

Civil Sentimentalism in the Americas - Conference Review

From November 9 to 11, 2022, the International Workshop *Civil Sentimentalism in the Americas* took place at the Amerikahaus München. Organized by Heike Paul (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg) and Ursula Prutsch (LMU München) and in cooperation with the Bavarian American Academy, the in-person workshop sought to discuss the forms and functions of the sentimental in popular and political cultures of the Americas. Topics presented by the speakers spanned the fields of literary, cultural, and media studies, while discussion points ranged from sentimentally infused activism and culture-specific imaginaries of order and belonging to issues of gender, race, and (civil) religion.

In her keynote address “Carmen Miranda – A Transnational Diva,” Elisabeth Bronfen (University of Zurich) characterized the movie appearances of the Brazilian singer as part of a self-proclaimed sentimental narrative of a double immigrant from Portugal to Brazil and further to the United States. According to Bronfen, Miranda literally embodied Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” by becoming the best-paid Hollywood actress during WWII. Her personification of the American Dream and the “perfect” immigrant made use of civil sentimentalism. Additionally, Miranda was able to cut across social and cultural boundaries, even though she ultimately danced herself to death.

Elaine Roth (University of Indiana) opened the second workshop day with her paper on “The Power of Sentimental Cinema and Sentimental Politics: Ava DuVernay’s ‘Selma’ (2014)” and emphasized the filmmaker’s focus on domestic scenes, providing visibility to the participation of women in the Civil Rights Movement. Roth explained how such images could trigger empathetic reactions, while the education of a new generation about civil rights issues by using popular culture shows the effectiveness of sentimentality in DuVernay’s filmic work.

Ursula Prutsch (LMU) followed up with her paper on “Cordialidade: Culture of the Heart and the Politics of Emotions in Brazil,” analyzing the national myth of Brazil and the birth of the Brazilian nation. Kinship and family ties shaped the ‘culture of the heart’ (*Cordialidade*), serving as camouflage of Brazil’s *realpolitik* and national goal of achieving *Order and Progress* (*Ordem e Progresso*). The importance of a sentimental *Cordialidade* in everyday Brazilian life was illustrated by soccer as an example of a national symbolism conjuring up both emotional unity and distinctiveness.

The documentary *Democracia em Vertigem* (*The Edge of Democracy*) by Brazilian filmmaker Petra Costa served as another case in point. The film provided a closer look at civil sentimentalism in Brazilian politics and its influence over the last 20 years.

In her paper “‘I Must Dress in Costly Materials’: On First Lady Fashion and the Sentimental Labors of American Womanhood,” Stefanie Schäfer (University of Vienna) elaborated on the role of the FLOTUS as a nation builder in a domestic setting. By focusing on clothing, Schäfer made clear that the public images of Martha Washington and her successors do in fact reflect both American ideals of Republican womanhood while also serving political purposes.

Ilya Parkins (University of British Columbia) reexamined the role of wedding attire and ceremonies in non-heteronormative relationships in her paper “Theorizing Sentimentalism through Queer and Trans Wetting Attire.” Parkins’ empirical approach included interviews with over 40 queer-identifying persons who had or intended to have a wedding ceremony. She argued that queer wedding attire fundamentally differs from heteronormative wedding apparel with regard to its sentimental messaging.

The third conference day was opened with a paper by Jan-Henrik Witthaus (University of Kassel), who elaborated on “Balcony Scenes: The Balustrade as a Dispositive of Political Power.” Witthaus discussed the importance of the spatial and visual setting in populists’ speeches in order to elicit emotional responses. He highlighted the tension between charismatic aloofness of the (political) speakers and closeness to their audiences, an observation reinforced by the fact that speeches and public displays occur in a theatrical setting. Using Hugo Chávez as a case study, Witthaus examined the dynamics of emotions in balcony scenes and explored how they can be used to create a personality cult.

Carmen Birkle analyzed “The Function of Tears in U.S. Politics” in her paper and acknowledged that the topic had long been neglected by scholars. The importance of tears and their connection to gender roles and their development and progression through time were discussed with respect to the examples of ex-presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, as well as the fictional character Claire Underwood in the TV series *House of Cards*. Birkle further argued that tears can signify unity by bringing people together through their mutual grievances, while too many tears, in gender-specific interpretations, may be seen as symbolizing weakness depending on political, societal, and historical factors.

Lastly, the conference ended with a paper by Harald Zapf (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), who discussed the “Sentimental Authority of the U.S. Poets Laureate.” Zapf humorously poked fun at the institution of the U.S. Poet Laureate and its symbolic capital, which is more closely aligned to U.S. ideals and values than to poetry as a literary form. Zapf explored the question of authority with regard to its function in fostering national unity but also drew attention to the undemocratic nature of the nomination of laureates.

Throughout the three-day conference, animated exchanges took place among all conference participants, scholars as well as students, in an overall convivial atmosphere. While talks and discussions already covered a considerable spectrum of topics and themes, the conference ended on an open note: More scholarly work on civil sentimentalism could include, for instance, other parts of Latin America, Mexico, or Canada (given Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s reputation for public tears), as well as other forms and expressions of civil sentimentalism, such as the shedding of ‘fake tears’ or the politically controversial notion of “thoughts and prayers.”

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