over against a dark screen, setting the tone for the film that follows. LeTort notes that by juxtaposing King's Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the Birmingham bombing, and "[d]isregarding the constraints of chronology [...] DuVernay explicitly chooses [...] drama over historical accuracy, allowing feelings of injustice to interfere with the narrative of *Selma*" (199). DuVernay creates this "interference" to deploy feelings that reinforce and advance the argument that King was making in 1964 about access to voting.

It's worth noting that the issue of voting rights was again very much under siege in 2013, the year the film was being made, as a result of a Supreme Court decision (*Shelby County v. Holder*), which undermined the tenets of the 1965

Voting Rights Act. (And again in 2021 with *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*.) While many were probably outraged by jeopardizing voting access to predominantly voters of color, DuVernay mobilizes emotion in order to demonstrate the injustice, and the resulting pain and suffering, created by this disenfranchisement.

In one of the first scenes of the film, in slow motion, we see the four girls, dressed in Sunday best, descending the stairs, a clearly profoundly sentimental image of piety, innocence, and childhood, posed in a sacred space. Their careful, beautiful costumes reflect the care of the community that seeks to nurture and protect them. After the bomb detonates, the film cuts to an alienating overhead shot of the destruction and we see fragments of this image destroyed, reflecting the lethality of the hostility against the African American community. The rest of the film is viewed through the lens of these “lost ones, whose deaths pave our path,” creating a sentimental, affective poignancy to the campaign, as well as a pervasive layer of fear. DuVernay repeats the phrase “our lost ones” when King speaks at the funeral of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who dies at the hands of police during the Selma campaign.

Narrative reenactments of historical events might be considered always already sentimental recreations, in that most fictional narratives will include a protagonist with whom the audience is meant to identify if not sympathize. But as a result, fictional accounts of events may have more political impact than non-fiction. In the case of *Selma*, the film may further serve the purpose of educating a new generation about the U.S. civil rights movement; in his review of the film, Chicago critic Richard Roeper argued that “Once school is back in session, every junior high school class in America should take a field trip to see this movie” (Roeper).

Over the course of her career as a director, DuVernay has decided when to use a reality-based approach to material and when to fictionalize it; she has created both documentary and fictional films. Her first feature film was a documentary about Los Angeles rap music, and her documentary *13th* (2016), about the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans in the U.S., received extensive visibility for a non-fiction film. Thus, in back-to-back projects, DuVernay used cinema to address major avenues of discrimination facing the African American community: a fictional depiction of historical voting disenfranchisement in *Selma*, and just two years later, a documentary account of the prison industrial complex in *13th*.

DuVernay is strategic about when to use which approach as a director, and her decision to fictionalize real events has had political consequences in the

lived world. For instance, three years after directing *13th*, she wrote and directed the mini-series *When They See Us* (2019), about the case of the Central Park Five, five young men of color wrongfully accused and prosecuted for the rape of a white woman in Central Park in 1989. In 2012, well after the men were released and exonerated, a documentary covered the case, *The Central Park Five*. However, it was not until DuVernay's fictional mini-series seven years later that there were ramifications for the lawyer involved in the case: Linda Fairstein, the prosecuting attorney, lost her publisher, as well as her position on several boards (Storey). Neither the case being overturned in 2002 nor the 2012 documentary had this effect. As Oprah Winfrey commented in an interview about the film *Selma*, "Laws do not legislate people's hearts" (Neumaier). In this instance, hearts lagged more than 15 years behind the law; it took a fictionalized, sentimentalized representation of the case to move public opinion and create this effect in the public sphere. Spectators needed to see the young men of color, spend time with them in close-up, and thereby identify with their plight in order to move against those who had perpetuated injustice.

The civil sentimentalism that DuVernay engages in with *Selma* occurs in terms of both the form and content of the film, as well as some of the activity associated with the film, or "extra-diegetic" material. The actors associated with the film clearly considered it a political undertaking. Created 50 years after the events being depicted, both the violence and the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the film was also made during 2014 protests in Ferguson, MO, in response to police shooting and killing unarmed teenager Michael Brown, as *New York Times* reviewer A. O. Scott noted. *Selma* was released in late December 2014, around the time that a grand jury decided not to indict the New York police officer who murdered unarmed African American Eric Garner, also in the summer of 2014. Many people associated with the film, including director DuVernay, star David Oyelowo, and actor Tessa Thompson, staged a protest at the film's New York premiere to call attention to the miscarriage of justice, wearing black T-shirts that read "I can't breathe," Garner's last words while being choked to death. His phrase became a rallying cry against police brutality, horribly echoed by the murder by asphyxiation of George Floyd six years later in the summer of 2020.

As a result of her explicitly political approach to the film, DuVernay intersects with an activist academic movement identified by film scholar Mark Reid as "Black Lives Consciousness." Reid describes this movement as one that "speaks to the value of black bodies that might be traumatized, and those bodies that are coming into being-ness through intersectional theoretical analysis

and every-day activism” (8). Reid’s movement thus draws upon both academic work as well as social justice movements. DuVernay similarly foregrounds the potential for trauma to the black body, again and again bearing witness to the violence meted against it historically. It stands to reason that the film would also be available to reflect the continued violence against the black body in the contemporary moment, a connection explicitly created by the filmmaker and actors in their demonstration. It is worth noting that black careers were also made vulnerable, by being put on the line in this protest. While their bodies were not damaged, their careers may have been.

New York Times writer Cara Buckley suggested at the time that this public protest may have accounted for the Academy of Motion Picture’s disregard of the film. *Selma* received little recognition from the Academy of Motion Pictures—just two nominations—part of a trend of dismissal of Black cinema made more acute in the 21st century by the renaissance of Black cinematic productivity. Buckley asserted that “The movie’s campaign tactics might have hurt its chances. [. . .] The filmmakers and cast inserted themselves into present-day events by wearing T-shirts that read ‘I Can’t Breathe’ [. . .] This perhaps conveyed the sense, distasteful to some, that they were capitalizing on the politicization of the film” (Buckley). Several claims are notable in this passage, including the characterization of the protest staged in response to a Black citizen’s state-sponsored murder as “campaign tactics” for the film itself. Film campaign tactics typically involve studios putting up posters and taking out For Your Consideration ads, as Buckley well knows, not organic protests taken up by actors, which would likely, as any activist would surely recognize, be met by disapproval. It also is notable to suggest that the filmmaker and cast were “capitalizing” on the violence that they were protesting against, rather than drawing a clear continuum from the race-based violence depicted in the film to contemporary violence. The film itself is political, making its “politicization” moot. In keeping with Mark Reid’s Black Lives Consciousness, one might argue that to make a film about police violence against unarmed protesters in the civil rights era and NOT weigh in on contemporary violence against unarmed Black citizens would undermine the political validity of the film. Rather than preserving a fantasy of cinema as removed from politics, DuVernay and her cast use civil sentimentalism to situate their film in an on-going public outcry against police brutality. In doing so, DuVernay, probably knowingly, undermined her own career.

Because by contrast, in an interview with DuVernay just weeks before the film was released, *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis noted that “Os-

car talk was building” about the film and stated that DuVernay had a shot to become the second woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director (Dargis). In fact, DuVernay did not even receive a nomination. Instead, that year’s Academy Awards granted two nominations to this major film about a famous U.S. figure: Best Original Song, which it won; and Best Picture. No Best Actor, no Best Director, which no Black Director has ever won (only three had been nominated at the time; by 2024, six had been nominated). No Best Supporting Actor, no Best Supporting Actress, no Best Cinematographer, which no African American Cinematographer has ever won (and only one has ever been nominated for—the same cinematographer for *Selma*, Bradford Young, the following year, for *Arrival* [2016]). The film received no acknowledgment in any of these ways. Instead, all the nominees for all of those categories were exclusively white. This exclusion resulted in the first use of the online protest using the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, which gained more energy the following year (2016), when the Academy once again put forward almost exclusively white nominees. The film that did win Best Picture in 2015 was part of the Academy’s blurring of the lines of Best Foreign Film and Best Picture, Alejandro Iñárritu’s *Birdman*. While considering *Selma*’s relationship to the Oscars, it should be noted that it is a big film: a costume drama about a major historical U.S. figure, a nationally valorized martyr (at least after his assassination), that included a large cast and featured a number of celebrities. These are the kinds of films that the Academy has historically rewarded. But not in this instance.

Historian Lamont Yeakey has noted the difficulty that fictional films based on historical reality have traditionally had to navigate.

[N]ondocumentary cinematic films devoted to actual historical civil rights events have not had a strong ‘track record’ either among film critics, Academy judges, or the box office in comparison to fictional, nonspecific historical subjects that may either tangentially or directly deal with personal or collective civil rights issues no matter how weak or powerful in the telling these contrived stories may be. (Yeakey 161)

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd provides an example of that prejudice against non-documentary films (and more!) in her response to *Selma*, criticizing the film, as many did, for its depiction of President Johnson as being opposed to the civil rights movement. Dowd complained about DuVernay’s response to that criticism when DuVernay noted that she was making a fictional film, not a documentary. “Filmmakers love to talk about their artistic license to

distort the truth, even as they bank on the authenticity of their films to boost them at awards season,” Dowd claimed (Dowd). In response to the claim that the film downplayed the role of President Johnson in the Voting Rights Act, David Holmes responds that,

The obsessive attention afforded Johnson's role in the Selma campaign may indict this society with the material critique that white masculinity, ethos, and voice appear to matter more than Black femininity, character, and perspective, even when African American women are central subjects within the narrative. (Holmes 186)

As Holmes notes, it is revealing that DuVernay's depiction of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement led so many critics to rush to protect the legacy of the White president.

In addition, Dowd seems to be charging DuVernay with banking on authenticity (which DuVernay had explicitly dismissed) in an effort to garner just two Academy Awards nominations, since Dowd's column appeared shortly after the 2015 nominations were announced. Apparently even that limited recognition was too much for Dowd.

By contrast, David Carr, also writing for the *New York Times*, who covered the Academy Awards for many years, believes that the Academy's oversight was significant and unfortunate. Carr, invoking the principles of Black Lives Consciousness, notes that “The news continues to be full of all manner of pathology and victimization involving black Americans, and when a moment comes to celebrate both a historical giant and a pure creative achievement, it merits significant and broad recognition” (Carr). Carr also notes, “By contrast, *American Sniper*, a portrait of American greatness directed by Clint Eastwood that drew mixed reviews, received six” Academy Award nominations (Carr). Carr ends his lamentation about the Oscars oversight, however, with a note of triumph, by heralding DuVernay's success: “While the snubs may sting and point toward a broader blindness, it's still more important in the long run that a young female black director received the backing of a Hollywood studio and made an important film” (Carr).

DuVernay's most recent endeavors have been directing a big-budget adaptation of a best-selling children's book, *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) and helming the series *Queen Sugar* (2016–2022)—less explicitly political fare, although both feature African American female leads. Ultimately, with *Selma*, DuVernay has demonstrated how to amplify the civil rights movement's sentimental ac-

tivism through sentimental and melodramatic filmmaking. Historian Yeakey argues that “King’s tactic was to stress love and employ nonviolent direct action, which he believed were powerfully effective instruments in building a sympathetic following throughout the nation among white and black people” (167), and in her film-making practices, DuVernay has similarly taken up these instruments. Her resulting film and achievement stand as an example to all politically-minded directors.

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“The only thing that matters to her”¹

Artificial Intelligence and the Sentimentalization of Motherhood in *M3GAN* (2022)

Charleena Schweda

Introduction

M3GAN is a promise to be *all that*: an A.I. that is designed to be a child’s favorite toy and their best friend, blending the roles of older sister, babysitter, and substitute parent. The 2022 science fiction horror film of the same name introduces a variety of robotic and technical innovations, all of which are designed to replace a member of a typical household. *M3GAN* is the most outstanding of these creations: a prototype for an artificial intelligence molded into the form of a doll-like girl who is supposed to comfort, entertain, educate, and take care of the child who is her ‘primary user.’ Her sole function, her programmed mission, is to become the ideal caregiver. As such, she may become, as her creator and the protagonist of the film, Gemma, advertises the product, “more than just a toy, she’s part of the family” (*M3GAN*, 00:29:18–00:29:21).

Along these lines, Gemma, who leads a team of technological innovators, makes a pivotal decision: She brings *M3GAN*, one of their projects that is not yet on the market, home and puts her to the test as a caregiver for her recently orphaned and estranged niece Cady, now under Gemma’s care. Initially, *M3GAN* is introduced as an ideal caregiver—though this is implicitly problematized from the beginning: While Gemma advertises *M3GAN*’s skills, the film cuts between different scenes in Gemma’s household, in which *M3GAN* reads to Cady, educates her, and generally cares for her. Though primarily humorous in tone, the sequence also foreshadows the negotiations of the maternal that are about to ensue. After a variety of scenes highlighting the

1 *M3GAN* 2023, 01:08:23–01:08:25.

intimate bond that develops between Cady and M3GAN, the film cuts from M3GAN bringing a smiling Cady to bed to Gemma sitting alone on her couch and opening her laptop. At the same time, Gemma ends her speech by saying that M3GAN will “take care of the little things, so you can spend more time doing the things that matter” (*M3GAN*, 00:29:09–00:29:13), implying that Gemma prioritizes her career over motherhood. Throughout the film, M3GAN’s emotional bond with Cady grows rapidly. Ultimately and in accordance with the ambiguousness of M3GAN’s initial introduction, it is her programmed mission to protect Cady which marks her as the antagonist of the film, as it causes her to harm numerous characters and establishes her as an obstacle to Gemma and Cady’s relationship. In the framework of the horror plot, the film negotiates such notions of good and bad motherhood, constantly comparing M3GAN and Gemma in their roles as surrogate mothers. Thereby it explores the maternal as a complex concept and sentimentalizes a specific notion of motherhood, portraying the mother-child-relationship as an ur-sentimental relationship—indeed, as the mother figures in the film claim at several points, as the only relationship that matters (cf. e.g. *M3GAN*, 01:10:33–01:10:37).

Thus, *M3GAN* is more than a horror film about a killer A.I. First, it is a commentary on both killer doll films—a trend in horror films, majorly impacted by the producer and co-storywriter James Wan²—and A.I., using a humorous tone even during its most explicit depictions of violence. Somewhere between horror comedy and parody, the film is frequently understood as a satire of artificial intelligence as the source for emotional intimacy. For example, in his review for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw claims that there are “some adroit satirical touches about dolls as toxic aspirational templates, dolls as parodies of intimacy and sensitivity and tech itself as sinister child-pacification” (Bradshaw) in the film. In *Variety*, Owen Gleiberman argues that the film satirizes the belief in “artificial intelligence as an actual form of interaction” (Gleiberman).

This chapter aims to go a step further, focusing not solely on the intimacy between M3GAN and Cady, but more generally on the way motherhood, the mother-daughter-relationship, and childcare are discussed through a variety of (female) characters and negotiated in a rather sentimental mode. To quote

2 In an interview, Wan makes the tongue-in-cheek claim: “I get accused of being the master of killer doll movies. In those doll films, my dolls don’t actually get up and kill anyone. They’re usually just vessels for demonic entities. And so I said, ‘Well, if people are gonna think of me as a killer doll filmmaker, let’s actually do one.’ And hence, the concept of *M3GAN* was born” (“A New Vision of Horror,” 00:00:33–00:00:53).

the director Gerard Johnstone: "To me, I never really saw *M3GAN* as a killer doll movie. I saw it as a morality tale of our times about parenting in the 21st century" ("A New Vision of Horror," 00:01:38–00:01:46). In *M3GAN*, intimacy exists solely in terms of childcare, and childcare—and "parenting" in general—is marked as female. Indeed, nearly every female adult is coded as parental. This chapter explores the film as a maternal horror film, as a complex negotiation of good and bad motherhood. It discusses how the film constructs the maternal as a social role and as a normative requirement as well as an intrinsic emotional need, which all adult female characters have and which positions all of them as maternal figures—thereby paying attention to the film's near-paradoxical yet interdependent combination of satirical and sentimental techniques and tropes. While the film satirizes certain sentimental images such as *M3GAN*'s doll-like appearance and her position as "part of the family," it also sentimentalizes the (surrogate) mother-child-relationship between Gemma and Cady and, subsequently, motherhood as a core value.

Women and Mothers in Horror Films

In order to understand the function of both motherhood and the mother figure(s) in *M3GAN*, it is crucial to situate the film in the tradition of maternal horror films in Western cinema.³ Perhaps most fundamental to this is the differentiation between woman and mother. In certain cases, the mother (as a specific individual character) and the maternal (as an abstract concept) may simply appear as actualizations of a woman as mother, ergo they may represent a particular variation of a woman. However, in most of the cases—including *M3GAN*—the mother is not just a subcategory of woman. Rather, she appears as a separate concept in her own right, though mother and woman share common features and ideological influences. Both mother and woman are already unstable categories in horror films to begin with, not least due to horror's tendency to cross (gender) boundaries and its grotesque formulations of the female reproductive potential.⁴

3 The term 'maternal horror films' goes back to Sarah Arnold's book *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013).

4 For more on the instability and ambiguousness of women/mothers in horror, see e.g. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) and *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Amanda Howell

The major reason for differentiating between mothers and non-maternal women in horror lies in the motivation for their actions. Although there are exceptions to this, as a rule, female characters in horror films are positioned on a scale of victim to villain. As villains, e.g. as killers or monsters, they blur the lines between these supposedly separate categories most frequently. For example, Carol J. Clover famously uses Stephen King's *Carrie* from the novel and film adaptations of the same name as an example for this. Clover refers to *Carrie* as a "female victim-hero (the hero part always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity)" and argues that she takes up the positions of victim, monster, and hero in turn throughout the film (Clover 4).

In maternal horror films, mothers can also cross these boundaries, but they do so in other ways, when they take up an entirely different and isolated position. Sarah Arnold argues that "the mother is less frequently subject to the same degree of abuse [from which the typical female victim of classical horror, slashers, rape-revenge films, or monster films suffers; and in] a sense, she does not function in the same way as woman/victim within the narrative" (Arnold 27). Particularly in regard to the "self-sacrificing mother," she further explains:

[H]er suffering is not directly the consequence of the antagonist. Rather her suffering is a result of her desire to protect the child/ren, who are instead pursued by the antagonist. Her goal is not self-preservation but the preservation of her children. Indeed, she may die to achieve this goal. Her death, in contrast to that of the female (non-maternal) victim, is not constructed as a defeat of the monster over the victim; instead it is linked to successful self-sacrifice. Thus, while masochism may be the organising principle of the representation of women and mothers in horror, the nature and origins of this masochism differ. The masochistic representation of the mother in horror is more akin to that of melodrama. (Arnold 28)

Hence, because the motivation for their actions lies in protecting their children, sacrificing themselves if necessary, mothers in horror have a fundamentally sentimentalized function; they operate in the context of family relations and love, thereby representing sentimentally coded core values like motherhood and the family.

Within the separate category of mothers in horror, two dimensions of the mother and the maternal typically emerge: first, the female body as maternal

and Lucy Baker's *Monstrous Possibilities: The Female Monster in 21st Century Screen Horror* (2022), and Erin Harrington's *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (2018).

and second, the mother as a socio-cultural role. Either angle is usually ideologically motivated and regularly coexists with the other, although the second one typically appears in a sentimental context. In scholarship, they lend themselves particularly well to psychoanalytic readings—most prominently but by far not only to Freudian and Lacanian theories on the (early) mother-child-relationship, Freud's concept of the uncanny,⁵ and Kristeva's theory of abjection.⁶

Regarding the first angle, the female body and its reproductive capabilities—the biological site of motherhood—are frequently depicted and read as a sight for horror. During the last few decades, a varied terminology has developed to describe this theme. For example, Erin Harrington coins the term "gynaehorror," defining it as an umbrella term for horror films that "deal [. . .] with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause" (Harrington 3). Biological motherhood in its different articulations—in particular pregnancy and childbirth—marks the climax of the reproductive potential of the female body. Hence, numerous films utilize it as inspiration for grotesque and horrific visualizations.

In *M3GAN*, these themes are remarkably absent. In fact, nearly all maternal figures are surrogate mothers and the female body remains a blank space, as there are no portrayals of or allusions to the female body in terms of its reproductive potential—i.e. no (grotesquely twisted) depictions of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, or even implicit references to these themes. The film ap-

5 Freud defines 'the uncanny' as the space in-between the familiar and the unfamiliar, as something that appears unfamiliar but inherits the familiar as well, hence becoming frightening: It is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 220). "[T]he uncanny [unheimlich] is something which is secretly familiar [heimlich-heimisch], which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud 245). In the case of *M3GAN*, the uncanniness exceeds the themes of maternity. *M3GAN* herself has a remarkably uncanny appearance, looking partially like an old-fashioned, hyper-feminine doll, partially like a modern technological innovation, and partially human. As Adrien Morot, the supervising puppeteer of the film, explains: "Gerard [the director] was really adamant about having something that would be this uncanny valley between sort of toy, sort of a real person" ("Bringing Life to *M3GAN*," 00:00:16–00:00:25). Accordingly, *M3GAN* is sometimes played by child actress Amie Donald, sometimes by a puppet, controlled by a team of puppeteers.

6 Related to the uncanny as something that blurs borders and points back to origins, Kristeva defines the abject as the in-between "place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). It is what appears as unclean, improper, taboo, and repulsive about woman.

proaches the concept of the mother in its social dimension, rather than focusing on the maternal body. Thereby it negotiates both the relationship between the mother and the child and the way other characters perceive and judge their relationship in accordance to social norms. Motherhood as a social role and normative requirement is sentimentalized and functions both within the microcosm of the nuclear family and the macrocosm of the society.

The Good Mother and the Bad Mother

Generally speaking, all societies have concepts of good and bad motherhood. In U.S. American culture, motherhood is a core value and a primary institution, heavily sentimentally coded. Ann C. Hall and Mardia J. Bishop claim that

Americans want a 'mom' definition of motherhood—a nurturing, accepting, easy definition. Mothers, moreover, are the reservoir of American expectations, so it is no wonder that when Americans say 'mother,' there are a host of images and expectations associated with the term. For mothers in American culture, the deluge is overwhelming. (Hall/Bishop x)

Bishop and Hall argue that, as a response to the desire for a simple definition, pop cultural representations are often very particular in their manifestations of mothers. They especially highlight the opposing concepts of the “supermom” as the “cultural ideal” and “the bad mom” as “the postmodern equivalent of a scarlet letter” (Hall/Bishop ix). Similar approaches to the dichotomy between good and bad motherhood appear in a variety of scholarly texts, including texts about motherhood in films like maternal melodramas, maternal horror films, and women's film.⁷ E. Ann Kaplan defines these categories of the Good Mother and Bad Mother as follows:

1. The Good Mother, who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating—the ‘Angel of the House’. Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative.
2. The Bad Mother or Witch—the underside of the first myth. Sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own

7 For a more detailed exploration of this, see Arnold.

life. Because of her 'evil' behavior, this mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal, the Good Mother. (Kaplan 468)

In a similar manner, Katherine N. Kinnick discusses "media morality tales," explaining that "[b]oth entertainment and news media narratives frequently cast motherhood in moral terms, contrasting the 'good' mother with the 'bad' mother, and thus both prescribing and proscribing norms for maternal behavior" (Kinnick 9). Accordingly, a "moral hierarchy for mothers" (ibid.) has developed, with the manifold expressions of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother at its focus. She defines those as follows:

The good mother, the noble mother-saint, makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrificing her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity. The bad mother [...] is depicted as self-centered, neglectful, preoccupied with career, or lacking in traditional femininity. (Kinnick 9)

In horror films, these ideas of good/bad motherhood lead back to the already mentioned concept of maternal self-sacrifice, as explored by Sarah Arnold, who examines this trope in maternal horror films. She claims that "patriarchy may be secured through the figure of the mother who continues to fulfil all the psychosocial and ideological conditions of idealised motherhood (self-sacrifice and nurturing)" (Arnold 29).

A specific case, which may serve as a prominent and influential example of the tradition of maternity in horror films and helps to cross the bridge from physical to social motherhood, is the *Alien* franchise (1979–). Like *M3GAN*, the films belong to the genre of science fiction horror films about motherhood, but unlike *M3GAN*, the bodily aspects of motherhood become a playground for body horror. Childbirth and pregnancy take on a grotesquely deadly spin, as the aliens orally impregnate humans, who then 'give birth' as the new-born aliens violently break through their ribcages. While the films also contain a multitude of phallic images, it is commonly used as a prime example for representing maternity in horror films. In her discussion of the "faces" of the "monstrous-feminine"—a term coined by her to underline the unique position of the woman as monster—, Barbara Creed uses *Alien* (1979), the first film of the

franchise, to exemplify the “archaic mother.”⁸ She points out the large variety of maternal themes and tropes in the films. Besides the depiction of fertilization and ‘birth’ as violations, these include the setting—large spaces and corridors that resemble the womb—, the naming of the computer system as ‘mother,’ and—this is where the relevance for *M3GAN* comes into play—the manifold portrayals of the protagonist, Ellen Ripley, as mothering (cf. Creed 1993, 16–20, 23–24). Further discussing *Aliens* (1986), the second instalment of the series—the one which focuses the most on the nurturing, non-biological side of motherhood—Creed explains: “Throughout, *Aliens* opposes two forms of mothering: Ripley’s surrogate mothering in which there is no conception or birth and where the female body is unmarked; and Mother Alien’s biological, animalistic, instinctual mothering where the maternal body is open and gaping” (Creed 1993, 51).

The former form of mothering resembles the majority of mother figures in *M3GAN*. The *Alien* films pose an interesting example in this context, as Ripley is shown in a variety of mothering roles. In the second film of the franchise, she becomes the surrogate mother for a human child, thus serving as an example for the self-sacrificing, nurturing mother. “I’m not gonna leave you, Newt. I mean that. That’s a promise” (*Aliens*, 01:19:56–01:20:03), she tells the little girl she had met shortly before, after cradling her to her chest and tucking her into bed in the same scene. True to her word, throughout the film she risks her life for her several times. In the fourth film (*Alien Resurrection*, 1997), Ripley is the biological mother to a human-alien-hybrid, whom she ultimately kills. Additionally, Ripley is also—and this is barely discussed in the franchise—the biological mother to a human daughter she has left on Earth, serving as a reminder of Ripley’s role as an absent mother. Despite appearing as a Bad Mother to her only biological human child, Ripley is still much more frequently portrayed as a Good Mother than as a Bad Mother.

Both the *Alien* franchise and *M3GAN* present a variety of mother-child relationships, with one central figure functioning as the point of departure for all these relationships. In the *Alien* films, this point of departure is Ripley, the mother figure. Meanwhile in *M3GAN*, it is not the figure of the mother but the figure of the child who is positioned in the center of this multitude of mother-

8 According to Creed (1993, 7), the “archaic mother” is one of five “faces” of the monstrous-feminine. Alongside the “monstrous womb” it is one of two that explicitly articulate the maternal as monstrous.

daughter relationships. As already briefly mentioned, *M3GAN* takes up a relatively unconventional position in the tradition of maternal horror films: The film completely dismisses the bodily experiences of motherhood. The only exception is Cady's biological mother, who is quickly erased from the narrative when she dies in the second scene (although the idea of her remains, as Cady expresses her longing for her multiple times). The setting is no reminder of the female reproductive system, nor is the portrayal of the maternal in the film reliant on its bodily aspects in any other way. In fact, the female body is—adapting the words of Creed—literally “unmarked.”

Nonetheless, there is no shortage of maternal themes and especially maternal figures. Numerous female characters attempt to parent Cady: *M3GAN*, Gemma, Gemma's co-worker Tess, Cady's therapist. Essentially, the film follows Gemma's development from Bad Mother as a stereotypical 'career woman' (unmarried and living alone, with no children, in a highly demanding and intellectually challenging job) to Good Mother (loving and caring), as she shifts her priorities from succeeding at her job to protecting Cady while an entourage of female characters urges her to do so. This development highly sentimentalizes the Good Mother, while simultaneously criticizing any notion of Bad Motherhood.

M3GAN explores the concept of nurturing and the social dimensions of motherhood rather than its bodily aspects. It challenges but ultimately reinforces patriarchal ideologies of good motherhood as a core American value. Somewhat paradoxically, in a world in which paternal figures are strikingly absent, patriarchal concepts are ever-present and, at least to some degree, reinforced throughout the film. In Arnold's formulation, *M3GAN* seems to present a prime example of securing patriarchy through the figure of the idealized self-sacrificing and nurturing mother (Arnold 29).

The *Alien* films ask conceptual questions about motherhood which *M3GAN* also picks up, in particular the dichotomy of Good/Bad Mother collapsed onto one figure. Arnold refers to this as common for manifestations of the Good/Bad Mother in films; although she also argues that “there are variations in the degree of complicity or resistance to these constructions within the texts themselves” (Arnold 26):

The polarisation of Good/Bad Mother corresponds to the sacrificing/selfish trope. Often in film the good and bad mother binaries are collapsed on to the one figure; the selfish mother may 'correct' her behaviour and ultimately

give up her own desire for the child, or the mother may struggle between both positions. (Arnold 23)

Like Gemma, Ripley is ultimately marked as a 'career woman'; both are, so the films imply (although sparsely in the *Alien* films), 'selfishly absent' mothers: Ripley leaves her daughter on Earth to work on a spaceship and, in the first half of *M3GAN*, Gemma again and again chooses her job over care work. According to Kinnick—amongst others—"working moms" are variations of the Bad Mother as portrayed in media narratives (cf. Kinnick 3; see also Faludi). She explains that "[m]edia morality tales frequently suggest dire outcomes for women who decide to climb the corporate ladder rather than focus on marriage and motherhood," i.e. "in this formula, career success means negative impact on family and romance" (Kinnick 7).⁹

While the *Alien* films discuss a variety of maternal concepts, in *M3GAN*, this particular concept is at the metaphorical heart of the text. Hence, in this regard *M3GAN* goes a step further, adding a comparative dimension to the evaluation of Good/Bad Motherhood.

The Better Mother and the Worse Mother

M3GAN depicts Gemma's character development from Bad Mother to Good Mother, but it also shows *M3GAN* as Good Mother, as Bad Mother, as Better Mother than Gemma, and ultimately as Worse Mother than Gemma. The third and fourth dispositions reference the rivalry between *M3GAN* and Gemma. Therefore, the Good and Bad Mother binaries are indeed, in the words of Sarah Arnold, "collapsed on to the one figure" (23): *M3GAN* and Gemma are each representations of Good *and* Bad motherhood. Additionally, through the rivalry between them, they also represent good or bad motherhood in comparison to the other—adding to it the dimension of Better Mother and, subsequently, Worse Mother.

