

## Mediatised Emotion

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*'Depressed?... It Might be Political'*

Feel Tank

**W**HEN Laurent Berlant and the Feel Tank Chicago organised two 'International Days of the Politically Depressed' using the above slogan, they meant to take negative feelings seriously as part of political culture. Part of their remit was to question the separation of the emotional from the rational, and the privileging of the latter in politics. They sought to justify and understand negative affective states such as depression not as disconnection from politics, but as another form of attachment to it. They consider this primarily as an aesthetic perspective, interpreted as another means of relating to the world, one that draws on the senses. They take their cue from Jacques Rancière (1999; 2004) and his discussion of the politics of aesthetics, in which he argues that aesthetics must be understood as that process that separates different domains within the perceptible or what he calls the 'sensible'; in these terms, divisions in social, cultural and 'biological' terms are in the first instance aesthetic divisions, which are subsequently politicised – that is, partake in struggles for power. As such, the aesthetic prefigures the domain that we understand as politics, and in doing so it is a political process. Following along similar lines of thought, this article is concerned with the question of emotion in its mediatised forms and its relevance in political practices. I want to argue that the typical problematic of emotion is not one that finds it 'other' to reason, but one that connects it to reason in a very specific form: as mediator between the 'lowly' sensations and the 'higher' cognitions. This leads to an examination of emotion in terms of truthfulness or credibility of that which it conveys (and by association of the person who is conveying it), and in terms of the actions to which it leads. But when it comes to mediatised emotion, how warranted is this problematic of credibility-action? Introducing the question of mediation is crucial in that it significantly modifies not only the ways in which emotion is conveyed but its broader political role or function. I will then argue

that a shift of perspective may provide a better insight when it comes to assessing mediated emotion in political terms. This alternative may be thought as an aesthetic perspective in the sense discussed by Rancière.

In support of these arguments, the paper will first discuss some of the philosophical underpinnings of emotion; the separation and links between emotion and cognition, which points to the connection between emotion and evaluative reason; the Christian emotion, which is linked to violence, and the subsequent normative exile of emotion from the public sphere (Arendt). The return of the emotion as politically relevant is signalled in the work of Jean Paul Sartre, which focuses on the worldliness of emotion, and the mediation of the emotion as connecting the subject to the world. This section will also consider Martha Nussbaum's proposal that fictional emotion as found in the arts and specifically in literature has the important political role of socialising people as moral agents. More broadly, this section will attempt to show that the problematic of emotion is one that prioritises questions of truthfulness/credibility and action. But a crucial question unaddressed by philosophy is the question of the form of mediated emotion as conveying real, i.e. non-fictional emotion to people at a distance. Its specificity may require a different approach.

The second part of the paper will consider some of the literature covering mediated emotion. Although providing important insights this literature reflects an underlying problematic that is the same as that of non-mediated emotion: how credible-trustworthy is the emotion conveyed and what action are we led to take on the basis of the emotion. This has had the result of trapping discussions of mediated emotion in terms of manipulation and effects and, to the extent that it does not view it as a separate and distinct form of emotion, it overlooks its specificity. We therefore propose an alternative view, which understands mediated emotion as an aesthetic form, thereby prioritising questions of aesthesis/perception of the world.

The final section will attempt to apply these arguments in an empirical analysis focusing on the internet. The analysis focuses on to one case-study, a video posted on 'YouTube'. The analysis will seek to identify the intelligibility and common sense created by this form of mediated emotion, and through this comment on the broader significance of mediated emotion for politics.

## Philosophers and the emotions

Although necessarily sketchy, a discussion of emotion as a separate faculty must begin with the classical arguments. Although the beginnings of thinking of emotions can be traced to Plato's *Republic*, it is mainly the reinterpretation and development of Plato's thought by Aristotle and later by the Stoics that has influenced subsequent thinking<sup>1</sup>. The Stoics' ideas on emotion were based on both Plato's and Aristotle's writings, which although disagreeing on the separation of the soul, agreed on the difference between emotion and reason, and the need for emotion to be guided by reason. Plato had already implied that emotions were linked to evaluative judgments, but Aristotle explicitly incorporated the cognitive dimension: in *Rhetoric* he describes how orators can change people's emotions by changing their beliefs. Aristotle further highlighted the normative ambiguity of emotions: in some instances a virtuous person must feel a particular emotion (such as anger when loved ones are insulted). In general, however, the possibility for excess and falsehood immanent in emotions had, for Aristotle to be contained by reason and the moderation that accompanies it. It is these elements, the cognitive dimension and the possibility for excess and falsehood, that the Stoics took further. Emphasising that emotions are evaluative judgements regarding people and things outside our control the Stoics went on to argue that the emotions should be extirpated from life because they lead to an over-reliance on external factors, and hence are liable to be false (Nussbaum, 1998). Morality, understood as dealing with both justice and the good life, is synonymous with reason: to live in a moral manner as a person and as a polis means to be governed by reason.

The Stoic understanding of emotion was very influential during roman times, but in the subsequent Christian-ruled era, it fell out of fashion. Augustine's interpretation of the Stoics was that their emphasis on reason and their insistence that people control their emotions convey arrogance and pride. His views, as discussed by Nussbaum (2001), represent to an extent the Christian position on emotions: emotions are intensely human experiences, and as such betray the neediness and dependence of humanity on God. But humanity must transcend the baseness of emotions, which for Augustine is due to the

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<sup>1</sup>Plato's *The Republic* postulated a tripartite division of the soul corresponded to the sensations and desires (epithymia), affective states (thymos) and reason (nous). Reason, the higher part, controls and regulates the other two parts, but it also needs them to provide it with input. The affective states are also linked to action and metaphorically connected to the class of warriors and their quest for victory and public recognition (1979, 580ff).

emotions' association to external objects. This can only take place through rendering God the subject of emotions such as love (*agape* or Christian love). In political terms, Augustine's City of God was not ruled by reason, but by the love of God, and through this love, by the love and compassion towards our fellow human beings. Yet, as Nussbaum (2001) points out, love of God implies anger towards God's enemies, hence the vengefulness that Nietzsche argued was central to Christianity. Certainly in historical terms, the anger and passions stirred by those deemed as enemies of God have led to the Crusades and the Holy Inquisition – this is of course not to explain the actual causes of such historical events, but to point to their justification in Christian doctrine<sup>2</sup>: such events, for instance, could not be justified in the rationally-ruled Platonic Republic.

