



DAS SENTIMENTALE  
IN LITERATUR, KULTUR  
UND POLITIK

## Conference Program

# SENTIMENTAL STATE(S) - SENTIMENTAL POLITICS OF ORDER AND BELONGING

**September 20-22, 2023**

Alte Universitätsbibliothek, FAU Erlangen–Nürnberg

## WEDNESDAY, 20.09.

- 16:00**            **Registration (Alte UB)**
- 17:00**            **Conference Opening**  
Heike Paul (Spokesperson of the Research Training Group) & Rainer Trinczek  
(Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Theology at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)
- 17:30**            **Keynote**  
**Marie-Luise Angerer (University of Potsdam): "Under Pressure: Fraying Bodies and Borders"**
- 19:00**            **Reception**

## THURSDAY, 21.09.

- 09:00 – 11:00**    **Panel I: Sentimental Leadership**  
Chair: Christian Krug
- Julian Müller (TU Graz)**  
"Politics as a Tough Vocation. The Exhibition of Sensibility in Contemporary Political  
Communication in Germany"
- Andrea Klinger (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"Affective Polarization and the Crisis of Democracy in France: Sentimentality,  
Memories of the Past, and the Populist Right during the 2022 Elections"
- Mandy Merck (Royal Holloway University of London)**  
"Crowning Sentiments"
- 11:00 – 11:30**    Coffee Break (Neue UB)
- 11:30 – 13:00**    **Panel I: Sentimental Leadership**  
Chair: Thomas Demmelhuber
- Antonia Thies (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"Back for the Future. Sentimental Repertoires of Collective We-Identities and Belonging  
in Saudi Arabia"
- Duncan McCargo (Nanyang Technological University)**  
"Not the Same as Before'? Contested Discourses of Political Change in Thailand's 2023 Elections"

- 13:00 – 14:30** Lunch Break
- 14:30 – 16:00** **Panel II: The People's Feelings**  
Chair: Marc Matten
- Bin Xu (Emory University)**  
"When the State Cries and When It Doesn't: Politics of Sentiments in Disasters"
- Heike Paul & Sarah Marak (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"Rally Around the Christmas Tree: The Sentimental Politics of a Civil Religious Holiday"
- 16:00 – 16:30** Coffee Break (Neue UB)
- 16:30 – 18:00** **Panel II: The People's Feelings**  
Chair: Sarah Pritz
- Jan-Christoph Marschelke (University of Regensburg)**  
"Sentimental Collectivization. An Exploration in Praxeology, Nationalism Studies, and Mass Psychology"
- Vincent Steinbach (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"United by Rage. Reflections on the Emergence of the Critical Milieu during the Covid-19 Pandemic"
- 19:00** Conference Dinner  
**Herzstück**, Schiffstraße 14

## FRIDAY, 22.09.

- 09:00 – 10:30** **Panel III: Modern Intimacy**  
Chair: Silke Steets
- Larissa Pfaller (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"How to Make Friends – Idealizing and Functionalizing of Friendship in Popular Self-Help Literature"
- Theresa Siebach (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"Care and Activism: Exploring the Intersection of Sentimentalism, Intimacy, and Politics in 'Self-Care' Culture"
- 10:30 – 11:00** Coffee Break (Neue UB)
- 11:00 – 12:30** **Panel III: Modern Intimacy**  
Chair: Katharina Gerund
- Charleena Schweda (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"More than a toy, [...] a part of the family': Artificial Intelligence as a Threat to Interpersonal Intimacy and Family Values in M3GAN (2023)"
- Sarah Pritz (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)**  
"Sentimental Spaces, Space for Sentimentality? Towards a Sociological Concept of the Sentimental Using the Example of 'Lost Places'"
- 12:30 – 13:00** Wrap-Up

## 20.09. – 22.09.

**Poster Session: The Sentimental in Literature, Culture, and Politics (Neue UB)**

# ABSTRACTS & BIOS

## **“Under Pressure: Fraying Bodies and Borders” (Marie-Luise Angerer)**

Self-containment in times of digital transgression has come under pressure. From leaky borders in the south of Europe to digitally entangled bodies, from synaptic chips to AI measurements of mental health. The protective shield, introduced by Sigmund Freud during WW I., as a self-protecting device of the brain to secure its integrity has become porous – in a very physical and mental state, but also in fictional perspectives. Films and novels circle around a scary void which once upon a time has been labelled the core of the human being: “It thinks, therefore I was”. In this lecture the affective tuning of a society under digital pressure will be analyzed in its complex structures: from political surveillance to nonconscious auto-affectation.

