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Sympathy, Sentiment and Media Spectacle

We live in a culture of spectacle, intensified by developments in mass media technology, and it is often implied that this is radically new; yet, as has been seen in earlier chapters, there is a sense in which a ‘culture of spectacle’ was central to the onset of modernity in the eighteenth century. The emergence of a public sphere, in necessary interdependence (and tension) with a ‘private’ one, was impossible without the spectacle of feeling that both embodied the potential for a managed display in private and paradoxically thereby ensured its ‘publicity’, with the private as a rehearsal for the public and vice versa, as modes of theatricality. How does one recognize the private, without giving it an image, a ‘public face’? Thus Habermas, leading theorist of the eighteenth-century public sphere, offers a formulation that makes the issues sound very contemporary for today: ‘Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always oriented to an audience [*Publikum*].’¹ There is at least some continuity here: the eighteenth-century spectacle can be related to the present by asking how the early twenty-first-century spectacle of sympathy engages with new modes of publicity, of presence and distance, and the projection, interpretation and transmission of ‘feeling’. And we can remember that the ‘public’ context is not just one of feelings and appearances but of talk, reflection and discussion, and it is in the relation between these – between what is ‘present’, included and evident, and what is ‘absent’, whether excluded, occluded or overlooked – that helps to pinpoint in all this a potential sense of community, and for the sympathetic engagement across boundaries that is what really gives meaning to ‘community’ beyond the existence of discrete, embedded groups and societies.

In the light of this, we can reflect briefly on the notion of spectacle, where there are, again, continuities as well as discontinuities as cinema, film and screen came to replace theatre, play and stage as scenarios and figurations of the world and our involvement in it. Spectacle is the mode of appearance of the world, its display before a subject, made real for the subject by the framing

that draws attention to it as if to a cinematic image. It is the world that displays its own mediated qualities, with its successive 'frames' as static moments in a process that does not negate the possibility of reflexive appropriation by the subject, indeed could be said to invite it, through the relation between static frames and processes of change, the resulting gaps and discontinuities within experience. Spectacle should not, then, be restricted to the moment of passive appropriation, subject and object positioned in timeless abstraction; 'spectacle' should include this as part of the unfolding, the incorporation of the reflexive difference, participation rather than identification.²

In the era of omnipresent screens and digital interfaces, of 'reality television' and live, breaking news, we find two particularly significant transformations. Events that are 'distant', whether in spatial or temporal terms, seem to become vividly 'present', hence conveying a sense of 'mediated intimacies', with space and time becoming emergent properties of interactions themselves, constituting presence *for us*; and, along with this, the experience of the 'truth' that we witness blends reality seamlessly into simulation, with no clear distinction between the boundaries. Nor does this *necessarily* seem to matter. In a world where reality and simulation become indeterminate, the vicarious becomes our mode of experience, the appropriate form of experience for a world of/as spectacle.

We can say, then, that the mediated screen becomes a permanent interface that enforces this sense of the present as recontextualization, but never does so without remainder, without tension: there is a jarring of contexts, informed by the body's differentiated experience. The 'distance' senses (sight, sound) can live easily enough in the new regime of extended presence, but the remaining senses are thereby subordinated or displaced, and hence the overall feeling of 'embodiment' cannot remain constant. If context becomes relative to presence, it does so with this element of simulation, and any sense of relationship or 'community' that evolves in response to this is necessarily reshaped by it. The mediated screen, enforcing a crossing of the boundaries it simultaneously enforces and disavows, is both a medium, and a figure, for the space of public/private dilemmas and the relation to otherness. Thus reality becomes performative, in line with our experience of it becoming vicarious, as the inheritance of theatricality disperses itself into these differentiated modes of mediated culture.

The upshot is that we live in a world where ontological issues around reality and representation have increasingly thrust themselves on our attention. If, as suggested, this does not necessarily matter, there is one area in which it would seem crucial: our capacity to relate to the other's suffering. From this point of view, whether a 'disaster' on the television screen is a scene from a disaster

movie or a real-world news broadcast is a crucial distinction to be able to make, and it seems to become more difficult to make it, in a world where it has become increasingly easy to 'stage' news items and where the technology of doctoring or 'touching up' images has become so sophisticated, *and* the knowledge that this happens has become so widely diffused. The risk here is that if, in the context of news, the promotion of spectacle *in itself* comes to take priority over questions of the truth-value of whatever the spectacle purports to be about, or to refer to – whether for commercial motivation, or interest in entertainment for its own sake – then any distinction between a real world where action is deployed and the representations that provide the information to guide this would be threatened with collapse.³ Such ontological uncertainty would favour a merely voyeuristic appropriation, and this would make it more likely that an exclusively or narrowly aesthetic response to the world – encompassing both entertainment and art – would come to take priority over issues of moral and political engagement. Such, indeed, has been the argument of many of those who have characterized these developments in terms of 'postmodernism', whether viewed favourably or critically.

This clearly poses a problem for the fate of the 'spectacle of sympathy' in our times, but we will have to consider it in the light of the approach developed here, suggesting that 'cultural aesthetics' is a framework that *encompasses* moral response, rather than appearing to preclude it, and that this has been latent in the relation between aesthetics and morality in the modern period. It has also been implicit in this approach that we need to be critical of attempts to separate contemporary ('postmodern?') developments too easily from what can be too readily dismissed as merely of 'historical' interest – that 'postmodern', if the term has any useful application, really just draws our attention to the reflexive mode, or reflexive aspects, of the modern.⁴ And it is now time to suggest that the three main kinds of problem posed for the possibility of sympathetic engagement with the plight of the other have not changed in themselves over the period since the eighteenth century: how to gain the necessary kind of attention in the first place; how to be convinced of the genuineness of the suffering and hence of the witness to it; and how to maintain an appropriate distance, neither excessive (an aesthetic focus on the spectacle of suffering in itself), nor too close (sentimentality), thus precluding appropriate moral or political response. At the very least, the sense of 'community' involved here must not be pre-given, fixed, for that way lie the temptations of identity and identification as an approach to the other, who must be reduced to 'the same' if a candidate for sympathy, or else rejected as too incomprehensibly different. In effect, the existence of a sufficient

resolution of these problems such that a 'spectacle of sympathy' becomes possible could *itself* be said to constitute the public sphere. These problems may have altered in form, intensity, or relative importance, but they are still recognizably central to contemporary debate, and a reconstructed sense of the public sphere, including a revised sense of 'presence' and a greater sensitivity to the openness of boundaries, would not alter this.

