Emotional Lives

Emotional Lives explores the changes in *emotional cultures* that have taken place during the last half century and continue to affect people's identities today. These changes are driven by the culture of consumerism in contemporary postindustrial society and by the emergence of new ideas about public and private life in a time when media culture generates new forms of social relationships and deep personal attachments to celebrity figures. McCarthy shows that people are drawn to public life, not only for entertainment and pleasure but also for its dramas, for memorializing events like disasters, acts of violence, and victimhood. McCarthy's cultural-sociological approach provides new insights about emotions as "social things" and reveals how today mass media is an important force for cultural change, including changes in people's relationships, identities, and emotions.

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Emotional Lives

Dramas of Identity in an Age of Mass Media

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Preface

Drama as Everyday Experience

Years ago, Raymond Williams argued that our postmodern lives had in effect turned us into actors. In fact, we may be distinguished from all known human societies in the sheer amount of acting that we observe on a day-to-day basis. What we have now is "drama as habitual experience" (R. Williams [1974] 1989, 3–5). The long tradition of performance theory in the social sciences draws from and systematizes this postmodern everyday experience, making mass media and the audience the social arena where the meaning of a performance is created and where social actors "encounter their identities" and those of others (Giesen 2006; cf. Gross 1986; Schechner 2003; Turner 1988).

This book is an attempt to understand the many ways that our everyday theatricality has shaped our feelings and emotions *and* (as dialectical thinking requires) to consider how our feelings and emotions move us along a new social trajectory that seeks out dramatic experiences as ways of discovering reality itself. I also want to provide here a kind of record of the many shapes and forms of these emotional dramas: the ones we are used to viewing on the digital screens we watch and inhabit; the dramas we ourselves enact in shopping malls and public parks; the horrific events we see and consume as *the news* day after day, and the dramas enacted by those heroes who play leading parts and dangerous roles, like cops and firemen; the rock concerts and football games we attend as fans and participants; the museums and monuments we enter as participants in an unfolding drama.

When "real people" describe themselves in public settings like these, their speech sometimes reveals their sense of something real and emotional, even life-affirming, happening to them in these public

places, suggesting that "authenticity" has become a vital cultural code (Alexander and Mast 2006), personally meaningful to each of us and important in the signs we give off to others, a code used and pursued by social actors in public places in an age of artifice, drama, and manipulation. So it is that visitors to memorials, for example, engage in public acts with others, becoming part of the montage they visit, participants in a "spectacle of suffering," members of an "imagined bereaved community" (Linenthal 2001, 2–3).

While Lionel Trilling (1971) first pointed out to us the literary and cultural significance of "authenticity" in our time, Alexander and Mast (2006, 2) first described *social performances* like those described above as dramas of "authenticity," referring to the growing number of intense and emotional social performances today and to the fact that, increasingly, dramas are built into the rhythms of our everyday lives, where social actors across a range of public venues implicitly position themselves and their actions on a public stage, "seeking identification with their experiences and understandings from their audiences."

As I argue here, collective acts like these suggest that a new postmodern social imaginary may be at work today, one only decades old. Earlier in this long history, modernity famously inserted distance between human subjects, a *rational* distance (as Max Weber called it) of separation and restraint. It was also a personal distance—we had become strangers to ourselves—one that Freud described and invited us moderns to overcome. Is this distance being replaced today by one for *closeness*—a closeness between subjects, between our private and our public selves? Can this closeness help us understand today's newfound urgency to feel things firsthand and for a new desire to enter public spaces (Kimmelman 2016)? If this is so, collective acts like those I describe here operate as signs of a new phase of modern subjectivity, a new "social imaginary," one described by Daniel Bell (1996) as the "eclipse of distance." This is one of my arguments in the chapters that follow.

Borrowing from authors working in culture theory (chapter 1), I examine what a cultural approach to emotions looks like and what it

studies. As I argue here, its approach takes up the question of modern and postmodern identity (chapter 2) and how emotions have been experienced and interpreted by social actors living today. I also argue, with the help of social theorists and social historians, that today's emotional experiences and dramas have their roots in earlier emotional cultures, especially the social movement described as Romanticism. Accordingly, my approach to identity and emotional life is historical, arguing that important changes have taken place throughout the modern era in people's ideas of the self and in the emotions people feel, and what emotions mean to them and to their identities.

In chapter 2, I examine how emotions and identity—how people come to think about who they are and who they want to be—have become closely implicated in each other's careers as what we call modernity has moved and changed into what we now call postmodernity—that world of today where consumerism has taken off at great speed and where consumerism's partner, mass media, spawns an extraordinary thing called "celebrity culture," where people called celebrities are known for being known or famous for being famous (Boorstin 1961; Muggeridge 1967). Postmodernity is also a place where its celebrities and its spectacles seem to be what many of us live for or, at the very least, look to for our greatest source of relief from our pedestrian lives.

Chapter 3 addresses a particular case of today's mediatized world: the rise of memorials to death and disaster where the disaster memorial (in the wake of plane crashes, street killings, school shootings, and other familiar events of death and disaster) provides a type of stage where numbers of us can enter and discover the liberating experiences and the deep feelings of remembering events we never witnessed directly but have come to know and to feel as our very own.

Chapter 4 examines some of the ways that our emotional lives have been altered in and through forms of mass media. The social movements discussed in this chapter share an emotional intensity and

a consciousness of belonging to a large group of others like ourselves, whether the enthusiastic followers of a young Catholic saint, or the crowds dancing in the streets after Lindbergh's landing in Paris, or the vast and consequential community we call *the nation*. These collective unities—some lasting, some fleeting—are made up of beings who share a faith and/or an identity as *individuals* (discussed in chapter 2) with a common object, a mass of individuals united in time and space whose individualities merge in a moment of belonging to and participating in an idea and image of themselves—an idea communicated to them on television and in newspapers. Today these messages and images come to us on the many screens that surround us or are carried in our hands or pockets.

In the Afterword, I conclude this work on a personal note about what it has meant to try to study emotions today.