These two aspects, the philosophical prioritisation of reason and the Christian theological prioritisation of love of God (and humanity), had to be addressed and incorporated in the Enlightenment, whose emphasis on knowledge and truth had to be reinvented. Kant's ethics, and in particular the categorical imperative, was based on the idea of a generalised moral duty. The categorical imperative, Kant's principle of moral duty, it requires/commands us to do 'the right thing' way. In deciding what action best fits the categorical imperative, Kant suggests that we must mobilise our reason. If a course of action appeals to that part of our mind which is pure and unaffected by emotion, and can be logically generalised as 'the right course of action' objectively, then it is the right action, and is inherently good. In this sense, if moral duty is to be universal then it must be applied to all: this requires that it is established on the basis of what is common in humanity: and although we all have emotions, their dependence on external objects makes them subjective, while reason is objective. Moreover, reason in the form of a rational and autonomous will, is the proof of and guarantee of freedom: unlike Hume's 'slaves of passion', Kant's human beings are autonomous and free agents. They act morally not in instrumental terms, but because they rationally determine their course of action on the basis of what is right. In political terms, the political commonwealth envisaged by Kant was primarily an ethical community. Politics cannot be instrumental, i.e. following self-serving principles, or else subjective emotions and passions. It must be moral in the sense of pursuing what is right not only for one's own community but for the commonwealth of nations as a whole (Kant, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>See also Thomas Aquinas' Augustinian justification of the Crusades – the well-known 'just war' doctrine in his *Summa Theologica*.

The two elements that emerge as crucial in Kant's account include the idea of emotions as subjective interpretations or experiences, and the universality and objectivity of reason and morality (or what is right). Both elements are prominent in Adam Smith's examination of moral sentiments (1759), in which he discussed the role of moral feelings. Smith acknowledged a role for moral sentiments in social (and political) life, but argued that not all emotions are worthy of inclusion. He therefore suggested a means by which to test emotions on the basis of their 'propriety'. This was the device of the impartial spectator: upon faced with an emotional situation, affecting either ourselves or others, we must assume the position of an external, impartial spectator, who is aware of the situation but is not influenced by it in any way. If this impartial spectator agrees with the appropriateness of the emotions experienced, then they are justified and action must be taken. This device is a means by which a sense of objectivity is reached and a measure or limitation is placed upon the emotions. Smith did not therefore conceive of the emotions as necessarily 'immoral' or 'irrational': rather his view was that under certain circumstances, certain emotions may be justified. But the conditions under which they may be found appropriate points to the evaluative element vis-à-vis the emotions.

Although the philosophers of the Enlightenment sought to prioritise reason, the political actions of the time showed a reliance on the emotional. The case in point here is the French Revolution which was to a significant extent justified on emotional grounds: on the basis of compassion with the poor. In her well known analysis, Arendt (1962) discusses two of the 'protagonists' of the French Revolution, the *enragés* ("for rage is indeed the only form in which misfortune can become active", social question, p. 106) and the *misérables* (linked to necessity – as opposed to choice that belongs for Arendt to the political). Together necessity and the violence that is always used to overcome necessity made the unfortunates '*la puissance de la terre*' (Saint Just, in Arendt, 1962: 110). For Arendt, pity is linked to violence and resentment (c.f. Nietzsche) as shown in the Terror. But crucially pity also creates a separation between the unfortunates and those who do not suffer, enacting an inequality of a very specific kind. Arendt's analysis shows that insofar as the French Revolution was premised on this politics of pity, its collapse into Terror was predictable. Arendt then compares the French to the American Revolution in which the focus was on liberty: the Founding Fathers were not shedding tears for the slaves, but noted how their condition conflicts with the demands for equal liberty. This, for Arendt, distinguishes a politics of pity which ultima-

tely leads to violence and to the splitting of the social body, which in order to reunite must eradicate the split and those responsible for it, from a politics of justice which revolves around questions of liberty, justification, and ultimately reasoned argument. This is why for Arendt emotion inevitably collapses into violence – and any kind of political action must be justified on the basis of reason and choice rather than emotion and necessity. The problems with this account stem from Arendt's understanding of the political as existing over and above necessity – yet we see time and again that necessity cannot be separated from politics in any pragmatic ways, thereby rendering the question of dealing with necessity a political question par excellence. Necessity, and the emotions it generates, cannot be realistically exiled from the political.

Against Arendt's pessimistic view of emotions as inevitably leading to violence, we can find arguments that provide a new impetus for the acceptance of emotion in the political. These may be found in the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Martha Nussbaum. Sartre's account of emotions emphasises the action-orientation and transformative potential of emotions, as well as their 'worldliness'; Nussbaum focuses on the morality of emotions, on the ways in which we can judge and morally apprehend emotions. Both aspects are important here as they provide crucial links between emotions and (democratic) politics: if the latter is concerned with acting upon and transforming the world in ways judged to be 'right' (in democracy these include the principles of equality and justice), then both the action orientation and moral concerns linked to emotions become immediately relevant.

Sartre's relevant work is better known for discussing psychological theories of emotion; nevertheless, it offers a philosophical perspective that combines several of the above insights. Sartre found that the psychological theories of his time did little to elucidate the ways in which emotions were in fact reactions to external events, but not uncontrolled or uncontrollable: rather they unite the external object and the consciousness that apprehends it. As such, their function is one mediating between the world and the subject: for Sartre emotions are a specific manner of apprehending the world (1939/1962: 57). And the way in which emotions apprehend the world is through seeking to transform it. The worldliness of the emotions becomes clear: they do not merely reflect an internal state, but are oriented to the external world, they provide links to it, and act in order to alter it. However, Sartre, true to his existentialism, prioritises the subjective experience over the worldly one: "Emotional behaviour seeks by itself, and without modifying the structure of the object

to confer another quality upon it, a lesser existence or a lesser presence (or a greater existence etc.)” (p. 65). Sartre uses the example of a bunch of grapes beyond reach: the ‘disagreeable tension’ experienced by the subject leads to a perception of the grapes as ‘too green’ and hence undesirable<sup>3</sup>. The problem with such an approach is that it focuses too narrowly on the experience of emotion, without taking into account the wider world that gives rise to these emotions. There is no reason to assume that the subject will not seek to change the world in order to deal with this ‘disagreeable tension’ rather than to merely change their perception. The transformative energy of the emotions cannot be limited to transformations of consciousness. Indeed, although Sartre points out that the emotional creates a synthesis of the external world and the subject, he ends up prioritising the latter. And in doing so, he repeats the control/slave to emotions metaphor: “Liberation can come only from a purifying reflection or from the total disappearance of the emotional situation” (p. 81).

