

## Media and emotion: An introduction

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From movies to emojis, from love letters to flame wars, from shocking television news to immersive video games – emotions are of utmost importance for media production, reception, appropriation, and interaction. They guide the sensory perception and meaning-making of their users; they imprint media experiences into memory; and they contribute to the formation of collective identities, values, and modes of action. Often, emotions are the main motivation for the use of media in the first place, as they form the basis of aesthetic experience, enjoyment, and entertainment. Today, media interfaces and algorithms even observe and influence their users' emotions. The perplexing variety of connections between media and emotions can be tentatively sorted into four groups of general questions:

1. Emotion representation: How are different emotions represented and expressed in media, and through what means?
2. Emotion elicitation: Which emotions do media evoke in users, and by what forms and structures? Which user dispositions and contexts underlie affective reactions?
3. Emotion practice: In which practices are emotions integrated, and how are they interwoven with media uses and functions?
4. Emotion culture: Which socio-cultural causes and effects do media emotions have in certain cultures and epochs? How are they linked to power, ethics and politics, and how do they change over time?

Theories of emotion *representation* model emotions, media structures, and the connection between the two.[1] Theories of emotion *elicitation* additionally require that media structures be brought into causal relationships with the affective dispositions and situations of the users.[2] Theories of emotion *practice* extend their scope beyond the users to other actors and contexts, including (digital) media as actors in their own way.[3] Finally, theories of medial emotion *cultures* presuppose an overall understanding of culture, society, and history.[4] The discussion reaches further levels of complexity when these questions are interlinked. In addition, each theory can focus not only on individual works, but also on the specifics of certain media or genres.

The majority of studies have been published on the question of emotion *elicitation*, while questions of emotion representation, practice, and culture have received comparatively little systematic attention. All those theories are based on heterogeneous emotion and affect concepts and methods hailing from various disciplines. Moreover, they are shaped by diverging research interests: some are intended to describe or recommend emotional experiences, others try to explain present or past responses, forecast future reactions, improve production practices, or criticise socio-cultural contexts.

The many open questions are reason enough to devote a special section of NECSUS to #Emotions. Before we give an overview of the seven contributions to this issue at the end of our introduction, we briefly outline the conceptual field of affective phenomena, discuss some theoretical lines of conflict, and reflect on the specificity of media emotions.

## Media and the affective field

Theories about media and emotions run throughout the entire history of media. Often they are connected to warnings about the affective seduction potential of newly introduced media like the printed book, film, or video games. Moreover, aesthetics has long dealt with the emotionality of all kinds of media and art forms such as music, painting, or literature.[5] Thus, theorising about media and emotion began early, but then was neglected for a long time. It was not until the 1970s that a more intensive preoccupation with the subject began, and since the 1990s it has experienced a proper boom. Research has split into several strands, which often take antagonistic positions towards each other. To some degree, these disagreements flare up because film and

media scholars deal with very different understandings of media and emotions. Moreover, scholars turn to different kinds of media: diary entries, sonograms, movies, or tweets will each be related differently to emotions. Media differ in their sensory and semiotic modes, their technology and materiality, their spatial and temporal range, their practical uses, their socio-cultural contexts, and many further respects that have a bearing on their affective potential.[6] Most existing research has concentrated on classic mass media, and in this issue we follow that direction, but hope that many observations can be transferred to other media.

Another theoretical challenge is equally demanding: film and media studies inherit contentious conceptualisations of affective phenomena from fields of research as different as psychoanalysis, cognitive science, phenomenology, cultural studies, or affect studies. Across these varied approaches and concepts, generic terms for the totality of affective phenomena differ: some use 'emotion', others prefer 'affect' in a broad sense. For both terms, numerous more specific definitions exist, and many other related concepts, such as 'empathy', are just as ambiguous. What many theories have in common, however, is the assumption that affective phenomena are complex dynamic processes that involve an interplay of bodily reactions, action tendencies, and expressive impulses, which go hand in hand with sensations, perceptions, or cognitions; they can be subjectively experienced as feelings and often (but not always) may be conceptually classified. Possible bodily reactions include neuronal activation, hormone secretion, muscle tension, goosebumps, changes in heartbeat and temperature. Impulses for action include approaching or retreating, whereas expressions take place via face, body, and voice. Not least, perceptions, evaluations, inferences, memories, or imaginations can enter or influence the affective process.

