Passion(s) in Culture(s)

Exploring the Emotional Signature of the 21st Century
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An Einstein Forum Conference Series Conceived by Rüdiger Zill
To Every Age Belongs Its Own Emotional Signature

The collective psyche: While feelings like fear, anger, love, compassion, and sadness are no doubt rooted in biology, the ways humans feel can and do change. Emotional forms and colors are shaped by experiences unique to each society and era. Ostensibly individual, our feelings are in reality part of a larger historical phenomenon—call it a collective mood, the emotional signature of an age. Which feelings and passions have prevailed at which times? Were there periods shaped principally by fear or by greed, by love or by melancholy? What about cultures and societal groups? Do they also have their particular feelings and passions? How do the rules and norms governing what we are supposed to feel change? And how do our real feelings change? What happens to the rest of our emotions when a single feeling comes to dominate an era? Do emotional economies pass through different states of equilibrium? Can their taxonomies shift altogether? Have there been particularly intense phases for certain emotions?

Does our society, for instance, contain more anger and fear now in the early 21st century than it did in the 1990s? Have current levels of envy and greed changed in comparison to the 1980s? How have the new digital media affected emotional states? What about the visual arts, film, literature, and music—do particular media accompany particular emotions? Aside from such relatively brief spans of time, are there also long-term changes in the way we feel? Do we really, as many claim, control our emotions more than in past centuries? Or are we—on the contrary—much better at permitting them?

Studying emotions: In recent years, the emotions and their variability have gained increased attention in cultural studies, sociology, political science, art history, and literature as well as in many other fields. The same trend can also be seen in philosophy, a discipline that for the longest time not only ignored the emotions, but regarded them as downright detrimental. Reason represented the traditional philosophical ideal, while the emotions were seen to disrupt reason’s work and thus to be overcome. Today this rigid opposition between (good) reason and (bad) inclination is being abandoned in favor of a view that promotes the rationality of feeling. Prompted in part by recent discoveries in neurology, this development has created new pathways between the arts—the traditional representatives of the emotions—and science, with researchers making great strides in understanding the connections between them.

In December 2003, the Einstein Forum began a series of conferences and workshops on the emotional signature of our age. It began with a general overview, Passion(s) in Culture(s), and has been followed by conferences devoted to specific emotions, such as compassion, envy, fear, anger, sadness, pride and first love. More recently the series changed its focus to institutions and events creating emotions.
Regulating feelings: Differences in how humans have understood feelings emerge most clearly in the changing history of emotional norms. In ancient Rome, anger was an indispensable attribute of full-bodied masculinity. For the average European of the 21st century, anger has long since lost this function, while the Utku Inuit have always regarded irate behavior as childish, believing pride and self-control to be the more appropriate expressions of adulthood. The emotional history of compassion has followed a reverse trajectory. In ancient Greece, showing pity was taboo and considered a sign of weakness, whereas Christianity, particularly the culture of compassion that developed in the 18th century, made feeling our neighbor’s pain into one of the most noble affects of all. In contrast to the vicissitudes of anger and compassion, societies throughout history have been virtually unanimous in condemning fear. Its only valorized manifestation has been respect for authority, whose fear-fueled origins reveal themselves most overtly in the German Gottesfurcht and Ehrfurcht. Only of late has fear been reconsidered as a rational and moral response to certain kinds of threatening situations. Just as attitudes about anger, compassion, and (to a lesser extent) fear are susceptible to historical change, so too are our sexual desires. Those before us who internalized the idea of original sin desired very differently than those today who haven’t. Romantic love is another case. Once the loftiest of the passions, many regard it today as kitsch. These developments in love and desire—a process Anthony Giddens describes as the “transformation of intimacy”—constitute some of the defining characteristics of modern society. Why shouldn’t we expect to find similar culturally-significant transformations in other emotions as well—in jealousy and envy, sadness and melancholy, self worth and shame?

Showing feelings: Feelings show themselves—first and foremost through the body. Recently, the embodiment of emotional experiences and their physical signs have become objects of extensive study, with histories of tears appearing alongside those of fear and sorrow. There has also been an unexpected renaissance of interest in physiognomy. Bill Viola’s ambitious 2003 work The Passions, for example, reinterprets Charles Le Brun’s famous physiognomic studies, translating etching and panels into dynamic video segments.

