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MELODRAMATIC STRUCTURES OF FEELING AND MASS BEREAVEMENTS OF CELEBRITY FOLK HEROES

ABSTRACT

This paper presents theoretical, methodological and political considerations pertaining to the affective configuration of public collective grief and bereavement. This configuration is described relative to the specific position held by celebrity folk heroes within the broader melodramatic cultural modality. The case of the bereavement for the singer Đorđe Balašević is compared here with two other historical episodes that involved similar affective patterning and related discursive formations. The article shows how the melodramatic modality underpinning all three cases operates beyond the representational and discursive dimensions of culture to form collective affective patterns or structures of feeling that transform the underlying economies of impossibility into melodramatic bursts of pseudo-political (im)possibility.

KEY WORDS: melodramatic structure of feeling, bereavement, celebrity folk heroes, Balašević, affect theory, (im)possibility

Melodramatične strukture občutkov in množično žalovanje zvezdniških ljudskih junakov

IZVLEČEK

Članek predstavi teoretične, metodološke in politične premisleke, ki se nanašajo na afektivno konfiguracijo javne kolektivne žalosti in žalovanja. Takšna konfiguracija je opisana v povezavi s posebnim položajem zvezdniških ljudskih junakov v kontekstu širše melodramatične kulturne modalitete. Primer žalovanja za pevcem Đorđejem Balaševićem se tukaj primerja z dvema drugima zgodovinskima

epizodama, ki sta vključevali podobne afektivne vzorce in z njimi povezane diskurzivne formacije. Članek prikaže, kako melodramatična modaliteta kot podlaga vseh treh primerov deluje onkraj reprezentativne in diskurzivne razsežnosti kulture, kako tvori kolektivne afektivne vzorce ali strukture občutkov, ki temeljno ekonomijo nemožnosti preoblikujejo v melodramatične izbruhe psevdopolitične (ne)možnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *melodramatična struktura občutka, žalovanje, zvezdniški ljudski junaki, Balašević, teorija afekta, (ne)možnost*

1 Introduction

A singer-songwriter, poet, and novelist Đorđe Balašević, born in 1953 in Novi Sad, Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, died on February 19, 2021 in Novi Sad, Republic of Serbia, from COVID-19-related pneumonia. Balašević was a household name and a revered pop-cultural luminary in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, with his work already a recognised subject of academic analyses in various fields and subfields (Mijatović 2004; Baker 2006; Asimopoulos 2012; Tadić and Đurđević 2017).

At the time of Balašević's death, the COVID-19 pandemic in the countries of the former Yugoslavia had lasted for a year already, which is a fact of importance here. Any COVID-19-related death, even the best documented one, presents an exercise in pseudo-accountability that accompanies the systemic (and systematic, if not orderly) governance of life and death and the propagation of the new-old order of increasingly carceral algorithmic capitalism (Wang 2018). Stretched across the repertoire of conflicting biomedical narratives and mutually incompatible statistical models, various causes and effects, morbidities, and comorbidities merge into an obsession of numbers that mark some mildly reassuring loops within prolonged anxiety, a structure typical for the process of quantification of life (affective, discursive, and material alike), and the onset of "data fetishism" (Sharon and Zandbergen 2016). At the opposite pole of the work of public dying is the repertoire of "people's" mystification and obfuscation, of the neo-premodern tendencies uniting conspiracy theories and digital-tribal waves of cultural wars and identarian clashes.

Surprisingly, none of these aspects proved to be crucial in the discursive and affective organization of Đorđe Balašević's death and the subsequent collective bereavement. His death was medicalised only superficially and tangentially, and it was not immediately mystified, in stark opposition to some other contemporary

COVID-19 deaths.¹ Instead, across the region of ex-Yugoslavia, an unexpected number of people went into a dramatic mode of mourning, expressing signs of intense and uncontrollable grief. People publicly described their feelings as intense sadness, endless crying, confusion, and incredulity in the face of such an “intimate” loss.

When I heard that he passed away, I couldn't believe it, the next day we headed from Aleksinac to Novi Sad to pay our respects to this legend. We could barely collect the money, and then went through Dositejeva Street 206 steps to house number 33 in Cvijićeve Street, huge tears fell, but no sobs were heard. My heart ached and my hands were shaking. A profound sorrow overwhelmed my entire family as we silently walked away from the house of the great man and singer. Rest in peace, our dear Đole. (S.G., YouTube comment)

I listen to him, images of life pass before my eyes, scorching tears flow down my face, without a voice, without a sound. It is my soul that is crying. (Anonymous, YouTube comment)

In the span of just a few hours, the entire post-Yugoslav transnational mediasphere had already resonated with these loud “silent” voices. Thousands of narratives immediately proliferated, attempting to showcase the unique position of Balašević in what used to be, and still is, a shared cultural space of post-Yugoslav republics. Acts of individual and group commemorations in most cities of the region merged with this public media frenzy, while politics echoed this sentiment by almost immediately suggesting street names, monuments, commemorative plaques, and other such devices of institutional memorialization.