Martha Nussbaum (2001), on the other hand, takes emotions seriously in their worldly consequences, and seeks to find ways in which to incorporate them in the social and political domain. She does this by focusing on the morality of emotions, the extent to which it is ‘right’ to experience them, as a means by which to evaluate the transformations they seek to effect. Finding a way of discerning emotions may then enable us to make the most of them when we are faced with complex decisions. For Nussbaum, the worldliness of emotions implies that we must take them into account along with reason, in political decisions concerning the fate of our communities. In rehabilitating emotions in this manner, Nussbaum stresses their historical and social situatedness. This implies that different communities may have different understandings of the appropriateness of emotions, but Nussbaum moves beyond this point of relativism, towards a normative-moral understanding of emotions as essential for human *eudaimonia* which includes happiness and the realisation of the good life. You cannot have *eudaimonia*, argues Nussbaum, without accepting the emotions; and accepting emotions requires a common (or universal) understanding of their unfolding, their bases and their justifications. For this, Nussbaum turns to literature. Emotions, she argues, are always embedded in narrative structures, they always unfold narratively over time. Literature will help us in developing an emotional literacy, a deeper understanding of how emotions

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<sup>3</sup>It is in this sense that Sartre found emotions ‘strategic’: they may be used to protect our consciousness or ego from harm or trauma brought about by external frustrations. But the potential for manipulation is evident.

operate and how to evaluate different emotions and their consequences. The morality of emotions therefore depends upon the extent to which our literature enables us to develop a deep understanding of emotions. From this perspective, we see that Nussbaum mobilises a device drawing upon Smith's impartial spectator: a kind of detached participant, a reader, an audience, whose previous direct or vicarious experiences have taught them about emotion, and how to recognize and distinguish between different emotions and their appropriateness. This is a crucial insight first because it shows the importance of culturally shared emotions, and second, because it shows that, transcending the personal and subjective, judgments of emotions are to be made by sympathetic others not directly implicated in the emotional narratives.

This brief and eclectic discussion of some of the sources of writing on emotion has provided four main arguments: first, that although reason and emotion may be thought as different, they are not necessarily antithetical; second, that the emotions are not exclusively or even primarily internal states, but rather mediate between aspects of the world and the (consciousness of) subjects; third, that they are action-oriented and have a transformative potential; and finally, that if we are to make political use of the emotions, we must find a way of judging them and discerning their appropriateness. Given the current interest in the public display of emotions and its political role, it is the last two arguments that are more relevant here: the evaluative and action-oriented aspects of public emotion. Following along these lines, we could incorporate Smith's and Nussbaum's arguments that in evaluating emotions we must assume a spectatorial position of detached participation: we are cognizant of the events that culminated in the observed emotions, but have not actively participated in bringing them forth. The questions that the spectators need to address concern the truthfulness of the emotion experienced and the credibility of the person that experiences them; and second, on the basis of the above evaluation, to address the type of action that the emotions require and the transformation they seek to bring to the world.

The implications of these arguments are manifold: first, they point to a pragmatic orientation towards the political and the emotional: the latter is always necessarily implicated in the former, as it is a way of apprehending the world. Second, the device of the spectator – impartial but learned – points to the requirement to judiciously rather than unconditionally accept emotions in the political sphere. But there are certain aspects in the argument that need to be further clarified. The emotions that theorists have discussed are expres-



sed in a direct, unmediated manner, or else, they are fictional renderings found in the literature with the function of educating us about emotions. Yet there is another ‘species’ of emotions, those mediated by the numerous forms of communication media. Are mediated emotions the same as directly expressed emotions or fictional emotions? And are spectators required to make the same type of evaluative judgments vis-à-vis mediated emotions? In the next section I will try to examine the relationship between the media and emotions, and seek to identify the changes in conceptualising mediatished emotions and their relationship to the political.

### **Mediatished emotions**

The question of mediatished emotions is one explicitly linked to their involvement in the political. The fictional mediatished emotions can easily fit in the scheme proposed by Nussbaum, in which they normatively play a role in educating people about emotions, and enable/facilitate emotional development. The mediatished ‘real’ emotions, however, or the mediatished reproduction of the emotions of ‘real’ people in ‘real’ situations merits further discussion. First, ‘real’ emotions unlike those found in the literature and other forms of art urgently call for action. Second, the mediated aspect of mediatished emotions implies the presence of intervening factors that may ultimately modify or otherwise interfere with the emotions expressed or represented. Third, these emotions are more firmly placed on the political in that they constitute public expressions in a public domain – this is even more the case when these emotions are found in the classic political genres of news and current affairs. Taking seriously the transformative potential of emotions means that mediatished emotion will have implications for the ‘world-subject’ unity, to employ Sartre’s terminology. In this respect, we must move beyond the didactic position of fictional emotion to a more politicised understanding of the actual transformations sought or effected by mediatished emotions. To keep things as simple as possible, the discussion will mainly focus on two emotions, sympathy or pity and anger or indignation.

