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Melodrama After the Tears

New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood

Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann (eds.)

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Cover illustration: Man Ray, "The Tears" (c. 1930) © Man Ray Trust / 2015, ProLitteris, Zurich

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek, Amsterdam
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 673 6
e-ISBN 978 90 4852 357 3
DOI 10.5117/9789089646736
NUR 670

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Acknowledgements

As part of the project entitled "Aesthetics of Irritation" (2010-2012), funding for this volume was generously provided by the "Kulturen, Institutionen, Märkte" (KIM) research cluster at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St.Gallen, Switzerland. Many of the contributions to the volume were first presented in November 2011 at the conference "After the Tears: Victimhood and Subjectivity in the Melodramatic Mode," also hosted by KIM and the University of St.Gallen, with the support of the Haniel Foundation Duisburg.



The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to the people who contributed to the project in various ways and helped to make this book possible.

Thank you to Elisabeth Anker, Timon Beyes, Lisa Cartwright, Chicago University Press, Heinz Drügh, Ulrike Hanstein, Christoph Henning, Vincent Kaufmann, Ulrike Landfester, Tom Mitchell, Fatima Naqvi, Daria Olgiati-Pezzoli, Alan Robinson, Sophie Rudolph, Marion Schmaus, Annette Schüren, Ulrich Schmid, Franz Schultheis, Jörg Schweinitz, Marq Smith, Julia Straub and Margrit Tröhler.

We would also like to thank the US Embassy in Berne, Peter Müller of the PHSG, Klaus-Detlef Müller and the "Melodrama" workshop at his Oberseminar at the University of Tübingen, our students from the MA courses "New Cinema Auteurism: A Survey of Contemporary Film Directors" and "Economies of Feeling: Melodrama as Film Genre and Global Social Narrative," the HSG Film Club and our bands "The Contextual Studies" and "From the Balcony."

Special thanks go to Rupert Antes and the Haniel Foundation Duisburg, Maximilian Schellman, Felix Seyfarth and Verena Witzig from our Contextual Studies team and Jeroen Sondervan and his colleagues at Amsterdam University Press. Special thanks also go to Sabrina Helmer and Roy Sellars, whose aid and dedication during the editing of the volume have been exceptional.

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We wish to express our deep gratitude to Thomas Elsaesser, to whom we are indebted for his path-breaking research in melodrama and film studies, for inviting us to publish in the AUP series *Film Culture in Transition*, for a glass of wine in Strasbourg one late November night in 2009, and for having been there to say it all: *tout dire or not tout dire – that is the question!*

Just as melodrama seeks to express the unspeakable, words cannot express our gratitude to our families.

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Introduction

Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann

> The first form of rulers in the world were the "tyrants," the last will be the "martyrs." Between a tyrant and a martyr there is of course an enormous difference, although they both have one thing in common: the power to compel. The tyrant, himself ambitious to dominate, compels people through his power; the martyr, himself unconditionally obedient to God, compels others through his suffering.
> – Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals*[1]

> Who will write the history of tears?
> – Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*[2]

On Victimhood

Inspiration for this volume is rooted in curiosity about the melodramatic forms that seem increasingly to characterize aspects of both the private and the public spheres in occidental and Western-oriented societies. Melodrama, it is said, has expanded beyond the borders of genre and fiction to become a pervasive cultural mode, with distinct signifying practices and interpretive codes for meaning-making that assist in determining parameters for identification throughout a variety of discourses and mediated spaces, be it the public spectacle of personal suffering, the emotive coding of consumer practices, or the sentimentalization of national politics. If melodrama is so culturally pervasive and emotionally persuasive, then what is its political potential, both within and beyond symbolic fictions, and what might its limitations be?

This initial inquiry necessarily led to a reconsideration of the present state of theory in melodrama studies. Since the publication of seminal texts by Thomas Elsaesser and Peter Brooks in the early 1970s, there has been general consensus among scholars that melodrama is an inherently modern dramatic form. Its ability to address and articulate experiences of modernity in a manner accessible to the masses in various national contexts, at different times, has contributed to its widespread prominence. As a mode of representation and sense-making (that is, as an aesthetic form), its historical durability and transportable social resonance can be attributed

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largely to its adaptability. However, while assessing melodrama's current status as a cultural mode in particular, it quickly became clear that the position of the victim is functioning more than ever as a paradigmatic figure for identification in myriad debates on the social practices of legitimation. Thus, while Brooks and Elsaesser have provided a kind of ground zero for understanding melodrama as a cultural mode, the claim that melodrama concentrates "on the point of view of the victim" has also only gained currency within a larger, extra-cinematic framework.[3]

The cultural history of victimhood's capacity to induce sympathy and motivate identification can hardly be overestimated. Where primitive forms of victimhood are linked to sacrifice and the supplication of deities, the contemporary culture of victimhood has developed on the one hand in struggles against hegemonic power structures, and on the other as a form of social legitimation alongside the advent of the modern subject. From the rise of the confessional-style talk show (Eva Illouz) to Glenn Beck and the Tea Party's conservative "cult of victimhood" (Thomas Frank), the spectrum of cultural artifacts evincing suffering and victimhood as powerful ontological categories in Western societies continues to expand. Their capacity as a mode of legitimation, though, has been a source of much debate. The overarching trajectory of contributions to this volume reflect upon the demands and deficiencies of a "victim society" (Baudrillard's *société victimale*) and the "cultural rhetoric of victimhood" (Fatima Naqvi), against the backdrop of the melodramatic mode qua modern social paradigm.

This volume represents both a condensation and an expansion of melodrama studies. It condenses elements of theory on melodrama by bringing into focus what it recognizes as the locus for subjective identification within melodramatic narratives: the suffering victim. Taking as its point of departure Thomas Elsaesser's claim that "[o]ne of the characteristic features of melodramas is that they concentrate on the point of view of the victim,"[4] this volume provides an expansion by going beyond the methodology of examining primarily fictive works, whether from the stage, the screen or the written word, for their explicit or latent commentary on and connection to the historical contexts within which they are produced. Though many of the contributions also address melodramatic works of fiction in relation to historical contexts, most of them apply theory from melodrama studies and the analysis of victimhood directly to historical events, social conditions and non-fictive cultural artifacts. Thus the expansion is not one beyond genre, a move that has been important in melodrama studies, but an expansion completely beyond generic and fictive forms, to contribute to a socio-cultural theory of melodrama.

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Mediating the Spectacle of Suffering

How are the narrative of victimhood and the spectacle of suffering mediated? Melodrama has proven to be a highly protean form; particularly, as John Mercer and Martin Shingler have illustrated, in the history of cinema genres.[5] Despite melodrama's capacities to transcend genre, medium and fiction itself, and to span a vast range of social contexts and time periods, there has been increasing consensus over the past forty years on a variety of definitional criteria regarding viewer identification, the dualistic scheme of good and evil and the loss of innocence, as well as the legitimation of retributive action to restore virtue and honor. In "Melodrama Revised," Linda Williams centralizes the relationship between pathos and action as a structural element of drama that arranges a network of other narrative features.[6] Williams's criteria foreground an agonistic narrative logic of cause and effect. A descriptive set of criteria explaining *how* things happen is represented in the third and fourth features (see endnote 6), though secondarily, as a means of mediating melodrama's narrative agonistic Manichaean chrono-logic. Concomitantly, there has also been a great deal of consensus about the aesthetic dimensions of melodrama, where hyperbolic visual and aural elements are central means of communication or, as Elsaesser put it in his seminal essay from 1972 that in many regards already said it all (*tout dire!*), "punctuation." In "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," Elsaesser described melodrama as a "system of punctuation, giving expressive color and chromatic contrast to the story-line, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue. The advantage of this approach is that it formulates the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation."[7] In a way, Elsaesser's notion of punctuation *does* what we seek to *undo* here for the sake of categorical distinctions: namely, he fuses narrative content and aesthetic style in the marriage of function and theme. The aesthetic means of melodrama – the orchestration of music, sound, color, space, dynamic movement and so on – have a functional *and* thematic use, both evocatively marking emotional intensities in the manner of a musical crescendo (functional, or "of structural significance"), and formulating specific moods as content (thematic, or "belonging to the expressive content").[8]

Taking into consideration the various articulations of melodrama's distinctive features as noted in the works of Elsaesser, Brooks, Gledhill, Williams, Kappelhoff and others, we believe it to be useful to classify the attributes and functions of melodrama with three categorical (mutually dependent) distinctions, according to the means by which they are carried

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and the effect they seek to elicit. For this, we propose a distinction between aesthetic, thematic, and temporal vectors (from Latin *vector*, "carrier").[9]

The vector of aesthetics elaborated in Elsaesser's notion of punctuation and *melos* has a history in melodrama extending back to Rousseau's use of the term to describe his *scène lyrique*, *Pygmalion* (written in 1762, first performed in 1770), as a drama with musical accompaniment. Though *melos* has remained central to the aesthetic dimensions of melodrama, nowadays it would be far-fetched to claim categorically that a drama with *melos* is a melodrama. Elisabeth Anker has provided a concise definition of the role of aesthetics in melodrama: "the use of images, sound, gestures, and nonverbal communication to illuminate moral legibility as well as to encourage empathy for the victim and anger toward the villain."[10] As Elsaesser's notion of punctuation in melodrama already makes clear, the separation of aesthetic means (of telling), thematic content and chronology is highly artificial. Nevertheless, such artifice of distinction can help to clarify how melodramatic narratives cohere and function. Conflating Elsaesser's theory of aesthetic punctuation and Williams's narrative logic of melodramatic agonism, Anker has nicely centralized the imbrication of (aesthetic) means and (thematic) message. Music, color, image and gesture are not secondary to thematic content; they are constitutive of thematic content. Allowing for emotional investment, aesthetic punctuation intensifies empathy and anger, providing a conduit for the viewer to identify with the suffering victim.

The thematic vector carries the narrative attributes that help to structure logic in and conceptually to populate a story-world. These include a Manichaean conflict of good and evil, loss of or threat to innocence, and often elements of fate and chance. The triad of villains, victims and heroes is indispensible to melodrama. Following Brooks, many argue that the rhetoric of melodrama speaks an "emphatic articulation of simple truths and relationships"[11] through its particular constellation of characters that are, as Williams suggests, invested with *primary* psychic roles.[12] Within the victim-villain-hero constellation, the victim and the hero might at times be conflated in one character, and the villain might be embodied in something more abstract than an individual character, such as a social institution or set of conditions. The plot is typically structured around an *agon* of loss. The loss may be some combination of the latent, potential, inevitable or already realized. Inter-diegetic tensions that affectively and emotionally engage the viewer are orchestrated through an interplay between initial loss/threat and subsequent action to retrieve or compensate for loss, which is usually accompanied by the further threat of loss. If characters remain flat

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due to their primary psychic roles or Manichaean coding, it is to eliminate moral ambiguity and thus to heighten the potential for a sense of injustice, desire for retributive action and, subsequently, viewer identification with the victim's "odyssey of suffering."[13] As Williams put it regarding moral legibility versus character complexity, "if emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions, the operative mode is melodrama."[14] The intensity of identification, and particularly of the emotional and affective sensations generated, is regulated through indexes of punctuation that function as aesthetic markers, but that also regulate pacing along a temporal axis.

The aesthetic and temporal vectors are woven together with the thematic vector, as dramatic revelation is not only dependent on a set of story elements linked to character, for example, or to events that exist hypothetically beyond temporality and aesthetic articulation, but are made functional and intensified through temporal mechanisms. Dramatic revelation, the return to the space of innocence (or the failure thereof), the dialectic of pathos and action (Williams's "too late" and "in the nick of time"), and the "breathtaking peripety"[15] that characterize melodrama become functional along a temporal axis, as does the so-called *work* of melodrama – that is, modes of identification via moral and ethical affirmation, or affective engulfment and cathartic relief.

The formula has been that the more breathtaking the peripety, the more acute the (affective) shock of emotional investment in and identification with the role of the victim. Likewise, the *agon* of good and evil in melodrama is initiated through the victim's displacement from virtue to disgrace, compromising the space of (often familial) innocence and engendering a hope of reconstituting and returning to that space – a tension that drives the action forward along a chronological axis. Recognition of the victim's virtue and the wrongs against her or him set into motion the relay of pathos and action, where felt truths require retributive action. These four characteristics – revelation, return, dialectic and peripety – constitute what might be called a core of temporality in melodrama, providing an operative force to the emotional identification with the victim.

To begin with, we hope that the preceding distinction between three vectors helps – not in spite of, but due to the artifice of separation – to reveal the imbrication of melodrama's aesthetic, thematic and temporal dimensions in one another. However, it should also lend a more material, affective dimension to the centrality of victimhood; foregrounding an aesthetics of

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moral legibility, facilitating the identification of and with the victim and increasing emotional investment and moral conviction.

A History of Tears: From National Politics to Political Fictions and Back Again

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes asks: "Who will write the history of tears? In which societies, in which periods, have we wept? Since when is it that men (and not women) no longer cry? Why was 'sensibility,' at a certain moment, transformed into 'sentimentality'?"[16] Anticipating Barthes's query by a matter of months, Brooks proposed that a gestural, hyperbolic, affective style in nineteenth-century popular dramatic theater and the novel marked the rise of melodrama, displaced tragedy, and initiated a turn toward a new social ontology in the aftermath of the French Revolution.[17] In his prescient response to Barthes's query, Brooks defines the historical and cultural shift from a logic of tragedy to a logic of melodrama as follows, whereby melodrama illustrates

> the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society. Melodrama does not simply represent a "fall" from tragedy, but a response to the loss of tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life is of immediate, daily, political concern.[18]

By insisting that melodrama does not simply represent a *fall*, Brooks on the one hand points to a metaphorical loss of innocence in which previous authorities and ways of being (that is, ontologies) are displaced (including Christianity's own fall from grace, and the impossibility of tragedy in a world without determinism), and on the other hand wants to underline that melodrama is not a lesser version of drama than tragedy. In its historic specificity, melodrama arrives as a social imaginary to take on the Herculean task of propping up moral and ethical truth-claims in a post-sacred universe and in democratic societies. Brooks argues that the aesthetic excess and meaning specific to melodrama resulted from the

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loss of the "transcendental signified" (Derrida) and was necessary in the attempt to make occulted moral knowledge evident where words, as well as earlier articulations of social codes, had failed. That is to say, melodrama legitimated and normatized bourgeois morality and sentiment as a reactive condition of modernity.

Along with Brooks, Christine Gledhill enumerates other sociological causes to explain the rise of melodrama around 1800.[19] Focusing on continental theater and the genesis of mass culture, she explains melodramatic aesthetics – particularly regarding spectacle, excessive dramaturgy and narrative simplicity – as a result of the emergence of new audiences. Industrialization and the movement of peasants to urban areas produced a bourgeois, petit bourgeois and proletarian audience that longed to be entertained.[20] The socio-economic dimensions of this new audience naturally had an impact on content and form. On the one hand, popular tastes had to be satisfied, which resulted in quick and catchy plots that might be articulated through a predominantly gestural style, a style that was also a result of the legal prohibition of dialogue on the public stage in accord with laws privileging state theaters. On the other hand, the social tensions of everyday life popularized stories that presented characters in their daily economic and political fragility.[21]

Hermann Kappelhoff's habilitation thesis *Matrix of Feelings* (*Matrix der Gefühle*) presents an in-depth study of aesthetics in the development of bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) melodrama, bridging eighteenth-century theater and twentieth-century film. This is coupled with the thesis that in both, the viewer is addressed as an emotional subject through her or his capacity to feel. With Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, a staged sentimental discourse is established through a centralization of emotion and affect, the result being the birth of the "bourgeois inner world" (*bürgerlicher Innenraum*):

> Melodramatic representation is aimed directly at the viewer's enjoyment, through which the artwork becomes functional: the desire of the artist and the artwork arrives as and is dissolved in the desire of the viewer. Through the audience's contemplation, through reception, aesthetic perception becomes an artistic practice. The viewer brings the artwork to realization by investing his or her own inner space – of feelings – into the artifact. The subject of the sentimental artwork is the dumbstruck, weeping audience.[22]

These social, psychological and aesthetic explanations for the rise of melodrama as an essential feature of modernity can be understood as pointing

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toward the necessity of *making something visible*: namely, novel problems of social injustice and bourgeois morality. As it continues to do even now, melodrama provided indicators for moral clarity and social justice through a Manichaean victim-villain schema, in which all action could be reduced to a function of delineating good and evil and making these positions fully evident. The ontology of such a world was neither a spiritual-epistemological nor cognitive-epistemological one, but one of affectively charged emotional and moral truths. In this regard, Brooks draws on Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, stating that the moral sphere of modernity was sentimentalized along with its democratization.[23]

A so-called "emotional turn" can be traced back to the paradigm shift in Western culture around 1750, where feelings were no longer perceived as a danger to reason, as in ancient and medieval thinking, but as an essential and cultivatable part of being human. The invention of "moral sense" by Francis Hutcheson and of "moral sentiments" by Adam Smith formed the starting point for an incredible amount of discourse production on the topic of human emotions,[24] in which, according to social theorists such as Eva Illouz and Martha Nussbaum, contemporary societies are still fully entrenched.[25] In relation to the history of ideas and the evolution of democratic forms of social organization in the West, the advent of the melodramatic imagination is coterminous with the advent of the post-monarchic secular nation-state. Barthes's history of tears, and the transformation from sensibility to sentimentality, is a history of melodrama.

Refiguring Melodramatic Victimhood: Cinema, Modernity, Nation

In an effort to map recent developments in the genealogy of victimhood, melodrama studies have produced some of the most insightful theories on narrative and aesthetic constellations of affect and suffering in fictional and non-fictional social contexts. From a political perspective, Brooks's cue for understanding melodrama as a cultural mode has been most importantly manifest at the intersection between media and gender studies. The publication *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (1987) was a crucial step in entrenching the study of cinematic melodrama as a genre of political fiction in the humanities. Like Brooks ten years earlier, volume editor Christine Gledhill recognized the potential for the collective attributes of melodrama to proliferate beyond the site of fictional artifacts, constituting "a pervasive mode across popular culture," where melodrama

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"refers not only to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world."[26] Along with many of the contributors to the volume, she acutely perceived Hollywood melodrama's relevance for gender politics: with a burgeoning third-wave feminism at the time of publication, and with contributions from an extraordinary collection of authoritative voices on women's studies and feminism in the humanities (including Mary Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Annette Kuhn, Tania Modleski, Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams), the volume's focus on the role of women in film melodrama went straight to the controversial heart of the matter, so to speak.

Indeed, we might even draw a parallel between theories of melodrama and the debates surrounding porn that were so decisive for the tectonic shifts that would redefine feminist alliances at that historical moment. Some of the same questions about ideological content and the capacity for reflecting and reflexively supporting certain kinds of subjectivity were posed in critical perspectives on both porn and melodrama: is it a degenerate fictional genre that relegates women and female sexuality to a subordinate position, perpetuating a diminished sense of agency and access to power *vis-à-vis* masculine desire and patriarchal forms of authority? Or does this genre offer modes of representation that make accessible "feminine pleasures"[27] and sexual empowerment, as well as potential for modes of resistance through embedded social critique?[28] Melodrama's "radical potential," as Gledhill termed it, was theorized in Laura Mulvey's "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," and is a line of thought further developed in this volume by Elisabeth Anker, with her application of Brechtian (via Sirk) strategies of critical distancing as a political tactic.

Looking back, nearly thirty years after the publication of *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, a lot has happened to melodrama – both to scholarly study of the genre and its proliferation as a cultural mode. It continues to be the predominant mode of cinematic storytelling, though the medium and habits of viewing are changing significantly (a condition that Williams addresses in this volume). Melodrama continues to provide a narrative and socio-psychological model for understanding how societal tensions assume particular expressive patterns, trans-medially and internationally. The application of theory on melodrama to describe a wide range of social phenomena also persists in constructive fashion. In our view, though, some aspects remain that have yet to be sufficiently addressed. First, melodrama tends to interiorize and personalize, which can compromise melodrama's political potential. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou also note this tendency in an earlier publication (1996): melodrama introduces "a sentimental turn that mutes political and economic conflicts."[29] Moreover,

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melodrama is said to overly simplify matters by reducing them to binary antagonism, where the overt moral legibility of a single party allows it to win out against its morally dubious opposition, thereby reducing a potentially complex socio-ideological antagonism to a clear ethical choice; reconciling the irreconcilable, as Williams put it. Taken with the previous two points, melodrama's equation of victimhood with virtuousness is deeply ambivalent.

The problem, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests in his contribution below, is the facile legitimation of righteousness through the victim position. Contemporary formations of melodrama often effectively eliminate the test of virtue that is essential to classic melodrama, creating a direct circuit between victimhood and virtuousness. It is one thing to talk about shifts within a cinematic genre, of course, and another to consider these formations in the realm of the non-fictional, socio-cultural-political sphere, where the same phenomenon can be observed. Agustín Zarzosa (2013) has suggested that there are three significant points of "overflow" that contribute to melodrama's shift from a generic form to a cultural mode: melodrama incorporates other genres, moves across media distinctions, and flows over "from fiction to the social realm."[30] For Zarzosa, melodrama becomes a trans-medial modality that "redistributes the visibility of suffering in the social sphere" in a causal relationship to moral ideals.[31] Within this context, is it not problematic when tests of virtue or moral integrity disappear from legitimation in political discourse as a potential result of habitually perceiving the victim as virtuous? What role, for example, might this legitimatory construct play in political claims to rights or in the legitimation of military action?[32]

A political reassessment of melodrama's "resentimentality," as Jörg Metelmann calls it in his habilitation thesis, must be concerned with the role and function of the victim.[33] Metelmann highlights the cultural logic of melodrama and emphasizes its importance for understanding modern struggles for recognition; he interprets this logic as the manifestation of a general failure to reconcile the notion of a liberal-universalist subject with the particular individual in concrete social situations, a failure that is articulated in the spectacle of the victims' emotions. The neologism "resentimentality" combines Nietzsche's "resentment" with "sentimentality" as a modus operandi, and thus condenses the origin of melodrama in the eighteenth century, its heyday in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its dissemination in late modernity into an integrative analytical concept. Going beyond Peter Brooks, Linda Williams and most recently Elisabeth Anker, Metelmann points not only to the Nietzschean "imaginary

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revenge" operating in melodrama, but also to the mode's inherent contempt for the "slave Romanticism" of its own symbolic form by which privileged (white, bourgeois) subjects can enjoy their well-being while watching the poor crawling towards justice. Melodrama is thus dangerous, and should be taken seriously (as Williams had always claimed), because it harms the idealized image of the good democratic-liberal citizens that we allegedly are – but that we fail to be, once positioned in the struggle for recognition.

Affirming the impact of melodramatic victimhood on identity politics, Thomas Elsaesser has claimed that the role of the victim becomes a desirable position of universal acceptance and recognition in contemporary societies.[34] One might recall Eva Illouz's work on the commodification of emotion. She has proposed a "therapeutic style" of self-narration in the public arena characterized by many of the same elements that define melodrama. Public enactment of the spectacle of victimhood in an effort to reductively polarize the social sphere and gain recognition through moral legibility can be found in the mass-media personality Glenn Beck and his nationally broadcast campaign to "restore honor" to America. Like Illouz's therapeutic style, Beck's dramatic performances and his "strategy of tears" (see Loren in this volume) find direct correlations in the melodramatic characteristics of hyperbolic aesthetics, virtuous victimhood, moral legibility, a lost space of originary innocence, and a contingent formation of pathos and action. With the vanishing possibility of bipartisan politics in America and the increasing divide between party lines and ideologies, melodramatic discursive styles are likely to continue to gain prominence within the social sphere and political arena. In a post-utopian world void of legitimate heroic action, convincing emancipatory narratives (see Ulrich Schmid in this volume), and positively constructive modes of encountering and living with otherness, victimhood has become one of the most viable claims to a moral-social subject position (see Elsaesser in this volume). In an age when popular media are a stage for the public display of personal suffering and political battles are framed in the Manichaean rhetoric of evil and innocence, and when suffering sells, victimhood, according to Elsaesser, becomes a place-holder marking a lack in the political.

The contributions to this volume explore possibilities for politicizing the melodramatic victim from a range of disciplinary and national perspectives. Jacques Rancière has significantly influenced notions of the political with or through aesthetics, arguing that the maintenance of social antagonism is indispensible for a political notion of the subject: "That [*sic*] is proper to politics is the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contrarieties" (thesis two of his "Ten Theses on the Political").[35] If a state

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of political exchange is to be maintained, there can be no resolution of tensions through the oversimplification of antithetical subject positions; rather, sustained fields of irreducible antagonism and differentiation are needed. Rancière's definition of the political and Elsaesser's claim that the role of the victim is based in a reductive binary model of identification that marks a lack in the political complement one another, insofar as melodramatic victimhood voids the legitimacy of any but its own position. Thus, maintaining the political might in part require resistance to the temptation of Manichaean melodramatic polarities. But perhaps it might also be achieved through finer shading in the rhetoric of melodramatic victimhood.

Scrutinizing the reflexive legitimation of victimhood as constitutive of virtuousness, we hope, will aid us in thinking through the future potential for political impact in melodrama and melodrama studies. This volume is divided into three sections, each providing revisions of melodramatic victimhood as it is situated medially, culturally and historically. In the first group of essays, entitled "Cultures of Suffering and Cinematic Identities," the authors foreground a cinematic approach in order to reflect upon constellations of melodrama's typical binary scheme, taking novel perspectives on mediated notions of good and bad through the victim/villain dichotomy. Their revisions include vacating the victim position (Elsaesser), challenging principles of temporality and aesthetic dimension in narrative construction (Williams), and corrective reassessments of the ways in which race (Decker), retributive violence (Kappelhoff), and gender (Hanstein) have been represented in and out of Hollywood.

The second section, "Modernity and the Melodramatic Self," specifies the logic by which the spectacle of victimhood and suffering becomes essential to modern thought and experience. The contributions explore the relation between the modern advent of a suffering subject and contemporary practices of performing the spectacle of victimhood. The section "Collective Traumas and National Melodramas" emphasizes melodrama's impact on modes of articulation and identity-building in the arena of Realpolitik and national identity. The contributions on the legacy of the Holocaust (Goldberg and Schmid) and on the after-effects of 9/11 (Anker, Loren and Mitchell) show how melodrama studies can facilitate conceptual mappings of an era marked at one end by the ravages of National Socialism, which centrifugally drew the world's nations into modern industrial-scale warfare, and marked at the other end by the ideologically entrenched conflict of East/West, with its erratic, decentralized, guerrilla-style terror increasingly present in many of the world's nations.

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I. Cultures of Suffering and Cinematic Identities

Thomas Elsaesser's "Victimhood and Melodrama: Modern, Political and Militant" sketches a panorama of the central problems of melodrama studies in order to articulate a novel perspective on the victim: a victim who does not consider him- or herself a victim. With the "abject subject," he describes a pole of resistance against the predominant Western welfare-state rhetorics of victimhood. In the public media-sphere, a pattern has developed in which the victim, by the very fact of being a victim, is also righteous; thereby eliminating any test of virtue, so essential to classical melodrama. Today, we also assume that righteousness is not an end in itself, but the means to an end, the end being the claim to rights. It is the combination of victimhood and entitlement that makes melodrama both topical and modern, but also morally volatile and politically precarious. Returning to his hypothesis of melodrama as a placeholder, Elsaesser addresses this political precariousness in three distinct victim discourses that have become significant in cultural debates and social theory over the past decades, all of which have been explored in recent film melodrama: first, victim discourses of racial, ethnic, political or sexual discrimination; second, discourses of the "abject subjects" whom society might view as victims, but who do not perceive themselves as victims; and third, through the "guilt management" in victim discourses derived from the Holocaust.

If melodramatic conventions such as Manichaeism, aesthetic hyperbole, moral legibility, the victim's spectacle of righteousness, and the imperative for retributive action have successfully transgressed the borders of genre and fiction and entered the realm of cultural myth and political discourse, a concomitant development can be found in which fictional melodrama becomes more mutable, for example in its depictions of characters experiencing internal conflict, evincing finer shades of difference and less Manichaeism, through mobilization of non-conventional time structures, or through reduced aesthetic hyperbolism. To put it another way, as social life appears increasingly to appropriate aesthetic strategies from the (melo-)dramatic arts in an effort to simplify complexities of ideological orientation, melodrama in the dramatic arts can be said to incorporate a less Manichaean and aesthetically hyperbolic style in an effort to lend an increased texture of authenticity to its depictions of social antagonism.

We find support for such claims in Linda Williams's "When is Melodrama 'Good'? Mega-Melodrama and Victimhood."[36] Williams argues that, among its many manifestations and capacities, melodrama has become more differentiated in its representation of social life and more expansive in

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its narrative chrono-logic. Constitutive of what Williams terms "mega-melodrama," the HBO serial *The Wire* achieves melodramatic moral legibility despite increased realism in its depiction of moral and emotional complexities, throughout a rich variety of social institutions and settings. In the critically and popularly acclaimed series, moral legibility is achieved even where peripatetic climactic structures, overwhelming aesthetics of astonishment and Manichaean oppositions of heroes versus victims are missing. These generic mutations, it logically follows, accompany developments in technology and media practices. Since the late eighties, Americans have been witnessing a literal expansion in the dimensions of movie and television melodrama. The blockbuster of the movie screen has grown both wider and deeper in competition with television. In contrast, the television serial melodrama has expanded horizontally and temporally, as stories go on and on. It is in the sheer extension afforded by the unprecedented length of viewing time – not the highs and lows and depths of the big screen – that we must measure the growth of melodrama in contemporary entertainment. Television may not "grab" our attention, but it can hold it for an extraordinary long time. What does this extended time bring with it? At its best, the new horizontality of serial television has enabled something more than a return to the suspense-laden serials of nineteenth-century fictions. It has enabled a new kind of melodrama whose quest for "the good" through victimization takes on a new and important political dimension.

With "Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema," Hermann Kappelhoff adapts his theories on the history of melodrama, applying them to the genre of Hollywood war movies. The genre's emphasis on the personalized victim makes it "intrinsically marked by the melodramatic mode." Beginning with a genealogical perspective on melodrama's ability to co-constitute a political community, he develops his argument with reference to Hannah Arendt's reading of Immanuel Kant's *sensus communis*. For Kappelhoff, Arendt shows the way to understanding purely personal aesthetic judgment as the source of emotional community-building when she claims that groups have to start on their own, with nothing but their emotions – a point reinforced in Richard Rorty's writings on the sense of communality. In Kappelhoff's reading, Hollywood war movies pursue this work of emotional community-building when they develop "their world from the subjective perspective of the simple soldier, of the average individual [...] and unfold the victim's suffering from this perspective in the mode of sentimental melodrama." In contrast to works of art such as Rabih Mroué's dOCUMENTA installation of war clips found on the Internet, where the spectator is confronted not with a victim but rather a kind of "feeling-less

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shock," a Hollywood war movie such as De Palma's REDACTED appeals to a "concrete political-cultural community." For Kappelhoff, it is this shared feeling that binds emotions to bodies and thus creates political communities through culturally learned ways of seeing. Melodrama thus transcends the boundaries of a concrete group when it appeals to sympathy in the name of general human values. The reverse side of this ethico-emotional generalization through melodrama is, as Kappelhoff concludes, that the other culture "can always only appear as a foreign, enemy and threatening outside."

In "Race Interactions: Melodrama and the Ambiguities of Colorism," Christof Decker addresses representation of race in American cinema. Decker sees a shift from an antagonistic scheme of "black" and "white" to a relational conceptualization of "colorism" that differentiates itself from Manichaean categorization. He claims that, while race has been a crucial category for stories of victimization and affect, in the history of the cinema spaces of interaction have developed from segregated and racist hierarchies to more open and democratic forms of interaction, culminating in what has most recently come to be called "network narratives."[37] However, if this historical trajectory implies a story of gradual progress, it is actually marked by contradictions and anxieties that are seemingly unique to American culture and that have surfaced in recent debates over a post-racial society. Drawing on work by Richard Dyer, Shawn Michelle Smith, Werner Sollors and Linda Williams, Decker addresses three issues: novel forms of interaction in increasingly desegregated spaces of performance; a renewed sense of anxiety over the rules and patterns of race interactions; and the shift from the meaning of race to the meaning of color as a cause for differential treatment and as a new paradigm for melodramatic forms of victimization.

Ulrike Hanstein's "The Purloined Letter: Ophuls after Cavell" revives a different strand of American melodrama on screen and in theory in her Cavellian reading of melodrama as a school of passiveness. Max Ophuls's LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN (1948) portrays a couple's failure to achieve the desired state of mutual recognition and acknowledgment. With regard to Stanley Cavell's genre of the "Melodrama of the Unknown Woman" and the notion of active and passive positions, Ophuls's film would appear to be a disputable case: given the afterwards-ness (*Nachträglichkeit*) of the woman's written account of her life, LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN in fact displays a melodramatic fantasy of inexpressiveness. For Cavell, thinking about Hollywood melodrama's commitment to human expressions and demands cannot avoid considering the films' moral dimensions. Cavell understands melodrama's pattern of desire and disappointment as

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interrogating the relationship between an individual self and the (social, political) world shared with others. Confirming the notion of melodrama as a post-sacred, imaginative cultural mode, Cavell nevertheless rethinks the relationship between articulations of the moral life and melodrama's aesthetic presentation of the ordinary. On the one hand, he reflects on individualistic judgments on the world within the framework of perfectionist moral thinking; on the other, he reassesses melodrama's polarizations by focusing on the antagonism between the sexes. For Cavell, this crucial asymmetry is grounded in the sexes' different forms of knowledge and the willingness (or lack thereof) to respond to others' independent existence. Providing resonances with Elisabeth Anker, and opening new grounds for a gender perspective on melodrama apart from the classical trajectories via Lacan, Irigaray or Butler, Hanstein claims that the sexes are different in their ways of knowing and expecting, and that melodrama is the genre *par excellence* to illustrate this.

II. Modernity and the Melodramatic Self

Few cultural discourses and theories on the shaping of modernity and the modern subject have had more impact than Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical claim that we are not the masters in our own respective homes. Paying particular attention to the unconscious impulses that help to construct identity and the modern subject, and based on her writings about the *homo sentimentalis*, Eva Illouz provides a cultural critique in which attributes of melodrama overlap to a considerable degree with a "democracy of pain" in Western civil societies. In "The Melodrama of the Self," Illouz shows how the narrative structure and conceptual content of melodrama have been transposed to autobiographical narratives of the self under the influence of two major social developments. First, a popularization of clinical psychology has resulted in the commercialization of therapy and therapeutic styles of the self, where notions of selfhood and so-called practices of the self are increasingly constructed in relation to narratives of suffering, victimhood and the possibility of returning to a utopian, originary space of well-being. Second, capitalism has helped to transform the private sphere of personal emotions into public realms of communication and commodification. The "melodramatic self" has been commodified in a number of cultural arenas, from talk shows and confessional autobiographies to support groups, and should be recognized as constituting new cultural structures of production and consumption as well as subject formation circulated on a global level. The success and globalization of such a melodramatic narrative of the self

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can further be explained by the convergence of feminism and therapy, viewed as cultural – rather than political – formations. Finally, one might say that only now has the central problem of Peter Brooks's investigations into the cultural melodramatic mode become fully visible: the "melodramatic self" is, as Rousseau's choice to "tell all" exemplified, a measure of the personalization and inwardness of the post-sacred ethics that modern societies and the social sciences necessarily have to deal with when trying to understand the affective basis of the Western world.

In "Rousseau's Nightmare," Vincent Kaufmann delineates a literary genealogy of melodramatic victimhood. To know Molière's play *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673), Kaufmann suggests, is to laugh at Argan's hypochondria: he tyrannizes his entourage with the imaginary conviction that he is sick. Yet can he truly be said to be doing well? Reflecting upon this play, one is prompted to consider the difference between medically certified and imaginary pain. This is not to say that pain or suffering is fundamentally imaginary – though it may often be historically and culturally determined. In its complexity, suffering includes a performative option: one suffers, in part, because one believes or says that one does so. This performative operation is precisely what modern autobiography has drawn upon since its invention by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century. It is no coincidence that Rousseau is also considered the inventor – or one of the inventors – of melodrama. Among his many talents, Rousseau seems to have been quite good at suffering, or at least at staging tears; to be precise, at staging the tears of and for an innocent victim, namely himself. Reexamining the melodramatic mood of Rousseau's *Confessions* along with its paranoid and thus political content, Rousseau's autobiography can be understood to be not only about the staging of the self as victim, thereby inventing subjectivity through victimhood, but also about defending this self against unjust persecution. From this perspective, one might think of Rousseau as a foundational figure in the development of melodramatic narrative styles that go beyond his *Pygmalion* and its influence on stage melodrama. The impact of Rousseau's autobiographical representations of melodramatic victimhood can be traced through a genealogy of modern French autobiography that stages and performs a suffering and sacrificial self.

Rooted in media and cultural studies, the lens of melodrama is only one way to analyze Western cultures of emotion. In *The Navigation of Feeling* (2001), the American historian and anthropologist William M. Reddy develops a framework that combines a universal theory of affect with concrete socio-historical analyses. The goal of this ambitious project is the creation of a yardstick for measuring *normatively* the political liberty *as* the

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emotional liberty of a given group or society. Reddy exemplifies his model with reference to the history of emotions in France between 1700 and 1850, a period also decisive for the genesis of melodrama. In "'Emotional Suffering' as Universal Category? Victimhood and the Collective Imaginary," Jörg Metelmann closely engages with Reddy's historical reconstruction and finds a world populated by Manichean worldviews, good-against-evil schemes and the oppressions of free-minded citizens. Reddy's universal concept necessarily presupposes the emotional regime as a *stable* framework for individual navigation of social contexts and as an indicator for liberty. However, as this regime can only be understood in terms of historical reconstruction, Reddy's universalism becomes problematic. Here, Reddy's hidden melodrama shows clearly how a normative framework is created from the shared fiction of a community of values that broadens the particular to the universal, but nonetheless remains bound in concrete emotional interpellations. The critical discussion of *The Navigation of Feeling* can thus contribute to positioning melodrama both as a form of modernism (its narratives deal with the essential problem of relating the individual to a lost totality) and as a media hybrid in a newly established public-sphere-as-market, where textual energies flow from law cases to theater pieces to journals and back again along economies of attraction.

III. Collective Traumas and National Melodramas

What role do images play in an era of global terror? W. J. T. Mitchell's *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (2011) takes up this query with the incisive timeliness and critical acuity for which his work has become known. In "The Abu Ghraib Archive," Mitchell turns his attention toward scopic aspects of national trauma to illuminate the staying power and resonance – the cultural significance in all possible senses – of photographs from Abu Ghraib. Behind the image archive of Abu Ghraib is a double archive of pornographic and religious images, a mixture of obscenity and uncanny holiness that evokes the central *pathos formulae* of Western painting in which, as Stephan Eisenman argues in *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, victims are portrayed as taking pleasure in the experience of punishment and pain.[38] This familiar tradition is indissolubly linked with the glorification of imperial power and the aesthetic justification of domination and torture, producing "the Abu Ghraib effect," which inures spectators to the moral horror of what they are seeing. This might explain why the images were so easily contained politically and psychologically, and why they failed to stir proper public outrage. Reprinted here with an introduction

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by Scott Loren, Mitchell's "The Abu Ghraib Archive" thematically conjoins culturally-specific images of suffering, iconic victimhood and a moral imperative for retributive action in a manner that makes it an essential contribution to post-9/11 political melodrama discourse.

Elisabeth Anker's "Victimhood, Nation and Trauma" presents an incisive reading of US politics post-9/11. Melodramatic political discourse, she argues, legitimated state actions by depicting them as a *moral imperative* for achieving freedom and rescuing victims. Anker's contribution asks how an alternative melodramatic tradition might be used to critique the acts of violence and cruelty promoted through the very melodramatic political discourse that shaped the post-9/11 moment. She suggests that the "women's weepies" of the mid-twentieth century, specifically those of Douglas Sirk, can offer a radical critique of power germane to post-9/11 political discourse. Sirk's women's weepies might seem the most unlikely place for this sort of critique, yet they draw on conventional melodramatic elements in order to articulate societal experiences of failed individual agency and social powerlessness. Viewed through a Sirkian weepie, 9/11 melodrama would become a story about national failure, one that reveals the limitations of unilateral responsive action to the problems of powerlessness, violence and fear that it diagnoses. In a Sirkian mold, the ending of the 9/11 narrative would not devolve into a continued investment in the imaginary promise of a heroic overcoming of evil and fear, but would emphasize how national responses to fear lead directly to the failure to eradicate evil. Sirkian politics can offer a way to work in and through melodramatic renderings of post-9/11 politics in order to critique the very political actions that these renderings incite and legitimate.

Unexpected shifts in political media practices and national identity are also the focus of Scott Loren's "Tears of Testimony: Glenn Beck and the Conservative Moral Occult." In the years following the World Trade Center attacks, bitter partisanship ultimately characterized US politics at the local and national levels. In popular media, news and talk shows became settings for the staging of emotive, personalized dramatic spectacles of partisan loyalty. At the same time, media personalities such as Glenn Beck could capitalize on the feelings of anxiety, anger and skepticism that charged the cultural climate as the private sphere dissipated in the name of greater state-controlled security. Beck's political profile was a strange admixture of stock conservative ideals, libertarian ethics, Mormon theology and millennial panic. Though his politics might account for ideological resonance with Republicans and Tea Party supporters, they cannot account for his more widespread success. Beck's critics had difficulty rationalizing his hijacking

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of the evening news with a strategy of tears and One World Government conspiracy theories. What had once occupied the position of the news on evening television was suddenly a one-man vitriolic circus. Loren's "Tears of Testimony" shows how Beck's reactionary populist rhetorical strategies never dealt in facts, but rather in feelings. Tapping strong emotions such as anxiety, resentment and a nostalgic longing for the phantom of a non-existent past, Beck attracted the eyes and ears of a nation for the better part of a decade. Though he has often been accused of achieving success through fearmongering, racism and political propaganda, Loren's aim is not to discredit Beck's methods, but rather to provide a discursive context that clarifies their efficacy. Mapping a melodramatic operative mode onto the spectrum of Beck's public performances, Loren's essay provides further evidence for the protean nature of melodrama beyond traditional fictional forms and its role in US politics.