This paper came about through intense field observations and theoretical evaluations of these events. Yet, its purpose is not to provide a discourse analysis or to be an ethnographic article about Balašević and his grieving fans, as those options require different procedures and methodology. This cultural studies analysis uses those field observations to propose and test theoretical models of melodramatic collective grief. It reactivates the notion of the melodramatic structure of feeling, whose historical iterations and narrative materializations are well documented, yet insufficiently conceptualised in the context of public collective grief and bereavement.

1. COVID-19-related deaths of the patriarch and two bishops of the Serbian orthodox church that died shortly before Balašević present a good example. Their SARS-CoV-2 infection was widely debated in regional media, their death was medicalized (and, in parallel, mystified from the religious perspective). Their funerals were criticized as epidemiologically dangerous.

To better grasp the affective patternings of mass bereavements and to understand their adjacent discursive vestments, Balašević's death will be juxtaposed with two other celebrity deaths of a similar subtype (celebrity folk heroes), namely, the well documented and paradigmatic deaths of Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales (1796–1817) and Diana, Princess of Wales (1961–1997).

2 Melodrama of resonances, synchronizations, and automations

2.1 Melodramatic structure of feeling

Williams's classical theory of "structures of feeling" recognises "elements" (expressions, manifestations, traces, accounts) of feeling, while trying to see how they make "configurations," that is, how they assume structural qualities, becoming a distinct spirit/taste/colour of an era, of a conjuncture, or some cultural formation (Williams 1978: 132).

[Williams] locates affectivity, no longer according to the coordinates we normally use, interior/exterior, subjective/objective and so on, but as a distributive phenomenon, an assemblage of small parts of different provenance, which make up, due to an internal system of relations, an unmistakable phenomenon, a feeling with a verifiable and identifiable structure. (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015: 5)

The one structure of feeling that I think deserves to be brought to the fore in the case of Balašević and other such celebrity folk heroes, structuring and colouring their life work, their death, and the processes of dramatic grief among their audiences and followers, is the melodramatic structure of feeling, that is, the one showing characteristics of melodrama. Defined by the standard Oxford dictionary as "A sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions" (Lexico 2021), the semantic field of melodrama extends far beyond the logic of this particular literary and theatrical genre.

Brooks's classical work from the early 1970s dislocated the crux of the debate from discussing genological (genre-related) and stylistic choices to acknowledging the "melodramatic imagination" or "melodramatic mode" that can also appear in hitherto venerated nonmelodramatic classical works of literature and other arts. Crucially, this mode is one of those "imaginative modes in which cultural forms express dominant social and psychological concerns" (Brooks 1976: viii). According to Brooks, not even our detachment through irony could change the role of melodrama in showcasing things that matter, but also in sustaining a

"Manichean outlook of things, of good and evil, vice and virtue, innocence and villainy" (Mercer and Shingler 2004: 85).

Melodrama as "a dialectical interaction between moral significance and an excess aimed precisely at noncognitive affects, thrills, sensations, and strong affective attraction" (Gunning 1994) explodes in "post-sacred" or "godless" times, but also in times of heightened uncertainty, anxiety, and rancour (or long-standing and controlled resentfulness). Effects of this interaction are superficially emulated by the operations of contemporary emotional capitalism (Illouz 2007), spectacular politics, and media production and consumption based on "emotionalisation" (Mujica and Bachmann 2013). Such flattened emotionality also charges the events of pseudomoral panic and is at the core of many particularistic identarian (and identitarian) games of passionate labelling, contemporary culture wars, and so-called cancel culture. These phenomena entail intemperate affective excessiveness, and while they operate through bursts of unreflected feelings, their "moral significance," that is, moral semantic anchoring, remains decisive. It is a type of communal or collective ethical balancing act around moments of loss or deprivation, usually standing for other losses and deprivations. The global COVID-19 pandemic, in itself dramatic and demanding (Lenarčič and Smrdelj 2020; Kamin et al. 2021), activated such mechanisms of (melo)dramatizing unspeakable loss.

These melodramatic mechanisms collapse the conventional opposition of the "intimate," of the "innermost personality" versus the "impersonal" of the "outer domain of social routines and pressures" (Mazzarella 2017: 200). Discussing Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, Mazzarella locates both the author's rejection of "direct transition of sentiments" and his trust in "a profoundly and spontaneously mimetic-corporeal faculty" that synchronises gazing mobs with the circus spectacle. That ambivalence is at the core of the "mass-mediated subjectivity": "It is the juxtaposition and the disjuncture between (ethical) identification and (mimetic) resonance that makes the peculiar self-relation established by the impartial spectator theatrical: a dynamic tension between distanced communicative representation and immersed sensuous participation" (Mazzarella 2017: 204). In short, what used to be a philosophical-political fiction of the impartial spectator/adjudicator that only occasionally sympathetically resonates with others, if at all, has turned into an endlessly (if superficially) resonating political subjectivity open to what one could call a publicised post-public.