The challenge here is suggested by Chouliaraki's claim that 'Under conditions of mediation, we should think of cosmopolitanism as a generalized sensibility that acts on suffering without controlling the outcomes or experiencing the effects of such action'; it is a 'disposition to feeling' that incorporates the possibility of action at a distance.⁵ How this might be possible clearly requires further discussion.

The spectacle of sympathy in the age of the mass media

The devastating Pakistan floods of 2010 were given extensive television coverage, generally with a focus on the distress caused to particular families or communities among the millions displaced; but some images were rather different. They gave panoramic views of areas of land, extending as far as the eye could see, completely covered by water, with a few trees, the remains of a few houses or telegraph poles – all that could be seen against the quiet, still, watery background. Such images generally did not show people at all. These images were simultaneously distancing, anonymous, disengaged; they invited contemplation; they often – dare one say – conveyed a kind of beauty, occasionally with hints of the sublime. These images embody an aestheticization of the spectacle of suffering, partly by removing any specific images of human suffering altogether, or by absorbing them into this apparently timeless, de-historicized background. And this is a clue to another feature: we have been here before. In her wide-ranging discussion of the presentation of suffering on the media, Chouliaraki refers to the comparably catastrophic Bangladesh floods of 2002. Here again we encounter the use of long shots portraying a static composition, such long shots working to universalize, producing spectacles that could be attributed to a range of other world locations, thus abstracting from particularities of time and place. It is all very aesthetic, turning reality into a 'tableau vivant', inviting 'not engagement with but gazing at the spectacle of suffering', and thereby breaking any 'emotional connectivity' with suffering itself.⁶

It may be that, in this particular context, this effect is mitigated – these images do not generally stand alone, but occur as part of an unfolding story,

with other images conveying the suffering more obviously. But there have always been those who have been perturbed by the way we can be lulled, seduced by aesthetic qualities, aesthetic form, distracted from the content. There is a fine line here. On the one hand, a focus on the aesthetic can relativize, or distract from, the distinction between truth and fiction; we respond to the art as such, whatever its relation to reality, and in this sense its status as possibly representational drops out of the picture, as it were. On the other hand, 'emotional connectivity' on its own, is also not enough, as it leaves us trapped in feeling, rather than being able to *react* to feeling, harness it, as a basis for judgement and action. So from this point of view, the mediated spectacle of sympathy *needs* a degree of representational distance, hence potential truth value, just as it needs to engage feeling: the two together can be a basis for that form of 'engaged judgement' that makes a sympathetic response *meaningful*.

There is a certain convergence here with the worries that have often been expressed about the impact of technology in this area. For its critics, suggests Chouliaraki, 'The *capacity* of technology to deliver immediacy is simultaneously the *failure* of technology to establish connectivity'. Technology interposes itself, converts authentic presence into spectacle, and leaves us trapped in the intimate space of reception. Like art, it reduces the distance between truth and fiction and risks reducing its audience to admiration for it – or annoyance with it – and indifference to its content. One might say that 'If looking *through* the screen immerses spectators in suffering ... looking *at* the screen reminds them of the reality of the medium that disseminates suffering as spectacle and fiction.'⁷ Whereas art *encourages* the latter, draws attention to itself *as* art, this is not generally true of technology;⁸ nevertheless, awareness of it, of its presence as a medium of transmission, cannot sink to zero, so the paradox remains. And here, we must ask a key question: what *exactly* is the problem here; why is this paradox necessarily a problem at all? We have, after all, seen reasons to relativize the concept of presence, to free it from unattainable ideals of 'authenticity', and to defend a perspective on 'spectacle' that does not necessarily reduce spectators to uncritical passivity and narcissism. In the light of this, the 'now you see it, now you don't' characteristic of media technology merely serves to remind us of the irreducible tension between *feeling* and *watching*, hence feeling and reflexive judgement, that has to be drawn on to understand the very possibility and potential of a 'spectacle of sympathy' in the first place. Thus we can agree with Chouliaraki that 'a space of public action towards distant suffering may be constituted in the process of mediation itself'.⁹

Let us take another case: this time, a specific image that has become relatively well-known, one from Africa, showing a vulture perched near a little girl in the Sudan who had collapsed from hunger. The vulture is clearly eyeing its potential lunch; the little girl, barely more than an infant, looks naked, alone, helpless, unprotected.¹⁰ And this raises an issue about the responsibility not only of the viewer in general, but of the specific viewer who was also the photographer, Kevin Carter, later winning the Pulitzer Prize for his efforts. Jacques Rancière puts it succinctly: did the photo justify itself by shattering the ‘wall of indifference’, or was Carter, in turn, a ‘human vulture’, with his gaze ‘enthralled by the aesthetic intensity of a monstrous spectacle’?¹¹ Should he have acted to save the girl? We know that Carter himself was not immune to these doubts; he killed himself a year later.¹² Actually, the child was near a feeding station, and was apparently then fed, but none of this is evident in the photo; a photo necessarily cuts out context (and history). Clearly this image is ‘sensational’ in both senses of the term – not a claim that could really be made of those long-shot images of the floods referred to earlier. In their discussion of it, however, Arthur and Joan Kleinman point to another, ideological dimension: for them, there is an implication that ‘unnamed Africans’ cannot protect their own; action therefore has to come from outside, a continuation of neo-colonialism. The demand for foreign aid, even foreign intervention, ‘begins with an evocation of indigenous absence, an erasure of local voices and acts.’¹³ As we will confirm, a political dimension is always irreducibly present, just as its implications are always controversial. For now, one can simply observe, in defence of Carter, that a gap between representation and action is not *itself* a problem; indeed, as has been argued here, it counts as a necessary condition for seeing a problem *as* moral, and permitting appropriate action. This is the legitimacy of witness, after all, which has been central to the possibility of the spectacle of sympathy from Adam Smith onwards.

The otherness issue returns in our third example. This is not a well-known image, for reasons that will become apparent. This time, the reader is invited to look at the image first, and only then read what follows. (For this reason, the image itself is given no descriptive caption at this point.)