Existing research in mediatished emotions has offered considerable insights, but is primarily oriented towards creating, justifying or, conversely, withholding public spaces for emotional expression, on the basis of the problematic we encountered in the philosophical discussion: are these emotions truthful/authentic and what action do they require? Specifically, much theorising

criticises the current forms of mediatised emotion, pointing to its excesses and lack of authenticity. The most well-known case in point is the publication of *Conspicuous Compassion* (West, 2004) which vociferously criticised the rampant emotionalism that followed events such as the death of Diana. For Patrick West (2004) the problem is not that people feel compassion, but that they feel compelled to display compassion and care for others. This is a mere show of sentimentality, a false and spectacularised behaviour aimed merely at making those experiencing such feelings to feel better about themselves. In psychological terms, these public displays of emotion, triggered by celebrity deaths or murdered children, have a cathartic function, and serve as a means to “(in)articulate our own unhappiness” (p. 4). In sociological terms, they provide the opportunity to form new social ties in the absence of traditional social bonds. But, West argues, following Stjepan Mestrovic, these are false emotions, because in a post-emotional age characterised by ‘crocodile tears and manufactured emotion’, we are not oriented towards changing the world, but merely towards being/appearing ‘nice’. West’s analysis is therefore one that focuses on the authenticity of the emotion and the action to which it leads: and because these public displays do not really lead to any world-changing action, they must be assessed as fake.

West’s arguments parallel the compassion fatigue arguments associated with the work of Susan Moeller (1999). Moeller argues that media depictions of catastrophic events, such as epidemics, famine, genocide, and assassinations are sensationalised. Audiences are confronted with images of disaster without any analysis or explanation but the most simplistic ones. The market orientation of the media, coupled with news values that prioritise negative news, human interest stories and pictorial elements, lead to an almost daily bombardment of images of death and disaster. As a result, rather than triggering truthful emotional responses geared towards action, audiences turn away and appear unconcerned by even the most striking images of suffering. Moeller points out that this is not due to a lack of caring for other: rather it reflects audiences’ increased cynicism vis-à-vis the media. From the current perspective, Moeller seems to argue that audiences’ inaction is due to a lack of a truthful and serious media coverage of human suffering. Again, the issues of credibility and action appear together and associated with emotional or affective aspects of the media.

This line of argument has been persuasively criticised by more nuanced accounts that point to the differing audience responses. Although in some cases

no action is taken, audiences are often mobilised into action by media accounts of disaster. Keith Tester (2001) points to the success of the ‘telethons’ as a case in point. We could also point to the tsunami disaster and the Pakistani earthquake of 2005: the extensive and sustained (for some days at least) media coverage triggered a massive response which provided significant aid for the victims. Tester’s analysis shows that media may evoke both blasé and active audience responses – this he takes as an indication that any response depends on the underlying ethical constitution of viewers combined with the style of the media coverage and the extent of audience engagement it involves. In explicating further this ethical constitution, Tester uses Carol Gilligan’s distinction between an ethic of justice and fairness and an ethic of care and responsibility. Tester’s emphasis is more on morality than emotion, but his arguments are relevant here as they highlight the persistent division between reason and emotion. More broadly speaking, Tester’s account focuses on action, implying that action constitutes a justification for public displays of emotion. We may therefore conclude that the problematic remains mainly unchanged.

An important issue raised by Tester’s work concerns the extent to which these two types of ethics are indeed separate. We have seen in the philosophical discussion that reason and emotion are linked in at least two ways: through the involvement of judgment in thinking about emotions, and through emotions mediating between the world (objectivity) and the subject. In this sense, extracting a different ethics from each appears an analytical than an empirical distinction. The many criticisms that Gilligan (1982) had to deal with when she proposed her (gendered) distinction attest to that: there may well be two components to ethics – understood as referring to conceptions of the good life, to how one should act in pursuing the good life – but as we have seen in the Stoic and Augustinian views, their juxtaposition leads either to total apathy or to violence and war. This discussion of the extent to which justice/reason and care/emotion are separate and distinct is a crucial one concerning emotion and the media and underlies many a contribution to the field. Luc Boltanski’s (1999) work explicitly addresses two kinds of politics that operate on the basis of this distinction. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, he talks of a politics of pity and a politics of justice: the former involves a separation between those who suffer and those who do not, and frames suffering as a spectacle. The politics of justice, on the other hand, is meritocratic and applies the same norm to all involved. At the same time, the politics of justice is geared towards resolving disputes, and as such as requires justification for any course of action

taken. The politics of pity, however, demands no justification – as Boltanski puts it, it would be obscene to demand from people who suffer to justify themselves. The politics of pity requires immediate action and justification may enter only in certain circumstances: “when the unfortunate is regarded as *victim*, this politics may compromise with justice and consequently pose the question of justification” (p. 5, original emphasis). Boltanski sees these as separate not in the sense of existing separately in the empirical world, but as organising relations in a different way and coming together in a compromise such as the above (which calls for justification because there is a dispute between victim and perpetrator which the agent/spectator is called to resolve). Boltanski may want to reconcile these in a more substantive way, thereby finding a place for humanitarianism in politics, but from our point of view, what is crucial is his reintroduction of the spectator.

Boltanski’s argument connecting the politics of pity to the political more broadly is that its existence coincided with the rise of the public sphere: people confronted with the spectacle of suffering in the public domain were required to take a side. But more crucially, the generalised obligation of a spectator of suffering was to articulate this suffering, to communicate to others what she has seen, thereby making it political: public, shared by others and demanding resolution. In doing so, the spectator has to: “tell the facts about suffering; to show how one has been affected by it; to avoid the reproach of impassivity (treating suffering and the unfortunate experiencing it as external objects) and the accusations of hysteria (letting oneself be taken over and contaminated by it) or hypocrisy (feigning nonexistent internal states)” (ibid., 45). These contradictory demands cannot be met successfully at all times, necessarily emphasising one aspect over others, thereby giving rise to criticisms, and through these to new forms of dealing with the topic of suffering. Boltanski discusses these forms as topics available to spectators both as a means of reacting and as a means of communicating: the topic of denunciation, the topic of sentiment and the aesthetic topic. In denunciation the spectator seeks to identify the perpetrator and denounce them, or conversely to refuse the validity of the events. In the topic of sentiment, the spectator sympathises with the unfortunate and seeks to express this sympathy in a form that is linked directly to action, through manifesting or articulating internal states: in other words, through showing to others how the spectator herself was moved – in so doing, she must show the lack of intentionality and self-gain. Finally, the aesthetic topic, which is relatively unconcerned with those who suffer, but which uses their representation