### **Bio**

Marie-Luise Angerer is a professor of Media Studies at the University of Potsdam, Acting Director of the Brandenburg Centre for Media Studies (ZeM), and spokesperson of the graduate program Sensing: The Knowledge of Sensitive Media. The focus of her research is on the relation between media technology, affect theory, and the re-formulation of the inside and outside of body and brain through the parameters of neurosciences and media technology. Her publications include among others *Ecology of Affect. Intensive Milieus and Contingent Encounters* (meson press, 2017), *Desire After Affect* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, German original *diaphanes*, 2007), *Timing of Affect. Epistemologies, Aesthetics, Politics* (with Bernd Bösel and Michaela Ott, *diaphanes* 2014). Most recently her book on the Nonconscious came out with meson press in 2022 (open access) where she deals with the question of synching processes between mind and machine.

## **“Politics as a heavy vocation.**

### **The exhibition of sensibility in current political communication” (Julian Müller)**

In 2020, the then German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz was photographed for the weekly magazine DER SPIEGEL. In the photo he is holding a copy of Max Weber’s *Politics as a Vocation*. Scholz has repeatedly emphasised in interviews that this text means something to him. The famous Weberian formulation that politics is a “slow boring of hard boards” is probably quite close to the Chancellor’s understanding of politics. His party comrade and predecessor Helmut Schmidt also repeatedly referred to Weber, who was his most important advisor for a policy characterised by endurance and stoic self-control.

This model of a self-controlled and rather impersonal form of politics is currently coming under increasing pressure. It is contrasted by a model in which it is not one’s own strength and heroic action but, conversely, weakness and sensibility that are exhibited. In all parties, one can currently find examples of politicians admitting to being overwhelmed, complaining about pressure, emphasising self-doubt, openly admitting to mistakes or declaring their withdrawal from social networks. Politicians today by no means appear only as those who have the reins of action in their hands. More and more often, they encounter us in turn as experiencing and sensible subjects— and exhibit this sensibility as an essential part of their politics. Anyone who follows current political communication closely may already have noticed this change.

This certainly also has to do with the change in the media and stages of politics: Whether in very personal interviews in podcasts, in long documentaries or also in the self-presentations on the social media channels of politicians, we sometimes get unvarnished insights into the dark sides of everyday political life. This shows more than just the usually described personalisation of politics or the effort for authenticity— on the basis of selected examples of contemporary self-representations by politicians, this article will explore the question of whether established ideas of public office and political representation have not fundamentally changed here, in that it is precisely the display of sensitivity that acquires a genuinely political significance.

### **Bio**

Currently Julian Müller is Visiting Professor at TU Graz’s Institute of Design in Existing Structures and Architectural Heritage Protection. In his research and teaching he focuses on sociology, sociological theory, political sociology, communications and media theory as well as cultural sociology. In the research project “Re/Präsentation. Neue Formen der politischen Ansprache und Fürsprache,” funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, and together with Dr. Astrid Séville and Dr. Christian Kirchmeier, he is concerned with how forms of political communication – both representation and self-representation – are changing. Moreover, Julian Müller has a strong interest in the relationship between society and architecture, which he also pursues as head of the “Institut für Allgemeinarchitektur” based in Munich.