Moreover, there seems to be some consensus in dividing the field of affective phenomena into several major categories, which include, among others, 'emotions' and 'affects' in a narrower sense. The most prominent category is *emotions proper*. Psychologists and philosophers often describe emotions with a component model that describes the interplay of appraisals/evaluations of an object, neurophysiological changes, action tendencies, bodily expressions, and subjective feelings/experiences. This is the model most widely endorsed in film and media studies, either explicitly or implicitly, with cognitivists putting emphasis on the appraisal part and phenomenologists focusing on the experience component. But emotion research also in-

corporates other influential theories, for instance psychological constructionism, which considers emotions as combinations of interoceptive or exteroceptive sensations with conceptual knowledge (e.g. about ‘sadness’) that makes those sensations meaningful *as* emotions.[7] Usually, media scholars use everyday language to describe certain emotions, including ‘basic emotions’ like fear but also more complex cases of mixed, social, political, or culture-specific emotions like moral shame or outrage. They have also developed a differentiated terminology for media-specific emotions (see below).

Emotions proper are often distinguished from *affects*. In Spinoza and Deleuze-influenced affect studies, epitomised by the work of Brian Massumi and adapted for film and media studies by Steven Shaviro and others, some understand affects as relational, prepersonal processes that bring forth changes in and between material bodies. Others see them as physical-neuronal precursors of conscious emotions that are felt but not yet cognitively classified. Many scholars in affect studies consider affects as primary, non-conscious, pre-subjective, and transpersonal.[8] They put them in stark opposition to emotions, which are seen as derivative, conscious, qualified, and related to a subject. Moreover, affects – in contrast to socially-formed emotions – are considered to bear a greater potential for social change.[9]

However, the term ‘affect’ is also used in quite different ways. Carl Plantinga, for instance, considers affect as an umbrella term, comprising *any* felt bodily state such as moods, reflexes, and felt bodily responses.[10] Raymond Bellour and others have applied Daniel Stern’s concept of *vitality affects* to audiovisual media.[11] Vitality affects come predominantly in the form of proprioceptive and kinesthetic experiences imbued with affective qualities, for instance, feelings of muscular tension or of ease and fluidity of movement.

This already points in the direction of the concept of *mood*, brought to the attention of media scholars by Greg M. Smith, Robert Sinnerbrink, and others.[12] Moods are typically distinguished from emotions by not having an intentional object, which is to say that they are not *about* something. Moods like cheerfulness or anxiety are thus considered as more free-floating than comparable emotions like happiness and fear. And while one may not be able to give a concrete *reason* for one’s mood, it is certainly *caused* by something, such as fatigue or the weather.[13] Finally, moods are often also longer lasting than emotions and more stable.[14]

*Mood* and *affect* are connected to – and contrasted with – further categories. Mood, for instance, bears some relation to Matthew Ratcliffe’s category

of *existential feelings*: examples would be feelings of being overwhelmed, lost, or in harmony with things (see Richard's and Moss-Wellington's contributions to this special section).[15] Affects, on the other hand, can come close to *bodily sensations*, which may include kinesthesia when watching someone frantically trying to escape, or vertigo when a camera dangles over an abyss. Scholars in film phenomenology like Vivian Sobchack and others stress bodily synaesthesia and claim that through cross-modal transferences from the senses of seeing and hearing we may have other sensory experiences like touch, smell, or taste.[16] While such distinctions between affective phenomena are indispensable for research, we should not understand them in an essentialist way but rather as heuristic tools.

Depending on the psychological or neuroscientific theory media scholars rely on, the *emergence* of affective processes is modelled very differently.[17] Some psychologists (e.g. Paul Ekman) assume that basic emotions such as joy, anger, or fear arise when specific stimuli activate universal 'affect programs' that automatically and cross-culturally lead to typical body, action, and expression tendencies, such as the release of stress hormones, a fearful visage, and the impulse to run away (the history of this position is critically examined by Bollmer in this issue). In contrast, constructivist emotion theories (e.g. Lisa Feldman Barrett) claim that stimulus perceptions initially lead to unspecific core affects, states of neuronal and physical arousal with pleasant or unpleasant valence. From these, conscious emotions would then be 'constructed' through an interpretation of the situation with the help of socio-cultural, language-based emotion concepts, such as 'love'. Psychological appraisal theories (e.g. Klaus Scherer) in turn assume that emotional processes are based on pre-conscious or conscious appraisals of stimuli that follow certain criteria: is something new or familiar, pleasant or unpleasant, does it correspond to one's own goals and social values, can it be influenced by action? This evokes bodily reactions, expressive and action tendencies; the interaction of these 'components' can finally be perceived as 'feeling' and labelled by emotion concepts. Neuroscientists such as Joseph LeDoux, on the other hand, differentiate between two forms of affective stimulus evaluation: *automatic* reactions in developmentally old brain regions such as the limbic system can be supplemented and influenced by *conscious* thought processes in the prefrontal cortex. Such theoretical approaches are interrelated with methodological choices regarding the extent to which phenomenological re-