As a context, we can take Susan Sontag’s critique of Virginia Woolf’s argument, in *Three Guineas* (1938), that photographs of the horrors of war can and should have an immediate effect on anyone of normal sensitivity, even across a gender divide in which men – who wage war, after all – may be less likely to be upset by images of its results. Such photos should induce an immediate horror of war, and a determination to avoid it. For Sontag, this just

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won't do. Woolf's pictures – of the atrocities perpetrated by Franco's army in the Spanish Civil War – are of a *particular* war, and a particular *way* of waging war. For Woolf, 'war is generic, and the images she describes are of anonymous, generic victims', and to read in the pictures 'only what confirms a general abhorrence of war is to stand back from an engagement with Spain as a country with a history. It is to dismiss politics ...'¹⁴ Wars, and victims, have identities; how one looks at a picture is crucially affected by one's politics, which side one is on – hence the caption, or the context, is as crucial as the image. Identical photos, with different captions, were used by both sides in the conflicts of the Balkan Wars of the early 1990s to justify claims of atrocities perpetrated by the other side. No one views pictures 'innocently'. Sontag concludes: 'No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.'¹⁵

Recent allusions to this controversy have tended to take Sontag's side; but there is a lot at stake here, and perhaps we should pause. Woolf's argument implies a version of the belief in a 'universal language' of images that was widely discussed in relation to early film: images can have transcultural meaning as immediate expressions of, and triggers of, emotions and feelings. This is characteristically linked to an assumed circuit of sensation, as indeed it is in Woolf. She is quoted as arguing that a photo is 'a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye', which in turn is connected to the brain, and the brain with the nervous system:

‘That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling’.¹⁶ While critical of this approach, Rancière sums up its implications cogently: ‘The classic use of the intolerable image traced a straightforward line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing; and from that to the desire to act in order to change it.’¹⁷ This whole structure of assumptions runs deep in modern thought, since the Enlightenment, and connects with significant ideological emphases on individualism and the shared humanity of ‘human rights’. This can overlap with another body of ideas that can easily come into conflict with it, as it does here: an assumption that individual views, even feelings, are essentially expressive of specific, group-focused cultural identities (whether of class, gender or nationality). This seems to be Sontag’s position: to engage with these images is to engage *as* a combatant, on one side or the other. This position at least has the virtue that it allows for issues of meaning, of interpretation, to be raised; it disputes the bio-psychological determinism implicit in the other model, even if it seems to be at the cost of a social determinism. And one might want to insist – *contra* both positions – on the presence of a reflexive indeterminacy in the interpretation of the image that seems to be implicit in the whole logic of a ‘spectacle of sympathy’ as it has been encountered since the eighteenth century.

It is time to mention that the photograph here is of the charred head of an Iraqi soldier inside his burnt-out vehicle, a victim of the massacre at Mutlah Gap, when a US division caught and destroyed a convoy of one thousand vehicles retreating from Kuwait in late February 1991, during the First Gulf War, incinerating them with vastly superior firepower.¹⁸ In terms of the above debate, one might note that just as one might anticipate *an* emotional response – or an element of one – to the image, there is no *specific* response that has to be present; indeed it might be a mixture: horror, anger, pity are all possible. This indeterminacy in the circuit of sensation has always been a problem, whether for those who adopt it as a scientific framework or hypothesis or for those who fear its consequences in ‘sensationalism’: the *appropriation* of sensation, its shaping – a condition for its availability for interpretation – is always at issue. Here, a perceptive observation from elsewhere in Sontag’s book may be useful. Noticing that ‘For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity, or mere contrivance’, it follows that photos of suffering should not be beautiful, as this ‘tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown’. Conversely, ‘uglifying’ is more appropriate, indeed more ‘modern’.¹⁹ If, in turn, this is to produce ‘horror’, then more is needed again: a transgressive crossing and

de-formation of categories manifest as a powerful *presence*; an encounter with life-in-death perhaps, the human as charred, monstrous, the accusing gaze of sockets that were once eyes ... And horror, too, is a matter of aesthetics, an aesthetics beyond good form, good sense, beyond the object *as art* – aesthetics as *embodied* response. Nor is such a response in any way incompatible with either sympathy or anger.²⁰

Whether a political dimension is implicit in our *response* to this image, it is certainly crucial to the context: one involving the limited availability of the image. At the time, it was shown once, in one (British) newspaper; and no other comparable image of the massacre was shown at the time, anywhere.²¹ Indeed, it was remarked then, as it has been since, that the First Gulf War seemed to be a ‘war without bodies’. John Taylor points out that a war apparently without bodies is ‘an imaginative and bureaucratic feat achieved by direct omission (as in censorship), by metonymic transfer on to objects such as machines, and by the media’s adherence to polite discourse when reporting state killing on an unknown scale.’²² Of course, *some* bodies get shown, and Jean Seaton adds the pertinent comment that ‘With the actual sensation of death kept at arm’s length, the true-life horror on the screen occupies a no man’s land between fiction and experience.’²³ Yet this uncertainty does not necessarily militate against an emotionally engaged response, as we saw in the discussion of eighteenth-century debates over theatre and tableau.

Implicit here is the theme of ‘otherness’. Taylor remarks that overseas reports of horrors and disasters concentrate on ‘the essential strangeness of victims, whether they invoke revulsion or invite compassion’,²⁴ and invariably involve stereotypes of otherness, the primitive, and the ‘naturalness’ of disasters in ‘backward’ countries.²⁵ Sontag, too, notices the way notions of propriety get mixed up here: ‘The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.’ Conversely, ‘our’ dead are individuals, and entitled to respect,²⁶ rather than instances of the anonymous mass of distant others. What we find, then, is that ‘othering’ techniques serve to increase distance through anonymity and stereotype, just as it is no answer to say that the absolute closeness of identification can rectify this. Sympathy can only emerge, ‘mediate’, when allowed space between excessive closeness (identification, sentimentality) and excessive otherness (abstraction or anonymity on the one hand, stereotyping on the other). One implication of this is that we must break with the conventional television politics of pity, producing narcissistic emotions that encourage us only to care about those perceived as sufficiently ‘like us’: intimacy minus real concern, in effect.²⁷

