

# EXPRESSING EMOTIONS IN TIMES OF COVID-19: A MELODRAMATIC APPROACH TO THE DETERIORATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BASED ON VISUAL MOTIFS IN THE NEWS PROGRAMS ON THE SPANISH NATIONAL BROADCASTER (RTVE)\*

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## INTRODUCTION

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This article continues a line of research pursued in recent studies (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2021; Qiuyi and Qian, 2025; Variano, 2022; Wasilewski et al., 2025) that explore the psychosocial impact of COVID-19—albeit with different methodologies—with the aim of analysing the predominant emotional states experienced during the early periods of the pandemic. The hypothesis tested in this study is that the reduction of affective expression to a narrow spectrum of negative emotions can be attributed to a breakdown in the culturally established ways of publicly communicating a whole range of feelings. One of this study's aims is to demonstrate that this breakdown is the product of an epistemic crisis affecting the language of gestures used to express, communicate and share emotions. Another is to show that this situation

resulted both from the physical restrictions that compromised the spontaneous use of commonly recognised expressive gestures, and from representational choices adopted by the media that undermined the foundations of empathetic interaction, instead promoting a state of apathy. In this sense, the abandonment or alteration of certain gestures may be interpreted both as the consequence of the restrictions on civil liberties and as a reflection of a consciously planned operation.

When culturally coded and shared by a particular community, gestures tend to elicit empathy and at the same time to induce imitative behaviour (Crescentini et al., 2011). Consequently, the absence or significant alteration of common gestures in television productions may be attributable to an attempt to encourage emotional and gestural restraint in order to foster compliance with temporary restrictions on physical movement. From

## THE PHYSICAL RESTRICTIONS AND MEDIA DECISIONS RELATED TO THE STATE OF EMERGENCY IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO AN EMOTIONAL BLOCKAGE

this perspective, communicative strategies such as attempts to reduce emotional interaction by delegitimising this need would form part of the efforts of the media to place their power at the service of the safety imperative. This study thus analyses the reduction in expressive possibilities and emotional interaction by exposing these mechanisms and demonstrating the effectiveness of such media measures, while also identifying the physical impediments caused by the restrictions.

This article analyses the most significant motifs in affective terms that are used most often in coverage directly or indirectly related to the pandemic in the opening sequences of evening news broadcasts on RTVE's La 1 channel in 2020 and 2021. The aim of this analysis is to trace how the physical restrictions and media decisions in response to the state of emergency in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an emotional blockage. The findings give particular attention to the formal alteration of visual motifs that require physical proximity between individuals and that elicit empathy, as well as the development of a new gestural syntax for conveying feelings that could not be expressed through traditionally codified gestures at the time.

This research forms part of a larger project, titled MUMOVEP (Mutations of Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere—Representations of Power in Spain 2017–2021: Pandemic, Climate Change, Gender Identities and Racial Conflicts). The objective of this project is to interpret the visual motifs used in the public sphere, with particular attention to the formal mutations resulting from contemporary

circumstances that have the biggest influence on them. In this context, the inadequacy of the reformulation of emotional expression that engages with the other, or that is only fully realised when shared, forms part of an epistemic crisis that confirms the profound impact of the pandemic in altering forms of expression. Moreover, this study also confirms a hypothesis developed during the project, related to the lack of an iconography of the *Pietà* that could facilitate a catharsis to help heal the collective wound, an absence attributed to impaired capacities of empathy and creativity.

The visual motifs discussed in this study, which have been identified and analysed in previous research (Balló and Bergala, 2016), point to patterns of expression that are culturally recognised and used to communicate emotions (Balló, 2000: 13). The theoretical formulations and applicable possibilities of this category have been developed in studies conducted by members of the Audiovisual Media Aesthetics Research Collective (Colectivo de Investigación Estética de los Medios Audiovisuales, or CINEMA) in the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, through funded projects such as OCEC (Observatory on Contemporary European Cinema) and MOVEP (Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere: Production and Circulation of Images of Power in Spain, 2011–2017), as well as the ongoing MUMOVEP project mentioned above. This body of published research is founded on Aby Warburg's approach to the historicity of images, which identifies the iconographic aftermath of certain pathos formulas (*Pathosformeln*) as evidence of their enduring capacity to affect observers emotionally in different historical, geographical and cultural contexts, cultivating transcendence as a result of an empathetic connection (Pintor, 2017: 2).