Turning to an alternative site of national politics and political identity, Amos Goldberg's "The Cultural Construction of the Holocaust Witness as a Melodramatic Hero" provides a framework for reading the melodramatic codification of the witness as a legacy of the Holocaust. Bearing witness to the victim's traumatic experiences and listening to his or her voice, Goldberg claims, has become one of the most fundamental ethical imperatives of the West in recent years. Holocaust memory in particular has been most instrumental in the establishment of this imperative. It has even been suggested that the Holocaust has replaced the French Revolution as the West's new foundational ethical myth. In this context one can trace a transformation in which the victim-witness as a prominent cultural symbolic figure has displaced other, potentially more political figures, like the revolutionary or the freedom fighter. The paradigmatic figure of the witness has drawn enormous theoretical attention and gained dominance in representations of the Holocaust. From the most sophisticated historiographical accounts to special archives, films and museums, the Holocaust victim-witness has become a historical moral figure. Goldberg draws on theories of melodrama and fetishism in his critique of the historical victim-witness, as both acknowledge excesses of history while at the same time exposing a lack of ethical and political potential. Drawing from Slavoj Žižek's work on fetishism and Brooks's work on melodrama, Goldberg shows how the victim-witness has gone from occupying a radical moral and political position to becoming a figure of conservative propaganda. Exemplified through his reading of Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (2005), Goldberg shows how Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" can be employed to re-politicize the victim-witness.

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In "Nation and Emotion: The Competition for Victimhood in Europe," Ulrich Schmid offers further perspectives on victimhood and Jewish national identity. Until recently, he claims, the Holocaust was the primary narrative for the *raison d'être* of the Jewish State. In the last twenty years, this exclusive position has been challenged both internally and externally. In Israel, more and more voices are claiming that the state should emancipate itself from its Jewish history and identity. Abroad, a veritable rally of counter-sites of victimization can be observed. Cases in point are national discourses about German suffering during the war, such as Jörg Friedrich's *The Fire* or discussions about the torpedoed vessel *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which was carrying German refugees from the Baltic countries. Similar tendencies can be seen in Ukrainian debates on the Holodomor, the famine of 1932-1933 that claimed nearly seven million victims, and in the Polish historiography of the events at Katyn, for example, which are presented as a kind of Polish holocaust. Even the Russians have claimed their own victimization during the siege of Leningrad.

What makes self-victimization a prominent nation-building discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Schmid contends that we are in an age that is not only postmodern, postnational or postheroic, but also post-historical. In occidental cultures, a sense of being part of world history has weakened considerably since 1991, with a depletion of historical narratives that might locate cultural identity in a historical temporality. If we do not know where we are in time – or as the protagonists of the TV serial *Lost* would have it, *when* we are in time – we need at least to know when we have been. Collective traumas can fulfill this task by concealing a post-historical void within posttraumatic emotions. National consciousness in the twenty-first century relies not so much on so-called imagined communities as on staged and incited emotions stemming from collective victimization.

Perspectives

In an interview with the volume's editors, Christine Gledhill offers some fresh perspectives on the present state of melodrama. By foregrounding the question of what melodrama does as opposed to what it is, she historicizes melodrama in a manner that allows for culturally specific distinctions. In a way that resonates with Illouz's theories on the commodification of emotion, Gledhill claims that melodrama stages processes in which social forces are channeled through personalized interaction, stressing that this is not a displacement of the social or the political but the very site at which social and

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political forces "play out." As such, a range of historical shifts characterizing melodrama can be mapped – for example, where melodrama once had the role of unifying the masses, there was a turn toward moral polarization that divided the masses at the turn of the twentieth century, a turn that was reinvigorated in America's post-9/11 War on Terror. In a cautionary gesture that concludes this volume in a fitting way, Gledhill warns that although victimhood may appear to be the focal point of the numerous melodramatically intoned political discourses in which we now find ourselves, victimhood is as historically situated as any other element of melodrama, and thus cannot constitute the ultimate horizon of melodrama, just as no single trope can. And with its ability to make visible the normative values of a given time and place, with the epistemological and ethical functions essential to melodrama, and with its pull of transgressive charm, one should never forget creeping villainy!

Notes

1. Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 151.
2. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002).
3. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" [1972], in *Imitation of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 64.
4. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 86.
5. Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility* (London: Wallflower, 2004).
6. Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65-77:
   1) Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence….
   2) Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue….
   3) Melodrama appears modern by borrowing from realism, but realism serves the melodramatic passion and action….
   4) Melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action – a give and take of "too late" and "in the nick of time"….
   5) Melodrama presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaean conflicts between good and evil.
7. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 74.
8. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 74.
9. We would also like to note a change we have made to our theory of melodramatic vectors, which we originally proposed in a monograph on subver-

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sive cinema melodrama. In *Irritation of Life: The Subversive Melodrama of Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars Von Trier*, (Marburg: Schüren, 2013), the three vectors were labeled aesthetic, narrative, and temporal. Due to the imbrication of aesthetic means and thematic content, which together *constitute* a narrative, we have chosen to replace the term *narrative* with the term *thematic* for the second vector.

10. Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11," *Journal of Communication* 55:1 (2005), 22-57, here 24.
11. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 13.
12. Williams challenges her own positions on the dimensions of character and narrative temporality in her contribution to this volume. Using the example of episodic serialization in the HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008) as a horizontal extension of melodrama in time, she argues that where characters of so-called classic melodrama may lack depth in their embodiment of primary psychic roles, the temporal expansion of a good serial can allow for the portrayal of more complex characters who might nevertheless effectively enact the functions of victim-hero-villain in the service of moral legibility *and* allow for a less internalized and personalized critique of social institutions. Her analysis of *The Wire* as a social melodrama also counters the notion of overly simplified relations and articulations of social and transcendental truths. In "The Evolution of Social Melodrama," John Cawelti similarly argued through the example of Charles Dickens (who also wrote serialized melodrama) that social melodrama could "represent society in a fairly complex and critical way yet still achieve tremendous popular success if he [Dickens] synthesized social criticism with the archetype of melodrama and thereby gave readers the pleasure of seeing the follies of men and institutions combined with the satisfaction of witnessing the triumph of virtue and the punishment of vice" (Cawelti, in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Landy, 33-49, here 33). Williams shows that in serial melodrama the moral legibility of virtue and vice remain central, but through the complexity of character and through making the victims to a large extent victims of unjust institutions – that is, through making (economic and governmental) social institutions the villain – she argues for the recognition of more highly complex socio-critical melodramatic forms.
13. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 47.
14. Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 42.
15. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 12.
16. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 180-81.
17. Brooks, a professor of comparative literature, had studied in Paris and was familiar with Barthes's work on Balzac, for example, when he wrote *The Melodramatic Imagination*. To a considerable extent, the book elaborates on concepts of popular dramatic spectacle outlined in Barthes's 1957 landmark work *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972).
18. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.

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19. See also Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
20. Gledhill, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 15.
21. Gledhill, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 21; see also Martha Vicinus, "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13 (1981), 127-43, here 130.
22. Kappelhoff, *Matrix der Gefühle: Das Kino, das Melodrama und das Theater der Empfindsamkeit* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2004), 130 (our translation).
23. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 44.
24. See Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
25. See Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Illouz, *Cold Intimacy: The Making of Modern Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
26. Gledhill, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 1.
27. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 215.
28. See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
29. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, in *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. Hays and Nikolopoulou (New York: St Martin's, 1996), xiii.
30. Agustín Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 9.
31. Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama*, 5.
32. Elisabeth Anker's *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) situates melodrama as a political discourse that polarizes popular opinion in order to legitimate state violence.
33. Metelmann, *Ressentimentalität: Die melodramatische Versuchung* (Marburg: Schüren, 2015).
34. Elsaesser, "Melodrama: Genre, Gefühl oder Weltanschauung?", in *Das Gefühl der Gefühle: Zum Kinomelodram*, ed. Margrit Frölich, Klaus Gronenborn and Karsten Visarius (Marburg: Schüren, 2008), 11-34.
35. Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).
36. An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2011 at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Williams's 2014 monograph *On The Wire* (Duke University Press) develops in greater detail several of the topics she introduces here.
37. David Bordwell, "Subjective Stories and Network Narratives," in *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 72-103.
38. Stefan Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 16, 48 and 79.

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I. Cultures of Suffering and Cinematic Identities

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Melodrama and Victimhood: Modern, Political and Militant

Thomas Elsaesser

In a previous essay on melodrama that the organizers were kind enough to cite in the prospectus for the conference from which this book derives, I make a number of claims which, by way of an introduction, I would like briefly to summarize:

1) *Victimhood*: the subject position and self-ascription of victimhood has become a powerfully universalizing category in Western societies. This is in line with a number of broader political changes that have affected the social contract and our notion of personhood, including ideas of subjectivity and gender. The most important among these changes is probably the shift from competing ideologies (Marxism/Communism vs. Liberalism/Capitalism) to competing post-Enlightenment universals such as "human rights" vs. "multi-cultural diversity," or "humanitarian interventions" vs. "sovereignty" or "religious self-determination." At the same time, we have witnessed a shift from "politics" as dissensual decision-making and collective action to politics as crisis management and security operations (the "police"), as well as from an understanding of "ethics" as "living the good, i.e. justified life," to ethics as "surviving in the shadow of death and disaster." Along with "trauma" and "bare life," victim status constitutes part of a very contemporary condition, which might be called (as the editors phrase it) "a powerful ontological category," but which is also "a powerful ideological category," and a rather militant way, for instance, of claiming rights and entitlements – some of which used to come as part of being a citizen, an active participant in one's society and a valued member of the community, others reflecting the changing role of women in modern societies or the relative scarcity of children in the developed world and a corresponding sense of their vulnerability, preciousness and precariousness.

2) *Righteousness*: the combination of melodrama and righteousness used to be a complex process of gaining recognition and attaining a voice through suffering made visible and public. In the nineteenth century, the virtuous were considered victims because evil and the wicked ruled the world. From this it was easy to move to a particular reciprocity of attributes: namely, the

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notion that victimhood automatically confers righteousness and virtue. But given the rather different faces of wickedness as well as the forces of evil and disaster in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – for instance, the feeling that these forces are often disembodied, invisible, systemic and endemic, rather than personal or located – the whole nature of the equation between victimhood and righteousness changes, and something like a slippage has occurred between righteousness and rights.

In the nineteenth century, the victim in melodrama makes virtue legible. For instance, the heroine will trust the villain, even if he has already given ample proof of his turpitude, because "trust" is the stake the heroine has in the social bond. This cannot but make the victim of melodrama a serial sufferer, apparently unable to learn or to become wise, to adapt or to compromise. She has to keep the moral high ground and be the vantage point by which the actions of others can be measured. Passivity and suffering can thus become forms of individual agency and social participation, even if in the form of a negative foil. This is why melodrama – so much the drama of the private realm and of intimate discourse – must nonetheless create a public sphere, in order to perform this legibility of virtue through the spectacle of righteousness wronged.

Today, victimhood is, more than ever, a way of making one's voice heard, in a public sphere that does not recognize many legitimate speaking positions. For instance, if we take as an example of the public sphere the media sphere of television, there are really only three roles that are legitimately occupied by members of the public: first, that of the expert or pundit (say in talk shows, or as commentator on political questions or public affairs); second, that of the talent or idol (in talent contests, celebrity shows, reality television); and third, that of the victim or survivor (of a disaster, a civil war, a divorce, a new piece of legislation or any other event that might befall a person). In the ensuing division of labor, the victim is assigned not only a certain circumscribed role (for instance, to produce affect and emotion, and to refrain from having an opinion or promote an argument), but also a certain power, namely that of filling the slot of "authenticity," righteousness and subjective truth – but only on condition of consenting to being a victim. In this sense, the voice and suffering of the victim is as much "harvested" by television as the scandal of the celebrity or the ambitions of the wannabe. It is the combination of victimhood and power, negative agency, rights and entitlements, which makes melodrama both topical and modern, but also morally volatile and politically precarious. Victimhood, in short, becomes a strong subject position, when narratives of the self no longer make sense as either retrospective biographies or prospective life-projects. Melodrama

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may be the name for some of the forms that the narratives of the self take under such pressure of making sense of the senseless, not least because being a victim might give one a new and universally understood myth of origin – that of "trauma," "abuse" or of suffering quite generally.

3) *Politics and victimhood*: however, the political side of victimhood is also the sheer scale of the uneven distribution of goods and vital necessities across the globe, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of forms of injustice both small and large, the pace of depredation of life and the environment in so many parts of the world. To all of this, we – the haves, the world's middle classes – have been silent witnesses, involuntary perpetrators and guilty beneficiaries over the past decades. This, too, is a subject position, and may well be one of the reasons why victimhood, considered as a universal and now part of the human condition, has become a desirable subject position. It helps alleviate guilt, by indirectly acknowledging the facts of the matter, making victimhood stand for a symbolic act of solidarity. But it is a compromise and thus also a compromised act, allowing us as individuals to carry on with our lives, to stay below the radar of personal responsibility, while still staking a place in the world, even if our mode of participation in this world merely testifies to our helplessness.

Slavoj Žižek calls this the Starbucks system: Starbucks knows about your guilt feelings of being an involuntary perpetrator, so it overprices its coffee and tells you that one cent of the price goes to educate children in Guatemala, and another five cents go to provide clean drinking water in Sri Lanka. In other words, Starbucks allows you to do good simply by being a consumer, because both your feelings of guilt and your desire to manage them by a counter-action are already included in the price.

All these are the reasons why in my essay I spoke of *melodrama today as a placeholder*: it is a placeholder for all the asymmetries and imbalances, for all the excesses seeking appeasement, for all the outrages yearning for redress and all the injustices thirsting for retribution, for all the feelings of guilt that act as forms of empowerment.

At the same time, *melodrama is failed tragedy*, but its value lies in performing this failure. What melodrama involves in the most abstract terms, at the level of narrative and drama, is that it takes the most extreme contrasts, the most discordant and jarring elements, and pitches them into external action and inner conflict, in order to draw from them the terms of balance, of poise and equilibrium, when none of these ways of arriving at justice are actually either available or feasible. Melodrama is the opposite of,

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but also the complement to, for instance, Jacques Derrida's infinite deferral of justice, as well as of Jacques Rancière's radical equivalence: the opposite, because it presses for justice in the here-and-now (as does Rancière), and the complement, because (like Derrida) it knows about the impossibility of achieving justice, at least not without residue or remainder.

To quote from the end of my essay:

> For is melodrama not finally the appropriate world-view or anti-metaphysics for an age that not only has lost faith in utopias, but has given up on solutions? Is it not the mode appropriate for those who proclaim the "end of history" but cannot claim to put an end to conflict and warfare, to inequality and injustice? Melodrama, in short, marks a gap, but does not – and probably should not – fill it: that of political action.

In light of the topic of this book, I want to build on this general hypothesis of melodrama as a placeholder, and to identify at least three distinct victim discourses that have become significant in cultural debates and social theory over the past decades, all of which can be and have been explored in recent film melodrama:

1) There is the victim-discourse around racial, ethnic, political or sexual discrimination; when leading to physical annihilation, it is often identified with or modeled on the Holocaust, with subsequent or analogous forms of persecution borrowing its rhetoric and narrative tropes. Perhaps because the universalizing tendencies of Holocaust victimhood are in conflict or tension with its historical specificity and uniqueness, melodramas that focus on the Holocaust victim-discourse have not only acquired a generational dimension, insofar as the Holocaust had made the survivors as well as their descendants "victims," including victims of survivor guilt, but they have also produced a victim discourse centered on the witting or unwitting perpetrators, along the lines of the guilt management I alluded to earlier.

2) The second category concerns victims whom society might class as victims, but who do not consider themselves victims. These are outsiders, marginals, the homeless. They can be people who have fallen on hard times, whose personalities make them unable to function within social norms or who reject these norms, but not in a way that makes them rebel or try to re-integrate themselves into society. I have written about these victims in a number of studies on recent films, under the heading of the "abject subjects" of contemporary Europe: a class of victims I find especially interesting,

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because their status gives them an intriguing sort of power – the power that comes from having nothing more to lose. One finds such characters in the films of Claire Denis, Mike Leigh, the Dardenne brothers and Aki Kaurismäki, but I want briefly to describe what I mean by the abject subject by returning to a director who has been exemplary for combining melodrama as a political form of cinema with victimhood as abjection, namely Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Fassbinder and Victimhood

The name of Fassbinder conveniently joins the genre of melodrama, which since the 1970s has become a highly reflexive cinematic mode of representation, with what I consider a different take on the question of victimhood, both within a specifically German historical context and within the Marxist framework of "exploitation," thereby also touching on the wider issue of the relation between social injustice and personal ethics.

In his first suburban gangster films (such as Love is Colder than Death or The American Soldier), the idea of victimhood is still polarized between exploiters and exploited, and characters often present themselves as caught up in the injustices of capitalism. In his later works, however, Fassbinder uncovers other areas of conflict, no less marked by exploitation and victimization. At first it was women who, by virtue of their mute or silent presence, became all the more eloquent accusers of the system and grew to represent the bad conscience of patriarchal society, reacting to power structures which they felt in their bodies and souls but which they were unable to resist other than by exaggerating their effects. Then the victims were homosexuals exploited brutally or cynically by other homosexuals, as in Fox and His Friends and In a Year of Thirteen Moons, or lesbians as victims of sex-and-status games and blind passion, as in The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant or Veronika Voss. These included the great hetero-hysterics such as Martha (in Martha) or Irm Hermann in The Merchant of Four Seasons.

Finally, the balance of power between majority and minorities, between the ruling elite and the outcasts was presented as asymmetrical, or in such a way as to suggest that perpetrators and victims are bound together by more than antagonism. It led to the sort of double binds that elsewhere I have called "relations of antagonistic mutuality," where apparent enemies or opponents collude with each other, either knowingly or unwittingly, across unacknowledged shared interests, mirrored resentment or transgressive and

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tabooed desires, such as one finds between the director of the US computer security firm and the terrorists in The Third Generation, between Franz and Reinhold or Pums and the police in Berlin Alexanderplatz, or in all the relationships between the five male protagonists of Querelle, each an attraction-repulsion duality of murderous love. The stabilizing perversity of these double binds is such that the protagonists cannot break out of them and, even more surprisingly, did not want to break out of them. It was Fassbinder's way of acknowledging, while already skeptically commenting on, the "identity politics" of the 1970s. Women's emancipation, the gay movement, "terrorism" – these were all developments he kept up with but also blew out of proportion in a tragicomic way, often to the displeasure of all parties concerned: the Left saw him as an anarchist and crypto-Fascist, the Jewish community suspected crass anti-Semitism, gay people took him for a homophobe, and feminists considered his statements, according to which women only wanted to be exploited "better," downright misogynistic.

Was there some misunderstanding? Or was Fassbinder concerned with something completely different, namely with a new concept of the victim in general? Although even today, power by no means rests with victims, it seems that everyone wants to be a victim, because there one finds strong subject-effects; why and under what conditions I explain below. But in the case of Fassbinder and his films, he upped the ante, and did not shy away from demanding the most from his victims: for in Fassbinder's world, it does not suffice to be a victim, or to feel like one; one must first *become* a victim.

Becoming a victim does not merely imply being aware of the injustice and power relations that are the cause of one's suffering. A victim carries responsibility. A victim might attain power. One will recall that in classical melodrama, the victim trades his or her suffering for the spectacle of righteousness, for moral superiority. The latter must constantly be put to the test through repeated temptation to relent, by learning to anticipate the dastardly schemes of the villain. But the victims resist, which is why the heroines of melodrama are often mislabeled masochists. They are repeat offenders of gullibility, but their naiveté serves a noble cause.

In Fassbinder there is something else at stake: becoming a victim only starts once certain dualities, interdependencies or double binds are left behind or out of action. For instance, the classic postwar German juxtaposition between perpetrators and victims, and the corresponding hope of finding a valid currency for trading "reconciliation" for "truth" or "forgiveness" for "admission of guilt," is not an option in Fassbinder, just as any form of dialogue or face-to-face encounter will not yield a new equilibrium: this kind of shared victimhood was already a dead end before it became

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a cultural trope. Hence Fassbinder's protagonists look for victimhood not outside the social boundaries imposed by sexuality and class, but in the fact that they consciously lead a life of exploitation within the socially accepted relations of exploitation. His victims are rebels beyond rebellion, because they recognize revolt as the trap of being caught in the imaginary of the Other. It is only after shedding the trappings of selfhood – sexual identity, social status – and the fetishes that sustain them, such as dignity and self-respect (most painfully and vividly shed and divested in films such as In a Year of Thirteen Moons and Veronika Voss), that these characters attain the freedom of pure victimhood. What seems to be sheer self-abandonment is justified by another truth of the subject and thus makes way for a new ethics. The purpose of this ethics of "becoming a victim" is to strip the self of all its physical, psychic and symbolic means of exchange, and in this way achieve a radical openness towards life.

The Paradigm Shift

I have spent some time re-examining Fassbinder's version of victimhood and cinema in order to have a foil for the third type of victim-discourse and melodrama in which I am interested, one that takes us back to the first, namely the universalization of the victim-discourse derived from the Holocaust and the notion of melodrama as failed tragedy. This has to do with what I – but also many others – have diagnosed as a paradigm shift in Germany in the relation between perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust and World War Two since the start of the new century. With the end of the war and the division of Germany, the nature of victimhood became problematic and ambiguous.[1] By the new century, however, this ambiguity seemed to have dissipated, and a paradigm shift had taken place: namely, a subtle but steady reversal of the once-perpetrator people morphing into a victim nation. In fact, one can almost pinpoint the year when Germans began to see themselves as victims rather than perpetrators: 2002-2003. The transformation, reversal or slippage is evidenced by four themes coming to the foreground that had previously been muted, if not altogether kept out of sight: the bombing raids by British and US planes on German cities in 1944 and 1945 that caused firestorms and killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, mostly women, children and the elderly; the expulsion of millions of Germans from the East in 1945-1947, notably from Poland and what became the Czech Republic; the mass rape of German women by Soviet soldiers as well as Allied forces, also in 1945-1946; and finally, the German

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prisoners of war held by the Soviet Union in gulags from 1943 onwards, until well into the 1950s. Sparked off by, among other events, a book of essays (W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur,* 1999),[2] a novel (Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang*, 2002),[3] a vivid history of the bombing raids (Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940-1945*, 2002),[4] and the reprint of a harrowing autobiographical account of multiple rape (Anonymous, *Eine Frau in Berlin*, 2003),[5] this paradigm shift has been extensively debated in the German press as well as in academia. It is of interest and importance to my argument for two reasons, however: it gives me the opportunity to put forward a more complex notion of what it might mean to be a victim, in the context of what has hitherto been regarded as a nation of perpetrators, and it allows me to mention a number of counter-strategies that have been pursued by prominent German and non-German filmmakers in coming to terms with the turn to victimhood. Space will not permit me to do justice to the second, which is why I have introduced Fassbinder as the foil.

At first glance, it is surprising to note how marginal a role the German cinema seems to have played in this new victimology of the German nation, the conversion of the *Tätervolk* (people of perpetrators) into an *Opfernation* (nation of victims). Bernd Eichinger's and Oliver Hirschbiegel's Downfall (2004), about the final days of Hitler in Berlin, was quickly enlisted, insofar as it was said to "humanize" the monster, but apart from showing the devastation of Berlin under the Allied bombs and Soviet assault, it does not touch on the thematics of the "ordinary Germans" who play such a central role in the new national memory frame of victims and victimhood.

A film by Helke Sander from 1992, Befreier und Befreite (*Liberators Take Liberties*), investigating the mass rape of German women by soldiers of the liberating armies, would be a better candidate. But while politely noted in Germany (and discussed in the US), it must have come too early to ignite a wider debate, indicating that the time-window for momentous shifts may be small, and the factors sparking such a paradigm shift are still quite enigmatic. For instance, it is not impossible that the intellectual and academic debate around trauma which began circa 1995, following the so-called memory wars around Freud's legacy circa 1990 (itself a key debate for feminists concerned with domestic violence and childhood abuse), prepared the ground for a much wider discourse on the victim, now regarded as a subject position with political significance. This feminist discourse certainly found an echo in Germany, of which Sander's film is a document and testimony.

For the general debate on victimhood in Germany, however, the more obvious international context would have been September 11, 2001, with

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the sense of threat and uncertainty, of massive danger and destruction coming from the sky, visited upon thousands of innocent people acting as a trigger for the return of other traumas. Friedrich's *The Fire* probably needed 9/11 to find a proper echo, but as critics quickly pointed out, in his descriptions (and images) Friedrich drew on the vocabulary and diction of the Holocaust, as did W. G. Sebald, whose essays were brought back into the debate after 9/11 (and after his death in December 2001). It is possible to be skeptical and a little cynical, and note the desire of Germans to assert their place in the increasingly crowded territory of victimhood, made appealing on a day-to-day basis through popular culture, talk shows, soaps and reality television, and politically appropriated by the United States. In the twenty-first century, victimhood has become a badge of honor, one of the last ways of presenting oneself as authentic and singular in the public sphere.

While there were quite a few voices in Germany that sharply condemned what they perceived as a revisionist, right-wing move, namely to claim victim status for the Germans of 1945 in order to draw even with Jewish suffering, the debate was generally more nuanced and thoughtful, indicative of a "more textured perspective on Nazism and the Holocaust," as one critic called it. First, there was the argument that "mastering the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) must also leave room for discussing these painful issues, and, especially with the Holocaust now standing for human rights, writers could with some justification also look once more at the moral and political justification of the bombing raids or the international legality of the expulsions, and acknowledge the women's suffering caused by the occupying soldiers, together with that of the thousands of children born of rape. Given that, with German unification, old wounds would have to be re-opened if the two Germanys were to find the terms of a new identity out of divided histories and divided memories, these would have to include the memories of the first years when families mourned their dead, as well as memories of being divided and estranged by the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall. Unrestricted travel after 1990, and indeed the wooing of German tourists by Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states, allowed Germans to revisit, for the first time in almost fifty years, the sites and landscapes that their parents or grandparents had called home and to get the feel of those places again.

Historians also pointed out that while the official commemoration policy made the Holocaust the central event upon which to reflect and remember, there was evidence suggesting that in families, unofficial memory had never been put aside, and that the firestorms or the flight to the West, the sons and brothers fallen in the senseless war, or what had happened to the

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women when the Russians came, all remained unforgotten. What Harald Welzer called the "family album" memory had always been different from the "public lexicon" memory, and already from the mid-1970s onwards, writers, biographers and historians had begun to collect the oral and visual memorabilia of the post-war period, even before television took charge of ever more of this audio-visual legacy, in seemingly endless compilation films, which in turn started a publishing boom in memoirs and coffee-table books. The television programmes were often underwritten by the journalist and historian Guido Knopp, so much so that his name became synonymous with history being given a human face, that is, when stories told by eye-witnesses are matched with archive material and stitched together by expert talking heads or voice-over commentary. DOWNFALL is really a Knopp production blown up to blockbuster dimensions.

Possibly the most persuasive reason for the paradigm shift, however, is the so-called intergenerational transfer in literature and public life, whereby it is members of the third generation who now feel a need, and want to have the right, to learn about their grandparents, and who are not content to take their parents' generally hostile stance towards this first generation (made into a first generation by the second, that radically disowned it as the *Täter-Väter*, i.e. the perpetrator-parents). Welzer and his collaborators put together the results of a sociological field study under the suggestive and ironic title *Opa war kein Nazi* (*Granddad was no Nazi*),[6] and several novels also explored the lives of grandfathers or tried to recover the lost emotional terrain of family histories that had never been told – out of fear, resentment, bitterness or shame, or simply because there did not seem to be the inner necessity or the interest from outside.

While many of these stories had common themes and shared the emotional need to fill a void in the narrators' life-stories, they also gave evidence of the diversity of German day-to-day living and circumstances during the Nazi years and after – the sometimes scarcely believable normalcy under the most abnormal conditions, or the subterfuges and ingenuity of which human beings were capable, once they had persuaded themselves that they had better just get on with things. This, of course, has always been the great theme of Alexander Kluge: his hundreds of short stories, even more so than his films, bridge the seeming gap between the 1950s and the 1990s. But in Kluge, there is a good deal of textual camouflage and narrative subterfuge that has to be deciphered before the full urgency of his intervention and the source of his desperate optimism can be appreciated. Kluge certainly never forgot the soldiers of Stalingrad, or the firebombs that in April 1945 (only days before the end of the war) were dropped on his home town

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of Halberstadt, to devastating effect, and there is a remarkable number of – often deceptively facetious – incidents of rape in his work that call for context, or rather, whose context the paradigm shift has suddenly made a good deal more visible.

New German Cinema

The aim of my move to associate melodrama and victimhood with what I call "guilt management" is that we can begin to understand guilt not only as an ethical or legal transgression of binding norms or laws, but more formally as a question of trying to generate movement in a situation of mis-aligments and asymmetries, to balance non-synchronicities and deferrals, to draw up a ledger of credits and debits within the fragile self-image of the subject towards itself and in relation to the other – where this other might be the community or God (I am here conflating guilt and shame, in order to make a more general point). Guilt, in some ways, represents an exemplary case of deferred action: a temporality important for both melodrama (what if/if only) and trauma (a symptom in search of its cause). In the case of guilt, an action undertaken in the hope of succeeding turns out in retrospect to have been a failure or a mistake, with the result that the question of intention has to be re-examined in reverse order, the causality of guilt running from the consequences to the causes.

Of course, guilt also has a vector that points to the future, aiming to establish a new equilibrium: whether we call this equilibrium punishment, retribution, revenge, forgiveness or reconciliation, in each case we are referring to a new zero-degree or equivalence, or, to use contemporary vocabulary, closure. However, we also know (almost every religion knows it, and Greek tragedy confirms it) that "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" does not necessarily re-establish the more encompassing, cosmic (now called "global") equilibrium. On the contrary, such balance-seeking action can just as easily lead to escalation or produce a Moebius strip or infinite loop, because the entities being weighed in the balance may well turn out to be incommensurable.

There are, evidently, other ways of trying to establish such a balance or neutralization of a given guilt-economy, especially when taking into the equation precisely such incommensurability. Here, too, the melodramatic potential of a situation can come to the fore, once we consider not only contradiction but also substitution, mistaken identities or other errors of comparison and exchange as part of the rhetoric of melodrama.

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To take a specific example, taken not from melodrama but from politics, and relevant for Germany's situation after 1945: I am thinking of the compromise that the first Adenauer government struck, as the legal successor state to the German Reich, namely to offer the newly founded state of Israel not an acknowledgement of "guilt" (*Schuld*) but instead, an acknowledgement of an as yet to be decided "debt" (*Schulden*), in the form of reparations to compensate the victims, descendants of victims and survivors of the Nazi regime. Or consider the way in which the West German establishment took the collective decision to convert its erstwhile anti-Semitism into a new philo-Semitism, as if it were just another currency reform, like the one that converted the Reichsmark into the Deutschmark. Or recall the equivalences that Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber tried to validate during the so-called historians' debate around 1986: to count "their" victims against "our" victims, in the context of re-interpreting National Socialism as a corrective and defensive counter-move against Communism, itself a strategy that resurfaced in the 1990s when one totalitarianism (that of the National Socialists) was measured against another (Stalinism). The fact that in almost all these cases, the accounts do not square, just as "the past will not pass" (Nolte), is further proof of how urgently a mechanism or modus is needed that can produce poetic or melodramatic forms of bringing together what cannot be united, of setting as equivalent what cannot be compared, and of creating a happy ending out of a situation or an outcome in which there are only losers.

Another strategy of guilt management may at first glance seem to be the opposite, but ultimately follows the same logic: this is the acknowledgement of guilt but with an afterthought in mind, namely to assure oneself of the higher moral ground *vis-à-vis* one's creditor. In 1983 a particularly sarcastic joke made the rounds in West Germany. The newly elected Chancellor Helmut Kohl paid a state visit to Israel, accompanied by his foreign minister, Helmut Genscher. As is customary, the two were taken to Yad Vashem in order to honour the victims of the Holocaust. In this potentially awkward and embarrassing situation, the joke has Kohl lean over to Genscher and whisper: "Die Schuld lassen wir uns nicht nehmen!" ("We're not going to let anyone touch our guilt!"). Mean and sarcastic as this may be, it does contain a grain of truth, insofar as official Germany is quite proud of the thorough way it has tackled the task of "mastering the past" – especially when compared to Japan, Italy and even, until relatively recently, France. Now that the Holocaust and Holocaust memory have become integral parts of Germany's national identity, the paradigm shift will not change this; on the contrary, it almost seems as though Germany is keen to export its commemorative culture of the nation's crimes to the rest of the world – notably to Poland, Hungary and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

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These, very briefly sketched, are some of the divergent strategies of guilt management in politics and public life, which all show structural analogies to melodrama. Paradigmatic of the attempt to join victimhood to guilt management in the mode of melodrama, however, is one of the very first stories in West German literature to thematize the reality of the death camps – bringing that reality into direct relation with the aerial bombing raids and firestorms. Albrecht Goes's Das Brandopfer (1954),[7] made into a film by Rolf Hädrich in 1962 as Der Schlaf der Gerechten (*The Sleep of the Just*), is remarkable already for its title, since the original German *Brandopfer* would be the exact translation of the originaly Greek word "Holocaust" – and this more than a decade before the term was first used in its present-day meaning as referring to the persecution and destruction of Europe's Jews. It is a striking example of the right word appearing in the wrong place, as well as a superimposition of temporalties – the narrative being set in Hamburg in 1944, rather than, if in 1944, say in Auschwitz or Sobibor, or, if in Hamburg, then in 1936 or 1938.

As so many narratives would subsequently do, Das Brandopfer deploys a rescue scenario, whose central conceit is that a Jewish man saves a German woman from her burning home, after she had tried to save a Jewish family from deportation. Having failed to do so, she offers herself as a burning sacrifice, accepting death by fire as rained down from the sky by Allied bombers as just retribution. But she is rescued – not least in order to tell the tale in a framing narrative. The twofold improbability of the situation constitutes its melodramatic core, because the idea that a Jewish man rescues a German woman who does not want to be rescued preserves, as if in mirror-fashion, its own reversal: a German woman (in 1938) fails to rescue a Jewish man (or family) from deportation or worse, namely leaving them to the flames of the Holocaust, causing her pangs of conscience, but pangs on which she does not have to act because she herself will be rescued – that is, absolved – by the victim himself. In addition, the fire is not that of the German crematoria, but of British bombers, thus insuring her own feeling of guilt with a kind of double indemnity: "rescue" for "failure to rescue," and the exchange of crematoria for bombing raids.

Read like this, Das Brandopfer becomes legible as a parable of German guilt, trying to find an appropriate form of equivocation as equivalence. As if to underline the didactic side of the story with a touch of the uncanny and the grotesque, the author gives a broad hint of how he wants it to be read: the woman is the wife of the butcher, who is licensed by the Nazis to sell kosher meat to the remaining Jews. Thus he is known as the *Juden-Metzig*, the butcher *for* Jews (presumably as opposed to being a butcher *of* Jews).

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The motif of the woman's attempted suicide is furthermore reminiscent of three of the best-known melodramas of 1947, where it is the Jewish characters who commit suicide, as if to relieve the non-Jewish Germans (those in the film and those watching the film) from having to kill them: Ehe im Schatten (*Marriage in the Shadows*; Kurt Maetzig, 1947), Zwischen Gestern und Morgen (*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*; Harald Braun, 1947) and In Jenen Tagen (*Seven Journeys*; Helmut Käutner, 1947).

Melodrama and Victimhood since 2000

I want to conclude by briefly looking at two melodramas of victimhood as guilt management that emerged during and as a symptom of the paradigm shift I discussed above, and which have been quite successful internationally: Margarethe von Trotta's Rosenstrasse (*The Women of Rosenstrasse*, 2003) and Max Färberböck's Aimée und Jaguar (*Aimee and Jaguar*, 1999). Rosenstrasse, for instance, combines many of the motifs of classical melodrama: family secrets, generational transfer, unlikely heroism, resistance, trauma and survival. Taking the February-March 1943 protest of two hundred women against the arrest and likely deportation of their Jewish husbands as its premise, the film tells this story by focusing first on a Jewish girl, rescued by a German woman Lena. Now a widow and living in New York, the survivor is questioned by her daughter and reluctantly tells of her past in Germany, leading the daughter to Lena, still living in Berlin, across whose reminiscences the story of the women's heroic protest unfolds via flashbacks.

It is notable that von Trotta has chosen a story where the heroism celebrated is that of German (and mostly aristocratic) women, while the first secret turns on the reluctance of a Jewish woman to admit to having been rescued by a German; the second secret is revealed to be the grief of a German woman who "loses" her (adopted Jewish) child – to the biological mother. The mother-daughter roles, temporally displaced across the change of generations, are in each case doubled and mirrored. Turning the melodramatic kaleidoscope by 180 degrees, the sense of these displacements becomes clearer: the historical grounding, which has to be preserved in the form of a rebus picture, can be read in terms of corresponding opposites, as the more likely historical state of affairs would have been the reluctance of a German woman to admit to *not* having helped or rescued her German-Jewish neighbors, so that it would have been a Jewish mother grieving over a lost child. The melodramatic constellation does not add

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up to an emotionally coherent picture, not because von Trotta was able to incorporate elements of a historical incident into her story, but because the inversions are like rhymes: under their aspect of guilt management, they focus on uneven exchanges, symbolic debts, and reversals of fortune. Moving the viewer to tears, the plot juggles these until it finally manages to produce closure through a happy ending of recognition, reconciliation and thus redemption. Do these unevenly balanced reversals shake up the classic German-Jewish binaries of perpetrators and victims, or are they intended to give German audiences a different emotional anchor, as guilt and grieving change places, and the affective centre of the film shifts from the rich but emotionally cold Upper Westside New York Jewish widow to the poor, sick but emotionally warm old lady in a dark Berlin tenement block? Historians have commented on some of the factual license that von Trotta and her screenwriter had to take with the Rosenstrasse protest, while one critic asked ironically how much credence one can give to the film's depiction of the Holocaust, "if a mere seven days of steadfast protest could have prevented it from happening."

As Daniela Berghahn points out in a sympathetic consideration of both Rosenstrasse and Aimée und Jaguar, these films

> construct a memory of the past that is no longer encumbered by guilt, principally because the relationship between Germans and Jews is re-imagined as one of solidarity. As post-memory films, they take liberties with the traumatic memory of the past and, by following the generic conventions of melodrama, family saga and European heritage cinema, even lend it popular appeal.[8]

This solidarity is as necessary for popular appeal as it is troubling from a historical and ethical point of view. Where does it come from, what is it based on, whom does it serve? Since one of the most egregious facts about the discrimination, expropriation and persecution of German Jews during the Nazi years was the almost complete lack of solidarity of non-Jews with their Jewish neighbors, colleagues, friends and, often enough, even lovers and spouses, the presumption of solidarity in the two films strains not just our credulity, but also a certain moral honesty. The affirmation that the stories are based on fact almost functions as a fetish, in order to protect a wish-fulfilling fantasy, which in the modus of deferred action and flashback is sealed and preserved intact thanks to a frame tale that gives it the aura of authenticity, especially when we learn in the credits that Lily is still alive and living in Berlin.

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Only by creating a community of victims can such solidarity lay claim to the semblance of verisimilitude. In this respect – in its mode of address to the spectator, partly due to the conventions of melodrama, partly sharing this solidarity and enjoying it as complicity – these two films can in fact be said to revert to the subject positions of the 1950s, where Germans saw themselves as victims and, as such, tried to *compete* with Jews, in order to compensate, but at the same time where characters on screen communicated with their audience across the public secret of this complicity, when a language of unintended euphemisms and double entendres still permeated official discourse.

On the other hand, both films are suffused with regret, projecting an affinity between Germans and Jews that both reaffirms and masks the fact that it may well have been this very affinity that made Jews such perfect victims of German self-hatred. Aimée und Jaguar, possibly aware of the trap, *overcompensates*: it ostentatiously inverts all the possible binaries, by pairing a German woman with little self-esteem with a Jewish woman full of energy and zest, thus criss-crossing "Aryan" and "Jewish" stereotypes, while also making the Aryan Lily a convinced member of the Nazi party and a heterosexual mother-of-four who has to fight her own anti-Semitism, because she is already too besotted with Felice by the time she finds out her lover is Jewish. Also "based on a true story," Aimée und Jaguar is a torrid tale of lesbian love, in which being Jewish and being Aryan appear to be interchangeable attributes, and imminent death and deportation spice up a tragic tale of mutual projection, mistaken identity, betrayals and loyalty after the fact, with further elements of *amour fou* transgression. Here, all the positive qualities of a boundless love of life that seizes the moment, regardless of risk, are projected on to the Jewish character as the embodiment of freedom, while the German is repressed and confused, her naivety inoculating her against any kind of responsibility for or part in the brutality of the regime. Yet this projection is also a retrospective act of compensation, again much like converting guilt into a debt, in the hope of balancing the books retrospectively.

Conclusion

I began by claiming that melodrama was a kind of placeholder: it marks a gap but does not fill it; it points to a politics, the failure of which is the reason for its existence. Tentatively, I can now be more specific, since I hope that

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I have indicated two areas where the placeholder function of melodrama and victimhood serves particular political ends:

1) What I called guilt management, that is, the impossible hope of finding a modality of exchange, equivalence, compensation, redress, forgiveness or justice. I gave more detailed examples of this from recent German cinema and the management of the Nazi past and the legacy of the Holocaust, which – as my quotation from Slavoj Žižek initially hinted – I see as also having potentially broader application.

2) What I called the politics of the abject subject, where victimhood gives way to abjection – the zero-degree of all possible forms of exchange, where melodrama again highlights the many forms of injustice and non-equivalence that make up our present-day reality. It is in this context that I could have introduced Jacques Rancière, for his insistence on absolute equality, radical equivalence and his objection to what he calls the "ethical turn." Rancière sees the politics of rational management and consensus (such as that practiced by the EU) as the very abrogation of politics. So-called post-ideological politics, involving, for example, intervention in the name of "world opinion," economic sanctions in the name of "human rights," or humanitarian missions on the back of military actions seem to him not only a negation of politics; they also testify to what he considers a deep (philosophical) nihilism (besides a political cynicism), because such discourses and actions that put victims, fatalities and survivors at the center of a politics of rights and obligations tend to define the purpose of life as living in the presence of death, or rather, they implicitly assume that life has to be rescued – whether from constitutive precariousness, from permanent danger, or from all-enveloping death. Thus, disaster and catastrophe (historically: the Shoah, the Nakba, the Armenian genocide, the Gulag; or environmentally: tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes; or militarily: "pre-emptive strikes," the "war on terror") become the ground and origin of being, from which victimhood emerges as the only form of authentic action or agency.