## **“Affective Polarization and the Crisis of Democracy in France: Sentimentality, Memories of the Past and the Populist Right during the 2022 Elections” (Andrea Klinger)**

Against the backdrop of an ongoing third wave of autocratization eroding progress in global democracy over the past 30 years, political polarization is increasingly manifesting itself worldwide. A certain degree of ideological polarization is necessary for functioning democratic party competition. However, affective polarization as the tendency among partisans to perceive supporters of other parties as disliked, sometimes hostile out-groups while holding positive in-group feelings for one's own party is considered a dangerous phenomenon for democracies. Such dynamics of interparty hostility undermine democracy's claim to equality as the central premise of democratic political conflict and can be considered a result of strategic choices of political actors. Furthermore, these phenomena correlate with a crisis of representation in liberal democracies, in the course of which a return of nationalism is emerging. This nationalism is expressed through emotionalizing connotations with regard to collective commemoration.

In the light of such developments, sentimentality as a relational code of communication oscillating between the past and the present and in its emotion-mobilizing function proves to be a powerful instrument of political top-down rhetoric. The case of France can be considered an example par excellence when it comes to contemporary politics and discourses of collective emotionalization. The last presidential election highlighted in what ways affectively charged (re-)constructions and (re-)contextualizations of national and collective memory practices matter in election campaign rhetoric.

Based on a dataset of Marine Le Pen's (Rassemblement National) official campaign speeches and public appearances, the contribution aims at deconstructing her political storytelling through the lens of sentimentality. In this process, it tries to seek answers regarding the forms and functions of sentimentality in the service of right-wing populist election campaign rhetoric which may promote affective polarization tendencies and thus the weakening of fundamental democratic principles.

### **Bio**

Andrea Klinger studied German-French Studies, a binational bachelor program of the German-French University, at the Universities of Regensburg and Nice. After completing her Master's degree in Intercultural European Studies at the University of Regensburg, she taught German for one year at the renowned Grande École École normale supérieure de Lyon (ENS de Lyon) and worked at the University of Trier as a research project assistant in the field of transnational European education. Her research interests primarily focus on French political culture, democracy studies as well as European integration.

## **“Crowning Sentiments” (Mandy Merck)**

Discussing the coronation of King Charles III in May, the London Observer noted the 'well-worn belief that “nobody does pageantry as well as we do”'. As a member of my university's 'Royal Feelings' research group I want to consider the British public's affective relation – not to the monarchy as institution or the royal family as people – but to itself: the national pride in the country's ability to stage ceremony, choreograph a procession of cavalry and carriages, put on a show. How does this national self approval relate to Britain's declining economic, political, governmental and institutional achievements? To the erosion of other British 'brands' such as the National Health Service and the BBC? To the increasing poverty and declining life expectancy of its population?

### **Bio**

Mandy Merck joined Royal Holloway as Professor of Media Arts in 1999. She previously taught at Sussex University, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Duke University and Cornell University. She is a specialist in feminist and queer approaches to the cinema and representations of national identity in US film. She is the author of *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (1993), *In Your Face: Nine Sexual Studies* (2000) and *Hollywood's American Tragedies* (2007). She is editor of *After Diana* (1998), *America First: Naming the Nation in US Film* (2020) and co-editor of *Coming Out of Feminism* (1998) and *The Art of Tracey Emin* (2002). In 2020, her monograph *Cinema's Melodramatic Celebrity: Film, Fame, and Personal Worth* was published with the British Film Institute.

## **“Back for the Future. Sentimental Repertoires of Collective We-Identities and Belonging in Saudi Arabia” (Antonia Thies)**

Against a strong material bias in the scholarly debate on authoritarian regime resilience, non-material factors of authoritarian power are of immense importance since autocrats are increasingly trying to strengthen societal bonds by referring to the past. In that respect, the mobilizing effect of sentimentality proves to be a tempting feature for political actors. Sentimentality as a relational code of communication serves as an instrument of social engineering by consolidating we-identities in order to sustain the political order. Therefore, the question arises in what ways the sentimental is reflected in the official political rhetoric of ruling elites to foster shared feelings of a mutual belonging and collective we-identities.