2.2 From techno-sadness to digital mass bereavement

Due to the centrality of the mass-mediated subjectivity of constant spontaneous synchronization, paired with pseudo-autonomy of self-curation, and involving falsely safe distances between screens, the flows of public grief and bereavement

can easily become both amplified and simplified, emotionally flattened and formulaic, while remaining dramatically “activated” around things that seem to matter. That is especially true for the flows entirely located within the digital sphere, spurred by the effects of that sphere, or, increasingly, occurring in the hybrid digital-analogue continuum of affective distribution and patterning. A powerful combination of technological, corporeal, discursive, and affective “digital social media are broadly characterised by creating the ‘immediatisation’ of social time, erasing the gap between receiving, being affected, and acting” (Timm-Knudsen and Stage 2015: 199).

To that, one needs to add the effects of the platforms themselves, a form of structural imposition of interface designs, of algorithmic governance of communication, of limitations in numbers of words, in shapes of newsfeeds, etc. There is a double or triple coding in place, with social codes interwoven with programming; the reality, in turn, is saturated with the super-coded pseudo-flows of sociality. What Martin Roberts called “automated sociality” (Roberts 2019, personal communication)—be it “happy,” as in felicitations and birthday greetings, or “sad,” as in grief and bereavement—is decisively marked by formulaic repetitiveness (R.I.P., R.I.P., R.I.P., R.I.P., etc.) that showcases an ancient aspect of hidden orality amidst the digitally written words. Such rhythms of automated sociality are highly contagious, not only in ideas or concepts, but also (or in particular) in basic shapes and usages that get copied and multiplied due to previously described aspects of spontaneous synchronization (Sampson 2012; Mazzarella 2017).

A notorious Facebook experiment with mass-scale emotional manipulation (or social engineering) from 2012 (Kramer et al. 2014) showed how the patterns of affective organization and simple forms of emotional directionality (positive/negative) could be contagious and spread in waves, regardless of the precise content. A full and unbroken affective continuum between such waves and their nondigital counterparts is increasingly visible and documented.² What Geert Lovink recently called “the society of the social,” that is, the mass-scale reformatting of interior lives by social media and the inseparability of individuals and platforms, while overly simplified, certainly remains telling.

For Lovink, one of the main default affective modalities of such reformatted masses is “sadness by design.”

2. A good example of such continuum occurred after the tragic accident involving the ferryboat Sewol in South Korea in 2014 (Woo et al. 2015). It is important to notice how this works in conjunction with the discursive position of Sewol as “the symbol of neoliberal South Korea” (Rhee 2018: 8).

No matter how brief and mild, sadness is the default mental state of the online billions. Its original intensity gets dissipated. It seeps out, becoming a general atmosphere, a chronic background condition. Occasionally—for a brief moment—we feel the loss. A seething rage emerges. After checking for the tenth time what someone said on Instagram, the pain of the social makes us feel miserable, and we put the phone away. (Lovink 2019: 48)

This short-lived awareness of loss is crucial for the analysis of public melodramatic grief and bereavements. Such “digital heterotopia” of briefly becoming both lost and connected in shared intensity happens in the background of the endless deflation and sadness, “a general atmosphere,” conceptually similar to the structure of feeling. The substance of this sadness surely materialises from the insufferable tensions between the curation of the polished digital self and the hidden world of precarious labour, of the capitalist expropriation of care, of criminalization of organic communality, of the neo-feudal political economy of the era, of environmental concerns, of pandemic fears, and so forth. To partake in an occasional “true” sense of loss and rage is almost akin to the classical Turnerian anthropological model of liminoid events pervaded by the collective energies of *communitas* (Turner 1969; Pužar 2007).

For Lovink, the connection of all this sadness with the traditional notion of melancholia is clear but complicated: Kierkegaardian melancholia as “the deepest foundation of the human in a Godless society” is now replaced by “the democratization of sadness” spread “thinly” and “flatly” in “homeopathic doses” across the technological plateau (Lovink 2019: 55).

Differences between melancholia and techno-sadness are not only distributional and quantitative. This contemporary sadness is also different in a temporal sense, as it comes suspended in the endless present time of attention capitalism: “While for the archaic melancholic, the past never passes, techno-sadness is caught in the perpetual now. Forward focused, we bet on acceleration and never mourn a lost object” (Lovink 2019: 56).

Finally, techno-sadness is acted out in the middle of the crowd. It is Simmel’s cool detachment of urban dwellers turned into a horror of juxtaposed lonelinesses:

Whereas melancholy in the past was defined by separation from others, reduced contacts and reflection on oneself, today’s tristesse plays itself out amidst busy social (media) interactions. In Sherry Turkle’s phrase, we are alone together, as part of the crowd—a form of loneliness that is particularly cruel, frantic and tiring. (Lovink 2019: 56)

We can see, therefore, how the dramatic collective grief and bereavement can act as a sudden and (un)expected affective intensification that cuts through the solitude and boredom of the “thinly spread” sadness of the global pandemic,

of social distancing and biopolitical interventions. Maybe even of the pandemic listlessness and ennui of the still privileged but increasingly frustrated middle classes.³ Due to its commemorative or memorial focus (an intense engagement in temporal projections backward), such bereavement momentarily destabilises the endless nowness. A visible phase or jump from the thinly spread affectivity to the heightened and directed/focused intensity temporarily restores more visible melodramatic splits. It is “us” and “them” now, and “we” are hurting.