The continued need for an empathetic response, as reflected in the use and effectiveness of visual motifs, defines these motifs as meaningful ways of conveying affective experiences. At the same time, the iconographic method employed

here facilitates an interdisciplinary approach to the observation of how these patterns migrate from cinema to other audiovisual productions, such as footage and images of the public sphere (Balló and Salvadó, 2023: 12), thereby legitimising comparisons of these two media forms.

In line with the previous research project (MOVEP), which examined the appearance in the public sphere of iconographies that have inherited meanings originally acquired through their use and development in cinema (Pintor, 2017: 2), this study interprets the visual motifs that offer the clearest evidence of an emotional blockage by comparing them with the meanings they acquired through the prism of what José Javier Marzal classifies as “the melodramatic” (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 30), referring to a device that transcends the various paradigm shifts in cinema, from classical to modern to contemporary. Moreover, the centrality to this genre of a relationship with alterity based on sharing emotions vests it with a greater sensitivity to factors that foster or threaten such an interaction. This explains the special attention given in melodrama to mechanisms such as repression (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 67–68; 158; 160) and sublimation (Gledhill, 2002: 335), which are incorporated into its stories (through the attitudes of the characters and the obstacles they face) and expressed at the narratological level through aesthetic choices that elicit *primary cinematic identification* (Metz, 1975: 40) from the spectator. This means, first of all, that comparing these narrative strategies can help reveal and contextualise the rhetoric that underpins the media discourses in which the visual motifs identified are embedded; second, that melodrama can serve to expose and investigate the psychological and social repercussions of the physical and visual restrictions imposed during the period of the pandemic; and third, that applying the concern with feelings that characterises a genre founded on emotional engagement to images disseminated in news programs may help reveal the specific affective nuances that remain after the

emotional spectrum has been pared down. This approach can thus facilitate an analysis of the images of loneliness resulting from the emotional blockage to discern the prevalence of attitudes of resignation (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 58), feelings of impotence (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 93) and the predominance of nostalgia, the implications of which are analysed in the conclusion.

In addition to considering the work of authors who theorise about and apply the category of visual motif (Balló, 2000; Balló and Bergala, 2016; Balló and Salvadó, 2023), this study adopts the Warburgian method in line with recent applied studies by researchers such as Iván Pintor (2017) and Miriam De Rosa (2019), who revisit theories originally proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman (2002) and Giorgio Agamben (2000). On the question of melodrama, this study draws mainly on the work of Nuria Bou (2002), Roberto De Gaetano (2022), Pablo Pérez Rubio (2004) and Jesús González Requena (1986), while also taking into account theoretical contributions that explore questions of emotions from various perspectives.

## EMOTIONAL REPRESSION

This section explores the image of the *Pietà*, an iconographic rarity in the corpus studied, in an effort to analyse its function and contextualise its use. This is the only case involving the use of the capacity of visual motifs to move spectators emotionally.

Broadcast on 8 September 2020, the short video titled *#EstoNoEsUnJuego* (“This Is Not a Game”) formed part of a campaign by Spain’s Ministry of Health aimed at promoting compliance with COVID-19 protective measures and encouraging responsible behaviour by raising viewer awareness. To this end, the editing establishes a direct correlation between unlawful gatherings and deaths caused by the virus by juxtaposing happy scenes of young people getting together with bleak images of people dying in hospital with grieving health-

care workers at their side. The use of this visual motif reflects an attempt to foster self-restraint in relation to the need to share happiness openly through celebratory gestures and rituals. By making viewers aware of the risks associated with failing to comply with the restrictions on human interaction, the video implicitly encourages them to contain their emotions. On the one hand, it aims to provoke guilt and instil a fear of being responsible for other people's deaths in order to prevent violations of emergency measures such as curfews, social distancing and bans on group gatherings. On the other, in its effort to elicit an emotional response from the spectator, it conveys a tragic tone to foster an aversion to behaviours identified as directly culpable for the death of innocent victims. In this way, the video awakens viewers' sense of civic duty in order to encourage them to regulate not only their own behaviour but also, implicitly, the behaviour of others.