as an occasion to present suffering as it really is: pure evil as a condition of humanity. The spectator here is called to realise this condition, through the aesthetic forms reaching her 'interiority' but no action is required. In this topic, the object, those who suffer, do not really exist in themselves, and there is no urgency to remove their suffering, but merely to contemplate it. And crucially, this contemplation does not require justification for action or inaction vis-à-vis the objects it contemplates. The aesthetic topic involves primarily an affirmation of pain and suffering, hence no denunciation of those inflicting suffering and no movement towards alleviating suffering. Although there is a political dimension involved in the aesthetic topic, used by the Right to justify power and force and by the Left to radicalise the social through addressing its *lumpen* elements, Boltanski argues that the asymmetry and immanent inequality between the unfortunates and those who contemplate them, as well as the disinclination to action of any kind involved in this form, ultimately confines the aesthetic form in the realm of fiction, and makes it inappropriate for a democratic politics based on equality. His final chapter attempts therefore to link the mediated images of distant suffering with the possible objections to action and to the particular actions linked to the topics of denunciation and sentiment. His conclusion is that 'the proposal of commitment' offered by the images of distant suffering must be taken on. In doing so, the spectators must act: "to prevent the unacceptable drift of emotions close to the fictional we must maintain an orientation towards action, a disposition to act, even if this is only by speaking out in support of the unfortunate" (p. 153). In foregrounding the two topics of denunciation and sentiment and in criticising the deconstructionist turn because it is close not only to the aesthetic topic (in its emphasis on representation and the blurring between representation and action), but also because it creates 'an empire of suspicion' (p. 158), Boltanski returns to the problematic of emotion as one of credibility and action, mutually guaranteeing each other. The only difference is that Boltanski advocates a prioritisation of action in spite or regardless of the question of credibility or authenticity: action requires a leap of faith.

Although very rich in insight and analysis, Boltanski's work ultimately does not deal with the specificity of mediatised emotion, other than in terms of real and fictional, and it is because of this that it does not escape the problematic of emotion as outlined above. More broadly, the problem with understanding mediatised emotion in terms of credibility and action is that it always holds the media accountable for questions of credibility, and audien-

ces/spectators accountable for questions of in/action. It is polarised between the two, and oscillates between denouncing the media as manipulators and audiences as hypocritical. From the perspective of an analysis of mediated emotion, therefore, we see that it is enclosed between these questions, that in the end do not deal with its specificity as a particular expression of (real, non-fictional) emotion. For if credibility and in/action always accompany emotion in its inter-personal forms, then the difference made by the media is inevitably one of degree rather than kind. And to the extent that mediated emotion is not considered as a different form or kind of emotion (different from both inter-personal, and fictional) appraisals of it will be caught in this oscillation between manipulative-objective media and hypocritical-authentic audiences. From a political point of view, the topics of denunciation and sentiment, to use Boltanski's terminology, appear always readily susceptible to the criticisms of tendencies towards violence and indulgence respectively. Both these are equally politically problematic, and we do not have any tools for distinguishing between them, or for justifying their inclusion in the political. In philosophical terms, thinking of mediated emotion in terms of credibility and action betrays an ultimate reliance on reason, as it frames emotions in terms of justification and justifiable/justified action hence reasoned argument and reasonable behaviour, that overlooks their existence as irreducible to reason and as articulated in a very specific form, that of the media).

I think that this is the problem with otherwise thoughtful accounts that seek to incorporate mediated emotion in the political: for instance McGuigan's (2005) argument of the cultural public sphere as one incorporating aesthetic and emotional forms. Although primarily focusing on fictionalised emotion (as in soap operas), in real life events of no immediate political character (as in the death of Diana), and in reality television as a modern morality tale, McGuigan views these as ultimately politically useful in allowing "people to think reflexively" (p.435). But rather than uncritically accepting the cultural public sphere, McGuigan identifies three possible responses, populism, radical subversion and critical intervention, indicating a clear preference for the latter. In this discussion, McGuigan allies himself with both Nussbaum, whose insights on the contribution of literature in the development of a moral character were outlined earlier, and Habermas, whose discussion of the political public sphere was openly premised first on an audience-oriented subjectivity cultivated th-

rough the novel (1989),<sup>4</sup> and ‘a populace accustomed to freedom’ (1992, p.) through been able to articulate their needs, desires, and identities in a cultural sphere. But his only offer of a link between the cultural and the political is in the form of the three actions, a populist (and uncritical) celebration of the cultural, its radical subversion (accused by McGuigan of elitism) and critical intervention, which is Habermasian in its conception, and which ultimately subjects the emotions to a critical scrutiny whose style is that of ‘critical argument’. The way in which the emotions are considered is either as a means by which people may be educated, or are subjected to a critical scrutiny, that is, they are not considered in their own right – if both the emotions and affective responses and political claims are subject to critical scrutiny (and discourse ethics) ultimately the difference of the cultural sphere from the political sphere collapses. It seems in the end that McGuigan is reluctant to open the Pandora’s box represented by the emotions, and ends up in the same place as others before him: in subjecting real emotions to questions of credibility and action, and in thinking of fictional emotions as an aid to developing a moral character.

A parallel line of scholarship is developed by Lunt and Stenner (2005), who develop the idea of an emotional public sphere as parallel to the political rational public sphere. However, the links that might exist between the two spheres are not very clear. Lunt and Stenner suggest that the controlled environment of the talk show points to some ways of integrating emotional expression with reflection and discussion, thereby combining both rational and emotional elements. However, the broadly consensual outcomes pursued by talk show hosts and the moralising, and often explicitly therapeutic approach, may be seen as politically problematic in that the often subaltern voices become normalised within a consensual ethics. On the other hand, as an analytical perspective the emotional public sphere may escape the credibility-action problematic as it focuses primarily on the constructed-ness and management of the publicly expressed emotion, but insofar as it insists on precisely this constructedness, careful crafting and management of emotion it fictionalises emotion. From this point of view, this perspective is close to Nussbaum’s account: what is important in the talk show as an emotional public sphere is to learn what is morally acceptable in the current cultural climate. In these terms, this perspective cannot provide an alternative to the specificity of real mediatised emotion.