Sontag's own *earlier* view seems to be the exact opposite to Woolf's Enlightenment optimism: the mediated image becomes necessarily divorced from any link to action, the spectator anaesthetized by the 'image glut'. Her later critique of Woolf, as just recounted, was now linked to a critique of this earlier view: both are too mechanistic, ignoring the complexity of the relation between image, reason and action. Now, she suggests that it is not so much the quantity of images, but the position of the spectator, that can pose a problem: 'It is passivity that dulls feeling',²⁸ a sense of the inability to make a difference that inhibits appropriate response. This raises the whole issue of what has come to be known as 'compassion fatigue', though this can comprise several elements – 'blocking out', denial, as well as numbness – and, as with Sontag, can swing between emphasizing the quantity of images and the passivity of their reception. Susan Moeller, who helped put the notion into circulation, argues that 'Compassion fatigue is the unacknowledged cause of much of the failure of international reporting today'.²⁹ This seems to throw the spotlight on to the theme of attention, linked to consumerism, or, more directly, to advertising. Indeed, all news is advertising, at least to the extent that it has to sell itself, through its content, to be noticed, and hence is inherently part of the drive to sensationalism. Trying to influence people's response to suffering is like selling them something: trying to persuade people to act or contribute money is analogous to asking them to spend it on buying things. This can be linked to the increasingly commercialized intimacies of present-giving: sponsor a child, a *named* child; give a gift to a charity in the guise of a gift to a relative. From this point of view, the idea of 'compassion fatigue' adds nothing to the known logic of advertising. The *repetitive* production of images may well induce a loss of effect; as with anything, you can have too much. Changing fashions can also come into it. All this relies on the assumption that the repetition is of something that is indeed *the same*, or sufficiently so, and this is where the battle for attention rages: is a particular image *sufficiently* different, or *sufficiently* extreme, to escape the trap?

One might suggest that, in practice, one of the most characteristic and successful ways of meshing all this together, of harnessing the potential willingness to make donations with the commercial and entertainment aspects into a 'spectacle of sympathy' as a communal event, is surely the telethon. Arguing that 'television will only be experienced by its audience as making a moral demand when and if it is able to impress some kind of *sensation* of a demand', whereby the 'sensation' of news can be made to stir feeling in its audience, Keith Tester sees the telethon as a way of resolving this by combining news coverage with spectacular entertainment and audience participation

– making a virtue out of necessity, as it were – and showing that something *can* be done to bridge the distance, to ‘make a difference’, particularly if it becomes socially acceptable, even desirable, to contribute. Audiences know what is expected of them; ‘compassion’ becomes bite-sized, individually manageable, yet collectively impressive. The sums raised can indeed be huge, whatever their ultimate effectiveness. This presents an interesting perspective on ‘compassion fatigue’, in that these telethons can become recurrent, even institutionalized: ‘telethons are able to secure recurrent investment *precisely because of their predictability*’, as Tester puts it.³⁰ This predictability becomes the comforting predictability of ritual, as it were.

Morally, of course, it is easy to be sceptical about all this. It is as though we are offered moral absolution, in return for money – and if we accept the deal, in these terms, we fail to get it. Only unmotivated, spontaneous giving (an expansion of feeling towards the other) or well-motivated giving (doing good because it is good) can really count. But the latter – rule-following for its own sake – might be widely perceived as inadequate. It is only when feeling is present that we can respond to the necessary specificity, the particular instance of suffering. This can be *guided* by rules, in turn requiring judgement, but these are really more like generalizations, expectations of responses to types of situations. Telethons and other forms of charitable response and action may be indeterminate between these possibilities – and in everyday life it may not seem important to choose between them, so long as *something* is done – but the more morally respectable options, as it were, are not in any way precluded. If there is a grey area here, it lies in the whole possibility, and the whole problem, of the modern response to distance, to otherness. And as this study has tried to show, the implications of the twin distances here – between spectator and sufferer, and between observation and action – have been crucial for our understanding of the varying modes and impact of the spectacle of sympathy throughout the modern period. If the great eighteenth-century innovation is the constitution of strangers as a potential moral community, through imaginative involvement in literature, urban spectacle, and the public sphere of discussion and feeling, then we are still living with this, its possibilities, limitations and consequences, and it is difficult to see that the contemporary omnipresence of the mass produced and reproduced photographic image necessarily alters this situation in any fundamental way, even though it greatly extends its visibility and scope. If, as Sontag claims, one of these consequences is that ‘Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience ...’,³¹ then this indeed remains part and parcel of our modern dilemmas.

Overall, one might suggest that ‘compassion fatigue’ can be significant not as the cumulative result of a linear process of sensationalism, but as the product of specific *cycles* of sensationalism, when a particular vein has been quarried to exhaustion, with an excess of ‘the same’ becoming a factor.³² But, just as there are always new opportunities for sensation (and its recuperation in melodrama), due to the very impossibility of an ever-intensifying linear process of uniform sensationalism, so the potential for sympathetic engagement, too, can break out anew, be replenished. To be effective in this context, sensation must produce a particular kind of attention – it should demand or attract attention, rather than swamp it, leaving us numb, or overwhelmed to the point of trauma or panic. Affect is not engaged to the point of intensity that excludes the mix of imaginative and emotional involvement that constitutes sympathy.

In the course of all this, we may have to consider the issue of authenticity, on any particular occasion – we know that sensationalism can involve exaggeration, even when there is a core of truth. But this is not necessarily a problem; most of us develop the skills to manoeuvre in, and survive, a culture of sensationalism, after all. Just as such a culture manifests a drive to sensationalize, to gain attention, so it also produces an attendant scepticism, a need to distrust it. Nor need this issue necessarily be present in any particular case. To return to the Carter photo, it may be significant that no questions about its authenticity were raised; all the controversy swirled around whether Carter should have taken the photo at all, rather than rushing to ensure the child got rescued and fed – and this, of course, is the classic contemplation/action dilemma that has been partially constitutive of the spectacle of sympathy since its very inception. One can conclude that sensationalism, in itself, is not necessarily a problem, both because of the built-in limitations implicit in *cycles* of sensation, and because it does not just involve feeling, but can be compatible with the exercise of judgement; it can indeed *open up* possibilities for sympathetic engagement.

Sentiment, sympathy and the vicarious

But now, as we move towards the end of the book, let us also move back towards the beginning, and a further encounter with the dilemmas of the sentimental in relation to sympathy, in the light of the ‘mediated culture’ we have just been discussing. Misha Kavka describes the effect of the ‘age of television’ on public consciousness in the context of the presentation and reception of Princess Diana’s death, using the term ‘mediation’, defined here in terms of immediacy, of

'presentation' in contrast to 'representation'. Her thesis is that these events show how we can move 'beyond the semiotics of representation to the affect of presentation', so that we can say the audience was offered 'emotional access to a person whom they *feel* as though they *know*', and hence, far from detracting from the emotional impact, the mourning was 'all the more real *because* of this mediation'.³³ Thus we encounter, with television, an 'affect of presentation' whereby we can be 're-moved' by the world, re-engaged in amplified fashion by the power of the media to reduce distance to proximity, bringing events and emotions home to us.