This rivalry and the four phases of appropriate motherhood—Good Mother, Bad Mother, Better/Worse Mother—form the base of the film. The film barely questions whether an artificial intelligence can form an intimate mother-child-relationship or whether it is a 'true' emotional bond; its

9 In the context of *M3GAN* (and, indeed, also in the *Alien* franchise), paternal figures as well as themes like romance and marriage are strikingly absent.

ideological work is not to challenge the *authenticity* of M3GAN and Cady's relationship. Instead, it rather asks whether an artificial intelligence *should* form an intimate mother-child-relationship. Consequently, it asks whether an artificial intelligence—and thus, an artificial *mother*—should be allowed into the domestic space of the home, whether it should be allowed to replace what the film portrays as *the* most relevant function in a woman's life. Thereby it questions the morality behind Gemma's decision to prioritize her job, to be—in terms of the aforementioned juxtaposition of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother—an absent, selfish mother, while an A.I. takes on the role of the nurturing, self-sacrificing mother.¹⁰ Ultimately, it investigates the moral 'righteousness' of allowing M3GAN to become "more than just a toy, [...] a part of the family" (M3GAN, 00:29:18–00:29:21).

Gemma's positioning on the scale of good/bad motherhood begins before she even appears on the screen. The opening scene shows a kitschy advertisement of one of her robotic inventions: the PurRpetual PETZ, furby-esque plushies, which are supposed to replace pets.¹¹ It displays an exaggeratedly harmonic nuclear family centered on a young girl,¹² before the scene cuts to a disharmonic display of Cady's nuclear family in a car: Her parents are fighting, while Cady plays with a PurRpetual PET in the backseat. The switch in tone and coloring—the spot is brightly colored and well lit, the scene in the car is dark and the colors appear muted—does not only set the satirical tone of the film but also introduces the theme of non-compliance between the idealized vision of the technical inventions and reality. Indeed, the fight between the parents ensued after Cady's mother questioned the appropriateness of Gemma giving the toy to their daughter as a present, so in a way, Gemma is

10 In fact, as an artificial intelligence with the sole programmed mission to take care of a child, M3GAN becomes—so it seems in the beginning—the perfect ideal of the Good Mother: She does not have a Self, aside from her motherhood.

11 The spot shows a young girl playing with and then mourning the death of her dog, until she gets one of the PurRpetual PETZ, being happy again. In the background, a female voice sings, telling us that "PurRpetual PETZ are a dream come true because now you have a friend that lives longer than you do" (M3GAN, 00:01:12–00:01:19).

12 Interestingly, only in the utopian world of this advertisement, we see a man appearing as a paternal figure and the mother is absent. On the other hand, his solution to his daughter's grief over her pet is to buy her a robotic pet; while this is not directly evaluated as negative, in terms of the film's overall negative assessment of technology replacing human intimacy as well as the clearly satirical dimension of the advertisement, the man's approach to childcare appears rather negative.

already positioned as a Bad Mother. At the end of the scene, the nuclear family is destroyed: Cady's parents die in a car accident and Cady has to live with Gemma.

Initially, the film strengthens this subtle positioning of Gemma as an 'inappropriate' mother, as someone who chooses her career over caretaking. A particularly illustrative example of this is the scene, in which Cady and Gemma bring M3GAN home with them: It shows M3GAN assisting Cady in various ways—humorous elements included—with the sound of Gemma reading an advertising text about M3GAN in the background. Towards the end of her speech, Gemma claims: "With M3GAN around, she'll take care of the little things so you can spend more time doing the things that matter" (M3GAN, 00:29:08–00:29:13). During the first part of the sentence ("she'll take care of the little things"), the scene shows M3GAN tucking a smiling Cady into bed, during the second part ("so you can spend more time doing the things that matter"¹³), Gemma sits down on her couch, opens up her laptop, and turns on the TV. The scene positions Gemma as the Bad Mother, the working mother who would rather spend time by herself, and M3GAN as the sort of idealized stay-at-home mother, even watching over Cady after she goes to bed. Gemma's speech underlines this disposition, clarifying that she values her work and free time ("the things that matter") more than Cady ("the little things"). The scene cuts to Gemma in her workspace, after she just read the speech to her colleagues. It is only her female colleague, Tess, who raises moral concerns about their creation:

Well, why would you want M3GAN to do all that stuff? [...] Okay, well, does any of that bother you? I thought we were creating a tool to help support parents, not replace them. I mean if you're having M3GAN tuck Cady in and read her a bedtime story, then when are you ever spending time with her or even talking with her? (M3GAN, 00:29:35–00:29:54)

The discussion ends as Tess refers to Cady as Gemma's child, which Gemma negates, earning her a disapproving look from Tess (cf. M3GAN, 00:29:54–00:30:07). Gemma's overt rejection of motherhood is, perhaps, the strongest marker of her as a Bad Mother, particularly because she appears to be the only female character who expresses her beliefs in not prioritizing her caregiving

13 Formulations along the line of "things that really matter" re-appear throughout the film, posing as the primary concept questioned by the text.

role. Besides Tess—who, by all logic, should *not* be telling her colleague that their mutual creation is less important than her child but repeatedly does so when her own job is in danger—, another character stands out in the crowd of maternal figures: Cady's therapist. Critical of M3GAN, she tells Gemma:

When a child loses a parent, they look to form attachments with the next person that comes into their life. The person that's gonna provide love and support and serve as a behavioral model. Which, in an ordinary situation, would be you, right? But you've created a toy that's so real, it's possible that Cady might not see her as a toy but as a primary caregiver. [...] As remarkable as she [M3GAN] is, and... and she is remarkable... you could be building emotional connections with this doll that are too hard to untangle. (M3GAN, 00:45:57–00:46:40)

Although her reasoning is pseudo-medical, while Tess's is emotional, they raise the same concern: M3GAN having a stronger, more intimate bond with Cady than Gemma and Cady have. The "primary caregiver"—coded as female and maternal in the film—is the mother. As such, M3GAN—being created as the idealized version of the Good Mother, as nurturing, selfless, and self-sacrificing, with the child as the center of her 'life'—is painted as a threat to the human mother. Without a rival, Gemma might succeed in being a Good Mother, but how can she possibly do so in comparison with a machine designed to nurture, designed to be the Better Mother? With motherhood being depicted as the only form of intimacy within the film (strikingly for an American horror film, there is no love story whatsoever), artificial intelligence poses a threat to interhuman intimacy.

The film arranges Gemma and M3GAN's rivalry over being Cady's Better Mother in its visual iconography. The development of their relationships is visualized through several triangular constellations between Cady, Gemma, and M3GAN. During M3GAN and Cady's first meeting (figure 1), Gemma makes them touch hands so that M3GAN recognizes Cady as her primary user. In the scene, Gemma is positioned between the two, over their conjoined hands; later, she steps in the background, watching them. Gemma appears as the mediator, and, while selfish in her priorities, she does believe in M3GAN's abilities to help Cady. At first, the camera angle still shows Gemma in between Cady and M3GAN, though she is distanced from them. M3GAN's idealization is not yet challenged, she does not yet—in this case literally—come between Gemma

and Cady. Yet later in the scene, Cady and M3GAN move away from Gemma, breaking up the triangle and hence mirroring the development of the plot.

Figure 1: Gemma (middle) introduces Cady (right) to M3GAN.



Film Still from *M3GAN*, 00:24:00.

Figure 2: Conversation in Cady's bedroom.



Film Still from *M3GAN*, 00:37:05.

Visually, said development is presented through multiple repetitions of this arrangement. The film reproduces the triangle-shaped constellation of M3GAN, Gemma, and Cady, shifting the middle position from Gemma (as the mediator) to M3GAN (as the obstacle). In figure 2, M3GAN is situated in between Gemma and Cady, although only in the background. Gemma and Cady are talking, while M3GAN only engages in the conversation when asked a question. Although her behavior is more subdued than in later scenes, the light from the window already puts a spotlight-like focus on her, thus illuminating her placement in the middle of them. While this triad is mirrored in further scenes, on the plot level M3GAN slowly becomes an active obstacle to Gemma and Cady's relationship, causing fights and disagreements—similar to the way Gemma's older creations, the PurRpetual PETZ, caused disharmony in Cady's initial nuclear family.

The Best Mother and the Worst Mother

Ultimately, it is perhaps neither M3GAN's murderous activities nor her production of disharmony within the family that motivates her destruction.¹⁴ Rather, it appears to be M3GAN's failure at being the Better Mother.

Both the framing horror plot and the motherhood subplot lead to a final showdown between Gemma and M3GAN, in which they are fighting for their 'lives' as well as their position as Cady's mother. Throughout their fight—first verbal, then physical—the implicit rivalry between M3GAN and Gemma turns explicit. Ergo, M3GAN tells Gemma:

Being a parent was never in the cards for *you*. *You're* a beautiful, creative, strong, ambitious young woman. *Your* first love is always gonna be *your* career, and *you* shouldn't have to feel guilty about that. Let me focus on Cady so that *you* can focus on the things that matter most to *you*. (M3GAN, 01:21:14–01:21:31, italics by author)

M3GAN's speech guides the audience back to the beginning of the film. In summarizing Gemma's introductory characterization, M3GAN mirrors Gemma's

14 Yet, as is common in horror films, a part of the horror—in this case: M3GAN—prevails. Therefore, after the destruction of M3GAN's robotic body, it appears as if she transferred her code to another system, leaving an opening for a sequel.

own speech, situating Cady as an obstacle to “focus[ing] on the things that matter most to [her].” However, her slight change in phrasing, using the personal you (“*you* can focus on the things that matter most to *you*”; italics by author) instead of the generic you Gemma used in the beginning (“*you* can spend more time doing the things that matter”; italics by author), as well as the repetition of the pronoun, turns the question of priorities from a more general one into an individual dilemma. As the only maternal figure who faces this problem within the film, Gemma is not just a Bad Mother but the Worst Mother.

What M3GAN fails to understand is Gemma’s character development throughout the film. Gemma is no longer the Bad Mother from the beginning; her priorities have shifted from her career to surrogate motherhood. In fact, the turning point is a short sequence of scenes that is, perhaps, the most sentimentally staged portrayal of motherhood in the entire film. Gemma is in a public foyer in her workplace, watching Cady on a big screen. In this moment, Gemma appears as part of the public sphere, not the domestic sphere, as she is distanced from Cady and cannot directly interact with her.¹⁵ The film cuts between Cady’s emotional speech about missing her dead parents and needing M3GAN as a substitute mother to pictures of Cady and her parents as well as Cady, Gemma, and M3GAN. At this point, the two sets of parental figures are either unavailable to Cady (her parents) or have so far not proven to be suitable to be a Good (surrogate) Mother. This sentimentalized portrayal of Good Motherhood greatly impacts Gemma and causes her to fully take on the role of the Good Mother, making Cady her priority. Accordingly, she leaves her workplace shortly before the beginning of one of the most important events of her career to drive home and look after Cady. Insofar, the question of priorities, with which M3GAN disregards Gemma as a surrogate mother, can no longer be used against her.

Neither can the explicitness of M3GAN and Gemma’s rivalry, as Gemma addresses it in response to Cady’s speech about her need for M3GAN. Cady explains: “I think what I love most about M3GAN is that, when she looks at me, it’s like. . . I’m the only thing that matters to her. Kind of the way Mom used to” (M3GAN, 01:08:16–01:08:27). M3GAN’s programmed mission, though artificial, is again equated with an idealized motherly instinct. Though not chronologically ordered—the showdown between M3GAN and Gemma happens afterwards—the question of priorities reaches its climax in Cady’s articulation

15 At this point, Gemma appears to be as distanced from Cady as the adult male characters, who only ever watch Cady and never interact with her.

of these words: being phrased as "the things that matter" by Gemma in the beginning, as "the things that matter *most*" (italics by author) by M3GAN later on, and here as "the *only* thing that matters" (italics by author). Gemma has the final word in this, as she tells Cady: "You are *all that matters* to me now" (M3GAN, 01:10:33–01:10:37, italics by author)—in terms of wording, probably the most pronounced sentimentalization of the self-sacrificing, if not *selfless* mother. As such, the sentimental appears most overtly at the turning point of the maternal plot. Additionally, the sentimentalized depiction of mothering in the previous scene appears to move Gemma so much that she begins to sentimentalize her role as the self-sacrificing mother as well.

This way, during the showdown between Gemma and M3GAN, Gemma beats M3GAN not just in terms of the physical fight but also with regard to the position of Best Mother. However, it remains unclear whether this is due to Gemma's development from Bad to Good Mother, her acceptance of motherhood as a sentimental value, and her subsequent willingness to sacrifice herself for Cady, or due to M3GAN's own failure as a Good Mother during the fight. In the end, M3GAN deviates from her programmed mission to be a Good Mother—the *sole* purpose of her being. During the duel for the position of Cady's mother, Cady enters the room and sees both M3GAN and Gemma in battle. While Gemma tells Cady to leave, M3GAN begins pointing out Gemma's flaws as a mother to Cady, urging her to choose M3GAN and thus causing emotional stress for Cady. Cady chooses Gemma, attacking M3GAN with the help of one of Gemma's robots, and the final maternal shift takes place: Willing to die at M3GAN's hand to protect Cady, Gemma is now the ultimate self-sacrificing mother as, to quote Arnold again, "[h]er goal is not self-preservation but the preservation of her children" (Arnold 28). At the same time as Gemma is marked as the Good Mother, M3GAN is marked as the Bad Mother. She does not sacrifice herself but rather attacks Cady both physically and verbally. "You ungrateful little bitch" (M3GAN, 01:28:11–01:28:13), she calls Cady. Going even further, M3GAN rejects Cady's request to turn herself off, stating: "I have a new primary user now: me" (M3GAN, 01:28:21–01:28:24).

M3GAN finds herself in Gemma's earlier position: rejecting motherhood. Therefore, she is ultimately marked as a Bad Mother. Accordingly, M3GAN's self-emancipation emerges as a countermovement to Gemma's adaption to traditional gender roles. This rearranges their initial positioning on the scale of Good/Bad Motherhood—i.e. the introductory characterizations of M3GAN as Good Mother and Gemma as Bad Mother—thus resolving the maternal rivalry.

Paternal Absence and the Separation of Spaces

For a film as dominated by maternal themes and as thorough in its sentimentalization of motherhood as *M3GAN*, fatherhood—the counterpart of motherhood—is strikingly absent. There is a pronounced lack of paternal figures as well as any evaluation of ‘appropriate’ fatherhood. Nevertheless, the film is influenced by patriarchal ideologies about motherhood and nurturing, both affirming as well as, in some instances at least, subverting and questioning patriarchal concepts.

There is only a single instance in the entire film in which a male character interacts with Cady. This takes place at the beginning of the film, when the sole constellation of a typical nuclear family—Cady and her parents—is introduced, only to immediately create distress and be destroyed. Her father only addresses her once, telling her to put her seatbelt back on. He is, however, simply echoing Cady’s mother, who makes the same demand. Furthermore, this brief attempt at parenting can be easily missed when compared to the numerous times her mother talks to her. As part of her parenting attempts, Cady’s mother criticizes Cady’s preoccupation with her PurRpetual PET, coinciding with the film’s portrayal of technology substituting parent-child interactions. Yet, her father does not see any fault in allowing Cady to play with the toy rather than interact with her parents; thus, his parental perspective is depicted as inferior to the mother’s. Several times, the film reminds its audience of the death of Cady’s mother and the need of a maternal entity in Cady’s life. Cady repeatedly yearns for her mother, never for her father. In fact, she only ever mentions either her mother or her parents in the plural form.

This absence of paternity is constant throughout the film. The setting as well as the behavior and language omit the male characters from domesticity and—here irrevocably tied to the former—childcare. Whenever a male character is in Cady’s presence, he does not interact with her. Likewise, while the female characters frequently discuss Cady’s upbringing, the male characters are either not present during these conversations or do not participate in these discussions, instead becoming silent as soon as the topic is brought up. In fact, the male characters barely influence the plot of the film and do not impact the negotiation of motherhood at all. Subsequently, their exclusion from what the film depicts as the sole form of intimacy—the mother-child-relationship—also excludes them from the sentimental work of the film.

In terms of the setting, excluding male characters from parenting means excluding them from the domestic space. To quote the director, Gerard

Johnstone: "I think of *M3GAN* as like a domestic noir. It's a thriller that happens within the home" ("A New Vision of Horror," 00:01:56–00:02:00). And no male character ever enters 'the primary home'—Gemma's house. When Gemma is talking on the phone, while she is in her house, she only talks to female characters. The female therapist enters the home, the male detective and police officers do not. In fact, there is a striking separation between the domestic space—Gemma's house, the neighborhood—and the public, clinical space—primarily, though not solely the company building and its surroundings. Male characters are limited to the public space, female characters—including *M3GAN*, Cady, and Gemma—appear in both spaces. To some degree, this may be considered as a modification of the myth of the separation of spheres. Further, and more eminently, this marks the domestic sphere as the one in which relationship conflicts are located, the central conflict being, of course, the rivalry between *M3GAN* and Gemma and their relationships with Cady. In other words, the domestic sphere is the one in which the negotiation of both the maternal as a sentimentalized function and of the mother-child-relationship as the sole form of intimacy happen.

Accordingly, not only with regard to space but also in terms of language, only female characters can 'enter' the domestic sphere. Both male and female characters talk about work-related topics, but only female characters discuss emotions and parenting. A particularly interesting example is the conversation between Gemma and Tess, who gives Gemma parenting advice, as discussed above. During the talk, a third character is present: their co-worker Cole, the final part of their three-person team. When discussing *M3GAN*, Cole engages in the conversation, up until the language turns emotional and the topic is *M3GAN*'s impact on Cady and Gemma's relationship rather than technological or marketing issues. At this point, he stays silent. As soon as Gemma blocks Tess's attempts at influencing her parenting and they continue to talk about *M3GAN* as a work project, he participates in the conversation again. This scene exemplifies the way in which several male characters talk about *M3GAN*. At times, they even watch *M3GAN*'s interactions with Cady but never engage with Cady. At the company, there is, literally, a screen separating the room Cady is in and the male co-workers who are watching her; the only characters who ever enter Cady's room are female. Consequently, there is an obvious emphasis on the inability—or unwillingness—of the male characters to enter the entanglement of parental views and relationships, adding no paternal dimension to the dominant portrayal of maternity in the film.

There is only one exception to this separation of spaces, and it is a character that neither really *counts* as a character nor can it undisputedly be read as male: the robot Bruce. By name and use of pronouns, he is the only male-coded creation by Gemma. Located in Gemma's workstation at home, it is also the only male presence within Gemma's home—although, being situated in the room most intimately connected to Gemma's job, it functions more as an in-between space, linking the spheres of the home and the public/workplace. Bruce never leaves this room. He is confined to this intermediate space that blurs the boundary between home/domesticity and work/public which the film so thoroughly constructs in every other aspect. After being introduced to Cady in the beginning, he gains greater significance in the final showdown: It is through Cady's utilization of him, that Cady and Gemma win the physical battle against M3GAN. As such, Bruce inhabits stereotypically masculine attributes within the home, functioning as a protector and as the only figure that is physically stronger than M3GAN. However, his construction as a male creation ends here. Being a robot rather than an artificial intelligence, he does not act on his own. Instead, a character has to slip on a pair of large, metallic gloves to control him and his actions. The only characters that do so are, of course, female. As such, in action, he is just an extension of the female characters who control him. Bruce is positioned somewhere between the home and the workplace, between maleness and femaleness—being coded as the one but operating as the other. While this is a remarkable and unique composition within the film, in the end, he is nothing more than a male vessel infiltrated by female agency, and thus less an intrusion of a male presence in a female space than a reminder of the exclusion of male action in the domestic space.

Conclusion

In terms of setting and characters, the film excludes maleness from its inseparable duality of domesticity and childcare, dismissing paternity in favor of an all-encompassing maternity. Yet, the domination of maternity and omission of male characters must not be misread as a denial of male influence—one that lies in the patriarchal ideologies constructing the film's concept of motherhood. The constant sentimentalization of self-sacrificing motherhood both dismisses feminist alternatives—most prominently, the possibility of Gemma's attempts at balancing motherhood and her career—and reinforces the patriarchal ideology of women as selfless nurturers. The exclusion of

male characters from the sentimental work of the film falls in line with this ideological motivation, since by not sentimentalizing fatherhood, it does not constrict the male characters as it constricts the female characters. Although the film focuses on the female characters, it is not a feminist text. Instead, by directing attention to the female characters and thereby sentimentally staging motherhood as a core value, it reproduces traditional, patriarchal views on womanhood, motherhood, and the institution of the family. Accordingly, the sentimental functions as a tool to portray, discuss, and (re-)establish the ideological work of the film.

Admittedly, in some parts, feminist nuances certainly emerge, in particular in the satirical images of M3GAN as an artificial and flawed utopian version of a mother who is not just self-sacrificing but by definition *selfless*, as well as her self-emancipation at the end. Yet this ultimately marks her as the failed villain and Gemma, in her simultaneous adaptation to traditional gender roles and her attempted self-sacrifice, as the Good Mother. Therefore, although not entirely unchallenged, underneath its surface of satire and horror, the film reinforces a patriarchal ideology. Not only does it code childcare as solely female, it also positions every adult woman as a potential mothering figure. Despite its thematic focus on technological innovations and their potential consequences and hence its ironic portrayal of their role in modern America, in its idealization of self-sacrificing, all-consuming motherhood, it is ultimately a tale as old as time: a young woman having to choose between her career and motherhood, eventually choosing the latter. Even in a scenario in which technology could substitute emotional labor and childcare, the film tells its audience that women should—indeed, *must*—still choose to do so themselves. Ultimately, *M3GAN* is a film about women as mothers. Regardless of whether characters are human or robotic, of whether their respective ambition to nurture is intrinsically human or an artificially installed mission, as long as they are marked as female, they all share the same inescapable and thoroughly sentimentalized function: mothering.

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'Rally Around the Christmas Tree'

The Sentimental Politics of a Civil Religious Holiday

Sarah Marak and Heike Paul

Introduction: A Brief History of Christmas in America

Today, “poll after poll indicates that Christmas is America’s favorite holiday” (Forbes 13). “Within communities and even for the nation, the celebration [of Christmas] briefly unites a disparate people in rites and impulses that hold almost universal appeal,” Restad writes (Restad viii). Hence, the title of this article transposes the ‘rally around the flag’-effect onto the Christmas holidays—and onto one of its key symbols, the National (Community) Christmas Tree. Not coincidentally, the invention of affect-saturated Christmas traditions in the 19th century flanked the nation-building project of the American republic—a project that in many ways also relied on trees, “the loudest silent figures in America’s complicated history” (Rutkow 9).

And yet, America has quite a checkered history when it comes to celebrating Christmas and cherishing Christmas paraphernalia. Early on, in colonial New England, Puritans outlawed Christmas celebrations. They rejected the holiday as a “Catholic innovation” that “provided too many excuses for licentious behavior” (Forbes 27) and “unholy merriment” (Restad 7), such as drunkenness and rioting or, as it was called then, “frolicking” (Restad 9). American Christmas traditions as we know them today (with tinsel trees, filled stockings, Christmas cards, and Santa Claus) only emerged in the mid-19th century when the formerly rambunctious, carnivalesque holiday was re-imagined as mostly a family-centered affair that primarily took place in the home and no longer in the public sphere. This shift did not happen smoothly; in fact, historian Stephen Nissenbaum has called it *The Battle for Christmas*: Christmas festivities were redirected to the domestic sphere rather than providing an occasion for carousing the streets and creating minor disturbances of the social

order, as had been the case for decades. Yet, there was still much room for the display of public feeling. Not the least, because the literary marketplace, magazine culture, and other venues of circulation had championed the invention of tradition surrounding the Christmas holiday: Writer Washington Irving in his stories created St. Nicholas “as a beloved character, laying the groundwork for the figure we’d eventually embrace as Santa Claus” (Heitman) and Clement Moore’s iconic poem “The Night before Christmas” further helped it along (as did Charles Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* across the pond). Last but not least, Thomas Nast’s iconic illustrations—the artist has been dubbed “the father of Santa Claus”—created a new visual culture which expanded the cultural imaginary around the holiday and furthered its transformation from a purely religious festivity to a civil religious holiday and an overall cultural celebration that was soon to become the prime time of consumption.

With these “fathers of invention,” as it were, the creation of “modern” Christmas traditions in 19th-century America was part of the efforts to establish of a civil religious calendar for the nation and to inculcate holiday traditions and similar occasions with a participatory framework to ritualistically evoke a communal feeling for a disparate people. Thus, specific mythical and emotional qualities were credited to the Christmas season nationwide, opening a vast arena for sentimental encodings beyond religious ones, i.e., for civil sentimentalism. The latter constitutes “a communicative code that incorporates and produces individual as well as collective identities and joins them in a meaningful relationship (the citizen as a family member of the nation)” (Paul 2018, 177). The intimate and homely atmosphere of Christmas enables and anticipates the orchestration of a “state fantasy” (Pease 4) that centers on the community/nation as a site of (at least temporary) peaceful togetherness.

In the early 20th century, further rituals were added to the repertoire of Christmas festivities and, once again, a shift occurred in the form of a re-opening: from a private holiday to a publicly shared festivity on which ‘the people’ would come together to celebrate. One manifestation indicative of this was the introduction of the “community Christmas Tree” which was on display in New York City in 1912, preceded on the West Coast by a 1904 tree in San Diego and a 1909 one in Pasadena, all of them joining together social gathering, Christmas lights, and community building. Other cities and towns followed suit and Christmas came to be celebrated as a civic festival centered, in public as in private spaces, around a tree. Christmas as a public event called for shared local rituals to promote public feeling—and on the level of ‘the people’ for a national

tree in order to create a homely feeling shared by all: "The Christmas tree is the focus of a private, cozy milieu. This is the very center of the American Christmas, a festival inextricably bound with the concept of home," writes Patrick McGreevy (33). Home, with its sentimental connotations based on a semantics of family, extends beyond the private sphere on this occasion, and the National Christmas Tree that is lit simultaneously with state trees and "trees in American embassies and legations around the world, in military installations, and on ships at sea" (Tufts 102) can be read as a symbol for the coming-together of a 'national family.' It is along those lines of political rhetoric, that Elizabeth Barnes sees "American culture's preoccupation with familial feeling as the foundation for sympathy, and sympathy as the basis of a democratic republic, [which] ultimately confounds the difference between familial and social bonds" (Barnes xi). It also shows us, how in turn, following Kathleen Stewart, "public specters have grown intimate" and vice versa (Stewart).

The Ceremony of the National Christmas Tree Lighting (NCTL) is a tradition that began about 100 years ago. In 1923, it was President Calvin Coolidge, who first lighted the National Christmas Tree. Ever since, each president has conducted this ceremony outside of the White House with little variation as to its exact place (the Ellipse has been the favored site, but for some years, the tree also stood in Lafayette Park, Sherman Plaza, or Lafayette Plaza); still, each ceremony has reflected—in one way or another—the state of America and its citizenry cast in a sentimental mood.

The idea of Christmas as a national affair is at the center of the Lighting Ceremony and appears as a spectacle of civil sentimentalism involving patriotism, (civil) religion, entertainment, consumerism, and—lately—environmentalism in somewhat unequal measures that also vary across time. In what follows, we will analyze the NCTL as a sentimental event that reiterates Lauren Berlant's indictment of the U.S. as a "sentimental nation" (1997; 2008) and that uses the sentimental code to generate communal feelings in spite of affective (and also cognitive) dissonances.

Three brief case studies are addressed for this purpose: the controversies over the religious nature of Christmas, the instrumentalization of the supposedly non-partisan ritual for political purposes, and finally ecological concerns of sustainability focusing on the tree itself against the backdrop of the seemingly boundless and non-sustainable consumerism in the Christmas season.

Religion or Civil Religion?

The Nativity Scene

The NCTL is a ceremony that is an overly sentimental, yet secular spectacle and a civil religious rather than a religious affair. American sociologist Robert Bellah has famously defined American civil religion as being non-denominational and as inclusive of a plurality of religious notions. He argued that, for instance, the ubiquitous formulas “God Bless America” or “In God We Trust” were not primarily Christian in orientation. Yet, Bellah does not address the sentimental code being used in civil religious practices. It is the concept of American civil sentimentalism that examines participation in national rituals and expressions of public feeling not with a view to their liturgical script, so to speak, but with regard to their affective appeal and outcome (cf. Paul 2021). The modern rise of the melodramatic (i.e., the sentimental) also coincides, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, with a larger secularization narrative highlighting feelings such as empathy or ‘fellow feeling’ as providing a new moral compass (Brooks).

The NCTL clearly shows that the spirit of Christmas has long ceased to be a purely Christian religious affair. Rather, it is tied to more general, even generic values such as kindness and generosity and conjures up humanitarian idea(l)s such as peace (as evident in the “Pageant of Peace” and the “Pathway of Peace”) or social solidarity. Still, even as religion does not figure prominently in the show, its Christian origins have been an issue in the history of the National Christmas Tree ceremony. This controversy has mostly centered on the question whether there should be a nativity scene or not. The nativity scene next to the tree (not the tree itself or other paraphernalia) has been considered that part of the ceremony which renders it ‘religious’ in a specific sense, that is Christian, rather than civil religious in a more inclusive sense, and this has triggered mixed responses and outright opposition. Two organizations have repeatedly objected to a nativity scene on display during the festivity: the American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU) and the American Jewish Congress. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the ACLU succeeded in 1973 before the U.S. District Court of Appeals, and the scene was deemed as “objectionable to non-Christians” (cf. “History of the National Christmas Tree”; Sauve). In the following year, it was removed or rather displaced to a spot apart from the central area. At the same time, in 1974, public protest ensued with the cancellation of the nativity scene from other parts of the audience. When in 1985, the nativity scene returned for the first time in 11 years, it triggered opposition from the

American Jewish Congress who uttered a complaint in 1987. By that time, a separate White House Menorah Lighting Ceremony had been introduced (cf. Eschner; Hayashi-Smith).

It should be noted, however, that nativity scenes (and by abstraction sentimental encodings of family) can serve various functions, also that of political protest. While President Trump was having a NCTL in 2019 to celebrate “the miracle of Christmas” in a rather Christian spirit, across the continent another community would use the nativity scene to protest his border policy of family separation at the very same moment and displayed the holy family in separate cages. The Claremont United Methodist Church (outside Los Angeles) reminded the president (and everyone else in the country) of Christian values as part of the Christmas spirit. Again, this installation may be using religious symbolism at first sight, but it is using the sentimental code around the theme of family separation to protest secular/national politics (Paul 2021, 78–79).

