

Editorial

Polarization is one of the great questions of our time. It is therefore not surprising that the response to a Call for Papers dedicated to “Polarizing Songs in Romance Languages” showed considerable and widespread interest. The received proposals offered a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives that is well represented by the contributions that have been selected and that are presented in this issue. This interest proves that the theme of polarization in popular music in Romance languages and in different historical and spatial contexts is not only a topic of contemporary relevance, but also a subject of critical engagement by scholars from such different fields as musicology, history, cultural studies, or political science.

Of course, the articles presented here do not cover the entire spectrum of scientific approaches dealing with polarization, but they may fill in some gaps. Scientific literature regarding this topic can be ascribed for the most part to political sciences, as polarization – often interpreted as a defining feature of contemporary politics – has gained renewed prominence, after a short period of calm, in the post-Cold War era, particularly following the rise of Donald Trump and the COVID pandemic, which aggravated tensions and conflicts within our societies. The literature on contemporary polarization seems to suggest that it revolves mainly around identity conflicts in a broad sense. Manuel Almagro (2025) describes it as a social phenomenon that takes places in five distinct dimensions: identities, emotions, narratives, beliefs, language. In their study on the ‘trigger points’ of social conflicts, Mau/Lux/Westheuser (2023) also offer important insights into the dynamics of polarization, pointing out in detail how conflict in the public sphere unfolds primarily at the margins of society, creating the false impression that society is divided in clearly distinguishable camps. The loss of diversity as a result of extreme polarization is also a key finding of the anthology by Levin/Milner/Perrings (2021). Recently, there has also been an increasing number of studies that focus on polarization as it relates to cultural aspects and cultural products. The 2023 collective volume *Polarized Past. Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization* (Niklasson 2023) provides an effective guide on how heritage has been used as a weapon for cultural separation and conflicts. In one of its chapters, archaeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal (2023, 136) affirms that “heritage can be actively mobilized to produce hatred”. As the articles in our issue suggest, songs can also be actively mobilized to produce extreme feelings, and the mobilization can be the result of various forces and agents at play. Finally, we would like to draw attention to the ongoing call of the European Association of Social Anthropology titled “Anthropology. Possibilities in a Polarised World”,¹ which also promises

to contribute to the exploration of the potential role of songs as catalysts for conflict and division.

Indeed, when viewed from the perspective of cultural studies, as prevalent in this issue of *ATeM*, polarization appears to be the successful mobilization of affects triggered by a cultural product. A conceptual interpretation is evident in the articles, moving from the identification of ‘polarizing’ musical products (polarizing songs) to an understanding of polarization as a complex, multi-level, and historically situated process that makes use of songs (polarization through songs). This distinction calls to mind the role of the media in generating public antagonisms, but finds a specific application in the field of popular music. In fact, the contributions presented here show that polarization cannot be reduced to a clear-cut dualism between supporters and detractors, or to a political positioning. Rather, it must be viewed as a dynamic process involving multiple actors, including artists, cultural industries, media, institutions, social groups, diaspora communities, and digital audiences.

From the contributions in this issue, at least three recurring forms of polarization can preliminarily be identified: a) polarization related to the cultural product; b) polarization related to the performers or artists; c) polarization related to the audience, music genres, social groups, or cultural belongings.

Some studies that focus on the polarization emerging from a cultural product as such – the song, the album, the video clip – center on its potential to spark debates about modes of interpretation, aspects of morality or political significance, as in the articles by Chiriacò/Fusari, Fouchereaux and Mancosu (but see also the review of Jacopo Tomatis’ volume, *Bella Ciao*). This approach is based on the premise that musical compositions are not regarded as neutral artifacts, but rather as culturally and socially situated ‘texts’ with symbolic potential. The circulation of their lyrics, sound textures, visual imageries, performative and transmedial dimensions takes place in a public space where different audiences, value systems and political sensibilities intersect. Consequently, a single cultural artifact has the potential to act as a catalyst for conflict when it mobilizes contested meanings, challenges established moral boundaries, or evokes memories and imaginaries interpreted by different groups in divergent and often antagonistic ways.