Image 1: “If I perish young/ Plant only rosemary at my grave/ Don’t allow them/ to make a sad third act out of it” (Đorđe Balašević, Slovenska [Slavic]) – an ad hoc commemorative “altar” for Đorđe Balašević, a day after his passing; Ljubljana, Križanke.



Photo: Robert Waltl.

3. Franco “Bifo” Berardi describes a tricky relationship of what he calls boredom and the ability to start a revolution. Boredom or deflation is a precursor for revolutionary bursts and movements. Intense contemporary neurostimulation, in his opinion, precludes it (Berardi 2018).

3 Celebrity folk heroes and the melodrama of (im)possibility

3.1 The affective patterning of mass bereavement and the role of secular saints

For a long time now, the melodramatic modality has been described as a dream-like realm, a “dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfillment and satisfaction found only in dreams. An idealization and simplification of the world of reality, it is in fact the world its audiences want but cannot get” (Booth 1965: 14). Such a public dream (or fairy tale) builds upon the dualities or contrasts that cut across the fabric of social life: abstractions, simplifications, and flattening of the complex landscapes of intensities. Unresolved bipolarity of the typical social dream built upon loss and bereavement unites the structure of melancholy, the structure of melodrama, and the structures of the political (Anker 2015; Cauter 2016).

Melodramatic social mode, while expressing and accommodating the aesthetics (and ethics) of excess (Newlin 2011), and while being built upon splits, contrasts, and clashes, also (and this is crucial) hides or obscures a symbolic economy of impossibility (Goldberg 2016). Goldberg’s queer reading shakes the polarities of melodrama. It is a structure of frustration and blockage, of suppression and obfuscation, that screams of love and hatred, of male and female, of us and them. It is that emotional “lockdown” that propels the excesses of public mourners without really giving them a chance to speak out.

Among the most notable historical examples of such a structure of melodramatic public grief and bereavement are the events of public mourning for Charlotte, Princess of Wales, who died in London in 1817 after giving birth to a stillborn son (Peacock 2015), and for Diana, Princess of Wales, who died following a car accident in Paris, in 1997. The latter case, related to “Lady Di,” produced one of the most complete catalogues of ethnographic data and of cultural studies analysis of public grief and bereavement in living history (Ang 1997; Walter 1999; Parrot and Harré 2001; Thomas 2002; Thomas 2008; Maclean 2014). Comparing these two royal deaths with the death of a petit-bourgeois and mildly left-liberal post-Yugoslav singer-songwriter might seem strange or frivolous, but my claim is that these three deaths show deep structural analogies and considerable genealogical overlaps. They are quite different from superficially similar groups of public deaths (and from the adjacent bursts of dramatic collective public grief). The first of those pertains to deaths of the anchoring, stabilizing, or oppressive systemic figures, leaders, dictators, classics of various arts, and patriarchal tribal

fathers, with public expressions of grief accommodated within properly systemic patterns. While often producing dramatic and deeply felt expressions, the affective-discursive organization of these deaths largely showcases a positive linear relationship between systemic expectations and personal affective overflows. Such was the model of death, grief, and bereavement for the ex-prime minister Sir Winston Churchill in 1965, for president Josip Broz Tito in 1981, and for supreme leader Kim Jong-Il in 2011.

Tragic individual or collective deaths of *hoi polloi* present the other extreme of these dramatised public deaths, often marked by the seemingly anti-structural *communitas* of grief (liminal and not liminoid, in Turnerian terms), waves and eruptions with visible political consequences even for nonpolitical deaths.⁴ Such public deaths often include a quick translation of the raw affect into an emotional spectrum of anger, rage, and indignation, even moral panic, along with more expected "sadness," but they are inconceivable in their final form without some organizing, relaying, shunting, or orienting mechanisms, even when they appear spontaneous or chaotic.

While this entire taxonomy seems almost ludicrously simplistic from the cultural studies point of view, considering complexities of subjectivation, individuation, ideological interpellation, symbolic structuration, and such, with every life and every death being (also) inherently "political," I still claim that *grosso modo*, such a simple classification (while not being in any sense precise or exhaustive) answers the analytical need to understand some finer nuances in how affects become socioculturally organised in the context of public deaths and bereavement.

Melodramatic collective grief requires character-people safely preshaped into character-types, and that invokes the old Russian formalist notion of "function." A function is what a character does, an action or lack thereof, something that affects the story. Unlike the character itself, it presents a stable and constant element in a tale, its fundamental component. More so, functions often come in binary splits or pairs of opposites, which is relevant for this article and its discussion of melodramatic opposites and contrasts. They can be assigned to different characters, or separated by the intermediary structures of the narrative, and are always bound to the inner temporal structures or flows (Propp 1984: 75–77).

4. Recent global protests related to the death of police brutality victim George Floyd, as a part of the broader Black Lives Matter movement, and the previously mentioned waves of public anger of South Koreans after the tragic sinking of the ship Sewol are cases in point. The relationship of Korean developmental models and specific structures of feeling, including melodramatic, has been hypothesized before (Abelmann 2003; Pužar 2011; Rhee 2018).