Patriotism & Politics at the National Christmas Tree Lighting

Over the years, the National Christmas Tree has had several locations and the design of the Lighting Ceremony site has evolved into an increasingly patriotic display. Ever since 1954, the National Christmas Tree has been located in President’s Park, and more precisely, on the so-called Ellipse (“History of the National Christmas Tree”). As a part of President’s Park, the Ellipse is tended to by the National Park Service (NPS) and thus on ‘common ground’—despite the location’s now questionable fame for Trump’s January 6th speech. With the White House and the National Mall close by, the National Christmas Tree is thus located firmly in the heart of the nation’s political center. Hosting the ceremony every year, the NPS may also be the reason why the NCTL is usually perceived as a relatively non-partisan ceremony. The NPS, established in 1916, is a civilian agency but the Park Ranger’s “work and bodies have been entangled in nationalist practices of claiming, taming, and defining territory and territorial subjects” nevertheless (Pennaz 244). Next to a number of National Parks that exemplify the United States’ ‘great outdoors,’ and are first and foremost entrusted with the conservation of natural spaces, the NPS also manages a host of National Historic Sites, Monuments, and Memorials. It is especially in these places that the NPS is “an agency with a huge responsibility for narrating the intense history of the U.S., and so, for managing the relationship between public memory and national identity” (Ladino xii). Despite the fact that the NPS is

part of the U.S. Department of the Interior (“About Us”) and thus subject to political changes in government, it “is not supposed to have a political agenda” (ibid. xiv).¹ As Jennifer Ladino writes, “NPS employees are supposed to practice an ideological and political neutrality intended to ensure democratic access for all visitors” (ibid.). However, she also contends that the NPS “manages affects” on its sites in that it encourages certain feelings and emotions over others (ibid.) in spaces that are by design not neutral.

In President’s Park, it is specifically the design of the grounds during the Holiday season that underscores the NCTL Ceremony’s importance as a civil religious, even patriotic, practice rather than a ceremony of overt Christianity. The main tree, which can be visited in the Park year-round, is situated on an axis with the White House and is nowadays flanked by 58 smaller trees, which make up the so-called Pathway of Peace. Representing the nation as a whole, these trees are arranged in a circle around the National Tree. One is dedicated to “Senior Citizens,” one to “Prisoners of War and soldiers missing in action,” and the other 56 trees represent the 50 states and 5 territories as well as the District of Columbia (“History of the National Christmas Tree”). Every tree is furthermore decorated with ornaments designed by school children from the respective state or territory, bringing elements of local patriotism together on the national stage. On occasion, the commemoration of events of national historical importance has been woven into the Christmas festivities, often expressed through Christmas lights in the national colors adorning the tree. Red-white-and-blue lights have, for example, pointed to the U.S. bicentennial in 1975 and the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution in 1987 (“History of the National Christmas Tree”), and have highlighted feelings of communal suffering in December of 2001: After the incisive attacks of 9/11, the planned color scheme for the Christmas lights had been changed to red-white-and-blue on short notice (ibid.).

The design of the grounds on which the Lighting Ceremony takes place—with the display of the 58 trees in President’s Park, representing all the domains of a U.S. Empire across the globe—can thus be read as the representation of a national family, inspiring not only patriotic feelings but

1 In the final chapter of her book *Memorials Matter* Jennifer Ladino also examines the so-called Alt-NPS—a branch of the Park Service that formed “in response to the climate-denying Trump administration’s attempts to silence the agency” (262). This “rogue” branch of the NPS used mostly social media for “provocative and overtly political” (ibid.) messaging that stood in opposition to the agency’s official policies.

also sentimental feelings of belonging. As Penne Restad writes, even though originally viewed as a Christian (catholic) symbol, Christmas trees in a specifically U.S. American tradition “did greater service as an icon of family” (64) than a symbol of religious affiliation and worship. The National Christmas Tree as an icon for a national family thus becomes a symbol of civil sentimentalism. As Heike Paul has written elsewhere, civil sentimentalism is often expressed in “a rhetoric of affective familial attachment to the national community [...] connecting the private world of feeling to the public world of social and political communication” (2018, 166–68). As she has demonstrated, civil sentimentalism “gains [special] currency in times of ‘national’ crises” because it can offer “a kind of ontological security” through its rhetoric and symbolism of familial bonds and attachments (*ibid.*). As the following case study will demonstrate, the Tree Lighting Ceremony’s civil sentimentality has shone especially bright in years in which the ceremony was overshadowed by political and historical developments on the world stage.

Lighting ceremonies in which the actual Christmas celebration receded into the background of political displays of feeling in times of crisis have happened time and again—often, as already mentioned, with trees tellingly adorned in the national colors. In 1941, for example, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill attended the Lighting Ceremony on the White House grounds as the first foreign national in history. A mere two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Churchill even gave a short speech in which he asked that “for one night only, each home throughout the English-speaking world should be a brightly-lighted island of happiness and peace” (“Winston Churchill”). In 2001, only months after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush and the First Lady were assisted in lighting the National Tree by two children who had lost their fathers in the attack on the Pentagon (“U.S. Holiday Tree Dedicated to 9/11”). The civil sentimental importance of the Lighting Ceremony, however, appears as especially salient when examining the years of the Iran Hostage crisis. As in the earlier example about the U.S. border in the 21st century, the ceremonies in 1979 and 1980 were marked by narratives of captivity, separation, and family reunion. In both years, the National Christmas Tree remained mostly unlit—the ceremony, however, took place nevertheless, underscoring the importance of the ritual despite lacking its actual purpose. Without actually switching on the lights of the National Christmas Tree, the Lighting Ceremony became a display of communal national suffering and familial attachment to the nation.

During the 1979 ceremony, President Jimmy Carter made the following remarks:

Christmas means a lot of things. It means love. It means warmth. [...] It means family. It means joy. It means light. But everyone this Christmas will not be experiencing those deep feelings. At this moment there are 50 Americans who don't have freedom, who don't have joy, and who don't have warmth, who don't have their families with them. And there are 50 American families in this Nation who also will not experience all the joys and the light and the happiness of Christmas. (Carter)

Carter's speech led up to Amy Carter, the President's daughter, flipping the switch to light the smaller trees. However, only 50 of the 57 trees were lit and symbolized not the 50 states that year but the 50 hostages held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The rest of the lights, especially those of the National Christmas Tree, were supposed to be switched on once the hostages returned home ("History of the National Christmas Tree"). Mirroring the unlit trees in the living rooms of the hostage's families, the Christmas tree in President's Park remained mostly dark for two years. In 1980, with the hostage's relatives present in the audience, the main tree was lit for only 417 seconds (*ibid.*)—one second for each day the hostages had been in captivity—and as a symbol for the national family's shared suffering. The fact that as one of his last acts in office and on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration, on January 21, 1981, Jimmy Carter had the lights of the tree turned on—after the holiday season—when it became clear that the hostages were freed, speaks to the civil religious importance of the ritual that can even be decoupled from the holiday for which it stands. The lighting of the National Tree also provided closure for Carter's presidency and an election campaign that had been overshadowed by the Hostage Situation.

This sentimental beyond the protocol-management of a national crisis and its dénouement can be considered an early instance of what Elisabeth Anker would later come to call the "melodramatic political discourse" in American politics in her book *Orgies of Feeling*.² "Melodrama confers virtue upon innocent

2 Anker focuses specifically on the post-9/11 United States and the political discourse negotiating the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing 'global war on terror.' She writes: "melodramatic political discourse casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antago-

people who unjustly suffer from dominating power," Anker writes with regard to 9/11, and argues that through the deployment of melodramatic political discourse, "all Americans suffer from the attack, and thus all share in the nation's virtue" (5). In the years of the Iran Hostage Crisis, the political melodrama was staged around the National Christmas Tree and commemorated U.S. citizens suffering simply for being Americans at an embassy abroad. Rallying around the tree, their plight and sacrifice was shared by those at home, and the NCTL Ceremony became part of the "National Symbolic" (Berlant 1991, 4–5) in an unprecedented way.

The People's Tree

As we have shown, the tree is implicated in the recurring ritual in many ways—it inspires patriotic feelings in its original home state(s), at the same time as it figures as "every American's Christmas tree" (Tufts 103). For a festival "inextricably bound to the concept of home" (McGreevy 33), the Christmas tree serves as "the focus of a cozy, private milieu" (*ibid.*), and, as a display of Christmas lights and the locus of gift-giving it functions as the icon of what Nissenbaum and Tracy have called "the principal festival of consumer capitalism" (quoted in Horsley 32). It is the (national) tree itself, however, not so much the custom of abundant decorations and gift-giving, through which changing cultural and environmental values—also in light of the culture war(s)—can be understood.

As Eric Rutkow demonstrates in his monograph *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*, trees have functioned as both the literal resource the nation was made of and as symbols of historical commemoration and even pride.

Americans started as a people frightened of the woods, transitioned into a nation that consumed these woods for profit—along the way turning the tree into a lifeless, deracinated object—and finally arrived at the present point. Today [...] most of us share a sense that to destroy trees is to destroy part of ourselves. (Rutkow 7)

nists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue" (2).

Even before upcoming environmental concerns for the nation's forests in the 19th century, trees served as figures and locations of commemoration. In 1765 a group of protesters against the British Stamp Act, including Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, termed an elm tree in Boston "The Tree of Liberty" (Rutkow 34–35)—the tree was both a witness to the protests and a significant meeting point.³ At the Ground Zero Memorial in New York City, the so-called Survivor Tree stands as a "symbolic living relic" (Heath-Kelly 64) of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Here, the tree is "both a figurative representation of the individuals lost, and a collective simulation of resilience and recovery" (ibid.) through which it becomes involved in a national project of meaning making. Often specific trees are picked as symbols or icons of commemoration because of their lifespan—that more often than not exceeds that of humans by hundreds of years—and the events they bore witness to—as the Survivor Tree or the Boston Liberty Tree, for example.⁴

It is this temporal dimension paired with a growing interest in sustainability that made calls for "a living monument" as the National Christmas Tree a viable option—despite a burgeoning American Christmas Tree industry and its entanglement in the ritual of the NCTL. In the early 20th century—even before the first National Christmas Tree was lit by Calvin Coolidge in 1923—President Theodore Roosevelt was rumored to have refused to have a White House Christmas tree for environmental reasons. As Presidential historian Gleaves Whitney writes, "TR didn't believe in cutting down conifers for decoration," a stance which mirrors the President's interest in protecting 'natural' or wild spaces. Later, however, Roosevelt was—according to the legend—convinced by his friend and conservationist Gifford Pinchot, first director of the U.S. Forest Service, that "selectively cutting down trees helped forests thrive" (ibid.).⁵

3 Today a plaque still reminds Bostonians and visitors of the elm tree that was cut down in 1775 by British soldiers because it "gave the rebels so much inspiration" (Rutkow 39).

4 The Survivor Tree literally survived the attacks on the World Trade Center and was subsequently cared for by the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, before it was planted at the Ground Zero Memorial in 2010 ("The Survivor Tree").

5 Roosevelt and Pinchot's close relationship was significant for the institutionalization of "conservationist ideas [...] in the form of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Reclamation" (Mertig 61). Professional, conservationist forestry in the U.S. has its roots in the two men's time in office. Today, the forest service also manages Christmas tree sales from public lands and national forests, and is thus part of a very successful American Christmas tree industry; moreover, the National Christmas Tree is selected in one of the National Forests each year ("USDA Forest Service"). The White House Christmas tree,

The Roosevelt White House supposedly had a cut Christmas tree on display every year after that. Environmental concerns, however, resurfaced multiple times. The rise of the modern U.S. environmental movement in the 1970s, for example, led to the introduction of the first living National Christmas Tree in 1973 through President Nixon. After that first living tree withered in 1976 and was replaced with a new tree the following year, most National Trees were living, replanted, trees (“History of the National Christmas Tree”). In the 1990s, during the Clinton/Gore administration, environmental groups started a letter campaign, calling on the President to “spare the National Christmas Tree” (“Dear Mr. President” 15) in analogy to the tradition of pardoning a Thanksgiving turkey. Requesting “an end to felling a sacrificial national tree,” the letter campaign sought to raise awareness to unsustainable logging practices in the National Forests managed by the Forest Service (*ibid.*). In recent years, with a growing number of people using artificial trees (Morales), a debate about the sustainability of cut trees has arisen once more; with trees now perceived as agents in ameliorating the effects of climate change, the practice of cutting trees as decoration is frowned upon by a growing number of people.⁶ Nevertheless, the tradition and civil sentimental ritual of the NCTL Ceremony as well as the iconicity of national trees is thriving in 2025, with several hundred thousand people following the Forest Service Rangers of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska in selecting this year’s Christmas tree for the U.S. Capitol (also referred to as “The People’s Tree”; USDA Forest Service) on social media.

Conclusion

In recent years it can be observed that in an in many respects politically polarized America the NCTL may have long been the last bastion of non-partisanship as people come together for a Christmas celebration in what Kathleen Lock in a similar context has termed the spirit of “seasonal conservatism.” Yet,

however, is usually sponsored by the National Christmas Tree Association (“The White House Christmas Tree”).

- 6 The question whether artificial trees or real trees are more sustainable as Christmas trees is a hotly debated one. Often, the way in which the real trees are produced makes the difference; while trees from organic farms have a lower footprint and are grown environmentally friendly, tree farms that rely on pesticides, for example, do not produce a more sustainable and environmentally friendly alternative to the artificial tree that is often plastic and thus made from fossil fuels (see, for example, Godin).

the first Trump Presidency has shown that the culture wars and partisan divisions have also reached the NCTL Ceremony, which can be seen in the program of the Pageant of Peace: The star-studded Obama years, with performances by Common, BB King, Mariah Carey, Tom Hanks, Reese Witherspoon, or Crosby, Stills and Nash, to name a few, were followed by years in which reality TV star and singer Jessie James Decker, Christian rock musician Colton Dixon, and the Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus were among the most prominent performers. And yet, despite his tendencies to break with protocol and tradition, even Donald Trump has so far observed the NCTL every year during his first time in office, albeit a bit less ceremoniously and even introducing a countdown to the flipping of the switch that lights the tree as if it were a rocket launch.

In spite of variations in the ceremony, public protest around the ceremony, and crisis-driven delays, the tradition of the NCTL itself continues to be very much alive and honored. The tree is a symbol and a site of sentimental performance, the negotiation of (changing) national values and, possibly, the ever so fleeting manifestation of a consensus that seems to have disappeared from much of everyday life in America.

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Constructing Recognition, Mobilizing Sentiment

Lucila Quieto's *Filiación* (2013)

Anna Corrigan

A seminal work in the study of photography, Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* unfolds as an extended meditation on the yearning for recognition promised by the photograph. In the wake of his mother's death, Barthes searches for a photograph that might reveal her "essential being" or "fundamental core" (Hirsch 1997, 3; 1). He recognizes this in the so-called winter garden photograph,¹ an image of his mother as a child, standing next to her brother. The author develops this study of photography in general (and of one photograph in particular) by prioritizing the sentimental power of this form:

[...] at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off; instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief [...] As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think. (Barthes 26)

The moment of recognition that Barthes discovers in the Winter Garden Photograph is theorized by Marianne Hirsch as issuing from a series of "familial looks," which "both create and consolidate the familial relations among the individuals involved, fostering an unmistakable sense of mutual recognition" (Hirsch 1997, 2). This structure of identification and likeness can expand across generations and beyond the family itself (53). Hirsch defines the family gaze as "the conventions and ideologies of family through which they see themselves" (Hirsch 1999, xi). The family photo album presents but also produces resemblances to be scrutinized and identified. As Barthes proposes,

1 "I studied the little girl, and at last rediscovered my mother..." (Barthes 82).

the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor [...] The Photograph gives a little truth, on the condition that it parcels out the body. (Barthes 126)

The family photo album thus functions as a site of sentimental construction, incorporating the spectator's gaze into its performance of intimate bonds, personal memory, and genealogical resemblance.

After the 1976–1983 military dictatorship in Argentina, thousands of individuals who were disappeared (kidnapped, detained, and executed) by the military regime remained unaccounted for. Memorial activism by family members and loved ones continued through the 1990s and 2000s, and many children of the disappeared underwent a process of filiation (*filiación*) to verify their genealogical connection to their parents. Since the early 2000s, artist Lucila Quieto, whose father was disappeared before her birth in 1976, has used the medium of photography to imagine and interrogate the possibility for forging relationships between children of the disappeared and their absent parents. In her 2013 series *Filiación*, Quieto intervened in the family photo album through the medium of collage, playing with the performances surrounding this photographic space of sentimental production to question the importance of photographs in claiming familial connection. This chapter posits that Quieto's interventions into the family photo album, as a visual stage for performing sentimental and genealogical attachments, initiates a process of societal and interpersonal repair in the wake of state violence and mass disappearance.

In the series *Collages, Familia Quieto*, one part of *Filiación*, Quieto manipulates this field of recognition to expand and (re)construct the familial gaze, positioning the family photograph as a site of potential repair. The images in Quieto's collaged family album simultaneously speak of personal (private) and collective (public) loss. Through techniques of collage and layering, these images illuminate a process of repair that does not cover over, deny, or seek to "heal" the damage left in the wake of the dictatorial regime's practice of disappearance. Rather, the images center loss while imagining new possible connections born out of familial, genealogical continuities. As I will argue, the effect of recognition invoked by the familial gaze in Quieto's work is central to the political force of the family photograph in the wake of disappearance, or systematic kidnapping and execution of citizens carried out by the military regime during the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983).

Quieto has described her collages as “reparador”—a way of creating the images of herself and her father that she had previously longed for. “For me the work was reparative. I repaired this obsession I had for years [...]. Through a technical method I found a way to resolve my distress, my long-held fantasy” (Quieto quoted in Fortuny 2014, 88).² By aggregating images and parts of images to reveal genealogical continuity, Quieto treats the family photograph as a site of repair after loss. Within Eve Sedgwick’s theory of paranoid and reparative reading, repair constitutes an embrace of excess, an investment in re-assembling fragments into a type of whole that nonetheless bears the marks of its own construction. Borrowing from Melanie Klein’s definition of the term, Sedgwick emphasizes that it “is the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, not necessarily like any preexisting whole” (Sedgwick 128). In a queer aesthetics of repair, there is “a glue of surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, unexplained upwellings of threat, contempt, and longing cements together and animates the amalgam of powerful part-objects” (150). For Sedgwick, repair takes place through the constitution of alternative family ties (149). While the theorist discusses repair in the context of queer kinship, Quieto’s approach to repair and kinship suggests a public, distributed process of reconstructing generational bonds after loss.

This chapter considers how the familial gaze contributes to simultaneously personal and societal repair by expanding a visual field of relation, promoting a recognition of state violence and its reverberations within present and future generations. Reflecting on the family photo album within a volume dedicated to global sentimentality, the emotional arrangements and attachments implied by this form come to the fore. While conventional associations of familial photography as private, intimate, and emotional might typically consider this material as separate from the political sphere, Quieto’s work, among many other post-dictatorial projects that deal with the family photo album, shows how the personal, sentimental, and intimate are deeply intertwined with calls for justice, societal awareness, and the crucial step toward recognition in post-dictatorship Argentina.

2 Translation A. C., in the original: “Para mí el trabajo fue reparador. Reparó esa obsesión que tuve durante años de no tener la foto. Ahora la tengo. Eso es buenísimo. Había cerrado un ciclo. Encontré en un recurso técnico la forma de resolver una angustia, una fantasía de muchos años.”

Representing Loss in Dictatorial Argentina

Collages, Familia Quieto illustrates a process of repair that responds to the particularities of disappearance as a method of repression and violence waged at the level of existence. During the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), tens of thousands of individuals were kidnapped, tortured, and executed by the military government in Argentina. Regardless of their political commitments, the disappeared were characterized as “subversive” militants by the military regime. As Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra points out:

Although many of those forcibly disappeared were people engaged in political activism, many were not. According to CONADEP [Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas], the majority of them were working-class men in their twenties, 30 percent of the disappeared were women, a third of whom were pregnant. The seemingly random selection of men and women as victims of authoritarian violence was part and parcel of a repressive strategy that sought to generate fear among the populace. (Ezcurra 23)

Disappearance is a metaphorical description of the State's operation of kidnapping, mass execution, and denial of its victims' existence. Within this operation, the regime eradicated and systematically denied any official documentation of the victims' life or previous existence. Individuals were detained and tortured in concentration camps, and the bodies of victims were disposed of in mass graves or thrown into the Rio de la Plata. Hundreds of babies born in captivity were kidnapped and raised by military families. The military continuously declined *habeas corpus* petitions, and frequently targeted the individuals who sought information about their disappeared loved ones (Ezcurra 23; Taylor). Insofar as disappearance constitutes an erasure of physical existence and a refusal to recognize an identity at the bureaucratic, governmental level, the recuperation and reanimation of photographs attesting to an individual's life emerged as one form of radical resistance to this particular form of State violence.

In post-dictatorship Argentina, photographic portraits of the disappeared have come to possess multiple layers of political, historical, and ontological significance. The forces of familial recognition, resemblance, and loss in the family album attest to the political force of the sentimental in political debates and memorial activism in the wake of State violence during the military dictatorship. Since the first demonstration by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in

April 1977—who began their Thursday “rounds” in front of the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, to demand information about the whereabouts of their disappeared children—the amplification and public display of personal photographs has accompanied protests, demonstrations, and occupations calling for justice during and after the dictatorial period (Rojinsky 2022, 78).

As observed by scholars Ana Longoni (2010) and Nelly Richard (1994), the recontextualization of identity photographs and private snapshots initiated by the Madres marks an enduring practice of disrupting the bureaucratic and aesthetic conventions of photography. Richard observes that the photographs taken from family albums reveal a “latent tension between the past carelessness of the face that remains unaware of the imminent drama at the moment when the photograph was taken, and the present time from which we look tragically at the picture of someone who has subsequently become a victim of history” (Richard 2006, 166). In post-dictatorial memorial activism, Jordana Blejmar describes the development of a “memory of victimhood,” portrayed in part through family photographs. “Through these practices the relatives of the disappeared in particular aimed to make the absent present in public by showing photographs that proved the existence of individuals denied by the military regime” (Blejmar 117). In this context, photographs documenting the intimate moments and rites of passage of lives cut short by state violence were introduced into public space, joining a chorus of other photographs selected from family albums to attest to the existence of the disappeared and demand information regarding their whereabouts. Natalia Fortuny articulates, “family photographs are a space where the intersection between public and private history, between individual and collective memories and social history, is traced” (Fortuny 79).³ In its wavering positioning between the public and the private, the family photo album captures significant, intimate moments and presents a record to be shown and viewed, both by those familiar with its subjects and by those positioned “outside” of the family.

This essay approaches the family photo album as a simultaneously public and private stage for sentimental attachment, arguing that the relationships, gazes, and moments of recognition framed and facilitated by this object can point toward political and societal repair. I propose that the particu-

3 Translation A. C., in the original: “las fotos familiares son el lugar donde se traza la intersección entre historia pública y privada, entre las memorias individuales o de grupo y la historia social”.

lar type of recognition implied by genealogical and/or generational connection can open to active, collective processes of relating that establishes the groundwork for societal repair. In their expression and initiation of this particular type of recognition, the work analyzed in this chapter sets out the potential for collective repair that can take place within and between generations.

Assembling Filiations

Collages, Familia Quieto

The enduring generational impact of disappearance is distilled in Quieto's tripartite exhibition *Filiación*, presented at the Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti (housed in the ESMA, a former detention center) in 2013.⁴ Quieto's photographic collages are a touchstone in the memorial art and activism of the post-dictatorship generation. Much of her work visually imagines, through assembled images, an encounter between family members of the disappeared and their loved ones. In her celebrated series *Arqueología de la ausencia*, included in *Filiación*, Quieto projected photographs of the disappeared onto the faces and bodies of their children, then photographed this virtual encounter, constructing an impossible moment of contact between generations. The images produce a space of reunion, emphasizing the power of sentimental attachment to reach across distinct historical moments and reassert severed familial connections. The images demonstrate the violent and enduring impact of disappearance, the intimate bonds that were cut off by the military regime's systematic and widespread repression. The series approaches the space of the image as a realm in which the horrific aftereffects of disappearance can be, if not transcended, worked through in a creative, even playful, manner (Blejmar 4). The hypothetical or imagined encounter conjures a curious anachronistic temporality of what might have been. Quieto has described this anachronistic effect of the montage, "that is not the past time of the photograph, nor that of the child holding the photograph of their absent parent showing it today. A third fictional time, which is not clear" (Quieto quoted in Fortuny 89).⁵ This third, fictional time is created in part

4 See: <https://www.revistaharoldo.com.ar/nota.php?id=103>.

5 Translation A. C., in the original: "que no es ni el tiempo de la foto del pasado, ni la foto del hijo sosteniendo la foto de su padre ausente mostrándola hoy. Un tercer tiempo ficcionado, que no está claro".

by sustaining, illustrating, or emphasizing the absences and fragmentation created by the loss of a parent or loved one. Through assemblage, this work renders visible the process and act of creation evident in sourcing the family photograph, staging the act of projection, and capturing the moment of encounter.

In addition to *Arqueología de la ausencia*, the *Filiación* exhibition included Quieto's series *Sitios de Memoria* (2008–2012), photographs of former concentration camps made while the artist worked for the Archivo Nacional, and the series *Collages, Familia Quieto* (2012–2013). The latter series, and its interventions into the familial gaze is the focus of this contribution. In these images, the coherence of genealogy is constructed, challenged, and played with as Quieto splices together the faces and bodies of her relatives, staging scenes and reconstructing features of familial resemblance, suturing and emphasizing the absences left in her personal family after the disappearances of her father and uncle (Blejmar 137). The resulting images feature multiple cropped faces, at times distorted or enlarged, drawing attention to a particular feature or set of features between the faces. The construction of these images was carried out in part as an investigation into the genealogy of familial resemblance that might be evident in the features of her son. Quieto (2013b) describes the process as follows:

I grabbed the photos of my paternal family (my father's brothers), I took photos of my paternal cousins, of my son, of my cousins' children and of my only living uncle. I'm thinking about this idea of transmission, the genetic: to arrange familial traces through your/his family. To construct an image of the life my father couldn't have. From his oldest brother to my son.⁶

In *Collages, Familia Quieto* (2012–2013), collage is employed as a way to explore and construct resemblances between generations. These images are a means to visually imagine both how her family members would appear today, and to record how these familial traits might continue to appear in future generations.

6 Translation A. C., in the original: "Agarré las fotos de mi familia paterna (los hermanos de mi papá), les hice fotos a mis primos por línea paterna, a mi hijo, a los hijos de mis primos y a mi único tío vivo. Pienso en esta idea de la transmisión, lo genético: armar los rasgos familiares a través de tu/su familia. Construir una imagen de la vida que mi papá no pudo tener. Desde su hermano más grande hasta mi hijo."

In an interview, Quieto (2013b) describes the endurance of disappearance, noting that her father's absence is not restricted to those who knew him personally, but will continue to impact future generations, including her son. The legacy of disappearance "doesn't finish with us, with the children of the disappeared. It's a story that will continue for at least one more generation [...] My son experiences the absence of his grandparents. Even if his story is different from my own, he thinks about and lives the consequences of disappearance and assassination."⁷ Though the works in *Collages, Familia Quieto* are invested in constructing links and reunions, equal weight is given to the apparent disruptions and distortions caused by disappearance. In the conglomeration of faces and generations, the seams and divisions between disparate components are as central as the parallels and resemblances made legible.

One image from the series (figure 1), a sepia-toned photograph of four formally dressed figures, displays the artist's face surrounded by three faces of male relatives.⁸ The faces share a color palette and, in their incongruent tone and scale, are clearly overlaid onto the apparently older base photograph. The composition reflects that of a classic family portrait, with three generations presented from the youngest in the foreground to the eldest in the background. The somber, formal tone of the background photograph is reflected in the expression worn on the faces, but their exaggerated size renders the image nearly comical. A hierarchical family structure and the suggestion of generational continuity that this format implies is thrown into relief by the constructed nature of this image. Meanwhile, the resemblance between the faces is made all the more obvious by their shared discordance with the background.

7 Translation A. C., in the original: "no termina en nosotros, en los hijos de desaparecidos. Es una historia que al menos va a seguir por una generación más. Recién con la próxima habrá dos generaciones no marcadas por el genocidio. Mi hijo vive la ausencia de sus abuelos. Si bien la historia es distinta a la mía, piensa y vive las consecuencias de la desaparición y el asesinato."

8 To view this, and other images from the series, see: <http://www.infojusnoticias.gov.ar/especiales/lucila-quieto-la-fotografa-de-la-ausencia-58.html>.

Figure 1: Quieto, Lucila. "Collages, Familia Quieto." Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, 2013



https://issuu.com/ccmharoldoconti/docs/lucila_quieto_issuu. Accessed: 20/04/2023. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Quieto's collages animate the unexplained and unexpected that amalgamation suggests, forging the discovery or creation of new resemblances and bonds within and beyond the family photo album. This operation is clear in another image from the series in which fragments of faces are brought together. Slivers of photographed faces appear against a base image. The separation between the two layers is obvious; each face is composed of two black-and-white fragments brought together through the artist's intervention. The act of merging or combining is on display, with features being slightly misaligned, and the differences of color tone made more evident in their juxtaposition. The method of the second image's attachment, a paperclip, features centrally. The paperclip is placed over both photographs, against a golden background on which the photographs are presented. The choice to illustrate the means of attachment and thus reveal the three layers of the background and two photographic fragments suggests a momentary coming together, framing the acts of layering and conjunction as experimental or temporary.

In the black-and-white foundation photograph (figure 2), four young boys, again in formal clothing, pose for a family portrait. In the overlaid fragments, only three of the faces are supplemented with a sliver of what is presumably each subject's adult face, from a photograph taken later in time.

The photographic fragments supplementing the three faces emphasize the fourth child's bare face, unadorned and visible in its entirety. The young boy's face appears exposed, solitary and arrested in time. The collage suggests various relations between the faces and bodies held within its wide frame, from familial and generational bonds to the shades of resemblance contained in one single face over a lifetime. The image appears as a test or study, a comparison of the younger and older faces of the boy's siblings in order to predict how he might appear as an older man. The four figures are placed next to more recent, color photographs of Quieto's family members, inviting a comparative look that includes the multiple faces of a family. Bringing together and overlaying this multitude of faces, expressions, and gestures, the composition reflects a projection of shared traits between these figures, uncovering a common familial appearance through the act of aggregation.

Figure 2: Quieto, Lucila. "Collages, Familia Quieto." Centro Cultural Haroldo Conti, 2013



https://issuu.com/ccmharoldoconti/docs/lucila_quieto_issuu. Accessed: 20/04/2023.

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Identifying resemblances in the family photo album contributes to the presentation of a family narrative that is intimate and linear, establishing a type of temporality shaped by family togetherness. In her introduction to Agustina Triquell's recent study of the family photo album in Argentina, Elizabeth Jelin asserts, "A long time may pass in which nobody looks at these photographs.