In essence, the Gulf monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia prove to be outstanding examples of sentimental leadership. On the onset of the post-oil era, Saudi Arabia is moving down a difficult path of renegotiating state-society relations without being able to fall back on earlier legitimization strategies that fed on oil revenues. In the course of that, a new nationalism draws on the emotional repertoires of its citizens and substantially aims at the elevation of affective ties connecting the populace with its leadership. A new founding day (22.02) introduced last year serves the shaping of a collective memory and reinterpretation of the ruling family in light of its founding fathers. 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. Based on a data set surrounding this new national holiday the contribution aims at deconstructing the top-down initiated storytelling about a nation, a common belonging and heritage. On the basis of official press releases, political speeches and Twitter tweets - the preferred medium of communication of the Saudi royal family - as well as official event flyers, those sentimental codes and narratives will be extracted that aim to appeal to the population on an affective level. As such, it contributes to an understanding of the forms and functions of sentimentality in official political rhetoric in the construction of collective we-identities, taking Saudi Arabia as a case study.

### **Bio**

Antonia Thies studied Economics and Arabic Studies at the University of Applied Sciences of Bremen and at the Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco. Afterwards, she completed her Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies with a focus on Political Science at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg. She already participated in the research project „Wechselwirkungen“ of EZIRE as well as in the VW project „Global autocratic collaboration in times of COVID19“ under the direction of Thomas Demmelhuber. Antonia is fluent in English and Arabic.

## **“‘Not the Same as Before’? Contested Discourses of Political Change in Thailand’s 2023 Elections” (Duncan McCargo)**

At the final election rally of his United Thai Nation (UTN) Party on 12 May 2023, incumbent prime minister General Prayut Chan-ocha paused his speech to show a video. Thousands of ardent Prayut supporters, crammed into the main auditorium of the Queen Sirikit Convention Centre, watched the ad on a giant screen. The video took as its cue a slogan popularized by the opposition Move Forward Party, which had pledged to ensure that Thailand would ‘not be the same as before’. Prayut’s party parodied the slogan, depicting a Thai family in which young adult children yelled at their parents during dinner, reflecting a collapse in traditions and standards of behaviour. The abolition of conscription had left the country defenceless against Muslim insurgents in the South, while retired civil servants, their welfare benefits cut, were reduced to begging on the streets. Prayut sought to frame himself as the defender of Nation, Religion and King, a national father figure who would ensure that the country’s traditions and values in the face of an onslaught of disrespect, division, and social conflict.

A few days later, the Move Forward Party secured over 150 parliamentary seats and became the largest party in the new parliament, while UTN came in fifth, with just 36 seats. The politics of emotion on display at the UTN rally did not translate into votes for the country’s conservative leadership – but they clearly exemplified an emerging generational rupture that resulted in a major voter cleavage.

This paper will draw upon political ethnography and interviews conducted in Thailand between 3 April and 14 May 2023, as well as online materials including video footage posted on various social media platforms.

### **Bio**

Duncan McCargo is Professor of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Previously he was Director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and a Professor of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. Duncan’s books on Thailand include *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Cornell 2008) and *Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party* (co-authored, NIAS Press 2020).

See <https://thaipolitics.leeds.ac.uk/>

## **“When the State Cries and When It Doesn’t: Politics of Moral Sentiments in Disasters” (Bin Xu)**

How did the Chinese state (or not) demonstrate its compassion toward victims of various disasters? What does its display of compassion and its absence tell us about the logic of symbolic politics in China and beyond? In this paper, I draw on cases of major disasters in the history of the People’s Republic of China, from the Great Leap Forward Famine to COVID, to answer these questions. I argue that the state and its individual leaders’ compassionate performance and its absence are shaped by their reactions to two interrelated political-cultural dilemmas: 1) compassion and suffering: the state’s effective demonstration of compassion must be preceded by its acknowledgment of citizens’ suffering, but such acknowledgment would raise difficult questions about the causes of suffering; 2) a compassionate state and a strong state: the state’s display of compassion and corresponding acknowledgment of citizens’ suffering may contradict the image of a strong, competent state that can effectively manage disasters and minimize people’s suffering. The state’s reactions to these dilemmas have been contingent on particular historical contexts, but in general, the Chinese state’s intention to project a strong state image often overrides its compassionate image, which in turn usually leads to concealing casualties and devastation, restricting public opinions, and rewriting history.