Confirming the omnipresence of surveillance practices first theorised in the pioneering work of Michel Foucault (1975), the proliferation of coverage made possible by contemporary video technology has resulted in the widespread expansion of surveillance phenomena into the social and visual space (De Rosa, 2014). In keeping with this evolution, during the COVID-19 pandemic ordinary individuals assumed the role of judges, using their mobile phones as surveillance instruments to film other civilians violating the prohibitions imposed. The intrusive gaze of filming devices that captured people eating or drinking in public places thus gave rise to acts of visual humiliation often featured in the news coverage of this period. However, the resulting sensation of being monitored also created the conditions for self-imposed restraint and latent paranoia. Subjects who realised they had been caught in the act responded with gestures such as turning their heads to hide their faces, or acts with more troubling connotations, such as raising their hands like hostages trying to express their innocence.

The repression of emotions imposed by the social order (Gledhill, 2002: 117) is also the dominant theme of melodramas of passion (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 148), which focus on the contrast between the law and desire (Elsaesser, 1985: 165). In *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), a lack of courage, coupled with guilt over an adulterous affair, brings the love story to an abrupt end, while in *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), a sense of responsibility towards the community compels the protagonist to give up a requited love. Such social constraints, which act primarily on the narrative possibilities of melodrama, also appear in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (Fa yeung nin wa, 2000), this time in the form of meddling neighbours. In this film, bourgeois morality is replaced with a Confucian perspective (Bettinson, 2025: 106). As a holistic ideology, Confucianism makes no distinction between the public sphere as the political domain and the private sphere as the moral domain, and thus government intrusion into private life is deemed acceptable (Esteban Rodríguez and Martín Rodríguez, 2024: 22). This gives rise to everyday situations comparable to those experienced during healthcare emergencies in societies with philosophical traditions that grant greater autonomy to the individual. As a result, as the director himself suggests (Tobin, 2008: 25), the murmurs and prying looks of the neighbours the true protagonists of *In the Mood for Love*. While this curious environment might actually be understood to create the conditions for the romantic relationship by bringing the two protagonists together (Gliatta, 2004: 109), what occurs in the film—presented at Cannes with the title *Secrets* (Gliatta, 2004: 111)—remains completely concealed from the gaze of the outsider, including the spectator.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, concealment from the intrusive gazes of outsiders required the organisation of clandestine events or the confinement of personal interactions to secluded environments. At the same time, the restric-

tions on behaviour, reinforced by the prevalence of surveillance that extended even to the level of self-surveillance, may have resulted in the blocking of emotions before they could be expressed and shared. From this perspective, the following section analyses certain mutations to the visual motifs used to represent situations in the public sphere.

## **TOWARDS AN EMPATHETIC BLOCKAGE**

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In order to foster the self-restraint necessary to contain the need to share experiences with others, the media strategies adopted to report on and counteract the tragic events of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have leaned towards compromising the capacity of the public to respond empathetically. The most common strategy involved the use of neutral images with minimal emotional impact yet capable of conveying an impression of control, with the aim of inducing similar attitudes of self-restraint in the spectator. In this way, the media contributed to the development of an aesthetic defined chromatically by cool colours and a syntax limited to a few visual motifs.

This tendency resulted in the still life becoming the dominant iconographic choice to represent the pandemic. The development of this genre in modern art reflects the emergence of a sensibility that originated with the *Wunderkammern*, in a transition away from the collector's inclination towards the criteria of scientific

classification characteristic of the encyclopaedic mentality of the Enlightenment (De Benedictis, 1991). However, as the corpus analysed here does not involve static images, it should be noted that the footage that reflects the rationale of the still life most clearly belongs to the visual motif of the series (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 111–116). In the context of the pandemic, this motif appears in shots of ubiquitous medical supplies, initially used to accompany daily updates on the virus. In the beginning, this motif was often associated with the production, use and orderly collection of diagnostic tests in order to check for the presence of the virus in patients. Later, it would be employed to depict the mass production processes of the long-awaited vaccine, which at that time was still in the manufacturing phase.

This mode of representation, however, extends beyond subjects visually conceived of as “things” to include people as well. This transition is observable in a series of consecutive shots shown in the opening sequence of the evening news broadcast on 9 September 2020. Reporting on the final testing phases prior to its rollout, images of individuals receiving the vaccine are alternated with sequentially edited images of the industrial processes involved in pharmaceutical production (Image 1). Queues of people constitute another variant of this visual motif due to the orderly arrangement imposed by mandatory social distancing and because a queue with a large number of people transforms what might resemble a crowd into a spatially distributed set of evenly arranged elements, covering a surface to form a regular geometric pattern. An example of this can be seen in an overhead shot of queues of people lining up for virus testing (Image 2). Social distancing strategies convey a certain emotional rigidity and serve to attenuate the more human qualities of the individuals shown.

