

Sentimentality - that's what we call the sentiment we don't share.

Graham Greene

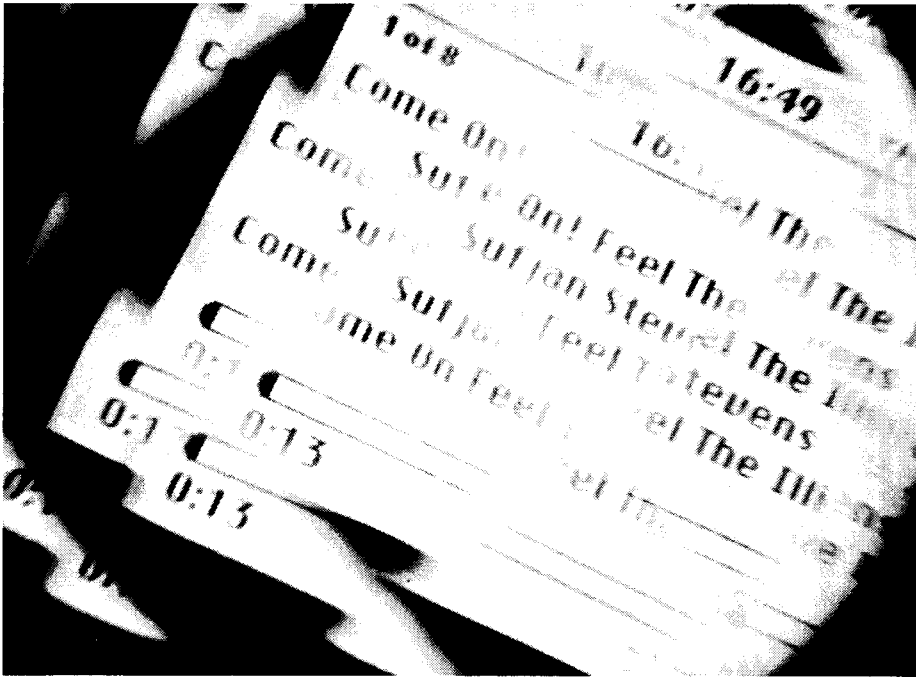
Now that I am in my early early middle age or perhaps later late twenties, I seem to have become one sappy sod; crying, and when I say crying I mean tearing up at the mere musical or textual hint of impending drama. Of course I am as ironically terrified by anything remotely new-agey or even earnestly emotional as the

next post-hipster early adopter, but something seems to ring true in the contemporary wave of tearjerking novels, films and records. Writers like Douglas Coupland, Dan Rhodes or Dave Eggers, filmmakers such as Cameron Crowe or Ang Lee, and huge-sounding albums by the Polyphonic Spree, Rufus Wainwright or Sufjan Stevens somehow package their tales of contemporary anomie so deftly that I cannot but be tenderly entrapped. Tackling the tricky and sticky subject of emotions is a dangerous endeavor since it is hard to quantify compassion or translate tears to keyboard without

the resulting prose emerging drenched and unreadable.

Sentimentality has always been defined, and reviled, as overly emotional or affected, but in the time of Dickens and other social reformist writers it still connoted an emotional shortcut to the minds of their readers, a rhetorical strategy meant to affect audiences through the use of pathos. The O.E.D. traces the history of the word *sentiment* from its current derisive definition as "insincerity or mawkishness" to its earliest occurrences, when it merely referred to subjective sensations or opinions, and its fascinating middle ground during the nineteenth century when it had evolved into a term that implied a certain reflexivity in emotional perception.

I cannot but be tenderly entrapped



/ Shared Sentiments

Tackling Tears in an
Age of Podpeople

Florian Duijsens

So far, so sentimental

Refined and tender emotion; exercise or manifestation of 'sensibility'; emotional reflection or meditation; appeal to the tender emotions in literature or art.

It seems that *sentiment* is the attempt at capturing emotions intellectually in order to appeal to another's feelings of compassion or sympathy. Dealing with suffering victims powerless at the machinations of fate and circumstance, the sentimentalists controlled a huge market share of the newly bourgeois, book-buying public in the 18th and 19th century. This literature explores the individual's relation to others, to a community, instead of focusing on oneself. Since hyperbole is the rhetorical strategist's weapon of choice, it is no wonder that sentimentality has been so despised in past centuries. For hyperbole is also the blunt sword of irony, the tool of the moral sentimentalist's utter nemesis, the tech-savvy modern cynic, who uses it with very opposite intentions, slicing the reader away from the text, distancing her from any emotional empathy.

Sentimentality relies on compassion to communicate the author's intent. Through intimate and extensive reportage of inner turmoil and emotional suffering, the audience comes to identify with the protagonist, and is often even directly exhorted to do so. When the audience does not share the author's moral values, the scales will shift and the sentimental text will be read as indulgent bathos,

overblown feelings exploited for their own sappy sake. Should the audience remain sympathetic, the floodgates are opened and sentimentality can work its magic, not authorizing previously un-feelable emotions but expanding people's sympathies. Perhaps the most facile contemporary example of this is the Oscar-winning film *Philadelphia*, which shunned no stereotype or cliché to accomplish its quite honorable goal.