### **Bio**

Bin Xu is an associate professor of sociology at Emory University and a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) in 2023-2024. His research interests are the intersection between politics and culture, including civil society, collective memory, symbolic politics, and disaster. He is the author of *The Culture of Democracy: A Sociological Approach to Civil Society* (Polity 2022), *Chairman Mao’s Children: Generation and the Politics of Memory in China* (Cambridge 2021), and *The Politics of Compassion: the Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Stanford 2017). His peer-reviewed articles appear in leading sociological and China studies journals.

## **“Rally Around the Christmas Tree’: The Sentimental Politics of a Civil Religious Holiday” (Heike Paul & Sarah Marak)**

Every year the Ceremony of the U.S. National Christmas Tree Lighting marks the beginning of the holiday season, and is inaugurated by the American President and his family in President’s Park, a National Park in the U.S. capital just across from the White House. The sentimentally charged ceremony is accompanied by a program that includes remarks by the President, the actual lighting of the tree, varied musical performances, as well as a display of ornaments from every state and territory, and is televised to reach the whole nation – abroad and at home. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the lighting ceremony – the first tree was lit by Calvin Coolidge in 1923 – our talk examines the history of the ritual and the ways in which the ceremony prevailed over various crises and contestations – be that controversies over the religious nature of Christmas, the instrumentalization of the supposedly non-partisan ritual for political purposes, as well as ecological concerns of sustainability regarding the tree itself as well as the seemingly boundless consumerism of the U.S.-American Christmas season. The National Christmas Tree Lighting can be seen as generating patriotic feeling and as interpellating its audience as part of one national community.

### **Bios**

Heike Paul is professor and chair of American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, director of the Bavarian American-Academy in Munich, and member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

She is the author of *The Myths That Made America* and four other monographs as well as numerous essays. She is editor and co-editor of essay collections on populism, future studies, reeducation, critical regionalism, and television series. Her research fields include gender studies, African American studies, cultural mobility, tacit knowledge, and contemporary American literature. She heads the „Global Sentimentality Project“ and is the spokesperson of the research training group “The Sentimental in Literature, Culture, and Politics,” funded by the German Research Foundation. In 2018, she was awarded the Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz Prize by the German Research Foundation.

Sarah Marak is a PhD candidate in American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg and coordinator of the research training group “The Sentimental in Literature, Culture, and Politics,” funded by the German Research Foundation. Her research interests include environmental humanities, critical terrorism studies, social movement theory, sentimentality, and popular culture. She is co-editor of the *Lexicon of Global Melodrama* (transcript, 2022) and *To the Last Drop: Affective Economies of Extraction and Sentimentality* (transcript, 2023).

## **“Sentimental Collectivization. An Exploration in Praxeology, Nationalism Studies, and Mass Psychology.” (Jan-Christoph Marschelke)**

When I speak of “sentimental collectivization” it implies two ideas: First, that sentimentality has a certain quality to create or sustain commonality among people (and, depending on the concept of collectivity, animals, things, artefacts, spaces etc.) which has essentially to do with temporality and affectivity. Second, the concept of collectivization points to a processual understanding of collectivity.

This latter idea is the foundation of my talk. It is based on the premise, that in order not to reify concepts of collectivities scholars need to think of it as something we do (“doing collectivity”). In my account, “doing collectivity” should be understood in a praxeological way as the concept of practice can integrate a multitude of interrelated dimensions of human activity: culturality, collectivity, temporality, spatiality, affectivity, the role of the body, and of things and artefacts etc. This is what I call a multidimensional concept of practice. Now, in practices collectivization happens through the twofold process of the emergence of commonalities and boundaries.

Integrating sentimentality into this framework entails a double task: How to analytically grasp sentimentality via the interrelation of several practice dimensions: especially, but not exclusively, temporality and affectivity; and how to add to this the construction of commonalities/boundaries. In order to illustrate this, I will resort to nationalism studies and mass psychology. Up to this day, nationalisms often rely on narratives of golden ages, eras of national grandeur, which are proclaimed to be remembered and restored. Here, I touch upon the concept of collective memory/remembering. At the same time, most scholars in national studies acknowledge that these kinds of narratives and their symbolic repertoires cannot simply be imposed upon people (top down perspective), but need a fertile ground to fall upon (bottom up perspective). The ground is fertile if the narratives and symbolic repertoires are sufficiently familiar with people. And, this is where mass psychology comes in, when it resonates with their emotional dispositions, which early mass psychologists simply deemed conservative, while post-Freudians point to a mixture of lack of recognition and fears of loss. Combined within a praxeological framework, both ideas may complement each other and feed an empirically versatile concept of practices of sentimental collectivization, employable to grasp both political and everyday (re-)production of sentimentality.