Clearly 'affect' is being used in an inclusive way here, synonymous with 'feeling', and apparently incorporating emotion too, but in a way that *excludes* representation, and this might give us pause. Diana, after all, had a history, and a very public one. She was flesh and blood, but insofar as anyone else knew her, she was also a composite of media images, narratives, rumours, myths and memories; what is brought to this encounter with her, in her death and its aftermath, is already deeply representational, for her and her audience alike. Calling this encounter 'affect' does not magically abolish all this, in the immediacy of the impact of the here and now. At this point, it is useful to draw on an alternative perspective, from Audrey Jaffe, who argues, with reference to feeling, that 'insofar as it is known, it is constituted by representation', hence is 'inseparable from the scenes that may seem merely to provoke it and the signs by means of which it becomes known'.³⁴ One can complement this with Rei Terada's claims that 'We are not ourselves without representations that mediate us, and it is through these representations that emotions get felt', adding that, in consequence, 'There is no reason to guard mental life against theatricality, to guard emotion against representation, or to worry that layers of mediation diminish emotional intensity'.³⁵

This usefully reminds us that what we may be encountering here are the contrasting routes whereby the two configurations traced in this book can produce intensity of feeling. 'Mediation as presentation' clearly corresponds to the circuit of sensation, in its immediacy of impact, whereby the proximity of the image abolishes its own distance in the power of its effect (its affect); 'mediation as representation' indicates the irreducibility of representation, of the image, to any immediate affective consequences, the distancing whereby its status *as image* indicates the presence of an otherness beyond presence, a theatrical space of imaginative engagement within which emotion can be enacted. We could perhaps say that emotion will necessarily involve imagination and representation, but that this is not necessarily the case with affect (depending on how exactly it is defined).

We can now look at all this in the light of the earlier discussion of the sentimental and its relation to the culture of feeling. The sentimental emerges as a paradoxical conjunction of identification with the other and excess of self, resulting in an uncertainty over boundaries, or even their threatened collapse. Imaginatively, this results in an intensification of presence, the expansive 'homeliness' so apparent in sentimental texts and situations; and this in turn incorporates nostalgia as a central mode, coming into focus as the sentimental reappropriation of the past. This covers over the loss of affect in experience itself through a compensatory excess, simultaneously registering loss yet regaining it as presence, in the here and now, with the embodied investment of emotion linked to the power of memory as imagination, as image. The 'homeliness' can involve a potential generosity of spirit that can coexist with what can also be seen, accurately enough, as a self-centred and self-indulgent exhibition of emotion. The two go together, inherent products of the sentimental moment; and all this helps us understand why the stigmatizing response is inherent in the very way sentimentality is constituted, its 'excess' and boundary-crossing, with emotion overflowing 'rational' restraint, necessarily problematical in a culture that self-consciously proclaims its adherence to the latter.

Not only this, but 'excess', of self and feeling, raises questions about 'sincerity', and hence about 'sympathy' itself. One can say that sentimentality is an excess of sincerity, the 'too sincere' that is denounced as 'insincere' and that thereby necessarily questions the whole idea of being 'true to oneself', implying that this mix of feelings and conflicting emotions only achieves authentic, coherent 'selfhood' through sleight of hand. For Terada, 'The distinction of sentimentality – its witless brilliance – is that it exposes the overlap between the genuine and the disingenuous'.³⁶ It thus interrogates the motives of sympathy even as it may parade its adherence to its virtues. Hence we can see both how sentimentality is indissolubly linked to the discourse and spectacle of sympathy, and how it renders the latter liable to attack at times of militant rationalism – for the terms in which it is characterized inherently involve the notion of excess, along with the idea of crossing boundaries that are not indeed 'there' in any absolute sense, but are produced as an aspect of such 'transgression', or of its denunciation.

What is also clear is the *outcome* of sentimental identification, its symptomatic presence in the uncertainty of the relation between nature and culture, or body and moral or social regulation. Sentimentality may reveal both an insufficiency of the latter, hence an excess of putatively 'natural' emotion, or an excess of such influence, whereby the expression of 'natural' emotion takes the form of intensely cultural, even theatrical, display – nor are the two necessarily

distinguishable. Thus, in Greuze, we found excess of body was revealed as cultural or gestural excess, its 'naturalness' becoming self-subverting in the very fact of its display as such. Hence both poles become open to criticism, the impossibility of deciding between them only contributing to the distrust.

In drawing us in – whether as full participants or as observers – sentimental situations may also lead us to react to our own emotions, questioning them in their troubling, unthinking immediacy. Here, in her discussion of Diana, Kavka makes an interesting contrast between mourning and shame as audience reactions, the latter arising as a second-level response to the former: 'Mourning is the affect that denies the mediation of Diana, claiming an intimate bond despite her mediation. Shame, on the other hand, is the affect that recognizes her mediation' because it '*exposes* us as mourners who cried real tears for an object judged to be inappropriate.'³⁷ Mourning denies the mediation that nonetheless brings it about, while shame recognizes this and consequently denies the validity of our reaction. We are forced, as it were, to confront the possibility that vicarious emotional display, in the age of the mass media, may be just as 'real' as what we conventionally take to be the more valid, 'authentic' responses, and we recoil from this. And it is a contention of this book that this is misleading, in that there is a vicarious element in *any* emotion, insofar as it attains public expression, cultural form, as display.

Sentimentality, then, can only show its 'excessive' sincerity through a display marked as vicarious, hence insincere; yet this is a pyrrhic victory for its critics if the vicarious is found to have infected 'genuine' sympathy as well. If one might have said, using Kavka's distinction, that one of these responses recognizes the mediated dimension the other mis-recognizes, its stigmatization of this 'mediation' as vicarious deprives it of the ability to embrace this insight, through sympathetic engagement, instead spinning it inwards, into shame and the consequent denunciation of the sentimental now positioned as unacceptably other,³⁸ denying the shared feature: precisely the vicarious itself.