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<sup>4</sup>Habermas refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> c novels, such as Pamela and Clarissa whose author Richardson, incidentally is referred to by Adam Smith in his theory of Moral Sentiments.

We may begin to formulate an alternative on the basis of two related observations/premises: first, the idea that emotions mediate between the subject and the world (common in most of the philosophers, Plato, Smith, Sartre) and second, that as such they already constitute aesthetic forms. When emotion is mediated, i.e. articulated through the media, its aesthetic dimension becomes even more pronounced as it must be articulated within the forms particular to the media (e.g. visual for television, oral for radio, textual for the press, multi-modal for the internet). We can now return to Boltanski's dismissal of the aesthetic form as unwarranted. In fact, Boltanski's dismissal is justified insofar as his understanding is premised on the Baudelairian aesthetic and its two forms the dandy/esthete and the flâneur, the 'free spirits' roaming in urban spaces in a state of a detached appreciation of all forms of life, but with an equal non-concern and non-involvement in anything. As Boltanski argues, this aesthetics is political only in the sense that it is radically other to politics, and as such it creates a space for the articulation of difference. But this is but one view of the aesthetic, which Bourdieu (1996) associates with a particular moment in history (modernity) and the power struggle in the field of art that led to the autonomisation of art. Equally, the opposing view, that of Benjamin and Brecht, of art as serving the purposes of emancipation, and thus as non-autonomous, but politicised, may reflect opposing forces in the same field, but crucially, from the current perspective it does not provide an alternative perspective. If we assume an alternative version of the aesthetic we may be able to acquire a better understanding of the political role of mediated emotion.

For this we may turn to the work of Jacques Rancière, who understands aesthetics in its broad sense as the distribution of the sensible, that is as the ways in which we set up, and dispute "coordinates of sensory experience", frame "and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (Rancière, undated, p. 2)<sup>5</sup>. Aesthetics precedes politics insofar as the distribution of the sensible "simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it [the sensible] (Rancière, 2004: 12). In other words, aesthetics concerns the visibility of common spaces and positions within these, which at the same time implies the relative

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<sup>5</sup>Article by Rancière, found only online: "The Politics of Aesthetics". Frankfurt Summer Academy. <http://theater.kein.org/node/view/99>



obscurity of other spaces and positions<sup>6</sup>. It is in this manner that Rancière understands aesthetics as political: “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it” (op. cit., 13) but aesthetics determines what is at any given time visible. The relationship between aesthetics and politics therefore concerns not the degree of their separation but the ways in which different aesthetic regimes determine different commonalities and visibilities. Rancière speaks of three different aesthetic regimes: the ethical regime in which images, artefacts, expressions are arranged in accordance to the ethos of the community; this regime operates on a strict division between reality/truth and simulation, and is didactic in its conception. The representational regime of art is linked to the autonomisation of the domain of art or poesis, setting up as its subject matter the fictional imitation of actions/reality – this regime defined a hierarchy within this domain that sets up its genres, forms and appropriateness; a closed-off domain which is canonical in its conception. Finally, the aesthetic regime, which abolishes the hierarchy of the representational regime and establishes an equality of represented subjects, forms and styles and is characterised by its paradoxical unity of opposites (primarily in the form of logos and pathos, Rancière, 2004). Although appearing at different historical times, these regimes coexist today. For Rancière, the aesthetic regime is coterminous with democracy and as such privileged over the others. But this equality comes at a cost, as it contains two opposing equalities and freedoms: those of the community that generates such a regime and those of the thing created, which stands alone, free, equal and indifferent to any usage. There are, argues Rancière, two ways of dealing with this opposition: first to reconcile the two forms through transforming the freedom and equality of the aesthetic sphere into the freedom and equality of the community, to make artistic freedom the everyday experience of the community – this is the route taken by Guy Debord and more recently by Hardt and Negri’s “Franciscan communism of the multitudes” (Rancière, undated, p. 4). The second way would be to disconnect the two forms of equality and freedom – the equality and freedom of the aesthetic expression must remain separate from the one of the community – separate from politics – because it is the only means by which it can guarantee the equality and freedom of the community from the dangers of political life (i.e. the collapse into tyranny). The only way for art to be political here is to

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<sup>6</sup>And as such this conception differs from Benjamin’s aesthetisation of politics, which viewed aesthetics as illegitimately infringing upon politics, an addendum that removed structural considerations of inequality in favour of superficial aspects of appearance of unity.

remain apolitical – but this, for Rancière, means the collapse of both politics and aesthetics into ethics – indeed, this position, exemplified by Adorno (but also found in Lyotard and Barthes) is reminiscent of the Platonic exile of art from the city, and ultimately of what Rancière has called the ethical regime. An alternative third way for Rancière would be to seek a kind of negotiation between the two equalities, that retains something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience towards reconfiguring common life and the tension that keeps aesthetic experience separate. And, argues Rancière, it should retain from the separateness of aesthetic experience the sense of foreignness “that enhances political energies (p. 5)”. In doing so it becomes a sort of heterogeneous “collage of opposites” (p. 5), to mix elements in a way that creates breaks in our perception.

This somewhat protracted discussion of Rancière’s aesthetics is necessary because it shows what is at stake in conceptualising mediatised emotion and its links to politics. Employing Rancière’s terminology, we can see that the problematic of credibility-action is very much an ethical problematic that positions spectators as ethical or moral agents – this is explicitly so in Adam Smith, Nussbaum and Boltanski, and implicitly so in other theorising. In their concern with ethics, these analysts overlook that the breaking of emotions into the mass mediated public domain already signifies a clash, a break of the ‘normal’, rational and orderly way of public life and as such this clash represents in the first instance a political (an issue of power) rather than ethical problem (a question of what is ‘good’ and ‘right’). In addition, as we have seen, politics is preceded by aesthetics, and mediatised emotion can be thought of as an aesthetic form, at least insofar as emotion is conveyed (or constructed) through a variety of genres, styles, forms, and vocabularies. In these terms, the political question of mediatised emotion as an aesthetic form is ‘what is this that we see, hear, read?’ and ‘what does this break/shock imply or reveal?’ and not the question of credibility: is what we see real/believable nor the question of action put as: what action must be taken if what we see is real? The aesthetic question therefore precedes and frames the question of credibility and action – it focuses on the occasion that has given rise to the emotion and on the way in which it is mediated. Liberated from the question of credibility and the urgency of action, analyses of mediatised emotion can then identify its political significance along the lines identified by Rancière. The final section will attempt to draw the implications of assuming such a perspective through a case study.