The aesthetic choices analysed are founded on the same logic adopted in physical containment measures aimed at preventing the virus from

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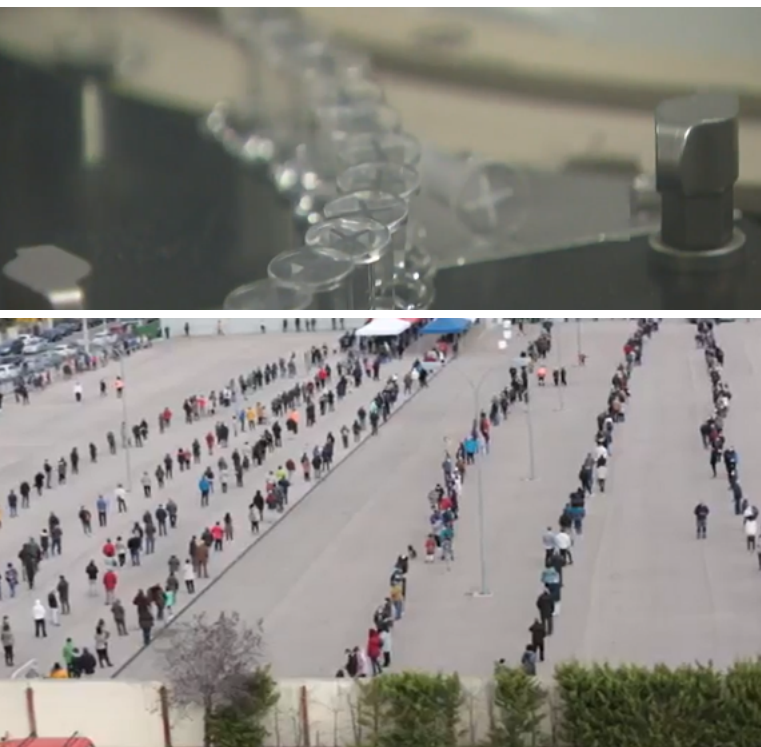


Image 1 (above). Broadcast on 9 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La I), 0:50–0:55

Image 2 (below). Broadcast on 14 November 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La I), 1:17

spreading, based on the idea that domination implies control. In this context, the most prominent element of physical containment is the face mask. This accessory disrupts numerous visual motifs by obstructing the spectator's view of the subject's face. It was also the most recurrent element in images captured during the pandemic, and its mandatory use inevitably compromised the expressiveness of the facial features. For example, any smiles that might be provoked by the rebellious and liberating hilarity of clandestine gatherings—swiftly condemned by the media gaze—are only faintly perceptible from the expression around the eyes. In any case, instances of relaxation interrupting the prevailing austere atmosphere are rare. In a period characterised by a behavioural regime dominated by restraint and fear, truly joyful smiles are relegated to memories of pre-pandemic times, portrayed in news reports with wistful nostalgia.

## SUBVERSION OF THE GESTURE

The father of classical cinema, D. W. Griffith, created a flexible space (Bou, 2002: 39) subject to the laws of emotion. As a result, the depiction of passion—as explored in books such as *Passion and Society* (L'Amour et l'Occident, De Rougemont, 1939)—can be found at the very origins of the cinematic form. The longing for absolute contact with alterity translates into a tension between different elements that leads to a profound fusion. In line with this melodramatic logic, in the segment “The Hand” (Ai Shen, Wong Kar-wai, 2004) from the collective film *Eros* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Steven Soderbergh, Wong Kar-wai, 2004), the ubiquitous obstacles on the path towards complete affinity with the other only intensify the desire associated with romantic passion, exacerbating the feeling until it achieves its most refined state. This is a love capable of overcoming obstacles by surviving subversively in other ways, such as through sublimation.