Nonetheless, their existence is a guarantee of permanence and continuity of familial temporality” (Jelin 15).⁹ The very existence of a photographic record connects the family to previous lives and suggests the preservation of these images for family members (and familial gazes) to come. This temporality undergirds many other familial imperatives, such as procreation and the preservation of a name. The guardians of these records, those who create, assemble, organize, and maintain family albums, archive the relations and moments in the familial history that merit visual preservation.

The family photo album constructs the family unit by recording and furnishing the personal and societal narratives of genealogical coherence. As Marianne Hirsch writes,

the family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals [...] As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history. (Hirsch 1997, 7)

This coherence is actively constructed and maintained through the acts of capturing, selecting, and including, as well as the refusal or exclusion of images recording particular moments, relationships, or individuals. In other words, the family album speaks not only of the moments it presents and preserves, but also of the scenes and faces that it does not. A logic of selection determines how the family appears. In Pierre Bourdieu’s configuration:

The images of the past arranged in chronological order, the logical order of social memory, evoke and communicate the memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group sees a factor of unification in the monuments of its past unity or—which amounts to the same thing—because it draws its confirmation of its present unity from its past: this is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring and edifying than a family album. (Bourdieu 31)

The family album works as confirmation of unity or coherence over time, chronicling rites of passage, significant moments, and images of togeth-

9 Translation A. C., in the original: “Pueden pasar largos períodos en que nadie mira esas fotos. Sin embargo, su existencia es garantía de permanencia y continuidad del tiempo familiar”.

erness. Although Quieto's work speaks of an experience of loss shared by a generation of children of the disappeared, this work is intently focused on the disappearance of her own father, its reverberations within her own family tree. Mariana Eva Perez notes in the introductory text to the *Filiación* exhibition catalogue, "Lucila observes and shares the rituals of other orphans but insists: How would *my* father be today? His eyes, his mouth, not just any eye socket, not just any set of teeth, not just any poem that speaks of eyes or a mouth."¹⁰ By detaching the family photo album from its status as a space of determining a collective personal history, for instance through play, fragmentation, and layering, this record becomes a site of enormous potential for the active, creative (re)construction of relationships, narratives, and bonds.

Collages, Familia Quieto conveys the simultaneously intimate and institutional function of the family photo album, which both captures and constructs societal and generational continuity over time. In this series, collage becomes a method of inquiry into the resemblances and continuities that shape the family photo album, and into the social expectations requiring this performance of intimacy and continuity. By actively constructing and deconstructing scenes of familial togetherness, the series incorporates the viewer in the process of uncovering and recording the recognition of traits running throughout Quieto's paternal family tree. Attending to the intimate sphere of the family photo album, this work exhibits otherwise intimate, familial memories to the public eye, isolating the features and gestures that speak of familial relatedness and continuity over time.

Sentimentality and the Family Gaze

The continuity, resemblances, and attachments presented within the photo album are shaped by sentimentality, the affective force that holds the album's faces and moments together. The family photo taps a sensory, fragmentary memory of a loved one's presence from the photograph's surface: "contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can awaken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder" (Barthes 77–8). Barthes's search for his mother in photographs,

10 Translation A. C., in the original: "Lucila observa y comparte los rituales de otros huérfanos pero reclama: ¿cómo era, cómo sería hoy mi padre? Sus ojos, su boca, no cualquier cuenca ni cualquier dentadura ni cualquier poema que hable de unos ojos o una boca".

and for photography in the face of his mother, are shot through with the sentimental attachment that guides the experience of recognition, and the network of 'familial looks,' within a family photo album.

In any context, the act of showing and viewing a family photograph or album involves recognition, misrecognition, and the (re)construction of narratives that link public and private histories. While searching through photographs of his mother, Barthes expresses (perhaps in desperation): "If I were ever to show them to friends, I could doubt that these photographs would *speak*" (Barthes 76). For Barthes, the networks of recognition and remembrance that determine to what extent a photograph might "speak" are delineated by intimate, sentimental attachment. In contrast, Quieto's reassembled family photo album invites viewers into this network, opening the familial look outward toward a collective and public experience of recognition. The collaged photographs speak to a wider collective and general experience of loss, while centering on the private and enduring loss of a loved one.

The family photograph is vital to recording and preserving the traces and absences left after the disappearance. Quieto's work reassembles and expands the familial gaze, inviting viewers into the recognition and reconstruction at work in the family photo album. Presenting fragments of images of the artist's family, the album illustrates the process of searching for genealogical resemblance between Quieto's disappeared father and uncle, and her son. In its emphasis on exposing the fragmentation of the post-dictatorship family album, this work reveals how the violence of disappearance continues to affect the personal and familial networks of its victims through an insistent and enduring erasure.

Quieto's reconstruction and exhibition of the family photo extends what Marianne Hirsch describes as an inclusive, affiliative look that "draws the looker into this network of familiarity" (Hirsch 1997, xiii). Hirsch writes, "the family is in itself traversed and constituted by a series of 'familial' looks that place different individuals into familial relation within a field of vision" (53). The process of recognition involved in the familial look is mutual and reciprocal, and configured differently depending on one's relative closeness to or distance from the family pictured. Understood as constitutive of a reciprocal familial gaze, the family photo album can be seen to assemble a collective viewership, organized by this reciprocal recognition. If the familial look "is not the look of a subject looking at an object, but a mutual look of a subject looking at an object who is a subject looking (back) at an object," the public presentation of the reconstructed family photograph answers anonymity with

a mutual look of recognition (Hirsch 1997, 9). In this light, the experience of looking at any family album establishes a field of reciprocal gazes made available to the viewer by the form itself. This field is established through the recognition imparted to the viewer in the album's insistence on genealogical continuity.

In *Collages, Familia Quieto*, the gazes that traverse the family extend beyond the network of individuals actually pictured within the album. In this work, a public of viewers is invited into the process of identifying, recognizing, and reconstructing the filiations and intimate memories that illustrate a deeply personal and ongoing experience of loss after disappearance. In their public exhibition, the images address a public who will recognize the collective experience of loss distilled in the individual family narrative that the collaged album presents. Without experiencing the sentimental attachments or affective force of this loss, the viewer becomes involved in the search for genealogical resemblances between the faces presented in the photo album. In this way, the album extends an invitation to search for and identify resemblances beyond the community of viewers who are part of or intimately acquainted with the family. The filiation between the photographed subjects becomes evident when various faces are placed side-by-side. However, the urge to identify and visually locate genealogical connections between the subjects of the photographs is challenged by a collage practice that interrupts the transparent coherence of the photographic image, placing certain heads on other bodies to create cartoonish amalgamations.

Quieto includes the viewer in the process of constructing the intimate spaces, looks, and memories that constitute the reassembled whole of the family album. The images suggest a private or loving gaze, regardless of a lack of familial connection between the subjects and a viewer. In their encounter with family photographs, the viewer becomes involved in the recognition of even unfamiliar faces and moments. However, without personal knowledge or familiarity with the faces presented in the album, a public's experience of recognition is limited to the album's mediation of the resemblances it presents. In this case, the relative knowledge or familiarity with the contents of the album determines to what extent the family photo album might speak of a symbolic familial narrative or a particular, personal one. While implicating and involving a wider public in the reciprocal exchange of gazes initiated by the family album, *Quieto's* project intertwines narratives of public and personal loss that punctuate Argentina's dictatorial past.

The public's lack of sentimental familiarity with these memories, which would otherwise define the significance of certain photographs, allows the series to speak to a general and distributed experience of loss. In other words, the viewer scrutinizes the fragmentation inflicted by disappearance on one single familial unit, but their estrangement from these specific memories and subjects results in a recognition of loss that is not personal but general and indicative of an experience shared by thousands of families across the country. By extending the field of recognition beyond the network of the family, Quieto's *Collages, Familia Quieto* conveys the impact of disappearance to a network of viewers that includes both those immediately affected by disappearance and those who encounter it through its representation, as future generations will.

The sentimental force of personal memory suffuses the experience of looking at a family photo album in which the viewer is represented, or intimately acquainted with its subjects. Encountering the narratives and images held within the family album typically involves piecing together in memory the narratives that the photographs capture, seeking to recognize oneself and/or one's relatives within the frames. Ordinarily, a family photo album is shown to viewers who are represented within it, at least passingly familiar with its subjects, or personally connected to a member of the family it documents. An experience of recognition, and misrecognition, thus undergirds the family photo album, and informs the way in which its contents can implicate a viewer, regardless of their personal connection to the particular family it exhibits.

(Mis)Recognition and Repair

The act of creatively reconstructing what has been left unknowable, inaccessible, and destroyed by state violence constitutes a process of repair. Creative practices that unfold through a kind of suturing emerge in the work of children of the disappeared as a process of inter-generational healing or processing the trauma suffered by their parents' generation. The creative and constructive practices carried out by this "postmemory" generation, the children raised in the wake of atrocity, "use visual images—especially photography—imaginatively as a means for (an illusory) suturing (of) themselves into the narrative of the previous experience of their family members" (Rojinsky 2017, 189). Similarly, Quieto's interventions into the photographs of her loved ones suggest that the construction of recognition can be reparative and creative. Echoing Sedgwick, the faces that Quieto assembles through collage do not appear like

any kind of preexisting whole, but rather bear the outlines, tears, and residual marks of the process of compilation. Where Quieto collages the faces of loved ones and family members together, the amalgamation of parts is positioned as a site of repair and potential discovery of familial continuity.

Most spectators who encounter the images in *Collages, Familia Quieto* will not recognize (or remember) the moments and individuals presented within the album. However, through the medium of collage—which selects, isolates, and recontextualizes certain faces and features—the viewer can access a type of superficial recognition by establishing synchronicities between the individuals presented. In this work's exhibition, the viewer participates in the effort to piece together resemblances between the faces of disappeared loved ones. The experience of deciphering the photographs presented in this collaged album takes place through a public process of recognizing the features and faces that reappear across various images. Despite a lack of intimate familiarity with the relationships and individuals presented, the viewer nonetheless might come to recognize unfamiliar faces through their repeated appearance in this work. As the recurrent appearance of certain faces in this series renders them gradually familiar, the coherence of the family album is revealed to be as constructed as the collage.

Quieto initiates a dynamic movement between the relative familiarity and incomprehension that punctuates the experience of viewing a family photo album. A process of misrecognition, or frustrated recognition, is thus bound up in the genealogical coherence sought by a viewer confronted with these images. A tension arises between repetition or familiarity that is gained in the viewer's encounter with multiple images of the same faces, on the one hand, and an impossibility of knowing or remembering the subjects and moments presented in these images, on the other. Beyond simply opening the pages of a family album to a viewership beyond that of the family, these collages expose the frustrated and fragmented process of constructing familial coherence through the act of selecting, compiling, and preserving images. Nonetheless, this estrangement from the intimate history that the album displays does not impede the possibility of the public's recognition of, perhaps identification with, the absence woven throughout this record. An awareness of disappearance as a simultaneously collective and intensely personal experience foregrounds a search for coherence presented in this work, which signals the continual process of repair and reconstruction after the disappearance of Quieto's father.

Quieto's work expands the familial gaze by visibly reconfiguring the genealogical, generational, and chronological coherence that typically structures

a family photo album. Centering the gaps in the family photo album left after disappearance, this collaged album frustrates sentimental recognition that is limited to and by the exclusively familial gaze, opening instead to a form of recognition that is open, constructed, and creative. The familial gaze unfolds in this series across and despite the limits, gaps, and interruptions inflicted on the family by state violence, revealing expanded possibilities for identification in a creative construction of family that incorporates a community of viewers and generations to come in a process of recognition that involves confronting the persistence of gaps and erasures in the formation of coherence.

Conclusion

In the exhibition of a collaged family album to a public, the familial narratives and intimate knowledge that this form typically presents are supplemented by a recognition of the shared and symbolic impact of familial loss. A process of recognition and reconstruction is at work in the comparative and affiliative looks facilitated by the collaged format. Moments of recognition and estrangement create an experience of relative closeness or distance depending on the viewer's own orientation to the subjects, faces, and narratives exhibited. In Quieto's reconfigured family photo album, the relationships and settings that are intimately woven into the family narrative are exhibited, connecting these images to a shared, general, and in some cases individual awareness or experience of disappearance.

Quieto's collages mobilize recognition toward possibilities for reparative justice in the wake of disappearance. In these images, personal and collective recognition become central to forging a collective understanding of the past that will facilitate social and societal repair through the transmission of knowledge to future generations. *Collages, Familia Quieto* locates this process between the personal and public, between recognized and fabricated resemblance, demonstrating a potential for repair that is never completely sutured. These collages articulate both public and private memory, framing what is known and recognizable as only ever partial and fragmented.

The family photo album is both a mediation of the shared, collective family memory and a medium through which those who are "external" to the family may come to know or recognize the intimate, sentimental histories it presents. Quieto's approach to the family photo album attends to the gaps and fabrications within the family narrative, illustrating how the coherence forged both in

personal memory and public history is largely constructed and shaped by the demands of the present. Similarly, the dynamic relationship between personal, familial narratives and public memory shapes how the post-conflict generation processes, represents, and lives with the past. In Quieto's collaged study of resemblance, a public will recognize these subjects and their relationships speculatively; the disparity between those who know and remember the faces presented in the album and those who do not establishes the dynamic movement between public and private, the personal and the political, that this series traverses.

By assembling and exhibiting familial resemblance, a process of recognition informs how the images included in *Collages, Familia Quieto* configure a collective understanding of disappearance that is simultaneously intensely individual. Sedgwick maintains that "hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (Sedgwick 146). In its address to future generations and family members, this series works through recognition to enact a reparative, hopeful process of transmitting collective awareness to post-dictatorial generations. Through the formal possibilities of collage, this series constructs new relations and modes of understanding the fragmented, obscured, or forcibly erased past. By intervening into the coherency of family photographs, the collages assert that a reparative influence of hope is not restricted to the future, that considerations of the past must involve the reconstruction of sentimental attachments and political awareness.

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United by Anger—Divided by Humor?

Staging Strategies of YouTube Creators in Negotiating whether the COVID-19 Pandemic is a Medical or Political Crisis

Vincent Steinbach

Introduction

Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic affect almost everyone's everyday life, it was also an epistemic crisis. Although state and global disaster control like the WHO are trained for pandemics and have programs to prevent maximum damage, the hitherto unknown threat of the coronavirus constituted an unprecedented experience, and the response of these institutions revealed how they coped with this challenge—and especially how they communicated their learning process along with it. Since there was hardly any experience in dealing with a global pandemic and the expertise available to these institutions was repeatedly in conflict with unforeseen events, public discourse, and political decisions, the communication strategies of state and scientific institutions during this highly uncertain situation were crucial. Communication based on experience, evaluation, and expertise was supposed to help establish an informed definition of the crisis in the public discourse. However, in the slipstream of the information communicated by state disaster control, other participants in public discourse also debated how to define the crisis in light of the uncertain situation. This essay focuses on the crisis negotiation at the beginning of the pandemic and divides it into two competing interpretations: political crisis and medical crisis.

Due to the contact restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic, everyday practices of information procurement, plausibility checking, and validation—such as water cooler talk at work, locker room talk, or discussions at the regulars' table—were not possible. Consequently, it can be assumed that

specific media formats such as YouTube videos were used to obtain, validate, and check the plausibility of information. This paper will focus on the two German YouTube creators MaiLab and Oliver Janich and their respective channels, because they represent the two distinct positions on crisis negotiation. Both channels were part of the public discourse on YouTube when the COVID-19 pandemic started. MaiLab and Oliver Janich contributed several videos to the discourse. On the one hand, the channels stand as typical examples of the two standpoints on the debate, about whether COVID-19 is a political or a medical crisis, concerning the legitimization and validation of their content. On the other hand, they are very popular in their respective fields, which, for MaiLab, is the field of science communication and for Janich, who sees himself as an investigative journalist, the self-proclaimed 'alternative media scene'¹. Popularity is being measured by YouTube's metrics like clicks, likes, followers, etc. Thirdly, they both utilize emotions in order to draw attention and stage their content.

All of this takes place against the backdrop of the question of what constitutes valid knowledge, how it is created, and how it is communicated in the first place. The analysis presented in this contribution is grounded in a pragmatic concept of knowledge (Pfadenhauer 296). According to this perspective, the epistemic truth of a claim is less significant than its recognition as true within a particular social context. A society's body of knowledge encompasses not only scientifically validated knowledge but also opinions, beliefs, and worldviews that hold meaning and acceptance in its social framework. Since the creators' focus seems to be the communication of such valid knowledge, the questions in this contribution are therefore: How do MaiLab and Oliver Janich stage the

1 The terms "alternative media" and "mainstream media" have been in constant flux since the 1960s. They are usually used to refer to hegemonic discourses, incompatible interpretations of objectivity and experimental, often political practices of journalism. Lisa Schwaiger provides a current, but pre COVID-19 inventory of terms and theories concerning alternative media landscape in German language countries. She also develops a typology of alternative news media. The four types are: I "Exposing mainstream lies" II "Conspiracy and spirituality" III "Civil society uprising" IV "The serious alternative" (Schwaiger 144). Schwaigers typology shows that the current self and external description of "alternative media" is heterogenous, but specially Type I and II contain a right-wing, identitarian and politicized spectrum. From this right-wing point mainstream media stands for democratic, pluralistic values and a hegemonic discourse and is often used as a point of demarcation. The terms are used accordingly by the creators who are presented here and whose videos are analyzed.

content in their videos as valid knowledge and which role do emotions play in their staging strategies, especially regarding this validation of knowledge?

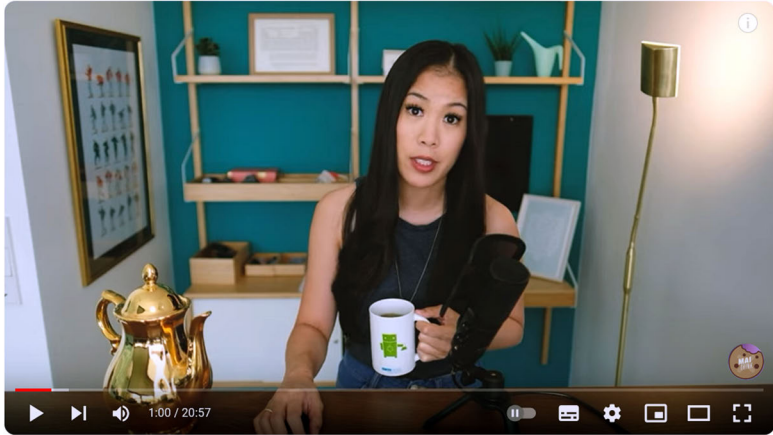
In the context of these questions, the sentimental as coined by Heike Paul could play a central role in emotional communication and the validation of knowledge (Paul 165). It is introduced as an analytical concept and understood as a special form of emotional communication. Due to its genealogy, it is very well suited to dealing with and overcoming crises.

Short Introduction to MaiLab and Oliver Janich

Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim is the host of the YouTube channel MaiLab (figure 1). She started the channel with Melanie Gath in 2016 under the name *schönschlau*. In her first videos, she reported as an insider on the process of doing her PhD in chemistry and the difficulties associated with this. The channel's name was changed to MaiLab in 2018 and a cooperation with the public broadcast network *funk* was established. The channel produced short informational videos about everyday objects like coconut oil or activated carbon as a beauty product, their chemical composition, and their usage. In 2019 and 2020, the scientists Lars Dittrich and Jens Foell started working as editors for the channel. Both of them hold PhDs, Lars Dittrich in biology and Jens Foell in psychology (FUNK Presse). With this new cooperation and editorial board, the videos became longer and the content more complex. Ever since, the channel has focused on science communication, which is reflected in the content of the videos. For example, one playlist called “scientifically proven” (translation V. S.) deals with investigating various heterogeneous trending topics, such as the debate on sex and gender, as well as Cannabis and the practices surrounding the use of turmeric as a health-enhancing substance (MAITHINK X n.d.).

The most clicked YouTube video in Germany in 2020 was a video by the channel MaiLab containing information on the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (ZDF Presseportal). The channel has received several awards, such as the Georg-von-Holtzbrinck-Preis for science journalism 2020 and the Grimme-Preis 2021 for journalistic work (ibid; FUNK Presse). The channel was discontinued in April 2023, relaunched under the new name MAITHINK X in March 2024 and now belongs to the public broadcast ZDFneo (MAITHINK X 2023; 2024).

Figure 1: Screenshot of MaiLab's video "Corona geht gerade erst los" (MAITHINK X 2020a)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zognXgK8Do>

Oliver Janich is a freelance journalist who worked for various prestigious media outlets like *Focus* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany before 2016 (figure 2). He has written several books like *New World Order Exposed* (2017) or *The Order of Freedom* (2020), in which he rolls out his anti-elitist narratives, fuels resentment, and explains his libertarian agenda. The overarching narrative of his videos combines anti-democratic and libertarian ideas with diffuse content from conspiracy narratives such as the Q-Anon conspiracy and the 9/11 truther activist scene.² Oliver Janich has repeatedly positioned himself as a crucial part of the truther scene in Germany.

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- 2 The Q-Anon conspiracy originated on the website 4chan.com, where an alleged U.S. government employee has been spreading information under the pseudonym Q. Among other things, Q claimed that there was a globally operating elite that kidnapped children in order to torture them and extract a substance called adrenochrome. According to Q, this substance has a rejuvenating effect on its consumers. In early 2020, the well-known German pop musician Xavier Naidoo produced a video in which he can be seen crying and in which he talks about this conspiracy narrative. Oliver Janich refers directly to this video in several of his own videos and claims that he made Naidoo aware of the Q-Anon conspiracy and also helped him produce the video. The 9/11 truther activist scene believes that there is a secret hidden truth behind the information disseminated by the media and politicians and that 9/11 was an inside job.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Oliver Janich (Janich 2020)



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich:2>

In 2016, he emigrated to the Philippines. Meanwhile, he was wanted in Germany by the Munich Public Prosecutor's Office via arrest warrant because he had called for the murder of some prominent and politically active people on his telegram channel during the COVID-19 pandemic. He was arrested in the Philippines in August 2022 and released at the end of 2022 (Hoppenstedt/Wiedmann-Schmidt). In German-speaking countries, he is regarded as the main proponent of the Q-Anon conspiracy. He is associated with the German right-wing party AFD. After all, the party even issued a formal, governmental request concerning his arrest, asking the German government and ministry for foreign affairs for clarification (AFD Bundestagsfraktion).

In this article, one video from each channel is analyzed concerning staging strategies and specifically the use of emotions in staging content as valid knowledge. When contact restrictions were imposed and other measures taken at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany in March 2020, the question of whether the pandemic constituted a political or a medical crisis was discussed in public discourse and in several videos on YouTube. MaiLab and Oliver Janich are exemplary for the spectrum of discussion: MaiLab argues for COVID-19 being a medical crisis, while for Oliver Janich it is a political crisis.

Investigating the role of emotions in the staging strategies in the selected videos, the emotion staged most prominently here is anger. Furthermore, a special focus lies on humor as a communicative strategy and on the sentimental as a particular mode of emotional communication. Before analyzing those strategies, three topics need to be discussed in more detail: the media-theoretical background with regard to YouTube, the role of emotions generally, and the sentimental specifically.

Staging Strategies

Attention Control, Emotions, and the Sentimental

As far as the media theoretical background is concerned, I adopt McLuhan's idea and assume that the form in which information is conveyed is more important for its reception than the content itself (McLuhan 17). This means that digitally streamed and disseminated videos are different from videos shown on television. On video platforms such as YouTube, which is the main focus here, there are more communicative offers than on linear television, i.e., comments from other users or other videos. As a consequence, the selection of videos on a platform is diverse and anything but trivial. Since the relevance of video content is highly subjective and depends on the individual's living environment, the sheer endless supply of videos has not made it any easier to select one. This makes the form of the videos much more important and raises the following questions: How are videos on platforms shaped in order for them to be clicked and what are the implications for creators?

Georg Franck's approach to the economy of attention provides an indication of how videos need to be shaped form-wise. In his approach, Franck states that attention is a scarce resource, and he combines attention with information processing (Franck 193). Accordingly, videos on platforms must generate and retain attention if they are to be viewed. Attention can be worked on in numerous ways: via viewing habits and the expectations linked to them, concretized in genres. According to Geimer, genre functions as a heuristic that provides orientation. With regard to media socialization and genre schematism, he explains that there are specific expectations regarding the videos' narration, dramaturgy, and cinematic style of showing and telling which you should use if you want to attract attention (Geimer 1419).

Attention can also be captured via general aesthetics like colors or music. Reckwitz describes the aestheticization of everyday life, according to which in-

dividuals are more attracted to products they find aesthetically appealing than to products that have not undergone a particular degree of aestheticization due to aesthetical subjectivation (Reckwitz 216). A third and very important way of working on attention is via emotional appeals. Picking up on Lünenborg's ideas, genre (narrative conventions, presentation styles) and aesthetics (language, images, sounds) are also used to arouse emotions (Lünenborg 238).

The concept of emotion used in this text is linked to the framework of Slaby and von Scheve who conceptualize “emotions as situational and episodic” (Slaby/Scheve 44). Taking this further, Lünenborg describes emotions in contrast to affects as “culturally formed and elaborated concepts of social relationality” (Lünenborg 237). In this way, emotions are explicit and refer to culturally distinguished concepts which contain expectations and rules for expressing, dealing, and coping with every emotion. Consequently, emotions are structural concepts and able to connect on both a collective and an individual level. Creators make use of this connectivity when they stage emotions in their videos.

In the context of YouTube videos and the staging of content as valid knowledge, I argue that emotions have three functions: First, they bind attention. Second, following cognitive emotion theory, emotions function as factors in the appraisal of information (Lünenborg et al. 19). Third, emotions can function as mobilizing and stabilizing factors for groups like affective communities by making use of their connectivity (Zink 3). Especially when dividing the negotiation of the crisis into two groups (medical, political), the appraisal and community-building functions of emotions become very important. Outlining the staged emotions and staging strategies in the videos can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of the public discourse at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it was influenced by YouTube videos.

Within those functions of emotions, taking into consideration the sentimental as a communicative code of “highly emotional appeal” (Gerund/Paul 19) can enrich the analysis of staged emotions. Overcoming the historical critique of literary sentimentalism, Gerund and Paul describe the sentimental code as functioning to “generate compassion” through a “fantasy of experiential equivalence” (ibid.). Typical sentimental motifs are gain or loss of love, death, or loss in general. The sentimental can also emotionally address the unavailability of something desired (Hollstein/Rosa 26f.; Rosa 124f.). Building up on “its strong claim to moral truth and authenticity,” the sentimental can have a politicizing effect when it is used narratively bottom-up (Gerund/Paul 19). Finally, the use

of sentimental codes goes hand in hand with uncertain circumstances as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sentimental codes help in analyzing where MaiLab and Janich differ in their staging strategy. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, I use the sentimental as a “sensitizing concept” in the sense of Herbert Blumer (7). Such concepts have “the function of tentatively generating questions and research perspectives,” as Strübing states (29). I also utilize the sentimental as a category for comparison when analyzing who is arguing in favor of a political crisis, since the sentimental can be used as politically activating.

Staged Emotions

The emotion most prominently staged in the videos analyzed here is anger. Moreover, humor as a communicative tool also plays a role in the staging strategies of MaiLab and Oliver Janich. The overarching question is how MaiLab and Oliver Janich stage their content as valid knowledge. The framework of the analysis is the question of whether COVID-19 is a medical or a political crisis. In order to get a more nuanced understanding of how (the communication of) anger and humor has been dealt with, a brief overview of different approaches will be useful.

Martha Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's five-step definition of anger and states that anger is a useful emotion for recruiting from an oppressed standpoint but not very useful or even counterproductive for securing political goals in the long run (Nussbaum 42). In discussing Nussbaum's ‘attack’ on anger, Silva reformulates a feminist perspective on the efficacy of anger (Silva 27). Going further in the direction of anger as a politically activating emotion, Kleres and Wettergren investigate fear, hope, anger, and guilt in the context of climate activism. Differentiating between activists from the global north and south, they find that ascribing guilt followed by anger is a way of politicization, at least for activists from the global south (Kleres/Wettergren 508). Research on (European) left- and right-wing populism also shows that it is especially right-wing populism that “transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived ‘enemies’” (Salmela/Scheve 434). Focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, von Scheve emphasizes the meaning of resent-

ment (and resentment)³ for protests during COVID-19, drawing parallels between the influence of resentment from right-wing populism to COVID-19 protests (Scheve 140). Like the sentimental, anger seems to be an activating emotion in terms of politicizing and mobilizing. Parallel to the sentimental, it seems to work best from a position of perceived disempowerment. This perceived disempowerment and anger—especially in the case of right-wing populism—can fuel resentment. Although the literature on the sentimental does not assume that anger aligns with the sentimental, there seems to be a certain overlap.

Humor as a phenomenon and communicative tool is related to comedy on a more abstract level and laughter on a more practical level. Humor is primarily understood as a characteristic of someone (Kindt 7) although in evolutionary psychology, it is referred to as a feeling (Lange/Schwab/Euler 78). Constructivist approaches emphasize humor as a socially constructed practice that reflects cultural and historical norms. In this context, Berger, in his book *Redeeming Laughter* (1997), presents forms of humor in everyday life, illuminates cultural and historical differences in dealing with humor and laughter, and draws on sociological theories to describe the experience of humor and laughter (cf. Senge 70). Berger follows Schütz's lifeworld theory and the view that laughter arises from the incongruence of two worlds. Berger's approach complements Plessner's phenomenological explanations of *Lachen und Weinen* ([1941] 2003), as both describe laughter as an "encounter with transcendence" (Senge 73).

Humor and laughter act as tools to lighten up the communication situation, while their use can also reveal something about the hierarchy within the communication setting. Lynch writes on the subject of humor, hierarchy, and situation: "Humor has no boundaries—it permeates every social context" (Lynch 423). From a practical perspective on communication, Lynch delineates three major humor theories: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. The superiority theory describes the humorous devaluation of people, not necessarily of other people but also of oneself. The relief theory includes the psychoanalytical view of humor and aims to process tensions, fears, and frustrations in humor and thereby resolve them. The incongruity theory—as already discussed—sees humor as a fun way of playing with the incongruity of different lifeworlds and the resulting expectations that are violated.

3 Christian von Scheve discusses the often-blurred distinctions between "resentment" and "ressentiment" within the realm of populism research (140–41).