It can be argued, after all, that second-order emotion is not necessarily any less 'emotional' than first-order emotion. Some aspects of this are clarified by Terada. 'When we're aware of the second-order nature of emotion we call it "pathos"', she writes, 'and act as if it were something other than emotion.' She suggests, in consequence, that '*pathos* conveys the explicitly representational, vicarious, and supplementary dimensions of emotion', and that 'debates about pathos come to be about the relation between representation and intensity'. The second-order, mediated quality of pathos always seems to engage with the problematic status of the image, never sufficiently present, always too early or

too late, not quite here, or there; and, in consequence, 'Parallel to this experience in the image-world is pathos in the emotion-world'.³⁹ This sense of a degree of image-dependence inherent in 'mediation' reinforces the connotation of pathos, going back to the ancient Greek, of 'something that happens' *to* someone, an element of receptivity to change, an 'active' response that occurs in the register of the passive. Again, if this is particularly clear in the case of the sentimental, this renders it particularly vulnerable to carrying the opprobrium for what is actually an essential continuity with other emotional responses.

After all, what sentimentality and sympathy or compassion have in common is precisely their status as 'witness' emotions, a degree of passivity, impotence or detachment inherent in the difference or distance of self and other, and indeed of identity itself and its mediated manifestation. What separates them, albeit tentatively, is that the sentimental refuses this difference, covers or floods it with its own excess, while sympathy respects it by harnessing it to judgement and allowing the imagination to explore the gap, without negating it. That gap is positioned through the whole culture of representation and its incorporation in theatricality. The vicarious can thus be understood as the experience of the gap between representation and reality, and the difference between sentimentality and sympathy lies in how they 'inhabit' this gap. Sentimentality *exhibits* our vicarious participation in the world, allows us to experience it, *as* emotion; sympathy *distances* us from this world, experiencing this vicariously through imaginative projection, embedded in feeling, enriched by it and extending it.

The vicarious thus comes into focus as the mode of inhabiting the difference between representation and reality that threatens the breakdown of the distinction itself – hence the world of modernity as *mediated* experience. This is the scenario on which the tension between distance and proximity, involvement and detachment, is played out, managed, and dramatized – life as a spectacle of vicarious involvement. If this can be disturbing, it is because we do indeed respond to real-life situations *as if* they are in some sense cultural products. We even respond to our own emotions as if we are witnesses, as if at some level we can *only* be onlookers. At this level, our capacity to sympathize with the other may be inseparable from our ability to sympathize with ourselves, just as, in sentimental mode, our joys and our tears at least *appear* to manifest an identity 'across' boundaries otherwise impossible to cross, in the very immediacy of affective response – an 'immediacy' that remains, nonetheless, clothed in borrowed garb. If the word 'vicarious' is derived ultimately from the Latin *vicis* (via *vicarius*), meaning an interchange, change or alternative, we can perhaps

say that it is through our performance of (or in) the vicarious that we survive the 'vicissitudes' of life.

One can further observe that sentimentality always has something of the sensational about it; indeed, it can reasonably be presented as the sensational mode of the spectacle of sympathy. Affect is clearly central to it, but it is affect *on display*, which is what can lead it be denounced as second hand, as 'vicarious'; and it is, one might add, affect in the form of emotion, which is never innocent of these dimensions of the demonstrative, hence inherently public. This also gives us a clue to the mutual attraction of sentimentality and melodrama, the former indeed frequently occurring as an aspect or subset of the latter, linked to the poles of innocence and virtue in the conflict of good and evil.⁴⁰ It could even be argued that perhaps it is only in the context of melodrama that the sentimental, as 'excess' of feeling, can plausibly be identified as such, hence reinforcing the potential for the stigmatization of both. As sensation becomes more sensational, so the spectacle becomes more spectacular, and melodrama becomes a characteristic feature of this, a superimposition of one on the other, and all the dramas of our lives – little and large – become available for this process of intensification and magnification.

As affect in a virtual state, sympathy testifies to that latent sense of connect- edness, relationship or 'belonging' that emerges into more specific states of feeling as they engage the spectacle of sympathy and the circuit of sensation. Thus Phillips and Taylor suggest that words like kindness, generosity, altruism, benevolence, compassion and pity all implicitly refer to 'the sympathetic expan- siveness linking self to other', though an alternative formulation, referring to how sympathy or kindness 'mingles our needs and desires with the needs and desires of others',⁴¹ is perhaps preferable, suggesting that we are *changed* by this, that it involves risks, in that 'self' and 'other' are emergent, rather than presup- posed. This 'mingling' testifies to a certain priority of relations over separate entities, suggesting the 'bounded self' as an artificial, secondary construct that is embedded in this, however much it may seek to cut itself off from it. And this is really the point: if there is a sense in which the bounded self is necessary for survival, it needs to be porous, too. It is bounded in action, yet porous in reaction, in its ability to experience the world. As responses, feelings involve an openness, a diffusion of being; this in turn may result in actions, which in turn involve a degree of limitation, a certain impoverishment of feeling, or distancing from it, even in the very move into the external world that is needed in order to 'realize' such feelings. This implies a concentration of attention, and of being itself, as against the receptive diffusion of experience that allows the plenitude

of feeling. A culture that gives positive valuation to action over feeling, particularly action purportedly guided by 'reason', will naturally have problems here (problems not unconnected with the gendered dynamics of all this). We can add that if an element of passivity is inherent in both sympathy and sensation, then the shaping of the response, and the further, possibly active reaction *to* the response, is where judgement is involved, in the case of sympathy, and where it may be involved, in the case of sensation (and may, conversely, not be, where sensation works 'contagiously').

Hence, if the spectacle of sympathy can be presented as a spectacular resolution of the tensions inherent in sentimentalism, in its conjunction of the natural and the social, pain and transcendence, image and narrative, good and evil, and its relation to sympathy itself, then it can only be seen to succeed 'vicariously'. Nor can it deny the insight of sensationalism, that there is an excess beyond representation, potential for a 'contagion' of affect 'infecting' the spectator, reinforcing the element of vicarious participation. The imaginative spectacle of sympathetic engagement includes us, as roles, as participants and spectators, just as the resonance of reverberating affects, vivid in their impacts, takes place in some quasi-physical zone that is located as much across as within or between physically separate entities, registered through the senses. Through the spectacle of the mass media, and the excesses of melodrama, the outlines of the two elements of the dual inheritance of the Age of Sensibility – sensation and sympathy – can, therefore, still be made out ...

Corrupt practices

It increasingly seems to be the case, then, that while the spectacle of sympathy, as a cultural configuration, presents tensions that are both internal to it and that result from the interaction with the wider context of modernity, the effects of the mass media, in themselves, are not the crucial factors here. For the major 'external' threats to the possibility of sympathetic engagement, we need to look elsewhere.