Songs can therefore be interpreted as polarizing in that they condense issues that societies find difficult to deal with in an easily accessible but nevertheless emotionally charged way. These issues include questions of gender and sexual orientation, national identity, class hierarchies, ethnicity, political ideology, and religious norms. It is obvious that such cultural products function simultaneously as places of identification and rejection. In this sense, polarization arises not only from the content of a song or the representations it conveys, but also from the interaction between the song itself and the heterogeneous social worlds that receive, contest, or appropriate it. One of the authors of this issue, Damiano Kerma, sums it up as follows: “[M]usic, as a cultural product, may play a role in framing social grievances.”

Other contributions, like those by Chaudier/Blauwart, Grein, and Homann, concentrate more on the performers and examine the role of artists as catalysts of conflict. Performers and artists thus become the linchpin of political, ethical, sexual, or other forms of iden-

tity-related tensions, as their public statements, ideological affiliations, or alleged violations of moral and cultural norms trigger controversies that go beyond the musical text itself. Performers function as condensed representations of social anxieties and aspirations; their *performance personae* become arenas in which competing values and visions of community are negotiated. This perspective is in line with existing research on the media construction of artistic personas and the politicization of the act of performance, thus emphasizing the fact that artists are relational instances shaped by the interaction between media, audience, and cultural industry (cf. among others Frith 1996, 203 ff. or Auslander 2004). Consequently, they frequently function not only as cultural producers but also as polarizing public actors whose visibility contributes to reinforcing processes of polarization.

A third group of articles by Bussotti/Nhaueleque, Hörner, Kerma, Milia, Nardi and Torres Castillo, shift the focus to the collective dimension and examine music audiences, local or transnational communities, subcultures, and entire music genres (rap, trap, musical, singer-songwriter traditions, and even Angolan *kuduro*). In such cases, polarization manifests itself not only in relation to specific songs or performers, but rather in the way social groups use music to explore the boundaries of cultural belonging. Genres and practices of popular music function as identity markers that promote cohesion within certain communities while simultaneously provoking exclusion, rivalry, or symbolic conflicts with other groups. In this context, polarization is inextricably linked to the dynamics of collective identification and differentiation, which determine how audiences listen to music, engage with it, question it, and reinterpret its meaning over time.

The socio-cultural components of the dynamics of collective identification elude rigid definitions and necessitate a situated and contextualized analysis. Therefore, polarization cannot be considered as an attribute of the song, but must be understood within its temporality, encompassing the re-signification of concepts even decades later. It is also crucial to situate musical conflicts and conflicts fueled by music within a broader context, including such factors as cultural memory, political transformations, coloniality and post-colonial dynamics, public morality, and the influence of digital media. It is paramount to acknowledge the plurality of actors involved, including digital audiences, which have become pivotal in the dissemination of assessments and contentious issues. This underscores the necessity to adopt analytical frameworks capable of encapsulating the dynamic interplay between text, music, performance, historical context, and reception practices.

In any case, the articles in this issue show that polarization manifests itself as a pluralistic and multi-layered process that defies rigid definitions and requires situational and contextual analysis. It goes without saying that the division into the three sections presented above does not suggest any strict distinctions, but is intended to provide a certain orientation, even if there are inevitably thematic and methodological overlaps.

The section on **“Polarization centered on the cultural product”** is opened by **Gianpaolo Chiriaco** and **Valentina Fusari**’s article “Nella trappola di ‘Faccetta nera’: tra polarizzazioni e stratificazioni di significati”. Starting from the thesis that the polarizing reception

of an artifact stems from absolutizing a particular interpretation, the authors point out the different polarizations to which the 1935 song “Faccetta nera” has been subjected: from the second Italo-Ethiopian war (Italians vs. Ethiopians) and the era of the fascist racial laws (‘white’ vs. ‘black’) through the opposition between right-wing songs and political folk music in the 1960s up to the clash between provocation and political correctness in recent decades. Given the symbolic multidimensionality that becomes apparent in this diachronic perspective, Chiriaco and Fusari suggest approaching “Faccetta nera” as a *stumbling song*: Its sound evokes layers of contradictory meanings that listeners should consider as the complex heritage of the song rather than ‘falling’ into any kind of polarized interpretation.

