

White Tears

«It is crucial to understand what we are talking about when we talk about 'white tears'. The kind of distress we are analyzing may well feel genuine, but it is neither legitimate nor innocent» (Hamad 2021: 12).

«White tears» can manifest in various situations, where **white** individuals feel **threatened in their privilege**, for example when confronted with their own racist actions. **As a reaction to the situation they start crying.** These tears and the reactions the tears provoke shift the focus away from structural issues and experiences of people of colour and center the white individual. «White women tears» furthermore open ground to the question of what happens, when racism and sexism collide, highlighting the need of an intersectional approach to issues of gender, race etc. Ruby Hamad talks of a 'sanctioned victim status' of especially bourgeois white women, that can be turned on women of colour.

The phenomenon of «white women tears» and the weaponization of White Womanhood is not new and continues to be a centerpiece in the dominant narrative defending the status quo. It was in settler colonial societies that «'women's protection' became key to the deadly disciplinary power that maintained racialized and classed regimes of extraction and exploitation» and the power of bourgeois «white women's tears» was solidified (Phipps 2021: 85).

Tears of grief

The tendency to cry in regard to death, is a universal human phenomenon. Still there is a distinction between the grievability of lives, the mournable and unmournable bodies. A distinction that stands for precarity, an inequality in the worth ascribed to different bodies. The said differentiation becomes recognisable by whether and which space is given to the grief for the deceased. **How tears of grief are made visible or invisible, makes us understand, which bodies are socially considered mournable and which are considered unmournable.** Judith Butler states: «One way of posing the question of who 'we' are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable. [...] An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all» (Butler 2015).

As an example for the handling and also the framing of the unmournable, stands New York's Hart Island, home to one of the largest mass graves in the U.S. for unidentified or unclaimed bodies. The island has been run since the 19th century by New York's jail system, which used inmate gravediggers and was kept off limits until 2021. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, many of the dead were buried there. Already stigmatised by society, a burial on Hart Island meant that rituals of grief were merely impossible, that the grief of those who lost partners was not recognized and the losses were treated as if it were no loss. Also during the Covid pandemic, unclaimed bodies were buried on the island. Bodies that were already marginalized and oftentimes overly exposed to the virus through e.g. their working and living situations.

Referring to Judith Butler, regulating and controlling grieving through systems of power, like governments, is a political issue of expansive significance. At the same time, tears of grief have political potential to unsettle dominant narratives, by making those bodies visible, whose lives were framed as unworthy of grief.

Tears of resistance

As resistance and survival strategies repeat and change, one must look for nuanced and multifaceted tools of expressions of resilience and survival. With tears never being unambiguous, **crying can mean resisting as well as the absence of tears can stand for a form of resistance.** Combating the forces of oppression, the silencing and erasure of one's own voice and history, racist, neoliberal and patriarchal structures requires operating at a «threshold beyond the grasp of the dominating culture, where otherwise muted voices can hold court and narrate their truths» (Ginwala 2018).

In several novels, Toni Morrison explores the complexities of laughter. She deciphers laughter as a partial tool for survival and resistance, as part of a communal experience that fosters collective healing, as well as a response to tragedy, grief, or absurdity. Morrison **juxtaposes laughter with tears, showing how these seemingly contrasting emotions co-exist in response to systematic oppression.**

The artists Ntando Cele and Julian Hetzel propose the concept of tears as an alternative raw material, contrasting it with the extraction of natural resources, such as drinking water physically enabling crying. Thus addressing the possibility of capitalizing tears as embodied intangible values and trauma on the art market.

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Tears of the political body I

The leaders of modern authoritarian politics, and especially of fascism, provide the masses with an image of themselves, the Volk projected as an organic, whole, and invulnerable body.

In her essay «Aesthetics and Anesthetics», Susan Buck-Morss analyses Hitler's facial expressions during his speeches (which he rehearsed with a director in front of a mirror). The emotions staged in his facial expressions, however are not what one would expect: namely the armored face so typical heroic Nazi aesthetics. Instead, it was «giving back to the man-in-the-crowd his own image – the narcissistic image of the intact ego, constructed against the fear of the body-in-pieces.» And using Darwin's «The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals» (1872) with its comparative photographic tables, **Buck-Morss identifies two key emotions that Hitler was thus mirroring back to his crowd: fear, and weeping.** For the latter especially, she identifies an analogy between Hitler's facial expressions and the plates of screaming and weeping infants. Thus Buck-Morss maintains that «the narcissism that we have developed as adults functions as an anaesthetizing tactic against the shock of modern experience [...] is the ground from which fascism can again push forth.»

In the article «Primal Scream, or Why Do Babies Cry?: A Theory of Trump» Aaron Schuster also draws on Darwin's analysis and tries to unravel the psyche of the crying child by consulting philosophical theories, such as the one of Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, the tears of a child are an expression of the injustice of not being able to take control over its own body. Looking at Donald Trump, who has been described as a crying baby more than once by critics, journalists, and concerned citizens, Schuster states: «**Like the Kantian baby, [...] Trump is enraged by whatever obstructs his freedom.** [...] it is not Trump's physical body that is obstructing, or better, persecuting him, but the even more unwieldy and fragmentary body of the State: laws, courts, and the Constitution» (Schuster 2017). Leaving the question open: If Trump is the infantile fantasy par excellence, then who is the adult?