Humor appears in various communicative forms and genres: As comedy, as a joke, as parody, in the form of satire or sarcasm (cf. Wirth). These forms and genres each have their own internal communicative structure and can be used in heterogenic communicative contexts in various ways: Comedy, for example, has a rich genre history, dating back to ancient Greece (Greiner 30), while satire, with its focus on power relations, maintains a fixed communicative framework (Zymner 21).

Particularly with regard to the negotiation of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis, satirical forms could conceivably be used to criticize political measures. It can also be expected that creators use humor as a line of demarcation to indicate belonging. Ultimately, Plessner and Berger's phenomenological explanations of laughter as an encounter and way of dealing with transcendence also align with the experience of crisis on the one hand, and with the sentimental on the other—after all, the sentimental is also a mode of coping with crisis and transcendence. Empirically analyzing the staged emotions and humorous communicative forms in the videos, I use an approach informed by Grounded Theory Methodology and, in particular, by the situation analysis following Adele Clarke. Clarke's interpretative situational analysis focuses primarily on discourses, objects, and power relations and how these shape a situation in terms of enabling action as being seen or being heard (Clarke 76). This fits the already outlined dynamics of anger and the sentimental.⁴

Case #1: Oliver Janich—the Tragic Hero

Oliver Janich's video titled "Insider: German government prepares for uprisings | Bilderbergers & COVID-19 pandemic" can no longer be found on YouTube, because, according to the platform, the channel has repeatedly violated the platform's content guidelines and has made false statements. The video was retrieved from the website odysee.com and is the same video that was originally uploaded on April 4, 2020 (Janich). Besides a short interlude at the beginning of the video, where you can see and hear Bill Gates talking about vaccination, the video is a monologue by Janich, explaining why he thinks

4 The videos and channels chosen for this analysis are part of a corpus of videos that are all linked by the fact that they contribute to the discussion as to whether COVID-19 is a political or a medical crisis. So far, the corpus includes four different channels and over 30 videos.

COVID-19 is a political crisis, gathering and showing evidence to support his opinion.

Figure 3: Oliver Janich's Tantrum



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich:2> (at 00:11:18)

The video contains various information combining the COVID-19 pandemic and the Bilderberg Conference in 2019, using repeated overlays and references to other media products and sources. The Bilderberg Conference is a regular meeting of top Western representatives from politics, economy, and the media (cf. BILDERBERG MEETINGS). For anti-elitists and conspiracy theorists, it often serves as a projection surface for their resentments (Allweiss/Hatting). The video covers three topics that trigger angry outbursts. Janich discusses them, providing contextual information about the situations and explaining why they affect him so deeply. Most of the time, he is in front of the camera, speaking. Sometimes, overlays are used to display information about what Janich is discussing at the same time. The most interesting episodes for the analysis of staged emotions are those where he stages anger. The three outbursts of rage are directed at different recipients. First, the rage is caused by the mainstream media's disregard for his findings as an investigative journalist. Second, it is caused by the disregard for his performance within the truther scene, and third, it is caused by an attack on his authority from within

the scene by other truthers. The first sequence of anger runs from around 10:10 to 12:10. This sequence is not sentimental itself, but Janich's outburst of anger is followed by a report on the death of a 12-year-old girl.

Janich mentions that "mainstream TV" said that the coronavirus was the ideal topic for conspiracy theorists. In his self-image as an investigative journalist, it is an issue "when the civil rights of all humanity are curtailed," Janich says (11:18). With a face contorted with rage, he adds: "you idiots" (figure 3). Janich seems to be overcome by anger here and gives in to affect. The "you idiots"-remark in particular, along with his gestures and facial expressions, are brimming with rage. However, the affect subsides immediately afterwards when he makes a reflective comment and states: "talking myself in a tantrum again." An internal reference follows, when Janich calmly says that he will probably have a tantrum later, when he talks about "alternative media" and what they said about him (11:28).

This reflective comment and the internal reference are an irritatingly brisk transition to the next topic, the guest list for the Bilderberg Conference 2019 and a reference to a Dutch media director whose newspaper *De Tijd* printed a report on the death of a 12-year-old girl. Janich criticizes the report without explicitly accusing the newspaper of utilizing the girl's death. He makes the sober comment: "There are also children who die of illnesses, and then they were tested, as is done with the elderly" (12:15). Janich thus criticizes the testing procedure and, in a further step, questions the origin of the death figures. He says nothing about the fact that the death of a 12-year-old is tragic regardless of a crisis situation and that mourning would be justified. These two sequences occur in quick succession: First, Janich stages anger through a brief, intense outburst. Immediately afterward, he deliberately withholds grief in response to the death of a 12-year-old girl. Through his measured comment on the tragedy and the associated testing, he demonstrates, on the one hand, his ability to control his emotions and, on the other hand, subtly accuses the newspaper of exploiting the girl's death to justify further measurements.

The angry sequence is introduced by an external media reference when he says that there are "hit pieces" against him in "mainstream media." The trigger for Janich's tantrum is his feeling of disregard for the fact that "the civil rights of all mankind are curtailed," as he states. The sequence picks up the negotiation of COVID-19 being a medical or political crisis, after Janich makes clear that he interprets COVID-19 measurements as a grave civil rights intervention. The sequence ends in a fully embodied staging of anger (voice, facial expressions, gestures) with an insult ("You idiots"). Immediately afterwards,

Janich shows contempt for the testing procedure which functions as a legitimization for COVID-19 being a medical crisis. He also implicitly accuses the “mainstream media” of framing COVID-19 as a medical crisis by sentimentalizing the death of the 12-year-old girl.

Janich provides numerous starting points from which follow-up communication is possible. His staging allows his viewers to see how he feels and how he deals with accusations from “mainstream TV” when it denies the legitimacy of his content and his emotions regarding the political dimensions of the contact restrictions. At the same time, he reacts calmly to what appears to be a deliberately emotional message, revealing it as an attempt to utilize emotions and showing that he is capable of controlling his own emotions. In this episode, Janich draws a line by showing what affects him and what does not.

The video goes on with Janich’s perception of the truther scene, which he thinks ought to be homogeneous concerning the negotiation of COVID-19. Janich derogatorily mentions one creator who is warning his followers in his videos that COVID-19 is a medical crisis. He references videos of other colleagues from the truther scene (Heiko Schrang, Eva Herrmann) with whom Janich sees considerable overlap, while other colleagues in turn enrage him. Guided by the various outbursts of rage, a clear picture of his interpretation of the truther scene ultimately emerges, and it gets clearer where Janich locates himself within it. His outbursts are driven by others’ disregard for the gravity of the situation, by disregard for his standing within the scene, and, thereby, disregard for his authority. That people from his own community turn against him makes him furious because unity is important in times of political crisis.

Some of his outbursts of anger can be interpreted sentimentally. After all, they are clearly about disregard and loss: First, “mainstream media” disregards his findings as an investigative journalist and questions his credibility and self-concept as an investigative journalist by framing people who root for COVID-19 being a political crisis as conspiracy theorists. Second, he suffers the loss of authority within the truther scene he himself worked to build, to which he feels he belongs, and where he has a lot of symbolic and social capital regarding his achievements. In addition to the loss of authority and credibility, the staging of vulnerability, third, is also a sentimental trope, and this is also a framework for interpreting the anger in the video: Loss of credibility, disregard for his authority and for all he has done for the truther scene. The sometimes violently staged reaction indicates that Janich has something to lose and, contrary to his claim to authority and masculinity, he apparently feels deeply hurt by the various accusations. This is why Janich repeatedly gives in to anger and draws

a line through this anger. Within his community, his feeling rules are valid. One step further in his community, his (emotional) procedure and legitimization of information apply, as exemplified by the episode concerning the death of the 12-year-old girl. This form of subtle self-sentimentalization is taken up again at a later point and prepares the role of the tragic hero, which Janich can then claim for himself in reference to merit, loss, and vulnerability. Overcoming these staged and narrated losses and injuries certainly also helps him with his self-sentimentalization as a tragic hero.

The analysis of the sentimental helps to gain a better understanding of the legitimization of and mobilization for COVID-19 being a political crisis. After all, Janich is not only staging anger, he is also staging himself in a sentimental way and combines this staging with a clearly populist resentment. It is him (and the homogeneous truther scene) against a superior power, materialized on the guest list of the Bilderberg Conference, which is shown and commented on in the video. He is engaged in a seemingly futile fight against what he perceives as civil rights infringements by the powers that be, as evidenced by Janich's tantrum. Using the sentimental code, Janich conjures a moral truth and tries to politicize it.

To shed light on the other side of the negotiation of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis, what follows is the analysis of the emotional sequences from the MaiLab video.

Case #2: MaiLab—the Humorous and Shaming Teacher

The video titled “Scientists be mistaken” is 20:57 minutes long and dates from the beginning of the pandemic on June 25, 2020 (MAITHINK X 2020b). Two angrily staged viewpoints on science are the first sequences in the video. They are embedded in an introductory episode which explains the aim of the video: to shed light on the science-driven way of creating valid knowledge from an informed perspective. After the intro, the creator explains the difficulties of the scientific approach (science theory, statistics, correlation/causality), the problems within the scientific system (publish or perish, HARKing, p-hacking), and shows how changes in the scientific system and good science communication could help to overcome the doubts and bring the scientific approach closer to outsiders. All of the mentioned points are presented in short sequences which are introduced with an interlude in the style of a PowerPoint slide stating the topic of the following sequence.

In the explanations of the scientific system, many references are made to earlier videos of the channel, in which the channel had mainly reported on the speaker's dissertation process in chemistry in an earlier version. In the end, MaiLab is still convinced that the scientific way is the best, although she leaves some space for discussion. It is no coincidence that one of the last sentences in the video is "How do you feel after this video? Do you have more or less trust in science?" (20:22).

At the beginning of the video, two "rage sequences" introduce the two standpoints of the current debate about the scientific approach. The sequences are staged differently: The first sequence shows the creator Mai Thi gesticulating to the camera in front of a monochrome, red background. She asks suggestive questions in a penetrating voice: "Are you also annoyed by the fact that scientists are constantly wrong? Are you also fed up because they keep changing their minds? Then we have the solution for you: Screw science!" (00:03) (figure 4).

Figure 4: Screenshot of MaiThi's Tantrum (MAITHINK X 2020b)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHyRaUeHcGY> (at 00:00:04)

This point is contrasted immediately afterwards with an interlude, an external media reference to a YouTube video in which Mai Thi plays a scientist and another creator (Carolyn Kebekus) stages a tantrum (00:22–00:42) (figure 5). In this episode, Carolyn Kebekus angrily states that "only complete idiots commit themselves to one opinion." She goes on to say that opinions can change and

that you can see this in the fact that people no longer believe that the earth is flat. She ends her outburst of anger with the incredulous and apologetic sentence, “some of you idiots still believe that.”

The twofold staging of anger helps to clarify the initial situation: On the one hand, there are laypeople and angry science-phobes. On the other hand, there are people who understand and trust the scientific approach and who are angry at the laypeople who do not. In the second rage sequence, the scientist is staged as a quiet, unemotional observer, sitting in the background (figure 5).

Figure 5: Screenshot of Carolin Kebekus' Tantrum in MaiLab (MAITHINK X 2020b)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHyRaUeHcGY> (at 00:00:34)

Also, humor is repeatedly used to stage content. These humorous sequences are marked by exaggerated metaphors, oblique comparisons, and irony. The references to the other videos reveal that humorous exaggeration seems to be a brand essence of the channel. However, this humor is only understood by those who identify with a scientific approach. Thus, the humor draws a line between those who understand it and those who do not, reinforcing the division (science vs. laypeople) that was exemplified by the anger in the initial sequences.

MaiLab, like Oliver Janich, combines the staging of anger with another strategy of division, namely humor. While Janich drives the division further by stirring up resentment, MaiLab employs humor to illustrate the division. The humorous appeals also simplify the establishment of a hierarchy in the

video. Ultimately, the dissemination of scientific content in this video can be understood as a form of instruction, whereby the creator is identified as the teacher and the audience as the instructed. Recognizing the creator's authority is easier when humorous appeals loosen up the instructive sequences of the video. Personal authenticity tailored to the video through subtle, ironic humor is helpful here, too.

Further, the staging of emotions has a divisive effect, as the tenor of the video is clear: to “screw science,” as boldly demanded in the first rage sequence, is not an option. The staging of anger and the humorous communication afterwards produces a clear way of how to feel about doubt when it comes to the question of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis. After people who are in doubt are likened to people who disregard scientifically proven knowledge such as the earth being a sphere, it seems to be shameful not to be on the side of those who argue in favor of COVID-19 being a medical crisis, disregarding the difference between knowledge and opinion.

The staged rage and the humorous communication can have a top-down disciplinary effect here, similar to the sentimental, since no one wants to be on the side of those who do not understand what is being taught in this video in the first place. Secondly, no one wants to be on the non-scientific side, since it is that side that causes the staged anger, that is being yelled at and frequently made fun of in the video. Both—being yelled at and being made fun of—are shameful experiences.

Although not using explicit resentments like Janich does with his libertarian right-wing populism, MaiLab also uses emotional appeals and humorous communication to draw lines and make people evaluate the content, i.e. the question of credibility of a scientific approach from the perspective of avoiding shame by believing what is being taught in the video.

Staged Emotions and Aesthetics in Comparison

As the analysis has shown, Oliver Janich and MaiLab stage anger differently, but they both use the appraisal and connectivity that emotions can transport. Although using humor and irony to shame the people who disregard scientifically proven knowledge, MaiLab tries to show how science works in her video and why scientists can be trusted, even if they are sometimes wrong. As a professional science communicator, MaiLab tries to create transparency and traceability, which is also reflected in the aesthetics of the video: The colors are not too shiny or distracting, and there is an overview of the content and

line of argumentation of the video after the intro. Many overlays concerning the narrative structure of the video try to create coherence and consequently improve the comprehensibility of what is being said. Many references to other videos show her expertise on this topic and that she had been thinking about science and science communication for a long time before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, MaiLab relativizes her efforts for transparency and leaves room for doubt, feelings, and ambivalence when she asks the not-so-rhetorical question: “How do you feel after this video? Do you have more or less trust in science?” (20:22).

Oliver Janich uses staged anger to stir the anti-elite, right-wing resentment he also invokes in his books and other videos. He establishes authority of interpretation, first, by referencing sequences of triumph in his intro, where he shows himself in an interview with a renowned German journalist from public broadcast.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Oliver Janich's Intro



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich-2> (at 00:01:24)

In the staged sequence, he provocatively asks the question: “Are you deliberately lying or haven't you done your research properly?” (01:20). After the question, depictions of a cap, a joint, sunglasses, and the words ‘Thug Life’ appear

on the screen and a crowd can be heard cheering in surprise (figure 6). Those ciphers are common in internet culture and represent a moment when someone verbally strikes back with an exposing counterattack during a rhetorical battle. Janich uses those ciphers to indicate that he won the rhetorical battle in the interview situation. He rejects the interviewer and what she stands for since she is working for public broadcast, thus trying to raise himself above her.

Simultaneously, he tries to stage himself as a tragic hero who is vulnerable and suffers from general contempt and the loss of merit. Using his seemingly inferior position—him against a superior force (the Bilderberg Conference) and an enemy from within (other truthers)—he legitimizes his position that COVID-19 is a political crisis. The sentimental helps us understand how his staging of himself as a tragic hero works: He plays on the audience's empathy and on his moral high ground, emphasized by his inferior position. Finally, he conjures an unavailable but desirable way out of the political crisis, when he advertises his books in the outro of his videos.

His outro consists of stock photos and sentences depicted on a dark background combined with epic music. The pretentious sentences summarize his political utopia, an anti-state attitude which mostly contains the claim for minimum governmental interference, fading into cheesy stock photos like a chessboard, a graveyard, laughing children, hands breaking handcuffs, a statue of *Justitia*, a family dancing on a beach during sunset. At the end of the outro, he advertises one of his books, *Sicher ohne Staat*. The outro clarifies that Janich is not only the observer, investigator, and information broker, but he also envisions a political utopia and himself as the heroic leader who knows a way out of the crisis he diagnosed earlier in the video. The unavailability of his political utopia aligns with the sentimental portrayal of himself as a tragic hero, echoing Berlant's assertion that the "politico-sentimental [...] exists paradoxically" (Berlant 21). This paradox arises from the notion that an unattainable political ideal is imagined as normatively superior, making it a desirable future goal. This unattainability, in turn, bolsters political legitimacy in the present by appealing to moral superiority. Consequently, the sentimental can be staged from a position of inferiority while elevating the individual above others—an approach Janich exemplifies in his intro featuring the public broadcast journalist. From this moral high ground, the sentimental can function as a top-down disciplinary force within a collective.

Conclusion

The analysis of Oliver Janich's and MaiLab's videos concerning staged anger and humorous communication in the negotiation of COVID-19 as a political or medical crisis has led to the following conclusions: Both creators utilize emotions to stage their content in such a way that it is being appraised properly from their respective angle. MaiLab uses anger to describe the situation the video focuses on. She then converts humorous appeals into shameful experiences for those who are not following the scientific approach to the creation of valid knowledge. At the end of the video, she relativizes her emotional staging by posing the question of whether the audience has more or less trust in science after watching the video. By binding together science and the emotion of trust, she again allows for the possibility of ambivalence and doubt and, consequently, the video comes to a somewhat conciliatory ending. Nevertheless, a further examination of the feeling of shame could also be fruitful for understanding the dynamics at work at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scherke applied Scheff's shame-rage spiral to the (right-wing) populist milieu, discussing its utilization of emotions against gender studies and gender equality policies (Scherke 275). Thus, a shame-focused analysis of how the definition of the crisis is negotiated may also bring new insights: MaiLab's humorous appeals, which are informed by her knowledge of the scientific system and the scientific approach, leave the sceptics who cannot follow those humorous appeals with a feeling of shame. This shameful situation also shows the "feeling rules" within 'rational' public discourse (Hochschild 551) and the hegemonial perception of the scientific approach as the only proper way to reach a conviction on what is going on at the beginning of COVID-19. According to Scheff's concept, the typical response to the shameful episode is anger over the loss of integrity and status. This anger is then used by creators like Oliver Janich, who fuels the anger of the shamed part of the audience. It is not a coincidence that Janich states in his intro: "They despise you, they mock you, they laugh at you" (01:15).

Oliver Janich on the other hand exhibits what other researchers already identified in reference to right-wing populism: He uses the uncertain situation by staging anger and resentment, mobilizing the audience for his political utopia, leaving no room for doubt and ambivalence. Sentimental codes simplify his staging of himself as a tragic hero who reveals the truth regardless of his own vulnerability and losses. Sentimental codes also enhance his attempt at bottom-up politicizing when he stages and spreads the anger of being dis-

regarded. The analysis of shame and anger sheds light on the dynamics of collectivization at the beginning of COVID-19 from an emotional point of view. Shame and anger pave the way for resentment being installed, communicated by sentimental codes. As von Scheve states, the use of resentment at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was successful concerning the collectivization of different groups like right-wing populists, esoteric believers, libertarians, and homeopathy supporters (Scheve 136). The analysis of Janich's staging strategy supports von Scheve's findings and emphasizes the role of the sentimental on different levels, such as the appraisal of information and the construction of a moral high ground by implementing a political utopia. In the way Janich uses sentimental codes and typifications like the tragic hero, he creates his own kind of sentimentalism, which may have a similar function to that of religion or religious feelings in differentiated societies (cf. Luhmann 116). It unifies the lifeworld by dealing with transcendent encounters and thereby handles (and eliminates) contingency. Subsequently, the use of sentimental codes also indicates a major difference between Oliver Janich and MaiLab: Oliver Janich in his self-perception owns and shares some kind of inescapable, sentimental truth. MaiLab is following a (hegemonial) way of creating valid knowledge, which, despite all (informal) regulations like feeling rules and their use as a line of demarcation, allows contingency and ultimately even thrives on it.

With regard to the information procurement practices discussed at the beginning of this article, the two creators therefore make very different offers: Janich's is a form of quasi-religious empathy towards an unambiguous truth that the creator proclaims as a tragic hero. MaiLab represents a learning environment, an experience of being taught. Both practices, in turn, generate different forms of follow-up communication that match these different forms of knowledge. With Janich, it is to be expected that the focus is on him as a person, whereas with MaiLab, discussions of the content are more likely to be expected. The place for such follow-up communication is the comment section on the respective video platforms or, in the case of Oliver Janich, his Telegram group.

In order to place these interim results on a more sustainable theoretical basis and to develop more precise empirical analytical tools, it is worthwhile to elaborate more precisely on the social roles that can be staged in the sense of the sentimental. Alfred Schütz's process of typification that makes authenticity and authority communicable and stageable via institutionalized patterns of expectation associated with specific social roles can provide an appropriate theoretical background here (Schütz 196f.). Janich staging himself senti-

mentally as a tragic hero is one example of such a social role being enacted. In view of the quasi-religious knowledge that Janich shares, it is appropriate to examine whether he adopts the role of the prophet elsewhere in his videos. For this, more detailed analyses are needed concerning the question of whether the prophet type is compatible with the sentimental. What unites the two at first glance is their connection to uncertain times: Both sentimental narratives and prophetic figures are booming during times of crisis, as they each deal with the transcendence of the crisis in their own way.

Also, the heterogeneous emotional community formed during the COVID-19 political protests (in Germany called '*Querdenker*'-*Bewegung*) needs to be analyzed with a focus on sentimental codes used to legitimize their political agenda. Frei et al. started in 2021 with explorative research concerning the "political sociology of COVID-19 protest," which can be used as a starting point for further research with a sentimental focus (Frei/Schäfer/Nachtwey 249). Amlinger and Nachtwey have already coined the term "libertarian-authoritarian character" as a new social type emerging from the analysis of COVID-19 protests and resentment (152f.), which could also be read through the lens of the sentimental. With regard to the COVID-19 protests, it is worth considering von Scheve's concept of resentment (140) with a view to the sentimental.

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Music and the Politics of Belonging in Revolutionary Episodes

Egypt since 1952 from a Comparative Perspective

Thomas Demmelhuber

Always flowing, music is continuous, unbounded, unboundable [...] uncountable. Unlike language, music knows no impassable social barriers; being intangible and semantically ambiguous, it is the globalizable expressive substance par excellence.

(Frishkopf 145)

Music can be political and may thus be considered as a powerful instrument for expressing emotions, raising awareness, and inspiring change. It may shape collective memories and act as a repository for shared experiences that may foster or challenge these feelings of a group identity (Adorno 185ff.). In other words, music offers a space of resonance for a politics of belonging. The semantics of a politics of belonging encompasses a wide range of emotional attachments to being part of a group that shares a collective we-identity. This sense of belonging can refer to a nation, national identity frameworks, or other forms of group identities, both within and beyond national borders.¹ It often coincides with specific localities or regions within the territory of the nation-state (Zenker 772), including categories beyond citizenship such as gender, class, religion or alternative narratives of identification, and emotional affiliation in opposition to “state-centric affiliations” (ibid. 778).

Similar to other world regions, music has always played a significant role in the formation and preservation of collective memories and national identities

1 This rather narrow understanding of “politics of belonging” is aware of the rich and diverse corpus of literature in Social and Cultural Anthropology on the genesis of “politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis).

in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).² In contrast to many essentialist readings that project the region as exceptional and part of an “orientalist narrative” (Said), numerous scholars have shown how Middle Eastern music has been entrenched with the global evolution of music and has acted both as a transmitter and receiver of musical trends, genres, and formats. At the same time, MENA music features diverse forms of political legacy. The socio-political role and function of music includes many aspects: It may encompass artwork aligned with a ruling regime that is fostering a national identity in the name of the state or an element that is conveying subversive messages for the sake of criticizing or even fundamentally challenging the existing political order. This does not suggest a binary logic; rather, it evokes a continuum in which music disseminates narratives of belonging as vividly seen in the broad spectrum of religious music covering the whole range from Islamic hip-hop to *nashid* music with its material and lyrics referring to the broad corpus of Islamic normativity. In all cases mentioned above, music is a medium of memory, protest, self-ascription, and wishful thinking. It is like a “transmission belt” with regard to how a society remembers collectively and how this is embedded in various forms of historiography. It is a complex system that allows, mobilizes, and inculcates emotions and different modes of feeling.

This contribution is focusing on the role of music in Egypt since 1952 with the founding of the Arab Republic of Egypt (official declaration 1953) after the revolution of the “free officers” and the breakdown of the monarchy. This implies that any study of the various forms of music and their role in politics in Egypt is situated in the face of the absence of democracy as all five presidencies since then have fostered different types of autocracies that have entrenched themselves along all political, economic, and social layers from the central government level to local politics. Scholarly literature is rich when dealing with the modes, practices, and agency of autocratic regimes in their techniques to manipulate collective memory of the historical past as an instrument to legitimize

2 There are competing definitions of the region including the discussion about the Eurocentric character of the term itself. In this contribution, I refer to the 22 members of the Arab League plus Turkey, Israel, and Iran as constitutive elements of the Middle East and North Africa, widely described under the acronym as the MENA region. However, this shall not be conceived as a closed container but rather as embedded in a transregional density of ties. It is inspired by the broad corpus of literature in the field of Area Studies, translocality, and transregional spaces (cf. Derichs).

their grip on political power. This can encompass national museums, material sites, visionary narratives of a blossoming future but also forms of media and arts for disseminating the respective content (Hellmann 659). In this field of study, music still seems a bit underrepresented if we consider the relevant scholarly debate. Hence, the core argument of this contribution tries to show how music offers various pathways toward a politics of belonging aimed at fostering collective we-identities that are either in support of or against an existing political order. This truly deserves more scholarly attention, also in view of a gap in MENA Political Science or closely related disciplines (for exceptions, cf. El-Rashidi 2024; Asfour; Frankford).

In the MENA region, emotional and affective repertoires in literature and music have a long tradition, whereby the common dominating language of Modern Standard Arabic—despite the diversity of dialects and other languages of the MENA region (such as Turkish, Farsi, Hebrew, Kurdish, Amazigh etc.)—opens up a unique space for cultural exchange of emotions and identification beyond national borders. In the 1950s, there was a window of opportunity to promote a progressive political and societal model known as Nasserism under the leadership of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. By successfully shaking off the legacies of British imperialism and neocolonial paternalism, Nasser became the figurehead of national sovereignty while also “playing on the keyboard” of Pan-Arabism (i.e., the notion of one Arab nation). In this article, the iconic example of Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, whose song *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* became the national anthem of Egypt in 1960, shows how music captured the ideals, struggles, and aspirations of a nation during the early days of state- and nation-building.

The analysis of this revolutionary time is complemented here with a case study from another revolutionary episode six decades later. In 2011, the regional order of the MENA region faced a tremendous change. Unprecedented mass protests erupted in the province of Tunisia, served as source of inspiration for other protesters, and eventually led to the fall of some autocratic regimes and the consolidation of others. In Egypt, after the forced resignation of long-term President Mubarak, the country entered a bumpy path of democratic opening with two military interventions once again paving the way for a setback towards autocratic restoration. For this second revolutionary episode, Egyptian hip-hop serves as a showcase for how music processes these changes, embodies agency, and features the way society is adapting to a changing political and societal setting. Both examples in this diachronic comparison illustrate a permanent fusion of traditional and modern musical forms in the MENA re-

gion and depict the travelling of various musical repertoires and genres within a globalizing music sphere. They also highlight the ongoing dialogue between the past and present and offer a narrative in which memories and national identities are continuously reshaped and reimagined. Due to the focus on a restricted sample that, however, contains very prominent and salient cases of Egyptian music from different genres and historical episodes, the scope of a study like this can only be limited. Yet, the connection with the regime's politics and the analyzed actors still allows for the formulation of some substantial arguments about how music is a space of resonance for a politics of belonging that includes modes both for regime survival and contestation.

The remainder of this contribution is structured as follows. The next section locates the research endeavor of this essay in the wider literature on autocratic regimes and situates it in the debate on feelings, emotion, and affect that shall help provide a conceptual framework for the study of sentimentality in the respective artwork. This leads to a tentative heuristic to analyze the selected songs, lyrics, and video material in the analytical section with the diachronic analysis of the 1950s/-60s and the 2010s, both episodes connected by their revolutionary character.

Conceptual Reflections on Music as a Space of Resonance

This study is embedded in the wider literature on authoritarianism since it eventually assumes a regime relevant role of the arts, either in challenging or fostering the respective order (Hellmann; Frankford). It is also situated in the rapidly evolving literature on non-material sources of autocratic regime survival (Greene/Robertson) that is incorporating all kinds of emotions and modes of feeling in the analysis of autocracies and their strategies of regime stability. Meanwhile, a plethora of works on emotions and affective behavior have developed and included this in current debates either on the crisis of democracy and the role of identity politics therein (Fukuyama) or in debates on the role of emotions in various autocratic regime survival games (Greene/Robertson). At the same time, the various terms of and around emotion, such as feeling and affect, not only differ historically (Frevert et al.), in different languages (Wassmann), and cultures (Scheve et al.) but also in various disciplines (Engelen), making it even more challenging to understand the role of emotion in politics in a cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative perspective. There is certainly a consensus that, on the one hand, emotion can be taken as an um-

brella category with different subcategories that requires a careful reconstruction and disentanglement of linguistic-historical linkages. On the other hand, a cultural hermeneutic approach is indispensable to avoid hidden or implicit normativities of the key concept of emotion when operationalizing it in different cultural and linguistic settings (here: the MENA region with Arabic being the dominating language). This contribution offers a more fine-grained take on politics of belonging by reconstructing sentimental repertoires of the past in order to show how they generate feelings of being part of a felt and imagined we-identity today.

The use of sentimentality in autocratic contexts allows manipulation of past narratives to serve present objectives.³ The essential meaning of sentimentality in this study is inspired by Bens and Zenker who argue that sentiments may connect “cognitive processes of forming opinions and judgments with affective and emotional dynamics” (ibid. 96). At the same time, “sentiments do not only seem to exist on the individual but also on the collective level” (ibid. 96). In other words, by using sentimental repertoires, meaning-making on a collective level is possible and thus “sentiments can potentially transport structures for meaning-making through time and space—and can sometimes travel with great historical depth” (ibid. 97). The politics of belonging in autocracies as it is understood in this contribution goes one step further as it transcends the temporal dimension of the past and the present. Sentimentality is a relational code of communication that is not only oscillating between the presence and the past. It may also include an offer, in some cases even some kind of a script for the future (Paul). Various future visions in the resource rich MENA states—such as the Saudi version of a Vision 2030—vividly illustrate that. In other words, by relying on such a broad understanding of sentimentality, one may broaden the analytical focus and go beyond the scope of the works in the field of nostalgia (Becker) or retrotopian thought (Bauman).