We can start by considering the provocative theses put forward by Slavoj Žižek in his book *Violence*. Of central importance is his argument that 'language, not primitive egotistic interest, is the first and greatest divider'; one of the most fundamental forms of violence 'pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning', and hence 'verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human form

of violence.⁴² Language is not corrupted into violence, as it were; violence is of the essence. Žižek is clearly gunning here both for a broad liberal consensus that postulates communication, particularly language, as inherently beneficial, diminishing the likelihood of conflict, and for specifically academic manifestations of this, notably the work of Habermas.⁴³ Overall, he argues that the evidence 'renders problematic the prevalent idea of language and the symbolic order as the medium of reconciliation and mediation, of peaceful coexistence, as opposed to a violent medium of immediate and raw confrontation'.⁴⁴

Žižek's key move is to link language, violence and desire. The fundamental power of linguistic symbolization involves separation and designation, a violence or 'dismemberment' of the thing, subordinating it to the realm of meaning: hence Lacan's idea of a 'master-signifier', which 'quilts' or sutures the field of meaning, holding it together. Hence a space of discourse is ultimately grounded in this 'violent imposition' which necessarily cannot be grounded in reason: it is a *diktat*.⁴⁵ The highest form of this in modernity is the Kantian moral law, the absolute imperative to obey the universal, the unrealizable, which becomes inseparable from *desire* for the universal, a desire so incapable of satisfaction that it is endlessly substituted, displaced, into the specific desires of consumerism, none of which ever really 'satisfies', and thus lead endlessly to further desires. The law embodies the power to define what is 'violent', and we must remember there that the 'highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as "violent"'. Hence we can see how 'language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence' and thus 'it is language itself which pushes our desire beyond proper limits, transforming it into ... an absolute striving that cannot ever be satisfied'.⁴⁶

Žižek takes his place here as the latest in a long line of pessimistic theorists of the human condition, and modernity itself, running from Schopenhauer, through Nietzsche, to Freud, and on through Lacan. Certainly Žižek's all-encompassing thesis, as it stands, would clearly be fatal to any hopes of articulating a plausible model of sympathetic engagement as anything other than deluded liberal ideological window-dressing⁴⁷ for the dark destructive forces of language and the psyche. My book has attempted to show, *per contra*, that between arguing that violence and inequality are inherent in human language and communication, and, conversely, that it is possible to specify a framework that would reveal egalitarian tolerance to be of their essence, there is room for a more historically based identification of specific cultural configurations that can open up various possibilities for communication, some of which may well be

contentious, and which will have consequences that can be evaluated in positive or negative terms, along with hints about the circumstances that are likely to realize the one rather than the other. It is within this framework that one can try to map the problems and possibilities of the spectacle of sympathy as a structure of feeling as this has existed since the eighteenth century.

But if this is to be plausible, the most ambitious part of Žižek's account, the critique of language, clearly needs to be answered. For a start, one might observe a slippery quality about his use of 'language' here. It is true that ultimate appeals to the rationality of reason can only return on themselves, so that the justification can only be circular, or ultimately ungrounded (a *diktat*), but this does not in itself necessarily imply or presuppose 'violence', and anyway does not appertain to language as such, the power of which ranges far beyond its use in reasoning. Of course, perpetrators of violence may well appeal to ostensibly 'rational' grounds for the justification of their actions, and this brings us to language itself, more broadly – for language, too, can be *used* to promote violence, either directly or indirectly, but is hardly violence in itself. Language can be dangerous, unquestionably, in various ways, notably through the power of categorization, evaluation and denunciation, and the construction of ideologies. All this is obvious enough (and far from unimportant). But any stronger claims, to the effect that language *is* violence, seem either to be unfounded or else the word 'violence' is being used in a misleadingly broad, metaphorical sense. But this is interesting in itself, this power of language as source of figuration, and it is to this that we now turn.

As has been suggested, Žižek attempts to deal with this problem through a Lacanian-Freudian theory of signification. And here, one can observe that the idea of a 'master-signifier', imposed by force, has all the power of a foundation myth. In such myths, the impossibility of the foundation *ex nihilo* is revealed in the death of the charismatic creator, a death followed by eternal rebirth. In the Freudian version of this – and we can surely, by now, accept that it is indeed another *version*, rather than an *explanation* – paternal authority is that of the Father, the Law, the master-signifier that fixes language to the world in a charismatic act that negates its own impossibility through the eternal recurrence of its death, symbolized by the death of Moses and the heroes who represent this self-creative power of language itself. Even more powerfully, it is death by murder, whether of the original creator or, subsequently, his sons, but this murder – as with Christ – is also, in a sense a self-murder, as if an impossible act negates itself by taking responsibility for negating its own origin. For Žižek, this leaves language itself inherently corrupted by violence, its affective power,

dependent on this myth of origin and reproduction, dominating its own power as difference, the creativity of the difference of language itself, of metaphor and figuration. But this very fact converts Žižek's *use* of this myth into another *variant* of it, an example of the power of language as figuration that necessarily implies that this dimension cannot itself be reduced to anything else, including violence, and that Žižek can provide no adequate account of this dimension of meaning and symbol that is coextensive with language and absolutely central to it, language in its inherent capacity to open up the figurative powers of the imagination.

But we can strike a more positive note as well. When Žižek claims that only psychoanalysis can disclose the full extent of 'the shattering impact of modernity – that is, capitalism combined with the hegemony of scientific discourse – on the way our identity is grounded in symbolic identifications',⁴⁸ there is a useful insight here. Indeed, it has been an argument of this book that when identity is based on, or assimilated to, identification, our relation with the other becomes always potentially hysterical or traumatic, and this may be particularly true of those to whom we are closest.⁴⁹ This in turn can affect other facets of self-identity and the motivational patterns associated with capitalism. One can accept this, without necessarily accepting the trans-historical claims Žižek would make for psychoanalysis, which has indeed been positioned here as a specifically modern project, limited as well as powerful, perhaps the highest form of modernist self-examination in the context of self and identity, even though it cannot escape the reflexive paradox inherent in its constitution in these very terms.

Žižek's reference to modernity as capitalism plus scientific discourse is also a useful cue for further reflection. We can indeed see how the 'everything can be measured' imperative of scientific discourse and practice can sit easily alongside the 'everything has its price' of the capitalist market orientation, and has many similar implications. But in order to pursue this, we need to move on from Žižek in order to bring capitalism itself into focus.