This is not to say that characters (let us say a princess X, or a singer Y) are immaterial, but rather that they only serve in contingent and disposable roles, channelling some "outer" purpose. According to Brooks, this is exactly the quality of melodramatic affectivity.

It is important that, in talking of affective structure...we not be deluded into thinking we are referring to the psychological structures of melodrama's characters. There is no "psychology" in melodrama in this sense; the characters have no interior depth, there is no psychological conflict. It is delusive to seek an interior conflict, the "psychology of melodrama," because melodrama exteriorises conflict and psychic structure, producing instead what we might call the "melodrama of psychology." (Brooks 1976: 35)

Two princesses of Wales and one singer-songwriter are, therefore, analysed principally as disposable entities (discursive, affective, and material alike), as narrative characters operating in public according to demands imposed by the dominant melodramatic structure of feeling, and whatever social or personal drama such structure reflects and hides. While cultural studies often work with the complexities of personal lives and deaths, it is also inherently culturalist to analyse how these complexities accommodate "functions," and what the role of this or that *dramatis persona* (dead celebrity) is in some other (broader) story.

For the two princesses and the singer (unlike, for instance, Sir Winston Churchill), that function is "celebrity folk hero," and the broader story is, I claim, the story of (im)possibility. It is that very underlying impossibility, as detected by Goldberg's (2016) queer reading, that turns melodrama into an aesthetic-political space beyond the heteronormative organization of truth (Goldberg 2016). Still, such a melodramatic opening transforms this underlying impossibility into an expressive and loud (im)possibility, without really being able to change it.

Melodrama is a timeless apparatus that redistributes suffering (Zarzosa 2013). Deaths that belong to the melodramatic social dream (or tale) of (im)possibility belong to deceased humans that were discursively and affectively shaped into "celebrities" and into "nobodies" at the same time, collapsing, at least superficially (or indeed, largely superficially), the social and philosophical distinction of "celebrity" and of "nobody" (Adler 2016), but also typically modernist tension between "an individual" and "an anyone" (or an "everyman").

"England's rose" (Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales), "England's rose" (yet again), "Lady Di" (Lady Diana Frances Spencer; Diana, Princess of Wales) and "Đole" (Đorđe Balašević) performed a role of unwilling or shy celebrities standing right between the systemic and antisystemic realms, in the liminoid (if not liminal) narrative environment of "people's princesses" and "queens of people's hearts."

Their lives and deaths, and in a particular way the extensive and explosive mass bereavement upon their deaths, belong to the affective redistribution of suffering and achieve a temporary queering of the public space (along with heteronormativity, one can also think here of different other diagrams of power and their petrifications: ethnic, national, class-bound, racialised, generational, etc.).⁵

To be vested with such a specific function in collective social dreaming, the personality behind the character needs to be shaped into a precise character-type. They are often required to be imaginary victims and enablers in one; they are often infantilised and kept in some place of purity and innocence (despite possible proofs to the contrary), in a prolonged post-Victorian childhood.⁶ They often unexpectedly find themselves in discursive spaces of secular sanctity, while being considered close relatives by those separated by class, income, and amount of agency. They avoid the accusations of being populist by publicly denying their relations to the official anchoring points of the conventional hierarchical organization of social forces. They tend to be publicly and maybe even honestly appalled by the very structures that engender their discursive and affective position and material existence. In short, they tend to be decently paid and careful character-type rebels without ever fulfilling proper functions of social rebellion that could tear apart the fundamental aspects of social dream, changing the outcomes of the tale. In that sense, they are perfectly positioned to voice some of the social anxieties, but also to aestheticise and dissipate, possibly anaesthetise, social ferments and insurgent energies.⁷

Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales was publicly recognised in her lifetime and her death, as a sort of victim of the royal machine, a child exposed to mutually estranged royal parents, a rebellious young woman in opposition to her strict and

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5. This limited article cannot give justice to the theorizing of the "celebrity" figure or the "folk hero" figure. Their broadly accepted meaning is assumed. For the celebrity studies approach to deaths in the digital era see Burgess, Mitchell and Muench (2019). My usage of the term "folk hero" is reminiscent of the usage in Burke's classical work on early modern Europe (Burke 1978), elaborated for the "in between" figurations in Pužar (2007).
 6. Hundreds of plush toy bunnies that used to be thrown at Balašević during concerts in response to his song *Neki Novi Klinci* (Some new kids), which describes his poetic memory of being given a white toy bunny as a child, is a case in point. Cutification and infantilization of such a (melo)dramatis persona is crucial, in opposition to the "dirty world out there". Such an innocent body is weak, ready to be sacrificed. Of course, there is an important intellectual genealogy here, that pertains to the modernist idea of youth or childhood and to the "split" or "doubled" persona of an artist (Mijatović 2014).
 7. Similarities between these political paradoxes and those lived by cultural studies academics are too apparent not to be mentioned, if only in passing.

imposing father (Stott 2019). Her attempts to escape these restrictions were the talk of the town and the matter of domestic politics (Plowden 1989). She was, on the other hand, discursively and affectively shaped into a (lost) hope for the system of hereditary transmission of power and the last (at that point) existing reservoir of beliefs in the mystical and pure quality of the Crown. As "England's rose," her role was, therefore, cocreated by the joint efforts of establishment propaganda and the dynamic field of political media and the wider public. Her death, and the unprecedented (in the living memory of her mourners) nationwide explosion of prolonged and intense grief, indicates this inner paradox or tension (Wood 1818; Plowden 1989; Peacock 2015).