Making Visible the Collective Psyche

The history of emotion: To speak of the history of an emotion—let alone the history of the emotions—assumes there exists something to study that all humans throughout the centuries have shared. It assumes for instance that the Greek pathos is ultimately akin to the English passion, emotion, and feeling or the German Gefühl, Emotion, Affekt, and Leidenschaft—all semantic differences aside. At the same time, such a history implies that this thing all humans share also changes. What Homer felt will be different from what Ovid, Petrarch, Montaigne, Rousseau, Proust, or Houellebeq felt. not only because they are different people, but because they lived in different ages. This view was not always as self-evident as it appears today. For centuries, feelings were thought to be natural, innate, and unvarying, a universal human phenomenon grasped privately and intuitively. Opposite to this belief is the more recent development that regards emotions as cognitively mediated, which is to say not given but learned, socially constructed, and historically generated. No matter which way one conceives of the emotions, however, there always remains something incommensurate and individual about them. Everyone appears to feel for themselves—and yet we still sense what others are feeling.
**Placing feelings:** It is not only emotional rules and norms that change; so do the real places and societal institutions in whose framework those feelings unfold. “In earlier times,” writes the historian Jean Delumeau, “people who lived in the country were fearful, exposed as they were to all sorts of attack. The cities, possessing a minimum of control and order, were regarded as islands of security. Today, by contrast, it is the big cities that are the most dangerous.” One of the most important spaces of experience is surely our immediate social surroundings. How has the shift from the extended family to the nuclear family to today’s patchwork family affected the development of emotional life?

Feelings are never private. Others are always constitutive for the development and formation of our emotions. How strong is their influence? Shame, for example, needs a witness, even if only an imaginary one. Witnesses also play a role in other emotions, such as compassion. More and more, however, the emotions we witness are not those of actual individuals but the projected images of media surrogates.

**Public feelings:** Generally, feelings depend on the media through which humans come in contact with one another. The media create a virtual social structure that evokes real emotional life. They also make feelings into an object of public discourse—as shown several years ago by a nation’s enduring preoccupation with the love life of its president. Though the media can be instrumentalized to produce fear, they can also be cathartic. The orchestration of public mourning can help individuals to process pain. How do the elaborate mourning rituals of a nation change? How do we understand the death of Queen Victoria, whose burial ceremony was only witnessed by those in attendance, vis-à-vis the death of Lady Diana, whose burial was broadcast live throughout the world?

**Emotional equilibria:** When individual feelings change, do their interactions change as well? Is there something like emotional equilibrium? If so, is there more than one way to balance it? What happens to the emotions in general when one particular passion dominates an age? What happens when it vanishes? The duel—which Effi Briest’s husband still needed to defend his honor in the 19th century—is now an extinct ritual. While a sense of honor still plays a role in southern cultures, northern countries have largely abandoned it. What feelings have taken its place?

**The history of civilization:** Is our emotional constitution the result of a civilizing process? Are our feelings more toned down, more even-keeled than they were in the past? Are we less likely to break out into fits of rage than even our 19th century forbearers? Has civilization, in other words, made us more cool? And if so, has this given other emotions the chance to unfold? What feelings are we currently cultivating? Does cultivation lead to greater discernment, making us all into veritable connoisseurs of particular emotional tastes? Have we tried to exclude certain feelings to make room for others? Do we become more fearful the less danger and aggression we experience? Or, as some cultural anthropologists have claimed, is the process of civilization itself a myth, designed to reinforce the notion of our own cultural superiority? What kinds of emotional difference exist between cultures?

**Which Emotion Hold Sway Over Us Today?**

Detail of *Réunion de trente-cinq têtes d’expression*  
Louis-Léopold Boilly (Tourcoing, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1823-28)
Passion(s) in Culture(s) December 11–14, 2003

Conceived by Eva Illouz Jerusalem, and Rüdiger Zill Potsdam

How are the passions being seen, heard, and perceived in the 21st century? How do we explore the collective psyche? And how do we understand our discoveries? This conference marks the beginning of a series exploring the emotional signature of our time. This opening program collects questions regarding the entire spectrum of emotions—from love, shame, and anger to sadness, fear, and compassion—and then presents some of their likely interrelations and economies. Which language(s) do they speak? Which media do they make use of? What distinctions can we make between passions, emotions, and feelings?