Rancière claims that the ethical turn associated with Levinas and Derrida is the complement to the same nihilism. In Levinas's formulations in particular, according to Rancière, both action and thought find themselves suspended in the face of pure otherness. Whether humanist and secular, fixated on health care, welfare and humanitarian aid (as in our Western democracies), or religious and messianic, living for the sublime encounter with absolute alterity (as in Levinas), both kinds of ethics are unable to attach positive value to the present, which becomes a site of paralysis and suspension, meaningful only against the foil of death or (natural/man-made)

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disaster. In other words, the underlying conviction of the "ethical turn" is that – in the words of Alain Badiou – "the only thing that can really happen to someone is death."

Against this view, Rancière holds on to a conception of democratic politics as thought and action towards equality. For him, democracy is not representative and has nothing to do with substituting or standing in for the people. Predicated on notions such as the distribution of the sensible, on dissensus, on the articulation of incompatible demands, on impossible choices, and thus on justice and equality as an active process in the here-and-now, Rancière argues that today, these fundamental aspects of the political can be found, if at all, only in modern (installation) art, and even there in an attenuated, ironic form: as montage effects, paradoxes or the agency of objects. Politics must reclaim this territory of contradictions, and with it, the public space that art still inhabits. Although Rancière does not name it, melodrama – according to my argument here – would be precisely such an art, which is there to remind us of the politics we no longer have, or never had.

Notes

1. On Fassbinder's GERMANY IN AUTUMN and the murder of the industrialist Hans Martin Schleyer by members of the Red Army Faction, see my *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 69-70.
2. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).
3. Günter Grass, *Crabwalk*, trans. Krishna Winston (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002).
4. Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945*, trans. Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
5. *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary*, trans. Philip Boehm (London: Picador, 2006).
6. Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, "*Opa war kein Nazi*": *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002).
7. *The Burnt Offering*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Pantheon, 1956).
8. Daniela Berghahn, "Post-1990 Screen Memories: How East and West German Cinema Remembers the Third Reich and the Holocaust," *German Life and Letters* 59:2 (2006), 294-308, 294.

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When Is Melodrama "Good"? Mega-Melodrama and Victimhood

Linda Williams

Mega-Melodrama

In a recent essay I have argued that, since the late eighties, we have been witnessing a huge expansion of the dimensions of movie and television melodrama. The movie screen has expanded *spatially*. Where it once grew wider in competition with television, it now grows deeper – with 3-D certainly, but also through a new dynamization of the vertical space of the screen. By contrast, the television serial melodrama has expanded *temporally* as stories go on and on. Both of these "mega"-melodramas suggest that, in an era of theatrical blockbusters and prime-time and cable serials, we need to rethink the very nature of the melodramatic space and time of the mass-market moving image.

I will not say much here about the blockbusters of big-screen melodrama, except to note that what Kristen Whissel has referred to as the "new verticality" of digitally enhanced movies, defined by "extreme heights and plunging depths,"[1] has expanded exponentially in films with titles like Vertical Limit (2000), Die Hard (1988), The Dark Knight (2008), Air Force One (1997), The Matrix (1999, 2003), Avatar (2009) and Inception (2010). Such films enlist remarkable special effects that defy or succumb to gravity. She argues that this new verticality of the blockbuster screen is well suited to an era defined by "economic polarization and new forms of political, religious, and military extremism, all of which seem to have had the effect [...] of evacuating previously available middle grounds."[2]

The absence of a middle ground has been a hallmark of the popular stage and screen melodrama ever since the early nineteenth-century dramas with music that gave the mode its name. Peter Brooks, for example, calls melodrama the very "logic of the excluded middle." If traditional "patterns of moral order" have become confused in a modern era in which good and evil are no longer clear, then it has long been the job of melodrama to reveal, either through the recognition of a Gothically-tinged villain or an innocent victim, a moral legibility with no gray areas in between.[3] Melodrama is the spectacular way in which popular culture has reassured its consumers that we are good and that those who threaten us are evil. Melodrama is

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not necessarily a drama of the victory of good over evil but rather the all-important *recognition* of both.

There are three essential qualities of melodrama that I want to stress initially in this discussion (borrowed from Brooks, Christine Gledhill and my own work on American racial melodrama). The *first* is this necessity to render legible an often occulted good or evil. *Second*, the "good" is often quite conservatively located in the past, or in a nostalgic space of innocence to which a happy ending returns and which a sad ending mourns. *Third*, melodrama has a reputation for flouting realism – as if it were essentially an outmoded form of theatricalized excess. But if we look for melodrama only in what seems archaic or excessive, we mistake its more contemporary forms. One way in which it has modernized and seemed realistic is by adopting novel objects of sympathy – new kinds of victim-heroes, new kinds of social problems. Thus melodrama draws into its orbit beings who previously seemed to be beyond the pale of humanity: Uncle Tom in one century; a Southern racist in another; an avatar in another.

The hero of the blockbuster movie displays his or her virtue not only in spectacular actions, but also first in forms of suffering that make this subsequent action seem morally legible. This pathos of the suffering victim turned into a righteous action hero is, for better and for worse, the alchemy of melodrama's cultural power. To suffer, to be injured, is perversely (according to a certain Judeo-Christian framework) to deserve to win. The very injury which makes me see the evil in my injurer and the good in myself is the basis of a fundamentally resentful form of moralism – a Nietzschean *ressentiment* – at the heart of much melodrama, well explained by Elisabeth Anker. We see this in mass entertainment action melodramas just as much as we see it in the stories we tell ourselves about our righteousness as a nation; whether it is the oft-told story of the conquest of the West or the more recent story of the invasion of Iraq, in the American popular imagination we inevitably portray ourselves as suffering from the attacks of others. *Because we* have suffered, we believe we morally deserve to conquer and invade. Such is our often misguided melodramatic sense of justice.

If we look for contemporary melodrama only in its most familiar and clichéd aspects – victims tied to railroad tracks, villains twirling mustaches, rescues that happen too late or in the nick of time – then we may mistake its more contemporary forms and its protean ability to transform.

If we can agree that melodrama endures not only as an archaic holdover of the nineteenth-century stage play (with its virtuous victims and leering villains), not only as women's films, chick flicks or Oprah confessions, and not only in soap operas and disease-of-the-week TV movies, but also as

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an evolving mode of storytelling crucial to the establishment of moral good – or, as the creator of *The Wire* David Simon would put it, justice – then we might be able to see not only how melodrama endures in *The Wire,* but also how it evolves towards the presentation of a higher sense of justice, beyond mere Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Melodrama has especially thrived in prime-time television drama, which, until cable came along, was not too interested in morally complex shades of gray. Now, however, increased seriality has made such complexity possible.

Horizontal Suspensions: Mega-Melodrama on the Small Screen

Television does not ignore suspenseful spectacle. TV is, after all, the place where we see "it" first and the place where we see it live: World Series, World Cups, oil spills, trapped minors, the Arab Spring and that quintessentially vertical spectacle of 9/11. But the "its" of these spectacles mobilize a different kind of attention, one that we may need to continue watching for much longer than the two-hours-plus of a movie, one that cannot be concentrated into a single turning point in space, and one that may need to be seen in something approaching real time.

Long ago, the television scholar Horace Newcomb wrote that except for the daytime soap operas, television had not exploited the one resource it had in abundance: time.[4] Now it seems that the medium has harnessed that resource in the increasing serialization of what used to be more or less discrete episodes. In roughly the same twenty-year period in which the action blockbuster has gained verticality and three-dimensionality, television has gained greater horizontality and temporality, moving both forward and backward, borrowing important qualities both from the greater live-ness and immediacy of news and reality shows while also borrowing from soap opera, which used to move at a pace almost as slow as "life itself." Those unending daytime melodramas once aimed primarily at women are now gradually dying off, but their DNA seems to have been passed on to melodramatic serial dramas, with the difference that they are no longer aimed primarily at women and that sometimes a series will actually end.

Descended from "soaps" and more distantly from nineteenth-century serial fiction, brought to prime time in the eighties with the likes of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, today's television serial is an adaptation of the familiar weekly episodic drama into a more cumulative and serial form of storytelling. At one end of the spectrum of this accumulation is a story that can end tidily with each episode, leaving only a few threads of the ongoing situation

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hanging. At the other end of the spectrum are a large number of series that do not tidily resolve themselves at the end of an episode or even a season and to which we return, if we are "hooked," like addicts of narrative.

Most television critics today agree that, with the advantage of more "cumulative" stories and the ability to write and produce series more rapidly than movies, television has become more aesthetically interesting, complex, sophisticated, timely and relevant than most movies, or than previously episodic forms of television drama.[5] Of course, there are many different kinds of sophistication and complexity. There is the kind that comes with numerous commercial interruptions on the networks, and which, like soaps, must build sufficient redundancy into the program for the non-regular viewer (for example, the popular cult blockbuster, *Lost*). Then there is the complexity and sophistication of the shows on premium cable channels that may count on viewers to pay better attention and remember. (My sole example here will be *The Wire*.)

The question I want to address through the serial television example of *The Wire* is whether melodrama is condemned to repeat these same patterns. Is melodrama's hold on our "mass consciousness" a vice-like grip stuck in these self-righteous and addictive forms of affective conditioning? Is melodrama itself the problem, as greater portions of the modern imagination have been given over to its influence? For example, theater historian Mathew Buckley asks if its affective structures and sensational effects have become by now "a normative form of feeling and thought."[6] Or, might it be possible to forge a less self-righteous kind of melodrama, not dependent on wild swings between pathos and action, not a matter of cycles of victimization and retributive violence, and yet capable of the kind of political address for which melodrama has previously been known?

It is in the sheer linear extension afforded by the unprecedented length of viewing time – not the highs and lows and depths of the big screen – that we must measure the horizontal extension of television serials. Contemporary television critics point with enthusiasm to some of the most complex, convoluted, even "baroque" moments of these serials.[7] Some of these critics refer to a kind of poetics of seriality that is inherently opposed to classical beginnings, middles and ends, as well as to the usual Hollywood conventions of a character-driven causality.[8]

Time affords longer arcs of characterization as well as the possibility of many more characters who, with yet more time, can change. It brings a more expansive economy of storytelling that can build and intersect multiple worlds. As Jeffrey Sconce has put it: "[w]hat television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for in depth and *duration* of character

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relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment".[9] David Simon's *The Wire*, which ran on HBO from 2 June 2002 to 9 March 2008, is composed of sixty hour-long episodes with no commercial interruption, organized into five seasons averaging twelve episodes per season. This strong serial (in the sense of strongly serialized components) has been considered so good, so "realistic," so "authentic," so "tragic," that it could not possibly be associated with something so lowly as melodrama. It has even been disassociated from television itself (as in the HBO advert, "It's not TV, it's HBO"). Simon himself has led the charge of disassociation:

> Swear to God, it isn't a cop show. Really, it isn't. And though there be cops and gangsters aplenty, it isn't actually a crime show, though the spine of every season is certain to be a police investigation in Baltimore, Maryland.[10]

Rather, *The Wire* is a realist "visual novel," following in the footsteps of *Moby Dick*; or, even more exaltedly, it is urban tragedy:

> [We have] ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides ... We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state ... What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason – instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it's the postmodern institutions ... those are the indifferent Gods.[11]

Despite Simon's protestations to the contrary, the series *is* a cop show, though one that uses the investigation into crime as a way to probe the interconnected realities – and injustices – of the American city. In this case, what is foregrounded is the very ideal of America as a land of equal opportunity and justice.

Also regardless of Simon's assertions of tragedy, the series may aspire to, but does not attain, the status of tragedy, which, I argue, is a good thing. Here I take the crucial difference between melodrama and tragedy to be their respective stances towards justice. Tragic heroes may rail against the injustice of their fate, but in the end the chorus, the audience and the heroes themselves accept this fate, reconciling themselves to the reality of a cosmic injustice. Tragedy is a mode of feeling that deals with awe and pity; it shows how human life and aspiration inevitably lead to failure, suffering and death. As we watch Oedipus suffer, we appreciate the tragic irony of how his efforts to escape his fate only ensnare him more deeply in it.

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Heroes of melodrama also suffer and struggle, but they are not put onstage to be reconciled to a predetermined fate. Whether their struggle succeeds or fails, whether the end is happy or sad, their function is to demonstrate a virtue that is proven through this very suffering. In the case of villains, we recognize an evil that, for a moment at least, ceases to be hidden. Melodrama unveils good or evil to confront the horrendous failure of justice in a world that dares, as the tragic sensibility does not, to hope for it. Melodrama is a mode of feeling that generates outrage against a fate that *could* and *should* be changed.

The term "tragedy" has a way of dignifying everything from bad luck to the most calamitous disasters.[12] But as critics have long taught, tragedy derives from overweening pride, fatal flaws (or at least momentous mistakes), and it depicts divided souls. Melodramatic heroes are often more wholly victims or villains, though here it is important to recognize that the absorption of realist practices has often meant that while early nineteenth-century stage melodrama had undivided victims and villains, neither the monopathy described by Robert Heilman nor the Manichaean worldview described by Peter Brooks has persisted unchanged into more recent works. Heroes may triumph or they may fail, but either way the feelings they exhibit or stir up – sympathy, outrage, righteousness, triumph, sadness – cannot be described as tragic. The facile emotional spectacle of the suffering of innocence may be melodrama's most embarrassing cliché, as with Little Nell, Little Eva or Uncle Tom, but why do we not recognize it when it takes place in the work of more established artists, as with Dreyer's Jeanne d'Arc, Von Trier's many suffering heroines, Almodovar's weeping men, or a great many of the characters discussed below in *The Wire*?

Those who, like Simon, have praised *The Wire* as tragedy have done so because they want to elevate its exceptional dramatic achievements beyond the usual televisual fare. If the usual is the simplistic black/white opposition of certain melodramatic genres, such as cop shows which pit good guys (cops) who solve cases against bad guys (usually underclass criminals) who eventually get caught, then Simon wants to deny the generic familiarity of the "cop show." Perhaps he especially wants to deny this familiarity as a former writer on *Homicide*, which *was* one.[13] However, it does not make sense to deny utterly the televisual generic elements of the series, any more than it makes sense to deny the larger modal qualities of melodrama that come with the territory.

For evil will rarely be located in a personal villain, nor will good only be located in a singular victim who might be saved or avenged. Early nineteenth-century stage melodrama relied upon such familiar deployments of victims and villains, but melodrama is not a static form. Over its

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two-hundred-plus-year history it has evolved in relation to both realism and modernism. It is because *The Wire* takes on more than the usual cop melodrama that its creator, along with many critics and viewers, wants to call the suffering of many of its protagonists "tragedy."[14] We know what they mean by this: that the series is better than typical TV; that it eschews facile happy endings, that it is "realistic." However, we misunderstand the real achievement of the series if we attribute to tragedy all that is great (and seemingly transcendent) in popular culture, when it is actually *from* the democratic mode of melodrama and its manifestations in serial television that it has grown.

There is such a thing, I want to argue, as good, rich, complex, socially relevant melodrama, and the case of *The Wire* offers an unusual opportunity to grasp what American genre-driven television culture can be at its best. So, just as melodrama should not be defined as failed tragedy, neither should ambitious, political melodrama be viewed as the transcendent achievement of tragedy. For *The Wire* is neither exceptional postmodern tragedy nor conventional "old-fashioned" melodrama, but rather the product of a unique tussle between them, one that melodrama wins.

There is no single main tragic hero in *The Wire*, but there is a fatalist tone and a certain brave acceptance of violent[15] death on the part of many characters that is easily read as tragedy. And some critics, following Arthur Miller's famous insistence that tragedy can still be written in modern America, have argued that, despite a lack of traditional nobility, it is possible to produce tragedy.[16] Most of the characters who have been cited, however, as Potter and Marshall note, are "merely sad."

However, there are two characters – Frank Sobotka in the second season and Stringer Bell in the third – whose fates do seem fully tragic. In the interest of brevity I will discuss only Sobotka. Sobotka is a flawed but noble leader whose attempt to revitalize his union brings about the death of thirteen women, the arrest of his nephew, the incarceration of his son for murder and finally his own death. Unlike many more innocent victims, he knows what he is doing and brings his fate upon himself.

Sobotka is the head of the predominantly Polish International Brotherhood of Stevedores union. He makes a Faustian bargain to save his waning union by helping Eastern European gangsters to smuggle contraband into the country through his port. His goal is to pay lobbyists to use their influence to expand the harbor. Police investigate and find thirteen Eastern European prostitutes dead in a shipping container. Horrified, Sobotka attempts to back out of the smuggling deal but, because his son and nephew have become involved in their own smuggling schemes as well, they are ensnared by the

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police. To assure that the law will go easy on them, he makes a deal with the police to turn informant on the head trafficker, known as "The Greek." When the Greek gets word of this, Frank is killed. We do not see his death, but we see its aftermath: the display of Sobotka's multiply-stabbed body as it is lowered by a crane onto the dock. As in classic Greek tragedy, in which the body is displayed on the *skene* and the orchestra of citizens in the semicircle below watches and laments, the stevedores stand witness to the fallen tragic hero.[17]

Though the season's twelve episodes exceed the Aristotelian unities of time and place, the confinement of this tragedy to the frame of this one season nevertheless lends the sense of a tight classical form.[18] This is a familial tragedy that sees the ruin of the house of Sobotka every bit as much as Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon ruins the house of Atreus. It is a self-consciously modern tragedy in a rather Arthur Miller style, not unlike *A View from the Bridge.* And when it is over, it is over; it has few narrative tentacles reaching into the other institutions and thus little larger resonance within the rest of the series. The individual tragedy of one man and his family to whom "attention must be paid"[19] is neatly (perhaps too neatly for "serial tragedy") contained within the season in which it appears, and thus its classicism runs against the larger ambition of the series to forge connections between institutions and to explore generational repetition over time. Although it is certainly part of the story of the urban ruin that is Baltimore, the fall of Sobotka stands out too much from the tightly woven series as a whole. It does not help that this tragedy is also predominantly about white ethnic workers and that it invites a back-in-the-day mourning for an era in which aspiration to the middle class was a predominantly white affair.

More in keeping with the interconnected nature of serial television and the fabric of the rest of the series is the story of Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) as it interacts with that of his close friend and partner, Avon Barksdale. I will not detail this other tragic fall, except to say that Bell's flaws combine a contradictory tendency ruthlessly to eliminate possible informants (Wallace/D'Angelo) and a naïve belief that he can turn drug profits into a legitimate (and peaceful) capitalist enterprise. His bid for legitimacy is represented by the waterfront condos that he is developing under the name of B&B (Bell and Barksdale) Enterprises. Thus, while his conversion to capitalist strategies represents a relief from the more overt violence of his partner Avon, as, for example, in his introduction of Robert's Rules of Order for the conduct of meetings, his behind-the-scenes manipulations are emblematic of the underlying but hidden violence of capital, which values nothing but the accumulation of wealth.[20] Ironically, then, the man who most advocates the abandonment of unnecessary "gangster" violence has ordered some of the most unforgivable acts of violence in the series.

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For example, to prove his hardness to his friend and business partner, who believes him to be soft, Bell confesses his murder of D'Angelo – his partner's nephew, whom he feared would turn witness against them while in prison. He confesses not out of guilt but due to a fatal flaw that compels him here to prove his "hardness," linked to his "smartness." Though his partner cannot argue with the necessity of this crime, things will never be the same between them and soon each has plotted to thwart the other.

In Stringer's case, his partner has given him up. We see him confronted by two hitmen, Omar and Brother Mouzone, in his final scene. With a proper *anagnorisis* (tragic recognition of fate) registered in close up, Stringer now faces his *catastrophe*. After a long pause and the quietly spoken recognition that he cannot "do nothin' to change your minds," he orders them to "get on with it motherf…." Shots ring out from both shotgun and pistol before Stinger can even finish the epithet. Omar walks into the space against the window where Stringer formerly stood, and, when he leaves it, a rack focus reveals that behind him on the wall across the street is a yellow sign that reads: "Coming Soon. Residential Opportunities. B&B Enterprises."[21]

The falls of Sobotka and Bell are seemingly textbook examples of tragedy. One fate is played out against the failed rejuvenation of the harbor as a place of middle-class work and the other against the failed transformation of the commodity exchange of drug money into Bell and Bell Enterprises as a "legitimate" real estate development on the waterfront. Two visions of the future of Baltimore's waterfront are depicted, both based originally on illegal trafficking, both attempting to launder an original basis in contraband commodity exchange – smuggling for Sobotka, drugs for Bell – into a more pure form of capital accumulation invested in Baltimore's future growth. Sobotka's investment of capital is to purchase political influence: to buy his union more work through dredging the harbor so that bigger ships can be brought in. Bell's investment of capital also attempts to buy political influence, but its end is pure finance capital – money to make more money. It is not for nothing that, when Detectives McNulty and Moreland search Bell's neat, almost characterless apartment after his death, they do not recognize their gangster antagonist, especially when they find there a copy of *The Wealth of Nations*.[22]

The vision of Baltimore's future that will win out in the end is certainly not the one that will produce middle-class work for self-improving working- and middle-class families. Liberalism, in its old-fashioned sense as the universal right to pursue equal opportunity offered by democratic societies, is no longer an option; neoliberalism ostensibly embraces the goals of the "rights of man," but in fact so strictly adheres to the operation of a "free market"

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that only the few, already wealthy, benefit while the middle and bottom are increasingly dispossessed. Indeed, this may be the deeper tragedy of what falls – Adam Smith's very idea of an "invisible hand" that benefits many. This liberal economic theory, which no longer seems to function, is also Frank Sobotka's outdated vision for the working man. Stringer Bell's vision is more properly neoliberal: the future of Baltimore as upscale condos where a certain quality of life is commodified for the wealthy and the rest decline. This commodification through finance capital will triumph, even though Bell himself is dragged down by his gangster past.[23] Thus a liberal workers' utopia fails; a postmodern neoliberal utopia of privatized urban space wins out. Any way you look at it, the future for the increasingly underemployed worker and for the already unemployed underclass is bleak.

Bleakness, however, does not define tragedy. Nor are all "fates" in *The Wire* bleak.[24] But even if there is no question that Sobotka's and Bell's fates are tragic, two fates (neither of which extends across the whole narrative) cannot define a series with some thirty major characters. It is therefore worth attending to how critics of the series such as Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall attempt to argue that, even if there are very few actually tragic fates, nevertheless the "show itself […] functions as tragedy." Their argument sheds light on a common misperception of how tragedy has been democratized and rendered "realistic" in a modern or postmodern age. In a liberal democratic spirit that is proper to melodrama but runs counter to the very spirit of tragedy, they argue that it is the mere fact of "giving a human face to what is usually written off as unavoidable urban blight, criminality, and addiction" that constitutes tragedy in this work.[25] As if the achievement of modern tragedy were simply a matter of lowering the socioeconomic bar by which fate decides who will be counted as worthy, they argue that the innovation of *The Wire* is, in Arthur Miller's terms, to have "paid attention" to lives formerly regarded as disposable, and thus to have advanced the argument "that all of American culture must act with justice…."[26]

Justice, however, is what tragedy can never accomplish. Rather, it is what it mourns. Tragedy cannot adapt itself to democracy as if it were a simple matter of liberal democratic inclusion. Neither the failure nor the achievement of justice constitutes tragedy. But this is not because tragedy cannot be extended to "the common man." Once "ordinary" people earn the "right" to be regarded as tragic, we fail to recognize that they do so by invoking democratic ideals of justice that are actually antithetical to tragedy. In taking Arthur Miller's arguments for tragedy and the common man one step further down the socioeconomic scale, Potter and Marshall twist tragedy into what it cannot be: a plea for justice for the disenfranchised, a protesting "dissent" to the injustice of the world. In other words, they turn tragedy into melodrama.

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Tragedy, I argue, is too final, too catastrophic, too inevitable and too reliant on the exceptional greatness of its flawed victims to make the kind of claims for justice that melodrama, as a whole, makes. Tragedy, as we have seen, is not about outrage at injustice. It is quite the contrary: acceptance of the terribleness of one's fate, even as it seems too terrible to endure. Stringer Bell begins to accept his fate when he tries to order his assassins to "get on with it motherf…," but this order is significantly cut short, his experience of his own tragic fate stunted, not given its full "hour upon the stage." In Sobotka's case we do not even see his acceptance of his fate, although the brave way he walks towards it suggests that he is reconciled. In both cases, however, the full tragedy – the tragedy in which a hero is allowed the time to bemoan fate – is cut short. You might say that part of the tragedy is that there is not quite enough time for it in a world that can no longer sufficiently value human life.

Simon is certainly right to claim that it is the postmodern (though the better term is actually *neoliberal*) institutions against which his characters struggle. But these institutions are not the indifferent gods of tragedy. Whenever an individual tries to struggle against the institution that fails to serve its citizens – whether it is Bell's attempt to reform the drug trade so that fewer bodies will fall, or Tommy Carcetti's attempts to make city government responsible to citizens' needs, or Major Colvin's attempt to reform the police or his later attempt to reform the schools – that reform will usually fail. We tend to call these failures tragic. Individuals struggle and put up a good fight, but their failures, I argue, are not tragic. There is too much hope for change in *The Wire* and too much pathos for helpless victims (such as young Wallace of the first season or Dukie of the last two) to say that it is predominantly tragic. Sad endings do not a tragedy make.

As Robert Heilman once aptly put it, tragedy is not about the plague in Thebes. Oedipus's solution to the riddle of the Sphinx may end that plague, but the play is not about the suffering caused by the plague. It is not about the afflictions of the city that might be rectified. It is about the conflict within the great soul of the tragic hero. Melodrama, in contrast, *can* be about the plague in Thebes, or New York, or Baltimore. Indeed, tragedy is interested in the dividedness of the great soul of the tragic hero. "In tragedy the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things."[27]

Bad things happen to people in melodrama, but we are allowed to hope for the happier ending that would seem just to the ordinary citizen. And if that hope is dashed, melodrama still wants us to know what justice could be – that the plague could be cured, that drug addiction and general human worthlessness could be alleviated. This is why David Simon has called his

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series "dissent." Like it or not, however, it is melodrama, not tragedy, that has the ability to dissent.[28]

In a foundational essay on film melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser famously noted that in the Hollywood melodrama, "characters made for operettas play out the tragedies of mankind." Elsaesser was writing about family melodrama of the fifties considered as a genre, not a mode; his point was the ironic "mediocrity of the human beings" who tried to live up to an exalted vision of man, but instead lived out the "impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare."[29] I would put this differently, even though I believe that in American melodrama the viability of the liberal American dream is still at issue. Rather than conclude, as Elsaesser does, that the best American melodramas of the 1950s are "not only critical social documents but genuine tragedies" – which leaves us with only one high, culturally exalted form and its melodramatic degradation – I argue that melodrama is not the degraded modern version of tragedy. Nor, when it is "good," does melodrama revert to ironic tragedy. Rather, just as there are great tragedies, there are great melodramas, especially now that no single catastrophe or "happy ending" need mark its conclusion.

But if *The Wire* is not classical tragedy, neither is it *classical* melodrama. If we only look for contemporary melodrama in its familiar aspects, we mistake its protean nature. We should keep in mind, then, the ways melodrama renews itself and makes itself modern by adapting the most recent awareness of social problems to melodramatic ends.[30] Contrary to popular belief, melodrama is not opposed to what we recognize as realism. Rather, it enlists realism to generate outrage against realities that could and, according to its creators, should be changed. Melodrama feeds upon the problems of these realities, the very injustice of them. Melodrama's commitment to justice is thus not in any way *objectively just*.[31] An audience's ability to recognize good depends upon the manifest suffering of an oppressed innocence. Only through the perception of suffering can moral legibility occur.

Many critics of *The Wire* have persisted in calling it, if not melodramatic, then what Simon regarded as the same thing: namely, "Dickensian."[32] In the fifth and final season, having heard one too many glowing comparisons of the series to Dickens, Simon created a venal, patrician senior editor at the *Baltimore Sun*, Charles Whiting Jr., significantly not from Baltimore, who demotes the responsible and hard-working city editor, Gus Haynes (Clarke Johnson), significantly from Baltimore and also of mixed race. The patrician editor cancels a planned series of (multi-sited) stories on education and instead urges a junior reporter to develop the "Dickensian aspects" of a story about homelessness. This reporter, Scott Templeton,

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writes a virtuous-victim story about a homeless Iraqi vet suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder that is a model of "surround a simple outrage," "rifle-shot" journalism. This story, like many of his others, is fabricated. On the basis of his Dickensian fictions, Templeton eventually wins a Pulitzer.[33]

Much of the fifth season is devoted to the rise of Templeton's lying career, in parallel to the lies told by Detective Jimmy McNulty about a fake serial killer. Where McNulty lies in order to channel resources to the police in the ongoing investigation of the new drug kingpin Marlo Stanfied, Templeton lies out of pure careerism. His venality is contrasted to the diligence of harder-working reporters who are demoted as the paper downsizes. We thus see how the entire profession has been cheapened through the melodramatization of decontextualized rifle-shot journalism at the expense of facts and deeper context.

In this way, David Simon shows how his own contextualized, "multi-sited" institutional reporting – that undertaken by *The Wire* itself – improves on the *Baltimore Sun*. Simon thus also gets to vent his spleen on the journalistic requirement to be Dickensian. Ironically, of course, Simon deploys the most obvious and clichéd tools of melodrama – uncomplicated victims and villains – in order to condemn the Dickensian project of telling stories with overdrawn victims and villains.

The fifth season of *The Wire* is its least successful, because this quality of Dickensian melodrama – which it both satirizes and performs – does not always live up to the higher standard of institutional melodrama established by the rest of the series. If one of the great pitfalls of the melodramatic imagination is an excess of self-righteousness, then the particular problem with this final season is that, in depicting the one institution about which he truly has no critical distance, Simon cannot help but grind his ax. We have only to see how the series pats itself on the back for having covered all the multi-sited stories throughout the city that the paper itself has failed to cover: one on education that was planned and then cancelled by the paper in order to "do" a superficial and mendacious one on homelessness instead, when we know by then that education had already been "covered" deeply by the series in season four's portrait of four middle-school boys; or one on Omar Little's death, cancelled in favor of a story about a fire. Indeed, the real melodramatic hero of season five might be seen to be the series itself. For it has already told all the important stories that the newspaper either ignores, cancels or garbles: city government's attempted reform; Bunny Colvin's "Hamsterdam" experiment; the succeeding drug dynasties; and so on.

What Simon really objects to in the epithet "Dickensian" is not so much the production of moral legibility – which *The Wire* does constantly – as the

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happy ending that produces it too easily. The "nice old uncle" or guardian who comes along in the end to "fix things" is Simon's true objection to Dickens.[34] For what typically gets "fixed" in the Dickensian happy ending is only the fate of the few good people who were already born to middle-class or higher status anyway. Although Dickens could brilliantly display the flawed workings of a single institution – say the Inns of Court in *Bleak House* – he could not show us the struggle within that institution between good and bad. Everyone who comes near it suffers, but those who survive have more inherent moral fortitude than those who do not.[35]

The Wire shows us a way out of the limits of the nineteenth-century Dickensian melodrama, by playing out the quest for moral legibility at both the personal *and* the institutional level and by not privileging the well-born as those who really deserve redemption. It thus is a matter of great concern whether the police can do more than merely catch bodies or make drug rips; or whether the city government can decide who needs the most funding, police or schools; or whether schools can enable teachers really to teach; or whether media can report the truth of what happens in the city. This is where the "procedural" element of the series, modeled on the police procedural but extending to all the other institutions – unions, city government, schools and media – becomes crucial. *The Wire* is a police procedural not simply in its observance of the routines of questioning witnesses, gathering evidence and so on, but also in its focus on the ethical life of the police as an institution. By the fifth season, when Detective Jimmy McNulty fabricates an attention-grabbing serial killer in order to receive funding to pursue the real crimes of Marlo Stanfield, and when Lester Freaman follows him down this path, we know that these lies are no more a product of being "good" police than Scott Templeton's fabricated stories are a product of good reporting. In order to do their job and solve the case of the many dead bodies walled up in the vacant houses, McNulty fabricates a serial killer whose sensational crimes, as reported by the *Sun*, brings them the overtime and vehicles to work the case of the "vacants." At this point, both the institution of the police and the institution of journalism have failed the ethical test. While there are still good police on the force who refuse to go along with this scheme (especially Kima Greggs and Bunk Moreland), and while there are still good reporters on the beat (Mike Fletcher and Alma Gutierrez), the institutions as a whole have failed to perform their most basic functions.

The police procedural, as a genre-friendly way into the institution of the police, offers the largest frame around the series as a whole, beginning and ending it. But within that frame are many other procedurals, each of which provides a full fabric of moral contexts, each context influencing

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another. For example, in season five, because the newly-elected Mayor Thomas Carcetti's ambition to run for governor had caused him to refuse to accept a handout for education from the current Republican governor, he finds himself without enough funds for both the police and schools. He chooses not to fund the police, and thus orders them to curtail the investigation into the bodies found in the vacant houses. This precipitates Jimmy McNulty's decision to fake evidence of a serial killing by breaking the neck of an already dead homeless man to match the *modus operandi* of a corpse he recently viewed in the morgue. With such a sensational crime, McNulty correctly figures, resources will flow again to the Major Crimes unit. Something like the same reasoning is employed by Scott Templeton as the *Baltimore Sun* downsizes and reporters, like police, are asked to do "more with less." The "more" that Templeton does is to fabricate local stories from scratch.

Thus *The Wire* recalibrates the very meaning of the melodramatic recognition of virtue to an institutional level: the institution of the police either can or cannot recognize the "good" of effective community policing (at the point at which McNulty fabricates false evidence and begins giving out overtime, they cannot); the institution of drug dealers either can or cannot recognize the good of avoiding the casualties of "dropping bodies" (the point at which Marlo Stanfield begins to kill for the slightest provocation proves that they cannot); the unions either can or cannot provide work without engaging in corruption (the point at which Sobotka's nephew and son take his cue, and do their own illegal smuggling, proves they cannot); the city government either can or cannot recognize the good of real reform, not just the appearance of it (the point at which Carcetti chooses his own career over money for schools proves that it cannot); the schools either can or cannot recognize the good of teaching and learning with the benefit of "soft eyes"; and the city newspaper either can or cannot recognize the good of truthful, scrupulous reporting (at the point at which Templeton is praised within the paper for his fabricated stories and purple prose, it is clear it cannot).

It is the day-to-day workings of these institutions, at the nitty-gritty level of budgets, drug profits, political horse-trading and editorial practices, all cross-cut for maximum interaction and comparison – not private loves, kindly uncles or personal villains – that determine fates. The fact that, in the end, none of these institutions as a whole can recognize what is just and good in its own operation, despite the many individuals who try, is the basis of the series' famous anger and "dissent." However, except for Sobotka and Bell, these failures do not form the basis of individual tragedy. In the end we find a city that remains in the grip of self-serving, short-sighted careerist police, ever-more

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ruthless gangsters, a corrupt city government that will always "disappoint," schools where the best an individual teacher can do is to control a class and encourage a kid or two, and a media that misses most of the important stories that the multi-sited ethnographic imaginary of the series has already told.

This shift to the institutional and political level of melodrama is the most remarkable achievement of *The Wire*; this meshing of the individual with the political-institutional is its most bravura aspect. In order to appreciate this more fully, I would like to consider the way in which the institutional melodrama plays out in relation to the most overtly Dickensian character in the whole series: Reginald "Bubbles" Cousins (Andre Royo). Bubbles is Dickensian in the most obvious sense of that word: colorful, eccentric, deeply pathetic. As a drug addict, he is a regular fixture of the drug corners; as a criminal informant, he is also familiar with, and to, the police. Indeed, unlike Sobotka or Bell, he is crucial to the very ability of the series to be multi-sited. In season three, we see him scavenging metal and selling t-shirts and used cell phones from a shopping cart in Hamsterdam, providing us with the inside view on this new and very temporary institution. But it is in seasons four and five that his trajectory shifts and he diverges from the usual Dickensian prototype.

In the introduction to a conversation between himself and David Simon, while *The Wire* was still unfolding on HBO, the novelist Nick Hornby praised it by observing that "the hapless Bubbles, forever dragging behind him his shopping trolley full of stolen goods, is Baltimore's answer to Joe [*sic*] the Crossing Sweeper."[36] Jo is a young vagrant of the slums of Chancery in Dickens' *Bleak House*. He makes his living by sweeping a path through the filthiest intersections for fastidious upper-class pedestrians to pass. It is through this occupation that he observes the last days of Mr X, meets Lady Dedlock, contracts smallpox and unwittingly passes it on to Esther. Despite the fact that Jo is an adolescent boy and Bubbles a mature man, it is easy to understand why Hornby wants to emphasize their similarities. Both are peripatetic figures of the street who arouse sympathy because they are so "hapless." Bubbles's shopping cart is like Jo's broom, a tool that enables bare survival from a street that only wants both of them, as the constable repeatedly urges Jo, "to move on."[37]

However, the differences between these two figures also reveal the ways in which *The Wire* diverges from the classical model of Dickensian melodrama. In the Dickensian model, victims or villains are in keeping with the dominant economic model of rising bourgeois hopes. Those who properly belong to those hopes can self-improve and have a chance at a happy ending. Those, like Jo, who are simply too benighted, cannot. Jo is Dickens's trump card in his plea for parliamentary reforms that might address the suffering of indigent Londoners; but as a trump card, he has a limited role to play, beyond generating pity. At one

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point the poor fellow sits on the doorstep of the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts" to eat a "dirty bit of bread," wholly in ignorance, since he cannot read, of what that building is for.[38] There is no institution to help him, only kind benefactors who always come "too late," because to save Jo would be to present the world with the problem of what to do with an individual who knows absolutely "nothink." It is Jo's function to be a go-between between Lady Dedlock, Esther and Mr Snagsby, and to give smallpox to Esther so that she might prove her greater virtue by enduring its physical mark.

Jo's pure goodness, and almost equally pure ignorance, allows Dickens to condemn all of those who would pretend not to know, or be so callous as not to care, about him. The young physician in whose arms Jo dies comforts him with an incomplete Lord's Prayer, after which the narrator pronounces, turning self-righteously upon his readers:

> The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!
>
> Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.[39]

No kind uncle can "fix" things for Jo; indeed, Jo is so pitiable that he really must die. There can be no happy ending for the truly "benighted." Dickensian melodrama tends to reserve redemption for the more principled characters, like Esther or Oliver Twist, whose rightful place in an ascending bourgeois order must be established and is, in fact, already assured through inheritance. The more "benighted" do more social good by dying than by living. Jo is not a character who can grow or change, not even over a six-hundred-page serialized novel. His virtue in suffering is taken seriously because it permits the virtue of the higher born and more deserving to shine in recognizing it.

Bubbles might initially seem Dickensian in this same way – as the poor but good-hearted vagrant with no proper place in society. As it turns out, however, Bubbles may be hapless but he is hardly benighted. Indeed, his intelligence is very much needed by the police. His memory of names, streets and license plates makes him an invaluable source of information. He is also an irrepressible teacher and mentor to his younger partners in crime, always trying to "school them" with his knowledge of how to make a buck off the detritus of the streets, repeating the joke that they think they are "brown" (wise like him in the ways of the streets) but are really "green" (inexperienced, in need of his mentorship). Deep within this compulsion to mentor younger, less experienced men may be buried a homoerotic urge that he himself does

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not examine.[40] In season three, Bubbles escalates his economic activities from scavenging to commodity capital as he invests in goods to sell from his shopping cart, catering in used cell phones and t-shirts to the inhabitants of "Hamsterdam" (a cardboard sign advertises "whitey sale"); later, in response to customers' needs, he stocks up on condoms, toilet paper and hoodies. By the fourth season he has two shopping carts and an assistant (Sherrod) and seems a fully-fledged entrepreneur. Indeed, except for the fact that his motive is to feed his habit – or perhaps because of it – Bubbles is the very model of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*; "calculating rather than rule abiding," he makes rational decisions about "costs, benefits and consequences," asking nothing and getting nothing from the dwindling welfare state.[41]

In the fourth season, however, Bubbles's life takes a different turn. Unintentionally, he causes the death of his latest partner and protégé, Sherrod, in a poisonous shot of heroin intended for a fellow addict who repeatedly robs and beats him. Devastated, the usually irrepressible Bubbles turns himself in to the police for murder and tries to hang himself in an interrogation room. Jay Landsman, the corpulent homicide sergeant known for his obsession with the number of open cases on his watch, pulls him down from his noose and has the decency to send him where he actually needs to go: not to trial and jail, but to a psychiatric unit where he will get clean and make good use of Walon (Steve Earle), his sometime Narcotics Anonymous sponsor.

The Wire thus dramatically makes the case for the need for state-sponsored care – though without the self-righteous editorializing of Simon's early reporting. Indeed, Bubbles's serial melodrama proves a rich illustration, despite all his industry, of the failure of the neoliberal ethic of self-sufficiency. Try as he might, in the fourth season he cannot overcome the predations of a more ruthless addict who steals his profits and his dope. His supposed friends and protectors, the police, repeatedly fail to come to his aid, prompting an appropriate revenge: his ingenious but hapless solution to the problem of the predatory addict is to prepare a poisonous shot which he expects the predator to steal, but which Sherrod mistakenly takes instead. Here Bubbles becomes a victim of his own scheme of revenge. In a Wildean irony, he has killed the one he loves, even if he does not know the name for the feeling he has for the boy. This unintentional murder shatters the entire edifice of his confidently moral identity, leaving a twitching mass of grief and guilt.

Important as state-sponsored care is, however, it is not what fully "fixes" Bubbles. It can only put him in the clean and sober place where he can eventually forgive himself. For the failure of his attempt to hang himself, and the further failure of his attempt to assume the legal guilt for Sherrod's death, leaves him in dire need of a more complete rescue than Sergeant

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Landsman and the psychiatric unit can offer. As perhaps the strongest story of redemption in the whole series, it is worth pondering why and how the anti-Dickensian Simon contrives to have Bubbles's situation "fixed." On first sight, it might seem that Simon is guilty of doing what he most abhors in the whole panoply of Dickensian tricks, insofar as the recognition of virtue through suffering leads to a happy end.