Similar organization of affect and meaning can be assigned to the dramatic persona of "Lady Di." Her vacillation between conventional fairytale roles of a distant icon of style (and conventional respectability) on one hand, and her intense dedication to reaching a popular "heart" by performing populist mediated emotionality and sentimental types of charity work as "one of us" on another, presented a captivating pair of opposites. This was only enhanced by the subsequent marital, health-related, and other intimate revelations shared with the public, in contrast to the ethereal quality and tricky nonsecrecy (visibility from a distance) of her celebrity life. One of her critics concluded that "her popularity rested upon both her extreme difference from common people and her similarity to them" (Dalrymple 1997: 1).

Đorđe Balašević enjoyed similar double-coded destiny: between his early role as a propaganda singer and mildly antisystemic "eternal boy"; between his subsequent soft activism and gloved antinationalist protest work, and the reactionary rustic fantasies and otherwise non-emancipatory contents of his songs; between the transnational, pacifist, and pro-Yugoslav sentiments on one hand, and his alleged nationalist or even anti-Albanian moments on the other. He was "one of us," and his death could therefore be easily depicted as a "family loss" or "a bereavement of the loved one" (Ilić 2021).

Yet such "familiality" does not need to be direct and based on an elusive romantic sense of "love" (as much as that sense was celebrated in the singer-songwriter's work). Like in some softened post-Wittgensteinian system of familial similarity, loving and mourning audiences synchronise with their "celebrity relatives" at different entry points (they connect and disconnect at different locations/shunts between affective circuits, and at different times), and the effects overlap and amalgamate rather than concatenate. It can be a story of love, or of sociocultural losers (Crow and Rees 1999); it can be about the normalization of sadness or pain at the background of endless and violent ideological interpellation into some contrived promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010).

In the view of the prominent Croatian writer and journalist Slađana Bukovac, Balašević became important and beloved for “allowing people to be sad,” opening space for the outdated, proscribed, despised, and medically suppressed sadness, considered tasteless and kitschy by social winners. “Be melancholic, be sad, and be unsuccessful, he was saying in a way. These are your layers, your fullness” (Bukovac 2021, personal communication). According to Bukovac, his concerts and the veritable pilgrimages related to them amounted to collective therapy sessions. This is somewhat akin to Brana Mijatović’s claim from the early 2000s that Balašević produced “cathartic effects by enabling his audience to experience deeply felt and yet often repressed emotions of grief, guilt, and shame” (Mijatović 2004: 101).

3.2 From misplacement of structural strains to the politics of sentimentality

While reasons for affective attachment, attunement, or synchronization can vary and can be very elusively political, the underlying ocean of societal (im)possibilities remains political in much more straightforward terms, verging on unpleasant determinism.

If one looks into the British social and political climate that pertains to the period of life, death, and bereavement of Princess Charlotte Augusta, one finds a landscape of heightened generational uncertainty and brutal mercantilist operations, of empty promises for *hoi polloi*, of the national debt, of failed anti-establishment secret societies and movements, and of increased repression and state violence. If one takes a look at the years of Diana, Princess of Wales, one encounters the consequences of Thatcherite dismantling of the social welfare state, the birth and explosion of neoliberal toxicity ruining the frail fabric of labour relations and communal solidarity. If one looks at the “political” (or better, antipolitical or postpolitical) destiny of Balašević, one finds a similar background of failed expectations, of almost millenarist endism ridden by anxieties, of mass spread popular pessimism and disenchantment of the endless “transition,” and, ultimately, of the troublingly incompetent ship of state sailing across the pandemic uncertainties of 2020 and 2021.

No wonder, then, that these secular saints might be invoked to melodramatically channel and dissipate the expressions of suffering, hiding the impossibility of some real relief or social change. In the cynical insight of the conservative analyst, Diana was one such secular saint, or even a goddess.

On the Tuesday following her death, for example, two commentators in the Guardian, one of them a professor of politics at Oxford University,

asserted that she both created and reflected a more compassionate Britain after the heartless years of Thatcherite selfishness. She also changed us from a nation of people who keep our feelings bottled up inside into one of frank and openhearted self-revelation—a change all for the better, of course. (Dalrymple 1997: 1)

Exaggerations of individual roles aside (among haters and sycophants alike), it is notable how these dramatic reactions to the Princess of Wales's death in 1997 came only a few years after the famous *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama. The book was widely misinterpreted as a manifesto for the new world order while invoking the collapse of traditional political sovereignty. At the time of princess's death, these endist readings, along with effects of a neoliberal realignment of the Thatcher era, could in no sense be mitigated by the cynicism of the Blairite "third way."