The central role played the hand in the first sequence of encounters between the two protagonists unfolds with a cold and erotic professional distance that follows the *courtoise* imagery analysed by Denis de Rougemont (1939), elevating the courtesan to the status of a *domina*, with an authority based on her greater sexual experience. These roles are established through shots and staging positions evocative of the relationship between the formal, romantic Count and the uninhibited actress in *La Ronde* (Max Ophüls, 1950), where the actress occupies the bed like a throne and orders the Count, whom she receives like a subject, to surrender his weapon. As she passes her hand over it, wielding it like a sceptre, her caresses allude to a sexual relationship that the count's *bon ton* compels him to postpone until the more intimate moments of the night, after several hours of devoted courtship. The construction of gestures in Ophüls's film is echoed in the *mise-en-scène* created by Wong in “The Hand”, which represents a strange professional



Image 3. "The Hand" (Ai Shen, Wong Kar-wai), in *Eros* (2004)

pact in the form of the courtesan's masturbation of an inexperienced novice (Image 3): a dressmaker's apprentice chosen by his master from among his most talented pupils, whom the courtesan is happy to offer calculatedly sensual caresses that transform into a tactile sensibility capable of emulating the intensity of passion. The memory of this experience will lead the apprentice to desire her services again, and to reciprocate them through physical contact with her body.

This segment was filmed at the time of a SARS outbreak that reached epidemic proportions in Hong Kong, nearly forcing the city into a total lockdown in the first months of 2003. The absence of physical contact resulting from the safety measures influenced the director's creative process, prompting him to reflect deeply on the possibility of love in the presence of disease, privileging the sense of touch (Heredero, 2018: 443). Much like the importance given to hands in this segment (which was conceived in a context similarly affected by physical restrictions), during the COVID-19 pandemic it was the hands (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 364–370), or by extension the limbs, that assumed full responsibility for gestures of expression, communication and affective understanding normally entrusted to other parts of the body, such as the mouth, that were now effectively "censored".

With the aim of ensuring while at the same time regulating the empathetic connection, a new non-verbal language was developed. The new syntax included the fist bump, which was extended even to formal contexts such as meetings between European political leaders, to avoid the prolonged physical contact required for the traditional handshake. Elbow greetings were also encouraged. Given that politicians, as public figures subjected to constant scrutiny, have the power to act as role models, such gestures became common in political contexts.

However, in order to promote this strict code of behaviour so that it might become part of everyday life, the new gestures were also promoted by institutions such as schools, through footage of typical children learning them in the classroom (Image 4).

These initiatives confirm the media's commitment to promoting behaviour for the public to emulate—in this case not through aesthetic conditioning but as an instrument for disseminating a new gestural language. Nevertheless, this new repertoire could not match the expressive efficacy of traditional, more culturally embedded gestures. Moreover, its purely supplementary nature—conceived for sporadic use during periods of heightened restrictions—defined this language as ephemeral, while the potential of gestures to subvert established patterns and escape categorisation remained (De Rosa, 2019: 114–115). Consequently, the instability of these new gestural patterns, documented in media footage, contributed to the dismantling of the expressive syntax of emotions and triggered an epistemic crisis.

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Image 4. Broadcast on 7 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La 1), 0:58

## INTERACTION BREAKDOWN

In opposition to the poietic capacity of classical cinema to tear reality apart, modern cinema offers a reality that resists the transcendence attained by intellectual and cultural means (Moure, 1997: 93). This impenetrability, resulting from the rupture of the episteme of modernity, change the nature of obstacles to relationships. In a cinematic approach associated with the most extreme conclusions of modernity, such as Antonioni's, "the drama is no longer psychological, but plastic," as Godard famously observed (Païni, 2015: 22). In line with this reading, Nuria Bou observes that doors, windows and other elements positioned between characters in Antonioni's films become impassable thresholds of separation (2002: 92). By marking blind spots for communication, they prevent the possibility of encountering the other.

During the pandemic, open doors were used to demarcate the spots where Christmas gifts could be delivered without risk of contagion. Architectural elements that once symbolised connection and passage thus became impermeable. This function of denying access is visually expressed through the recurrence of the motif of the fence (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 88–93), which appears in

particular at moments of higher risk and harsher restrictions, such as the closure of schools, shops or other venues that were previously sites of daily activities. In classical cinema, the fence might foreshadow obstacles threatening a relationship (Bou, 2002: 47), as in *Peter Ibbetson* (Henry Hathaway, 1935). Conversely, in modern cinema, it can represent the romantic couple's inability to be happily together, as it does in *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962) (Image 5).