Mieke Bal What If? The Language of Affect
Jack Barbalet From Passions to Emotions; from Emotions to Feelings. Transitions in Early Modern and Late Modern Affective Cultures
Stephen Greenblatt The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet
Valentin Gröbner Compassion. A Feeling for Images
Klaus Herding Severed Heads. The Medusa Myth and its Displacement in Modern Society
Thomas Hauschild Passions and Politics
Axel Honneth Culture and Emotion. A Comment on Eva Illouz
Eva Illouz The Stability of Volatility. Imagination, Emotion, and Consumption
Martha Nussbaum Shame in Public Life. Protecting the Vulnerable
Robert Solomon Emotional Experience and Artistic Expression
Rüdiger Zill Medea vs. Odysseus. Models of Emotion
The Roth Explosion. Confessions of a Writer, a film by Christa Maerker
Suffering strikes a chord in its witnesses. By identifying with sufferers, we feel for them, with them. Yet ever since modern media broadened our horizons, countless sources of suffering have struggled for our attention—and our compassion. If it is true that we feel more with those close to us, how do we respond to the constantly growing number of outlets for our sympathy? What happens when visual imagery—from its beginnings always a medium for emotion—gets multiplied? Do the media really bring us closer to suffering? Or does the sheer quantity of suffering they portray only serve to distance us emotionally, bringing about what could be called a crisis of pity? Does compassion require human mediators? If so, what gives them their credibility? What means may they apply? Can compassion still be regarded as the foundation of morality?

A joint conference with the Akademie der Künste, Berlin

II. Zivilisationsbruch mit Zuschauer? Gestalten des Mitgefühls

December 9–11, 2004

Witnessing Suffering: Figures of Compassion

Conceived by Rüdiger Zill, Potsdam

Annalise Acorn Compassion. A Warped Ruler? Doris Bischof-Köhler Empathy, Compassion, and Cruelty, and How they Connect, Erik Durschmied “I thought those guys were with us.” What it is Like to Be a War-Cameraman

Georg Franck Compassion and the Economy of Self-Esteem

Luca Giuliani Ancient Greek Representations of Suffering and Death. Did the Beholders Feel No Compassion? Ruth HaCohen Compassion from a Musical Point of Hearing

Hilge Landweer Resonance or Cognition? Two Concepts of Sympathy

Tom Lutz Why They Call it Compassion. Internet Responses to the George W. Bush Reelection

Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus Between Pity and Horror. Liminal Phenomena of Sympathy and the Critique of Pity (Aristotle, Lessing, Benjamin)


David Shulman Hungry Mountain. Vedanta

Desika’s Hundred Poems on Compassion

Anne Vincent-Buffault Compassion and the Sharing of Sensibility in the Eighteenth Century
Envy is one of the seven deadly sins, something that mythological and literary texts since Cain and Abel do not tire of reminding us. Only seldom does envy appear in a positive light, say as the motor of economic competition. Today envy again figures prominently in political debates over class resentment and distributive justice. What distinguishes envy from its neighboring emotions—grudgingness, jealousy, resentment, and Schadenfreude? Can we make a clear separation between a negatively-valued envy and a positively-valued sense of justice or moral outrage? Is envy always accompanied by the wish to harm the person who is envied? Can envy be collective, or are concepts like class resentment mere polemical inventions? Are there cultures in which envy is particularly widespread?

With generous support from the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung
Fear is a primal response, anchored deep within our nervous systems, whose purpose is to safeguard our survival. But that which scares us and the extent to which we fear differs from age to age and society to society. Though scholars have studied the history of fear in the West and in other cultures for some time now, the question remains whether or not we have fewer reasons to be fearful today than in the past. Might we have become more fearful with less reason? Is fear the dominant feeling of our society? How is it put to use politically? Through what means is it disseminated? To what extent can fear also be pleasurable?

With generous support from the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung
Coolness is as cool as ever. Cool people impress others precisely because they aren’t easily impressed; they keep their feelings in check, put on nonchalance. Even so, the long-term historical trend points to the sinking value of detachment and the rising value of emotion. Coolness, it would seem, has become uncool. Feelings were once regarded as a disturbance, a threat to mental stability and the social order. Now not feeling is seen as the source of evil itself and doctors treat alexithymia—the inability to recognize and express emotions—as a medical disorder. Are there significant national and cultural differences in how people express coolness? Is it a product of a subculture, or an essential part of adolescence? What roles do class and social strata play?