The expressions of grief could therefore be seen as inherently cryptopolitical, as they stood in strong relations to a very specific climate of lack and uncertainty. Still, such relations are not based on reflection (as in mirroring and as in reflecting upon) or on causality, but rather on the misplacement of structural strains marked by the confusion of sentiment. Zarzoza's vision of melodrama as "a distinctive interaction among bodies that involves an inverted image—an image according to which ideas act directly on bodies and bodies react to this suffering" (2013: 36) explains this paradox of misplaced effects of structural strain. Melodrama is about how ideas directly affect bodies and how bodies react. Being impotent to respond in kind to the affections of other bodies, their direct interaction is prevented. According to Zarzoza's almost Marxist gesture, a distorted image "occludes" the interaction between bodies.

We can clearly see that what critics have called the melodramatic imagination amounts to a cluster of inadequate ideas borne out of sad affections, an effect that postulates itself as a cause, the inverted image of the world in which we recognise our own sad affections as genuine. The melodramatic imagination turns the interaction among bodies into a stage for the dramatization of social ideas. (Zarzoza 2013: 36)

The folk might have been choosing their folk heroes and venerating their secular saints, but in an unpleasant analogy to the narrative taming of "Robin Hood the outlaw" into "Sir Robin the vassal to the righteous king" (Pužar 2007), the ship of state is (un)expectedly called to intervene. A reactionary collapse of pseudopolitical grief is usually imminent.

When Princess Charlotte Augusta died in 1817, Britain was plunged into deep dramatic mourning, with shops running out of black cloth, and with even the poor

and homeless (sic!) wearing black armbands (Peacock 2015). The captains of the ship of state were careful to support and channel this outpouring of popular grief, and the folk followed.

Consternation seized all classes throughout the United Kingdom on the announcement of the melancholy event and the whole nation was filled with sorrow and mourning. No pen can at all adequately describe the universal lamentation at this national calamity. (Timpson 1846: 93–94)

It took a stubbornly simple revolutionary figure of a quaker—a religious reformer—to warn how it was entirely possible to be sad and experience loss without subjecting oneself to the rituals of collective bereavement that are always open to systemic abuses and political manipulations. Ephraim Wood's soul "was melted into sympathy," but he felt a "great aversion to the solemn pomp and parade." He did not put on the "habiliments of mourning," but was still dramatically sad in private: "How many heavy sighs heaved from my breast—how many tears ran down my cheeks when in secret, (though not altogether alone) God and myself can witness" (Wood 1818: 69). This was an important nuance and a rare one.

When Diana Princess of Wales tragically died, it famously took some days for the captains of the state to channel the chaotic grief and turn it into political gains and points. But they also acted upon the melodramatic requests of frustrated crowds that demanded stately rituals or even invented them.⁸ Elites were criticised but also implored to symbolically adorn and celebrate people's princesses and other celebrity folk heroes.

Similarly, in the case of Balašević, the political and media elites of the ex-Yugoslav region (case in point: otherwise largely anti-Yugoslav Croatian state television) tried to follow up on and capture public sentiments and demands, much to the surprise of some mourners who themselves nurtured a paradoxical dream of the singer-songwriter as an antisystemic and, especially, antinationalist presence.

Yet, Balašević's relationship to the ship of state and various state ideologies was always a matter of some complexity, as he engaged with reactionary nostalgia and soft antisystemic gestures to gain some distance from the history of the present. His work does not really involve (or indeed affect) this regional mixture of ethnically coloured plutocracies and oligarchies, with their fresh and conflicting memories of the joint past.

8. A case in point is a famous episode of the crowds imposing the ritual of Union Flag flown at half-mast on Buckingham Palace on the day of Diana's funeral, a ritual that was subsequently accepted and repeated over the years for other royal deaths and sad or tragic events.

Balašević's sentimental utopias of the "better past" or of the "timeless love" were pretty much the same in 1985, in 1995, and in 2015. They inhabited a mythopoetic space more akin to some imaginary and tacit pseudo-Austria-Hungary rather than the vision of Yugoslavia, which always seemed secondary, except in his rare and early propaganda work (Roić 2021, personal communication). A recurrent recent motif of "with him, Yugoslavia died at last" (Ilić 2021: 1) must therefore be rejected. Spectral states can, of course, always die when needed, only to be resurrected as needed, but Balašević was not into either of those operations with regards to Yugoslavia.⁹

His melodramatic impulse was to displace the living phantasm of the state and replace it with another: a distorted, timeless image of rustic and petit-bourgeois life, acting as a fabric softener of identarian clashes and dramas rather than a cure. Such impulse strongly corresponds to one of the main qualities assigned to melodrama: its encouragement of the "backward gaze" that is not confronting things as they are, but returning to how things ought to be, often shifting this latter focus (due to the impossibility of the present!) to some golden past, thus suspending the utopian work of imagining futures (Gledhill 1987: 21). His work was often seen by critics as purely sentimental, as was the lifework of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Princess Charlotte Augusta. Hugs, roses, bunnies, warm tears.

Yet, the politics of such sentimentality is not straightforwardly reactionary or anti-emancipatory; it assures initial attachment and relays between the affective circuits. The sentimentality crystallised in various discursive or narrative contents is also in tune or easily synchronised with "thinly spread sadness" or deflated forms of melancholy that precede the dramatic expressions of "grief politics." Right-wing critics often condemn this sentimentality. Comparing an old lady known to him who had lost a son and used to cry only at home, showing her "fortitude," with the outpouring of emotions upon the passing of Princess Diana, conservative pundit Dalrymple seemed utterly annoyed.