Other architectural elements also communicate this idea. In *All That Heaven Allows*, a window (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 383–388) is used to express the protagonist's confinement in society (González Requena, 1986: 112), and it is also used to represent the isolation both of students in university residences and of a healthcare worker positioned at the edge of a desolate frame, recalling Goya's dog in his series of *Black Paintings* (1820–1823), symbolising solitude.

However, as a means of conveying the psychological impact of the breakdown in interaction, the motif of the kiss (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 64–70) is particularly revealing. This gesture is severely affected by the pandemic restrictions because it requires maximum physical proximity. In classical melodrama, a genre shaped by the



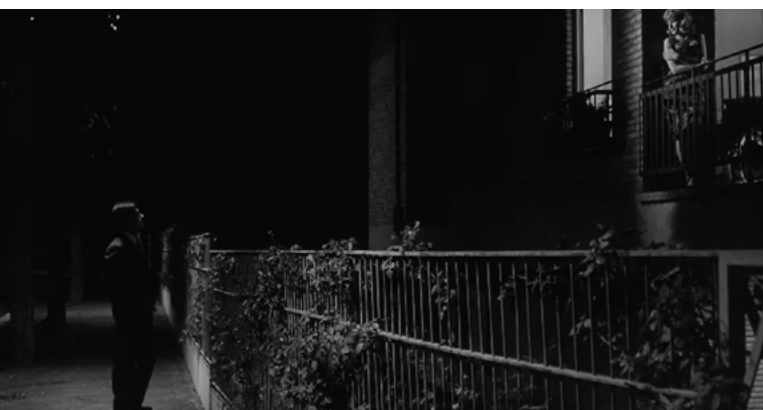


Image 5. *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

notion of two becoming one, the kiss marked the expressive frontier (Bou, 2002: 63): the point of total fusion between two individuals. The face-mask, however, disrupts the flow of shared tension, precluding any possibility of a fully realised encounter (Image 6).

## DISSIPATED EMOTIONS

In a public address, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez recommended refraining from physical contact as a way of expressing affection, showing love and concern for the other person's safety by preventing the virus from spreading to them. This suggestion fosters guilt and worry over the possibility of harming others, establishing fear as the foundation for a diminished range of

emotions. On the one hand, the loss of socially established rituals characterised by the codified gestures that vest hardships with meaning contributed to an impoverishment of symbolic expression, as reflected in cases of individuals who described difficulties in processing grief because the absence of the symbolic relegated many emotions to a vague status that made it hard even to identify them. On the other hand, emotional distancing became consolidated as a human response to measures that deprived individuals of physical and empathetic contact. Unfortunately, this psychological reaction only served to reinforce the recommended safety distances, making them seem unbreachable.

Various initiatives were launched to compensate for the physical isolation caused by the pandemic, such as getting schoolchildren to write letters to elderly care home residents. In cinema, however, the letter often symbolises the irreversible passage of time, underscoring the implicit distance between the sender of the message and its reader. In *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (Douglas Sirk, 1958), for example, the letter serves as a metaphor for irrevocable separation (González Requena, 1986: 162).

The motif of the window, often serving in films as a point where women confined to the domestic space can observe the outside world, has been used in cinema to mark a state of exclusion

Image 6. Broadcast on 23 December 2021 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La 1) 2:53





Images 7 and 8. *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937)

(Gledhill, 2002: 302) from active public life, becoming a metaphor for a conscious resignation to the passage of time that allows them only a vicarious existence. This is the feeling conveyed by the protagonist in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) as she watches her daughter's wedding through a window (Images 7 and 8), knowing she will only ever be able to live fully through her child. Her resignation establishes a connection with the melancholy prince in *The Court Concert* (Das Hofkonzert, Douglas Sirk, 1936), who transfers his passion for his lost love to his daughter's dreams.

Thanks to its polysemous nature, the window, like other barriers, can thus acquire a temporal connotation, giving visual substance to the expression of attitudes and feelings that have grown fainter over time. In what probably reflects an acknowledgement of this connotation, the window was the motif chosen to represent the 2020 Christmas season in images showing people looking at street decorations from their homes. The allusion to passive, voyeuristic attitudes suggests a symbolic distance from an outside world from which people were feeling excluded. The repeated use of this iconography in news stories about lifestyle changes imposed by the pandemic (Image 9) seems to support this hypothesis. In such cases, the freedom to share emotions through public dis-

plays of affection may be portrayed nostalgically as a luxury characteristic of other perhaps happier and certainly more carefree times. Such examples offer a means of interpreting the subdued and gloomy emotions that defined the pandemic.