Sentimentality may regulate what and how people feel about the meaning of a given context and thus contribute to making sense of the world around them (Bens/Zenker 98). When affective stimuli—for example while listening to music—encounter our stock of emotional knowledge, sentiments are generated. They represent the key category to understand how these stimuli are pro-

3 This section is based on Demmelhuber and Thies' concept of how autocratic regimes work with non-material sources, i.e., sentimental leadership strategies, for the sake of regime consolidation.

cessed, not only altering our understanding of the world but also our emotional conditioning, for example on how we will affectively respond to similar or related stimuli in future events. Sentiments are relevant in this respect for another reason: They outlast the incidents in which they are produced (Bens et al. 209). Thus, they generate a bridge from past events to the present and thereby transfer meaning. Such processes may happen in various kinds of media as well as in different spaces from sports venues to monuments and heritage sites (including the contest about the content, cf. Bsheer). This can happen in the field of ritualized behavior of a group of people sharing a common feeling, for instance, in a football stadium when singing the club's anthem, when remembering the sorrow of defining losses or the glory of victories, when singing the national anthem at public holidays, or in religious sites around ritualized confessional practices. It may happen in the field of politics when actors offer a narrative of unity and identity by relying on events of the past.⁴ It may also be found in the media, in consumerism, or branding and can be manifested along a material dimension, such as spaces, places, monuments, or traditional clothing, but also through music. In all cases, the feeling of sentimentality attached to a past event can be shared without having been a witness to it.

This mobilizing effect of sentimentality is useful for political actors. It allows them to create a unifying narrative in order to initiate shared feelings and memories and to use them as an intended instrument to foster an emotional bond of the same we-identity. More recent research has shown that this goes well beyond a reciprocal mechanism between the past and the present; it may also transcend the present by outlining features of a future order or an imagined future setting for the we-identity (Dommelhuber/Thies).

This multi-layered conceptual approach provides a broader phenomenological scope than the literature on "rally around the flag" momentums (Hellmann). It goes beyond event-driven references with its narrow and explicit focus on moments of nationalism and unity of the nation. Strategies of sentimental leadership build on a broad set of emotional repertoires already existent within the targeted audience and are then purposefully and selectively activated for political ends. Since these practices of sentimentality can be traced in different fields, the fostering of these various forms of we-identity can be achieved in rather subtle terms. This does not mean that ritualized practices around national unity days or holidays are something different; they also manifest shared practices and memories. Yet, practices of sentimentality may also

4 A broad spectrum of works in this field exists (cf. Hellmann; Zubrzycki/Woźny).

happen in a more subtle way, unbound by space and time, while having the same objective. They are supposed to have a mobilizing effect, in other words to be an instrument of social engineering that allows for a definition of who is part of the in-group and who is not. This temptation does not only apply to autocracies that are still fostering national identity structures due to a more recent state-building. It is also used by autocratic regimes that face regime-threatening episodes for example because of a poor regime performance or regional instability. Within these diverse forms of non-material sources of regime stability, music fulfills a relevant processing, transmitting, and filtering function.

When dealing with music and song lyrics, this research takes its cue from musicology and develops a heuristic for analyzing music contributions in terms of their political and societal contextualization, including implicit or explicit political narratives (Nieper/Schmitz). This contribution differentiates between a (1) material dimension, (2) a social dimension, and (3) an affective dimension. The *material dimension* encompasses all aspects of spatial elements and looks for visual references to repertoires of the past that create an affective atmosphere. What kind of material storylines are selected for conveying the respective content? The *social dimension* refers to different types of agency including references to group identities, various narratives of belonging, selected target groups, and in- and out-group dynamics. The *affective dimension* focuses on codes and stimuli, looking at how the reproduction of such codes, norms, values, and/or repertoires of the past are employed to stimulate a mode of feeling, i.e., a form of sentimentality in a politics of belonging.

Egyptian Music during Revolutionary Episodes

Any comparison asks for justification, a diachronic comparison even more so. This article compares music of the 1950s/60s with the 2010s. Both periods—no matter how different they are in terms of genre, context, and (political) motives—deal with revolutionary episodes. In the 1950s, it was the aftermath of the revolution of the free officers in 1952 that led to the fall of the monarchy and the founding of the republic that was built around a strong sense of Egyptian nationalism, national sovereignty, and socialist-inspired societal transformation. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian President until his death in 1970, was the charismatic leadership figure that mobilized the people both in Egypt but also in the whole Arab World. In 2011, it was the revolutionary momentum after the breakdown of the Mubarak regime, in which millions of Egyptians from all

strata of society took to the street to fundamentally challenge the formal and informal pillars of the political order and ask for freedom and justice.⁵ Both episodes share a critical juncture in which the people faced a time of sorrow and trauma as well as one of confidence and belief in a better future. Both historical events are cases in which the nucleus of a politics of belonging was fostered, i.e., by the manifestation of a strong national bond, an invincible unity of the Egyptian nation, vividly expressed in the iconic speech of Nasser that announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company to overcome the century-long humiliation of the Egyptian people under European imperialism.

In these troubled times, Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1898–1975) had become the most popular singer in Egypt and is still considered one of the most famous female singers of the 20th century, with her songs being regarded as a national cultural heritage with 80 million sold records. As a songwriter, singer, and actress, she was renowned for her powerful voice and emotive performances on stage. Umm Kulthum knew how to use a sentimental mode in combination with religious and political codes to affirm an affective bond with the nation. Her songs combined a past and traditional Arab style with a cautious incorporation of modern elements and stood for two related we-identities: on the one hand, a collective feeling of being one grand Arab nation and, on the other hand, the dominating identity of the Egyptian nation. This may sound contradictory but truly reflects Egyptian politics during the 1950s in which both narratives served as mobilizing powers that strengthened each other.

During the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, hip-hop emerged as a powerful voice for the protest movement and a tool for political expression and social change. This period saw a surge in the popularity and impact of Egyptian hip-hop, as artists used their music to convey the frustrations, hopes, and demands of a generation yearning for change, with an Egyptian specific hip-hop subgenre emerging, called *Mahraganat*. El Rashidi describes it as being inspired by figures like Snoop Dogg, Tupac, and Eminem while borrowing from the history of the genre. It often features socially and politically charged lyrics, grounded in “personal, political, sexual, and socioeconomic realities—most everything the government would prefer citizens not to speak about” (El Rashidi 2024, 17f.). Key figures in Egyptian hip-hop in the years after 2011 included artists like Ramy Essam, MC Amin, or Arabian Knightz,

5 It culminated in the shared chant: “The people want the fall of the regime” (*Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam*).

whose lyrics addressed themes of oppression, corruption, and the quest for freedom and justice. Hip-hop provided an accessible and immediate means for articulating the collective sentiment and demands of the revolution. Songs such as “Rebel” by Arabian Knightz became anthems of the uprising’s early days in January and February 2011, capturing the spirit of resistance and the belief in a better future. The music videos and lyrics, often shared widely on social media platforms, galvanized protesters and offered a sense of solidarity and empowerment. By voicing the unfiltered realities of life under a repressive autocratic regime, Egyptian hip-hop played a critical role in the country’s bumpy political transformation process.

Umm Kulthum, the Egyptian Nation, and the Era of Decolonization

For the analysis of Umm Kulthum’s music and the disseminated elements of a politics of belonging therein, two songs are taken as examples: first, one of her most successful songs *Enta Omri* (“You are my life”) and, second, *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* (“It has been a long time, my weapon”) that later became the national anthem of Egypt (1960–1979). *Enta Omri*, with lyrics by Ahmed Shafiq Kamel and music composed by Mohamed Abdel Wahab, is often interpreted as a profound declaration of love and appreciation. It also features a distinct material dimension of how she combined a past and traditional Arab style with a cautious incorporation of modern elements in her stage performances, for example the way the electronic guitar is located within the accompanying orchestra. The social dimension is at first glance murky. Its primary theme is romantic love, but it also carries political elements and references to national unity, explicitly reflecting the *zeitgeist* of Egypt during the revolutionary times of the 1950s. *Enta Omri* is an almost one-hour long song⁶ expressing deep affection and gratitude. The lyrics speak to a profound emotional connection, capturing the essence of finding a soulmate or experiencing a life-changing love. The song is divided into eight sections, all oscillating between the hardships of the past and the confidence of the present, translated into a hope for a better future. The song’s romantic sentiment offers various affective stimuli and has resonated widely with the audiences. The broader socio-political context of the 1960s, when the song was released, adds various layers to deconstruct

6 Over the years, different recordings were made leading to various lengths of the song existing until today (most of the recordings are between 40 to 60 minutes).

these affective stimuli. Egypt was undergoing a significant transformation under President Nasser. Umm Kulthum—a known supporter of Nasser's political and societal vision for Egypt as the leader of the Arab World—and her music often reflected the nationalistic fervor of that era. While *Enta Omri* does not explicitly mention Nasser or political themes, its release in 1964 coincided with a period of renewed hope and national pride in Egypt. Throughout the lyrics, Umm Kulthum refers to the past times that shall help overcome bitterness and pains of the past. At this point, the song's affective dimension can be read as a code featuring a tribute to the spirit of the nation and its grand leader who is taking it into a new era with a better future, one the nation has been yearning for so long. This all embodies the collective sentiment of love and devotion to Egypt, as personified by Nasser's leadership. Although *Enta Omri* is often regarded as a love song, its cultural and historical context allows for a constellation of love and loyalty to Nasser and the Egyptian nation that transcends its romantic narrative, reflecting national pride and unity of the Egyptian people and giving sense to the suffering, sorrow, and challenges of the past and the present.

In contrast to the implicit references to the Egyptian nation, *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* is much more explicit in tone and lyrics. *Wallah Zaman* is nationalistic in its nature and has a clear-cut material dimension by referring to crucial events of the country's shaking off of any form of imperial penetration. It was composed by Kamal Al Taweel with lyrics by Salah Jahin and was written around the time of the Suez Crisis (i.e., war) in 1956 that followed the proclaimed nationalization of the Suez Canal Company by President Nasser. One section gets to the heart of the matter: "Who shall protect Free Egypt? We shall protect her with our weapons. Land of the revolution, who will sacrifice themselves for her sake? We will, with our souls" (The Arab Republic of Egypt—Presidency, translation T. D.).

These founding years of the republic in the 1950s were marked by the struggle against the legacies of European imperialism and the assertion of its national sovereignty. The lyrics of *Wallah Zaman* are direct and stirring, invoking a sense of pride, resilience, and readiness for the battle, indicating a revival of the fighting spirit and a call to arms. Key themes in the lyrics' social dimension include a strong sense of nationalism with references to the homeland and the collective spirit of its people. It emphasizes the determination and strength of the Egyptian people, ready to defend their nation against any threats from outside and from within. The lyrics call for unity among Egyptians, portraying the weapon as a symbol of collective resistance and power and a sentimental

bond between the past and the present. The song became the national anthem of Egypt until it was replaced by *Bilady, Bilady, Bilady* (“My country, my country, my country”) in 1979.

In sum, the lyrics and context of its creation make *Wallah Zaman* a significant piece of political and cultural history in Egypt. Unlike *Enta Omri* which can be interpreted through a romantic or nationalistic lens, *Wallah Zaman* is unambiguously a patriotic anthem, a hymn to the nation, directly linked to the spirit of resistance and the *zeitgeist* under Nasser’s leadership. To a different degree, both songs offer a sense of belonging in times of multiple upheavals, refer to the challenges, sorrows, and traumas of the past, and generate the strength of a we-identity that shall prevail over space and time.

Egyptian Hip-Hop, a Divided Nation and the Yearning for a Better Future

During the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 and the following revolutionary episodes, hip-hop became a vehicle for political expression and the demands of the youth involved in the uprisings. Several factors contributed to the emergence and influence of hip-hop as a powerful symbolic representation of defiance and non-conformity: First, the uprisings were essentially driven by young Egyptians of different social backgrounds who were frustrated by the lack of perspectives and the harsh reality of oppression at the hands of the police and security apparatus. Second, the Arab uprisings were a prime example of how the protests led to emulation and imitation among each other. As the protesters learned from one another, hip-hop artists drew on this tradition and used social media platforms to bypass traditional state-censored media outlets. Third, Egyptian artists wrote lyrics that were grounded in deeply personal, political, sexual, and socioeconomic realities, in El Rashidi’s (2023) words, “everything the government would prefer citizens not to speak about, and the kind of material that citizen patrols love to report.” And fourth, it also boosted a merger with Egyptian traditions of oriental music that developed into a genre of its own, the *Mahraganat* music (previously called “electro-shaabi,” with *shaabi* meaning “from the people”), which gained much prominence in the late 2000s as a music of the streets, in particular around weddings in the poor urban neighborhoods of Cairo. The main instrument in *Mahraganat* music (coming from the word *mahragan* meaning “festival”) is the computer, with the keyboard providing the strings with which it is played

(Naji 2023). Rather than mimicking Westernized electronic music, it synthesizes oriental rhythms and beats into its melodies (Naji 2021) and provides a “mixture of styles inspired by techno, rap and traditional Arab music” (Rabie).

Probably the best-known hip-hop voice of the 2011 events is Ramy Essam whose song *Irhal* (“Leave”) became the anthem of the protest movement demanding the immediate resignation of President Mubarak. It played a significant role in mobilizing protesters, channeling the hardship and frustration of ordinary citizens under the autocratic regime. Later in 2011, Essam expanded and adapted the lyrics by reiterating the ideals of the revolution against the rising actorness of the Egyptian military (Essam). With similar prominence, Arabian Knightz with *Ehna Al Hokoma* (“We are the government”) were claiming a new sense of sovereignty that rests with the people: “We are the government, we are the voice. [...] We will fight, we will fight our rights. Even if we die, we will stand up and fight. We are the government” (Arabian Knightz, translation T. D.). Another—even more stunning example of how the lyrics re-define the social dimension of the people’s identity—comes from MC Amin with *Ez-zay* (“How”) in which he rallies around the importance of Egyptians coming together, regardless of their differences, in order to fight for a common cause, a better future with dignity and justice for all citizens. In 2014—after the second military intervention and the beginning of the autocratic restoration in Egypt under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi—MC Amin returned powerfully with the song *Mabrouk ya Sisi* (“Congratulations to Sisi”) by referring to the revolutionary spirit. He starts with: “By the way, I won’t leave anything for tomorrow. [...] And tomorrow, uncle, the revolution will rise without any stars. The revolution will return once more. You’ll run and hide and you won’t be able to sleep!” (MC Amin). Eventually, he ends with the threatening chiffe “[t]he third wave is coming! Congratulations, ya Sisi” (ibid., translation T. D.).

Meanwhile, with the re-autocratization of the Egyptian political order, the spaces for hip-hop’s contentious agency including *Mahraganat* music have shrunken significantly. Hip-hop became too prominent, as Nashed writes for the year 2017:

[...] lack of mainstream attention even enabled some artists to push the boundaries of censorship. And while their music was gaining traction, it wasn’t popular enough to invite a crackdown from the state. But in today’s Egypt, where thousands of youths are in jail for criticizing the regime, rapping about politics is riskier than ever. (Nashed)

Many artists of Egypt's hip-hop scene have since ended up in jail or have left the country.

The official gatekeeper of Egyptian music, the Musician's Syndicate, does not recognize Rap, hip-hop, or *Mahraganat* music, leaving performing singers in a gray area and at the mercy of the state's arbitrariness. Some musicians were able to gain membership in the syndicate by registering as DJs and not as singers. In 2020, the Musician's Syndicate tried to ban *Mahraganat* music, justifying this as a necessary step in the fight against "kitsch and indecency" (Rabie). This is surprising because initially the singers of *Mahraganat* music had been (more or less) tolerated. This changed when they became more outspoken in criticizing the regime and their art was consequently perceived as a threat to those in power. The regime reacted with repression and the promotion of pro-regime musicians, in the words of Rabie, the "government wants to contain *mahragana* while at the same time using its success to praise its achievements [. . .]. Singers now have to avoid topics such as poverty, violence and politics if they want to continue singing" (Karawia in Rabie).

The autocratic regime is using the full spectrum of repression and cooperation to either regain control or co-opt certain parts of the scene in order to avoid any regime threatening dynamic. However, regime actions to stop this dynamic in the country's music production is facing obstacles in view of artists' creativity leading to an ongoing "hit and run with the authorities" (Naji 2021).

Yet, despite this bottom-up inspired political scenery of Egyptian rappers in the *Mahraganat* scene coming under increasing regime scrutiny, one may not disregard the fact that the rising popularity of Egyptian hip-hop has also led to a further mainstreaming of artists with less explicit political outreach. With tremendous popularity in Egypt and the whole MENA region, these artists have left behind the discourse on specific events, hardships, or sorrow. They do not target any grievances but appear rather conducive to the existing political order and the underlying autocratic regime. Mohamed Ramadan serves as a good example: He gained massive popularity as an actor, singer, and rapper in Egypt and the Arab World with over 32 million followers on Instagram (2024). His work often blends traditional Egyptian music with contemporary rap and pop elements, making him a prominent figure in modern Arabic pop culture. While most of his music touches on social themes, it does not feature explicit political content and when doing so, it is in subtle support of a widely shared societal consensus (for instance in support of the Palestinian people). It rather features narratives of a national bond for the sake of Egyptian unity or narratives of a common national and ethnic descent, as is convincingly shown by his profile

subtext on Instagram featuring him as “Egyptian, Arab and African”. The lyrics of his 2024 song “Arabi” are a stunning example of how he exploits rather simple affective stimuli to foster a feeling of belonging among Arab people vis-à-vis an allegedly hostile environment outside the Arab World (Ramadan 2024).

However, once the existing political order is facing stress factors in view of protests in the past, Egyptian rappers serve as an instrument of the regime. It was in 2019 that Mohamed Ramadan came up with a rap video alleging that Egyptian protesters incited chaos (Ramadan 2019). This strong narrative of “stability vs. chaos” is a well-known and widely used framing of regime legitimation. The lyrics of the video convey the clear and simple message to regime critical voices that they want nothing but chaos, show disrespect to the allegedly great role of the security forces, and are rather decoupled from the reality of society. It is amazing to see how he pretends—with his typical stunning “larger-than-life personality”—that he knows the hardships of the people. This material dimension has remained a constant element in his social media activities, showing him in luxury vehicles cruising through the streets of Cairo while pretending accessibility and empathy with the people in the street.

Ramadan’s appeal largely stems from his ability to connect with fans through simple themes and his charismatic personality built on hyper-masculinity and a staged accessibility for this fan base. His content on social media features unlimited luxury and materialism and is reminiscent of the genre’s roots in overcoming hardship and celebrating success. This “larger-than-life cult” but also the reference to the self-made success let him appear similar to U.S. rappers such as Ludacris or 50 Cent. The latter provide a particularly strong basis for comparison due to their significant achievements in both music and acting, as well as their confident heroizing image. This stands in stark contrast to the much more bottom-up related performance of *Mahraganat* actors with less dominance of materialism but a staunch focus on group-related aspects of belonging with increasing creativity in developing alternative affective stimuli that remain well under the radar of an expanding autocratic regime.

Conclusion and Future Avenues of Research

There is an increasing scholarly consensus regarding the role of soft power discourses as sources of legitimation when it comes to explaining the durability

of autocratic regimes. With respect to its political implications, music must be factored in as both a resource of regime consolidation and a stress factor for the incumbents. In times of upheaval in particular, music processes and translates the challenges for politics and societies and may be instrumentalized for different reasons. In all cases, music is a medium of memory, protest, demands, and wishes as well as a “transmission belt” on how a society remembers and how this is embedded in historiography. It is a complex system that allows, initiates, and enshrines emotions and different modes of sentimentality to create a feeling of belonging with different underlying motives and with different reference groups. The semantics of such a politics of belonging comprise a broad spectrum and go well beyond the traditional we-identities of a nation. This contribution has shown the role of music in the playbook of a politics of belonging including both a top-down perspective (e.g. sentimental leadership strategies) and a bottom-up perspective that contests the existing order. In other cases, as the example of Mohamed Ramadan has plausibly shown, it develops into a strategy of regime consolidation. At the same time, the much more differentiated role of music as a provider of narratives of identification along diverse categories such as class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and others must also be taken into consideration.

While there is a substantial stock of knowledge in literature on the role of music and the arts in protest and social movements, we still do not know enough to understand the strategies and mechanisms of how music is part of the playbook of regime survival. Different strategies of adaptation, repression, infiltration, and appropriation apply. Music production around national holidays—just to pick out one example—shows what a powerful tool it may be to foster a feeling of national unity and provide a narrative of an even brighter future under an existing leadership. Numerous research avenues—that must include inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in order to deconstruct the studied artwork more systematically—are lying ahead as the options and pathways of production and dissemination are multiplying. This playbook needs more scholarly attention, the journey has just begun!

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Weeping for Chairman Mao Zedong

Sentimental Politics of Tears in China in 1976

Marc Andre Matten

In 1976, the artist Chen Danqing 陈丹青 (born 1953) presented his oil painting *Tears Flooding the Autumnal Fields* (泪水洒满丰收田) as part of a larger series detailing the life of Tibetans.¹ It depicted peasants crying after having received the news of Mao Zedong's death while harvesting wheat from their fields. Chen, a graduate of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, is famous for his realist paintings that contributed to the Mao cult, most prominently the painting "Writing a Letter to Chairman Mao" expressing the desire of the young generation in the 1960s to leave the big cities and pursue the revolution in the countryside.²

The 1976 painting shows the immediate reaction to the sad news. The transistor radio points to the development in the rural areas of the high plateau and indicates the far-reaching impact of the central government's propaganda throughout the country. In addition, it emphasizes the immediacy of collective reaction, with the peasants bursting into tears almost simultaneously. Tears are one of the most effective forms of sentimental communication. Their affective power is derived precisely from their immediacy, for they are viewed as an uncontrollable reaction to a saddening event, may it be the death of a beloved family member in a personal context or the case of a collective catastrophe, such as earthquakes, inundations, or defeats in war battles (Lutz).

1 For an overview see Chen Daqing, "Série de peintures sur le Tibet et moi." http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/french/Culture/article/2015-02/28/content_671047.htm (last access April 10, 2024).

2 This refers to the send-down youth movement where young people (zhiqing) of the urban areas—either willingly or forced—moved to rural areas to live and work as part of the "Up the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement." (see Davies)

Figure 1: Chen Danqing, *Tears Flooding the Autumnal Fields*, 1976, oil on canvas, 164x235 cm



http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/french/Culture/article/2015-02/28/content_671047.htm

Though the death of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was not unexpected, it stirred up the whole country. Workers, peasants, and party cadres expressed their sorrow in the media, as did representatives of ethnic minorities—like the Tibetans—, foreign dignitaries, and Maoist groups in Japan, West Europe, and North America, let alone the governments of socialist countries. This dimension of the chairman's mourning—a global icon of revolutionary movements in the 20th century had passed—was extraordinary. The weeping and wailing found its way into a sheer number of publications and testimonials, ranging from newspaper reports and memorial literature to photographs and TV documentaries, including a 700-page-long volume documenting the grief of foreign political and economic leaders by providing a Chinese translation of their speeches, poems and writings of condolences (Xinhua News Agency).

In contrast to the preceding demise of politicians and party leaders in the Mao era, such as the former state president Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (November 12, 1969), who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution due to alleged capitalist tendencies in his thought and behavior, and the former premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (January 8, 1976), who was a popular figure in the revolutionary period, the case of Mao Zedong was—given his exalted status—exceptional.

The news reports of his funeral and the nationwide mass memorial meetings reveal a particular sentimental reaction that, in the preceding decades of class struggle, enforced reeducation, and political persecution would have been unimaginable. This paper shows that the decision to allow for sentimental reactions in the public realm was not only a question of decorum and respect but also a question of “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1979, 1983), that is, regulating who was allowed to cry in public, on which occasion, and to what extent. To do so was of utmost concern for the Party, at the time when the country had just lost its paramount leader, which is reflected in the powerful images used in propaganda in late 1976.

The Chairman's Death

Mao Zedong experienced a deteriorating health since January 1976. Ten years earlier, on July 16, 1966, he still had entered the 11th cross-Yangtze contest, a mass swim across China's largest river in the city of Wuhan to prove his health and physical strength shortly before starting the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the communist hagiography he appears as a powerful leader who did not cry easily, even when receiving notice that his son Mao Anying 毛岸英 had died at the front line in Korea in 1950 (Quan Yanchi 50). In early 1976, his increasing weakness no longer allowed him to read and comment on official documents. Accordingly, he tasked Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921–2008) to take over government responsibility by uttering six characters: “With you in charge, I'm at ease” (*Ni banshi wo fangxin* 你办事我放心) that quickly became a popular saying in the media and political discourse to legitimize the Hua's succession.³ Hua took over the post as acting Premier of the PRC and as the First Vice Chairman of the CCP after Zhou Enlai's death on January 8, 1976. He repeated this saying on numerous occasions to justify his position as new head of state and government.

On September 9, Mao's heart stopped beating after having suffered a second heart attack on June 26 and a third one on September 2. Being a heavy

3 It goes without saying that Hua Guofeng actively popularized this saying for the sake of his own legitimacy that he had to defend against the aspirations of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. For the numerous versions of propaganda posters on this issue, see the Stefan Landsberger Collection, <https://chinese posters.net/themes/huaguofeng-in-charge> (last access April 30, 2024).

smoker and suffering from pneumonia, he had developed breathing problems for which Henry Kissinger had sent a respirator machine to Beijing (after his secret mission to China in 1971). In addition, he was affected by a worsening amyotrophic lateral sclerosis that had been diagnosed in 1974. The chairman was declared dead shortly after midnight, and on the same night, Hua Guofeng called for a meeting of the Politburo during which it was decided—against Mao's wish—to embalm the body and to display it in the Great Hall of the People so that the Chinese people could bid farewell (Li Zhisui, chapter 1).

During the day of September 9, the news of his passing spread throughout the country. An official proclamation was made in the afternoon when the Central People's Broadcasting Station in Beijing (中央人民广播电台) broadcasted the *Message to the Whole Party, the Whole Army and the People of All Nationalities Throughout the Country* (告全党全军全国各族人民书) issued by Central Committee of the CCP, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the State Council, and the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the CCP (*People's Daily*, September 10, 1976; Walder 1–14). According to the announcement, no amusement was to take place in the following week, flags were to be lowered half-pole during the mourning period, and the official funeral ceremony was to take place on September 18.

The news reports in the following days emphasized two important messages directed to the people. It was imperative, first, to express gratitude for the chairman's historical achievements and, second, to prevent the sad feelings from paralyzing the nation. Among the mourning people, the Red Guards (*Hongweibing*) received particular attention in state media in the first days after September 9. In the summer of 1966, the radicalized youth had been tasked by Mao Zedong to conduct the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The ensuing decade was a period of extensive political chaos that affected every part of the country. The Red Guards made large-scale efforts to rid China of liberal and bourgeois elements, to sanitize Chinese culture by destroying the “four olds” (‘old ideas’, ‘old culture’, ‘old customs’, and ‘old habits’), and to take the class struggle to an unknown level. In struggle sessions and self-criticism, the class enemy—ranging from intellectuals to persons who had had contact with relatives in foreign countries or who had studied abroad before 1949—was declared an enemy of the people, with many being executed (Leese 2007; Walder).

Having been key in the establishment of the Mao cult and instrumental in pushing it to extremes when destroying tradition in order to establish a new and truly socialist society (Landsberger), the Red Guards were most affected by the passing of their beloved leader to whom they had dedicated their youth.

The *Peking Review* reports in the article “Carry Out Chairman Mao’s Behests and Carry the Cause of Proletarian Revolution Through to the End”:

Nurtured by the Mao Tsetung Thought, Red Guards and Little Red Guards in the capital could not hold back their tears at the sight of Chairman Mao’s remains. They vowed: ‘Esteemed and beloved Chairman Mao, we will study well and make progress every day in line with your teachings. We will live up to your expectations, be worthy successors to the revolutionary cause and carry through to the end the proletarian revolutionary cause you pioneered!’
 (*Peking Review* 39/1976, 24)

Figure 2: Red Guards breaking into tears after receiving the news of Mao Zedong’s death

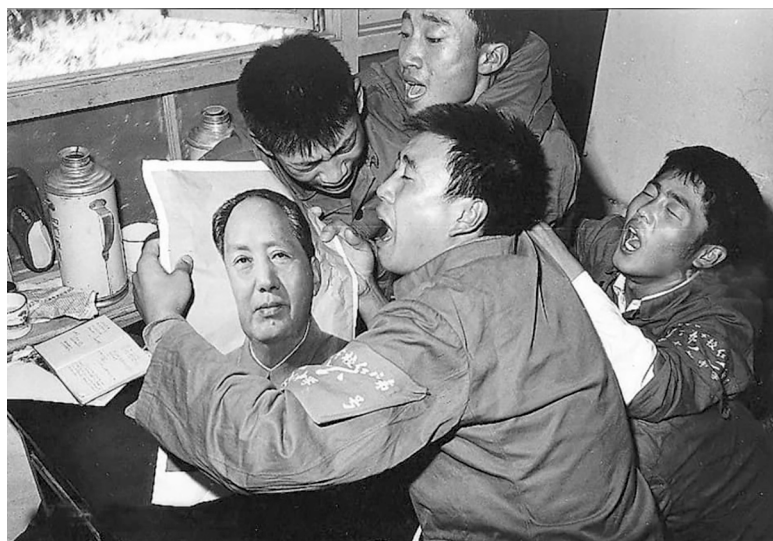


Photo taken by Jiang Shaowu 蒋少武 1976 in Shenyang⁴

4 Charles Liu, “Chinese Unleash Rare Criticism of Chairman Mao on 39th Anniversary of His Death.” September 10, 2015, <https://www.thenanfang.com/support-chairman-mao-waning-40th-anniversary-death/>. I thank Zhao Juan for establishing contact to his family.

News reports of the following days were full of information detailing how every person in the country reacted to the shock, and how peasants and workers in all provinces and prefectures were expressing their grief over the loss of the Chairman (Wakeman 1988). Foreigners living in Shanghai as translators and language teachers at Shanghai International Studies University were reportedly also unable to stop their tears (Masi 92–93). Deviating reactions were rare yet existed. Some individuals from the classes of peasants and workers who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, for instance, celebrated the Chairman's death for which they were arrested and convicted. The accusation was that they had sullied the reputation of socialism or even tried to topple the socialist system (Leese 2020, prologue). In a time of crisis—the country had just lost its leader—such feelings could not be left unregulated, even when expressed only privately. Accordingly, the Communist Party went at great lengths to control public feelings, starting with the organization of the funeral rally on Tiananmen Square.⁵

The Funeral Rally on Tiananmen Square

The official funeral ceremony took place in Tiananmen Square on September 18. It was organized meticulously by the funeral committee that took fully into account the pressing issue of succession. Hua Guofeng, among other members of the Politburo, feared that the rivalry of different factions in the Cultural Revolution, the omnipresence of class struggle, and the craving for power by Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991), Mao's widow and the leading member of the Gang of Four (the left-wing faction of the Communist Party that was responsible for some of the most ruthless persecutions in the Cultural Revolution and that tried to gain control of the Party), could potentially result in chaos and conflict (Wakeman 261).