Her fortitude is precisely the virtue that the acolytes of the hug-and-confess culture wish to extirpate from the British national character as obsolete, in favour of a banal, self-pitying, witless, and shallow emotional incontinence, of which the hysteria at the princess's death was so florid an example. (Dalrymple 1997: 1)

9. His refusal to sing his old propaganda song *Računajte na nas* ("Count on us"), either before or after the collapse of the Yugoslav state, is a relevant example (Baker 2006; Radoš 2018), as is his recent ambivalent criticism of Yugoslavia as a "bad state" while he "still misses those times" (Radoš 2018).

When a group of conservative scholars edited an entire book about the “weakness” of “modern sentimentalization,” an entire chapter was dedicated to Diana, Princess of Wales (Anderson and Mullen 1998). It did not take me long to find similar conservative critics for the bereavement of Đorđe Balašević. Right-wing pundits in Croatia were quick to criticise “tragicomic scenes,” “hysterical showing off,” “liberal, green, left, and Yugo-nostalgic trans” (Hodak 2021), “ideological yelping, a disgusting noise,” and “general madness over manipulated deaths” (Vrabec 2021). Some cultural studies scholars might agree with them in part, considering traps of emotional capitalism, and of the mass-neurostimulation that splurges those precious political potentialities (Berardi 2018). Indeed, (melo)dramatis personae engaging in sentimental fairy tales and performing roles in (basically bourgeois) social dreams is not how cultural studies or the left thought (at least the non-American one) usually imagines political ideas and political action.

Nonetheless, while such structures might often be visibly and trickily flat and overly dissipating, they are also often class-bound and gendered. Sentimentality seen as “female,” “trans,” or “gay” is not easily rejected in the name of some generalised political action.¹⁰ Yet, as it happens, political operations of sentimentality, while often enabling and cathartic, can only very rarely affect more general economies of impossibility, as they recruit energies for the aporetic realm of the (im)possible.

Image 2: "Flowers and tributes left at Kensington Palace soon after the death of Princess Diana on 31 Aug 1997".



Photo: Maxwell Hamilton/Flickr, converted to grayscale; Attribution 2.0 Generic [CC BY 2.0].

10. Berlant's early work on the destiny of “female sentimentality” in American literature and culture is instructive here (Berlant 2008).

4 Conclusion

A (dead) melodramatic body is the "body seized with meaning" (Brooks 1994), acting as a relay or shunt of affectivity that temporarily accommodates the overspill, only to allow its dissipation to different other circuits (mediatic, political, commercial). Such organization of affect presents one of the regulatory alluviums for the contagious and threatening overspills of public affect, especially if digitally replicated and amplified. Many such events of dramatic public grief and bereavement could be traced to historical periods of great change, great challenge, and great deprivation (or better, those that for some reason feel like that). To study the melodramatic structures of feeling is, thus, of the utmost importance, be it in relation to the pre-Victorian labour relations, to the post-Thatcherite exhaustion, or to the never-ending post-Yugoslav "transition."

The death of Đorđe Balašević was yet another "news of the day" that unleashed itself and jumped into the lake of techno-sadness and boredom, making visible ripples and waves, moving pebbles for weeks upon weeks. There can be no denial that the long months and years of COVID-19, of fear, isolation, general lockdowns, the precariousness of income and employment, the ongoing loss of life and health, and the heightened societal regulation of life (intrusions of the state), contributed to the affective charge (the accumulation of intensities) ready to burst and dissipate laterally, as a transferrable charge or misplacement of the structural strain.

The pandemic situation, furthermore, expanded the pre-existing engagement with digital communication channels, media outlets, digital shopping, and digital intimacy, that is, with all those realms that for decades now have been marked by emotionalization and (quasi-) personalization, just as public politics is (or what remains of it). Add to that the broader effects of contemporary "emotional capitalism," shaping "homo sentimentalis" as one of its dominant figurations (Illouz 2007), and all ingredients were in place for the outburst of the mass-scale and passionate affective reconfiguration of grief and bereavement. About a month into it, these affects subsequently dispersed into many other configurations, leaving discursive traces, shaping future biographical feelings, and adding to memories.

In this cultural studies account of the affective patterning and discursive structuration of and around a recent public mass bereavement and of two among its comparable historical counterparts, I have attempted to mark several conceptual zones or possibilities, each deserving of further exploration. Among these, the effects of shaky or aporetic (im)possibility of the political, entailing specific affective bursts and patternings, require more precise work in affect studies of

death and bereavement. Ideally, some new intersectional qualitative studies, ethnographic or otherwise, including those of more recent (and therefore markedly digital) public mass bereavements, should both dynamically underpin our conceptual attempts and benefit from them. Such empirical and theoretical work will probably need to account for the “melodramatic” Manichean superficialities or dramatic surface polarizations that misplace and disguise the heavyweight effects of material conditions and societal divisions (class-bound, gendered, racialised, generational, etc.): the world of lived impossibilities.

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