Late in the fifth season we find Bubbles, one year clean, at an NA meeting. He stands under a cross and against prominent stained-glass windows – rather than in the usual church basement – and "confesses" his lingering desires to get high, as well as his guilt and grief about Sherrod. In this iconic atmosphere, he receives a nod of approval from Walon, who has been waiting for him to share this burden with others. Bubbles, who always did like attention and was willing to pretend to be earnestly reforming in order to get it, here tells his truth in the approved NA manner. At this point the series seems perilously close to deploying Christian compassion as his rescue.[42]

Fortunately, however, *The Wire* does not leave it there. It has a bigger redemption in mind, not only the personal redemption of Bubbles but the partial institutional redemption of the amply vilified news media as well. Indeed, it is at the point where these two redemptions come together that the series seems to believe that a happy ending has been adequately earned. To be sure, it is a highly qualified happy ending, and it certainly does not redeem the *Baltimore Sun* as much as it redeems Bubbles. But what the ending leaves us with is that most important component of melodrama: hope that justice can, at least sometimes, be done. In this case, the fact that the news media manage to tell one "true" story serves as a counterforce to all the lies of the Pulitzer-hungry Scott Templeton and his editors.

As Templeton's star rises at the *Sun* and as city editor Gus Haynes loses clout, Haynes nevertheless continues to do his job and encourages a young news writer, Mike Fletcher, to test his wings. Because publicity has now shifted to the plight of the homeless, Fletcher is now writing about that. But he recognizes and articulates its flaws: "formula [...] anecdotal lead...." Haynes agrees with this criticism but encourages him to dig deeper:

> Spend some time with these people. Sometimes the weakest shit in a story is the stuff with quotation marks around it. You got a guy telling us how rough it is on the street.... That doesn't have much pull; but if you can describe how it really is, *tell his story in moments*.... Look, tomorrow, get back to the shelters and the soup kitchens. I mean, just be with folk [...] if something presents itself as a story, great, but if not, just spend the day being with people. I'm not interested in great quotes, I'm interested in what feels true.[43]

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At the same time as Scott Templeton is generating bogus quotes from the homeless and a phone interview with a serial killer (perfectly enacted by Jimmy McNulty), Haynes tells Fletcher just to hang out with the homeless, to tell a story "in moments" and to write what "feels true." In search of this truth, Fletcher finds a guide to this world in the person of Bubbles, who is at this point volunteering in a soup kitchen and selling the *Baltimore Sun* on the street. Bubbles shows Fletcher a homeless encampment under the freeway and, encouraged again by Haynes, Fletcher decides to write about Bubbles even though he is not at this point homeless himself. Compared to the "rifle shots" of Templeton, his journalism – the very model of Simon's contextual reporting at the *Sun* – does indeed take time to build context. We should note, however, that in the same breath that Haynes grants Fletcher a couple of weeks to write about Bubbles, he also chooses to run a story about a fire rather than a story about a 34-year-old black man killed in a convenience store by a juvenile, thus missing the "other" most popular personal story in *The Wire*. The *Sun* – even when its "good" editor calls the shots – still misses a lot.

Though we never read what Fletcher writes about Bubbles, we get snatches of it, as Bubbles gives the manuscript to Walon, his NA sponsor, to seek his advice about letting it be published. Walon does not directly advise, but his judgment about the writing would certainly please Haynes, for it is clear that to Walon "it feels true." "It's you, he's got you.... He ain't lettin' you off the hook for shit; he's just putting it all out there: the good, the bad...." But here Bubbles interrupts. He does not mind the bad, but he does suspect the good. "You skeered of somebody callin' you good?," asks Walon, finally getting Bubbles' number. Bubbles correctly observes that perhaps what he is doing is not special, but just what anybody needs to be doing (volunteering, not getting high). Why should he get special moral credit for that? Walon's answer is worth considering, since it is ultimately an answer to the question of the moral value of melodrama itself. He brings out a well-worn quotation passed on to him from an NA meeting. Bubbles reads it aloud: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world and you are free to do so for it is in accordance with your nature. But perhaps this holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided."[44] According to the writer, whom Bubbles calls "Franzie Kafka," the worst suffering may be that which holds back from suffering; Bubbles has thus already endured that. The advice would seem to be that the suffering of the world is actually, and paradoxically, a good thing and should be recognized as such.

In the end, Bubbles allows the profile to be printed. We see him read it in the paper, alone, sitting on a box outdoors. It is a feature entitled "The Road Home" on the front page of the *Sun*, with a caption that reads "A Life

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at the Margins is Reclaimed Day-by-day in West Baltimore" and a picture of the cleaned-up Bubbles beneath. He reads, ponders and seems to approve. He has allowed his suffering to be recognized and at the same time he has questioned its automatic moral value, perhaps the best that can be asked of melodrama's always dubious transformation of suffering into virtue. He passes through that process, stands up, puts on dark glasses, and picks up two plastic bags apparently full of food, as if he has just been to a market. This is the first time we see him in the role of a consumer (of anything but dope) instead of a scavenger or vendor, a sign of his new maturity and citizenship and imminent admission into the upstairs world of his sister and her family. We immediately miss the old Bubbles, for there is no question that once his suffering ends, once his virtue is recognized in conjunction with that of the institution that publishes it, he will cease to be of much interest. His story, and the multi-institutional one of the series itself, is over.

Does this happy ending mean that *The Wire* has gone all soft and Dickensian on us? Is this ending perhaps even more Dickensian than Dickens? Certainly, if we simply measure these two works by the standards of the usual clichés about melodrama, it would seem that in the case of their street-level virtuous victims, Simon is even more melodramatic than Dickens, for the fact of Jo's death – if not the manner of it – is "realistic," while Bubbles's rescue from abjection is less so. It is, moreover, a rescue that needs to be repeated many times over.[45] To say this, however, would be to fail to understand the first rule of melodrama, as well as the very reason for the existence of the form. For as we have seen, melodrama is not that which opposes realism, but that which becomes more modern and relevant by incorporating realism's outward manifestations. Signs of realism in melodrama are always in the service of the recognition of virtue or its opposite. Thus, for example, when Bubbles almost dies, he does not behave pitiably like Jo, but involuntarily pukes all over the detective who rescues him. His grief is messy and un-picturesque, but it is also a more realistic way for us to gauge his suffering and that suffering's tenuous but tenacious link to the hope for justice. In *Bleak House*, there can be no justice for Jo; the recognition of his virtue in pitiable death points out in the most vivid way what needs fixing in social-Darwinist industrial Britain. Above all, the "lords and ladies" and "right and wrong" reverends must recognize that children like Jo are "dying all around us." A society that permits this is unjust, and Dickens loudly shouts "shame on you."[46] Jo's suffering and Dickens' outrage are in the service of establishing the very kinds of liberal institutions that might save other children like Jo. Rather than dying "benighted," he might one day live and know "somethink."[47]

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In *The Wire* young boys are still "dying all around us," as the series certainly shows in the stories of Wallace, Bodie and so on – usually from much more violent causes than starvation and smallpox. And there is indeed pity generated for their suffering. Wallace's death is one of the most pitiable. In season four, Dukie and Randy do not die, but their hardening in the face of insupportable circumstances is almost as painful to watch.[48] Neither Bubbles nor Wallace has that hardness; one dies, the other lives. In neither case is the fate of the suffering victim determined by the proverbial kind uncle or guardian. The death of Wallace teaches us that the series is serious about suffering; the rescue of Bubbles teaches us that there is hope for justice, that melodrama need not always be an affair of the suffering of the innocent, but that it can be a more complex fitting together of many institutional and personal pieces. The good that Bubbles recognizes in his own suffering is earned. And it is earned not only by Bubbles, but also by a practice of journalism that lends an aura of justice to the story told about him.

We should make no mistake: a sense of justice is no substitute for actual justice. But it is the aspiration for justice that is melodrama's own, most important virtue. What melodrama can offer at its best is thus something that tragedy cannot supply. It is a vision of a better governmentality, or of what political scientist Wendy Brown has called "an alternative vision of the good [...] a vision in which justice would not center upon maximizing individual wealth or rights but on developing the capacity of citizens to share power and collaboratively govern themselves."[49] This is the good gained when Bubbles ceases to be a victim and becomes instead a "citizen."[50] When Brown argues the need for a "different figuration of human beings, citizenship, economic life and the political – to fashion a more just future," I cannot help but think that that figuration has in fact been achieved, not in a utopian picture of fairness, nor in a bleak tragedy of the triumph of injustice, but in the admixture of melodrama and occasional glimpses of tragedy that is *The Wire*.

It is thus not the case that the alternative to Dickensian melodrama is the bleak austerity of Greek tragedy, or more entertaining forms of Shakespearean tragedy. But neither is it the case that whenever the series grants a happy ending to a particular individual it betrays its principles. Perhaps most important to the new type of representative melodrama is what I have called the mega-melodramatic dimension of the television serial's temporal extension. This is what cannot be achieved in even a long movie, for it only happens when the rhythm of certain situations is felt again and again. Consider, for example, the moment when Major Bunny Colvin stands before

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the bulldozed ruins of Hamsterdam and pronounces upon the goodness that was that experiment. In this instance it is Bubbles who recognizes the virtue of another. It is partly because we have known Bubbles since the first season and have come to know the scavenging and pedagogical routines of his life – including the favorite lesson to a new protégé about thinking one is "brown" (cool) when one is really "green" (inexperienced) – that we have a strong temporal sense of the trap of repetition in which Bubbles is caught; his pathos is evident as well as Colvin's. This is a satisfying melodramatic moment, better than what any tragedy of individual flaws, tragic pride and fall could deliver. It has a particular resonance because the rhythm of the part is so important to serial melodrama.

Conclusion

We tend to forgive melodrama for being melodramatic if it seems "realistic" and if its politics, or sense of justice, coincides with our own; in other words, when the good that *we* believe in suffers and is (at least briefly) recognized, as Jo is above, whether that good prevails or fails. The undeniable innovation of *The Wire* is its effort to tell a melodramatic story at the level of the social institutions that have repeatedly failed to find justice. Seriality enables a new energy and means for that justice to be rendered as a felt good. However, we should recognize the limits of a mode which in this liberal form falls victim to what Wendy Brown has called "left melancholy" – an exaggerated mourning for a liberal democracy that may never have actually existed, certainly not for Baltimore's black inhabitants. If we rejoice at the quick justice that kills Cheese, this may be a sign that the justice sought in *The Wire* – the restoration of a nostalgic "back in the day" – may be a limited vision of the just. Any vision of the just is bound to be limited. But if the aspirations for liberal democracy are still valid in the new era of neoliberalism, and if tragedy cannot stoop to care about the truly powerless, melodrama is the only tool with which artists can make the case against unnecessary suffering.

We should neither laud *The Wire* as exceptional tragedy nor identify it as conventional melodrama, but rather appreciate a more nuanced, deeply felt contemporary realization of the mode of melodrama, made possible by a seriality in conflict with the classical strictures of tragedy and the restless quest to recognize a good that is no longer self-evident in a neoliberal era. The mode of melodrama holds us in its grip. We should recognize it even when it is "good."

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Notes

1. Kristen Whissel, "Tales of Upward Mobility: The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects," *Film Quarterly* 59:4 (2006), 23-34, here 23.
2. Whissel, "Tales of Upward Mobility," 25.
3. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 18-20.
4. Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City: Anchor, 1974), 254.
5. Television critic Jason Mittell, for example, has argued that from the nineties to the present we have experienced an age of televisual complexity and experimentation that has challenged the very norms of the medium ("Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 [2006], 29-40, here 29); where conventional episodic form demands plot closure within every episode, "narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" (32). Compare Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); see also Angela Ndalianis, "Television and the Neo-baroque," in *The Contemporary Television Serial*, ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 83-101.
6. Matthew S. Buckley, "Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss," *Theatre Journal* 61 (2009), 175-90, here 188.
7. Jeffrey Sconce, for example, speaks of "ever more complex narrative universes" ("What If?," 95); Jason Mittell enthuses over an age of "televisual complexity" ("Narrative Complexity," 29) that is unique to television itself ("Genre Study – Beyond the Text," in *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber [London: British Film Institute, 2008], 9-13); and Angela Ndalianis speaks of a "polycentric," "open" structure that is neo-baroque to the point of losing totality in favor of "instability, polydimensionality, and change" – a system of the labyrinth ("Television and the Neo-baroque," 85-87).
8. Others, however, simply view the soap opera or the serial as attenuations of the classical "well-made play," except that they have none of the efficiency or closure of such a work, in which case the term hardly seems to have much meaning. See Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fiction from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 148-50.
9. Sconce, "What If?," 95.
10. Simon, in Rafael Alvarez and David Simon, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2009), 2.
11. Simon, in Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The Crusader Behind *The Wire*," *The New Yorker* 22 October 2007, 4.
12. See Robert Bechtold Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).

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13. Marsha Kinder, "Re-Wiring Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City," *Film Quarterly* 62.2 (Winter 2008/2009), 50-58.
14. See, for example, Potter and Marshall, eds., The Wire: *Urban Decay and American Television*. Amongst bloggers, see *What's Alan Watching*, 22 August 2008: "There are many great tragedies throughout the run of *The Wire*, but the death of Wallace is the first and still the one that probably cuts deepest," http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2008/08/wire-season-1-episode-12-cleaning-up.html.
15. Note especially Potter's and Marshall's brief attempt (in The Wire: *Urban Decay and American Television*) to equate the drug addiction of Dukie to the suicide of Willy Loman, which seems especially bogus, since Dukie only follows a passive line of least resistance, while Loman acts.
16. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man" [1949], in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola (New York: Da Capo, 1996), 3-7, here 4.
17. See Christopher D. Love, "Greek Gods in Baltimore," in *Creating Tragic Spectators: Rebellion and Ambiguity in World Tragedy*, dissertation (University of Michigan, 2009), 112.
18. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. and ed. Stephen Halliwell, in *Aristotle,* Poetics*; Longinus,* On the Sublime*; Demetrius,* On Style (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
19. Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man."
20. See Jason Read, "Stringer Bell's Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism," in Potter and Marshall, The Wire: *Urban Decay and American Television*, 122-34.
21. *The Wire* 3.11, "Middle Ground."
22. They are amazed to discover a modern, sleek, almost characterless décor. McNulty asks, "who the fuck was I chasing?" as the camera tilts down to reveal the title of the book.
23. Freaman: "From the looks of things Stringer Bell's worse than a drug dealer...."

    Prez: "He's a developer!"
24. Potter and Marshall say this themselves, even as they attempt to argue for *The Wire* as tragedy ("'I Am the American Dream:' Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction," in The Wire: *Urban Decay and American Television,* 8).
25. Potter and Marshall, "'I Am the American Dream,'" 7.
26. "'I Am the American Dream,'" 8.
27. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama*, 72.
28. For Heilman, in *Tragedy and Melodrama*, melodrama is the "principal vehicle of protest and dissent, of polemic."
29. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Essays on Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 67.

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30. Christine Gledhill and Thomas Postlewait have both convincingly argued this point. Gledhill writes that melodrama seizes upon the timely social problems of everyday reality; yet it differs from realism in its will to force the status quo to yield signs of moral legibility within the limits of the "ideologically permissible," even as it builds upon genuine social concerns ("The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Gledhill, 38). Postlewait, for his part, argues against the simple dichotomies whereby "melodrama distorts, realism reports; melodrama offers escapism, realism offers life; melodrama is conservative, realism is radical; melodrama delivers ideologies.... In fact, both melodrama and realism distort and report, conserve and criticize. And both articulate and challenge the ideologies of the time" (Postlewait, "From Melodrama to Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama," *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou [New York: St Martin's, 1996], 39-60, here 56).
31. Indeed, what seems unjust in one melodrama might seem just in another. The slave is the innocent victim, the slave owner is the villain, in the abolitionist melodrama; the proud former slave owner is, post-Reconstruction, the innocent victim of black misrule in The Birth of a Nation.
32. William Julius Wilson and Anmol Chaddha, "'Way Down in the Hole': Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Autumn 2011), 3.
33. Naturally, he too is not from Baltimore, and only sees his work at *The Sun* as a stepping stone to *The Washington Post*, whose editors, to our great satisfaction, find Templeton's prose too "purple."
34. In an interview in *Vice*, Simon explains his objection to the many comparisons made between the series and Dickens. While admitting that Dickens was a great writer who exposed "the fault lines of industrial England and where money and power route themselves away from the poor," he abhors the fact that "[i]n the end, the guy [Dickens] would punk out. [...] But *The Wire* was actually making a different argument than Dickens, and the comparison, while flattering, sort of fell badly on us." Simon goes on to explain that there was "a little bit of tongue-in-cheek satire on the show directed at people who were using Dickens to praise us." He adds his more personal motive: "When I was coming back off of the reporting for *The Corner* and preparing to go back to the newspaper, this editor and I talked about writing columns about life on the streets in West Baltimore. That, to me, would have been the narrative equivalent of telling some stories that you ultimately saw on *The Wire*, but using real people. The first one that I tried to tell [...] he spiked. It was about a guy very much like the *Wire* character Bubbles who was harvesting metal – two guys harvesting metal, actually." The editor "came to me and said, 'I want to do the stories that are about the Dickensian lives of children growing up in West Baltimore.' What he was saying was, 'If you give me a nice, cute eight-, nine-year-old kid who doesn't have a pencil, who doesn't have a schoolbook, who lives in poverty, who's big eyed and

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sweet and who I can make the reader fall in love with, I can win a fuckin' prize with that. Write me that shit. [...] Don't give me a guy who's, like, trying to get high but maintain his dignity. Don't give me anything complicated.' And he really used the word 'Dickensian'." *Vice* 2 December 2009, http://www.vice.com/read/david-simon-280-v16n12.

35. Dickens attempts to redeem the law, in the figure of Inspector Bucket, towards the end of the novel.
36. Nick Hornby, Interview with David Simon, *The Believer* August 2007, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon (note that Bubbles pushes his cart, rather than pulls it).
37. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ch. 19.
38. *Bleak House*, ch. 16.
39. *Bleak House*, end of ch. 47.
40. Kinder calls him gay but does not explain why. All attention goes to Omar on this score. But Bubbles's less overt, less examined desire may certainly contribute to his deep sense of guilt and responsibility for both Johnny Weeks and then for Sherrod.
41. Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7:1 (2003), paras. 15-16.
42. *The Wire* 5.9.
43. *The Wire* 5.7, "Took" (emphasis mine).
44. *The Wire* 5.10.
45. The rescuers include Landsman, the state, Walon, Fletcher and the *Sun*.
46. Dickens does so much as Simon once did in "Metal Men" and *The Corner*.
47. Jo can only intuit the good, he does not know it.
48. There is some hint, though, that the career of Dukie might head in the direction of Bubbles's.
49. Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," para. 41.
50. I use this term here as it is used in *The Wire*.

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Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema

Hermann Kappelhoff

I.

Looking back over the forty-year discussion about film melodrama, we can now claim that certain fundamental theoretical approaches have become established. One of these is that hardly anyone would still make an attempt to define melodrama as a specific genre to which we could then taxonomically assign a certain group of films. Rather, as Christine Gledhill writes, melodrama designates a "culturally conditioned mode of perception and aesthetic circulation," which has historically unfolded as a "genre-producing machine."[1] The melodramatic is a fundamental mode of entertainment cinema, even of entertainment culture, which can structure the widest variety of genre types. Indeed we can accept the thesis, if not without reservations, that melodrama – as fits the historical usage of the word – ultimately designates all forms of sensation-oriented entertainment culture.[2]

The idea of the melodramatic mode[3] corresponds to a genre-theoretical concept in which genre cinema itself is understood as a system paradigmatically formulated in the interplay between various aesthetic modalities.[4] In this system, the melodramatic mode is surely one of the base aesthetic modalities that can indeed be sufficiently differentiated from others, themselves perhaps just as fundamental: for instance, comedy, horror, action or the thriller. I myself, in reference to this (incomplete) list of the aesthetic modalities of genre cinema, have attempted to define the melodramatic as sentimental enjoyment. The following is in no way meant as a recap of this discussion. Rather, I would like (a) to pursue a motif where the melodramatic modus can clearly be set apart as a sentimental modality in relation to other modalities: namely, the motif of the victim. The melodramatic image of suffering is marked both historically and systematically by the almost programmatic opposition between the passive suffering of sentient subjects and the heroic acts of dramatic heroes, presented as a dramatic spectacle. Furthermore, I would like (b) to look into this melodramatic image of suffering in a specific genre in which we do expect to find the representation of victimhood, but not necessarily in the variety seen in

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melodrama: namely, in the Hollywood war movie. The thesis is that this genre is intrinsically marked by the melodramatic mode.[5] This brings us to a systematic question, (c): how can genre cinema interact as a system of aesthetic modalities with the political and moral value systems of a given cultural community? In posing this question I am referring to a theoretical field of inquiry that on the one hand is marked by reference to Rancière's "politics of aesthetics," and on the other by reference to recent discussions of the term "community."[6] Associated with this term are somewhat premature mediations between politics and art, or politics and aesthetics, which once again provide the term "community" with a Romantic charge. In order to clear away these difficulties, I would like to go back to how the term *sensus communis* (i.e. "common sense") is used in Kantian aesthetics.

Only on the basis of this terminological reconstruction can we pose the key question to be pursued here: namely, what is the relationship between, on the one hand, the melodramatic modality and, on the other, the concepts about the bonding of a subject to a political body that assign great significance to the aesthetic mode of experience? Although this question cannot be definitively answered by examining the melodramatic representation of the victim in the war movie, it can be made more precise.

II.

The art exhibition dOCUMENTA (13) included a cycle of works by Rabih Mroué.[7] His objects were videos downloaded from the Internet, showing images recorded using simple mobile phone cameras. The images seem to be familiar from television: houses, streets, courtyards somewhere in Syria, or Libya or Iran. They reproduce the movement of the person who is taking the images – until a gunman comes into the field of view. As soon as the gunman notices that he is being filmed, he shoots at the person holding the telephone; he shoots, as it were, into the camera's gaze. The image shakes, there are rattling noises, darkness.

A large video projection in a black box shows Rabih Mroué holding a performative lecture. He is making an analysis of these videos, using all the rules of visual art and theory; he plays them in slow motion, breaks them down frame by frame, verifies the dramaturgy of the sequence. At the same time he develops basic theoretical questions; how dangerous these video images must be, if people are shot on sight when they are discovered filming them! Why do the mobile phone users continue filming after they have been discovered by an armed soldier? They must

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know how dangerous it is. Do they feel immortal holding the mini-camera in their hands – as immortal, say, as a Hollywood hero? And what is the ontological status of these images, whose producers were shot during production? Were they in fact killed? When, at what moment in the video, do we see their death? Has this eye that has witnessed death, disseminated worldwide as seeing and hearing, survived this death, having been released from the body that has been shot and having passed over to other bodies?

One leaves the screening room, moving back, passing once again through the installation of the artist's works. On the longer wall there are large posters; they show the pixilated faces of the gunmen who brought death, as if they were responding to what you feel when the lecture is analyzing the Internet videos. You want to know more about these monstrous events, you want to see the perpetrator's face, the victim behind the camera, you want to get closer, you want bigger images. Well, here they are, hanging there, absurd abstract enlargements in which all contours are lost. And on the opposite wall is the counter-shot: the video image, washed in red; in razor-sharp silhouette you see an actor positioned as if in a duel, only that instead of a Colt he is holding a mobile phone camera. He is slumped into himself, as if hit by the bullet, then stands upright again, only to slump again, and again, and again… Finally, at the front entrance is the counter with handy little booklets: a series of images printed out on paper that works like a flip-book. The soundtrack can be turned on by pressing a button. You can reconstruct the clip, listening to the sounds like a sound engineer, trying to get the recording to match the sound in a meaningful way, to make it fit the moving image. Then there is a Super8 film that you can start up by hand. Here are the images of razor-sharp fictions, which can be moved backwards and forwards on the editing table: zooming in on the face of the perpetrator, with quite sharp contours… Visitors find themselves in a film analysis workshop – experimenting in and groping their way around the mental space, the analytical configuration, with which they can continue the act that the victim performed when he or she took the murderer into view and made him visible.

III.

But what are these bodies that Mroué uses to speak of the continuing life of the eye? Who is the subject of this eye which survives the death of its user? Mroué's reflections suggest one answer which has become central

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to the genre-theory approach that I would like to develop here: that is, the subject is the endlessly extendable community of those who share the rage about what is seen and heard here; it is the community of those who share this moral indignation in their sensation and feeling; it is everyone who can agree with this sensation.

Kant refers to this participation, in which a community experiences itself as connected through its moral values, when he formulates his usage of the term *Gemeinsinn* ("common sense") and develops it as an *a priori* condition of "aesthetic judgment" in the *Critique of Judgement*.[8] Here it is crucial to bear in mind the fundamental and distinctive inflection that Kant gives to this term when he delimits *Gemeinsinn* in its transcendental-philosophical function from the traditional understanding of "common sense." For by *Gemeinsinn*, Kant by no means wishes to signify – as in the usage within the philosophical tradition – a *per se* given basis of all human sensual experience, and therefore of all knowledge, a generally shared stock of "the obscure" that needs no reflection: that is, theoretically undeclared knowledge and judgments. On the contrary, Kant's understanding of *Gemeinsinn* corresponds to the strict division of aesthetic judgment and conceptual cognition. We do not perform any cognitive operations when we make judgments in order then to come to reasonable conclusions; rather, we rely on the one hand upon the sensations that we get from something presented to our senses, upon a feeling for a circumstance, and on the other hand and at the same time, we align ourselves with the many others who, like us, make aesthetic judgments on exactly this particular circumstance. We make this alignment because we have come to the conclusion that our feeling for the thing could be followed by anyone else without any conceptual communication, if only that person were to assume the same aesthetic attitude. Obviously, this is a theoretical construction. This is why Kant speaks of pure aesthetic judgment, even if the mixture of conceptually conveyed assessments belongs to the empirical reality of aesthetic judgment. *Gemeinsinn*, however, is the condition that makes it possible for a pure aesthetic judgment to be formed – a pure judgment of taste, which is an utterly subjective feeling and yet can be communicated and can be generally valid. Common sense, in the Kantian sense of *Gemeinsinn*, is a subjective principle that only uses feelings, and not concepts, but nonetheless can determine what is pleasing and what is not pleasing in a way that is generally valid.[9] We already assume this possibility with every aesthetic judgment that we speak and communicate to one another; and so runs the argument from transcendental philosophy.

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In her reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Hannah Arendt shifts the understanding of common sense sketched out there, making it central to her theory of the political. For Arendt, Kant's view of the *sensus communis* is political philosophy in the sheep's clothing of the (aesthetic) judgment of taste. In her view, one can grasp a spontaneous "feeling for belonging in the world"[10] in the aesthetic judgment of taste, an "extra sense" – as Arendt writes – "that fits us into a community."[11] If I experience something as beautiful, then I place my feeling in relation to others who experience the world of appearances in the same way. And if I judge an action as bad, then this judgment is grounded in the decisive feeling of sharing my sensation with all those who belong, as I do, to the human community. This is the sense in which Richard Rorty speaks of the sense of communality.[12] He draws a link to the dynamic element of an open society in historical process, which always has to reconfigure itself as a community. Community for him is the unending process of an unjustifiable judgment of feeling about what values can be commonly shared. It is the subjective emotional approval of a set of common values, assessments and stances. The sense of communality is the appeal that demands this approval.[13] It is an expression of the feeling of being connected, which – in view of the scope of shared values and goals – insists on being requited.

But it is precisely this, the interweaving of subjective feeling with the appeal to a sense for a general sensation, which also characterizes the common sense in Kant's *Gemeinsinn* as an *a priori* condition for the possibility of making pure judgments of feeling. For Rorty, the appellative expression of a sense of communality is the basis for the political community, which always has to be contingently produced anew as a "poetically experimental" configuration. Ultimately, this justification is circular. Political community cannot be anchored in anything other than a feeling of communality, which generates just this sense of belonging in its appellative expression in the first place.[14]

Rorty is able to get such an understanding of the sense of communality by interpreting the political philosophy of American pragmatism: "To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance."[15] But this is also the tradition that Hannah Arendt takes up when she unfolds the model of a political communality in view of the American Revolution, which is grounded in the contingency of the "beginning" alone.[16] The attempt to carry over Kantian common sense into the understanding of a feeling for belonging to a community, into a sense of communality, might have the goal of ensuring a justification

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for the contingent beginning within the terms of transcendental philosophy. But at the same time, and this is the decisive gain here, it also connects the appeal to the sense of communality with the appeal of the judgment of taste to affective approval. In this line of thinking, Rorty's circular justification of the sense of communality can be linked to a concrete communicative practice in analogy to the Kantian judgment of taste. This practice is marked as that of art.

In the theoretical perspective sketched out here, aesthetic judgment is not based on any previously given poetic norm or on a political, cultural or social function of art; rather, it itself has significant interest in a historical-social process of communication, in which a generally valid feeling for the good and the beautiful, the reprehensible and the abominable, is produced by calling on this feeling. The sense of communality – understood in this alignment – emerges neither from the mere fact of particular ideas, objects or circumstances that require a judgment, nor is this given *per se* as a generally accessible basis for knowledge. It is not to be confused with a common sense of values or of reigning taste, supported by convention and tradition. The sense of communality is the mobilizing appeal to a generally valid feeling for the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the reprehensible, which can only be brought to life in an individual's concrete subjective experience of feeling.

It is in this sense that I will speak, in what follows, of the sense of community as a very specific definition of a common sense that relates to the feeling for communality. The sense of community designates an affective expression of "loyalty to other human beings," which insists on emotional reciprocity and produces it in affective approval. The expression of this feeling is nothing more than the demand that everyone else feel him- or herself to be part of a community.

Whether it is the Kantian common sense, a feeling of belonging to the human community, or the appeal of the sense of communality – we are always speaking of a *feeling* that can neither be substituted by means of a grounding argument, nor can it be grounded in the emotions of empirical individuals. In this genealogical trajectory, the term "sense of community" becomes distinct and precise, which can be of great use if we want productively to approach the question of how genre cinema interacts with the range of political goals and values in a given cultural community;[17] the recourse to this concept should allow us to reformulate the question in a way that would lead out of the circular argumentation found in most work on genre in media studies. At any rate, the sense of community, also in relation to genre cinema, is neither a question of discourse nor of the aesthetics of affect. It is constantly being created anew in the mode of the requirement for approval.

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This mode is aesthetic judgment, and the appeal is the aesthetic operation that challenges the subjective judgment of feeling and relates it to the open historical extent of a sense of community. The challenge of aesthetic judgment itself demands that the judging subject assume a relation to the feeling for communality in his or her subjective feeling. In this sense one could say that the practice of aesthetic judgment itself mobilizes a sense of community. This is why every operation that requires an aesthetic judgment necessarily challenges the existing common sense of judgments based on the feelings of the senses, on good taste; it poses *the* question, therefore calling *into* question, what can the sense of communality be – in this case and in general? This should become clear from Mroué's work. To repeat the question as he puts it in his lecture performance: for which human community can the video camera's eye continue to live, for which cultural community can it become a vivid sense of communality?

What this calls into question are the ideas and representations of the passive victim that circulate in contemporary depictions of war. For it is not the oppressed and martyred body of a passive, suffering victim that is imagined in the off-space of the video camera, but the testifying and judging gaze. The image of the victim that is thus created also does not then conform to the schematic dichotomy of heroic and passive victim in a post-heroic culture.[18]

On the contrary, Mroué's film analysis workshop stands in opposition to the images of victims that have been circulating – since the occupation of Iraq by Western armed forces – among the users of Internet platforms such as YouTube. The clips there have provided television news reports and talk shows with images of victims of unrest in Iran following the last presidential election, as well as images of violent acts in the last Iraq war or in the contemporary civil wars in the Arab world. They have long been the object of broad debates about the function of these media in the new civil wars and revolutions. But these flickering, blurry video images have also become the aesthetic signature of the most recent Hollywood war movies. This leads me to the main subject of my reflections, the Hollywood genre that concentrates on the victim of the violence of war, namely the war film genre.

IV.

But what does it mean when these video images get transformed into the visual world of genre cinema, which we then watch at home on DVD or as a film projection in the cinema? How do these aesthetic treatments relate to what Mroué is saying about the continued life of the eye? The

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answer seems obvious. Indeed, it is clear that genre films ground their poetic principle in aesthetic norms and rules. Genre cinema does not, it seems, present any challenge at all to aesthetic judgment, because it always seeks to target the reigning sense of taste in each case. Now the fact that industrially-produced mass entertainment has a relation to these tastes is not to be dismissed; but it seems to me that this designates only an accidental aspect for the theoretical understanding of the genre system. At any rate, this is the case if we want – and this is the basis of the following reflections – to take into account the interrelation that I have sketched out here between aesthetic judgment and a sense of community for genre cinema.

This is an unlikely thesis, one that at first might seem counterintuitive. In this context, genre means an ensemble of representational rules, character stereotypes and narrative patterns which can be distinguished from other genres according to a more or less strictly formulated system of more or less fixed story/form correlates. In this respect, contemporary entertainment cinema seems to be organized according to the rules of historical genre poetics, and is thus the opposite of what has been associated with aesthetics since Kant. Indeed, genre poetics in the European tradition of philosophical aesthetics are considered to belong to a historical theory of art that has been overridden by modern aesthetics.

And this is in fact how genre poetics are presented, if we start from film studies research, whether or not we see this ensemble as essentially defined by the industrial means of production of Hollywood studios,[19] or whether we understand the poetics of individual genres to be proposals for reception processes based on an aesthetics of affect which leads the spectator through more or less rigorously laid-out parameters.[20] It makes no difference whether we establish this matrix of production using narrative standards that act as a generative pattern of the so-called classical Hollywood narrative or whether we start from formations of stereotypes, from sets of standardized scenes, characters and constellations of characters and other catalogues of distinguishing qualities which make a genre a genre in the first place[21] – either way, genre cinema appears to be the epitome of a system of rules that is incompatible with the philosophical understanding of aesthetics.

Just how inadequate such theoretical definitions of the poetics of genre cinema are becomes clear if we examine the current Hollywood films about the war in Iraq. These films reproduce the conventional patterns of the genre to only a very limited degree. Rather, they focus on how the various media routinely handle images of war – the private

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as well as the public, the political-strategic as well as the personal-sentimental. The films thematize the various uses of audiovisual media, and they show how new media-technological configurations alter the way in which war appears, the interaction of things and people. As a result, they produce new audiovisual constructs of imagery; and this new imagery presents a challenge to aesthetic judgment. This is why we read over and over again that these films have abandoned the war film genre and have had "to develop entirely new visualities in order to unfold their narrative."[22] In return, the new visuality, as a transgression of the genre, becomes the decisive criterion for the film's own artistic value, it becomes the criterion for aesthetic judgment. However, I would emphatically contradict this argument, which only gains its plausibility in relation to a concept of genre that is, as I have described, insufficiently complex. I would counter that the motive of the genre system, its historical dynamic, consists precisely in its capacity constantly to bring forth new audio-visualities, which could be designated as chronotopes (following Bakhtin) and which challenge convention and reigning taste by relating to the altered conditions of experience. This is also why these new audio-visualities are the object of an aesthetic judgment that cannot invoke criteria and rules derived from argumentation. They are based solely on a subjective feeling of complacency, on the appeal to a sense of community.

V.

Deborah Scranton's film The War Tapes (2006) – I will be drawing on Cilli Pogodda's analysis[23] in the following – is based on video images that are comparable to those analyzed by Mroué. All of the film material comes from American soldiers, who recorded it during their military deployment in the region around Baghdad and Fallujah. The soldiers could volunteer for a project in which they were required to keep audiovisual logbooks during the deployment. A total of 21 soldiers took part. They were provided with hand-held mini-DV cameras; during combat operations they sometimes wore them mounted on their helmets or their gun barrels. Five of the soldiers filmed over the entire year of their deployment, and of these, three were chosen whose video diaries became the basic material of the documentary film. This footage was combined with scenes from the home front, in which the everyday life of the soldiers' families was documented and presented by professional film teams. The arrangement

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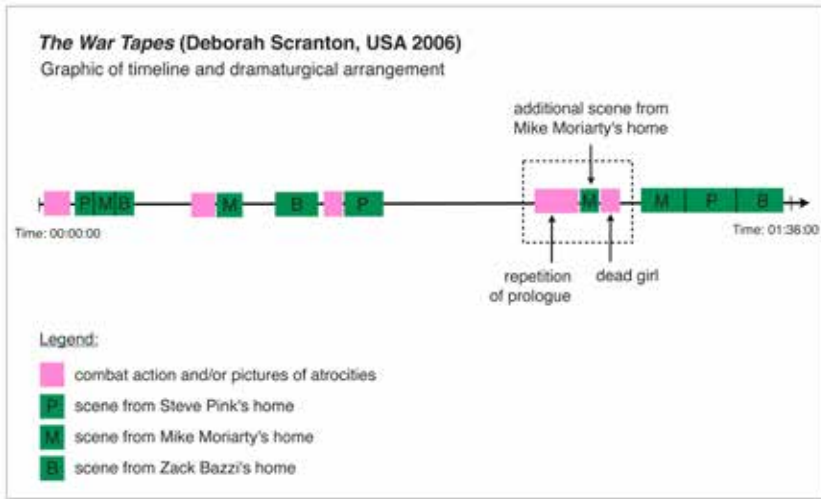


Fig. 1: Deborah Scranton, The War Tapes: Graphic of timeline and dramaturgical arrangement

of videotapes and home stories follows a strictly symmetrical ordering of military routine, combat operations and home front. This symmetry is broken only at a few particular moments. There are video images where we see, barely recognizable, a dead girl, a civilian victim of the combat operation.

Viewing the film as a whole, the dramaturgical arrangement of alternating video recordings from various perspectives appears as an indirect subjective monologue. They successively allow for the three filming soldiers to appear as the film's protagonists, and their characters completely correspond to the personnel of the war film genre in that they are so pointedly typical. Framed by this dramaturgical arrangement, the video recordings of the dead girl gain a specific temporality, thanks to the subjective presence, in both space and time, of the man who, in the service of the army, has contributed to the death of this girl lying on the street at exactly this spot – and who uses his camcorder as has been arranged.

But the moment of witnessing horror seems peculiarly displaced from reality. The currency of the horror in this film, not unlike every genre film, is a thoroughly fictional presence. We experience it, we can literally feel along with the soldiers as if they were part of our world – and yet the horror occurs in a segment of space/time that is utterly separate from our own, and to which we have no access.

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Fig. 2: Image of a dead girl, barely recognizable. Screenshot from The War Tapes



Fig. 3: Civilian victim of the combat operation. Screenshot from The War Tapes

The fiction of The War Tapes, the present mode of this film experience, draws its aesthetic appeal from a process of emphatic authentification of what is represented. But how would it be if we were not told that these video images originate from the area of Baghdad and the region around Fallujah, or that they were recorded by three soldiers in the Army National Guard while stationed in Camp Anaconda, which lies about 110 kilometers north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle? What if we were not conscious at every moment that this is the moment disclosing the morally reprehensible effect of war, the collateral damage – a moment of horror that was altogether real at that place and at that point in time?

The answer to these questions is almost banal. If we did not have this information, we would most likely be just as horrified, but this horror would blend more easily into that which is aesthetically expected, and which the war film genre announces to its spectators. We would not really be able to distinguish this film from fictional films such as, for example, Redacted.

Brian de Palma's film from 2007 expressly begins with such a notice, that all the characters and their actions are purely invented, although they are based on events that occurred in Samarra in 2006. This somewhat old-fashioned notice is necessary due to the aesthetic process chosen by the film. *Redacted* – that is, edited or treated; on the one hand, the title is a euphemistic synonym for television censorship and the politics of embedded journalism. On the other, it indicates the aesthetic process of the film itself. For the film fictionalizes a director's strategy that, as in television, treats and edits existing film and video footage without establishing the neutral viewpoint of an objectively narrating camera. Instead, the fictional video diary of a soldier becomes the overriding point of reference. This means that the focus is on the indirect subjective perspective of the soldier. Around him, the film groups clearly defined audio-visual material through marked perspectives and moral stances: the videos of other soldiers; news images from Arabic television; static shots from surveillance cameras in the camp and during interrogations; Internet videos, over and over; the despairing wife of a dead soldier or the confessions of an anonymous soldier in a video chat with the then latest weapons of warfare; video clips of Arab insurgents, which show a successful bomb attack or the condemnation and beheading of an American soldier. The film's narrative perspective is completely divided into a montage construction that pretends to be able to make visible all the video and film images that were omitted and cut out of Western television.

Even the brilliant cinematic images that follow the hero's first video recording, in order to cast a critical eye on the procedures at an American checkpoint, are produced in the best tradition of the European auteur film. They are – a film title and the off-screen commentary leave us in no doubt about this – the pastiche of a French film that stages the equally banal and existentially physical suffering of the soldiers, who persevere doing nothing in the sun, heavily armed and covered up to the chin in their protective uniforms. Close-ups of the soldiers' faces alternate with shots showing them looking at children playing, or at occasional passers-by; an endlessly repeating course of the same. The music from Handel's Sarabande, which constantly underscores the scene, gives a concrete shape to the temporality

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of this agonized perseverance: the monotony of endlessly continuing to pace, which appears as unlimited as it does aimless in its circular arrangement – until one of the cars driving (not very often) into the barrier abruptly alters the whole situation, placing everyone involved on high alert. While the music keeps up its steady tempo, the images are accelerated, repeating the same situation over and over in fast-forward.

Suddenly the baroque arrangement is loudly and dramatically shattered by television images of an Iraqi station reporting on an incident at this border post. A woman in labor pains has been shot and killed because her brother misunderstood the orders of the soldiers at the checkpoint while driving her to the hospital. We see the victim, the blood-soaked pregnant woman, who is hastily rushed into the operating room by doctors. Our hero's video diary then shows the perpetrator, his comrade, back in the barracks. As in a real interview, he is coolly asked about his feelings. What is it like for a soldier when he has shot his first civilian, when he has killed a woman and her unborn baby? But this interview is also just a game to kill time and the enervating boredom of the men sitting between the pallets and the chairs. For the biggest problem is the circumstance that time will simply not go by; they just need a deployment order, and the longed-for end of waiting will start the process all over again. The only thing left to do is to keep playing cards decorated with naked women, to flip through porno magazines, to read novels, or even to surf the Internet.