### **Bio**

Jan-Christoph Marschelke is manager of and a post-doc researcher at of the Institute for the Study of Cultures and Collectivities at the University of Regensburg. His research and teaching address perspectives from social and cultural theories on collectivities, interculturality and normativity. His major post-doc project is concerned with praxeological approaches to collectivities.

## **“United by Rage. Reflections on the Emergence of the Critical Milieu During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Vincent Steinbach)**

The starting point of my considerations in the dissertation project is the situation definition of a health crisis and pandemic at the beginning and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to come to the conclusion that one was in a pandemic during COVID-19, special knowledge must be recognized as valid. Numerous demonstrations in Germany showed that the recognition of the validity of knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic (and later about the vaccines) was not without problems. The demonstrators resisted the definition of the situation of the crisis, did not approve of the associated restrictions on fundamental rights and disregarded the background knowledge. In addition to many other media formats, I assume in my project that online videos had an influence on the spread of knowledge over time. That's why I'm investigating how creators stage content in their videos as valid knowledge. In a second step, I ask about the effects that the different staging strategies can possibly have. I qualitatively examine the staging strategies in online videos that were published during the COVID-19 pandemic and that (want to) transport knowledge in some form and thus make a contribution to the discourse on the status definition for and against the crisis. Methodologically, I try to make the various staging strategies analytically observable or describe them with four dimensions: aesthetic, narrative, affective and authoritarian/symbolic/power dimension.

According to the thesis, it is particularly in the affective dimension that there are opportunities to connect with the sentimental. On the one hand, the affective dimension contains something like ‚truthiness‘ in the sense of a validity that one feels and arises from the guts. On the other hand, the affective dimension also includes sentimental, communicative forms such as the anticipation of loss (specifically: contact limitation, economic losses, etc.). Depending on how much one is affected by the sentimental forms, one recognizes the situation definition of the crisis or not. According to my thesis, this ultimately leads to the experience of being excluded from public, civil discourse (pejorative term: Querdenker). After feeling of being excluded based on the neglect of the situational definition of crisis, in a second step, this leads to a form of bottom-up political resistance that opposes the situation definition of the crisis. The resistance is connected by recognizing the common feeling through sentimental communicative forms in the videos. These sentimental forms refer to shared emotional repertoires, which in the long run may adapt to each other through exchange and form permanent social structures such as specific milieus with individual emotional repertoires.

## Bio

Vincent Steinbach studied sociology and German at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg. During a stay abroad in Nijmegen, Netherlands, he also studied communication science and sociology at Radboud University. Since April 2019, Vincent Steinbach has been involved in the institutionalization of the Digital Humanities course at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg. Vincent has also worked in the training of teachers in the field of politics and society. In addition, Vincent Steinbach has been a researcher with the EFI project Discourses and Practices of Digital Sovereignty since April 2019. Vincent Steinbach has been pursuing his research interests in sociological theory, communication and media sociology as well as digitization since October 2022 as part of the DFG-funded research training group “The Sentimental in Literature, Culture and Politics.”

## “How to Make Friends – Idealizing and Functionalizing of Friendship in Popular Self-Help Literature” (Larissa Pfaller)

The talk presents friendship as a form of „modern intimacy“ and deals with a very special cultural practice of the use of sentimental communication: self-help books.

The boom of self-help literature points to the increasing individualization in modern societies and the discourses of optimization accompanying this trend. The modern subject is responsible for the individual fate of his or her life, must make well-informed decisions, and therefore wants and has to be well advised. This also (and especially?) applies to the shaping of personal relationships. So what does it mean for our modern understanding of friendship, if it is not only seen as something to individually grow and form, but also as a task to conform to, that is possibly achieved only partially, or even fails.