## **The Aesthetic Politics of Mediatised Emotion: ‘A Struggle for Palestine’**

An analysis of mediatised emotion as an aesthetic form brackets, at least initially, the role of producers and receivers/spectators of such forms. The former might be linked to the question of credibility while the latter to the question of action. But a broader understanding of the question of mediatised emotion focuses on the aesthetico-political regime to which it is linked and the respective ways in which it positions both producers and receivers/spectators of these aesthetic forms. The context of production and reception therefore is a function of the aesthetic regime. Equally, the question of the medium as such, of the form or genre within which the mediatised emotion appears becomes a question of the aesthetic regime and the relationships it prioritises. The choice for the current analysis is in many ways arbitrary but hopefully revealing of some of the issues involved in the analysis of mediatised emotion as an aesthetic form. It is a video that appeared on YouTube earlier this year posted by a subscriber with the alias LittleAtari, but which was made by MPACUK, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, a British-Muslim activist organisation working for the ‘empowerment of British Muslims’, through more participation in British politics and through media lobbying<sup>7</sup>. The video has attracted a relatively high number of viewers, around 9,100 at the time of writing.

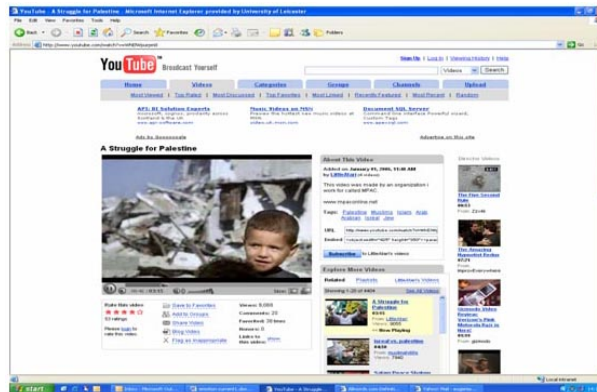
The video consists of some well-known photographs from Palestine, showing scenes of war and destruction, soldiers, tanks and a lot of rubble and debris along with pictures of injured people, primarily children and women, but also people fighting back, with an emphasis on the inequality of the fight (e.g. children throwing stones against tanks, women shouting and throwing stones etc.). The photographs follow each other, they meld into each other, as continuous scenes of the misery brought about by war confront the viewer. It is accompanied by a rap-style song talking about Palestine, personalised as a ‘she’, and its quest for liberation. Some of the images are very emotive, particularly the scenes of injured and dead children, as well as a photograph of soldiers holding a child, who has wet himself out of fear. In this context, the images of the people fighting back particularly in this David v. Goliath set up, point to the evident futility of such a struggle thereby seeking to generate more emotion for the unfortunates. The rap song with its staccato rhythm and its male

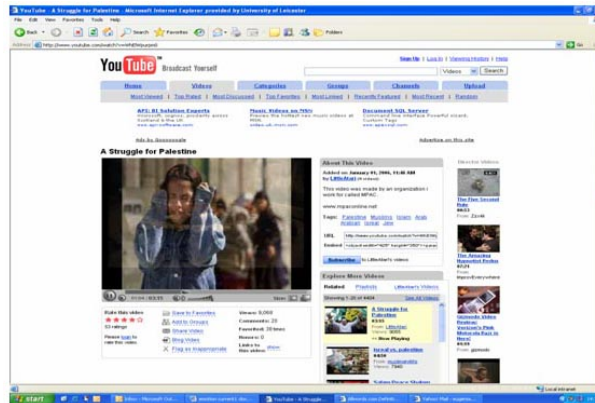
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<sup>7</sup>The organisation is not free of controversy: it has been accused of anti-Semitism, and the national Union of Students in the UK has banned it from university campuses.

chorus evokes impressions of a martial order, as well as of sadness with its soft background music, and appears geared towards galvanising people into action over the injustices evident in the visual aspects. The lyrics talk about people suffering, about ‘sisters dying’ and about the need for action.

Clearly this is an example of an attempt to convey distant suffering commensurable with some of the above analysts’ comments. Following Boltanski, we can argue that in constructing / showing this video the producers want to show both the facts, as evidenced in the photographs, some of which have appeared widely in the media, as well as how they were affected by these facts, as evidenced in the rap song, with its personalisation, narratives and rhythm of staccato male voices. The spectators are then confronted with a choice of the two topics of denunciation and sentiment. The former proceeds through either questioning the credibility of the facts and thus refusing to accept the presented version of events, or through accepting the truth of the depictions and denouncing those responsible. The topic of sentiment proceeds through moving spectators to tears by the suffering depicted and subsequently mobilising them to take action to stop it. In their combination, provided that the events, and those who publicise them are found credible, both topics lead moral agents (that is people concerned with ‘doing the right thing’) into action.





*Two scenes from the video.*

Indeed, given that YouTube allows for comments, we are able to document precisely such reactions. The comments left by viewers can clearly be classified into those that dispute the credibility of the events and those who accept them and then denounce the persecutors of the unfortunates presented in the video. In terms of the former, consider the comment made by ‘bblondy’<sup>8</sup>: “This video is a blatant example of Palestinian propaganda that aims to empathetically win the perceptions of those who know little or nothing about the situation in the region.” While the above disputes the credibility of the video, the following comment, made by ‘Ennie’ in response to the above, denounces the ‘persecutors’: “bblondy those pictures are true... jews have no right to go to pplz countries and kill them they should be thank full that god even gave them a country to live in, and how can some one kill another human begin dont they have souls god what the hell is wrong with these ppl”. The topic of sentiment is clearly illustrated in this comment made by ‘Shinada’: “Oh Father almighty, I pray to you so that you bless them and please bring peace to them especially Palestine....In your name I pray...” What is further evident here is the tendency to violence as the (re)action to the video, supported by the anger and indignation linked to the topic of denunciation: this anger may be due to either the perceived untruthfulness of the events or to the role of those perceived as the persecutors of innocent victims. Two further examples: from ‘Shinada’ again: “many countries in the world do not recognize Israel as a country:)you mur-

<sup>8</sup>Original spelling kept throughout.

derer...curse on you...” and from ‘Dylancaca’ “TX jews to kick some muslims ass, Christian love U”.