The atmosphere of debilitated, tense stagnation suddenly changes in the plot: there is an assault on an Arab family, the daughter is raped, killed, burned, the mother and the grandfather shot. In the style of a home-made Internet video we see our hero condemned by an Arab court of Arab combatants. He was there with his camera when the lecherous fantasies became real, he filmed the murder and the rape. For this he is decapitated – in front of another running video camera. We see, in the Internet video, how the knife cuts through his throat, the way one would kill a lamb. The head is held up for the camera.

His accomplices are condemned by more or less secret military courts. We see video footage of their interrogation; the baroque tables and armchairs, adorned with gold leaf, mark the spot. We are familiar with this furniture from images in the newspaper announcing the victory over Iraq, which showed American soldiers spreading their legs out in the expensive furnishings of the conquered rulers, before the administration turned the palaces into their quarters. The last amateur video shows a celebration at home: people applaud for the returning soldier, the only one from the group who got away, who left the scene of the crime to look away, who betrayed

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his comrades and who survived the grind of the court martial that blatantly turned this betrayal into an accusation. He speaks of his feelings of guilt; his stammering and his weeping face mark out the possibility of imagining a post-heroic victim. No narrative can insert his suffering into a meaningful context of community.

In Hollywood Vietnam films, the American solider had been described as a disillusioned, lost individual, despairing at the senselessness of his activity. In the reality of the clinic, those returning from Vietnam were traumatized victims. Jonathan Shey has portrayed these post-heroic heroes from the viewpoint of psychiatric practice. With great accuracy, he chose the essential war epic of the west, Homer's *Iliad*, as the dramaturgical blueprint on which to trace a clinical pattern in the undoing of character through the stages of growing rage, which leads Achilles first into mania and finally to death.[24] We also see such a wiped-out character in Brian de Palma's Casualties of War (1987). In the character of the soldiers falling to pieces in their feelings of guilt, the legacy of the Hollywood Vietnam war film is recapitulated and brought to a critical point.

Casualties – this means the fatalities, the injured and wounded that one tallies up at the end of a war. It designates the lamentable number of cases of more or less randomly destroyed lives, of which there can be as many as one can imagine in an open series. As with the term "victim," being a casualty involves the passive reception of damages from an external event – whether the violence of war, an accident or a crime. This passivity marks a fundamental difference from the heroic sacrifice, as when the soldier surrenders his physical life through his own action; for the victim is excluded from the symbolic exaltation of suffering. The victim's suffering finds no framework in the narrative of collective thought such that it could be transformed into a heroic sacrifice as a community-founding emblem. What appears in its place can be called the melodramatic formation of the image of the victim: a passive, wordless suffering with a corresponding narrative that unfolds the pathologies of the individual psyche.

VI.

Looking at the final sequence in Casualties of War, it is actually hard to imagine the existence of any Hollywood war film at all any more. The character of the soldier seems absolutely exhausted. In fact the genre only picks up again at the turn of the millennium, with films that thematize the Second World War. This leads us to the central question: what is the

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relationship between the poetics of genre cinema and the possibility of invoking a politically effective sense of community in aesthetic judgment?

In relation to the circumstances presented here, in relation to our political reality, this question is easy to answer in the sequence of examples. The film The War Tapes effects a peculiar change in position when it depicts the three soldiers in terms of a passive image of the victim. For the appeal to the feeling for moral reprehensibility does not refer to injured and murdered children, men or women, neither to the killed enemy soldiers, nor to the civilians. Rather, it is the soldiers themselves who appear as casualties of war. They are wounded by hearing and seeing, by perceiving the collateral damage of their own military operations, by seeing the victims of their military action: as if this perception itself had hit them like a bullet.

In this sense, The War Tapes articulates the ideological switch that pervades the American Iraq war film as a whole. The staging of the victim always refers to the suffering of the American soldier. From the standpoint of a political-moral analysis of current circumstances, this may be viewed as a scandal. But the aesthetic judgment demanded by such a staging raises a claim to validity that is different from that of a historical-political analysis. At any rate, the judgment does so if we want to take its claim, as I do here, as the manifestation of an aesthetic judgment targeted at mobilizing a sense of community. In the case of the war film genre, the judgment can be heuristically formulated as a feeling for what is authentic[25] in the representation of suffering, for the aesthetics proper to this concrete image of the victim.

The question that the aesthetic judgment raises is then whether the aesthetic operations of the film convey to us an image of the victim such that we can assume that it is generally judged and taken to be an authentic image of suffering. If we follow Kant, this does not mean an effect of feeling – that is, charm and emotion (*Reiz und Rührung*) – any more than it does a conceptual assessment of what is represented in terms of our political or moral understanding. Ultimately, it concerns the degree to which a feeling for the victim conveyed by the film's staging, in the form of this concrete image of the victim, can be a generally shared feeling.

Every aesthetic judgment examines the subjective feeling of the judgment with regard to what claim it can lay to being a feeling shared by all human beings.[26] It is only in the sense for perceiving the general in the subjective experience of feeling that the aesthetic judgment opens up the possibility of a sense of communality as the basis for a "feeling for (practical ideas), i.e. for moral feeling."[27] The basic sense itself is not a faculty given to human beings in advance, but something that we always assume as a possibility whenever we pass a judgment of taste. The sense of communality is something entirely

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contingent that is produced and reproduced in corresponding practices by a concrete cultural community.

Against this backdrop, the representation of the victim in The War Tapes can be understood as an appeal to the sense of communality of a given cultural community. Within the form (that is, the medial and aesthetic modalities of its representation) of this image of the victim, there circulates a possible medium for this cultural community in which a generally valid feeling for the suffering of the victim becomes an authentic representation of suffering, by making it possible for anyone to experience this feeling for the authenticity of the form of representation. I will therefore spell out the thesis sketched above in relation to aesthetic judgment and a sense of community once again with regard to the war film, because it is exactly this formula that can provide a poetics of the Hollywood war film genre. The feeling presented in the film for the soldiers' suffering defines the melodramatic core of this genre, its aesthetic sensation.

This is not the place to take up my thesis in relation to materials of film history. In the following I will therefore restrict myself merely to describing it in more detail.

VII.

There is a famous photo taken by Don McCullin in Vietnam in 1968. It shows a soldier, his eyes wide open but vacant; he does not seem to be in his right mind, stunned, but not mad; paralyzed, but not dead. "Shell Shocked Marine" is the caption, as if the flash from the grenade were only an extension of photographic light technology. The photograph encapsulates one of the visual formulas of the American war film genre. Varieties of it can be found in numerous Hollywood films. It is the stunned astonishment of Montgomery Clift (Figure 5) in From Here to Eternity (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) and the face of the man running berserk in Full Metal Jacket (Stanley Kubrick, 1987). It is the insistent stare of Martin Sheen (Figure 6) and the coldness of Colonel Kurtz's controlled cruelty in Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). It is the paralyzed face of Tom Hanks (Figure 7) in Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and the flashing self-consciousness of Nick in The Deer Hunter (Michael Cimino, 1978). And time and again it is the image of the soldiers' suffering (Figure 4), emphatically pointed out and provided with the mythic signs of sacrifice, as in Steel Helmet (Samuel Fuller, 1951), Platoon (Oliver Stone, 1986) and Hamburger Hill (John Irvin, 1987).

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Fig. 4: The soldiers' suffering. Screenshot from The Steel Helmet



Fig. 5: Image of stunned astonishment, Montgomery Clift. Screenshot from From Here to Eternity



Fig. 6: The insistent stare of Martin Sheen. Screenshot from Apocalypse Now



Fig. 7: The paralyzed face of Tom Hanks. Screenshot from Saving Private Ryan

This face – the shell-shocked face – can be understood as a double emblem: on the one hand it is an imago of sacrifice, in which the terror, the agony of the soldier is formed into an evocative icon. On the other hand, it represents an accusatory document, showing nothing more than naked, physical suffering, the sheer annihilation of human life.

But both are staged in terms of a feeling for the hero's subjective suffering. And it is just this that forms the melodramatic core of the war film genre. It is only in exceptional cases that the story of these films is the heroic act; usually it is the experience of passive, impotent suffering. These films develop their world from the subjective perspective of the

simple soldier, of the average individual. And they unfold the victim's suffering from this perspective in the mode of sentimental melodrama. This is also why, as a rule, the protagonists of the war film are not generals or commanders.

Whether in a landing in the African desert, in Normandy or in Italy, whether in the Pacific War at Guadalcanal or Saipan, the protagonist of the classical Hollywood war film is the assault or reconnaissance patrol, that smallest of troop formations, operating in close proximity to the events of war as eye, ear and nose. As they become the sense organs of the military body, the individual soldiers lose their overview. Their actions are no longer governed by the active radius of their own bodies, but by the hierarchy of orders. This perception of the infantryman, which constantly operates at the border of blindness, is the basic audiovisual motif of the classical war film. Whether facing the invisible enemy who hides in the night, in the jungle, or in tunnels and caves below ground, or whether facing the chaos of the barrage, the colorful haze of cloud bombs, the flash of the exploding grenades, the patrol is the epic ego, completely wrapped up in an event without ever having had a view of the whole.

The classical Hollywood war film is much more frequently about the experience of the impotent suffering of the soldiers than about the triumphal feelings of action cinema, the illusion of the overview. And it is just this obstruction of the view, the inability to recognize and judge the situation, and being helplessly offered up to a destiny that one cannot get an overview of, much less have an influence on, that characterizes the hero of the American war film as a melodramatic victim character.

From the beginning – and by this I mean since the creation of the cinematic genre in the early 1940s – this formula has defined the formation of the Hollywood war film genre. It also structures its historical variation and development. And the poetics of the American Iraq war film, whether in the format of a documentary or a fictional drama, can still be defined by this formula. It is exactly here that it demonstrates its generative power. One can say that the historical variation of the genre, its historicity, can be grasped in the ever-new attempts to (re)stage an authentic image of suffering, a representation of the victim, which can be communally shared, which articulates and affects the sense of communality of a cultural community.

In this sense, and continuing on from Richard Rorty's thoughts, we can understand the staging of the victim's suffering in these films as an appeal to a generally shared feeling for the communal – to a sense of community that is the origin of the community itself, depending on whether we wish

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to follow this appeal or not. And here lies the only reality of the sense of communality; it becomes reality to the degree to which a communally shared "feeling for a practical idea" (Kant) is produced in the approval of the many.

VIII.

From this perspective, Redacted can be clearly differentiated from The War Tapes. In order to elaborate on this, I would like once again to come back to the end of Redacted. For, while the home movie of the homecoming at the beer table may give us the last video images, they are not the last images of the film. After the suffering face is frozen in a final shot, there is an epilogue. Under the caption "Collateral Damage" we see a series of photographs of mutilated corpses, mostly children. In a countershot to the home video, they represent precisely those victims who designate the off-space of the images from both Western television and the war film genre.

While in The War Tapes the much too dark, blurry night-time images of the murdered girl mark the soldiers as wounded, traumatized victims, Redacted glaringly illuminates the darkness of these images. The photo series makes perfectly clear what is actually meant by the collateral damage of which both The War Tapes and the daily news speak. On the one hand the photographs create a link to a very specific temporality, which can be fundamentally distinguished from that of the video image and of the film. They articulate, in fact, the temporal form of a witnessing gaze, which in The War Tapes is externally attributed to the videos. For photographs displace – or at any rate we can constantly read them as doing so in the relevant theories – everything that is represented into a mode of the immediate present as well as the irretrievable past. They attest to the precise time-place of being-there, which, seen from the present of the viewer of the photographs, always designates an absolute past, a radical having-been-there.[28] This is the basis of the often thematized elegiac pathos that seems to belong to the medium of photography itself; at any rate, in the epilogue to Redacted the series of photographs – linked to the dramatic final-act aria from Puccini's *Tosca* – becomes an audiovisual requiem, an elegy of horror, mourning and rage.

But even this epilogue is not some kind of commentary where Redacted finally turns directly to its spectators. The sequence of photographs also

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Figs. 8-19: Photo series from REDACTED

restages – like all the visual formats of this film – one of the audiovisual media forms of representing war. It paraphrases the slide shows which first became popular during the Iraq war, in which we see thousands of versions of American soldiers returning home, laughing and hugging women and children who are crying with joy. These are pictures like those found in a family photo album, reminding us of happy days, here arranged as melodramatic miniatures and circulating in the Internet portal YouTube among an audience numbering in the millions of clicks. Much as in these arrangements, in REDACTED we see the steady sequence of photographs, melodramatically underscored with music – except that, here, Puccini's music is laid under the mutilated corpses of women and children. The faces of the corpses are covered with black bars, as if blocking the face would make the victim visible while still keeping the spectators' gaze away from the person in coy deference – except that the crossed-out faces seem to have erased the pathos-laden form of the melodramatic image of the victim itself.

In fact, they are images of raw horror, which contrast the melodramatic figure of the victim of the traumatized soldiers to the nightmare of unatoned guilt. In REDACTED the photographs and video images themselves become vengeful ghosts who return into the world of Western media, of official news reporting, and of artistic entertainment from which they had been banished. They culminate in the image of the defiled and burned corpse of a girl: the photographs become a slide show of a horror film which links back to the melodrama of the home video, as the interior view of an unbearable atrocity links back to the sentimental form of its external representation.

Seen in this way, Brian de Palma's film also represents an attempt to stage an image of the victim that, in its appeal to aesthetic judgment, targets the central formula of pathos in the war film genre. This appeal can mobilize a sense of community exactly to the degree to which the genre's formula of pathos is realized, in such a way that the spectator experiences it as a subjective feeling of approval which every individual can share, as long as doing so fuels a sense of belonging to the present of the Western cultural community and assumes an aesthetic stance – no matter what political position is taken toward the politics of the American war in Iraq. In this sense, I can understand and analyze this and all other American Iraq war films as nothing other than an engagement with Hollywood genre cinema.

If we investigate the melodramatic mode with regard to the relationship between the representation of war in media and the representation of war in art or artistic entertainment, then there are principally two possibilities. The

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first I have attempted to develop by analyzing the example of REDACTED. Here we see the possibility of genre cinema related to the sense of belonging to a given cultural community.

A second possibility can be described with reference to Mroué's work. Here as well, the representation of the victim designates a neuralgic point. As blurry as the videos are, we still see the perpetrator, and we try to recognize the face, to read it. But we do not see a victim. There are no wounded bodies, no faces consumed with pain, no image of agony. What a passive victim might be remains hidden in the off-screen of the video.

It is as if all sentiment were withdrawn from representation along with the victim's visibility, in order to replace the melodramatic figuration of suffering with a kind of feeling-less shock. The shock is based on thoughts that we conclude by making our film analysis: what can be seen in this video clip? What links together the user of the video camera, the trigger-happy soldier, and the medial production of the image? What possibilities are opened up if we analyze video imagery in this way? An image of the victim emerges only in the analytical operations that consider the media conditions, the qualities and the properties of the video images. As a result, feeling is removed from judgment and transferred into an analysis of media constellations in a civil war.

The fact that a time-place is designated in the video at which someone was hit by a bullet and perhaps lost his life, because he happened to focus his mobile phone camera on a soldier who saw himself threatened by his own visibility, is not directly given to our senses. These events only emerge through an analysis that the anonymous addressee of the video images must produce him- or herself. By taking on the roles of active detective, witness and judge, the audience is led through a process that is rationally related to media facts and operations. The audience itself is made into a political agent in a civil war, one that is literally being carried out as a war about the visibility and erasure of images of war, and not only on the Internet. In this sense, Mroué's art fulfills the criterion of propaganda to a certain degree, while De Palma's genre film challenges aesthetic judgment from the position of an artwork.

This idea can be understood in another way. Mroué cannot appeal to any sense of community because he has no concrete political-cultural community in view, but rather is seeking to engage in global communication, which – as with the Internet – goes beyond all political and cultural borders. Melodramatic genre cinema, however, can shift the boundaries of community that the sense of community is based on time and again; it can make them absolute in the name of general human values, but it cannot

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get beyond them. The other culture can always only appear as a foreign, hostile and threatening outside.

Notes

1. Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 227.
2. See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 1 (1990), 45-66, and Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000).
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9. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, A 62-63.
10. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 209.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 70.
12. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101.
13. See Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*.
14. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Rorty, *Achieving our Country,* 16-17.
15. "To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance." If we rest on understanding our fellow-humans, "we shall lose

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what Nietzsche called 'metaphysical comfort,' but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community – our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage – is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature's. Shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is the loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right." Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166.

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26. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, § 40.
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Screenshots:

Apocalypse Now Redux; D: Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1979. BMG Video.
From Here to Eternity; D: Fred Zinnemann, USA 1953. Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.
Redacted; D: Brian De Palma, USA/CA, 2007. Kinowelt Home Entertainment.
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Race Interactions: Film, Melodrama, and the Ambiguities of Colorism

Christof Decker

In 1900 the African American writer Charles Chesnutt published an essay called "The Future American" in which he described how the American nation would develop in the twentieth century. A light-skinned mulatto, Chesnutt was preoccupied with the cultural meaning of skin color and the legal definitions of whiteness, blackness, and the in-between group of mixed-race individuals. He argued that this group was in a unique position to experience the problem of the color line, and it served as an implicit reference point for his utopian vision of a post-racial society. As he put it, "it ought to be quite clear that the future American race – the future American ethnic type – will be formed of a mingling, in a yet to be ascertained proportion, of the various racial varieties which make up the present population of the United States [...]."[1]

In this process of mingling, which Chesnutt went on to sketch for a number of generations, no perceptible traces of black would be left: "There would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals."[2] Chesnutt's concept of the "post-racial" envisioned a society in which the mingling and mixing of races would eventually lead to the dissolution of race classifications – which he saw as scientifically dubious in the first place. Crucially, since the mingling would change the skin color of the future American ethnic type, his argument made skin color the decisive visual marker of difference. Yet, expressing the bias of his time, Chesnutt's concept put blackness at the bottom and whiteness at the top. He proposed a notion of middle-class-ness as well as a form of respectability that was built on the cultural hierarchy of skin color types.[3]

As Chesnutt's essay showed, the mulatto or mixed-race perspective offered a unique point of view from which to discuss the effects of skin color. Depending on the observer's position, skin color was perceived as a source of shame, a source of guilt, or a source of pride. Yet these connotations also created a dilemma: a lighter skin color was presented as desirable as a signifier of upward social mobility and cultural capital, but as a marker of identity it made a clear sense of racial belonging more difficult. Viewed

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from the position of blackness, skin color therefore had to be overcome *and* affirmed at the same time. Or to put it differently, in a culture that valued individual achievement as well as ethnic or racial identity, the position of blackness was placed *vis-à-vis* the double-bind of simultaneous denial and affirmation of skin color.

In more recent discussions, this dilemma has been viewed as a historical constellation that also shapes contemporary developments. Trina Jones, a legal scholar, points out that skin color is "one device for assigning people to a racial category."[4] Yet she also argues that race and color are *distinct* phenomena that sometimes, but not always, overlap. As persons of mixed racial heritage increasingly shape American society, race classifications lose their definability and an internal differentiation based on color gains importance. Jones writes: "(1) the more the races mix, the more difficult it becomes to place individuals within specific racial categories; and (2) discrimination may nonetheless occur on the basis of skin color."[5] Following Alice Walker's terminology, Jones calls this phenomenon "colorism," a process of assigning meaning to skin color that can happen within races and across racial boundaries, intra-racially or inter-racially: "With colorism, skin color does not serve as an indicator of race. Rather, it is the social meaning afforded skin color itself that results in differential treatment."[6]

In the broader context of debates about a post- or multi-racial society, this essay discusses the representation of skin color and race interactions in American cinema, and examines their relation to the discourse on melodrama. Race has been a crucial category for stories of victimization and affect, yet focusing on race *interactions* allows us to treat the notions of whiteness and blackness as relational concepts. I want to argue that in the history of cinema this space of interactions has developed from segregated and racist hierarchies to more open and democratic forms of interaction, culminating in what have most recently come to be called "network narratives." However, although this historical trajectory might imply a story of gradual progress, it is actually marked by contradictions and anxieties that appear to be unique to American culture and that have surfaced in recent discussions about a post-racial society. With Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004) as my case in point I will address three issues: new forms of interaction in less segregated performance spaces, a new sense of anxiety over the rules and patterns of race interactions, and, finally, the shift from the meaning of race to the meaning of color as a cause for "differential treatment" and as a new paradigm for melodramatic stories of victimization.

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Melodrama, Skin Color and Justice

The central theme of victimization in melodramatic films can be related to two concepts of justice: social equality and the recognition of cultural difference. Being victimized usually means that either of the two paradigms is being violated. Following Nancy Fraser's distinction, this violation may have different causes. Social inequality is often seen to result from economic forms of injustice such as exploitation or material deprivation, while the injustice of nonrecognition is caused by forms of cultural domination. As Fraser argues, nonrecognition is regarded as a symbolic or cultural injustice for which the remedy is the recognition of cultural difference. The remedy for social inequality and economic injustice, on the other hand, is redistribution. A crucial observation in Fraser's argument about social equality and cultural difference as well as the remedies of redistribution and recognition is that both types of injustice may be experienced by an individual at the same time as interrelated forms of injustice.[7] Uncle Tom was not just economically exploited but also culturally despised, indicating that the status of cultural inferiority has often been seen as a justification for economic exploitation. Conversely, the double sense of economic *and* cultural injustice has created the strongest melodramatic archetypes of a double victimization, that is, victims who may not only claim a redistribution of wealth but also a recognition of cultural difference which, historically, has often meant a recognition of their status as human beings.

In the history of film melodrama, many early films focused on the question of social equality, and injustice was a result of different forms of exploitation – from economic exploitation in relations between workers and employers or tenants and landlords in the city slums to sexual exploitation of innocent country girls or freshly arrived immigrants. Often these scenarios of victimization were implicitly linked with the notion of cultural difference, particularly in the case of immigrants or the portrayal of class hierarchies, but the explicit introduction of cultural difference as a major issue of justice became more prominent in the 1940s as the self-definition of American culture and society increasingly shifted toward multiculturalism.[8] The race relations cycle of the late 1940s indicated that the argument for equal treatment was turning away from the specter of poverty and economic exploitation to the recognition of cultural difference which, at that particular historical moment, was actually articulated and presented as a vision of sameness. Films such as Pinky (Elia Kazan, 1949), about African Americans passing for white, or

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Gentleman's Agreement (Elia Kazan, 1947), about a Gentile journalist who pretends to be a Jew and experiences discrimination as a result, disguised the topic of cultural difference behind an outward appearance of visual indistinguishability and the humanist plea for equal treatment of all races. Gradually, in the decades to come, the case for the recognition of cultural difference would include visible and audible markers of alterity that changed the underlying melting-pot and assimilationist ideals of the late 1940s.[9]

While this eventually led to a more varied and inclusive representation of ethnic or religious groups such as Italian Americans or Jewish Americans, who had been archetypical melodramatic victims in the silent period, it did not change in quite the same way the basic racial hierarchy between white and black. For the melodramatic imagination, African Americans were still often primary examples of a double victimization suffering from the injustice of both economic exploitation and cultural nonrecognition.[10]

However, as numerous authors have argued, the social parameters in American society are increasingly shifting toward a post-racial or mixed-racial society in which the question of race is superseded by the question of skin color.[11] In this new environment, the problem of belonging either to the black or the white population, which has a uniquely difficult history in the United States,[12] is transformed into the classification of people according to their skin color. One consequence is the increasing fuzziness of the color line between white and non-white groups, while the doctrine of color-blindness has redefined older concepts based on race and is seen to "celebrate" multiculturalism.[13] Yet, as some authors point out, the shift from a rigorous black vs. white scheme to finely tuned shades of skin color does not preclude cases of differential treatment or discrimination. Indeed, in some crucial ways the experience of "colorism," that is, a "skin-color bias,"[14] replicates traditional hierarchies – most importantly, the cultural tradition of attributing virtue, civilization or beauty to whiteness, and sinfulness, savagery or ugliness to blackness.[15] While race relations under these new conditions may thus potentially be more equal, the experience of injustice due to the nonrecognition of difference may persist. As Trina Jones points out, the least fortunate group in a system based on skin color are dark-skinned blacks. She asks: "what happens when Whites (or Blacks) favor lighter-skinned Blacks or lighter-skinned mixed-race individuals to the detriment of darker-skinned Blacks?"[16]

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Thus, the recognition of cultural difference as one element of melodrama's concept of justice becomes more complicated and fluid in a multi-racial society. However, while the interaction between whites and light-skinned blacks may be more equal, the position of dark-skinned blacks is more akin to the older notion of a double victimization. *Vis-à-vis* the white population they exist at the lower end of the traditional racist hierarchy of non-white groups, yet *vis-à-vis* light-skinned blacks they also exist in an inferior position of an internal or intraracial hierarchy based on skin tone (see fig. 1).[17] The shift from race to skin color, from racism to colorism, and the concomitant vanishing of a sharp, if arbitrarily defined, color line, therefore affects the core of the melodramatic concept of justice. On the one hand, it destabilizes the sense of solidarity within the victimized group that has become more stratified and heterogeneous.[18] On the other hand, it complicates the process of visually and culturally placing individuals in a group who may rightfully claim the status of being victims.[19] As a result, many competing claims for cultural difference based on shifting professional and class alliances, income and lifestyle, gender attributes, skin color, religious practices or personal aspirations are voiced and hope to gain recognition.

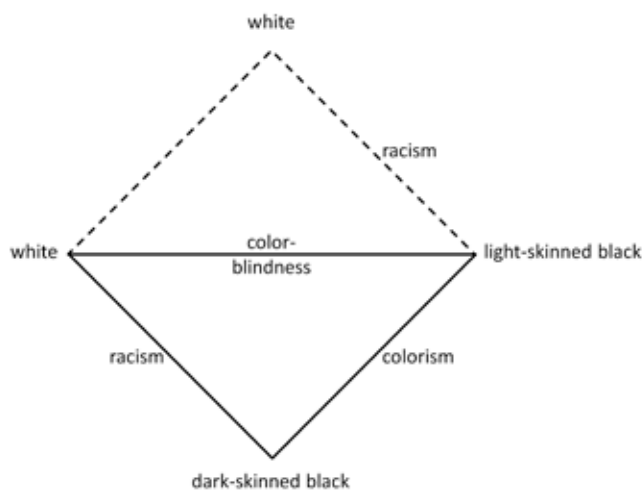


Fig. 20: Cultural hierarchies in a post-racial society based on skin color

The Performance of Race Interactions

As indicated, Trina Jones argues that issues related to color and race must be seen as distinct phenomena, yet since they often overlap we should shift to a broader view of race interactions and the so-called "performance" of whiteness and blackness. Recent work has emphasized the quality of these performances as cultural constructions.[20] However, drawing on the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman, it can be seen that performances do not necessarily construct race identities; rather, they define situations and rules of interaction taking place in front of an audience which influence the designation of racial belonging. Goffman understands performances to be "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers [...]."[21] Performances establish who is a performer and who belongs to the audience; they define what kind of situation or event is taking place, and they assign roles as well as behavioral scripts to the participants acting in this situation.

Furthermore, Goffman argues that performances rely on a process of framing in which the participants formulate an answer to the question: "What is it that's going on here?"[22] And they establish "primary frameworks" that provide the most crucial answer to this question. In Goffman's model, individuals try to affect their audience, and this can only take place in the process of interaction: "For if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey."[23] As Richard Wright remembered in his autobiography *Black Boy*, "While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word."[24]

As James Naremore has shown, in the cinema performances involve a number of expressive techniques: posture, gesture, speech and voice, clothing and makeup, or facial expressions. All of these techniques are used to present the self to an audience, and they establish "the entire body as an index of gender, age, ethnicity and social class."[25] They are activated in an attempt to create what Naremore calls "expressive coherence," a sense that the different ways and elements of behavior add up to a unified and coherent image. Performances thus provide us with body signs that are decoded by the audience as emotions and states of being. From their display we draw conclusions about the interior realm of the individual, which is usually seen to represent the most truthful and authentic side of human beings. If a performance is meant to be convincing, the emotions and actions on display have to be judged as being sincere and truthful, as representing on the body surface what has emerged in the inner life of the psyche or soul. And yet,

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as Naremore points out, the constructed quality of social roles in fictional representations makes it clear that the search for an unacted emotional essence is futile. The display of true feelings as a key to the essence of the individual is a cultural ideology that disavows the ubiquitous forms of imitation and mimicry: "Instead of treating performance as an outgrowth of an essential self [...] the self is an outgrowth of performance."[26]

Following Goffman and Naremore, we can thus concede that the fictional representation of race relations is produced in the process of interaction. And yet, as the school of symbolic interactionism makes clear, all of these processes are in flux and implicated in cultural struggles. Primary frameworks that provide a definition of a situation may differ in the assessment of the individuals involved, just as the roles and protocols of behavior that a specific situation requires may be contested. Indeed, this is one of the major points about the historical representation of race interactions in visual culture: although American cinema has gone a long way from the early history of racist depictions, it has also emphasized the increasing difficulties of trying to define the primary framework of situations in which race interactions take place. Thus the more flexible and fluid the cinematic spaces of race interactions become, the more problematic and contested appears to be the process of assigning primary frameworks. Put differently, spaces and performances have been gradually expanded and opened up, yet the position and meaning of race in these interactions – how it affects the situation and how it should be performed – becomes increasingly unclear. Indeed, the vision of a dehierarchized and deterritorialized space in recent films produces fear and anxieties, while the search for its racial connotations turns into an almost obsessive narrative desire.

This historical development culminates in recent films that have been called "network narratives":[27] films such as Short Cuts (Robert Altman, 1993), Traffic (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), Babel (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), or Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004), that interweave and interrelate multiple story-lines to create a complex web of seemingly unrelated events and life-worlds. Meditating on accidents, chance encounters or unforeseeable reversals of "fate" that often draw on conventions of the sensational or sentimental melodrama, these network narratives depict the contradictory forces shaping American culture and society. Often set in Los Angeles as the quintessential city of borderlines as well as ethnic and class differences, these narratives rearrange the space of race interactions and interrogate the experience of colorism. Before focusing on Crash from 2004, three examples from earlier periods shall briefly be introduced to indicate how space and performance have historically been linked. In Hollywood

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mainstream genres, the visual organization of space and the codes of performance traditionally supported race segregation and hierarchy.[28] Yet, beginning in the civil rights era, a gradual dehierarchization of race interactions occurred that was based on new arrangements of cinematic space and more fluid and improvisational performance styles such as method acting. Traditional forms of victimization receded in this process, but new anxieties and new economies of melodramatic victimization emerged that gradually acknowledged the experience of colorism in a multicultural context.

Race Interactions in the Cinema

The first example from classical Hollywood is JEZEBEL, a film from 1938, directed by William Wyler. Of the ante-bellum plantation fantasies produced in the 1930s, it was among the more "liberal" examples, centering on the headstrong, capricious and ultimately self-sacrificing character of Julie, played by Bette Davis. Yet it also showed that race, performance and space were organized in unmistakably hierarchical terms. In the highly conventionalized spatial system of 1930s Hollywood, unequal forms of interaction dominated. They were shaped by fixed roles, scripts of action, and by clearly assigning the positions of actor and audience. For instance, in one scene, Preston Dillard, played by Henry Fonda, returns to Julie's plantation home after a long absence. Tasting the mint julep that the "house slave" Cato (Lew Payton) has prepared according to a long-established family tradition, Preston invites Cato to share a glass. Cato is tempted to join him, yet stating that "it ain't hardly proper," he takes the glass with him and disappears to the left of the screen space as soon as he, but not the viewer, has noticed Julie's presence.

In this brief scene, then, Preston's inclination to interact in a more equal fashion with blacks like Cato is supported by the visual framing of both and the temporary redefinition of a situation which is unmistakable in its hierarchical design of master and slave, servant and guest, or passively waiting onlooker and active participant. Yet as soon as Julie enters the deep performance space, the temporary redefinition is immediately abandoned, both by Preston and by Cato. Indeed, what follows is a scene in which Julie presents herself in a white dress of purity and submission that she had refused to wear in a crucial previous scene of the Olympus Ball. As she is kneeling in front of Preston, not knowing that he had been married in the meantime, the white dress fills the image and virtually obliterates all traces of blackness that Cato had introduced before, and that Julie herself had been

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associated with when she had worn a sexually alluring and provocative red dress, coveted by her black maids.[29]

This may serve as a classic example of spatial arrangements that support and maintain race divisions and predefine a very narrow range of performative options for blacks. Yet, as Richard Dyer points out, the notion of whiteness in Jezebel was ambiguous, resting, as he puts it, on the "belief or suspicion that black people have in some sense more 'life' than whites."[30] Although Julie epitomizes the image of superior white womanhood, she is ultimately a broken character who could not perform her role according to the rules of the imaginary Southern society of the film.

A more fundamental shift of cinematic space and the definition of race interaction became noticeable as the civil rights movement gained prominence in the 1950s. Stanley Kramer's The Defiant Ones from 1958 created a performance space that, again, on the surface presented a racially segregated society, which, at a deeper level, was characterized by race mixing and mingling. The main characters Joker Jackson (Tony Curtis) and Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier) – escaped convicts and thus melodramatic archetypes of victimization – were not only literally but also symbolically chained to each other as representatives of black and white America.

In the first half of the film, the framing of shots and the lighting emphasizes the equal value of the characters, placing them horizontally in the image space and allowing the viewers to see a full frontal view of their faces. Shadows in Curtis's face downplay his whiteness, while close-ups of Poitier individualize and emotionalize his character. As they decide to rob a store, Curtis puts on an improvised blackface as Poitier/Cullen shyly tells him to hide his white skin. In the visual framing of the film, black and white are thus initially forced into a common performance space, yet gradually a sense of brotherhood and solidarity is established that is put to the test as soon as they enter a remote farm house, inhabited by a single white woman with her son.

While the woman is making coffee, hesitatingly serving both Jackson and Cullen, an intricate series of shots establishes the domestic interior space of the house. Jackson glances in her direction; off-screen, she returns his gaze, their sexually coded glances seeming to meet. Cullen is shown at first oblivious to the exchange of glances, until he notices the growing desire of Jackson and the woman and begins to sense that she is breaking up the bond between the two male convicts. As the scene continues, it is reframed in the earlier fashion, including both Jackson and Cullen, yet by this time, the white woman has taken the center position and is effectively splitting the frame up in the middle. Just as the presence of Julie had redefined the

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encounter between Cato and Preston in Jezebel, the white woman in The Defiant Ones creates a new situational framework for the interaction between white and black characters. For Cullen the primary framework of the situation is still the flight with Jackson, but for Jackson it has begun to shift to the prospect of white heterosexual normalcy.

The presence of the white woman within the performance space therefore has two major implications: On the one hand, her scopic desire is focused exclusively on Jackson, the white character. As an object of sight or erotic desire, Cullen is disavowed, and he switches from active agent to the role of child-like observer. On the other hand, as the following scenes underline, the prospective reconstitution of a white, nuclear family also recreate and reaffirm a system of racist thinking and behavior. However, in the end, the white character Jackson eventually follows Cullen/Poitier and Kramer's film ends with an image, as well as a utopian fantasy, of two racialized bodies, holding and embracing each other in mutual support and dependence.

In the 1980s a young black cinema emerged, creating complementary or counter-narratives to earlier socially-conscious filmmakers such as William Wyler, Stanley Kramer, Martin Ritt, Shirley Clarke or John Cassavetes. Spike Lee's Jungle Fever from 1991 illustrates that a major shift of race and color consciousness has happened. The film tells the love story between Flipper, an African American from Harlem, and Angie, an Italian American from Bensonhurst. Visually and narratively it creates a common space for the mixed race relationship, yet the couple are violently rejected by their respective communities and eventually split up in order to return to the security of the more stable and spatially defined neighborhoods of racial belonging.

The inter-racial conflict at the heart of the film triggers an intra-racial discussion about skin color that brings out a keen awareness of colorism, particularly among the women. As they share their experience, a cultural hierarchy from dark skin tones at the bottom to light ones at the top emerges that echoes Chesnutt's essays.[31] Flipper's wife Drew, played by Lonette McKee, has such light skin that she feels particularly humiliated by his affair with a white woman. And yet, just before Flipper and Angie split up, he argues vehemently against mixed children. Reducing their relationship to a case of mere curiosity, he makes clear that he does not want to have mixed children, octoroons or quadroons. Angie, who is not convinced and points out that his family already included "white blood", wants to know how he could tell the difference between his own and mixed children. "They look black and they act black," is Flipper's reply, harking back to a long suspicion over the status and legitimacy of the "buffer class" of mulatto or multiracial

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individuals – a view of their being "degenerate" that Chesnutt had been fighting against. Culturally and socially, therefore, the film reflects upon, and tries to transcend, the problem of colorism. Yet at the same time it also firmly makes racial identification dependent on skin color. In Flipper's passionate argument against racially mixed children, Jungle Fever superimposes the violent and blatant racism between African American and Italian American neighborhoods upon the intraracial colorism that, in previous scenes, had reinforced the desire for light skin tones as a marker of upward social mobility.

Network Narratives and the Post-Racial Imagination

In Jungle Fever race interactions are defined primarily as illegitimate sexual relations or as violent encounters. They transgress the boundaries of the neighborhood, which define and delimit areas of belonging. This sense of a coherent cinematic space, of Harlem as a realm of authentic African American-ness, changes in the more fluid and amorphous space of network narratives. Like many recent examples, Crash is set in Los Angeles. Its deterritorialized urban space, dominated by highways and cars, creates an atmosphere of chance encounters that was developed by earlier films such as Robert Altman's Short Cuts. In exemplary, almost pedagogical fashion, and embedding the network metaphor in a melodramatic framework with high-intensity vignettes, Crash uses this tradition to investigate how differences of race and ethnicity are produced: language, speech habits, skin color, facial and bodily features, ethnic and family backgrounds, instances of discrimination, institutional procedures, popular culture, neighborhoods, work contexts – all of these elements combine to produce a network of differences that, in everyday encounters, appears to be so complex that it has to be simplified by reducing it to stereotypes.

Some academic critics, who initially welcomed the attempt to tackle questions of race in a new and provocative fashion in Crash, found fault with this use of stereotypes. They saw the film as being only superficially honest in its probing of racist sentiments among different ethnic groups, while at the same time avoiding the topic of white privilege, promoting liberal humanism and glossing over the deeper conflicts at work in American society. As one author put it, Crash was primarily concerned "with making all racisms and prejudices equivalent by creating pathos for all the characters."[32] Yet, as this reference to the creation of pathos makes clear, in spite of the superficial recourse to a more realistic portrayal of race

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relations, the film is firmly rooted in the melodramatic tradition with its unique "dialectic of pathos and action."[33] Rather than aiming for a new realism, it isolates emotionally intense, culturally instructive moments of abuse and redemption, of injustice and the search for recognition of victimized individuals who are coded as belonging to larger ethnic or racial groups.

Instances of racism are frequent and, when they happen, they take on a similarly symbolic meaning as the chains in The Defiant Ones. In one of the crucial scenes indicative of the melodramatic economy at work in the film, a police car with two white policemen stops a light-skinned black couple in their car. In Goffman's sense, the situation is a ritualized encounter in which both sides should know how to act. Yet the black woman, Elizabeth (Karina Arroyave), protests as they are being searched for weapons, and the white policeman, John Ryan (Matt Dillon), uses his position of power to touch her body in a sexually aggressive way that both molests her and humiliates her male partner Cameron (Terrence Howard), who watches helplessly. In the end, the black couple leave, devastated, and the successful, professionally assimilated television producer must realize that "he is actually black," as Elizabeth points out. Reproaching him for not having protected her, she emphasizes *her* inability and unwillingness to "shuck and jive," that is, to use a performative routine that would portray a position of inferiority and feigned submissiveness while interacting with whites.[34] Several scenes later, the white policeman and the black woman will meet again, involuntarily, as he arrives at the scene of an accident and heroically saves her in the nick of time out of her burning and upturned car. Forcing both races into the cramped visual space of the car's interior, the framing suggests not only their unavoidable physical proximity, but it also allegorizes their mutual dependence on each other and their mutual quest for a better understanding.

Scenes like this certainly partake in the "desire to humanize and redeem protagonists and antagonists within a liberal humanist paradigm,"[35] as Vorris L. Nunley puts it, and they invite the criticism of leveling out the characters by showing "both their racist and their redeeming qualities,"[36] as Christine Farris observes; yet they cannot conceal that, on the whole, Crash presents anxiety-ridden race interactions that affect everyone. All situations and forms of interaction are defined on two levels: on the one hand, the performances establish a professional or social framework for the situation. But on the other hand, they also define a racial framework that guides the patterns and rules of conduct. However, since this second framework no longer rests on a clear definition of racial and cultural hierarchies, as it is embedded in a dehierarchized and fragmented symbolic space, interactions

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are haunted by the anxiety that they may be contaminated by the history and persistence of prejudice.

In the melodramatic mode of presenting this "structure of feeling", all of the major characters can rightfully claim to having been victimized: Graham Waters (Don Cheadle), the dark-skinned African American detective, allows himself to be corrupted and moves up the career ladder by framing a white man in order to save his drug-addicted brother. His mother feels that, by making a career, he has abandoned his family – indeed, at the end of the film he realizes he has been "too late" to save his brother. Ria (Jennifer Esposito), the colleague and partner of Waters, is called a white woman by him, although her parents come from Puerto Rico and El Salvador. Ryan, the white racist cop who molests Elizabeth and later heroically saves her, has to care for his sick father, who does not get the right medical treatment (due to the effects of affirmative action, so Ryan thinks). A shop owner from Iran who is mistaken for an Arab and insulted in the post-9/11 climate is robbed because he does not understand some well-intentioned advice. He goes out to take revenge on the Hispanic locksmith who had given him the advice and almost kills his young daughter.[37] The black television director Cameron is told to make his actors more "black" by his white producer and eventually concedes to this request.[38] Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillipe), a white policeman who is troubled by the racist attitudes of the LAPD and who comes to the rescue of Cameron during a confrontation with other police officers, later kills a young black man (Waters's brother) because he misinterprets one of his gestures. Even the district attorney's snobbish and biased white wife complains that she feels constantly unhappy. All of the characters are thus victimized by forces that are real but also imaginary. Indeed, the fantasies and projections, the prejudices and stereotypes that they express while interacting with each other make clear that they are primarily victimized by their own race anxiety: the anxieties and fears of not knowing how to interact properly. The film ends with a scene in which illegal immigrants from Asia, chained to a van, are set free in Chinatown, thus closing with the ambiguous and counterintuitive vision that the US is still a coveted place of freedom and opportunity, and that the reality of race mixing will continue.