Set against a similar historical backdrop, **Gianmarco Mancosu**’s article “Sounding Memories: Afterlives and Transmedial Reinterpretations of Italian (Post)Colonial Soundscapes” analyses filmic soundscapes that address the Italian (post)colonial heritage. He argues that in post-war productions, colonial nostalgia was often reproduced through musical exoticism, reinforcing stereotypes that look at the African continent as distant, atavist Other. At the same time, Mancosu shows how sonic materials have been reappropriated, generating tension between nostalgic memory and critical reflection. The case of the song “Asmarina” illustrates how a stereotypical song can be transformed into a vehicle of diasporic memory and counter-narrative.

The case of a polarizing song in the context of the contemporary (2012) Canadian media scene is discussed in “‘L’attente’ de Manu Militari: les limites des sentiments collectifs et l’impact d’une polémique canadienne”. **Claire Fouchereaux** draws on the findings of Affect Theory and explains how Militari’s efforts “to grieve for the ungrieved” are misunderstood. On an emotional level, the attempt in “L’attente” and the accompanying clip to grant the Afghan insurgent fighting against Western, Canadian soldiers an affective, more human side is interpreted by the Canadian collective as a violation of taboo.

Selected musical products are also discussed in the section “**Polarization centered on performers**”, but here the interpreters’ *performance personae* play a central role. In “Un scandale peut en cacher un autre: Sardou, ‘Le rire du sergent’ (1971)”, **Stéphane Chaudier** and **Théo Blauwart** examine the phenomenon that some of the songs published in the 1970s by the successful right-wing singer Michel Sardou were considered scandalous at the time of their creation for reasons that are very different from those that would apply today. “Le rire du sergent”, for example, caused public outrage in 1971 because of its mockery of the army; today, however, it is primarily the homophobic codes that Sardou used for his anti-militaristic parody that are striking.

An autoethnographic perspective is at the center of **Mathias Grein**’s article “Till Lindemann in meinem Französischunterricht? Zu Entscheidungen der Lehrperson und Rezeption der Schüler*innen bezüglich ‘Le jardin des larmes’ (Zaz/Lindemann) in der Sekundarstufe I” that provides an analysis of a teaching unit, proposed by one of his students, which is based on the song “Le jardin de larmes” (ZAZ/Lindemann) and its video clip. The article focuses in particular on the discrepancies between the teacher’s expectations and the students’ actual reactions to the video clip, which depicts violence.

Thomas Homann's contribution “‘Ahora no vayan a escandalizarse’: Controversias, polémicas y denuncia social en las canciones del rapero afrocolombiano Junior” looks at selected songs by Afro-Colombian rapper Junior Jein, who was murdered during a strike in 2021. He analyses the provocative potential inherent in Junior Jein's raps, both in terms of content and interpretation, and asks how irony and transgression (e.g. of good taste) are used to criticize the political situation.

Kicking off the third and final section, “**Polarization centered on audiences, musical genres or social groups**”, the research authored by **Luca Bussotti** and **Laura Nhaueleque** in “La musica LGBTQIA+ nell’Africa lusofona. I casi di Angola e Capo Verde” digs into the role of music in polarizations that focus on LGBTQIA+ rights. Through a comparative examination of the popular music scenes of two Portuguese-speaking African countries, Angola and Cape Verde, supplemented by interviews with activists, they show that commercial success, like the one enjoyed by Angolan transgender artist Titica, does not mitigate social conflicts but instead fuels them, expanding opportunities for polarization.