flection and description, hermeneutic interpretation, cultural analysis, participatory observation, depth-psychological interviews, psychological experiments, questionnaires, or neuroscientific brain scans are suitable.

How we conceive of affective processes has far-reaching consequences for which structures of media are regarded as decisive for both the representation and elicitation of emotions and the emotional practices of media users. The choice of a particular theory of emotion directs attention to different media structures and user dispositions: those that evoke unspecific core affects (affect studies); activate innate affect programs (evolutionary psychology); lead to feelings and sensations that can be grasped reflectively (phenomenology); or are related to situation appraisals, goals, and social values of the users (cognitive psychology). In addition, evaluation theories can take opposite directions: while analytical philosophy emphasises conscious moral evaluations, psychoanalysis highlights subconscious desires and amoral fantasies. Further conflicts concern the extent to which affective processes are shaped by nature, culture, social groups, individual personality, or current situations. Even if theories agree on the importance of socio-cultural factors, they do not agree on which are most important: early childhood relationships, habitualised schemata, moral norms, social identities, or group-specific experiences?

## What is specific about media emotions?

Moreover, media theories differ not only in the theories of emotion they rely on, but also in the extent to which they acknowledge differences between everyday and media-specific emotions.

*Affective preconditions of the media situation:* media offer different affective affordances and gratifications to their users – affective niches that enable media-specific types of emotionality (see Hven's contribution to this issue). For instance, print media predominantly demand *imagination*, audiovisual media may directly address *perception*, video games presuppose *interaction*, and social media invite *communication*. Often, media emotions develop in freely chosen, safe situations (e.g. the cinema hall), which relieve the pressure of action and focus attention on the media texts.

*Collective and shared emotions:* frequently, media emotions are collective emotions (as discussed in Deidre Pribram's article). When media reception takes place with others, processes of shared attention, collective emotionality,

and physical contagion can develop. Just think of collective laughter or social emotions like shame.[18] In contrast, the very same media productions may also evoke diverging emotions in dispersed audiences with different dispositions, for example in the case of political online videos.[19]

*Witness emotions:* many emotions in the media are not directed at the users' own situation, but at the situation of observed actors: they are witness emotions – often involving empathy or sympathy – that neither require nor enable the user to act.[20] This can mean reassurance through safety, but also the tension of not being able to help. Just think of the Hitchcockian scenario of the bomb under the table that the viewer knows about, while the characters do not.

*Awareness of fictionality and factuality:* media experiences may be fictional or factual. It certainly makes a difference for my emotions, if I observe a fictional character in a television series or if I transform into an avatar in a documentary AR experience. And users of *fictional* media are usually aware that the observed events are only invented. Older aesthetic theories have discussed the fact that media users nevertheless develop emotions under the heading of the so-called *paradox of fiction*. Most current theories dissolve this apparent paradox by taking into account, among other things, pre-conscious stimulus reactions as well as processes of simulation and imagination.

*Prefocused emotionality:* most importantly, media direct and manipulate the representation and elicitation of emotions through narrative, rhetorical, audiovisual, or other means. They present 'criterially prefocused' texts inviting the users to develop emotions of a certain kind, intensity, duration, etc.[21] The way they do this is largely media-specific. For instance, where films use close-ups to focus attention on emotional faces, print media may employ detailed descriptions.