Network narratives can thus be seen to evoke and to perform the process of mingling and mixing in a multi-racial culture that Charles Chesnutt had predicted. They achieve this by a more flexible, less segregated concept of visual, narrative and symbolic spaces. And they seem to imply that the meaning of skin color gradually shifts from racial classifications to group affiliations connecting individuals to a profession, a subculture, a class and

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so on. And yet they also give expression to a deep-seated feeling of anxiety in race interactions, of being haunted by the inescapable forces of the history of slavery and the challenges of multiculturalism. In this atmosphere of fear and paranoia, some critics of Crash felt that the film was evading the issue of white privilege and paternalism: "Race in this film is never about whiteness, it is always about the other,"[39] wrote Sangeeta Ray, while Joyce Irene Middleton suggested that, despite its focus on race and racism, whiteness was still the "default racial category"[40] in the film.[41]

Given the complicated history of race melodramas, Crash certainly participates in a depiction of race that rests on cultural hierarchies derived from the implicit notion of white privilege.[42] Yet, as Vorris L. Nunley points out, the film "productively registers heterogeneity within African American culture"[43] as well as in other ethnic groups. Indeed, it puts two African American characters at the center of its melodramatic pathos, who illuminate the dilemmas of colorism. Cameron, the light-skinned television director, and Graham Waters, the dark-skinned police detective, experience crucial moments of humiliation and loss. In their professional worlds, both have to give in to the demands of white superiors. Cameron has to reshoot a scene while Waters is forced to frame a man who acted in self-defense. Both characters' actions testify to the reality of white domination where "blacks have agency over their own voices, unless the whites in charge decide otherwise."[44] Yet they not only illustrate hierarchical relationships *vis-à-vis* white institutional power, they also represent positions of cultural difference based on their skin color. Through scenes of humiliation and emasculation, the successful light-skinned television director Cameron, who claims cultural prestige and status, realizes that the doctrine of color-blindness and more equal participation is a myth. The dark-skinned detective Waters, on the other hand, has a final moment of subdued frustration when his mother does not recognize him as the good, caring son and instead fixes his image as an outcast alienated from his racial background and heritage. For dark-skinned blacks, then, the perception of, and belonging to, "race" overrides the more fluid forms of social interaction open to light-skinned blacks. Yet, both characters finally come to realize that recognition as a professional regardless of skin color as well as recognition as an individual regardless of race is resisted by both the white establishment and the black community.

In this sense, a new melodramatic constellation emerges from network narratives such as Crash, with its fluid, deterritorialized space that highlights the interconnectedness of individual claims of recognition without, however, resolving them in classic melodramatic fashion. Rather than

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focusing on one individual gaining poetic justice, it expresses a ubiquitous feeling of victimization. Everyday interaction is overshadowed by the anxiety of feeling or expressing racism, of showing preferences based on skin color, or of relying on racial stereotypes. The feeling of injustice, then, persists; but in a multi-racial society that has blurred the color line, the causes and remedies for being victimized have likewise become more ambiguous and fuzzy. In this new constellation, race and skin color are publicly disavowed as reasons for making distinctions, but privately seen to be legitimate as claims for the recognition of cultural difference.

In other words, network narratives of a post-racial age, such as Crash, are trying to balance the competing claims of the underappreciated (light-skinned) black director, the misunderstood Iranian shop-owner, the unloved (dark-skinned) black detective, and so on, without making a final judgment on whose claims are most valid and justified. In contrast to the traditional melodramatic structure of feeling, the metaphor of the network implies that the viewer's affective empathy is drawn away from the plight of the individual and shifted to the group. In the end this shift suggests that the network narrative is not so much concerned with the remedy of poetic justice. Rather, it focuses on the underlying feeling of race anxiety fuelling the characters' actions and their sense of victimization. A paradox appears to make up the core of this feeling: skin color should not be a cause for discriminatory treatment, but it must be acknowledged for the recognition of cultural difference. In the utopian, de-hierarchized space of the post-racial society, the new melodramatic constellation thus addresses, but does not resolve, the ambiguous aspirations of a democratic culture attempting to uphold the ideal of color blindness and tolerance while experiencing the social reality of discrimination.

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Notes

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Future American [1900]," in *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 2002), 845-63, here 846-47.
2. Chesnutt, "The Future American," 850.
3. For a discussion of similar problems facing W. E. B. DuBois when preparing a section with photographs of African Americans at the 1900 Paris Exposition, see Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others': W. E. B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," *African American Review* 34:4 (Winter 2000), 581-99.
4. Trina Jones, "Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color," *Duke Law Journal* 49:6 (April 2000), 1487-1557, here 1497.

5. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1545.
6. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1497.
7. As Nancy Fraser points out, this leads to a "redistribution-recognition dilemma," since the remedy of redistribution implies the similarity of individuals to which it applies, while recognition implies their inherent difference: "People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity." See Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (1995), 68-93, here 74.
8. For a detailed analysis of this transformation, see Christof Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick: Das soziale Melodrama in der amerikanischen Kultur 1840-1950* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2003), 434-91.
9. There is, however, an ongoing debate about the character of these ethnic markers in the context of Hollywood feature films. Drawing on the work of Werner Sollors, Lester D. Friedman has made a strong case that they are subsumed under a larger concept of American-ness: "Regardless of race, religion, or national origin, most Hollywood movies superimpose Americaness as a self-ascripting category whose value orientation totally dominates any primordial ethnic conditions. In fact, far from delving into cultural distinctions beyond the most superficial, American movies militantly stress cultural uniformity. Thus, value orientations become ideologically rather than ethnically defined. So while Hollywood films show primordialism and descent characteristics, they preach symbolic interactionism and consent values. According to these films, outward ethnic markings may be predetermined, but inner ethnic values are self-ascriptive". See Friedman, "Celluloid Palimpsests: An Overview of Ethnicity and the American Film," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema,* ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 11-35, here 22.
10. For an elaborate discussion of the "race melodrama," see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
11. See Jones, "Shades of Brown," and Angela P. Harris, "Introduction: Economies of Color," in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1-5.
12. Sketching the history of race mixing and miscegenation law in the United States, Werner Sollors has provocatively alluded to an "exceptionalist taboo" in American culture: "Could the question of what is American about American culture be answered with 'prohibiting black-white heterosexual couples from forming families and withholding legitimacy from their descendants'?" Sollors, "Introduction," in *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-16, here 5.
13. See Harris, "Economies of Color."

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14. Mark E. Hill, "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness Among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65:1 (2002), 77-91, here 77.
15. See Hill, "Skin Color," and Jones, "Shades of Brown."
16. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1555.
17. According to Hill, this position is related to socio-economic categories such as occupation, income and cultural status; it appears to be worse for women than for men. The bias against dark skin developed, as Hill argues, in the 1940s when empirical research suggested that "the African American community had internalized a variant of the traditional American bias against dark skin and African features" (Hill, "Skin Color" 78). See also Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith, "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy," *Gender and Society* 15:3 (June 2001), 336-57.
18. However, as Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver point out, in the social realm the experience of colorism has not yet had major political consequences. They explain this "skin color paradox" by competing commitments to issues of race and skin color: "[...] Blacks' commitment to racial identity overrides the potential for skin color discrimination to have political significance. That is, because most blacks see the fight against racial hierarchy as requiring their primary allegiance, they do not see or do not choose to express concern about the internal hierarchy of skin tone. Thus dark-skinned blacks' widespread experience of harm has no political outlet – which generates the skin color paradox." Hochschild and Weaver, "The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order," *Social Forces* 86:2 (December 2007), 643-70, here 643.
19. Writing about the Holocaust and its importance for the American Jewish community, Peter Novick has alluded to the growth of a "victim culture" where "the assertion of the group's historical victimization – on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation – is always central to the group's assertion of its distinctive identity." However, as he points out, the "grounding of group identity and claims to group recognition in victimhood" is not just characteristic of the Jewish community, it has become a common pattern for various groups in American politics. Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 8, 9.
20. See Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
21. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 32.
22. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), 8.
23. Goffman, *Presentation,* 40.
24. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*)*: A Record of Childhood and Youth* [1945] (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 196.

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25. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 4.
26. Naremore, *Acting,* 19.
27. David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.
28. For an analysis of the complex relationships between the African American minority and Jewish immigrants during the silent and early sound period, see Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
29. On the history of the "Jezebel" stereotype for black women, see David Pilgrim, "Jezebel Stereotype," *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, Ferris State University (2002), http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel.htm, last accessed 16 October 2012.
30. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29:4 (1988), 44-64, here 55.
31. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. from 1991, Spike Lee stated that "a jury of black males in America today would still think light-skinned women with long hair and light eyes are more attractive than dark-skinned women. That's the way it is." See Spike Lee and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Final Cut," *Transition* 52 (1991), 177-204, here 195.
32. Vorris L. Nunley, "*Crash*: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 335-46, here 342. This issue of *College English* devoted a symposium to the discussion of Crash as a film that could be used in pedagogical settings. Many contributions suggested that it was a good choice for the classroom, but at the same time pointed to its shortcomings; see David G. Holmes, "The Civil Rights Movement According to *Crash*: Complicating the Pedagogy of Integration," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 314-20; Joyce Irene Middleton, "Talking about Race and Whiteness in *Crash,*" *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 321-34; Catherine Prendergast, "Asians: The Present Absence in *Crash*," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 347-48; Victor Villanueva, "3D Stereotypes: *Crash*," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 348-50; Sangeeta Ray, "*Crash* or How White Men Save the Day, Again," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 350-54; Christine Farris, "*Crash* Course: Race, Class, and Context," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 354-59.
33. Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* 30.
34. Goffman gives a similar example for a "negative idealization" in black-white interactions in his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959: "The ignorant, shiftless, happy-go-lucky manner which Negroes in the Southern states sometimes felt obliged to affect during interaction with whites illustrates how a performance can play up ideal values which accord to the performer a lower position than he covertly accepts for himself." Goffman, *Presentation* 47.
35. Nunley, "*Crash*: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," 337.
36. Farris, "*Crash* Course: Race, Class, and Context," 355.

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37. The young girl is saved because the shop owner's daughter had put blanks in the revolver. Combining intense music, slow motion and the horrified facial expressions of the Hispanic father, this scene is presented as one of the emotional climaxes in the film. It introduces the topic of the child as "child angel" protecting adults unable to protect themselves, thus functioning as a sign of their feeling of helplessness and vulnerability. On the role of children in melodramatic films, see Christof Decker, "'Unusually Compassionate': Melodrama, Film and the Figure of the Child," in *Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood*, eds. Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah and Ruth Mayer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007), 305-28.
38. In the case of the television director, the performative quality of blackness becomes most obvious as his behavioral register shifts dramatically. At work and *vis-à-vis* the police he exhibits a "professional mode": he controls body and voice and moves with restrained gestures. In a later scene that again forces him to face the police, he reacts aggressively and switches into a "street mode." Ostentatiously he waves his hands and arms, drawing on more expressive and overtly emotional gestures. The ostentation of the street mode appears to re-racialize him, to make him more black, yet it also supports the stereotypical assumption that, by default, genuine African American-ness rests on a more expressive body language.
39. Sangeeta Ray, "*Crash* or How White Men Save the Day, Again," 352.
40. Joyce Irene Middleton, "Talking about Race and Whiteness in *Crash*," 331. She goes on to point out that "*Crash* very effectively equates and replaces the term 'race' with the term 'prejudice,' and then argues that everyone is a little prejudiced" (324).
41. The strongest criticism came from Robert Jensen and Robert Wosnitzer, who called the film 'white supremacist': "So, *Crash* is white-supremacist because it minimizes the reality of white supremacy. Its faux humanism and simplistic message of tolerance directs attention away from a white-supremacist system and undermines white accountability for the maintenance of that system." Jensen and Wosnitzer, "*Crash* and the Self-Indulgence of White America," *Dissident Voice* 21 March 2006, www.dissidentvoice.org/Mar06/Jensen-Wosnitzer21.htm, last accessed 10 October 2012.
42. In that sense it continues a representational pattern that Mark Winokur identified in the early 1990s: "The 'thought' that contemporary films about race embody is the desire that blackness cease to exist, that it be replaced with at most a white version of who and what blacks are. Blacks should be replaced by humans – as humanity is whitely defined." Winokur, "Black Is White/White Is Black: 'Passing' as a Strategy of Racial Compatibility in Contemporary Hollywood Comedy," in *Unspeakable Images*, 190-211; here 192.
43. Nunley, "*Crash*: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," 337.
44. David G. Holmes, "The Civil Rights Movement According to *Crash*: Complicating the Pedagogy of Integration," 316.

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The Purloined Letter: Ophuls after Cavell

Ulrike Hanstein

Introduction

For Stanley Cavell, thinking about the commitment of Hollywood melodrama to human expressions and needs also means considering the moral imagination articulated by Hollywood melodrama and how significant its contribution to American culture's conception of itself has been. Highlighting the artistic achievements of Hollywood movies from the 1930s and 1940s, Cavell understands melodrama's pattern of desire and disappointment as interrogating the relationship between an individual self and the (social, political) world shared with others.

In his study *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Cavell refers to Peter Brooks's distinctive understanding of melodrama as an imaginative cultural mode for the post-Enlightenment era.[1] Brooks defines melodramatic aesthetics as a historically and culturally located theatrical mode of imagining, which turns the characters' expressive bodies and their affective meaning into the sites of dramatic or novelistic representation. With regard to the modern literary sensibility that followed the Enlightenment, Brooks's conception is that the religious foundations of moral values and maxims have been transformed into a non-metaphysical vision of the social world, which provides the scene for an expressive enactment of moral justifications and displays compensatory solutions to the injustice of the present state of society. According to Brooks, melodramatic texture and dramaturgy entail a polarization into moral absolutes; they hypostatize a heightened conflict between good and evil by starkly juxtaposing suffering innocents with triumphant scoundrels, culminating in denouements which eventually reveal the victim's true moral virtue and the villain's fraudulence and wickedness.

It is by elaborating the tensions in Immanuel Kant's declaration of the limits of experience and the limits of knowledge that Cavell explains why Brooks's characterization of melodrama as a response to the Enlightenment introduces a causal dependency to the theory of melodrama in that, misleadingly, response is subordinated to event. For Cavell, Brooks's assumption of a melodramatic, expressive aspiration for the "moral occult,"[2]

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which melodramatic texts suppose to exist "behind or beyond the facade of reality,"[3] perpetuates melodrama's operative semantic formation of the supplementary status of morality. For Cavell, then, the problem that emerges from such an account is the negation of "Kant's claim that the moral provides the ground of the religious."[4] Given Brooks's entangled notion of a post-sacral, moral (as melodramatic) imagination, the central point Cavell seeks to make is that the consequence of such an explanation could be the occlusion of the moral together with the sacred realm. According to Cavell, the melodramatic scenes in Brooks's understanding of the melodramatic mode seemingly pass over Kant's grounding of an autonomous moral judgment, which had attempted to overcome false concepts of moral laws resulting from their speculative transcendental justification. In other words, the critical endeavor at work in Kant's thought is to claim the reality (or objectivity, i.e., the universality and necessity) of morality – which holds out the possibility for us to act morally in spite of our sensuous nature – in order to enlighten the autonomous moral judgment about itself.

It is a principal objective of Cavell's writings on Hollywood movies and their speculation about moral life to trace the reverberations of Kant's legacy for modern philosophical thought. In his reading of Kant's *Critiques,* Cavell points out that, on the one hand, Kant's envisioning of our finitude results in his limiting systematization of the human conditions of knowledge. On the other hand, this elaboration on the necessary conditions for the possibility of human knowledge might be best understood as an extension and productive realization of knowledge. Cavell thus highlights the two perspectives which Kant's formulation of the human powers of knowing can provide for us:

> The very facts that from one point of view are to us limitations of human knowledge are from another the necessary conditions of knowledge as such; and, therefore, in knowing these conditions once for all, we know once for all the general conditions or specifications or features anything must have in order to become an object of knowledge for us at all. And to know this is a traumatic increase of human knowledge.[5]

As stated by Cavell, Kant's systematic exploration of the limitations to our knowing does not terminate the aspiration to think or fantasize about the things that are excluded from the possibility of knowledge. On the contrary, Kant's observation that our world is determined by sensuous experience and categories of reason takes into account the various forms of human investment in overcoming the world of appearances, and thereby pictures the restless quest for knowing the "things-in-themselves." Thus, for Cavell, Kant's

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clarification of the necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge shows that whatever "our relation to things-in-themselves will turn out to be, it cannot be one of knowing."[6] Put briefly, Cavell conceptually repositions Kant's statement that the limits on knowing might have a knowable form themselves, and presents the inherent tension in Kant's perception of the human inclination to think. In contrast to the classical empiricists' concepts of the limitations on positive knowledge set by sensuous experience, Kant's interpretation of the conditioned but essentially restless relation of the mind to the world leads Cavell to the question "whether this is an answer to skepticism or a further description of its truth."[7]

It is in explicating Kant's notions of passive (sensuous) and active (intellectually organizing) constituents of knowledge,[8] as well as his concepts of autonomy, duty and practical moral judgment, that Cavell demonstrates the persistence of Kant's philosophical project and its decisive role for Ralph Waldo Emerson's perfectionist thinking of morality. For Cavell, the genre which he reviews as the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman works through the possibility of enacting one's individual expressive existence and of claiming one's own experience of (and judgment on) the world. The specifically modern (and melodramatic) condition of human existence is presented as a highly expressive theatricalization of the self, which results from experiences of isolation and envisages the friction between privacy and community that arises from society's imperative to behave in conformity with its regulations. In essence, then, Cavell explores classical cinema as a popular public sphere where issues of equality and justice, as well as ideals of individual happiness, self-knowledge, friendship, mutual acknowledgment and communal moral values can be addressed seriously. Moreover, these public articulations of moral thinking are sensuously and rationally accessible to the audience because of the movies' imaginative aesthetic reconfiguration of individual quests for happiness and the common good in life. The philosophical aspirations of Hollywood movies may arise from a singular work's revealing investigation of the medium of film and from the manifold forms of relatedness between screened images and viewers. For Cavell, classical movies' "power is bound up in their exploration of a strain of moral urgency for which film's inherent powers of transfiguration and shock and emotionality and intimacy have a particular affinity."[9]

In the following, I want to trace the consequences of Cavell's conceptual shift in his thinking about Hollywood melodrama's articulation of moral life and its aesthetic presentation of passive and receptive modes of existence. I shall first characterize Cavell's intervention in film studies discourse on melodrama, in order to highlight the general contours of his reevaluation

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of popular movies as a prominent province of the ordinary. Given Cavell's reassessment of melodrama's polarizations (e.g. victim vs. villain, sensuous world vs. deeper meaning, pathos vs. irony) by focusing on the asymmetry between the sexes, my interest is to explore the different forms of knowledge and refusal of knowledge which result in positions of subjection and victimization that are mainly those of a woman. Taking the example of Cavell's reading of Max Ophuls's film Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948), I shall indicate the ways in which Cavell displaces and relocates issues of melodramatic (in-)expressiveness by redirecting Ophuls's epistolary film to scenes of writing and reading within the domain of psychoanalysis. With regard to Cavell's notion of melodrama as an enactment of a man's opprobrious threat to a feminine voice, Ophuls's film is a debatable case. Given the fatal power of the posthumous feminine voice-over, Letter from an Unknown Woman could be understood as a *film noir* that looks back on and transcends melodrama's gendered identity formation by propagating positions of masochistic pleasure, abandonment, passivity and victimization.

Being Subject to Melodrama

For Brooks, melodrama's moral legibility derives from the texts' latent moral meanings, which are gradually disclosed and distinctly realized as the narrative course of action progresses. By contrast, the guiding intuition of Cavell's elaborations on Hollywood melodrama is his confidence in the movies' apparent manifestation of everyday modes of conversation and interaction. Thus, the undecided and unforeseeable connections between a speaker's capacity to speak and her specific claims to community and agreement with other speakers can take manifold forms in the movies. And it is the procedures, the negotiations and the extent of agreement in the movies' account of what it means to know something together, which need elucidating. A key motivation behind Cavell's writings on film is to accentuate movies' capacity to bring to conscious articulation the knowledge that a culture has of itself and considers as shared.[10] In the introduction to *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cavell states his view of movies as initiatory impulses for a philosophical exploration of the ordinary: "The implied claim is that film, the latest of the great arts, shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture (even perhaps particularly, when the lives depicted are historical or elevated or comic or hunted or haunted)."[11]

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Corresponding to his philosophical endeavors regarding literary criticism and literary theory, Cavell's reflections on Hollywood melodrama pursue the traces of ordinary language's reverberations. Following the paths of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Langshaw Austin, Cavell's attempt to restore the ordinary involves a particular understanding of the objects and methodological practice of philosophical reasoning. His particular view of the relationship of speakers to the language and to the act of speaking not only emphasizes the multifarious forms of speaking a language that are presented in interlocutors' everyday utterances, but also includes the instances, purposes, requests, conditions and effects of verbal expressions as well as the wide range of possible responses to something a person might say.

Cavell expands upon this understanding of language (and the methods of ordinary language philosophy) in his detailed examination of classical Hollywood movies. This preoccupation with the ordinary is clearly indicated by two theoretical responses to classical cinema: first, by the clarification of the viewers' experience of particular films and the exploration of their devotion by means of language; and second, by a notion of genre which claims the cultural setting of cinema to be a popular and profound form of entertainment that stimulates its audience to self-examination. According to Cavell, the experience of a particular film gives rise to specific thoughts, impressions, moods, stances, wishes and verbal descriptions with which viewers return to the subtle ways in which a film's images can bring the everyday world to their attention. In view of the difficulty of finding words for one's own intricate, involving and confusing experience of movies, Cavell privileges a mode of writing that expresses the personal and biographically-grounded relationship to particular films.

Given this understanding of classical Hollywood cinema, Cavell's introspective mode of critique diverges fundamentally from theoretical positions in the field of film studies. With regard to Hollywood melodramas, Cavell's unique approach is important on three levels: first, he highlights the ways in which the movies are capable of giving significance to – and thereby revealing – certain possibilities of the medium.[12] The myths and the style of Hollywood genre films may be conventional and demonstrative, yet a particular work can still explicate, transform and redefine film's aesthetic capabilities in a remarkable and meaningful way. Second, Cavell examines the network of resemblances, references, comments and reworkings that links the members of a genre. This approach involves the idea that a single film work may exhibit a particularly explicative relation to the genre's history:

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> [T]he members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures, and subjects and goals of composition, and [...] in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance.[13]

This claim, I suggest, implies that films themselves demand careful consideration with respect to their power to generate accounts of film history by means of their aesthetic and narrative forms. Third, Cavell questions the dogma of semiotic and psychoanalytical film studies that movies are ideological constructs that conceal their hallucinatory dimensions as audiovisual representations and disguise their own powerful effects on the viewing subject. For example, early feminist studies of classical Hollywood melodrama and the woman's film sought to decode the hidden systems of cinematic representation that effectively structure the viewing subject's desire. Accordingly, feminists' critical reappropriation of melodramatic aesthetics mainly addressed the ideological and cultural discourses of popular film and television which reproduce gendered subjectivities and patriarchal spectatorial desires by means of narrative form and a masculine scopophiliac system of signification. Given its strongly marked direction toward a female audience, melodrama and the woman's film was a privileged site on which to examine critically the inherent contradictions of Hollywood's construction of subjectivities along the lines of power and pleasure, the private and the public, class and social climbing, gender and race. A central theme was melodrama's paradoxical negotiation of injustice and repression in terms of narrative solutions that display the female protagonist's virtuous suffering and her final morally triumphant pleasure in passiveness, subjection and self-renunciation. Thus, the melodramatic scenarios which present the female protagonist's failure to claim positions of agency were criticized for their affectively manipulative transfiguration of victimhood, which necessarily becomes a justification for inequality, repression and injustice in the end. A major shift within the history of feminists' critical endeavor has been the recognition and analysis of melodrama's highly ambivalent – emancipatory or oppressive – meanings for the female spectator. The evocation of contradictions in melodrama was located in unsettled and unsettling tensions between its fictional discursive structure and the extravagances of its expressive visualization, which provide scope for the (female) viewers' varying aesthetic experiences.[14]

Outside these critical frameworks for decoding Hollywood's melodramatic rhetoric and representation, Cavell devotes his attention to the obvious significance of films' stories, dialogs and images, which might be

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overlooked due to their unpretentious and conventional form. Instead of arguing against viewers' attachment to the films, for Cavell critical descriptions of movies originate in the viewer's own experience of a reversible relationship of involvement and his or her responses to the film's claims. In *Contesting Tears* Cavell develops detailed readings of a small group of Hollywood melodramas, thereby demonstrating what it means to take them seriously as popular, intelligible and self-consciously shaped works.

Cavell specifies the genre of the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman as a reiterated interpretation of the modern problematic of skepticism. He traces back the events on film and the advent of the genre to his elaborations on Shakespeare's tragedies and late romances, opera and a group of Hollywood talkies, which he takes to constitute a genre – the comedy of remarriage. According to Cavell, the comedy of remarriage displays the central couple's exhilarating and sharp exchanges on the legitimacy of their marriage. In the comedy of remarriage the pair's bond with one another is threatened by their differing ambitions for a transformation of the self, which give rise to questions of identity and change, the separateness of embodied individuals, and the anxiety of (skeptical) doubts. In brief, the couple's daily conversation and union are subjected to examination and finally reaffirmed by both individuals' willingness to achieve an atmosphere of equality, playfulness, forgiveness and mutual education in their shared life. In Cavell's understanding, the melodrama of the unknown woman negates the comedy's presentation of a couple's witty responsiveness to each other's aspirations and of the virtuoso capacity for talk. The founding myth of the melodrama is the woman's search for a metamorphosis of her own self, which is emblematized by her demand for an education and her eventual abandonment of marriage with a man who cannot match her quest for knowledge and re-creation. Here, the crucial asymmetry between the female and the male protagonist is grounded in the sexes' different forms of knowledge and doubt, their dissimilar claims on knowing and their willingness or unwillingness to respond to each other's independent existence. In opposition to the comedy of remarriage, Cavell observes that, in melodramas, the pair's conversation is depicted as on the brink of failure, misunderstanding, ironic reversal or violent outcome. The woman's voice is effectively silenced because the man repudiates her expressions of what she knows, or even, infamously, denies the different existence of her self. For Cavell, the melodrama of the unknown woman reworks the irrefutability and restlessness of skeptical doubt by means of overtly demonstrating the woman's distance from the world and others in it. Hence, the female protagonist's experience of her independent subjectivity

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is articulated by her states of madness or isolation. The melodramas end with the female protagonist abandoning the common world of her marriage. By accepting her condition of *unknownness,* the woman eventually follows her route to *self-reliance* and realizes a new mode of existence. Nevertheless, the unknown woman's transformed relation to her own autonomous self implies a loss or refusal of sociability. Accordingly, the melodrama of the unknown woman enacts a negative solution to the difficulty of finding equality, emblematized by the collapsing relationship between the sexes.

The endings of melodrama, however, register an attainable answer to the skeptic's loss of the world: Cavell suggests that the woman's turning to a future self could be understood as envisioning "the phase of the problematic of self-reliance that demands this expressiveness and joy first in relation to oneself."[15] Cavell develops an interpretation of *unknownness* as a specific manifestation of human finitude and transience which responds to skepticism's threat by emphasizing the inventiveness of the self's open future. In order to explicate melodrama's development of the idea of *self-reliance,* Cavell reads Emerson's notion as a repositioning of René Descartes's formulation of insight in the self's existence as the self-knowledge of a thinking consciousness. Cavell emphasizes that Descartes's discovery of the individual is doubled by the expression that, in order to assure one's existence, one must acknowledge and declare it. For Descartes, one's certainty of existence is possible only while the individual *I* is thinking. In his reading of Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance," Cavell demonstrates that this text, differing from Descartes, reevaluates the relationship between an existing self and its involvement in thinking. As Cavell puts it:

> Emerson goes the whole way with Descartes's insight – that I exist only if I think – but he thereupon denies that I (mostly) do think, that the "I" mostly gets into my thinking, as it were. From this it follows that the skeptical possibility is realized – that I do not exist, that I, as it were, haunt the world.[16]

Emerson's diverging interpretation of Descartes's insight leads to his understanding that the individual being must claim and enact its existence. This private enactment of the self's existence by means of bodily expressivity and visual self-revelation *vis-à-vis* the community necessarily involves a mode of theatricality. Accordingly, Emerson's idea of the individual's conscious sense of distance from the world and of the theatricality in proving one's existence constitutes a specific interpretation of skepticism, which for Cavell is significantly expressed as melodrama:

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> [T]he price of Emerson's proof of human existence, our exposure to the consciousness of otherness (say our subjection to surveillance), is that our relation to ourselves is theatricalized, publicized. It is no wonder that it is in melodrama, and in movies, that such matters are worked out.[17]

Melodrama's unknown woman overcomes the alienating negation of her expressions by the male protagonist by means of moving from separateness to a new sense of relation to her individual existence. In Cavell's consideration of melodrama, this reclaiming of one's own voice is an autonomous proof of individual existence as well as a vision of a possible recreation of the world. Cavell associates Emerson's descriptions of an individual's skeptic condition – which might be expressed by isolation, by a haunting relation to the world, by the capacity for change, or by an excessive and extravagant expressivity – with the specific visibility and expressive revelations of the medium of film. In other words, the melodrama of modern subjectivity (in Emerson's sense) and the skeptic's (in its hyperbolic style essentially melodramatic) fantasy of the world's absence are expressed most articulately and sincerely by the medium of film. How should we understand this claim?

For Cavell, the melodrama's female protagonists "represent the highest reaches of glamourous [*sic*] independence registered in the idea of a star."[18] Evidently Cavell traces the themes of self-reliance and the theatrical display of the self to film's capacity to transfigure the physiognomic appearance of a human being in order to create a self-conscious vision of individuality and change. His characterization of melodrama's female stars – most notably of Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Bette Davis – involves reflections on their expressive performances as an impersonation of privacy and distinctness, which cannot avoid acknowledging the limitedness of the views that others (in public) might have of them, but nevertheless envisions an idiosyncratic passion in personal expressiveness. As Cavell puts it, "The wish, in the great stars [...] is a function not of their beauty, such as that may be, but of their power of privacy, of a knowing unknownness. It is a democratic claim for personal freedom."[19] In other words, the female star's enactment of an independent existence entails various instances of firmly resisting the ways of behaving that public or political conformity requests. Given film melodrama's aesthetic negotiation of meaningful expressions and (the lack of) responsiveness, this issue effectively shapes, on the one hand, the relation between the unknown woman and other characters in the screen world and, on the other, the relation between the self-revelatory individuality of the star and the film's viewers. Accordingly, the female protagonist's aspirations to communication could be understood as an

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attempt to transcend the cinematic world's independent existence, which viewers might recover by acknowledging their wish and interest in bringing it close to themselves. Cavell's model of a doubled articulation of *unknownness* confirms the impulse of skeptical doubt as relevant for the viewers' experience of movies. Nevertheless, this model invokes the idea that the female protagonists/stars accept their expressions as limited with regard to others, but claim them as their own – thereby withstanding the skeptic's fantasy of inexpressiveness.

According to Cavell, the unknown woman's enactment of her self's existence emphasizes the individual's right to act according to one's idiosyncratic sense of a future self. The unknown woman's route to integrity and *self-reliance* exhaustively conveys the desire for – and the desirability of – personal and social change. With regard to Emerson's moral perfectionism and his strong emphasis on the individual's freedom, judgment and choice, Cavell examines the elitist or justice-oriented implications in this liberal specification of a political community. Cavell's portrayal of the woman's *known unknownness* elucidates the contradictions and the fragile forms of consent or disagreement between self and society. For the unknown woman, the disappointing present world initiates her individual search for change, which explicitly refuses the existing social arrangements but allows scope for the community's further development of moral and aesthetic forms of life.

However, the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman fails in restoring justice and equality to the relationship between the sexes. Moreover, the films' endings interpret the unknown woman's consent to a further attainable state of society and her share in constituting a community as yet to be achieved. In the best case the woman's path toward self-knowledge and her declaration of an independent judgment about the world might find the viewers' acknowledgment. Thus the melodrama's aesthetic imagination of individualist moral judgments provides scope for the viewers to adopt their own position with respect to the enacted moral arguments and encounters. Cavell's emphasis on Hollywood melodrama's moral discourse and its contribution to a cinematic-cultural sense of community assesses melodrama's central topics of inequalities and injustice anew. The films' (at times ironic) negation of conversation and their reversal of compensatory conclusions is the starting point for Cavell's interpretation of a modern melodramatic subjectivity. In early film melodrama, the plots present an inevitable rapport between positions of passive suffering and moral virtue. The victims' true moral sense and sensibility is revealed to all characters by a change of fortune and, in the end, allows for the restoration

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of principles of equality and social justice for the victimized. By contrast, the Hollywood melodramas of which Cavell provides a detailed account tend towards irreconcilable and jarring endings. The melodrama's final discrepancy between self and society leads Cavell to challenging speculations on the possibility of a self-grounded, reflective critique of – and within – modern democracy. As Stephen Mulhall has shown with regard to Cavell's discussion of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice,* Cavell identifies a dimension in conversations about justice, taking the form of an individual who expresses a subjective conviction of injustice and who claims to voice a conviction that the people addressed should share and justify. Since the speaker and her interlocutor are both part of the democratic society which is under critique, the speaker's claim implies that both are involved in the injustice and that both are to be held responsible for it. Cavell predicates his political notion of consent – and his concept of the self's sense of compromise with society – on this idea of the implication of both sides in the articulated criticism, which turns out to be self-directed. For Cavell, a subjectively grounded complaint about inequality or discrimination cannot be answered by subsuming the particular moral conversation under fixed principles. Rather, the speaker and her interlocutor may acknowledge their responsibility and probe more deeply their own sense of compromise in relation to the imperfect justice of society. Accordingly, the self-directed critique could be met as a challenge to a responsive conversation and as an instance for reexamining one's own judgment, responsibility and range of consent to society.

Mulhall recapitulates Cavell's notion of perfectionist morality with regard to the conversation of justice and its call for a change in the self and in society as follows:

> In such an encounter, the voice of society's victim is the voice of the next or further self of society's representative, and so of the next or further state of society; and the hope is that the mode of character formed under such a voiced invitation to one's next self is one capable of withstanding the inevitable compromises of democracy without cynicism. It is a way of reaffirming one's consent to society by reaffirming that this idea of consent is one of responsiveness to society; and it thereby extends that founding consent.[20]

Against this background, the unknown woman's transcendence of subjection could be understood as an initial step in cultivating her sense of autonomy and future change. Since her transformation and self-knowledge is not appreciated or responded to by others, though, a practical change of

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her world does not follow. In short, unknownness as spelled out by Cavell is a mode of existence that does not amount to overcoming subjection and the melodramatic pathos (and pathology) of limited agency. This brings us to the point at which this particular notion of a melodramatic subjectivity links up to the question of the intelligibility of the self and others. Cavell's interest in melodrama's enactment of various (bodily) manifestations and expressions of knowledge comes into focus as an aspect of a wider concern with concepts and the practice of interpretation and analysis.[21] With regard to Ophuls's Letter from an Unknown Woman, Cavell's picture of the unknown woman's knowledge and (self-) exploration seeks to trace the internal affinities of cinema, psychoanalysis and philosophy.

"Feminine Voices" in Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Cinema

In the second chapter of *Contesting Tears,* Cavell turns to Ophuls's Letter from an Unknown Woman and takes the protagonist Stefan's gesture of covering his eyes with both hands in "horror and exhaustion"[22] as this particular movie's most genuine and memorable moment. Opening his reading of Ophuls's film with a description of the man's expression of shock, incomprehension and denial, Cavell aligns his observations with philosophical and psychoanalytical writings which speculate about the problem of inner and outer reality and the specific notion of conscious and unconscious forms of knowledge.

In his interpretation of Letter from an Unknown Woman, Cavell points out that the temporal composition and narrative structure of Ophuls's film doubles the depicted letter – the woman's written memoir. The film presents in voice-over the female protagonist recounting her memories. Cavell argues that the voice of the already dead woman and the narration of her letter imply "that it is the (ghost) woman who writes and sends the film."[23] Thus Cavell expounds on the film's melodramatic negation of communication, given that the sender of the letter is absent and the past tense of the woman's written recollections is closed. Furthermore, Cavell maintains that this phantom-like displacement of the woman's voice – and her life's story – echoes the specific capacity of the medium of film: namely, to realize an identical mechanical repetition of images out of the past to ghostly or uncanny effect. The title of Ophuls's work identifies the film with the letter, which suggests the convergence of the epistolary text's temporality and address with the film's traces of moments of past time. Accordingly, the film presents itself as a relic and as a ghostly apparition, "sending simulacra to us of figures who will be dead."[24]

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In his interpretation of Ophuls's film, Cavell attaches considerable importance to the depicted and implied acts of signing and assigning the letter. There is perhaps no better expression of the entangled acts of writing, reading and rewriting confronted and analyzed by Cavell in his interpretation of Ophuls's film than the title of Edgar Allan Poe's detective story *The Purloined Letter*. My point is not to speak of Cavell's misappropriation or misreading of Ophuls's film/letter. Rather, I want to suggest that Cavell reallocates this cinematic letter by rerouting it via the cultural places and the theoretical and practical grounds of psychoanalysis. Hence Cavell's purloining of the letter might be described as a very distinctive way of conceptualizing that manifests itself in the tendency to prolong – or to slow down or twist – the progress of the reading of the film/text. What is at stake, then, are the detours and repetitive returns which Jacques Lacan brought to the fore in his famous "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*." It is in elaborating the etymological origin of the word "purloin" that Lacan explains the dynamics of displacement – as the path – of the signifier:

> *To purloin*, says the Oxford dictionary, is an Anglo-French word, that is: composed of the prefix *pur-*, found in *purpose*, *purchase*, *purport*, and of the Old French word: *loing*, *loigner*, *longé*. [...][*L*]*oigner*, a verb attributing place *au loing* (or, still in use, *longé*), it does not mean *au loin* (far off), but *au long de* (alongside); it is a question of the *putting aside*, or, to invoke a familiar expression which plays on the two meanings: *mettre à gauche* (to put to the left; to put amiss). Thus we are confirmed in our detour by the very object which draws us on into it: for we are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been *prolonged* (etymologically, the word of the title), or, to revert to the language of the post office, a *letter in sufferance*.[25]

So, what is put aside or taken amiss when a letter drifts from its intended destination? And how can we account for the divided paths and returns of moments from Ophuls's Letter from an Unknown Woman in Cavell's text? Here, then, I will track down the course of Ophuls's cinematic letter, which is relocated by Cavell's writing in the most intimate connection to the question of "feminine voices" in the domain of psychoanalysis, philosophy and cinema.

While Ophuls's oeuvre has been illuminatingly discussed with respect to the director's stylistic extravagances and his virtuosity in weaving expressive iconographic motifs into the fluid rhythm and pacing of camera movements, Cavell surprisingly confines his concerns to a few isolated

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moments of the film.[26] The point of departure for Cavell's interpretation of Letter from an Unknown Woman is the gendered difference in the articulation of the skeptical problematic. On the one hand, Cavell traces the provenance of literary representations of doubt along the lines of sexual difference, with reference to Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*.[27] And on the other hand, Cavell correlates these aesthetic elaborations of the skeptical problematic with philosophical and psychoanalytical writings that speculate about differences between the knowing of women and the knowing of men. What is at stake, then, in Cavell's genealogy of skepticism's (aesthetic) manifestations is not the effort to determine sexual difference in knowledge. Rather, his observations on texts concern their representation of dissimilar passions of – and objects in – doubt. For Cavell, melodrama's enactment of female subjectivity as unknownness demonstrates an alternative to masculine senses of skepticism. According to Cavell, the gender asymmetry and the wish to know about the sexes' difference in knowing present themselves in psychoanalysis and cinema, which turn the skeptic's doubt concerning other minds into the question of the woman's certainty: "[P]sychoanalysis and cinema can be taken as asking of the woman: How is it that you escape doubt? What certainty encloses you, whatever your other insecurities, from just this torture?"[28] More precisely, the male question directed toward the woman concerning her access to knowledge (implying the male's dissociation from her experience of separation) seems to be: How can I know for certain what you know and what you want without changing over to your side?

With reference to Freud's case histories (like that of Dora or the female patients whose cases are reported in Freud's and Josef Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*), Cavell seeks to elaborate the ambiguous premises of Freud's therapeutic relation. It is precisely the assumption that the woman possesses some sort of knowledge, and that her access to this knowledge is not available to the masculine interrogator, which for Cavell provides proof of "the skeptical provenance of the woman's presence at the origin of psychoanalysis and of cinematic discovery."[29] For Cavell, the centrality of individual women in psychoanalysis and classical cinema indicates that they are not merely the objects of study; rather, they are thought to represent the position at which the study of human existence and expression can be brought forth to the fullest extent. Cavell maintains that "the origination of psychoanalysis and of film in the suffering of women"[30] is strongly connected to the idea of the woman's/hysteric's unconscious experience of unpleasurable excitation, which is discharged by means of her capacity to produce motor symptoms. And Cavell goes on to suggest that this attempt

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to determine "the sense that the human body is expressive of mind"[31] constitutes that dimension in the relation to the other that is crucial for the modern philosophical redemption of the other. According to Cavell's reorientation of the skeptical formulation of privacy (with the example of pain), this dimension in the relation to the other cannot be taken as one of knowing, but rather of acknowledging.[32]

For Cavell, the tangle of psychoanalysis and cinema is articulated by their common impulse to scrutinize the woman's bodily expressions and render them comprehensible. In the realm of psychoanalysis, women are considered as suffering subjects whose unconscious mental reality manifests itself in motor symptoms. In film melodrama, women are the subjects of the camera's discoveries and transfigurations. Both cultural practices emphasize the possibility of communication by means of the eloquent and revealing expressions of the body. While the philosophical formulations of privacy along the skeptic's line of thought tend to insist on the limits of a meaningful expression of experiences and feelings, Cavell finds an alternative scenario in Freud's "idea of our expressions as betraying ourselves, giving ourselves (and meaning to give ourselves) away – as if, let us say, the inheritance of language, of the possibility of communication, inherently involves disappointment with it and (hence) subversion of it."[33] This interpretation of Freud's psychoanalytic claim can be read as tracing a line of force that leads to the idea of absolute expressiveness. Cavell reevaluates Freud's project as a practical response to the manifold singular acts by which someone might make her/his own experiences known to others. For Cavell, the figure of the unknown woman – the melodrama's female star – is the most distinctive emblem of "a talent and will for communication"[34] that amounts to a believable proof of the existence of minds. At the historical intersection of psychoanalysis and cinema, this proof of psychical reality is thought of on the feminine side of human existence and discerned as the compelling presence of passive or active, meaningful or over-determined forms of expressivity.