In cooperation with the Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen
Today when we describe outpourings of anger, we are more likely to resort to notions like aggression and outrage than to fury, which recalls divine wrath and the intemperate outbursts of mythological heroes. Yet despite its archaic associations, fury is back in the public eye. Does the renaissance indicate a new way of managing our feelings? What are the links between anger, fury, wrath, aggression, and outrage? How do they originate? Has fury, once a mark of poor upbringing and dysfunction, become socially acceptable? Does its rehabilitation result from a new interpretation of societal behavior or political expression? What are the moral connotations of fury?
There are many forms and prefigurations of laughter: Mona Lisa’s smile, the schoolgirl’s giggle, the Cheshire cat’s grin, Loriot’s smirk, Stefan Raab’s convulsive fits. Laughter can be sneaky—a good joke hides in a dry delivery and then takes you by surprise—but it can also be contagious, which is why American sitcoms employ laugh tracks. Psychologists and doctors today confirm what people have believed since antiquity: laughing is good for your health. But laughter also has a dark side. Smiling at someone can always give way to laughing at someone; light-hearted exuberance and innocent joking, to bitter satire, biting irony, and insulting caricature.

In cooperation with the Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen

Julian Hanich Es muss nicht immer komisch sein. Über Formen des Lachens im Kino
Carey Harrison Kritische Kultur. Humor im amerikanischen Fernsehen
Harald-Alexander Korp Worüber lacht der Prophet Mohammed? Die schwere Leichtigkeit im Islam
Stefan Lukschy „... des Ernstes Lebens ...“. Anmerkungen zu Loriot
Barbara Merziger Was Sie schon immer über lachende Frauen wissen wollten ...
Willibald Ruch Lachen und Auslachen
Barbara Sichtermann Humor markiert Milieus.
Die inkorporierende Funktion des Gelächters im Fernsehen
Marleen Stoessel Das Kichern im Gebüsch. Von der Geburt des Humors aus dem Zwurchfell des Trickster
More so than other emotions, sadness and mourning have distinct individual and collective manifestations. Sadness is closely connected to despondence, melancholia, desperation, and depression, but also to apathy, fear, anger, and guilt. The rules of decorum tell us how to express grief, whether we can suffer in silence or express our sorrow openly, and give rise to complicated rituals, political symbols, and societal institutions. Which conventions help us express sadness and process loss? Which do we regard as inappropriate? How do codes and conventions change over time? How do they differ from culture to culture? How is sadness institutionalized in politics? How is it evoked, represented, and orchestrated in the media? And how does media’s portrayal of sadness shape the way we experience it?
For many central Europeans, pride is a feeling that is supposed to have been surmounted. Once so common that it figured among the seven deadly sins, pride today is thought to be confined to Asia, the Mediterranean and other societies that overvalue honor. Yet the feeling is more familiar, and more positive, than it might first appear. Think of the connotations of being proud of something, the proud heroes of young adult literature, and the national pride felt during the world cup soccer tournament, to which even Germans are susceptible. How is pride connected with phenomena like honor, self-respect, arrogance, vanity, assumption, or shame? How do ideas of pride differ from culture to culture?
Is first love one of the most important events in our lives or a myth fabricated from old memories? In countless novels and stories first love is portrayed at turns as a traumatic experience and a romanticization of an irretrievable past—but either way it’s supposed to be deeply formative. Is first love only conceivable against the backdrop of Western individualization? Does the concept of first love necessarily imply a second? One of first love’s distinguishing features is that it develops only after we’ve achieved a certain reflective capacity, permitting conscious search for its linguistic expression.
Celebrations, festivals, ceremonies, feasts—the semantic range comprised by the German word “Fest”—are temporary emotionally communities that foster long-term emotional bonds among their members. The emotions these event cultivate are specific: Christmas is about love and intimacy; Carneval and New Year’s Eve offer ecstatic escape from the everyday; funeral rituals channel sorrow; national anniversaries are exercises in pride. The division of labor is not always strict, however, and sometimes multiple emotions occur at once. The festive event is proleptic, raising hopes, making demands, and funneling enthusiasm during the period that precedes it.