*Awareness of communication:* finally, media come with an awareness that they serve the communication of meaning.[22] They not only show something, but they show *how* someone has experienced it. Moreover, media users usually search for overarching meanings and imagine a communicative situation, where somebody (e.g. a filmmaker) addresses someone (e.g. a specific target audience) with certain intentions and effects. This also means that the use of media and affective responses to media texts is influenced by media-specific dispositions, for instance the knowledge about certain genres, stars, or narrative conventions. As audiences use this knowledge to reflect on the style of media texts or on their own experiences, aesthetic emotions or meta-emotions emerge.

Film and media theorists helpfully distinguish between various kinds of media emotions. One basic distinction concerns their duration: are they 'global' and long-lasting or are they 'local' and brief?[23] (Brown's contribution to this section deals with related questions of affective temporality.) Another distinction starts from the levels of affective causes in media experiences.[24] Affective responses may arise from immediate sensations and perceptions of stylistic features; from experiences of depicted worlds, agents, and conflicts; from an understanding of general messages and meanings; from evaluations of the aesthetic design; or from reflections about the communicative situation, including the media producers and users themselves. Most research has focused on affective responses to represented worlds, for instance, the emotional engagement with characters[25], reactions to their conflicts and events, or narrative suspense, surprise, and curiosity.[26] Some theories have also concentrated on the affective contribution of media forms and styles. Ed Tan coined the term *A(rtifact)*-emotions for the admiration of a brilliant camera movement or the anger about a stereotypical screenplay.[27] Another concept used is *meta*-emotion, like feeling ashamed about having enjoyed a cheap joke in a comedy.[28]

With the surge of digital, networked, and mobile media, theoretical discussions have begun to expand. Features like interactivity, participation, social networking, or artificial intelligence profoundly shape their affectivity and confront media studies with difficult questions: How, for instance, do we respond to figures in computer games?[29] How do 'affective publics' arise in microblogs like Twitter?[30] What is specific for the affectivity of visual social media? And how can we understand emerging sensory media whose artificial intelligences not only record their users' emotions, but also construct complex feedback loops by processing their uptake of emotional data and manipulating the users' emotions again through their interfaces?

Since we had to concentrate on the most fundamental issues related to media and emotions here, we could only gesture at such larger questions, certainly not all of which have found their way into this special section. This only shows that there is a necessity for more research in the fields of emotion representation, emotional practices, emotional effects, and media cultures of emotion, over and above the intriguing contributions of our seven authors.



## Overview of the current section

The seven articles about emotion from scholars working in Germany, the US, China, Australia, and England offer theoretical, methodological, and analytic contributions to media studies spanning cinema, television, photography, and social media.

Steffen Hven's theoretical contribution advances understandings of how emotional capacities are altered and supported by environmental resources. For Hven, media-induced emotions are not solely internal states. Building on 'niche construction theory', which focuses on how organisms modify their environment, he argues that humans create an evolutionary feedback loop of mutual influence, employing media technologies to construct affective niches and emotional experiences previously unavailable to our forbearers. Using examples from a broad range of media, Hven demonstrates that humans have created a media-saturated environment that influences affective states by constructing affective niches that motivate desire and behaviours, direct attention, guide cultural norms, and elicit synaesthesia.

Whereas Hven provides tools to decode the affective assemblages of media, Grant Bollmer contextualises the development of scientific concepts of emotion. Bollmer traces the study of physiognomy and the use of hand-drawn and photographic 'books of faces' to interpret character and emotion through to digital emotional surveillance techniques. His historical account of efforts to detect subjective emotional states from images of faces leads toward disturbing Facebook facial recognition software intended to classify and modulate emotional responses. Exploring neglected work in experimental psychology and its influence on Paul Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS), which is used in motion capture, animation, and the construction of emotions in synthesians, Bollmer argues the media employed by researchers affect how emotions are categorised.

Carl Plantinga's research about Bertolt Brecht and reflective spectatorship elaborates on the distinction between estrangement and engagement that he develops in *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (2018). He demonstrates that although Brecht initially rejects sympathetic emotions and is hostile to plays and films that elicit empathy, alienation effects (*Verfremdungseffekte*) are not necessarily devoid of emotion. Brecht's later writings acknowledge that righteous anger, complex emotions, and unsettling shifts in tone can provoke the audience to reconsider social issues. Plantinga argues that emotion is involved in critical spectatorship and that films such as Spike

Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) employ Brechtian techniques that create a dialectical interplay of estrangement and emotional experiences that encourage both engagement and reflection.