A specific case of cultural appropriation is the focus of **Claudia Torres-Castillo's** article “Chanter l'inconfort: mélodies de discorde dans *Emilia Pérez*, la comédie musicale qui agite le Mexique”. By examining the reception of this French-Spanish film about Mexico that chooses the genre of the musical for staging such critical issues as drug trafficking, corruption, and violence, she highlights the polarization between international success and national rejection in Mexico itself and reflects on the ethical boundaries of intercultural representation through Camila D. Aurora's satirical response *Johanne Sacreblu*.

A rather different form of appropriation is at the center of **Damiano Kerma's** work. In “Reclaiming the Fight. Framing and Resignification of Radical Struggles in Italian White Power Music”, he discusses how musical bands that express far-right ideologies re-appropriate songs from specific musical genres to frame the political and experiential boundaries of the social group that they support and help to enlarge. While re-structuring the struggle against globalization and capitalism within the context of a populist rhetoric and a new use of fascist symbols, they play a music that is polarizing as it helps to re-configure traditional leftist themes into a different territory.

Musical expressions can also generate separation in smaller communities. It is the case of the contribution authored by **Andrea Milia**, “*Gangsta e b-boy nella ‘Sarda Side’*. Diatribe e reinterpretazioni nella scena hip-hop sulcitana tra gli anni Novanta e i primi Duemila”, who delves into the birth and development of rap and hip hop in the south-western part of Sardinia (Sulcis-Iglesiente). As he demonstrates, the separation between b-boys and gangsta rappers recalls the East Coast/West Coast diatribe that was animating the American rap scene in the 1990s. By aligning with one or the other stream, each group in the context of the insular province was building up its own sonic expressions and cultural references that stood in contrast to those of the rival group.

While focusing on the 75th Edition of the Festival di Sanremo, **Carlo Nardi** shows in “Fra devianza e autenticità: autotune e stampa italiana durante il Festival di Sanremo” how even the discussion around a technological element such as Auto-Tune can spark a wide po-

larization. Obviously, the technology is only a device that nevertheless creates a divide along the line of authenticity and inappropriate behaviours (both on stage and elsewhere) that musicians (ab)using Auto-Tune apparently encourage. Such conflict, once analyzed from an intersectional perspective, reveals additional divides along the line of class and ethnicity in Italian media discourse.

Finally, an innovative methodological approach is introduced in “‘Vous les hommes êtes tous les mêmes!’ Une nouvelle méthode pour analyser des stratégies de polarisation dans la réception d’un clip vidéo”. **Fernand Hörner** presents an analysis method developed by him and his research group as part of a project, which can be used to evaluate comments by users on social media quantitatively and qualitatively. The method is applied to the last 10,000 of a total of 70,000 user comments on a polarizing YouTube clip by Stromae, “Tous les mêmes”, whose controversial statements are grouped and interpreted using deductively and inductively determined categories (language, interaction, interpretation, identification, and so on).

In conclusion, popular music in Romance languages is a privileged terrain for observing how cultural meanings are constructed, contested, and transformed over time. Tensions, conflicts and contested interpretations are part of both its history and its contemporary uses. This issue offers therefore an important contribution to comprehend this fundamental aspect of songs and their potential within a variety of contexts.

A quick look at the two regular sections of this annual issue: The review section of this issue provides insight into five recent publications in the field of Romance popular music research, published between 2023 and 2024, and in the “Forum”, **Andreas Bonnermeier** presents an obituary for the chanson singer Nicole Croisille, who passed away in June 2025.

Last but not least, we would like to draw your attention to the next issue of *ATeM* (11,1), which will focus on “**Intersections of Opera and Popular Music within Romance Languages**”. In addition to Gianpaolo Chiriaco, who will be enriching the editorial team with his musicological expertise on a permanent basis, we are also pleased to welcome opera specialist Serena Guarracino as guest editor of *ATeM* 11,1.

Our thanks go to the guest editor of this issue, Valentina Fusari, as well as to all those who contributed to it as authors and reviewers.

We wish all our readers an inspiring read!

The editors

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Endnotes

- 1 Cf. <https://easaonline.org/easa-conference/easa2026/easa2026-theme/> (access 20.12.2025).

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