Tears of soldiers

The soldiers' tears in specific situations of war and the traumatized soldier who returns from war, unable to cry and thus express his suffering, is a narrative that has been repeated countless times in literature and cinema.

The trope of the soldier comes with gendered projections of invulnerable and heroic bodies. **The tears flow when that armor breaks down.**

By foregrounding the trope of the traumatized soldier and evoking compassion and authenticity through the tears of the soldiers, attention is diverted from the cruel acts and effects of war, as well as the structural causes and political decisions that lead to war and directed to patriotism, communality and one-sided solidarity. Cilli Pogodda and Danny Gronmaier state that there is no «right» way to represent war through media, rather, there are different modes of aesthetic construction.

In the book «Having a Good Cry» Robyn Warhol describes the reaction of a lawyer who sees Steven Spielberg's «Saving Private Ryan» (1998) in the cinema. The man is overcome by a wave of patriotic nostalgia about a national past when «we all stood together and fought evil». At some point the lawyer feels that he is beginning to cry, something he hardly does outside the cinema, but in the darkness of the theatre he takes no pains to conceal his tears. The example also emphasises the good cry of the alienated viewers through the melodrama of war. As Walter Benjamin once stated, in cinema people who are no longer moved or touched by anything learn to cry again.

Tears of the political body II

What forces the so-called political mass to cry?

In his series of silk prints «Crying People» (2022) the artist Isaac Chong Wai works with images depicting people mourning at funerals of totalitarian leaders, addressing collective mourning and performativity of sorrow. «In the colossal funerals of totalitarian leaders, numerous people manifested patriotism through the act of mourning: weeping, wailing, screaming, and hitting the ground. Hysterical demonstrations of grievances in the funerals contagiously spread among mourners captured by international media for staging the mythmaking of grief, meticulously narrated by the state» (Zilberman 2022). Chong Wai uses media images from the internet, some of them being displayed in this vitrine. He exaggerates the facial expressions by dropping artificial tears on the faces of the mourners and emphasises the symbolism of the tears by cable chain curtains floating in front of the prints. The mix of explicit artificial tears and crying faces underlines the impossibility of verifying the authenticity of the mourners' tears and leads to focus on representations of grief. Chong Wai examines the tears of the individual as a form of emotional expression and reads them as a sign for their **disconnection of their own ideologies, that is produced by the politicisation of those tears through the state.**

But the state force provoking tears can also be more literal: As the name of the chemical weapon already indicates, tear gas is one of the most visible triggers for involuntary tears and a direct tool of state violence. **Irritating the mucous membranes of the eyes and the upper respiratory tract, tear gas can cause coughing, choking, and general debility.** Worldwide, there is an upward trend in the misuse of tear gas by the police at peacefully held demonstrations. By disrupting the protestors' ability to act, tear gas is a form of anaesthetisation, a numbing of the demonstrating crowds.

Tears of phantasmagoria

The moment when tears flow on the screen is intended to attract viewers and increase sales, thus being the «money-making» moment of Reality TV production. **This tearing up in the scripted and highly controlled environment of Reality TV is often referred to as «the money shot».** What makes these scenes especially captivating is their ambiguity, the tension between authenticity and artificiality.

It is not only on TV but also on social media that the «money-shot» has found its place. Tears have become a form of lifestyle and serve as content for tearful apologies, after cry make-up tutorials, crying schedules and ugly crying talks. This digital sphere of public life can be seen as a «phantasmagoria», a built up reality where the individual is numbed through flooding and overstimulation of the senses. The overstimulation leads to a sensory addiction which enables social control and consequentially encourages the alienation of the individual. Crying and displaying one's tears on social media thus happens within this state of alienation, while at the same time upholding this built up reality.

Tears of cleansing

When crocodiles open their jaw to swallow their prey, their lacrimal ducts are squeezed and tears are released. Metaphorically speaking, **crocodile tears are a sign of false remorse, like Judas weeping after betraying Jesus**. In Christian tradition, tears are a form of repentance - they pay tribute to God and clean you from previous sins. In the case of Judas, after realizing the gravity of his actions, he was filled with deep sorrow, leading him to shed tears. **However, these tears are often seen as insufficient repentance, as Judas ultimately chose despair and ended his own life instead of seeking forgiveness and redemption from God.**

The act of offering up tears has long established itself in the political arena, where politicians' tears flow to cover up unpleasant deeds or underline their own authenticity. The Priest Robert Southwell called tears «mighty orators», being so powerful that they act as attorneys in their own right. Regardless of whether the reason for them is justified or not, tears possess the power to affirm the sincerity of the weeper, to seek forgiveness and beg for mercy, thus also serving as a cathartic release for guilt.

Tears of creation myths

Creation myths are not the same as scientific accounts or speculations of origins. Much rather, they refer to the world-making power of storytelling and symbolization. They might be seen as the storytelling process by which chaos becomes cosmos. But they also carry with them ancestral experiences, and mediate trauma and suffering.

There are abundant references to tears and weeping in creation myths. In the origin myths of the Ancient Middle East, tears over the dead god Ba'al shed by his sister have had the power to bring the dead god back to life. In ancient Egypt, Isis's tears over her dead husband Osiris cause the yearly cycle of floods of the river Nile, which create the fertile sediments on which life in Egypt depends. Elsewhere, the life-giving force of rain is connected, and ritually invoked with tears. **When tears flow, natural powers unleash, resurrection is possible, seeds of life are planted.**

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