## CONCLUSIONS

Melodrama's bourgeois transformation of tragedy (Gledhill, 2002: 16) is marked by an inclination towards vicarious experience, as reflected in the success of numerous programs and works of fiction during the pandemic (Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022), framed in the nostalgia that constitutes a key feature of the genre (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 50). This represents one of the possible emotional responses to the sensation of powerlessness caused by the passive behaviour to which individuals may have felt confined during the periods of severest restrictions. However, the censorship imposed upon the active expression of emotions, so similar to the castrating repressive mechanisms that are central to this genre, may be understood in terms of melodrama's symptomatic response to drama, i.e., silence (Brooks, 1976). In this respect, it is worth noting that in Japanese melodrama, in contrast to the expressive saturation that characterises its Hollywood counterpart (Brooks, 1976:



Image 9. Broadcast on 14 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La I), 2:24

41), emotional excess transcends the level of representation (Dissanayake, 1993: 150–151). In the case of the pandemic, it would be hoped that the build-up of emotions that could not be externalised might find other avenues for release. This points to an opportunity to analyse practices that transcend representations of the public sphere, such as the initiative launched by the librarian Juan Sobrino to harness the evocative potential of language by offering book readings over the phone to library users. Beyond the limitations of such acts of therapeutic sublimation providing only a projective form of proximity to others, it would be inappropriate to pursue such questions through an analysis focusing on visual motifs of the public sphere.

One of the aims of the analysis offered here has been to show how the deterioration of social relations effectively reduces the individual's emotional range, based on the logic that the lack of interaction affects the expression of emotions that require alterity to be experienced fully. To this end, melodrama has facilitated an exploration of the mechanisms of repression and the possibilities of transcending them, revealing how social control measures condition how we express emotions. The structure of the study reflects this logic: the first section deals with the repression, while the final section examines resignation and nos-

talgia, and the two sections between them—"Subversion of the Gesture" and "Interaction Breakdown"—consider the ways in which the emotional obstacles may or may not be overcome. Moreover, given that visual motifs elicit an empathetic proximity and that some of these motifs require physical proximity for their formulation, the analysis of the changes to these forms of representation in the context of the pandemic has shed light on the serious disruptions to their shared dimension.

To explore the repression and the moral encoding of emotions, the first section ("Emotional Repression") analyses the specific use of the image of the *Pietà*, which constitutes an iconographic rarity in the corpus of motifs analysed, while the final section ("Dissipated Emotions") identifies the emotional allusions left in the wake of the debilitation of other feelings: the motifs of the letter and the window, which are interpreted in terms of the meanings they are given in melodrama. The three sections in between these offer overviews of the undermining of empathetic proximity ("Towards an Empathetic Blockage"), the destabilisation of gestural syntax ("Subversion of the Gesture"), and the physical obstacles to interpersonal contact ("Interaction Breakdown"). In "Towards an Empathetic Blockage", the deterioration of empathetic receptiveness is expressed in the motif of the series, which, as the most recurrent motif in rep-

representations related to the pandemic, is identified as part of a media strategy aligned with the moral rejection of emotions. Given that emotions were deemed a potential threat to compliance with the physical restrictions that required the adoption of an austere lifestyle, the media's contribution can be described as an aesthetic approach aimed at discouraging heightened emotional states. "Subversion of the Gesture" examines the promotion by the media of a new repertoire of gestures for empathetic communication, along with their expressive inadequacy and their role in destabilising the validity of culturally established gestures. While the preceding section explored the role of the facemask as an obstacle to empathetic receptiveness, this section focuses on the expressive role of the hand, and the "Interaction Breakdown" section centres on elements functioning as physical barriers, with the mask reappearing here due to its capacity to hinder physical contact, associated with other elements whose function and recurrence are comparable to the motif of the fence.