Cavell's interest in his speculative investigation of the relation of psychoanalysis to philosophy lies in the interpretation of psychical reality in both realms. With regard to Freud's ambivalences in writing on the dissociation of psychoanalysis from philosophy, Cavell points out the inherent but obscured (or repressed) references to Kant's study of the unknown nature of inner and outer reality.[35] By reintroducing a philosophical perspective into Freud's psychoanalytic discourse on the unconscious, Cavell outlines the continued existence and specification of Kant's differentiation of mental representations from external reality.

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A second intuition that guides Cavell's re-association of psychoanalysis and philosophy concerns the dynamic and reversible relationship of transference as a productive constituent of a progressing analysis. In the therapeutic situation, the relationship between the analyst and the patient provides a setting for an ongoing process of interpretation that enables an oscillation between active and passive positions. According to Cavell, this model of identifying and generating meaning is pertinent to the relationship between a reader and a text as well. This equation claims that an analysis of a text affects the concepts and terms of criticism, which necessarily initiates a series of redefinitions and rearrangements of the concepts in order to enable a critical reflection on the reader's involvement in reading the text. Moreover, from the analogy of therapy and reading, a picture of a text emerges that can be therapeutic and that Cavell relates to a concept of "philosophy as reading."[36] With regard to writings by Emerson, Henry David Thoreau or Wittgenstein, Cavell maintains that they render acts of interpretation into scenes of "reading and being read."[37] Thus Cavell envisions a practice of reading which could serve remedial or redemptive ends: "[F]rom the point of view of psychoanalytic therapy the situation of reading has typically been turned around, so that it is not first of all the text that is subject to interpretation but we in the gaze or hearing of the text."[38] This model of interpretation includes the idea of overcoming the person of the author in order to explore the extent to which we as readers are willing to let ourselves be instructed by texts: "[W]hat you really want to know is what a text knows about itself, because you cannot know more than it does about this; and then to ask what the fantasy is of the text's knowledge of itself."[39] Listening to Cavell's words on reading, then, the notion of transference and counter-transference puts great emphasis on the reader's response to the text's conception of itself and on the text's voiced idea of its readers.

These elaborations on the subject of writing and reading inform Cavell's tentative exploration of active forms of passivity as a mode or pitch of philosophical thinking. With regard to the gendered inflexion of the skeptical problematic that the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman dramatizes, Cavell touches upon the man's avoidance of the "feminine" position of victimization. Relying on Freud's notion of the threat of castration, Cavell returns to the scene from Ophuls's film in which, after reading the woman's letter, the man covers his eyes, "in that gesture both warding off his seeing something and warding off at the same time his being seen by something."[40] Cavell observes that this twofold negation expresses a refusal to see (as a refusal of knowledge) and a refusal to reveal something of one's individual being and thereby to let one's own being be known to others.

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Thus the man's avoidance of seeing others as others – which would come at the cost of the threat of castration – and his withholding of self-exposure could be understood as a rejection of being known by the woman. But Cavell insists that at the same time the man's gesture blocks his being seen

> by us, [...] the audience of film, as assigning ourselves the position [...] of the source of the letter and of film; which is to say, the position of the feminine. Then it is the man's horror of us that horrifies us – the revelation, or avoidance, of ourselves in a certain way of being feminine, a way of being human, a mutual and reflexive state, let us say, of victimization.[41]

Cavell identifies this scene, of a man's outrageous response to the declaration of a feminine position that confirms and yet threatens his existence, as central to the melodrama of the unknown woman. Moreover, he extends the scope of melodrama's exemplifications of a man's opprobrious wish to negate the woman's voice by stressing the refusal of a feminine register of voice within the history of (male) philosophers' writings. Cavell's description of the moment from Ophuls's film, however, envisions his (a male's) identification with the position of victimization and receptiveness. This attainable alignment with the unknown woman's mode of existence is explicitly stated in Cavell's confessional aside in *Contesting Tears*: "I find that to say how I take the films I must from time to time speak for their central women. I feel that I am amplifying their voices, listening to them, becoming them, in films in which, on other accounts, they are unlistened to, being deprived of a voice."[42] Cavell reveals the risk in expressing his personal quest for involvement, which might be understood as a further taking over of the women's voices.

Of course, Cavell's speaking for the women of melodrama, his view on female and male modes of thought and existence, as well as his critical elaborations on Freud's normalizing concepts of sex and sexuality might provoke – and have already provoked feminist critics' – vehement objections.[43] Nevertheless, against the background of Cavell's thorough examination of the purposes of speaking, the relation to one's own voice, and the claim to community with other speakers in every act of speaking, I take his speaking for the unknown woman, sometimes articulated by his imagining and voicing of the female protagonists' self-reflexive monologs, as impassioned and believable acts of philosophical drag. With regard to melodrama's gendered polarization of passive (feminine) and active (masculine) positions, Cavell's exegetical techniques at times tend to blur the role of cultural, socially charged and cinematically allegorized narratives

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in generating meaning along the lines of dichotomized models. Yet, Cavell's consideration of Ophuls's LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN hints at the oscillations of feminine/masculine economies with regard to melodrama's enacted fantasies of subjection and repudiation.

The Female Voice-over and the Displacement of Masochistic Pleasures

Cavell derives the designation of the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman from Ophuls's film, yet the movie seems to mark the limits of the genre, given the woman's "failure to overcome revenge"[44] and the film's strong invocations of a religious sphere as an explanation for the woman's fanaticism in love. In the following, I shall elucidate the mediating and displacing function of the woman's voice-over with regard to the enfolding retrospective narrative structure, which reveals and conceals a tangle of love and aggressiveness, leading to a masochistic interpretation of sexuality.

Ophuls's film is about a woman called Lisa. At the age of fourteen she falls in love with her neighbor Stefan, a budding concert pianist. Unnoticed by the man, Lisa follows his career and works on her own music education to feed her fantasy of a life together. Lisa and Stefan meet one night on the eve of his departure for a concert tour and become lovers. He does not keep his promise to return; Lisa gives birth to a son and remains silent about the father and her lifelong romantic devotion to him. She marries a wealthy, much older military man to give her son a home. Years later she meets Stefan by chance at the Vienna opera. Because of her enduring love for Stefan she leaves her husband and visits the pianist, who fails to remember her. As she lies dying, Lisa writes a letter to Stefan telling her story and telling him about her passion, which he knows nothing about. As she is already dead when Stefan reads her letter, all possibilities of sharing a life have gone forever. In the last scene Stefan leaves for a duel with Lisa's husband, which most probably will end fatally for him.

As is the case in the psychoanalytic situation, Ophuls's film delves into the temporality of afterwards-ness (*Nachträglichkeit*). Paradoxically, the film presents the man's reading of the letter by means of the female protagonist's voice-over. In doing so, the testament-like document is uncannily reanimated, and it is her voice that seems to call forth the film's flashback scenes. The introspective and contemplating dimensions of the female voice-over might be best understood with reference to Christian Metz's elaborations on the "I-voice" (*voix-je*), as expressed in his study *L'énonciation*

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impersonnelle, ou le site du film.[45] Metz defines the I-voice as the voice of a film's character, using the pronoun "I," whose speaking is presented to the viewers without a visible representation of the body that might announce the act of speaking explicitly. For Metz, the visible absence of the speaking body allows for the I-voice to be taken as the source of the film's enunciation, although the nature of the voice is different from it. Further, the I-voice could be understood as the voice of the film's viewer, because the I-voice mirrors the viewer's distance from the film. Therefore, the I-voice could also be located at the destination of the enunciation. As with the viewer's absence from the presented action, the I-voice sees everything but cannot intervene in the ongoing events. Metz stresses the I-voice's invocation of passiveness and contemplation: "It's no coincidence, I would add, that [the I-voice] mostly goes together with a flashback, i.e., with a 'fait accompli.'"[46] According to Metz, the I-voice is characterized by its oscillating between the enunciation's source and destination. The I-voice is at the same time located in an intimate proximity to the film's diegetic world and dis-located, transcending the images by which this world comes into view.

With regard to Ophuls's film, the dynamic evolving from the female I-voice's constitutive instability brings into movement the perception of the letter as well. How are we to take the voiced letter's source and destination? The woman's voice might be perceived as immersed in writing or in reading the letter, prescribing or reciting the events. Given the omnipresent pastness of the posthumous feminine voice-over, however, the transposition of her troubled memories into a coherent narrative endows the presentation of all events with a conclusive meaning derived from their relation to the ending of the story.

With regard to the film's narrative configuration of time, I want to touch on the melodramatic logic of bad timing and its omnipresent sense of time as already lost and circumscribed. At the beginning, a title card informs the audience that the film is set in Vienna around 1900. Given that the film was made and released in 1948 and that Ophuls was an émigré, the title card invokes a historical period and cultural setting that have disappeared forever. Thus the film's opening shots that establish the diegetic world are identified as an imaginary and nostalgic recreation of the past. The present of the storyline's unfolding events is indicated by the first and the last sequences of the film: they develop the framing story of Stefan reading Lisa's letter. For the duration of the night in which he reads it, the character appears absorbed in the past. And the time that passes while he is reading turns out to have fatal consequences, because Stefan forfeits his future. He eventually runs out of time and misses his opportunity to flee from

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the duel with Lisa's husband that is set to take place early the following morning. The film plot presents the story of Lisa's life chronologically in four flashback scenes. At certain points the soundtrack with the woman's voice-over bridges the cuts from shots that present the time level of Stefan reading to the flashback scenes of Lisa's past. Accordingly, the montage of image and sound provides the foundations for the viewer's experience of contradictory or asynchronous forms of time.

The dissonances between voice-over and images present a conflict between imagination and reality, which reinforces the plot's logic of a masochistic displacement of sexual desire. In order to elucidate the aggressive impulses in the film's picture of the erotic relationship, I shall draw on Leo Bersani's reading of Freud's writings, bringing out their disturbed textuality. In his book *The Freudian Body,* Bersani elaborates on the contradictions within the argument of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which normalizes a teleological perspective on stages of infantile sexuality. For Bersani, Freud's endless writing and rewriting of the text for successive editions, over a period of twenty years, indicates Freud's ongoing difficulties in separating the concepts of destructiveness and love. With regard to the *Three Essays*, Bersani draws attention to the peculiar fact that this text on the nature of human sexuality begins with a chapter on "sexual aberrations," including fetishism, sadism and masochism, amongst others. Freud normalizes these aberrations by redefining them as stages in a teleological narrative that ends in heterosexual genitality. For Bersani, Freud's attempt to define the nature of sexual pleasure and sexual excitement presents a paradox: on the one hand, only genital pleasure is expounded by Freud as the pleasure of discharge or "a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct."[47] Since this form of pleasure is identified with the extinction of excitement, any relation between sexual satisfaction and excitation is renounced. For Bersani, Freud's argument thus raises the question whether "the end of sex, the goal of sex, could also be its end, its disappearance."[48] On the other hand, Freud asserts that sexual excitement is experienced as pleasurable, and even claims that there is some satisfaction in tension itself.[49] Thus, Freud's text thwarts the explicitly presented argument of an infantile pre-genital organization that eventually develops toward genital organization.

More precisely, Freud is obliged to acknowledge his insight concerning the unpleasurable tension of a sexual stimulus that can only be removed by a repetition that intensifies this unpleasurable tension. With regard to Freud's ongoing inquiries, Bersani highlights the dualistic tension in the text itself, which fails to achieve a satisfactory resolution in robust theoretical

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concepts. Bersani's analysis of circular lines in the narrative of sexuality and in the moving forward of Freud's argument results in the question: "What would it mean to say that in sexuality, pleasure is somehow distinct from satisfaction, perhaps even identical to a kind of pain?"[50] And he adds: "[In] the *Three Essays*, the mysterious repetition (and even intensification) of something unpleasurable is explicitly seen as inherent in sexuality. Freud seems almost on the point of suggesting that beyond the pleasure principle we find – sexuality."[51]

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Freud lays out his difficulty in placing cruelty within sex life. As Bersani shows, Freud concedes in a footnote that his enquiry in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* led him "to assign a peculiar position, based upon the origin of the instincts, to the pair of opposites constituted by sadism and masochism, and to place them outside the class of the remaining 'perversions.'"[52] Freud's investigation thus leads to the implicit conclusion that sadomasochism plays a constitutive role – or even could be thought of as the precondition – for the origination of sexuality. Bersani claims that, in Freud's writings, masochism could be construed as the model for a mental strategy that deals with the human organism's dysfunctional tensions between the shattering stimuli of sexual excitement and the development of defensive ego structures. This model of sexual pleasure within suffering positions is complemented by sadism. Freud specifies sadism as "correspond[ing] to an aggressive component of the sexual instinct which has become independent and exaggerated and, by displacement, has usurped the leading position."[53] Given Freud's earlier definition in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," however, this pleasure in inflicting humiliation on others goes along with the sadist's emotionally powerful masochistic identification with the suffering object. Thus, the concept of sadomasochism implies a relation constituted by opposing active and passive forms of sexual activity. As Freud puts it: "A sadist is always at the same time a masochist."[54]

Bersani's reading of Freud's text underlines the interplay of sadomasochistic instincts at the origins of sexuality. Bersani contends that: "[S]adomasochistic sexuality would be a kind of melodramatic version of the constitution of sexuality itself, and the marginality of sadomasochism would consist of nothing less than its isolating, even its making visible, the ontological grounds of the sexual."[55]

From this melodramatic scenario within psychoanalytic discourse, I shall now return to Letter from an Unknown Woman and its ambiguous scenes of pleasure, destructiveness and love. At the end of the film's

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last flashback scene, the final paragraphs of Lisa's letter are presented in voice-over. The images show her in a small room in the hospital where she finishes her writing. The images of the woman gradually blur and dissolve in a close-up of the letter in her handwriting with inkblots. The last sentences conjure up the specter of a story that never happened. These last words of the woman in the film's next-to-last scene introduce a fictitious version of her life story.

Unlike Stefan Zweig's novella *Brief einer Unbekannten* (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*), Ophuls's adaptation concludes with subjunctive clauses, which set the stage for the melodramatic "if only." This final comment on missed opportunities emphasizes the melodramatic mismatch of desire and reality. And the repetition of the words "if only" overtly demonstrates a melodramatic delight in displacements:

> If this letter reaches you, believe this that I love you now as I have always loved you. My life can be measured by the moments I've had with you and our child. If only you could have shared those moments … if only you could have recognized what was always yours … could have found what was never lost … if only.

The images of Lisa's handwriting anchor her floating narration and the origin of her omnipresent voice to a specific moment in the story time and to a locale. Then a cut indicates a time-lapse and leads over to the letter's recipient, with him reading her final words. In an extreme close-up, the letter's typed postscript is then displayed. The absence of the woman's voice and the music's emphasis on this visual disclosure reinforce the distress of the short matter-of-fact notice of her death. The coherent narrative of Lisa's chronological account of her life relates the couple's past encounters meaningfully, thereby triggering the male protagonist's memories. Stefan's stimulated recollection is rendered as a sequence of images that evoke the audience's impressions of earlier moments in the film.

The woman's melodramatic story of a meaningful but one-sided relationship unknown to the other party could, however, be understood as an overwriting of a more aggressive and disturbing pleasure. At the film's beginning, when Stefan enters his flat he washes his face before reading the letter. At the end of his reading he is frozen in a trance-like posture, his face covered with tears. The letter could be understood as teaching him a lesson in sorrow and inflicting upon him the pain of separation. Thus, the woman's voice-over attains a prompter-like status and operates in terms of

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revengeful, destructive instructions for a male melodrama, which Stefan follows to the letter. The woman's words from the past impose on the male protagonist a passive suffering position in the present as well as the loss of his future.

The moment of Stefan's final recognition and his response to the letter with a "melodramatic gesture of horror and exhaustion," then, signals the change of active and passive positions within the sadomasochistic scenario. Nonetheless, this rearrangement of the protagonists' stances of subjection and domination is thwarted by an alteration of the film's audiovisual discourse. Up to the film's last sequence, the progressing narration originates in Lisa's I-voice, which also seems actively to control – or send – the images of which Stefan has no recollection. After Stefan's moment of insight, the film's sounds and images are attuned to his subjective perception and imagination. When he leaves his flat for the duel, he picks up one of the white roses that Lisa has sent him. On the soundtrack a sentence from Lisa's letter is repeated in her voice, as if he takes up her voice and her expression: "If only you could have recognized what was always yours, could have found what was never lost." Some seconds later, on his final departure, he stops for a moment and turns his gaze to the glass door of the building's entrance. With the shadowy superimposition of the following shot, Lisa comes into sight as a young girl standing next to the door. This choreography of the man's looking back and the ghostlike visual remembrance of the woman recalls Orpheus's final, fatal glance at Eurydice.

Given the mortal power of the posthumous voice-over, Letter from an Unknown Woman can be understood as a *film noir* that looks back on and transcends melodrama's gendered identity formation in propagating positions of passiveness and victimization. The plot and the audiovisual images invoke the oscillations of a sadomasochistic economy that allows for pleasure by means of the passive or active involvement in suffering positions. The love letter from the unknown woman turns out to be a letter of rejection. It perpetuates the fantasy of the male suffering the pain of humiliation and repudiation that he originally inflicted on the woman. According to Bersani's reading of Freud, masochistic pleasures serve life in contributing to the continuity of infantile sexuality. In Letter from an Unknown Woman, the repetition of a pleasurable unpleasurable experience is brought to a halt by the extinction of any excitement. Evidently, the film's unresolved female-male-*noir*-melodrama stems from its aggressive negation of the good in love.

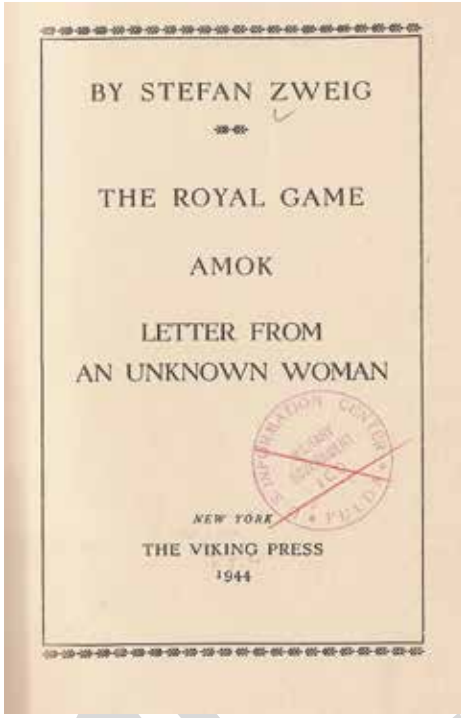
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The *film noir* could be taken as a male-centered negative derivation from the comedy of remarriage. In contrast to the melodrama's emphasis on privacy and the doubt about self-existence and other minds, the *film noir* elaborates on the skeptical problematic with regard to the individual being's uncertainty about the existence of the world. Thus the *film noir's* enactment of skepticism's threat as the loss of an external world shared with others effectively forecloses any possibility of overcoming one's individual isolation by a responsive relation to the other. The negation of a context – or of a background of agreement for an individual being's specific claims to knowledge or judgment on the world – obstructs any objective or necessary moral dimension. This might explain why the death-dealing unknownness of Ophul's Letter from an Unknown Woman marks the limit for Cavell's mapping of the melodrama.

Postscript: Tracking the Transatlantic Return of Zweig's Epistolary Text

In September 2012 I ordered the American translation of Zweig's novella *Brief einer Unbekannten* via the German lending library network. A copy of the first American edition, published in 1944 by Viking Press in New York and held by a library in Fulda, was sent to my home university library in Weimar by mail. Given the handwritten abbreviations and numbers scribbled in pencil, the various stamps and the little plates stuck in the front of the book, the material object itself rather resembles a letter. In 1948, the year when Ophuls's film was released in the United States, the copy of Zweig's novella that I held in my hands was among the holdings of the US Information Center in Fulda, in support of the American cultural policy of "reeducation" (fig. 21). This copy's pages of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* bear scribbled notes in pencil by a former German reader, including stenographic annotations and instructions on how to pronounce the English words (fig. 22). The inside of the book's back cover displays some regulations for using the former US Information Center library (fig. 23). To purloin this version of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* might lead to speculations about the reasonable needs of a reader and about how to name a reader's other needs.

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BY STEFAN ZWEIG

THE ROYAL GAME

AMOK

LETTER FROM
AN UNKNOWN WOMAN

NEW YORK
THE VIKING PRESS
1944

Fig. 21: Copy of the first American edition of Zweig's novella (1944)

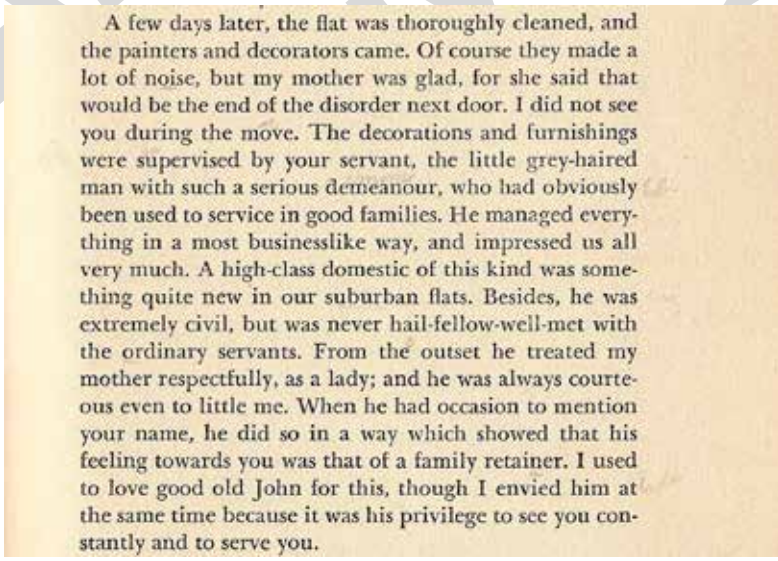

A few days later, the flat was thoroughly cleaned, and the painters and decorators came. Of course they made a lot of noise, but my mother was glad, for she said that would be the end of the disorder next door. I did not see you during the move. The decorations and furnishings were supervised by your servant, the little grey-haired man with such a serious demeanour, who had obviously been used to service in good families. He managed everything in a most businesslike way, and impressed us all very much. A high-class domestic of this kind was something quite new in our suburban flats. Besides, he was extremely civil, but was never hail-fellow-well-met with the ordinary servants. From the outset he treated my mother respectfully, as a lady; and he was always courteous even to little me. When he had occasion to mention your name, he did so in a way which showed that his feeling towards you was that of a family retainer. I used to love good old John for this, though I envied him at the same time because it was his privilege to see you constantly and to serve you.

Fig. 22: Detail of a page with annotations



Fig. 23: The inside of the book's back cover

Notes

1. See Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 38-43.
2. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* [1976] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.
3. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 202.
4. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 42.
5. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 76.
6. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 126.
7. Ibid., 127.
8. Ibid.
9. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 9. See also Stanley Cavell, "The Good of Film," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 333-48.
10. See Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 82-83.
11. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 6.
12. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 31-32, 186-188. See also Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Cavell on Film*, 62-65.
13. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28.

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14. Compare Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24:1 (1984), 2-27; see also Christine Gledhill, "On Stella Dallas and Feminist Film Theory," *Cinema Journal* 25:4 (1986), 44-48. For a survey of the development of psychoanalytical and feminist film criticism on melodrama, see *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 2002).
15. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 9.
16. Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 86.
17. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 71-72.
18. Ibid., 7.
19. Stanley Cavell, "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and Now, Voyager," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), 228. See also Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 128-29.
20. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 278.
21. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 169.
22. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 81.
23. Ibid., 108.
24. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 389.
25. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972), 59.
26. For a more detailed analysis of Ophuls's film see Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 384-408.
27. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 100-01. See also Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
28. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 101.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 100.
31. Ibid., 104.
32. See Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 262.
33. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 105.
34. Ibid., 106.
35. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 95-97, 224-25.
36. Ibid., 113.
37. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?)," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.
38. Ibid.

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39. Ibid., 53.
40. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 111; see also 180.
41. Ibid., 111.
42. Ibid., 132.
43. See Tania Modleski's response concerning Cavell's essays on Now, Voyager and Letter from an Unknown Woman, *Critical Inquiry* 17:1 (1990), 237-38; see also the detailed account of Cavell's ruminations on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings in Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 316-43.
44. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 178.
45. See Christian Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), 135-50. Metz refers to Michel Chion's definition of the I-voice; see Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 1982).
46. My translation of: "Ce n'est pas par hasard, ajouterai-je, qu'elle accompagne le plus souvent un flash-back, c'est-à-dire un 'fait accompli'." Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle*, 140.
47. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (London: Imago, 1949), 28; *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 24 vols., trans. and ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), VII (1953), 149.
48. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 33.
49. See Freud, *Three Essays*, 87-88; *Standard Edition*, VII, 209-10.
50. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 34.
51. Ibid., 34-35.
52. Freud, *Three Essays*, 38; *Standard Edition*, VII, 159.
53. Freud, *Three Essays*, 36; *Standard Edition*, VII, 158.
54. Freud, *Three Essays*, 38; *Standard Edition*, VII, 159.
55. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 41.

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II. Modernity and the Melodramatic Self

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The Melodrama of the Self

Eva Illouz

Oprah Winfrey is undoubtedly one of the most famous women in the world, perhaps the most famous American woman. Having built an economic and cultural empire in less than two decades, she has starred in and produced movies, had her own talk show, a magazine and more recently a TV channel. The initial talk show formula that turned her into a cultural icon has now ended, but its basic structure has largely survived: its most salient characteristic was the fact that it solicited, to put it in broad and vague terms, the stories of unhappy people. Oprah became the master at staging emotional unhappiness in all its guises.

Let me begin with an example, that of Truddi Chase. This example might be prototypical of the fact that the ideal Oprah Winfrey guest is a victimized guest. Less prototypical, however, is the fact that, when the guest appears on the show, she has already been abundantly recycled by the media, through her own autobiography recounting her trials and her life story as the subject of a nationally aired documentary. Presenting her guest, Oprah Winfrey claims:

> this small baby girl was born whole but was not allowed to remain safe for very long because at the age of two Truddi Chase was brutally raped by her stepfather and was continually abused until she ran away at the age of sixteen. But her nightmare did not end there because as a result of some of the most horrific abuse, and we will not discuss all of it today, but the most horrific thing you can't ever in your consciousness imagine, Truddi Chase dealt with her pain by splitting into several different personalities. Eventually all those personalities, which has been documented, totaled 92 distinct people living in one mind. She calls them her troops… Truddi Chase, the real Truddi Chase, underwent years of therapy and most of the therapy….[1]

Here Winfrey stops and cries on camera before continuing: "and most of the therapy was videotaped because Truddi says she wanted others to someday be able to understand that they are not alone in their abuse and that is why we are doing this show."[2]

Truddi Chase first told her story in the autobiographical book *When the Rabbit Howls*,[3] which was made into a miniseries entitled "Voices Within:

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The Lives of Truddi Chase" and aired on ABC the evening before her appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Shifting the viewers' attention over to Chase, Oprah says: "Truddi, it all started when you were two." Truddi Chase's status in the show is signaled by the fact that, as with the precedence of movie stars in the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, she *alone and for the whole hour* occupies the space of the show. Her voice is neither complemented nor contested by anyone else's. This woman's story is so gruesome, her suffering so overwhelming, that it does not admit any contestation. For Truddi Chase is, in a way, a super victim: 92 times a victim of sexual abuse. Indeed, as the detractors of talk shows have repeatedly pointed out, victims of abuse and trauma have become the heroes of our culture. They demand from us, the viewers – demand and even command – our moral reverence and compassion. Functioning as a signal and support for viewer identification, Oprah's compassion for the teller of the story impacts the viewer through an explicit framing of uncontrolled emotion as she cries on camera. The trauma narrative does not admit contestation.

In the 1970s, under the influence of both feminism and therapy culture, the notion of trauma was applied to children who had been victims of abuse. Because this narrative intertwined children, those most sacred characters of our culture who require our protection most, and sex, a social practice that is usually carefully contained by moral categories, the trauma narrative of abused children became to the notion of family what the Holocaust is to political history: that is, a form of uncontested and unrivaled evil. It automatically bestows on its victims a special moral and symbolic status simply from having been there and survived it.

However, the trauma narrative transferred to the family does not require one to split one's personality 92 times in order to qualify for the status of victim. In fact, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is full of many other categories of victimhood. You could have been neglected by your parents, abandoned by your fiancé(e) on the day of your wedding, bullied by a boss, be recently divorced or simply be a single woman in your late thirties in order to present yourself as a victim. The art critic Robert Hughes has claimed that "the democracy of pain reigns supreme" in the *Oprah Winfrey Show's* staging of victimhood.[4] Victimhood and the so-called democracy of pain have become so culturally prominent that the sacred status of the victim is threatened by derision and irony. To take just one example among many, the Harvard legal scholar Alan Dershowitz made these positions clearest when he claimed that "it is virtually impossible to flip the TV channels during the daytime hours without seeing a bevy of sobbing women and men justifying their failed lives by reference to some past abuse, real or imagined."[5]

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Why are victims such a pervasive cultural category? As a sociologist of culture, I do not think that victims are self-evidently defined by the objective harm that has been done to them, nor even by their position *vis-à-vis* a specific institution. Rather, a victim is someone who uses very specific autobiographical narratives, and only through a specific cultural narrative does he or she shape his or her identity as victim. Across a variety of disciplines there is a commonly shared view that narrative has become a key category in understanding how selfhood is constituted through culture, how the self communicates with others and how one makes sense of one's place in a particular social environment. Life stories focus attention on certain objects through the ways in which they connect events and build certain trajectories for the self. Narratives contain what cognitive psychologists studying the processing of stories call an abstract; that is, the summary or the gist of the story, what the main theme of the story is. They contain an orientation in space and time and they contain what cognitive psychologists, like narratologists, call a "complicating action" as well as an evaluation, which is the significance and meaning of the action and the resolution. Students of autobiographical discourse have argued that narratives shape our self-understanding as well as the ways in which we present ourselves to others. This means that life stories have a definite cultural form, to use Paul Ricoeur's expression. They employ the self in very specific ways, integrating the various events of one's life within an overall narrative framework or stories that carry a general theme as well as a *telos*. Personal narratives embed or contain a collective dimension as they can be linked to master narratives or grand cultural key scenarios, to use the expression of the anthropologist Sherry Ortner.[6] A personal narrative is never idiosyncratic, but always harks back to some collective dimension (such as finding one's great love, or being redeemed, and so on).

One constructive way to understand the kind of victim narrative presented above is through the concept of melodrama. Here I do not mean melodrama as a narrative that establishes a very particular relationship to the viewer or reader of the victim, although of course that aspect does exist. But rather, I use the term "melodrama" as a way to define the relationship of the self to the self itself, of the person to her or his own self. So what I am saying here is that the self itself is melodramatized; that is, it entertains a melodramatic relationship to one's own self. Foregrounded in the example above are many of the elements of melodrama as defined by the various scholars contributing to this volume: strong emotionalism, pity, overt villainy, the persecution of the good, emotionality. Moreover, what is particularly salient in such narratives is that the subject takes itself

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as its own object of spectacle. The self is traumatized in such a way that should elicit the compassion of others, of course, but it is also the object of one's own pity and compassion to the extent that we can speak of a melodramatization of the self: the self takes its own self as an object of the gaze, as its own source of emotional spectacle and tension, as its own site for emotional relief. In therapeutic melodrama, or what I am calling the melodrama of the self, the self is at once the viewed and the viewer, the victim of and the witness to evil done.

Let me give an additional example in support of this claim, again from Oprah Winfrey. She has given an interview; indeed, she has given many interviews. This is an interview about an autobiography that she was supposed to write, and which everybody was waiting for, but which never came. Eventually she announced that she was not going to write the autobiography. In this interview, the journalist reports on a non-event that had become an event – that is, on the fact there will not be any autobiography. In the interview, the journalist's and Oprah's voices are interwoven with each other:

> Before the book [i.e., the autobiography], she was emotionally adrift in the murky and suffocating waters of self-doubt… What matters is how she felt inside, in the deepest corridors of her soul and there she never felt good enough. Everything flows from that, her perpetual struggle with obesity ("The pounds represented the weight of my life"), her sexually active adolescence ("It wasn't because I liked running around having sex. It was because once I started I didn't want the other boys to be mad at me"), her willingness to make fool of herself for a man in the name of love ("I was in relationship after relationship where I was mistreated because I felt that was what I deserved"). "I know it appears I have everything," Oprah says, glancing around her $20 million, 88,000 square foot film and TV complex just west of downtown Chicago. "And people think because you are on TV you have the world by a string. But I have struggled with *my* own self-value for many, many years. And I have just now come into terms with it."[7]

This is a very interesting way to give an account of the non-book. Oprah Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in the world, explains to her viewer – and readership – that she has not written her autobiography as a result of indelible psychic wounds such as obesity, translating her physical weight into a somatic symptom marking a psychic burden. Her sexually active adolescence, which many might view as enviable, or certainly not

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worse than being shunned by boys (or girls for that matter), is translated here into, "I didn't want the other boys to be mad at me"; that is, it is framed as a psychic problem. She presents the condition of loving a man who did not reciprocate as a psychic deficiency of feeling that she deserved, so her psyche was damaged to the extent that she felt she did not deserve to be loved back. Clearly then, here it is not only the innocent psyche that is damaged; the psyche generates a narrative of victimhood because of the fundamental assumption that the psyche is innocent, and here I rejoin Linda Williams in claiming that melodrama presupposes an original innocence. So, if the psyche is fundamentally and originally innocent, whatever does not correspond to a model of what *should* be right at a given moment – that is, being thin, having a steady boyfriend during adolescence, not loving a man who does not love you back – implies that the original innocence has been corrupted. The failure to have a successful psyche is interpreted retroactively as pointing to a flaw, a lack in the psyche, which in turn can only be the result of damage that has been done to the psyche. In other words, this melodramatic narrative of the psyche looking at itself being dysfunctional or wounded can occur only if we assume that it is initially innocent and good and that, if it is not fully developed and good now, it is because it has been damaged in the past. Here I want to suggest that the concept of melodrama, which is useful to me to understand this self-narrative, might, however, be too broad a category to understand what is at stake. I think there is a very specific narrative frame that can be subsumed under melodrama: that of the therapeutic narrative. I would say, then, that the therapeutic narrative is in fact a subcategory of the melodramatic narrative enabling this emplotment, this melodramatic emplotment of the self. The main characteristic of a therapeutic narrative is that it is a memory narrative dictated by the goal of the story. It is the goal, such as mental health, sexual liberation, or self-realization, which dictates the events that are selected to tell the story as well as the way in which these events, as components of the narrative, are connected. Narrative goals such as sexual liberalization, self-realization, being assertive, being in control of my feelings or even being able to feel intimacy or to have intimacy, these are narrative goals, psychological narrative goals which in turn dictate the complication that prevents me from attaining my goal, dictate the passivity in my life. The question to be explored is: what emotional logic binds these events together? For example, let us say that I am a 25-year-old woman, and thus should have a sexually active life. Yet I do not have an active sexual life. In fact, most of the men I am with are distant or not very attracted to me. Why is that? That is because I have sought out those who will be distant

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or not very attracted to me. Why is that? That is because my mother never really attended to my needs and was distant from me. How do I know that my needs then were not fulfilled? That is because they are not fulfilled now. That is exactly the logic at work in the therapeutic narrative. In this sense, the therapeutic narrative is retrospectively emplotted or written retroactively. The so-called proper end of the story, from a psychological and narrative perspective, is one in which I am sexually emancipated, active, self-realized and so on. This imagined ending retroactively initiates the story of my past needs, actions and conditions, the complication of the story, what needed to and what still needs to be overcome in a process that continually returns me to the past.

A therapeutic narrative is less about the historical past than about the way in which the integrity of the self has been ruined or damaged in the past. In the melodrama of the self, a supposed original innocence has been damaged and emotional wounds inflicted by others. The emotional wounds are thus the very knots of narrative complication around which the story *the melodrama of the self* is constituted. These knots of narrative complication that I carry inside as also constitutive of my emotional past – shyness, shame, guilt, low self-esteem – create something that I must overcome. Ironically, they do not constitute my self as such as much as they hinder me from achieving my true self; that is, the self that becomes present at the so-called proper end of the story. Therapeutic culture cannot but generate a narrative structure in which suffering and victimhood actually define a self. Indeed, the therapeutic narrative functions only by conceiving of life events as markers of failed or thwarted opportunities for self-development. When you presume something like self-realization or self-development according to this narrative structure, there will almost inevitably be the need to explain why you are not yet living your full life, your full potential, your self-realized life. From a narrative perspective it is a question of the need to introduce a complicating action. The present condition of loss, of lack, of incompletion is inevitably constituted through the fact that you have been somehow wronged in the past. In this regard, in this tension between past injustice and present incompletion, it seems logical that the therapeutic narrative is fundamentally sustained by a narrative of suffering. Suffering sustains the tension of this narrative. It is the life of the narrative, one might say. It initiates and motivates narrative action, helps it unfold events in a logical sequence, and makes the overarching story cohere. Therapeutic story-telling is thus inherently circular: to tell this tale is to tell a story about a diseased self, which presupposes a whole and healthy self from which the diseased self devolves and which might again be attained. As Michel

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Foucault remarked in his history of sexuality, the care of the self is cast in medical metaphors of health, paradoxically encouraging the view of a sick self in need of correction and transformation.[8]

As a final example, let us consider the website of Landmark Education. Landmark is an internationally active company. They provide three-day workshops to help participants become more self-realized. The two crucial thematic elements of this very intense workshop consist in making participants realize, first, that they are not living out their full potential and, next, that Landmark will help them become who they are really supposed to be. On Landmark's website there are several testimonials. This is a testimonial from someone named Daniel:

> One of my automatic ways of being came out of an incident when I was eleven. I was forced to admit publicly to my friends that I was too shy to kiss a girl who lived across the street. I felt humiliated. I concluded that I could never make it socially or really be brave with girls. So instead I redesigned myself to be studious, serious, hard working and responsible as a way of compensating for this. Part of this was that I had to make do on my own, by myself, it became my winning formula.

Indeed, Landmark Education teaches one to understand how one's routine way of being is a response to flaws and deficiencies.

> I have the freedom to be, and in a way to create, things which the previous automatic way of being would have forbidden as off-limits or too threatening. I see myself as less rigid and more able to enjoy integration in an increasing variety of people and activities in my social circle, my community and my work.[9]

In Daniel's therapeutic narrative, we see the melodrama of the self fully at work. The narrative frame requires that a person identify his or her pathology; here it is a socially inhibiting automatic way of being. Once the automatic behavior is identified, the person builds a connection with the past, identifying a childhood incident in which the self was presumably diminished. That incident is in turn supposed to have had momentous consequences for conduct in his or her subsequent life. Notice, though, what these momentous consequences are. In this case, they are actually quite positive indicators for integrative social behavior: becoming studious, hard working, responsible and serious. I use this example because it illustrates very well the absurdity of the narrative: favorable social traits

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are reframed as constitutive of a personal pathology. Given that normative hard work is commendable, for it to qualify as pathological here it has to be reinterpreted according to the frame of compulsiveness; a therapeutic frame of compulsiveness. By positing an undefined and endlessly expanding ideal of a healthy, fully realized self, any and all behaviors can be labeled *a contrario* in some way pathological.

The therapeutic narrative poses normality and self-realization as the goal of the narrative of the self. Yet because that goal's positive content is never clearly defined, the ultimate horizon of self-realization being the perpetually moving target it is, it in fact produces a wide variety of potentially unrealized, and therefore sick, selves. Self-realization becomes a cultural category that produces a Sisyphean play of Derridean differences. Self-realization and therapeutic narrative structure are thus the sources for the melodramatization of the self, allowing the self to become its own spectacle of suffering. There is an additional fundamental way in which the therapeutic narrative is also a melodrama of the self.

The therapeutic self is, by definition, a self whose moral worth comes from its capacity and desire to change. Self-change, improvement and transformation are the performative effects of the therapeutic narrative. In fact, I would go further: becoming a victim allows you to activate a large variety of social actors working around you *qua* victim-subject, helping to change you or helping you change yourself. The therapeutic narrative of self-realization and self-change is thus widely pervasive because it is performed throughout a wide variety of social sites, from support groups, talk shows, counseling offices and rehabilitation programs to for-profit workshops, therapy sessions and problem-specific social network platforms. They are all sites for performing the transformation of the self and the melodrama of the self. These sites have become invisible and pervasive appendices to the ongoing work of having and performing the self in modern society. I diverge here from Thomas Elsaesser's claim that victimhood has become a prominent form of identity because the social contract has been broken or because it is here to fill an empty space. On the contrary, I would say that the space of the victim is an extremely crowded one, and although I am normally not a Foucauldian, it appears to me that the therapeutic narrative in fact mobilizes a wide variety of social groups each advancing their interests. Without going into this complex history, let me briefly provide an example of what I mean. In the 1970s, the women's movement used the trauma narrative to defend children inside the family, and in this way they mainstreamed feminism. Prior to that, the women's movement had been quite inimical to Freudian psychoanalysis. Using categories of trauma

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helped to mainstream the movement and mutually promote the respective projects of feminism and psychoanalysis.

Vietnam veterans, for example, also benefitted from the trauma narrative, legitimating new legal claims with the expert testimony of psychologists and psychiatrists. The state, the American state of the 1960s, widely used the expertise of psychologists in schools, in social work and in prison programs in order further to universalize its legitimacy and its actions. In the 1920s, American corporations were already making intensive use of the rhetoric and tools of psychology to manage workforces. Movies, women's magazines and self-help culture in general have extensively mobilized psychological and therapeutic narratives as a way to diversify their formulae. These narratives have deeply influenced the modes of consumption definitive of our contemporary cultures, with culture reflexively and increasingly becoming a way for the self to help guide itself through the morally coded mazes of modernity.