It would be difficult to argue that there are any intrinsic qualities that enable something to be a commodity, subject to market forces, available to be bought and sold, or indeed that there are any that enable it to resist this fate. Nonetheless, the idea of 'intrinsic quality' is important here. One might say that 'commodities' are precisely *not* seen as having 'intrinsic qualities' that make them ends in themselves: rather, they have a utility, they derive their value from human needs or aspirations, and, as such, their values are always relative, hence comparable, and measurable in market terms (money). And really, we need to

think not of commodities, as things, but rather of *processes*, the transformations whereby objects, activities, and relationships, can be shaped according to the language and practices of the market. Conversely, when something is seen as, or treated as, having value in itself, as being self-sufficient and self-justifying, then it either escapes the market, or can be seen as justifiably attempting to do so. The corollary of this is that the market presents a threat to it: it is vulnerable, corruptible.

It is interesting that we can so readily draw on the language of ‘corruption’ in this context, in the broader sense of the term that goes beyond the narrowly legal (giving and taking bribes, nepotism) to include debasement, contamination, defilement, taint, uncleanness, rottenness, putrefaction and decay. Some of this carries strongly organic and visceral connotations: ‘corruption’ may more neutrally be ‘transformation’, but it is clearly not a transformation that is good for the body politic. And this language is extensively deployed by Michael Sandel, in his critique of the process whereby ‘we drifted from *having* a market economy to *being* a market society’, with the resulting ‘remaking of social relations in the image of market relations’. He adds: ‘To describe what’s disquieting about this condition, we need the moral vocabulary of corruption and degradation. But to speak of corruption and degradation is to appeal, implicitly at least, to conceptions of the good life.’⁵⁰ His critique incorporates many well-chosen examples of this process and its consequences.⁵¹ One general point that comes through clearly is that if a task is seen as intrinsically worthwhile, paying people to do it may mean they make *less* effort, and this helps to draw out a difference between intrinsic motivations (moral conviction, interest in the task) and external or instrumental ones (money, status, tangible rewards), a distinction that again reflects the contrast between a market attitude to the world and its opposite.⁵² One might extend this to a critique of the destruction of professionalism in an era when trust and responsibility are displaced by accountability, supervision and managerialism, and motivation is weakened as the conscientious performance of tasks is replaced by the mechanical repetition of assignments designed to be measurable, ticked off on a list of superficial ‘performance indicators’.

One aspect of this, then, is a ‘corruption of the subject’, a degradation of the quality of motivation, and this is significant because of what it, in turn, liberates: a narrow emphasis on self-interest, whether as defensive or expansive, reinforced by what the system *can* offer, in terms of material reward and competitive self-esteem. This, in turn, has the effect of strengthening the idea that people are essentially motivated by a market-driven focus on economic calculation, deciding what will provide most ‘utility’, the latter in turn being

affected by what others are perceived as wanting, thus contributing to the cultural hold of emulation through fashion, as a central facet of personality.⁵³ Hence the powerful impetus to ideologies justifying all this as 'natural' and inevitable, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

The other side of all this is a 'degradation of the object'. In some cases, after all, to attempt to buy some sought-for good, such as friendship, would destroy or undermine what is sought. Thus, argues Sandel, treating religious rituals, or natural wonders, as marketable is a 'failure of respect'. The sacramental is lost if the access to experiencing it is up for sale. But if nothing is *inherently* beyond the reach of the market, as argued above, then this suggests that what is at stake here is a *relationship*. What matters is that something be *treated* as an 'end in itself' by a subject. In the language used previously, what we have is an *encounter*. Such relations are in turn embedded in, and manifested by, the symbols which thereby both represent and strengthen the relation, or indeed may create or re-create it. The characteristic material symbol here is the gift, which is precisely what defies economic rationale.⁵⁴ If we persist in giving gifts, this is because of the symbolic relationship here: gifts 'express' friendship, love, family obligation – something 'beyond' mere money.

This can also be reflexive. Sandel instances an episode of the public performance of Shakespeare in Central Park, New York: there had to be tickets, as space was limited, but these were free, on a first come, first served basis; when some of these were sold on, there was an outcry. The logic is the same: in effect, free public theatre was seen as a communal, civic celebration, 'a gift the city gives itself', hence something that was seen as corrupted when access to it was made marketable. Indeed, the implicit link to citizenship here is fundamental to the sense of 'belonging' that underlies the nature of sympathetic engagement, involving differences across encounters that mark community and communication not as a reaffirmation of identity but a shaping of mutuality and interaction in an overall context of fairness and respect. In claiming that some gifts are 'expressive of relationships that engage, challenge, and reinterpret our identities',⁵⁵ Sandel points to the way identities – far from being given, fixed, or presupposed – are emergent properties of the ongoing relations themselves, and that new encounters transform both parties.

Finally, it is important to add that this is neither an appeal to a nostalgic vision of the pre-modern, or to a utopian view of a possible future. Rather, this is grounded in the experience of modernity itself, in the circumstances of its development. Individualism, secularism, industrialism, the decline of traditional class-based sources of cohesion: these are not the problem. It is not these

that have threatened the possibilities of sympathetic engagement. The age of the internet makes it abundantly clear that some general 'decline of community' is not what is at stake – what this presents us with is simply the transformation of the conditions under which relationships develop, with new modes of friendship and mutuality, and an emergent sense of 'community' as network. All this provides new possibilities – and problems – for face-to-face interaction, rather than displacing it. Nor is individualism the problem in itself, though as we saw with trauma it can become a key site for modern dilemmas over identity. What *is* a problem, again revealing the centrality of capitalism, is that particular form of it that can be called egoism: the reduction of the other to the status of means to an end, a pursuit of self-gratification as self-realization, and the construction of this as the self-sufficient project of life.⁵⁶ At the same time, we can return to Žižek for a caution here: it is not egoism *per se*, but egoism in relation to envy, emulation, and *ressentiment*,⁵⁷ whereby 'self-interest' is indelibly marked by self-deceit and frustration, resulting in anomie, melancholy, addiction, and the other pathologies of object-desire that are inherent in consumerism. We can conclude, then, that the problems confronting sympathy in the contemporary world are not primarily due to the media, or to some generalized 'human condition', but to our embeddedness in ever more aggressive, oppressive and environmentally destructive forms of capitalism in the era of its globalization, along with the character structure it fosters.

Let us end by recalling Emma, from the third chapter. Earlier in the modern era, in another time of political and economic upheaval, Emma struggled to reconcile feeling, imagination and judgement as the basis for a life of good citizenship and personal fulfilment. In a later era, of rampant capitalism, with similar hopes, similar frustrations, and essentially the same weapons, we struggle still.