The point of these references to the responses in terms of the two topics of denunciation and sentiment is to show their ultimate polarisation and inability to deal with mediated emotion in terms that belong to it properly. In other words, we can see the polarisation to which this problematic of credibility and action leads, and the lack of any criteria by which we can exit this impasse. While this may be seen as a ‘finding’ in the sense that it might be argued that mediated emotion linked to war and conflict leads to polarised reactions, this does not paint the whole picture. From the point of view of the analyst of mediated emotion (as opposed to the reactions to it), we must transcend what is apparent, and seek to grasp more basic or fundamental aspects rather than repeat or classify reactions (which would be a pragmatic position orientated towards evaluation of outcomes). This is even more pressing in seeking to evaluate mediated emotion: in the case of this video, the polarisation and hints of violence make its evaluation as an inappropriate representation may appear straightforward. But it would be equally straightforward (and equally problematic) to evaluate it if the reactions were consensual: first because of the inevitable violence attached to denunciation or anger in case the question of credibility was resolved, and second, if credibility remained an issue, because of the ease by which suffering may be overlooked.

In applying an aesthetic perspective, the analyst’s position is somewhat clarified: no longer concerned with studying the credibility or assessing the action, the position is one of observing the observers – the spectators’ spectator as Smith has put it. And this analysis in the first instance prioritises the aesthetic form of mediated emotion as setting up certain visibilities and relationships or belonging to a regime that has already set up such relationships. This particular form that is represented by the video may be taken to belong to political art in its straightforward sense: the production of aesthetic experience for specific political purposes – here for the liberation of Palestine. The particular terms of visibility and relationships that it constructs rest precisely on claiming a position of visibility for Palestinians, and in positioning them as victims of injustice, thereby also justifying their fighting back. It does so through a process of remediation – perhaps the internet process par excellence – through recycling and reusing photographs already published elsewhere, but placed in a given sequence and accompanied by a narrative song. The re-using of materials implies that this video belongs to Rancière’s aesthetic regime,

which demolishes the hierarchy of forms and genres set up by the representational regime; however, the purposeful compilation of the materials links this form to the ethical regime, in which images reaffirm the ethos of the community – in this video this is done negatively, by showing the incompatibility of injustice and inequality with a democratic ethos. But there is another element that perhaps binds inextricably this video to the aesthetic regime: this is the anonymity of its producers: the aesthetic regime could only be established on the basis of an equality of subject matter and style – it was not the heroes of the tragedy, those individuals endowed with a special destiny that were worthy of artistic treatment, but the everyday, anonymous people. In these terms, we can take this video form as an extension of the principle of anonymity and the equality it affords, to cover the producers or artists, whose position as exceptional or gifted beings is actively questioned by the materials (photographs) and forms (rap song) (re)used. What we can conclude here is that this video belongs to the aesthetic regime but it has some links with ethics, in its purposeful deployment of aesthetic forms.

It is precisely because of this ethical link that this video becomes equivocal: the problem is not located in the politics of the producers, or in the polarised responses of the viewers. Rather in something preceding and framing these: the ethical convictions of the video, as betrayed in the positioning of children and women as victims, of the rubble and destruction of war, of the injured and dead bodies, of the ineffectual fighting back: all these, recognizable and acceptable as belonging to the existing ethical order are reproduced rather than questioned. The quest of the video is for a part in the existing consensus: victims must be protected and perpetrators must be punished, this is something recognizable by all. Significant and understandable as this may be, it does not go far enough in revealing the underlying ‘secrets’ of war. Because of its reproduction of consensual ethical convictions, it presents a simple story of innocent victims and evil perpetrators that ends up inevitably in the polarised problematic of credibility-action that reproduces the very violence that it sought to oppose. This is not to deny the suffering brought by war, nor more specifically to question the suffering of Palestinians. Quite the contrary, our argument aims to show the ways in which this reproduction of suffering in this context ends up either banalising it (the reaction of indifference always present if not specifically discussed), or else, leads to further polarisation and ultimately in more violence. The aesthetic approach aims to highlight the ways in which the aesthetic expression of mediatized emotion could and should move

towards revealing underlying dynamics, hence towards keeping open the break signalled by the spillover of emotion onto the public open, rather than sealing it by seeking a consensual agreement over its place. In the terms of this video, the aesthetic approach would lead us to ask what is not shown, what is obscured by its particular visibilities – and this is not the suffering of the Israelis, nor any ‘objective depiction’ of ‘facts’ – rather this could, for instance, include all those sustained by this conflict, the arms industry, the oil industry, and capitalist power, on the one hand, and the violence of a human history interpreted through territory, race and religion on the other.

The more general point is that mediated emotion – and the occasion that warrants it – already represents a rupture of normalcy, which in turn represents an undeniable opportunity. But this opportunity is dissolved by the problematic of credibility-action that typically accompanies analyses of mediated emotion, which are primarily based upon inter-personal experiences of emotion. On the other hand, the didactic position espoused by Nussbaum (but also encountered in Habermas and McGuigan), that holds that people develop a moral understanding through fictional representations of emotion overlook the specificity of mediated real, i.e. non-fictional emotion, or emotion occasioned by real events. Finally, the spectatorial positions to which (mediated) emotion leads, the topics of denunciation and sentiment, as discussed by Boltanski, may end up in violence, and thus become ambiguous. We proposed here a way of exiting such problems, through conceptualising mediated emotion as a form of aesthetic expression. This links mediated emotion to politics, in the sense that aesthetic experience configures political categories and memberships. This view offers a set of criteria for assessing mediated emotion in terms of the extent to which it promotes the questions of equality and freedom, rather than closing them in a repetition of an existing consensus.

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