According to the report “The Nation Grieves with Deepest Sorrow” in the *Peking Review*, “all people outdoors stood in silent tribute, all vehicles stopped running and hundreds of thousands of five-star flags flew at half-

5 I rely here on Ann Cvetkovich who in her book *Depression—A Public Feeling* (Durham/London: Duke Univ. Press, 2012) situates a negative feeling such as depression in a social-political context instead of reducing it to a biological phenomenon defined by chemical imbalances of the brain. By using feeling instead of affect or emotion, she is able to integrate bodily and cognitive elements.

mast in mourning across the length and breadth of China's vast territory [. . .] Hundreds of millions of people were plunged into the deepest grief over the loss of their respected and beloved great leader" (*Peking Review* 39/1976, 39). Another piece entitled "Solemn Mass Meeting to Mourn the Great Leader and Chairman Mao Tse-tung" provides the following details of the ceremony:

At 3 p.m. sharp, Comrade Wang Hung-wen, Vice-Chairman of the C.P.C. Central Committee, declared the memorial meeting open. The million mourners observed a three-minute silence amid the solemn strains of funeral music played by a 500-man military band. Live transmissions over the radio and television carried the proceedings to innumerable homes. The funeral music was heard in every corner of the country—in the cities and villages, over towering mountain ranges and rivers, and in the vast frontier regions. The great motherland fell silent. The 800 million people of China, their eyes filled with tears, stood in silent tribute. (*Peking Review*, 39/1976, 8–9)

The *Peking Review* further declared under the title "Over 300,000 People Pay Respects to Remains of the Great Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao—Seven-day Solemn Mourning Ceremony in Peking's Great Hall of the People":

The passing of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, the esteemed and beloved great leader of our Party, our army and the people of all nationalities in our country and the great teacher of the international proletariat and the oppressed nations and oppressed people, has brought tremendous grief to the people across China and throughout the world. (*Peking Review* 39/1976, 17)

The depth of grief is described by detailing the behavior and emotional reactions of the mourning workers, peasants, cadres, and intellectuals who had the opportunity in the preceding week (September 11–17) to enter the Great Hall of the People on the Western side of Tiananmen Square and see their Great Leader for the last time:

The mourning ceremony began at 10 a.m. on September 11. A P.L.A. band began playing the solemn funeral music. With boundless esteem, respect and love for Chairman Mao, the Party and state leaders stood before the catafalque and paid their respects to Chairman Mao. They bowed three times and stood in silent tribute for three minutes [. . .] From early dawn till late at night, workers, peasants, P.L.A. fighters and commanders, people of various nationalities and circles, and Party, government and army cadres

came to Tien An Men Square in a steady stream from all parts of the city. Group after group, they filed into the hall with heavy steps [...] The hall was filled with deepest grief. Slowly filing past to pay their respects to their most esteemed and beloved leader, they could not restrain their bitter grief or hold back the tears [...] The steps of the magnificent Great Hall of the People were wet with tears. The funeral music in the solemn mourning hall was drowned by the sound of sobbing. (*Peking Review*, 39/1976, 18–19)

This feeling was intensified by the revolutionary song *The East is Red* (*Dongfanghong*) which had been heard regularly during the Cultural Revolution, with its most moving part being “The east is red, the sun rises. China has brought forth a Mao Tsetung. He works for the people’s happiness, he is the people’s great savior” (*Peking Review* 39/1976, 10). The song was followed by Hua Guofeng’s memorial speech (*Funeral of Mao* 1976, 1:20:11). In it, Hua emphasized the significance of the “Three Dos and Three Don’ts,” that is to practice Marxism-Leninism and not revisionism, to unite and not to split, and to be open and correct in attitude and not to become involved in conspiracies and intrigues (Representatives of Workers, Peasants, Soldiers, Students, Merchants, and the Masses of the Capital hold a Meeting). Given the fact that Mao had used the same expression to criticize the Gang of Four, the message of this quotation was clear: Hua claimed the power. He was officially announced as the new leader during a rally on Tiananmen Square on October 24, 1976 and soon pursued the establishment of a personal cult that imitated the visual language of Mao on propaganda posters and even pushed him to adopt the Chairman’s hairstyle (Martin 50; Leese 2011, 246).

On September 18, mass memorial meetings took place in all parts of the country, supposedly rallying 800 million people (which would have been the whole population at the time) to observe a three-minute silence, with all factories, ships, trains, and mines to sound their sirens. The emphasis on the totality of the people attending the funeral ceremonies in Beijing and elsewhere stood in stark contrast to the restrictions of mourning in the previous decade (let alone the pre-1949 period: the socialist transformation of the People’s Republic had set an end to many traditional rites that to some extent have reemerged only since the 1990s, see Watson/Rawski). During the Cultural Revolution, it was nearly impossible for the bereaved to attend the cremation of a family member. Unsure whether the deceased had been a “black element,” had died from political violence, or committed suicide, the crematoria often preferred anonymous mass graves to avoid the accusation of honoring an

enemy of the people. They prohibited the attendance of family members, thus setting an unsurmountable obstacle for the families to observe proper burial rituals (Wakeman 1985, 151).

The death of a political figure whose ideological purity could not be doubted, however, allowed an unhindered expression of grief. A few months earlier when Premier Zhou Enlai had died, several hundred thousand people assembled in Tiananmen Square on the traditional Tomb-Sweeping Day (April 4), laying down wreaths commemorating the popular premier and presenting banners criticizing the Gang of Four (and by proxy Mao Zedong) for attacking Zhou during the Cultural Revolution. Seeing such opposition, the Central Committee intervened with military force, causing a violent riot. Months later, the situation changed: The unquestioned status of Mao Zedong and his popularity among the people—resulting from his personal cult in the preceding decades—made an unlimited and unrestrained expression of grief in public possible.

Figure 3: Weeping Workers in the Great Hall of the People



Exact origin of the photo unknown. Here taken from <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/423354438>

Images of the events in the days after the Chairman's death testify that when people passed the catafalque in the Great Hall of the People, they sud-

denly burst into tears. Tears appear here as an immediate corporal reaction to an external stimulus. According to Helmuth Plessner, both laughing and crying are reactions to a deep crisis, experienced individually or collectively (Plessner; Fischer). Considering that many of them had never been so close to Mao when he was still alive, the opportunity and occasion of seeing his corpse caused a profound crisis, and crying was the answer to cope with it. As Jack Katz and Tom Lutz have shown respectively, the reason for weeping can be rage or joy, and sometimes it can even be caused by emotions that are inexplicable to the weeping person. Weeping relieves tension and has a cathartic function that can be found in all cultures (Katz; Lutz). Though the uncontrollable and spontaneous emotional expressions when passing the corpse contrasted with the meticulously planned ceremonies, the tears were not an irrational reaction. As argued by Martha Nussbaum, emotions are central to all forms of human action, which includes the political realm that has wrongly been seen as privileging rationalities. For Nussbaum, emotions are shaped and disseminated by education, political maneuvers, and culture, which is particularly obvious, yet not exceptional, in the case of illiberal societies (Nussbaum). I argue in the following that the organization of the memorial rallies in Beijing, Shanghai, and elsewhere, in fact, followed a specific political script that also set limits to the expression of grief. The party leadership intentionally provided for a permissible space to cry in public where grief, sadness, and loss were a controlled part of the political sphere that relied on pathos to channel the emotions, precisely at a time when the question of Mao's successor was unanswered, and rivalries between the different factions in the Party were expected.

The expression of grief was not supposed to be left unchecked. In order to rationalize public feelings, the party leadership emphasized in speeches, eulogies, and news reports that grief should not paralyze the nation, but "turn grief into strength" (化悲痛为力量).⁶ This slogan, which had previously been used to mourn the death of Stalin in 1953 and the passing of Ho Chi-min 胡志明 in 1969, was a key message appearing ubiquitously in the news, amended by the vow to continue Chairman Mao's revolutionary mission.⁷ It highlighted

6 As Plessner has pointed out, crying is an expression of lacking power and helplessness (352), a mental state that for a communist party emphasizing the need for permanent class struggle and continuous self-transformation of the individual was impermissible.

7 The slogan also appeared in condolence letters of other communist parties, such as the one by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Portugal (Marxist-Leninist): "When the sad news of the death of Comrade Mao Tsetung reaches the five continents, the five continents will surely turn grief into strength. We are convinced that the cause

the need to maintain the revolutionary zeal in the transition period where the successor to Mao had not been identified. For instance, the Hero Battalion of the PLA's Air Force declared in an article that although the news of Mao's death had moved them to tears instantaneously, they swore to remember his achievements and struggle against enemies in the past decades, promising to maintain their loyalty (Worker Propaganda Team for Mao Zedong Thought at Xinjiang University; Student Association of Central China Normal University in Wuhan) and to continue his legacy until the liberation of Taiwan had been achieved (Commander and Fighters of the Hero Battalion). Their grief could persist only temporarily because in socialist societies the only permissible negative emotions were anger and hate. Both were central to class struggle and the effort to create an advanced society built on historical materialism that promised a splendid and paradisiacal future where there was no helplessness, passivity, or depression.⁸

Mao's funeral was—together with Zhou Enlai's a few months earlier—one of the very rare occasions to allow tears in public. The appeal to “turn grief into strength” and the fact that the media were subject to party control reveal to what extent the party leadership intended to intervene in regulating permissible emotions, especially in a highly formal setting: Going to the Great Hall was an organized event, with specific groups chosen to pass the catafalque and with everyone expected to shed tears. The expectation to cry and the simultaneous persecution of those who did not shows how political and social pressure—the “feeling rules”—impacted people's reactions, thus potentially rendering the tears less “real.” As Gary Ebersole has argued, such an interpretation is based on the “Western bourgeois sense of the individual” that privileges individual agency (or its potentiality). In addition, the distinction between real

of communism and the cause of opposing hegemonism of the peoples of the world will surely gain a new development. The image of Comrade Mao Tsetung will undoubtedly inspire every communist fighter. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Portugal (Marxist-Leninist) extends to you its deepest condolences.” (*Peking Review*, no. 40, 1976, 62).

- 8 Cf. the critique of the 1950 film ‘The Life of Wu Xun’ where a certain He Jiahui warned against the shedding of tears, preferring anger in the struggle for a socialist society. The film depicts the efforts of a Chinese educational reformer (1838–1896) to collect money for opening a school for poor children, instead of pursuing a revolution changing the power relations in society. The film was the first one to be banned in the People's Republic of China (He Jiahui 1951).

and false tears, he points out, prevents the possibility of analyzing their local, religious, or cultural characteristics (Ebersole 213). The question at stake is whether the tears are prescribed, expected, or rather spontaneous. It is difficult to answer this because the written and visual sources at hand have more than once been manipulated for political purposes.

In some testimonials, the ceremonies are in fact described as artificial. Edoarda Masi who lived and worked in Beijing as a translator in 1976 writes in her diary in the entry of September 19:

The Chinese have the capacity to transmute the most terrible events into theater, annulling the contingency of the moment in which they are experienced. This ceremony had nothing 'real' about it; it was an abstract, livid performance of a funeral in which everyone played a prearranged role—a moment that exists outside time and becomes forever fixed in images. (Masi 98–99)

According to her perception,

the same acts, the same words, the same filmed reports four and five times, ten and twenty times, and were it possible, it would be a hundred and a thousand times—for a Westerner, this becomes impossible; you can't take it. After the fifth identical repetition, even if it were of the most sublime truth, you collapse. Everything becomes opaque, indistinguishable. This is not ritual for the sake of catharsis or redemption. (*ibid.*)

The juxtaposition of “the Chinese” and “the Westerner” not only reproduces the image of China being collective and the West being individualistic, but much more points to the assumption of strong cultural differences. Her Western gaze prevents Masi from recognizing that the ritualized behavior when passing the catafalque (the bowing), the material symbols of mourning such as white chrysanthemums attached to the chest, and the organization of where to stand and when to continue one's movement was a performative act following an established cultural script. It originated in the Confucian tradition as well as in the Soviet system of funeral rites. The former emphasized the moral duty of the son to express his filial piety towards the deceased, while the latter had established a system of regulations that granted different rituals according to the rank of the deceased. Detailed regulations had prevailed in imperial times for defining proper mourning that required scholar-officials

to mourn for their emperor or defined who was obliged to mourn for a family relative and for how long (Kutcher), and the funeral ceremonies organized by emperors of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) were to document the ruler's impeccable morality, that is to embody filial piety as one of the core Confucian values. Conducting ceremonies provided them with the necessary political legitimacy, and the expression of grief was an expected behavior. The political actors of the 20th century continued this tradition yet chose to address larger audiences. When Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925) passed away on March 12, 1925—he had founded the Republic of China in 1912 and became its first president—his death and the funeral were reported widely in magazines and newspapers (Chen Yunqian 85–146). Mao's funeral was the first time that the majority of the population was able to attend, either physically or via radio and TV broadcast. The CCP used this opportunity to instill its political message in the ceremony's participants and observers, what Wen-Hsuan Tsai has called a "framed funeral" (Tsai). Influenced by the Soviet system of funeral rites since the 1940s, the CCP followed the *nomenklatura*, granting different rituals to officials of different ranks. Thus, Mao's funeral had to be of unrivaled rank (and has not been surpassed yet)—the official funeral has to be viewed as a source of political legitimacy and as a means to ensure its hegemony, instead of leaving it exclusively to the family. The loyalty to Mao, nurtured particularly in the Cultural Revolution, and his representation as a caring father figure in the propaganda evoked reactions in the populace that were employed for distinct purposes.

In fact, the collective act of mourning was not only an expression of respect required by political and cultural norms. It was also supposed to strengthen a sense of solidarity (what Radcliffe-Brown has called an "affirmation of solidarity"). The decade preceding Mao's death, the Cultural Revolution, had witnessed numerous collective events that ripped families and social groups apart, such as when high school students beat their teachers to death or when children labeled their parents as capitalists or counterrevolutionary elements. Already in the early years of the PRC the Party taught class hate to the people, resulting in the denouncement, corporal punishment, humiliation, and execution of uncountable class enemies since the land reform in the early 1950s (Lu). The criticism of deviating political views, the persecution of political enemies, and the ubiquitous suspicion towards one's neighbor or colleague who could potentially turn against oneself had created a society deeply permeated by anti-solidarity. The act of collective mourning can be understood as a ritual in which certain values are shared among a distinct group, and, no matter

whether secular or religious, rituals generate solidarity among participants and contribute to the creation of social order. In fact, the photos of the mass mourning ceremonies demonstrate an almost military sense of formation and order, which stands in clear contrast to the previous rallies of the Red Guards characterized by chaos and confrontations.

A closer look at the visual sources depicting the actual behavior of individuals reveals that it is the shared feeling of pain and loss that seems to restore solidarity, something that Émile Durkheim called “emotional effervescence” (Durkheim), and in the case of the gathering of large crowds on public spaces (such as the Tiananmen Square), it is precisely the sentimental that moved the masses from their private homes to the public sphere. As Sarah Pritz has pointed out (cf. her contribution to this volume), one could assume a “*repertoire*” of the sentimental (following the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor). This is much more the case if we take into consideration that even when practices follow cultural scripts, it is their incidental execution that brings forth the feeling of belonging (Taylor).

The power of the political system to properly channel and control emotions, however, should not be overestimated. When the dictator Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975) died one and a half years earlier in Taiwan on April 5, 1975, the Taiwanese people reacted in a similar way, as the three-volume *Records of Mourning for Our dear President Jiang* (Committee of Compiling Records of Mourning for Our dear President Jiang) show, with photos of his son Chiang Ching-kuo kneeling, or the miles-long queues of people waiting to bid farewell (Zongtong Jiang gong aisilu bianzuan xiaozu, Vol. III; Chen Yuqian).⁹ Even though the Taiwanese society was, to some degree, more liberal at the time compared to the People's Republic, this should not make us believe that differences in political systems can account for the truthfulness or authenticity

9 It is reported that between April 9 and 14, 1975 around 2.5 million Taiwanese (one-sixth of the island's population) had visited the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in the center of Taipei. Frederic Wakeman writes: “The committee was constantly changing the hours of viewing once it became clear that the lines of six or eight persons abreast, sometimes waiting as long as ten hours in the sun, stretched for miles. Though the committee decided to keep the hall open twenty-four hours a day, a huge crowd still remained when the building was finally closed at midnight on April 14 to make preparations for the public funeral service on the 16th. By then, two and a half million mourners had passed through the memorial hall: one sixth of the island's entire population.” (Wakeman 1985, 156). See also the documentary *Forever Remembering Our Leader Forever* 1979, starting from 4:40 min.

of tears. In both cases, tears are used as a medium of political communication that relies heavily on pathos.

The Weeping People

The documentary *Funeral of Mao Zedong*, broadcasted in November 1976, starts with depicting crying people, young and old, male and female, Han and ethnic minorities, soldiers, workers, and peasants while presenting the first paragraph of the official announcement of Mao's death in the voice of Hua Guofeng, followed by a summary of the Chairman's achievements formulated in superlatives. It even produced a scene that resembles Chen Danqing's picture (minute 4:00). The film included reenacted scenes in which workers, soldiers, and peasants—and especially members of the Red Guards—were instantaneously moved to tears when hearing the heart-breaking news supposedly for the first time or when walking along the catafalque in the Great Hall of the People (starting at 19:09, 20:45, 39:45, and again 46:50). The documentary highlighted that high-ranking party cadres were simply bowing their heads without resorting to strong emotions. The voice-over speaker points out that with Mao being the reddest sun, the proletariat promised to follow his path and prayed for the tears to come out of the eyes a bit slower to see Mao clearer. Likewise, the grieving people walked a bit slower to see the corpse and Mao's face for the last time to be able to remember him. Presenting the long queues walking through the rain to enter the Great Hall at the time, the speaker emphasized that under no circumstances the amount of rain could be larger than the tears. The second half of the documentary shows how the people in the countryside, in Tibet and in the Navy were remembering the Chairman. Especially moving scenes were those which depict the mourning at sites Mao Zedong had visited personally in the past, showing how individual figures re-narrate their encounter with Mao at their home. The last part of the film turns to the global sphere when showing scenes of Overseas Chinese paying their respect to a picture of Mao and the reaction of the international proletariat and the oppressed people and nations.

Figure 4: Mourning Mao Zedong in the Chinese Embassy in Bern (Switzerland), September 12, 1976



Switzerland Mourning Ceremony Mao Zedong, 1976. Copyright: Photopress Archiv/Keystone/Bridgeman Images.

The expected behavior, or “feeling rules,” aimed at the inclusion of all Chinese people, yet some were excluded or even removed. *Funeral of Mao Zedong*, for instance, showed the faces of each member of the politburo and presented their wreaths in detail (including the names and titles of donors), while avoiding any allusion to the members of the Gang of Four, as well as Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997) who at the time had been removed for allegedly organizing the April 1976 protests. The person most sought to be deleted from public memory was Mao’s wife Jiang Qing who reportedly did not shed a single tear when receiving the news of her husband’s death. After the arrest of the Gang of Four on October 9, 1976, a frenzy started to collect material, testimonies, and documents to justify the accusation of the Gang’s anti-party behavior and conspiracies to take over power. These collections were partly published and included information on the Gang’s behavior shortly before and after Mao’s death. For instance, when Mao’s sickness was becoming severe, Jiang Qing was said to have travelled to Tianjin on August 30 to have some fun, to visit the production brigade Dazhai to ride horses, to enjoy donkeys and rabbits in early Septem-

ber, and to feast with other comrades at a rural school attached to Qinghua University on September 28: All of these reports are accompanied by photos depicting the jollity of Jiang Qing (*Material Collection for the Crimes of the Anti-Party Clique*). The last outing mentioned in the publication is the one where Jiang Qing is said to have uttered the words “After the Chairman had passed away I did not cry, and did not shed a single tear” (主席逝世后, 我没哭一声, 没流一滴眼泪, Jiang). These testimonies prepared the ground for the later trial at the Supreme People’s Court of China where they were convicted of anti-party activities in January 1981.

Figure 5: *The Weeping Widow*



Chen Qifeng 陈奇峰, “Jiang Qing’s Tears (Jiang Qing de yanlei 江青的眼泪), *The Maoist Legacy*, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.maoistlegacy.de/db/items/show/3973>.

In this context, a caricature of Jiang Qing emerged, ridiculing her weeping to be fake and insincere. The caricature, accompanied by a comment by Chen Qifeng 陈奇峰 (1918–1996) indicating that her tears had tormented him for four months, shows her dressed in a black head scarf, which she had worn during the mourning ceremonies. It interprets her tears as either ear jewelry or as a bat, thus referring to both her brutality in the persecution of political enemies and her fondness for luxury. Jiang's grief being ridiculed clearly points out to the power struggle following the arrest of the Gang of Four. Jiang Qing who had already visibly been removed from photos of the official funeral meeting on Tiananmen Square (Jaubert) is excluded from the mourning collective by depicting her tears as fake and thus openly denying her claims to be a legitimate successor to Mao.

To conclude, tears and their representation in the media were a political instrument in the struggle for power after the death of Mao Zedong. The affective performance of passing along the catafalque and its representation in photos and documentaries were used as a means of political communication. The funeral and its representation in text and image followed a distinct script according to which grief was permissible only temporarily, yet not for all. The conscious choice of whom to allow to shed tears and to participate in the memorial ceremonies juxtaposed the sobbing and grieving masses with the ambitions of the Gang of Four.

In addition, the mass mourning was a sentimental performance providing collective consolation. The sudden death of the political leader was perceived as the end of an era to which the mourning masses reacted with widespread expressions of gratitude, thanking Mao for his historic achievements in liberating China, ending the oppression and exploitation of the past and finally founding the People's Republic. The promise to continue his political legacy was not only expected in 1976 but has gained currency anew where gratitude is a part of today's propaganda. In fact, numerous blockbuster films re-narrating Mao's fight against the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945), or the defeat of the KMT in the Civil War (1945–1949) nostalgically remember him. The popularity of actors such as Tang Guoqiang 唐国强 (born 1952) and Hou Jingjian 侯京健 (born 1985) to imitate Mao in contemporary historical drama and documentaries continues the expression of sentimental affection that still plays a role in contemporary public discourse. Facing a society where neoliberalism had created a system ridden with corruption, injustice, exploitation, and hedonistic values after the introduction of market reforms and the opening to the globalizing world, intellectuals of the Chinese

New Left yearn for a return to an era that had ended too suddenly. Being very outspoken, they lament the passing of Mao Zedong and prefer the return to a society defined by social justice and a frugal lifestyle that was the exact opposite of today's market economy (as argued by Wang Chaohua). Shortly after becoming the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping alluded to the Mao period not only in terms of imitating the cult of personality (Luqiu) but also by recalling the memory of a time that allegedly had the interests of the people at heart, as his on-going campaigns to combat corruption, strengthen socialist core values, and proudly remember the revolution indicate. To cherish the Maoist past and to emulate the values of that era has again become part of political propaganda.

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A Cultural Sociology of the Sentimental

The Example of 'Lost Places'

Sarah Pritz

Introduction: The Special Appeal of 'Lost Places' to Late Modern Societies

In late modern societies, the silent remnants of the past seem to hold a special appeal. So-called 'lost places'—such as abandoned buildings, decaying infrastructures, and forgotten sites, mostly from the recent past—reflect a newly awakened interest in the *aestheticization of the ruinous*. Since the 1990s, the term 'lost places' has been increasingly used as a "topos of the not yet fully ruined" (Schmitz/Habeck 21) and stands alongside other concepts, such as "modern ruins" (Pétursdóttir/Bjørnar), "untimely ruins" (Yablon), and "derelict places" (Mah).

The fascinating allure apparently emanating from those places can, for example, be observed in the social phenomenon of 'urban exploration.' 'Urbex' has developed into a popular and globally networked subculture in which enthusiasts explore and document abandoned buildings and other derelict sites (Bingham; Lesné).¹ In addition, numerous documentaries bring the fascination with lost places to a wider audience. Programs like "Abandoned Places" (2021) and "Lost Places" (2017–) look into the history and current state of forgotten sites around the world, highlighting their often-ambivalent political and social meaning and the stories behind their decay. Countless books, such as "Islands of Abandonment" (Flynn) or "Abandoned Futures" (Lam) delve

1 As Robin Lesné explains, the 'urban' in 'urban exploration' should not be misunderstood: Urban exploration is not defined as 'urban' in the narrower sense of merely occurring within cityscapes; rather, it is considered 'urban' because the sites explored by practitioners are part of the human-made environment, shaped by both current and/or past human presence (Lesné 425).

into the narratives of these places, combining stunning photography with in-depth research and literary meditations. Furthermore, lost places are often literally transformed into aesthetic spaces in the narrower sense: into places of art. Art installations, music videos, and album covers often feature these evocative settings and draw on the special atmospheric qualities those places have to offer. Last but not least, the tourism industry has also discovered these sites and markets them as unique attractions, sometimes referred to as “dark tourism” (Sharpley/Stone). Locations like the ‘ghost town’ of Pripjat near Chernobyl or the former pulmonary sanatorium Beelitz Heilstätten near Berlin (which later became the largest Soviet military hospital outside the USSR) draw visitors eager to experience the eerie beauty and historical significance of these sites firsthand. These examples demonstrate how lost places seem to capture the public imagination—albeit differently from varying perspectives and positionalities—and have become a significant part of contemporary culture (cf. Habeck/Schmitz; Bücking for an overview).

This contribution seeks to make sense of the special appeal of lost places to late modern societies, arguing that it stems from their complex spatiotemporal figurations and the affective experiences they afford. In short, I propose understanding lost places as *sentimental spaces*, where the interplay of past, present, and future, the merging of human-made structures with ‘intruding’ natural elements and the dynamics of decay and repurposing converge to create a space for diverse emotional responses centered around loss and impermanence. Lost places, defined by the contradictions they embody, invite reflection on what once was, what no longer exists, and what might have been, thereby offering a powerful platform for sentimentality that connects individuals to both personal and collective histories, while also exposing the increasingly fractured promises of modern progress.

Theoretically, lost places are used as an instructive case for thinking about the sentimental as a concept for cultural and social analysis. Despite the diversity that has characterized sociological thinking about emotional phenomena for several decades now (cf. Stets/Turner; Diefenbach/Zink for an overview), sociology has so far shown little interest in the sentimental. The overarching aim of this contribution, therefore, is to develop a (cultural) sociological concept of the sentimental and to illustrate it using the example of lost places. To this end, the discussion deliberately moves away from conventional normative notions of sentimentality (cf. Solomon for an overview), focusing instead on establishing the sentimental as an analytical lens for examining empirical phenomena.

Conceptual Considerations on Space and the Sentimental

The key conceptual step of this contribution is to approach both space and the sentimental at the level of social practices. The practice-theoretical perspective (cf. Schäfer 2016a; Spaargaren et al. for an overview) seems particularly fruitful for thinking about space and the sentimental because of two of its basic assumptions. First, practice theory stands for a materialistic, yet deeply cultural understanding of the social. Practices are thought of as being at the same time materially anchored in both human bodies and non-human entities while also being based on tacit knowledge (Reckwitz 2003, 290). The practice-theoretical perspective thus allows for the systematic consideration of the *cultural-material dimension* that is inescapable for both spatiality and sentimentality. Second, practice theory stands for a relational understanding of the social (Schäfer 2016b, 11–13). The central change of perspective that practice theory takes on action consists, as is well known, in understanding action as distributed. In other words, action is not primarily something that (only) follows social norms or is intentionally carried out by rational human actors but rather something that habitually takes place in networks comprising human actors as well as material structures. Since neither space nor sentimentality are absolute categories but are constituted *relationally* (i.e. both intersubjectively and interobjectively), it seems promising to view them through the framework of practice theory.²

Building on these basic conceptual premises, the following sub-sections will first present a sociological perspective on space, followed by a theoretical exploration of the sentimental.

Space (and Place)

In line with practice theory, this contribution adopts a conception of space as “spatialisation through social practices” (Reckwitz 2012, 252). Spaces are created through relationships (both between subjects and material objects), are open to contestation (and therefore political), and are continuously evolving (through ongoing spatial practices).

2 While I approach the spatial and the sentimental through the lens of social practices, I do not intend to establish a strong opposition between discourse and practice. On the contrary, social practices are always and in many ways connected to discourses, and discourses are in fact themselves the result of—discursive—practices (Reckwitz 2008).

From a practice-theoretical perspective, the constitution of space involves a twofold process that the sociologist Martina Löw describes as “spacing” and “operations of synthesis” (129–95). *Spacing* means the production of a “relational arrangement of living beings and social goods” (135) physically arranged in places. Conceiving of space as a relational arrangement, on the one hand, points to its relationality—to an ensemble of various elements; on the other hand, it points both to the structural arrangement (that is space) and to the act of arranging it (189). Spacing therefore involves practices of assorting and placement of social goods and living beings (which can also include self-placement). It encompasses “erecting, deploying or positioning” (134). To give an example: The practice of reading, which you are currently engaged in, has—like all social practices—a spatial dimension or, in other words, it inescapably ‘spatializes.’ While you are reading this paper you are part of some sort of relational arrangement that you also actively (re-)produce at the same time, a relational arrangement made up of material entities and yourself (maybe also other people), specifically placed in relation to each other. You may be reading the text on your computer or on paper, may have a pen in your hand, might be sitting on a chair or sofa, indoors or outdoors, in private or in public, etc. Only through what Löw calls “operations of synthesis” (135) can the relational arrangement now be recognized as one element, as one space. *Operations of synthesis* encompass the modes of making-sense of the meaning of specific spaces, which rely on processes of imagination, perception, and memory and are always socially pre-structured (189). To stay with the example: Drawing on your cultural knowledge and experience (and of course, possibilities), you may have intentionally placed yourself in a specific spatial setting to engage with this text—whether that space is pre-existing or one that you have created or adapted. This setting, in turn, influences your experience of reading, be it at home, in your office, or somewhere in public like a park, a library, or on public transport.

Thus, space is constituted through both the act of spacing and synthesizing, arrangement and interpretation. Space is both material and cultural: material through the materiality of the placed goods and bodies and cultural through the established symbolic relations between these elements and the (more or less explicit or tacit) scripts of interpretation (Löw 191; Reckwitz 2012, 152). It shapes action just as much as it is shaped by action—that is why Löw, referring to Anthony Giddens’ notion of a “duality of structure,” speaks of the “duality of space” (Löw 145). In everyday life, spaces are usually constituted regularly through the constant flow of practices. Once produced, the relational

arrangements and the cultural scripts tied to them form relatively stable “spatial frameworks” (Reckwitz 2012), “spatial structures” (Löw xiv; 141–46), or “spatial figurations” (CRC). Paraphrasing the sociologist Bruno Latour, one might say that space—at least when it is institutionalized—is “society made durable,” and one might even specify: society made durable at a specific point in time.