Strictly speaking, only individuals have emotions. And yet, wherever many people congregate, common moods spread: there is contagion of enthusiasm, outrage, or fear. Be it open air concerts, sports events, demonstrations, or pilgrimages: each type of event is dominated and defined by a different set of emotions. Organizers may welcome these emotions while still fearing that they might spiral out of control. For centuries, police forces and crowd control experts have been discussing whether to ban certain types of events altogether in order to prevent upheaval, or whether orchestrating emotions in crowds might on the contrary help prevent turmoil. Can emotions in crowds be controlled and regulated? Can individuals resist collective moods or even influence them? What makes excitement suddenly veer into panic, mirth “turn” to wrath, and involvement give way to apathy?
Emotional communities are groups of people who share the same or similar norms for the expression of feelings. Together, those norms strike a certain affective tone that not only shapes how people talk about and appraise emotion but also generates an entire way of life. A crucial part of that process is the embodiment of a community’s affective tone in books, music, and film, where protagonists serve as role models—and sometimes idols—of emotional behavior. Just as important as—or perhaps even more important than—what they say is how they say it, how they look, how they move, and the explicit and implicit signals they send.
Whether it is Kann denn Liebe Sünde sein? or Love is Just a Four-Letter Word, Nathalie or Nine Million Bicycles—no other feeling has been sung about as often as love. There is no desire, no hope, no disappointment, no doubt that has not found expression in a song. And no song captures the feeling as deeply as the love song, which combines the sensuality of music with the poetry of lyrics. A particular feature of love songs is their ability to contain a message that seems personal—lovers who receive or send a mixed tape or a YouTube video think it captures their relationship in all its idiosyncratic quirkiness—yet also tell us something about an entire generation, about the private and political moods, desires, and Weltschmerz of an era. Sometimes, they even stand the test of time. All you need is love.
Today, the feeling of fear has come to seem ubiquitous as its triggers have multiplied in recent years. An ongoing financial crisis, terrorist attacks around the world, and many other examples both large and small have conspired to create a climate permeated by angst. We fear social decline, poverty in old age, foreigners, the loss of identity, epidemics, dementia, nuclear war, mass extinctions, climate change, and catastrophes of all kinds. Multiple factors explain fear’s rise to predominance at this historical juncture. Which combination has been decisive in spreading this general climate of fear? Which societal and cultural changes have promoted it? What role have old and new media played? Do merchants of fear seek to derive political and economic capital from its dissemination? How rational are our fears?

January 25–27, 2018

Shining, Stanley Kubrick (1980)

Woman at the shooting range, Photo: toodtuphoto © fotolia
Other Talks of the Series

Joanna Bourke  
*Fear in a Gendered World.  
Women and Violence in Modernity*  
November 13, 2007

Beate Söntgen  
*Auftritte vor dem Bild.  
Die Leidenschaft der Kunstbetrachtung in der Moderne*  
May 27, 2009

Barbara H. Rosenwein  
*The History of the Emotions.  
Narratives Old and New*  
July 7, 2009

Zoltán Kövecses  
*The Conceptualization of Emotional Experience*  
December 12, 2009

Thomas Brudholm  
*The Anatomy of Hatred*  
June 1, 2010

Heiko Christians / Thomas Macho  
*Weihnachten – Ein Fest der Liebe?*  
December 13, 2012

Hans Dieter Huber  
*Edvard Munch – ein Maler zwischen Gefühl und Geschäft*  
July 20, 2013

Fabienne Liptay  
*Face to Face. Beobachtungen am Zuschauer in Abbas Kiarostamis Shirin*  
November 14, 2013

Gisela Trommsdorff  
*Lassen sich Emotionen zähmen? Selbst- und Emotionsregulation als Aspekte kultureller Sozialisierung*  
November 24, 2015

Barbara H. Rosenwein  
*The Bodily Turn.  
New Directions in the History of Emotions*  
May 10, 2017
Passion(s) in Culture(s) was an international conference held at the Einstein Forum in Berlin 2006 and 2009. The conference focused on the exploration of emotions and the role of empathy in cultural understanding, particularly in light of our globalized times. The presentations and discussions at the conference highlighted the complex nature of emotions and the importance of empathy in understanding cultural phenomena.

For more detailed documentation of the programs and videos of selected presentations, see http://www.einsteinforum.de/programmreihen/passions-in-cultures/