Deidre Pribram offers a 'socioemotional' perspective on audience emotions and an analysis of collective responses to the television series *Wanted* (Richard Bell and Rebcca Gibney 2016-present). Pribram examines transnational television audiences' communal experiences of gendered anger, contending that socioemotionality informs social relations wherein emotional experience is a binding factor that is felt and shared across national boundaries. Her contribution to studying audiences' affective experiences of commonality in the age of streamed television sees emotion as a category with multiple variations – like genre. In addition, she conceives of gender as an imagined community populated by people who exist as communal images providing touchstones that extend emotional experience.

Wyatt Moss-Wellington also provides a fresh take on genre, examining the emotional politics of contemporary romantic comedies in which limerence (the intensity of feeling during romantic pair-bonding) gives rise to personal and political awakenings. Moss-Wellington explores the vicarious pleasures that romantic comedy offers, arguing that limerent emotional experiences are valuable beyond the elation of love. The affective power of limerence can challenge and change emotions and notions of value, recalibrating one's mindset during experiences of courage or rejection. Political romantic comedies revalue sensitivity to emotional states and qualities that facilitate being more selfless, vulnerable, and responsive to others' needs, becoming attached to hopeful ideals, and willing to engage in risk-taking behaviours that may convert convictions and desires into reality.

David Richard's phenomenological analysis of embodiment in the television series *Sharp Objects* (Marti Noxon, 2018) reveals how viewers tune into the experience of depression via a traumatised protagonist with a history of self-harm. After introducing the phenomenology of illness, Richard details how intimate framing, a gothic milieu heavy with suffocating familial decay, and the immersive qualities of textured acoustic close-ups elicit emotive responses from the audience and convey mood and existential feelings. Richard demonstrates how the series' non-linear editing expresses depression's episodic nature and the feeling of being out of sync or out of tune with life as he argues that *Sharp Objects* gives embodied insight into the phenomenological experience of depression.

In his analysis of *Better Call Saul* (Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould, 2015-present), David Brown distinguishes televisual ‘narrative dread’ from suspense, fear, ‘art-dread’, and ‘cinematic dread’. Narrative dread is akin to a mood or a diffuse, prolonged global emotion directed at a future concern. Brown notes that television’s structural and aesthetic elements such as slow pacing, foreknowledge of story outcomes, and long form narration amplify dread. He contends that viewers are caught in a paradox of aversion in which we formulate negative hypotheses and tolerate dreadful anticipation of when or how badly a known unpleasant event will unfold in order to satisfy our desire for knowledge.

Collectively, these articles advance understandings of emotions and affective states from fear, anger, and love, to depression and dread, using approaches including affective niche theory, media history, neo-Brechtianism, genre studies, phenomenology, and cognitivism. If the term ‘emotion’ has etymological roots in ‘motion’, as it is often claimed, then it may not be too far-fetched to hope that these seven contributions will move both discussions and understanding forward.

## Authors

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## Notes

- [1] E.g. Feng & O'Halloran 2013.
- [2] E.g. Plantinga 2009.
- [3] Cf. Lünenborg & Mayer & Töpper 2018.
- [4] E.g. Harding & Pribram 2009.
- [5] Robinson 2005.
- [6] Cf. for instance Meyrowitz 2009.
- [7] Feldman Barrett 2014.
- [8] See Shaviro 2016.
- [9] Cf. Angerer & Bösel & Ott 2014.
- [10] Plantinga 2009.
- [11] Bellour 2002; Barker 2019; Väliaho 2011.
- [12] Smith 2003; Sinnerbrink 2012. See also Plantinga 2012. Several differences between moods and existential feelings are mentioned in Eder 2016, p. 78.
- [13] Plantinga 2009, p. 60.
- [14] Sinnerbrink 2012.
- [15] Ratcliffe 2012. For films see Eder 2016.
- [16] Sobchack 2009; Marks 2000.
- [17] Scherer 2009, see also Moors 2009.
- [18] See Hanich 2018.
- [19] Eder 2018.
- [20] Tan 1996.
- [21] Carroll 2003.
- [22] Van Dijk 2008.

[23] Plantinga 2009, p. 69.

[24] See, for instance, Yacavone 2015; Eder 2018.

[25] Smith 1995.

[26] See Hogan 2011.

[27] Tan 1996.

[28] Bartsch 2008.

[29] Perron & Schröter 2016.

[30] Papacharissi 2014.