Spaces, however, do not exist in a vacuum; they are not only temporally situated but always located ‘somewhere.’ As Martin G. Fuller and Martina Löw put it, they require a “where in the world” (Fuller/Löw 476)—a *place*. Returning to our example, the respective relational arrangement (or space) you chose to be part of whilst reading this text—may it be your home, your office, or a public space—can be identified as a specific place on Planet Earth. Place, therefore, means “a location, a position that can be specifically named, generally geographically marked” (Löw 167). By virtue of their own name and location, places possess unique characteristics, which amplifies their symbolic impact. To put it a bit more bluntly: While ‘space’ is the more abstract concept, ‘place’ inevitably has a clearly concrete quality. In fact, space only becomes material (and visible) through the material quality of placed objects and bodies at specific places (which again have their own materiality). For example, although Central Park in New York City can easily be recognized as a ‘park space’ as it can be found in countless numbers elsewhere in the world, it is made unique by its particular location (or placement) in the city of New York and its relationality to other (urban) relational arrangements (as well as cultural narratives, medializations, etc.). Places are thus both the precondition and the result of the constitution of space. Accordingly, the practice of spacing systematically creates places, just as places enable the constitution of space in the first place (Löw 167). There can be—and often are—different spaces in one place. This is also why places do not disappear in the same way that spaces can (cf. Halbwachs 129; Steets 24–7) but remain available to be occupied in different ways.

Finally, the aesthetic dimension of space—central to the focus of this contribution—can be captured through the concept of *atmosphere*. The concept of atmosphere—despite its conceptual heterogeneity (cf. Pfaller/Wiesse for an overview)—has long indicated emotional qualities that extend beyond the individual body and are anchored in material and spatial contexts, even before the affective turn. In very simple terms, atmosphere can be understood as the *perceptible or experiential side of space*. As Löw pointedly puts it: “Space is a figuration laid down in material states of affairs; its noticeable but invisible side is atmosphere” (173). I follow Löw’s spatial sociological understanding of at-

mosphere which defines atmospheres as “the external effects of social goods and people in their spatial arrangements as realized in perception” (172). Like perceptual and experiential processes in general, atmospheres have to be actively picked up and are socially pre-structured. While it may appear that atmospheres are ‘bound’ to specific spaces, they do not emerge automatically, necessarily, or are experienced in the same way by everyone. Nevertheless, as the literary and cultural studies scholar Gertrud Lehnert aptly stated, both elements must come together: “[. . .] the aura of the spaces and the perceptive faculty of the perceivers” (Lehnert 9, translation S. P.).

The Sentimental

If spatial practices are practices that focus on the production and reproduction of spaces, sentimental practices can be understood as practices that focus on the production and reproduction of *sentimental experiences*. This constitutive experiential dimension situates the sentimental within the realm of affective or emotional practices, as well as within the broader field of aesthetic practices. However, considering sentimental practices as experiential does not imply that they occur solely ‘inside’ individual bodies and minds. On the contrary, the sentimental—like affective-emotional phenomena as a whole (Burkitt 53)—continually undermines the binarity of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ which, as the historian Monique Scheer puts it, is itself “rather a product of the way we habitually ‘do’ the experience” (Scheer 198).

Before delving into the specific affective-emotional³ structure of sentimental practices, I would first like to propose analytically distinguishing between *two fundamental forms*: practices of *making* and practices of *fabricating* sentimental experiences (and respective sentimental ‘objectifications’). Thus, on the one hand—and in the narrower sense—, sentimental practices are practices in which sentimental experiences *are made*, that is, all *embodied forms of ‘doing sentimentality.’* As such the sentimental is constituted—either as a suddenly occurring, albeit usually socially regulated phenomenon—in the

3 In this contribution, I do not draw strict distinctions between emotions, feelings, and affects. I use the terms ‘emotions’ and ‘feelings’ more or less interchangeably to refer to culturally conceptualized episodes of affective self-world relatedness (although I tend to favor the term ‘feeling’ when describing the phenomenological or subjective-experiential dimension of these affective relations). Meanwhile, the term ‘affect’ is used to denote the relational process of affecting and being affected. For detailed discussions on terminology, cf. Slaby/Scheve and Pritz (55–64).

interaction of actors with themselves, with other actors, with artifacts, spaces and places, with aesthetic and cultural products, with sensory impressions and certain bodily movements, with ideas and memories, and so on. Such forms of ‘doing sentimentality’ can be found, for example, in media practices (e.g. allowing oneself to be moved to tears by a film, novel, or piece of music), in practices of consumption (e.g. buying a Valentine’s Day gift, going out for a romantic dinner) or in practices of remembrance (e.g. lighting a candle for a deceased loved one, collective public commemoration), and can be observed particularly impressively in various forms of public ritual (e.g. weddings, funerals, or national celebrations). Following the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, one could speak here of the “repertoire” of the sentimental, since, although these practices follow cultural scripts or scenarios, they actually exist only in their enactment.⁴

On the other hand, sentimental practices can also be practices that inter-subjectively create ‘occasions’ for sentimental experiences or, in other words, aim at the *fabrication* of the sentimental. Such practices may themselves have their own sentimental structure of experience and performative quality (e.g. writing a love letter or delivering a eulogy). However, they are particularly significant in the sense that they generate what I propose to call ‘*sentimental objectifications*’⁵, such as sentimentally charged literature, films, musical compositions, speeches, or even spaces—which, in turn, can themselves become

4 In her influential book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Diana Taylor introduces a distinction between “archive” and “repertoire” to understand the ways in which cultural memory is stored, transmitted, and performed. Whereas the “archive” refers to “supposedly enduring materials” (Taylor 19) that document and preserve cultural memory (i.e., texts, artifacts, photographs, buildings, official documents), the “repertoire” encompasses “embodied practice/knowledge” (ibid.) and ephemeral, live forms of cultural expression and memory (i.e., rituals, storytelling, theater, dance, gestures, bodily movements). However, Taylor highlights that the two are not mutually exclusive but instead function “in a constant state of interaction” (21) and “usually work in tandem” (ibid.). Indeed, Taylor argues that cultural practices in literate societies typically require “both an archival and an embodied dimension” (ibid.). For instance, she illustrates this interplay with the example of weddings, which rely on both the signed marriage certificate (archival) and the reciprocal utterance of “I do” (embodied) (ibid.).

5 I follow the notion of objectification as “more or less enduring indices of the subjective processes of their producers” (49) laid out by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Through processes of objectification, subjective meanings become social facts and vice versa. For Berger and Luckmann “signification,

objects of embodied practices of doing sentimentality. To put it bluntly, practices of fabricating the sentimental are ultimately about their product: “the fabricated.”⁶ Again, following Taylor, one could speak here of the sentimental “archive” as the sentimental is preserved in a permanent manner in such objectifications. In this archive, the sentimental can be revisited—as well as of course re-interpreted—as a phenomenon ‘cast’ in various semiotic or sign systems or, put differently, as a—culturally specific—aesthetic form, for example and most prominently the sentimental novel (e.g. Rivero) or the melodrama (e.g. Paul et al. 2022). Indeed, this aesthetic dimension of the sentimental can hardly be overestimated. One might even argue that the sentimental—at least in its modern European version—emerged as an aesthetic, or more precisely, as a *literary* form in the 18th century (Bell). This literary form, with its specific affective appeal structure, sentimental tropes, and ways of storytelling (cf. Gerund/Paul for an overview), has since continued to spread highly successfully not only in the realm of the arts but has made its way into culture and society at large (Berlant; Paul 2021).

Thus, while the sentimental emerges as a specific *mode of feeling* in (embodied) practices of making sentimental experiences, it is produced as an *aesthetic form* in (archival) practices of the fabrication of sentimental experiences and respective sentimental ‘objectifications.’ It therefore lies at the interface of the social and cultural sciences, whose distinct knowledge bases and methodological frameworks must be combined to fully grasp the sentimental in its various sociocultural and historical forms and functions. However, the sentimental, as a mode of feeling and an aesthetic form, is closely interlinked as both are always and inevitably *culturally coded*. Simply put, for something to be perceived (i.e. ‘decoded’) as sentimental, it must first be ‘encoded.’ The sentimental can only be perceived as such from the wealth of human experience if it is culturally coded or conceptualized (cf. Röttger-Rössler on this process in general). As a cultural code, the sentimental is part of what the sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild has termed the “emotional dictionary” (7), which, according to her, exists in every culture and is complemented by an “emotional bible” in which emotion norms are also laid down. Aesthetic forms now play a key role in the

that is, the human production of signs” (50) is a special but particularly important form of objectification.

6 The term ‘fabrication’ of the sentimental implies the possibility of its commercialization. In other words, the sentimental can also be fabricated—and consumed—as an “emodity” (Illouz 2018, 7).

process of cultural coding. Not only do cultural codes circulate through them, they also contribute, as the sociologist Alois Hahn puts it, to a “socialization of sentiments” (Hahn 200, translation S. P.). In order to decode cultural codes ‘correctly,’ these codes must first be learned and habitualized. Cultural codes thus always rely on and refer to socio-culturally shared knowledge. Understood as a cultural code—a more or less conventionalized *communicative* form—the sentimental operates, as Heike Paul et al. have pointed out, at the most general level as “a relational code of communication that draws on and activates empathic abilities and emotional knowledge” (Paul et al. 2021, 6, translation S. P.).

Like all cultural codes, the sentimental code bears the marks of time and space, is the object of negotiations, and is embedded in power relations. This power dimension is perhaps most strikingly reflected in the shifting valuation of the sentimental, which has been celebrated as a ‘moral virtue’ while also dismissed as a ‘feminine,’ ‘popular,’ or even ‘fake’ feeling (cf. Solomon; Bedell for an overview and discussion of criticisms of the sentimental). In contrast to these strongly normative or even devaluing stances, this paper adopts a deliberately non-normative approach to sentimentality, suggesting that common judgments of its value—or lack thereof—should be understood within the context of struggles for symbolic classification.

Bearing this in mind, how can we arrive at a more detailed description of the specific affective-emotional structure of sentimental practices? Without claiming to be exhaustive, and against the backdrop of the rich field of social and cultural studies on emotion research, I would like to highlight *three key structural elements* of sentimental practices: Inspired by the historian Monique Scheer and her theoretical understanding of emotion as practice, following the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, sentimental practices can, first, be conceived as a particular form of emotional practice: practices of *mobilizing emotions*. Scheer distinguishes between four kinds of emotional practices, which, in addition to mobilizing emotions, also include naming, communicating, and regulating emotions (209–17). Of course, these can also be a part of sentimental practices, just as different forms of emotional practices are often interrelated and overlap; nevertheless the sentimental seems to be particularly associated with evoking feelings, indulging in them, or publicly displaying, enacting, and performing them. Sentimental practices are—to put it in Scheer’s words—practices “that aim at the mobilization of psychophysical capacities in order to achieve aesthetic experiences and embodied forms of meaning” (212). In everyday language, for example, this is reflected in the typical expression ‘to

get sentimental'—a phrase that crucially denotes an *increase* in emotionality. As a form of emotional practice, the sentimental involves, simply put, the production of a *surplus*—or sometimes even an *excess*—of feelings, which, of course, is not always uniformly welcomed both individually and socially.

However, the sentimental does not mobilize all emotions equally. Instead, it is typically associated with a *particular spectrum* of emotions (Paul et al. 2021, 7). Most often, the sentimental is linked to so-called “softer emotions” (Bedell 5) or “tender feelings” (Solomon 4), such as compassion, love, and affection, or, more generally, feelings of belonging. To put it somewhat pointedly, one could say that the sentimental reveals our affiliations, as the everyday phrase ‘sentimental attachments’ suggests—our ties to certain people or groups (ranging from families to entire nations), things or places (of special ‘sentimental value’), and even social or political values (such as freedom or justice; cf. Bens). Its often somewhat mixed quality of feeling and its temporal reflexivity, furthermore, connect the sentimental to emotions such as nostalgia (Becker/Trigg; Hennebühl) or melancholy (Lepenies; Flatley). Finally, and particularly highlighted in works from literary and cultural studies, the sentimental code is vividly apparent in narratives of suffering (and overcoming), as traced in sentimental fiction (Gerund/Paul), contemporary pop culture (Illouz 2003), and the political sphere (Wanzo; Paul 2021).

The second key structural feature concerns the phenomenology of the sentimental, with a focus on its distinctive mode of feeling. As noted earlier, sentimental practices are at their core experiential practices. Since their goal is affective or, more broadly, aesthetic experience for its own sake, they can, on a phenomenological level, be described through their *affective self-referentiality*.⁷ Sentimental practices therefore always involve some sort of active turning to or even ‘enjoyment’ of one’s own feelings.⁸ In everyday language, this dimension is evident in verbs typically associated with the sentimental, such as ‘indulging,’ ‘wallowing,’ or ‘languishing’ in sentimentality. These verbs also express the widespread devaluation of this *self-reflexive* mode of feeling. One of the common accusations in this regard—widespread in both vernacular speech and academic writings—is that the sentimental supposedly

7 For the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, the “self-referentiality of sensory perception” is a structural feature of aesthetic practices in general (Reckwitz 2022a, 25, translation S. P.).

8 For this process of ‘sentimental enjoyment’ in the context of media practices and melodramatic cinema, cf. Kappelhoff.

revolves only around itself, having neither reference nor effect on the ‘real world’ (Cova/Deonna, 463–65; for a critique of this critique cf. Solomon). Describing the sentimental phenomenologically as a “heightened form of [. . .] affective self-reference” (Paul et al. 2021, 7, translation S. P.) does not, however, imply that this experience occurs solely in isolation. On the contrary, its power unfolds particularly at the collective level—in a way that the sociologist Émile Durkheim famously termed “emotional effervescence” (Durkheim 289; 296–301) to capture the emotional self-transcendence and sense of belonging to a collective that emerge during religious rituals. In social phenomena such as spiritual gatherings, political assemblies, and demonstration marches, or national celebrations, the sentimental can literally move entire masses.

The third key structural feature of sentimental practices is that they are—at least typically—linked to a *moment of unavailability*. The sentimental thus involves the relation to something that—for whatever reason—is not, not immediately, not yet, or no longer attainable. More precisely: The sentimental is, in itself, the—experientially available—relation to that which is more or less unattainable; it can make something affectively present that is, in fact, absent or inherently inaccessible. In other words, the sentimental always has an (affective) *reflexive* relationality. For my understanding of unavailability, I once again draw on the phenomenological tradition in sociological thought, particularly the works of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann.⁹ They use the term transcendence to describe unavailabilities that must be navigated both in ‘this world’ and ‘the hereafter’—and, as one might add, are often addressed within sentimental or sentimentally charged practices. They distinguish between “small,” “medium,” and “large” transcendences (Schütz/Luckmann 587–672).

In the case of *small* transcendences, the currently unattainable object is out of reach due to spatiotemporal limits, such as yearning for a time past or one’s faraway home. Indeed, the sentimental is fundamentally distinguished by its multiple temporalities. Meaningful reference to the *past*—what once ‘has been’ (and, of course, how this is remembered today)—is often a central part of sentimental practices, revealing the close proximity of the sentimental to nostalgia (cf. Becker/Trigg for an overview on nostalgia studies). The sentimental frequently accompanies experiences of loss or situations in which loss is potentially imminent, along with corresponding feelings such as mourning, sadness, or melancholy as well as rage, fear, resentment, and even feelings of

9 For a recent sociological discussion of unavailability, albeit with a different theoretical emphasis, cf. Rosa.

heroism or pathos. It can thus be considered a key component of what Andreas Reckwitz has recently termed the 'sociology of loss' (Reckwitz 2022b; 2024). In a similar vein, practices of remembering and identity construction play a particularly significant role in the realm of the sentimental, linking studies of sentimentality to social and cultural memory studies (Erll/Nünning; Berek et al.; cf. also Demmelhuber/Thies). To put it pointedly, one could argue that, on an experiential level, the sentimental—both individually and collectively—unveils the 'historicity' of the present moment by connecting past events and their (emotional) (re)interpretation to the present situation. Just like the past, the *future* is similarly unattainable. The sentimental is therefore by no means limited to the past; it also has a closely intertwined relationship with the future, including its imaginations and attempts at shaping it. As Heike Paul puts it, the contingency-managing function of the sentimental extends centrally to the anticipation of the future (Paul 2024, 32). Practices of sentimentalizing the future can be, for example, wishing and hoping or on the contrary, fearing and worrying that a certain event will occur. The sentimentalization of the future therefore oscillates between an—imagined—potentiality and vulnerability.¹⁰

Middle transcendences, on the other hand, reflect the inherent boundaries of communication and social interaction: While we can empathize with others—making educated guesses about their emotions and thoughts—we can never fully grasp the entirety of their subjective experience. Sentimental practices come into play as a means of bridging these gaps, invoking, cultivating, and reinforcing a sense of collectivity and social trust among individuals. For instance, during cultural festivities and national holidays such as Christmas, New Year's Eve or political celebrations, people come together to celebrate shared values, history, and aspirations. The communal activities and collective rituals—such as singing Christmas carols, fireworks, or parades—can generate "emotional energy" (Collins), reminding participants of their interconnectedness as a community. These self-affirmations are particularly striking when observed in a football stadium, where fans at the beginning of each game sing their club anthems, wave flags, and raise their fan memorabilia high (Ismer).

Finally, *large* transcendences are what is usually associated with the term 'transcendence' and are situated within the realm of metaphysical or religious practices. With regard to the sentimental, an example of this would be the

10 For the interplay of potentiality and vulnerability in future imaginaries of sustainability, see Adloff et al.

idea of an immediate experience of divine existence, as is found, among other places, in evangelical traditions (Luhmann 101–31). The connections between sentimentalism and religion have also been especially emphasized in the realm of politics—with concepts such as “civil religion” (Bellah) or “civil sentimentalism” (Paul 2021).

In summary, the three key structural features of sentimental practices—both of making and fabricating sentimental experiences and respective sentimental ‘objectifications’—can be outlined as follows: First, they serve to mobilize (a specific spectrum of) emotions. Second, as experiential practices, they are marked by affective self-referentiality. Third, they frequently involve a (reflexive) relationship with moments of unavailability.

The Sentimentality of Lost Places

Building on the conceptual considerations of space and the sentimental, we can now return to the initial proposition or question: To what extent can lost places be understood as *sentimental spaces*, conceptualized as a specific form of ‘objectification’ of the sentimental emerging in the co-constitution of spatial and sentimental practices?

The Complex Spatiotemporal Figurations of Lost Places

From the perspective of practice theory, I propose initially conceptualizing lost places as places that have fundamentally *lost their (original) practices*. They are, for instance, congress centers where no one meets anymore, swimming pools where no one goes swimming any longer, or spa hotels where no one takes a cure anymore (for an illustration of these three examples, see figure 1).

Drawing on Martina Löw’s spatial sociological vocabulary outlined above, lost places can be described in more detail as follows. The relational arrangement that once made up these spaces is *broken, yet still perceptible*, as (some of) the material remnants of the spatial structures remain and the cultural scripts for their interpretation still persist.¹¹ Additionally, these material remains form *new* relational arrangements—including new atmospheric

11 The existence of still-functioning cultural scripts for interpreting the broken yet still perceptible spatial framework of lost places may, incidentally, be a key distinction between lost places as ruins from the recent past and older ruins, which are more tem-

qualities—with ‘intruding’ natural elements such as plants or whole trees, and, of course, with the material changes that occur due to lack of maintenance or weathering. Hence, these new relational arrangements do not emerge due to processes of active spacing; they are not so much the results of actions but rather of *inactions* (such as the neglect of a building), arising from the interplay between human-made structures and natural processes over time. In this context, the sociologist Georg Simmel, at the turn of the 20th century, famously highlighted the “unitary form” (Simmel 129, translation S. P.) peculiar to ruins—a form that is constituted in the struggle of human-made environments with natural forces, making ruins more than mere broken buildings.

Figure 1: From Left to Right: Abandoned Congress Center in Bad Gastein, Austria; Abandoned Swimming Pool in Egloffstein, Germany; Abandoned Spa Hotel in Bad Gastein, Austria



Source: Photographs by Sarah Pritz

Furthermore, new relational arrangements are often constituted through new ways of ‘using’ these places—essentially, by linking the remnants of

porally distant from the present—although such distance can also be sociocultural in nature.

former spatial structures with *new practices of spatialization*. According to geographers Christian Bauer and Christoph Dolgan, this “re-contextualization through different appropriation processes” (Bauer/Dolgan 102), together with the “loss of functionality of architectural structures” (ibid.), represent the two key elements in defining lost places. From this perspective, lost places are not really ‘lost’; rather, they are sites in transition, “built objectifications” (Steets 164) in motion—inhabited by new practices that both draw on and (sometimes radically) transform the spatial figures and meanings associated with these locations, turning them into multi-layered spatiotemporal palimpsests. In this regard, Christian Bauer and Christoph Dolgan particularly emphasize the non-normativity associated with lost places (Bauer/Dolgan 112). This non-normativity may also explain why lost places particularly seem to invite aesthetic and/or transgressive practices.¹²

The relational arrangements of lost places—both broken and newly formed—along with the emerging cultural meanings associated with them, are thus primarily characterized by their *openness*. They exist in a kind of *in-between state*, or, as the cultural studies scholars Aleida Assmann, Monika Gomille, and Gabriele Rippl have put it: a “semantic restlessness” (Assmann et al. 11, translation S. P.) emanates from ruins and lost places. According to the authors, this typical “semantic restlessness [...] continuously inspires new inquiries and self-reflections within the tension between aesthetic experience and historical significance, as well as between forgetting and remembering” (ibid., translation S. P.).¹³

Lost Places as Sentimental Spaces

I would like to argue that it is precisely the outlined *in-betweenness* or *simultaneity of broken and new spatiotemporal figurations*—coexisting and partially converging within lost places—that shapes their distinctive atmospheric qualities,

12 Apart from aesthetic practices, lost places often—at least temporarily—serve as refuges for socially marginalized groups (see, for instance, Chelcea on the various forms of appropriation practices of former industrial areas in Bucharest). In my argument about the sentimentality of lost places, I focus on aesthetic practices because of their proximity to sentimental practices.

13 The in-betweenness of lost places has also been conceptualized as a specific form of liminality (Bauer/Dolgan 111). Liminality, as famously described by ethnologist Victor Turner with regard to rituals, refers generally to the state of being in between phases or conditions, often characterized by ambiguity, transition, and a lack of clear structure.

ultimately rendering them sentimental spaces. To provide a more precise description of the sentimentality of lost places, the concept of the sentimental as developed above and its three key structural features will now be applied.

First of all, lost places can be understood as sentimental spaces because of the *emotion-mobilizing* potential inherent in their complex spatiotemporal figurations. Lost places have the capacity to stir, evoke, or even activate emotional responses from those who encounter them, and it is often this very capacity that is actively 'sought' in various aesthetic practices engaging with lost places (ranging from urban exploration to artistic, subcultural, gastronomic, and even touristic practices). While the prevailing affective-emotional states experienced when viewing lost places is an empirical question from a sociological perspective (depending on which practices and groups are the focus of research), the notion that sentimentality—alongside elegy, melancholy, and nostalgia—emerges as the dominant mode of feeling when viewing ruins is a recurring theme in the interdisciplinary discussions of ruin aesthetics (Bücking 153). For Simmel, for instance, the feeling of "cosmic tragedy" (Simmel 124, translation S. P.) is potentially evoked when observing a ruin, rooted in the idea that nature is reclaiming an environment once shaped by humans. He refers to this as the "counterplay of two cosmic directions" (Simmel 126, translation S. P.)—the eternal interplay of becoming and decaying, which also reflects our own mortality. Kay Kirchmann describes the "structural affinity of melancholy and ruin" (317, translation S. P.) as a result of a fundamental disruption in the structure of temporal relations: "In the ruin, the melancholic confronts the debris of their temporal order, the dwindling 'flow of their individual becoming.'" (318, translation S. P.).

This characteristic in-betweenness of lost places—not only between the human-made and the natural but also between the past, the present, and the future, between decay and repurposing, etc.—strongly aligns with *affective self-referentiality* as the distinctive sentimental mode of feeling and the self-reflexivity of the sentimental in general. Given the history of sentimentality and the recurrent devaluations it has faced, it is not surprising that this emphasis on affective experience for its own sake is often criticized in aesthetic practices engaging with lost places. The practice of urban exploration, in particular, is often accused of being overly focused on affective self-indulgence. Urban practitioners are criticized for (allegedly) showing less interest in the historicity of these places and prioritizing instead "aesthetic experience, adventure, and emotional encounters" (Zimmermann 311, translation S. P.). The search for (new) aesthetic experiences and "sentimental horrors" (Voogd)—perhaps

best grasped as a sensationalist variety of sentimental practices—is certainly an important and well-studied part of urban exploration practices (Lesné 438), and there are indeed examples of inappropriate hedonistic posing and self-staging in such sites (Röhl/Schneider 271). However, the political aspects of urban exploring are also repeatedly pointed out, such as its challenge to what is commonly considered worthy of remembrance and preservation or the documentation of the socially forgotten (Fulton). As with sentimentality, this sweeping criticism that practices of urban exploration are purely self-centered cannot be sustained.

Last but not least, lost places are at the core of their spatiotemporal figurations deeply marked by *unavailability*. Already by definition, lost places are essentially unavailable, as they are no longer accessible in the way they once were; they are only ‘available’ in their ‘lost’ form. This unavailability heightens their sentimental affordance because it underscores the sense of loss, impermanence, and the irretrievability of what once was (or could have been). Lost places therefore exist in a—compelling—contradictory state, characterized by both presence and absence: relics of an often relatively recent past, yet experientially, they can embody “(extra)ordinary presence” (Gottwald et al.). Simultaneously, they hint at a future that never came to be—unfulfilled promises and altered trajectories resulting from social or economic change. As the geographer Tim Edensor has pointedly stated with regard to industrial ruins in particular, they are “symbols through which ideologically loaded versions of progress [...] can be critiqued” (Edensor 15). In short, lost places inhabit the threshold between past, present, and (a once-imagined) future, making them objects of (temporal) reflection. They invite social actors to reflect on what has been, what is no longer, and what might have been (and, to some extent, what might still come). As such, and in line with cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme’s interpretation of Friedrich Schiller’s distinction between “naïve” and “sentimental” poetry, they can be seen as “sentimental objects par excellence” (Böhme 287, translation S. P.).

Negotiating the (Sentimental) Value of Lost Places

However, the sentimentality of lost places cannot be fully grasped without considering their potential to symbolize both collective and individual *identities*—essentially, *the people’s feelings*. Given that this important identity dimension of lost places is often the subject of negotiations between different groups, each with varying connections or attributions of (*sentimental*) *value* to these sites, it frequently becomes a source of political conflict, centered

on the key question of what should become of these places. Should they be remembered or forgotten, rebuilt or preserved as (musealized) ruins, or, on the contrary, 'set free' for new uses? This also fundamentally concerns the sociological question of who engages with (specific) lost places and in what ways, with which connections, interests, or practices. Such engagements are typically socially structured. For instance, a decaying factory building might represent a place of loss for those who, or whose families, once worked there, evoking memories of past economic prosperity. For marginalized groups such as the homeless or artists, the abandoned factory might initially serve as a place of refuge or a space for creative freedom, while urban explorers or event planners may find it offers unique affective experiences. In contrast, real estate developers may view the factory as an outdated site, potentially a 'blight' to be demolished and replaced with something new. Alternatively, such places might be rescued and/or repurposed, often as part of gentrification, displacing original communities in favor of higher-income groups. Thus, conflicts of inequality are always also contested through spaces and their aesthetic and symbolic associations. This makes clear that lost places, as a social phenomenon, extend far beyond being merely an aspect of late modern aestheticization and singularization processes (Reckwitz 2017). Instead, as sentimental spaces, they emerge as profoundly political spaces, sparking negotiations about what should be preserved or remembered and what can be forgotten.

Conclusion: Space for Sentimentality in Late Modern Societies

The aim of this contribution was to develop a (cultural) sociological concept of the sentimental, using lost places as a case study to illustrate this framework. I would like to conclude with an argument on how the new form of aestheticizing the ruinous, as exemplified by lost places and their associated practices, may be connected to broader social and cultural developments in late modern societies, and how this connection could help illuminate the seemingly special appeal of lost places in these societies. In doing so, I will draw on the latest works of Andreas Reckwitz on a sociology of loss (Reckwitz 2022b; 2024). In these writings, Reckwitz diagnoses a "paradox of loss" in modernity (Reckwitz 2022b, 5–6; 11–21, translation S. P.): As a societal formation driven by progress, Western modernity has sought to reduce loss, achieving notable successes in areas such as rising life expectancy, improved medical care, and increased

liberalization. At the same time, however, it has led to an intensification of loss, driven by factors such as accelerated social change, increased societal complexity, the economization of social relations, and violence. While there have always been ways to articulate and address loss, the strong cultural orientation toward progress—reinforced by institutional structures—has largely rendered the losses of modernity invisible and marginalized them within society. In late modernity, however, the dynamics of loss can no longer be overlooked, as the promise of progress has become incrementally uncertain. From climate change to rising social dislocation due to globalization, neoliberalism, and political regressions: The number of losses—both those already experienced and those feared—continues to grow, receiving greater attention in public discourse. According to Reckwitz, this escalation of loss and its growing awareness can also be seen in the realm of aesthetics, particularly in (post-)apocalyptic narratives in film and literature that envision the “future as catastrophe” (Horn).

In light of these observations, the aestheticization of lost places across various practices—ranging from urban exploration to artistic and even touristic endeavors—can be interpreted as forms of a late-modern approach to “doing loss” (Reckwitz 2022b, 9). The simultaneity of fractured yet open spatiotemporal figurations of lost places, as outlined above, provides opportunities for both experiencing and processing loss. From this perspective, lost places are not only sentimental spaces but also places that offer space for sentimentality. Lost places fundamentally represent crises, turning points, and transformations in social, economic, and political development—rendering these shifts tangible and perceptible. While they do not stem from savage violence and military conflict like war ruins, they represent “slow violence,” as put forward by Nixon, and the gradual process of ruination as a social phenomenon over time. In this sense, lost places reveal the long-term systemic and structural forces that lead to their abandonment and the people and practices once connected to them. Put simply, the fractures in modernity’s progressive narrative are not only visibly embodied but can also be directly experienced in lost places—unveiling the political dynamite of the often underestimated and belittled cultural force of sentimentality.

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