Using case studies from the research seminar „Friendships between Ideal and Relationship Practice,“ the talk discusses how advice literature conceptualizes and problematizes friendship. In them, the specific internal structure of self-help literature as a genre reveals itself: self-help books identify a problem and offer a solution that the individual can act upon. They document modern subjectivity and the meaning of friendships as „modern intimacies“ where the idealization of friendship on the one hand and the functionalization of friendship on the other intersect.

Overall, the material reveals the time-diagnostic potential of friendship discourses: friendship is used to negotiate the uncertainties, restlessness, and risks of modernity, which not only confront individuals with specific challenges, but also puts personal relationships to lasting changes.

## Bio

Larissa Pfaller is a lecturer in sociology at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg. Her research interests focus on qualitative social research, methodology, and cultural sociology. She has co-authored an introduction to the method of metaphor analysis and published on topics like anti-aging medicine, successful aging, and organ donation. Larissa Pfaller’s current research project “Das Imaginäre an den Grenzen des Sozialen” (DFG) focuses on the social imaginary of the forth age and post-mortem organ donation. She also hosts the podcast “Distanzbesuch” that discusses different forms of solidarity during and after the pandemic: <https://www.distanzbesuch.de/>.



## **“Skin Care and Activism: Exploring the Intersection of Sentimentalism, Intimacy, and Politics in ‘Self-Care’ Culture.” (Theresa Siebach)**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hashtag #selfcare has virtually flooded the internet, gaining widespread pop-cultural relevance. Since then, the importance of self-caring practice seems beyond doubt, facing multiple crises like war, inflation, and climate change. In this context, “self-care” serves as an umbrella term for various practices aimed at maintaining personal mental well-being. In doing so, they mostly address a collective experience of suffering that manifests itself in articulations of negative feelings such as exhaustion and anxiety.

Most of the self-care related content on social media platforms shows how morning routines are performed, skin care is applied, and minimalism is celebrated and is thus linked with other popular trends like decluttering or detoxing. These quite dominant representations of a pastel-colored „bedroom culture“ (Bishop 2018) point to a retreat into the private sphere. This turn to the safe and “sacred” space of home, where intimacy and privacy are naturally located, raises questions about the potential forms of sentimentalization. These are not only based on certain affecting images, but also on intimate insights into the inner life of the (mostly female) protagonists.

On the other hand, feminist activists reclaim the idea of radical (self-)care as coping strategy for enduring “precarious worlds” (Hobart/Kneese, 2020), referring to its political meaning and are usually criticizing the above mentioned representations of self-care. Nevertheless, narratives of suffering and pain also play a significant role in articulating their political demands and in shaping collective feelings of belonging, pointing to a specific form of „political sentimentality“ (Bargetz 2018).

This contribution focuses on these exemplary observations related to the phenomenon of „self-care“ and elaborates on how sentimental narratives and aesthetics play a role here. In addition, the paper examines the correlation between sentimentalization and intimacy, and asks how self-care can be situated within the context of popular culture and politics.

### **Bio**

Theresa Siebach holds a master's degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Leipzig and worked as a research assistant during her studies. Afterwards she received funding in form of a research proposal scholarship from the Gutenberg Graduate School of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Mainz. Her research interests include cultural sociology, digital media, popular culture, and memory culture.

## **“More than a toy, [...] a part of the family’: Artificial Intelligence as a Threat to Interpersonal Intimacy and Family Values in M3GAN (2023)” (Charleena Schweda)**

The sci-fi-horror-comedy M3GAN (2023) introduces the audience to several artificial intelligences. All of the objects the A. I. are inserted into – a house, toys, a doll – already carry sentimental value to begin with. They are also all associated with the image of the nuclear family, particularly childhood, and replace certain members of a household. While they are supposedly assistants, all of them eventually fail and act as disruptors, if not threats to the human's interpersonal relationships.