Given that visual motifs generally encapsulate physical and empathetic proximity and involve culturally recognised gestures, they offer an object of study that is particularly useful to make sense of the epistemic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis here has confirmed the significant role played by the pandemic in the transformation of repertoires of gestures and iconographic forms. The loss of the language that sustained the shared dimension resulted in a marked absence of an iconography of the *Pietà* capable of releasing collective pain, as that iconography depended on the stability of a formal repertoire that was now undermined, and on an empathetic understanding of alterity that was necessary for the cathartic process but difficult to achieve in times when the capacity for empathy appeared to have been compromised. ■

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**GIVEN THAT VISUAL MOTIFS GENERALLY ENCAPSULATE PHYSICAL AND EMPATHETIC PROXIMITY AND INVOLVE CULTURALLY RECOGNISED GESTURES, THEY OFFER AN OBJECT OF STUDY THAT IS PARTICULARLY USEFUL TO MAKE SENSE OF THE EPISTEMIC CRISIS TRIGGERED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## NOTES

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- \* The findings presented in this article form part of research conducted as part of the MUMOVEP project (Mutations of Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere: Representations of Power in Spain 2017-2021: Pandemic, Climate Change, Gender Identities and Racial Conflicts), ref. PID2021-126930OB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF, EU. The stage to which these results refer relates to the coding and classification of visual motifs through which the pandemic and other events dominating the contemporary public sphere from 2017 to 2021 are presented or interfere with other news topics, with the aim of tracking visual motifs related to them more easily. This constitutes the first step towards creating a digital archive that can include the visual motifs related to these factors of primary importance whenever they appear in photographs published on the front pages of the Spanish newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*, and in the images and recordings included in the introductions to the evening news on the first channel (La 1) of Spain's national public broadcaster.

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## EXPRESSING EMOTIONS IN TIMES OF COVID-19: A MELODRAMATIC APPROACH TO THE DETERIORATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BASED ON VISUAL MOTIFS IN THE NEWS PROGRAMS ON THE SPANISH NATIONAL BROADCASTER (RTVE)

### Abstract

Based on the premise that the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a contraction in the range of emotions that could be expressed in social settings, this article examines the relationship between this reduction and the decline in culturally coded ways of communicating emotions in the public sphere. The analysis focuses on images accompanying news reports broadcast on the evening news on RTVE's La 1 channel in 2020 and 2021, taking an iconographic and iconological approach aimed at identifying the formal mutations of the most significant visual motifs (Balló, 2000) in affective terms that are used most often in coverage of the pandemic. The study also analyses iconographic variants found in images associated with other news stories whenever these can be understood as consequences of the pandemic's impact on other events in the news during this period. Identifying signs of a possible epistemic crisis evident in the manifest absence of the representation of certain emotions, this analysis interprets the affective implications of this absence through a comparison with examples from cinematic melodrama, a genre grounded in emotional interaction.

### Key words

Visual motif, COVID-19, Pandemic, Emotion, Empathy, Iconography, Melodrama, Television.

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## LA EXPRESIÓN DE LAS EMOCIONES EN TIEMPOS DEL COVID-19. UNA APROXIMACIÓN MELODRAMÁTICA AL DETERIORO DE LAS RELACIONES SOCIALES A PARTIR DE MOTIVOS VISUALES EN LOS INFORMATIVOS DE RTVE

### Resumen

Partiendo de la premisa de que los periodos de restricciones impuestos durante la COVID-19 provocaron una contracción del abanico emocional socialmente expresable, este artículo examina la relación entre dicha reducción y el deterioro de las formas culturalmente codificadas para comunicar emociones en la esfera pública. El corpus de análisis se limita a las representaciones derivadas de las imágenes que acompañaron las noticias en los informativos vespertinos de RTVE en La 1 durante 2020 y 2021. La argumentación se desarrolla mediante un enfoque iconográfico e iconológico orientado a identificar las mutaciones formales de los motivos visuales (Balló, 2000) más significativos desde una perspectiva afectiva y de aquellos empleados con mayor frecuencia en la cobertura mediática de la pandemia. Asimismo, se analizan las variantes iconográficas que emergen en imágenes asociadas a otras noticias, cuando pueden considerarse consecuencia de las repercusiones de la pandemia sobre acontecimientos que compartieron la agenda informativa del periodo. Al identificar indicios de una posible crisis epistémica, rastreable en la ausencia manifiesta de la representación de determinadas emociones, se interpretan sus implicaciones afectivas mediante una comparación con ejemplos cinematográficos del melodrama, género centrado en el intercambio emocional.

### Palabras clave

Motivo visual., COVID-19., Pandemia., Emoción., Empatía., Iconografía., Melodrama., Televisión.

### Autor/a

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