Although sentimental literature has been criticized since the 18th century, its techniques still thrive on the flat and big screens of today, even if its original intention as compassionate criticism has been largely forgotten in an age concerned less with morality than with the happy endings to these tragic tales. Cameron Crowe's *Elizabethtown* tells the story of Drew Baylor, a young creative at a corporate giant, driven to suicide after his career-culminating work turns out to be a fiasco. Ironically, his act of desperation is interrupted by the news of his father's death. Drew has just a few days to bury his father and finish himself off before news of his professional failure spreads. So far, so sentimental, but Crowe would not be a true member of the Hollywood élite if he did not inject a romantic plot twist into this tale of woe. On the plane, Drew meets a confident stewardess named Claire who spontaneously volunteers to be his guide, both geographically as well as spiritually, on his journey home.

Stevens shocked the critical community with his intensely hyperbolic ode to Illinois

Claire sends Drew (and his paternal urn) on a blatantly patriotic solitary road trip to scatter his father's ashes. The movie's oddest moment comes when Claire sends him to the motel where Martin Luther King drew his last breath. Blasting U2's grandly pathetic song about the event, *Pride (In the Name of Love)*, Crowe has his protagonist stand in a fog of ash, face to face with the audience, while Claire's voice-over tells us that King's death was only the beginning of his victory. A similar argument is made as we zoom in on Claire's favorite tree, the one surviving elm at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing. Leading Drew (and the audience's suspended disbelief) to these completely unrelated sites, Crowe is truly sentimental in his use of hyperbole; because we feel for Martin Luther King and the Oklahoma victims, we are meant to sentimentally expand our compassion for Drew's journey of solitary mourning. *Elizabethtown* exemplifies how Hollywood hijacks the rhetorical traditions of sentimentalism, yet somehow subverts them to be life-affirming; laughter breaks through the tears, choreographed eulogies receive applause, and the last goodbye proves to be only the beginning.

When singer songwriter Sufjan Stevens released his *Greetings from Michigan: The Great Lake State*, critics laced their acclaim with disbelief at Stevens' statement that this was only the first in a series of fifty albums dedicated to each of the United States. After an introspective and

biblically rich *Seven Swans*, Stevens shocked the critical community with his intensely hyperbolic ode to Illinois, filled with exuberant homemade and heartfelt semi-symphonic tone poems, lyrical snapshots of the lives of local heroes and villains. The track listing alone makes one wonder whether the songs can make up for the sheer number of words dedicated to them. They vary from the sillily political *THE BLACK HAWK WAR*, or, *How to Demolish an Entire Civilization and Still Feel Good About Yourself in the Morning*, or, *We Apologize for the Inconvenience but You're Going to Have to Leave Now*, or, "I have fought the *Big Knives* and will continue to fight them until they are off our lands!" which forms a kind of overture to the epic full-length, to, just a few pod-clicks down, the downright devotional thirty-five second choral *In This Temple, As In The Hearts Of Man For Whom He Saved The Earth*. Although the artist is ambiguous in his interviews as to the level of irony he intended in his patriotic cycle, no such ambiguity seems intended in his sentimental treatment of morality.

In the album's most somber and stellar track, Stevens seeks his listeners' compassion for one of Illinois' most infamous denizens, John Wayne Gacy, Jr. (and what an appropriately gun-toting name this truly American serial killer has). The opening verse's first part sketches Gacy's unfortunate childhood, pleading for this killer's original humanity and the compassion that entails:

His father was a drinker
And his mother cried in bed
[...]
The neighbors they adored him
For his humor and his conversation

The second section directs the narrative underneath the house, where Gacy buried his victims, once again



affirming their humanity before directly addressing the audience with a question of compassionate identification:

Find the few living things
Rotting fast in their sleep of the dead
Twenty-seven people, even more
They were boys with their cars, summer jobs
Oh my God [this line is sung on an impossibly
high note, Stevens' voice breaking as if
desperately reaching for heaven's door]

Are you one of them?

The last lines, however, take the sentimental identification a step further as the instrumentation breaks down and the singer provides the shock ending.

And in my best behavior
I am really just like him
Look beneath the floorboards
For the secrets I have hid

Both Crowe and Stevens, even in the current climate of hostile anti-sentimentalism, dare to use the staples of that old literary tradition, mystifyingly fusing sentimental elements with its natural antithesis, irony, thereby somehow uniting the two distinct fronts of historically separated cultures—modernist 'high' culture's effects

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of distancing detachment and sentimental 'low' culture's need to milk the tears from its audience by mirroring them on screen or page.

One could say that these two 'opposites' found each other in 1964, when Susan Sontag defined *camp* as being earnest hyperbole purposely and tenderly misunderstood as bad taste for connoisseurs. Yet I feel that a new con-fusion of the two has arisen, an ironic sentimentality that is neither kitsch nor camp, sentimentality matured into modernism, e-modernism, if you will. Proof that the audience has gotten over their inhibitions regarding emotional excess in art, now able to understand hyperbole dually, as both a dis- and affecting statement, both sympathy and snark.

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Florian Duijsens is a second year Liberal Studies student.

Images/Florian Duijsens