There are three central A.I.: the aforementioned toys function as immortal pets, yet are only shown as the cause of arguments within the family and spectators to the death of family members. Next, there is Elfie, a home-system, which is supposed to aid the protagonist, Gemma, in her household and her social interactions, essentially replacing a housekeeper, perhaps the home itself. However, it never appears to succeed in developing interpersonal relationships; the only reminders of other humans are their digital footprints: unanswered voice messages and tinder notifications. It is ultimately infiltrated by M3GAN, the third A. I., thus turning against Gemma. M3GAN is visually somewhere between a doll and a girl – decidedly coded as feminine – and a prototype for a technical care-worker. She is, as Gemma suggests, “more than just a toy; she is a part of the family”,<sup>2</sup> a replacement for a nanny/friend/sister/mother. As it turns out, M3GAN is the biggest failure: in her quest to protect Gemma's niece Cady and maintain their close relationship, she turns murderous. Meanwhile, Cady is bonding more with M3GAN than Gemma, repeatedly choosing the A.I. over her aunt. Yet, the moment M3GAN attempts to murder Gemma, Cady turns against M3GAN and chooses her human family, i.e. choosing human intimacy over an alternative, technological intimacy.

Various critics have referred to the satirising quality of the film. The sentimental and emotional value of artificial intelligence and digitalised interactions is certainly questioned and parodied, if not overtly criticised within the narrative, but simultaneously the film places great sentimental value on the traditional nuclear family, particularly the mother-daughter relationship. Somewhere between horror and comedy, satire and kitsch, the film discusses and parodies the threat of modern technologies on interpersonal intimacy and the ‘ideal’ family.

## Bio

Charleena Schweda studied English and American Studies as well as Comparative Literature at the Ruhr-University Bochum, including a semester abroad at the University of Limerick, Ireland. During her studies she worked as a journalist, lector and functioned as a student representative. Her research interests include Victorian studies – with a focus on GB and Ireland –, popular culture, gender studies, and queer studies.

## **Sentimental Spaces, Space for Sentimentality? Towards a Sociological Concept of the Sentimental Using the Example of “Lost Places” (Sarah Pritz)**

The talk aims to explore the connections between sentimentality and spatiality from a sociological perspective. It thus approaches the panel topic „Modern Intimacy“ not in the sense of interpersonal relationships, but rather via the possibility of intimacy with the material, specifically: intimacy with spaces and places.

From a conceptual point of view, the paper will first address the fundamental issue of how spaces and places can be understood as sentimental at all. What constitutes sentimental spaces and places? What distinguishes them from non-sentimental spaces and places? And what new perspectives on spatiality does the concept of the „sentimental“ allow, for instance, compared to other concepts such as „affect“ or „atmosphere“? After discussing such basic conceptual problems, the paper will secondly deal with the more socio-theoretically oriented question of not only which spaces, but also how much space societies as a whole grant the sentimental. Finally, these theoretical considerations are exemplified by the empirical case of so-called „lost places“: abandoned or forgotten places, decaying buildings or no longer used areas from the recent past (e.g. military facilities that have lost their purpose, shut down industrial complexes, abandoned sanatoriums, hotels that have become unprofitable, etc.). The focus here is on a twofold question, namely: To what extent can we understand „lost places“ as sentimental places and what can we learn about the sentimental itself by studying them?

## Bio

Sarah holds an M.A. in German philology and a B.A. in sociology from the University of Vienna. She was a research associate at the Institute of Sociology (Chair of Prof. Dr. Sighard Neckel) at the J.W. Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and the University of Hamburg. In 2021 she completed her PhD in sociology at the University of Hamburg with a dissertation entitled “Gefühlstechniken. Eine Soziologie emotionaler Selbstvermessung/Technologies of Feeling. A Sociology of Emotional Self-Quantification” (to be published soon). She is also co-editor of Un-Wohl-Gefühle: Eine Analyse gegenwärtiger Befindlichkeiten (transcript, 2016) and Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit: Umriss eines Forschungsprogramms (transcript, 2018). Among her research interests are cultural sociology, sociology of emotions and sociology of literature. Her current research focuses on sentimentality as a concept for the social sciences and urban exploring as an aesthetic practice of deliberately experiencing (and photographing) abandoned premises.