These shifts in culture were particularly reinforced by shifts that occurred within psychological theory itself. In the 1960s, under the influence of humanist psychology, many psychologists adopted the ideal of self-realization. The impact of such new models of selfhood was to enlarge the realm of action and relevance of psychology. If Freud had already considerably enlarged the realm of action in psychoanalysis by creating the category of "neurosis" (which included not only mentally disturbed patients but also ordinary people, sick with nothing but the ordinary trials of having conflicted personalities), self-realization entailed a similar enlargement: you did not need to be a neurotic to go to the psychologist, you simply needed to feel that your life had not yet produced the fruits that secretly lay waiting inside you. Not to be self-realized was to hold an image of a potential, fuller self, which in itself now justified therapy. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's humanistic theories of Self Actualization promoted a view of psychic health in which the failure fully to realize one's potential was effectively a clinical sickness.[10] Extending this notion to its logical consequences, with the proliferation of behaviors that point to an unrealized and therefore sick self, there is a commensurate increase in the pathologization of behavior. The commercial effects of this shift can be seen somewhat later in the pharmaceutical industry's targeting of *emotional* as opposed to *mental* disorders. Using the cultural template of the pathologization of the emotional self allowed for new marketing strategies and new markets. Take, for example, a pill called Paxil. Forty years ago, if you were a woman, you were shy, as reserve was considered to be a virtue, with shyness pointing toward the non-explicit presence of a kind of morality.

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Shyness, though, was eventually pathologized and Paxil became the pill that would help you fight what was now recast as social phobia.

The point, in short, is this: by having a host of social actors organize themselves around the idea of therapeutic change, by activating large bodies of expert knowledge, by activating the market, by making politics into a mechanism for the reparation of psychic wounds, and by turning media toward the commodified spectacle of suffering, through all these processes the victim becomes a wide and pervasive cultural template and narrative for the self. Not only do much knowledge and many economic interests converge today in the social persona of the victim, but there is also something about the uncanny agility of the therapeutic narrative that makes it a cultural structure able to circulate in a variety of social fields. What is it that makes the victim position so uncannily agile? There are various properties that I have been able to identify. One is that the therapeutic narrative is able to address and explain a variety of emotions, even in their contradictory forms: loving too much or not loving enough, being aggressive or not being assertive enough, for example. In marketing terms it would be as if a cigarette were invented to satisfy both smokers and non-smokers at the same time, and as if smokers of different brands of cigarettes could smoke the same cigarette. In other words, the therapeutic structure is a generic structure which lacks strictly specific content, making it highly mobile, mutable and flexible, adaptable to a wide variety of ills, able to account for individual particularity and yet able to be shared by many people.

The second property is that these narratives tap into the subject simultaneously as a patient and as a consumer: as someone in need of management and care and at the same time as someone who can be in control of his (consumer) actions. In this respect the therapeutic narrative merges two contradictory constructions of the self at work in contemporary culture. One is the self that is the victim in need of the help of others; the other is the self as the author and coauthor or actor of his or her life as victim with the potential to become a non-victim. These therapeutic narratives make one responsible for one's own psychic well-being, yet they do so by removing any notion of moral culpability. The therapeutic narrative enables one to mobilize the cultural schemes and values of moral individualism and of self-improvement; yet by transposing to childhood or to deficient parents and families the cause of one's own deficiencies, one is exonerated from the moral weight of being at fault or for living an unsatisfactory, not fully realized life. The moral program for the self on offer here should be thought alongside the new historical model of the self, a self whose status

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of being split enables new kinds of moral legibility; a moral program of self-improvement without guilt and without responsibility.

In one of her less well-known books, *On Revolution*,[11] Hannah Arendt offered a distinction between the politics of pity and the politics of justice. The first is based on the spectacle of suffering which is, by definition, incommensurable, whereas the second is the object of justice, which is commensurable; that is, one good (or one injustice) can be exchanged for another. Arendt pointed to a fundamental incompatibility between these two modes of engaging politically with what is wrong in the world. I think that the melodramatization of the self represents an even deeper inroad of the politics of pity, for pity here is not merely the pity that the non-sufferer feels on behalf of or for the sufferer. Rather, it is a pity that the sufferer him- or herself feels for him- or herself, making this type of pity antithetical to the political bond as we knew it. For one thing, it aims at immediate and definite change, where victimhood is overcome through narratives of confession and self-realization. Pity is made into the private accomplishment and victory of the person who suffers, the spectator identifying with his or her own spectacle of the suffering self. Additionally, far from pointing to a collapse of the social contract, and far from morphing into collective anger, this kind of therapeutic narrative activates the social bond through a wide variety of experts and through the market. In fact it activates the professional gaze and management, the effect of which is to neutralize collective claims and to privatize suffering. Finally, because victims and the suffering proffer a discourse of emotions that cannot be contested, they abolish the very essence of the public sphere qua political space; and here I am a Habermasian, for I view the very essence of the public sphere as that which is organized around the possibility of reasoned discourse and disagreement.

What looms over our political landscape after the tears, then, is the increasing difficulty in articulating a public sphere that is not based on the contest of sufferers with their suffering, or on the carnival of sufferers. I think such a public sphere threatens the possibility of reason and dialog.

Notes

1. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Season 5, Episode 1, 21 May 1990.
2. Ibid.
3. Truddi Chase, *When Rabbit Howls* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987).

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4. Cited in Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 81.
5. Ibid.
6. Cited in Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 173.
7. Cited in Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 53.
8. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).
9. See http://www.landmarkworldwide.com/.
10. See Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).
11. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2006).

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Rousseau's Nightmare

Vincent Kaufmann

I.

Everybody is supposed to know Molière's last play *The Imaginary Invalid* (1763) and to laugh at the hypochondria of Argan, the man who tyrannizes his entourage because he believes that he is sick. He tries to force his daughter to marry the son of his physician, who happens to be a physician too, in order to have his son-in-law take care of his body rather than that of his daughter; incest and other little family accidents are never very far away in Molière's universe, which is one of the reasons that should prevent us from thinking that the likes of Argan are basically in good health. Is it not obvious, at least when we take a second look at Argan, that he is really very sick, that he is not doing well at all? More generally, my first question here, implied by Molière's play, would be: what exactly is the difference between real and imaginary suffering? Do we not suffer when we just believe that we do? What is the difference between medically correct pain and imaginary pain?

I am not arguing that pain is always imaginary – although we know that what we perceive as such is constructed, historically and culturally determined, at least to some extent, as shown by Roselyne Rey's impressive history of pain.[1] Neither would I affirm that we suffer only when we decide that we do – that would be absurd. My point is, however, that in its complexity, suffering includes a *performative* dimension: it happens – not only to Argan – that we suffer because we believe or we say that we do. In the twentieth century, the French writer Jean Paulhan, for a long time editor-in-chief of the famous *Nouvelle Revue Française*, argues *a contrario* in the same way in a short story entitled "Imaginary Pains":[2] the suffering narrator seeks medical advice from a Chinese acupuncturist who sticks a few needles here and there in his body and tells him that, if he keeps suffering, it is just an effect of his imagination. And of course the narrator does keep suffering, but no longer knows what to do with his pain if it is just an illusion. Paulhan, who knew probably more than anybody about the true and imaginary pain of almost all the French writers of the twentieth century, seems to consider here – in his usual ironic way – some kind of end of literature which would be made possible by the needles of an acupuncturist, as if nothing would be left to be written if pain stopped

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being taken seriously. In short, Chinese medicine is seen by Paulhan as the end of Western melodrama, of the Western ability to suffer by imagining that one suffers.

But let us go back to Molière and his *Imaginary Invalid* for a while. In France in the seventeenth century, hypochondria as well as all kinds of family accidents seem to have been good topics for comedies, something to laugh about. The *grand siècle* was obviously not ready to show any pity for hypochondriacs, keeping its compassion for more noble issues, especially the various struggles of the aristocrats staged in the then dominant genre, tragedy, which is *never* about imaginary pains but about living up to one's aristocratic origin or status. There would have been no chance, in this period, for Rousseau or Chateaubriand, let alone Antonin Artaud (who would be, in the twentieth century, the ultimate incarnation of victimhood), to get any form of recognition. Hypochondria, or more exactly hypochondria taken seriously, is something specifically *modern*, which seems to emerge somewhere in the second half of the eighteenth century. If one wants to associate it with a name, it would probably be that of Rousseau; less the Rousseau who is said to have invented melodrama in 1762 with his *Pygmalion* than the Rousseau of the *Confessions*, written just afterwards, between 1765 and 1770. Here it is worth remembering another play by Molière, *The Misanthrope*, which Rousseau considered almost a personal insult to himself, as if Molière had laughed at him *personally* a century before he lived, with the staging of a character aiming ridiculously (from a seventeenth-century perspective, at least) at sincerity and authenticity (one of Rousseau's favorite games, as well as a condition of possibility for melodrama). There is no indication that Rousseau felt offended by *The Imaginary Invalid* too, but my point is that just as *The Misanthrope* turns Alceste-Rousseau into a fool, *The Imaginary Invalid* laughs in advance about the suffering subject which emerges with Rousseau to play an absolutely crucial role in the history of the literature of the last two centuries, and more precisely in the historical development of melodrama.

By mentioning Argan as another possible ancestor or anticipation of Rousseau, besides the well-known Alceste, I aim to bring together two essential features of modern subjectivity as staged, or more exactly *produced*, in *The Confessions*. On the one hand, the modern subject is an always *suffering* subject, born in or from pain. In the case of Rousseau, it starts emblematically with his birth, which represents the sad end of Jean-Jacques's parents' idyll: "[…] my mother […] loved her husband tenderly; she urged him to return: he left everything and returned. I was the unhappy fruit of that return. Ten months later, I was born feeble and sickly; I cost my mother

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her life, and my birth was the first of my misfortunes."[3] From the idyll of the former generation to one's own melodrama: this is obviously not a good start in life. Jean-Jacques's birth kills his mother, throwing his father into eternal grief ("[…] I know that he never consoled himself for it"[4]). In addition, he is born ill and disabled, although one would search in vain for more details about this initial disability. It could just as well be a quite imaginary disability, something like the shadow projected by the death of the mother on her son. In other terms, illness and the suffering associated with it are a matter of principle here, something like the condition of possibility for the existence of a self that will be able to tell its own story. I suffer, or I make someone suffer, therefore I am. Remarkably, Rousseau's beginning – I use this term on purpose – combines both formulations: he, as a person as well as an author, comes from his own pain as well as from the pain he has inflicted on his parents with his birth.

In this sense, the modern (literary) self has much less to do with its Cartesian cousin, who is not really good at feeling, than with the Christian tradition of compassion, of sym-pathy (literally an ability to share suffering, to suffer *with*) in which a self identifies itself through its ability to identify (with) the pain of another (ultimately with the figure of Christ), a tradition of which the invention of modern autobiography, as well as the whole melodramatic tradition, would be the secular (post-revolutionary) version, according to Peter Brooks.[5] This ability for identification is in any case what makes Rousseau's famous sentence "I know my heart, and have studied mankind" possible, or what explains such a sentence: I identify myself because I am able to identify (with) my fellow humans. From a more psychoanalytical perspective, which by no means contradicts a Christian one, one could also describe the birth of the modern self as the constitution of a sado-masochistic position in which subjectivity is essentially linked to the possibility, or more exactly the pleasure, of inflicting pain, and/or being submitted to pain: it is not a coincidence that the expression "I (make) suffer, therefore I am" is to be found in a letter written by Marcel Proust to André Gide about the *Vatican Cellars* the latter had just published.[6] No writer explored the connections between pain, subjectivity and the imaginary as deeply as Proust did,[7] both in or through his letters, at an obviously autobiographical level, and in *In Search of Lost Time*, which is, after all, only slightly less autobiographical.

On the other hand, the modern subject is a *persecuted* one. He suffers not only as a matter of principle, but also because in his innocence he never stops facing injustice. He is born as a suffering subject as well as a *victim*. This is familiar to every reader of Rousseau's *Confessions*, the famous first

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book of which is structured by the model of the fall from the (lost) paradise of innocence and good, as shown by Starobinski and Lejeune.[8] I am what I am – that is, no longer innocent – because of the unjust punishments that have been inflicted on me, because I have become a victim. This would more or less be the summary of the first book of the *Confessions,* which ends significantly with a situation of exile (Rousseau is exiled from Geneva, his home town). Rousseau invents autobiography and *at the same time* victimhood, which has been described many times as one of the basic features of melodrama;[9] and although I would not define the *Confessions* as a melodrama (despite the many melodramatic scenes it includes), Rousseau's work contributes in a decisive way to configuring subjectivity in an appropriate way for the development of the melodramatic imagination, since it provides the basic subjective posture or position, the matrix which makes melodrama possible.

But there is more than merely injustice involved in persecution. Just as pain can be imaginary, persecution is very often imaginary too, and we know very well what to call it if this is the case: namely, paranoia. The paranoiac dimension of Rousseau's *Confessions* becomes obvious in the introduction to its second part (Book Seven):

> I would give anything in the world to be able to shroud in the night of time what I have to say, and, now that I am forced to speak in spite of myself, I am still reduced to hiding myself, to resorting to trickery, to trying to lead astray, to lowering myself to things for which I was least born; the ceiling under which I live has eyes, the walls that encircle me have ears, surrounded by spies and malevolent and vigilant watchers, anxious and distraught I hastily throw on to the paper some interrupted words which I barely have time to reread, still less to correct. I know that, in spite of the immense barriers that are heaped up endlessly around me, it is always feared that the truth will escape through some fissure.[10]

Paranoia, however, not only determines the second part of Rousseau's project, but is also a feature of it from the beginning, especially with the first and very famous sentence of the *Confessions*: "I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever. I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself."[11] What a program, and moreover what a contradictory one: my undertaking is unique and therefore I am unique too, I am the only man who can be seen in his truth, I am the only genuine human, the only one to be able to feel, the first and the last one, which

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is of essential interest for all those who resemble me, my fellow humans (in French, my *semblables*), yet who happen to be so different from me, so unable to incarnate authenticity, which is my unique quality. This is a program for a clash, and as far as persecution is concerned it works like a self-fulfilling prophecy: sooner or later, when you pretend to be unique, your *semblables*, your fellow humans are going to react, to lose their goodwill and turn against you.

Why do I insist on paranoia here, and why in these terms? Because paranoia is the *limit* or the *other* of melodrama: it exceeds melodrama, it is not compatible with melodrama, it represents a breaking-off from the economy of feelings of the melodramatic mode that is grounded in a quite Christian (inter)-subjective power of identification and compassion. Whereas the melodramatic subject is always embedded in a community, at the same time hero and victim, the paranoiac has cut ties with the community; he or she is alone or more exactly unique, having lost any possibility of identifying with *semblables,* fellow humans, since he or she is the last human in a world of zombies without authenticity, without souls, who then try to get the paranoiac's soul, the only one to remain.[12] Moreover, as shown by the quotation from the beginning of the second part of the *Confessions*, the paranoiac *hides* from his or her fellow humans, who are relentlessly spying on him or her: he or she tries to escape any economy, any exchange of feelings, any form of identification with anybody else. With regard to emotions, the paranoiac position represents not only a radical interruption but also a defense against the visibility and communication of feelings; it consists in having given up any kind of *commerce* with fellow humans.

In other words, one has to make a distinction between at least two forms of victimhood. There is a form of victimhood which aims – even if desperately – at some kind of repair, acquittal, reconciliation or social reintegration: this is precisely what melodrama is supposed to enact or to tell. And there is the paranoid form of victimhood, which is based on a subject who has swallowed humankind, who is its last and always threatened representative, who must hide because everybody is trying to steal his or her soul and feelings, since he or she is the only one to have a soul and feelings. It goes without saying that both positions can be more or less rhetorical or staged: I would think twice before affirming that Rousseau was really paranoiac or psychotic.

I insist on this distinction for two reasons: firstly because melodrama, with its many definitions that have been proposed over recent decades, seems to have become the inescapable horizon of modern and contemporary subjectivity as well as the horizon of its narrative enactment. Melodrama is

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everywhere, from Dickens's novels to contemporary TV series. With each new – and often illuminating – theoretical perspective, it becomes a broader category, a kind of almost universal mode or genre. At least this applies to melodrama theory (more than to melodrama itself, since many novels or movies probably do not know anything about their melodramatic quality), which is astonishingly inclusive, *as if* melodrama were a category without any *other*. Just as, according to Guy Debord, we live now under the sign of the *integrated spectacular,* which means that the society of the spectacle has imposed itself everywhere,[13] we also live under the sign of an integrated and ubiquitous melodrama, which could just as well be a consequence of the spectacular, at least if we follow Eva Illouz in her reflections on melodrama as a commodification of the self.[14] In other words, paranoia is interesting as otherness, as resistance with regard to melodrama – and, by the way, to the spectacular: we will see below what a paranoid mode as opposed to the melodramatic mode could mean in the field of contemporary literature.

The other reason is obvious: if there is a paranoid mode which can be opposed to the melodramatic mode, it is quite remarkable that both positions can be deduced from the same text, being invented simultaneously by Rousseau in his *Confessions*, even in its introduction. This speaks for the complexity of Rousseau's thought and position, for its dialectical quality: if on the one hand he can be considered the inventor of the potentially melodramatic self, if the introduction to the *Confessions* triggers our modern economy of feelings, he produces on the other hand the antidote to it, in a kind of double *coup de force*, as if he were immediately aware of the self-destructive dimension implied by the exhibition of the self he had just invented, or as if he were aware that the self cannot show itself "in all the integrity of nature" without paying a price, without being threatened with losing its authenticity in the gaze of the other to which it submits itself. In short, it is as if Rousseau had already anticipated what is going on in the ultimate version of the spectacular commodification of the self represented by some contemporary TV reality shows, one of which is not coincidentally entitled *Big Brother*. At the more general level of the history of ideas, the dialectical dimension of Rousseau's introduction to the *Confessions* can be considered the key to its double (at least) posterity: Romanticism on the one hand, with its relentless staging of suffering selves (hypochondria turned into the core business of literature), and social criticism on the other hand, with the systematic denunciation, from Marx to Guy Debord, of the alienating effects of society and more precisely its spectacles. In the second part of this essay, I would like to examine some of the contemporary versions of this double posterity, which amounts to paying tribute to Rousseau:

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maybe he still constitutes the horizon of our current ways of thinking the representations of the self, as well as the escape from these representations.

II.

What is the status today of the adventures of the self as programmed by Rousseau? First, it seems obvious that in terms of literary history, and more exactly the history of literary genres, we have entered the age of the hegemony or triumph of autobiography. It is not only that the number of autobiographies published – including more and more non-literary autobiographies of politicians, and of movie, sports or media stars, and so on – has increased in an exponential way over the last decades, but also that autobiography has increasingly contaminated fictional genres. We live in an age of autobiographical novels, which often turn into fictionalized autobiographies. The French have even invented a new genre to describe this mix of fiction and autobiography: *auto-fiction,* a term that henceforth allows every author to write about themselves, whilst simultaneously freeing themselves from any obligation or form of accountability with regard to the truth. Since the word was invented by Serge Doubrovski in 1977, the theorists have debated its validity or scope: should it include Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* – or at least Gide's *The Immoralist*? Are there formal criteria to be found which would allow us to distinguish between fiction and autobiography?

Because I fear that we might wait some time to get answers to these questions, let us switch to another question: why the triumph of autobiography *today*? Why did the hegemony of autobiography begin somewhere around 1980, rather than a century ago? Why did it take such a long time for Rousseau's invention to be generalized to the point of becoming almost the most trivial literary category? It obviously has a lot to do with individualization: in the nineteenth century, melodramatic energy was still principally invested in collective narratives, for instance those allowing some form of nation-building. This was no longer the case at the end of the twentieth century, dominated by a fragmented – and fragmenting – consumer-culture that was no longer imposed by institutions on citizens or would-be citizens but chosen, or more exactly bought, by consumers. This also has something to do with the democratization of access to the literary field: with continually lower access costs (a trend enhanced by e-books, blogs and so on), almost anybody can become an author; but once you have become one, you are the only one in the name of whom you have anything to say (and I do not even

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mention the other difficulty which appears with the democratization of authorship: if everybody turns out to be a writer, at some point there will be no readers left). The time of the big collective narratives, the time when one could speak or write *in the name of many* is probably gone forever. The more people who have access to the literary field, the more the scope of the authority of these people is reduced to themselves. The hegemony of autobiography is not only a matter of lack of imagination, as sometimes stated; it is, so to speak, a structural effect of the demography of an increasingly crowded literary field. Last but not least, it is closely linked to another form of hegemony: that of audio-visual media (i.e. television) over print media, which emerged more or less at the same time, somewhere between 1970 and 1980, according to media historians.[15] Whereas TV was still clearly in the service of the (great) authors up until the 1970s, there was a shift in power or authority at this time, the result of which was that literature, or more exactly the author, increasingly fell into the service of TV, which is much more interested in showing authors than books, and therefore more interested in authors talking about themselves than in rhetorical subtleties or strange things such as the death of the author, a literary posture that was advanced by the French *avant-gardes* and (post)structuralist theorists of the sixties and seventies.[16] Why is this? It is because what TV does best is not operating with words, that is, not *thinking*, be it philosophically, critically or literarily, but *showing*; and preferably showing feelings. TV is at its best when it is able to move a large audience with emotions, that is, when it can sell a moved audience to advertisers. If literature wants to adjust to this new hegemony of the spectacular, this will take place at the price of substituting sophisticated rhetoricians abasing their selves and claiming that they are dead as persons by much more congenial authors – such as you or me – ready to prove in as many talk shows as possible that they are not only living, but also overwhelmed by their feelings and their ability to suffer and sometimes, just as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, to inflict pain. TV determines the autobiographic turn of contemporary literature not only because it is compulsory in terms of book marketing, but more essentially because it has imposed media presence as the dominant form of *authority*. And media presence is about selling yourself when you get attention, about selling your self: your feelings, desires, fantasies, secrets, and so on.

Let us browse through contemporary French autobiographical literature, which has invaded or contaminated almost the entire literary field. The number of works about suffering or sacrificed selves, victims and tormenters is striking, as if (almost) everybody today were drawing upon Rousseau's invention of suffering as the basic modern literary posture. As a first

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example, I would like to mention Hervé Guibert's AIDS trilogy (*A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* [1990], *Le Protocole compassionnel* [1991], *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* [1992][17]), at the center of which there is Guibert's dying body, thoroughly described in the three "novels," photographed, painted or staged by artists who are his friends (or lovers), as well as filmed with a camcorder by himself for a TV show (actually a commission or proposal from the then-famous TV producer Pascale Breugnot). It is worth going into some detail about this almost endless narrativization of the Christian *hoc est corpus meum*, which appears as the genuine matrix of Guibert's narratives. In 1990, when the first volume was published, the until then rather withdrawn author Hervé Guibert became famous overnight after having been invited onto the famous literary talk show *Apostrophes*, moderated by Bernard Pivot. The whole country was *moved* by the sight of the dreadful emaciation of the handsome young writer, bought his book and *sympathized* with him, as he would acknowledge in the second volume: "In fact what I wrote was a personal letter faxed directly to the hearts of a hundred thousand readers, it's something extraordinary for me. I am busy writing them a new letter. The one I am writing to you here and now."[18] It is as if we were beyond literature here, with sympathy faxed (e-mail was not yet popular) directly into the heart of 100,000 readers (or viewers?), something that speaks for the trans-generic and trans-medial quality of the melodramatic mode. As least, this is what Pascale Breugnot must have thought, since she asked Guibert to produce a video version of his autobiography, the title of which would be *Modesty and Shame* (aired posthumously in 1993; Guibert died in 1992). At the core of the trilogy, we have not only a self-portrait of the artist as the victim of a totally unjust fate (not a word about his possible responsibility in his disease) which leaves him on the side of the sacred, of the saints or the damned, but also an account of the multi-media staging of his quasi-Christian sacrifice, his *passion*, which can be translated from the written to video, photography, theater and painting, as well as to talk shows.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this plasticity, that is, the ability of the melodramatic staging of suffering and victimhood to switch from one medium to another, is to be found in other French contemporary autobiographical practices. For example, Chloé Delaume, who describes in *The Cry of the Sandglass*[19] how, when she was a child, her father stopped short of killing her after having shot her mother and how he decided instead to shoot himself, making her in just a few seconds an orphan – the victim *par excellence* in terms of melodrama – is also well-known as a video artist and performer: as if there were a kind of drive leading writers representing themselves as victims or suffering selves to take advantage of visual staging

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techniques, which are always more efficient, more moving, as far as representations of pain are concerned, than the books that the melodramatic mode affects with a centrifugal force. Rousseau at the beginning of the twenty-first century would have been a multi-media performer rather than just a writer.

This is, in any case, what an author such as Annie Ernaux also tries to be when she bases an autobiographical narrative on family pictures (*The Use of Photography*[20]), or when she published, more recently, an audio-book devoted to an older sister she had never known, dead ten years before her own birth because of diphtheria.[21] Here is another form of melodramatic victimhood, marked once again by an accident, an interruption of genealogy: I would never have been born had I not been the substitute for a dead sister, her replica, so I am the result of the grief of my parents, I am marked by their mourning. By trying to *recall* – in an audio-book – a dead sister I have never known, it is as if I could eventually depart from her, become somebody other than her shadow; it is as if I could repair the broken genealogy.

It is worth noting that broken genealogies lie at the heart of many melodramas (as well as at the heart of the matrix, that is, the *Confessions*: after all, Rousseau is almost an orphan, too). In a reverse way, this factor lies behind an autobiographical account by Annie Ernaux, *Happening*,[22] which tells the story of her illegal abortion in the sixties; another story of a dead child, of bleeding and suffering turned into Christian passion, as shown by the following excerpts:

> I would listen to Bach's *Passion According to St John* in my room. When the Evangelist's solo voice rang out in German to celebrate the Passion of Christ, I felt the ordeal I had suffered between October and January was being recounted in an unknown language [...]. I walked along the city streets, my body harboring the secret of that night of January 20-21 as something sacred. I couldn't decide whether I had reached the outer fringes of horror or beauty.[23]

> I have finished putting into words what I consider to be an extreme human experience, bearing on life and death, time, law, ethics and taboo – an experience that sweeps through the body [...]. Maybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing, in other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to *merge* into the lives and heads of other people.[24]

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Other family-accidents of the same kind take place in Ernaux's works; for instance, her father's attempt to kill her mother in *Shame*,[25] apparently with much less success than in the case of Chloé Delaume's father, as well as in other contemporary French auto-fiction. Christine Angot seems to have been sodomized by her father,[26] Serge Doubrovski has no problem appearing as the one who pushed his young wife to commit suicide,[27] and Camille Laurens could not miss the opportunity to tell us the story of the death of her child.[28] What would be left of contemporary autobiographical literature without the possibility of staging victims, tortures and pain? Very little, I fear.

But let us go back to the centrifugal quality of autobiographical literature. If it is about translating or dissolving the body and its pain into the written, then it should come as no surprise if, at some point, literature disappears behind the immediacy of the audio-visual, or if, in other words, the body returns to the body: as far as the melodramatic mode is concerned, literature might just have been a mistake, or more precisely an expedient – for as long as (moving) movies, TV shows and videos downloaded from YouTube did not yet exist. As a matter of fact, it is no longer necessary, within the contemporary media environment, to be able to *write* an autobiography if you want to show yourself to your fellow humans. Written autobiographies tend even to be mere spin-offs of hotter forms of media presence, to put it in McLuhan's terms. At the heart of the contemporary culture of confession, as its hottest medium, one finds countless more or less trashy talk shows, with their differing hierarchies, authority and prestige, as well as the most diverse formats of reality show, which appear to me the most striking symptom of both the society of the spectacle and the commodification of the self on which the spectacular is built. Most of the time, talk shows are about people ready to pay for the attention they get by means of the exhibition of their feelings and the sacrifice of their intimacy, very often appearing as victims, as abused in some way or another, and sometimes even taking part in the show together with their abusers (especially when family matters are at stake). And as diverse as they are, all reality shows are finally about people suffering or performing before being eliminated (this is true for the casting shows as well as for the survival shows), being symbolically executed and crying thoroughly before leaving the TV panel, which makes it clear that the contemporary culture of confession is also, as was already programmed in Rousseau's introduction to his *Confessions*, a culture of (court) appearance. The media never stop judging you, they never stop asking you what you are ready to pay for having been invited, or what you are ready to show in order to justify your presence on the panel.

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The *setting* invented by Rousseau in the *Confessions* has been implemented, enhanced and generalized in a way Rousseau would probably never have dreamt of, not because he could not have foreseen such success, but because the contemporary culture of confession is the exact opposite of what he was trying to do; namely, to show himself in his inimitable singularity: *I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever.* Rousseau was not aiming for success, for followers, for imitation: *Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know mankind.* The democratization of self-exhibition made possible by the audio-visual, and moreover by digital media, could be nothing less than Rousseau's ultimate *nightmare*: a world in which everybody swallows up everybody else's feelings in order to boost his or her self. Instead of being the only one, unique, Rousseau seems ironically to have triggered the contemporary, all-encompassing "me-too" culture.

This is not what he wanted, and moreover it is what led to his paranoia. I want to show myself in the whole truth of nature, but I do not want Big Brother to watch me. It is no coincidence that the name of the key figure in the paranoid society depicted by George Orwell in *1984* has become the title of the prototype contemporary reality show, the difference being that, in contrast to Orwell's world, surveillance by Big Brother is now consented to or even desired. Because of this paranoid dimension, the *Confessions* become an antidote to the *Confessions*: nobody will imitate me, nobody will identify or sympathize with me, and moreover, nobody has the right to judge me. I show myself in the whole truth of nature, but I deny you any right to pronounce a verdict. The court in front of which I appear is not constituted by my fellow humans: "Let the trumpet of the last judgment sound when it will; I shall come with this book in my hands to present myself before the Sovereign Judge."[29] Your gaze does not count, and only the "Sovereign Judge" – somewhere there, and later – is entitled to see and judge me. It is no coincidence that Rousseau's work (his whole work, more or less) can also be read as one of the first critical discussions of the spectacular, that it disqualifies systematically every form of *representation* (from theatrical to democratic representation) because of its potentially alienating effects, a topic on which Marx as well as Marxist thinkers would later draw. The whole criticism of the spectacle, of capitalism as spectacle or as a useless supplement to what is really needed, has its roots in Rousseau's philosophy, as well as in the generally paranoid and iconoclastic dimension of Marxism.

If one looks for the most *singular* contemporary enactment of anti-spectacular paranoia (which is almost tautological, since paranoia and singularity are closely linked to each other), the figure of Guy Debord, whom I have already mentioned, imposes itself, at least in the French literary field. Let us conclude with a few comments on his life and work, and more precisely on

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the very significant autobiographical part of it, because this is also one of the best examples of the refutation of the contemporary ubiquity of melodrama. With regard to melodrama as well as to the spectacular organization of the world, Debord positions himself as its *other*, as the most radical resistance to the spectacle, the theory of which made him famous and gave him the aura of the last enemy of the society of the spectacle, to put it in his own words.[30] But rather than assuming his theoretical positions, let us emphasize here that he is the author of at least four autobiographical texts as well as an autobiographical film, which means, in fact, that about half of his major works are autobiographical. This may come as a surprise, as this was a man who was very successful in keeping his whole life almost clandestine, in totally escaping the media, in avoiding any kind of appearance, position or even employment in a society depicted and despised as spectacular. Why should he then turn to autobiography, like all those who are ready to die or to kill in order to get a spot in the spectacle? It is because you cannot position yourself as a singular self, as the only one to escape the spectacle or the melodrama, without giving an autobiographical form to the singularity at which you are aiming. Just as Rousseau's autobiography is its own antidote to the new economy of feelings that it launched, Debord's autobiographical texts are the antidote to contemporary spectacularized literature. You can read all of them, but you are not going to learn anything about Debord's private life. There is no intimacy there: it is autobiography void of any representation of feelings, pain or of course victimhood – autobiography void of its melodramatic origin. There is no subject here with whom one could sympathize or identify, as Debord identifies explicitly only with himself – or at least pretends to – and never stops *refuting* us, all his readers, as his fellow humans. *You cannot follow me*: as subjects or slaves of the spectacle, you basically do not deserve to read him or to know more about him than the few things he is ready to let you know. This is clearly stated in the first pages of *Panegyric*, his "official" autobiography:

> In the same way, I believe people will have to rest content with the history I am now going to present. Because no one, for a long time to come, will have the audacity to undertake to demonstrate, on any aspect, the contrary of what I will say, whether it be a matter of finding the slightest inexact element in the facts or of maintaining another point of view on them.[31]

There is no other point of view than that of Debord himself on Debord. There is nothing you can put in opposition to it, but on the other hand, you cannot share it: there is no space for sympathy here, and you have perhaps left the realm of melodrama.

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Notes

1. Roselyne Rey, *Histoire de la douleur* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).
2. Jean Paulhan, *Les Douleurs imaginaires*, *Œuvres complètes*, III (Paris : Cercle du livre précieux, 1966).
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, V, trans. Christopher Kelly, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters and Peter G. Stillman (Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1990), 6.
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 7.
5. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
6. *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, XIII [1914] (Paris: Plon, 1985), 139.
7. One could also mention here the Norwegian writer Nikolaj Frobenius and his novel entitled *De Sade's Valet* (London: Marion Boyars, new edition 2002). Just as the Jean-Baptiste Grenouille of Patrick Süsskind's *Perfume* (trans. John E. Woods, New York: Vintage International, 1986) does not have any sense of smell, Frobenius's character, Latour, who will become De Sade's valet in the novel, is totally unable to feel – and therefore to identify with – any kind of physical pain. Interestingly, this "non-ability," which transforms him into a monster trying to identify pain by torturing his victims in the cruelest ways, leads also to a total lack of (inter)-subjectivity. Unable to feel anything, incapable of any kind of sym-pathy or compassion, Latour appears basically as a psychotic, unable to talk or to interact with other humans, as if compassion were the condition of (inter)-subjectivity.
8. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
9. See, for instance, Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 (1975); Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987).
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 234-35.
11. Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 5.
12. In this regard, one has to mention Artaud's work as the ultimate paranoiac radicalization of Rousseau's position and quest for a unique authenticity. The topic of the "soul theft," present in Artaud's first writings, will become explicit in many of his *Lettres de Rodez*, written between 1944 and 1947. See Jacques Derrida's masterly commentary "La parole soufflé," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), as well as my own discussions of Artaud in *Post Scripts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and in *Ménage à trois: Littérature, médecine, religion* (Lille: Septentrion, 2007). It is worth noticing that, besides, or more precisely before, entering paranoia, Artaud was working for years, theoretically (especially in his *Le théâtre et la peste*) and to some extent practically,

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on the concept of *Theater of cruelty*, which could be defined as the absolute stage of melodrama, since it is constructed on the utopia of a spectator's total identification with the feelings (and more exactly the pain, the *peste*) represented on stage. Artaud as Rousseau's legacy: as we will see below in the case of Rousseau as well, both position themselves at the juncture between compassion and persecution, between melodrama and the paranoiac escape from it.

13. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998).
14. See Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), and *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (London: Polity, 2007).
15. See, for instance, Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), and *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).
16. See Patrick Tudoret, *L'Ecrivain sacrifié: Vie et mort de l'émission littéraire* (Paris: INA-Bord de l'eau, 2009).
17. Paris: Gallimard, 1990, 1991 and 1992; see my comments in *Ménage à trois.* See *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), *The Compassion Protocol* (London: Quartet Books, 1993), and *The Man In The Red Hat* (London: Quartet Books, 1993).
18. Hervé Guibert, *The Compassion Protocol*, 104.
19. *Le cri du sablier* (Paris: Farago-Leo Scheer, 2001).
20. *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
21. *L'Autre fille* (Paris: Audiolib, 2011).
22. *L'Evénement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); *Happening*, trans. Tanya Leslie (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001).
23. Annie Ernaux, *Happening*, 87. "J'écoutais dans ma chambre *La passion selon saint Jean* de Bach. Quand s'élevait la voix solitaire de l'Evangéliste récitant, en allemand, la passion du Christ, il me semblait que c'était mon épreuve d'octobre à janvier qui m'était racontée dans une langue inconnue [...]. Je marchais dans les rues avec le secret de la nuit du 20 au 21 janvier dans mon corps, comme une chose sacrée. Je ne savais pas si j'avais été au bout de l'horreur ou de la beauté" (Ernaux, *L'Evénement*, 118-19).
24. Ernaux, *Happening*, 91-92 (emphasis mine). "J'ai fini de mettre en mots ce qui m'apparaît comme une expérience humaine totale, de la vie et de la mort, du temps, de la morale et de l'interdit, de la loi, une expérience vécue d'un bout à l'autre au travers du corps [...]. Et le véritable but de ma vie est peut-être seulement celui-ci: que mon corps, mes sensations et mes pensées deviennent de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire quelque chose d'intelligible et de général, mon existence complètement *dissoute* dans la tête et la vie des autres" (Ernaux, *L'Evénement*, 124-25; emphasis mine).
25. *La honte* (*Paris: Gallimard, 1997*).
26. *L'Inceste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); a story she has confirmed recently in *Une Semaine de vacances* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013).

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27. *Le livre brisé* (Paris: Grasset, 1989).
28. *Philippe* (Paris: POL, 1995). In 2007, Camille Laurens accused Marie Darieussecq, who had just published her own story about a dead child (*Tom est mort* [Paris: POL, 2007]), of "psychic plagiarism," arguing that it could not have been possible for Darieussecq to write about a dead child without having experienced the loss of a child herself. This controversy (Darieussecq answered with a book entitled *Rapport de police* [Paris: POL, 2010]) raises an interesting question: can contemporary individualistic melodrama be fictional, or must it be based on true autobiographical episodes? Have we the right to cry when we read *Tom est mort*, or only if we read *Philippe*?
29. Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 5.
30. On Debord's work and autobiographical praxis, see my *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
31. *Panegyric, Volumes 1 and 2* (London: Verso, 2004), 11.

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"Emotional Suffering" as Universal Category? Victimhood and the Collective Imaginary

Jörg Metelmann

> The only questions that need to be asked are, Who suffers? Is the suffering an unavoidable consequence of emotional navigation or does this suffering help to shore up a restrictive emotional regime? That is, is this suffering a tragedy or an injustice?
>
> – William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*[1]

Victimhood and Subjectivity in the Melodramatic Mode: Obfuscated Clarity

Melodrama is one of the most prominent discourses of victimhood in Western modernity. Its worldview focuses on the emotional suffering of a victim, conceived as virtuous and subjected to forces of evil, who can be rescued by forces of good. In melodramatic mode, victims function as a moral cipher, inasmuch as they understand the social world, profaned by secularization since 1750, through emotion, thus making the world ethically readable once again.[2] Melodrama as a form of display alerts the heart to the essentials, and to what cannot be seen with mere eyes. The shortest and most poetic formula for the genesis of melodrama and its claim to validity comes in the words of the fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*: "It is only with one's heart that one can see clearly."[3] In fiction, hope can be found, especially after the tears.

In the course of melodrama's history, the victim has passed through different figurations, each of which allows a reading of the prevailing socio-historical attitudes.[4] Regarding recent developments in the light of melodrama's omnipresence in movies, television series, soaps and talk shows, Thomas Elsaesser notes that the victim figure fundamentally changes its meaning if the victim can no longer be interpreted as virtuous.[5] If anyone can become a victim at any time and in return receive social recognition without ever representing and advocating the good, the role of the victim loses its morally privileged position.[6] Rather, Elsaesser sees the

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classic *Oprah Winfrey Show* staging affects and victimhood for their own sake, with audience affliction (*Betroffenheit*) not aiming at social change, but instead at the medial performativity of emotions. This is not meant disparagingly; acknowledging that the Enlightenment's notion of universality has collapsed and that the idea of a multi-cultural identity has failed, the universal role of the victim is now to be understood *as a license to speak*, thus establishing the last remaining form of subjectivity that can report general failure and suffering at all. Melodrama, according to Elsaesser, functions thus as the most important place-holder of the political.[7]

With the following contribution, I would like to expand on Elsaesser's observations on the medial performativity of victims and to inquire into which *other*-level emotions, to do with morality and victimhood, can be joined into a universal concept. I begin yet again with the educational, politico-normative level of suffering and end by considering the narrative-imaginary function of melodrama. The route that my answer takes is interdisciplinary and leads from historical science to a theory of media emotions. The starting point is the theory of the historian William M. Reddy, whose main concern "Who suffers?" in his study *The Navigation of Feeling* appears to point directly to the object of melodrama, although, despite allusions to the "melodramatic mode," he never actually broaches the issue and instead develops a normative theory of emotional suffering. Discussing some of his claims will lay the groundwork for my argument concerning the extent to which the universal feature of melodrama is less a specific content (justice) or a certain subject-position (victim), but rather the power of narrative aimed at the creation of emotional communities that avow given values.

The Navigation of Feeling: An Introduction to a Far-reaching Concept

In his well-known study *The Navigation of Feeling*, the American historian and anthropologist William M. Reddy develops a theoretical framework for cultural studies that combines a universal theory of affect with concrete socio-historical analysis of emotions. Using the concept of *emotional suffering* as an expression of emotional oppression, the goal of this ambitious project is the creation of a yardstick for measuring *normatively* the political liberty (i.e. *emotional liberty*) of a given group or society. The second part of his book is dedicated to the history of emotions in France from 1700 to 1850 – a decisive period in the genesis of melodrama. In a boldly non-relativist claim, remarkable for a historical scholar,

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he concludes that – assuming his general theory of "emotives" is valid – the sentimentalist view of the human condition prevalent in this era was "wrong."[8]

Reddy's key term "emotives" combines findings from cognitive psychology and anthropology (regarding the importance of goal-orientation and mental control of emotions) with John Austin's speech-act theory. In a proposition such as "I am angry," the anger has a different meaning from the acceptance in a proposition such as "I accept." Even if, on a superficial reading of an emotional statement such as "I am angry," it appears to contain a descriptive or declarative referent (anger) in Austin's constative sense, Reddy notes that in a more precise analysis, the referent is not passive and unchanging at all. Rather, the referent takes form by way of being expressed and changes during this very process, as that to which it refers can be seen to influence the overall proposition itself. Emotional speech acts (propositions), which Reddy terms "emotives," are therefore not constative but performative; they "do things to the world."[9]

In this manner, emotives can be understood as a tool of tentative self-fashioning for a universally conceived *disaggregated self* that is neither entirely rationalistic and autonomous nor completely lost in sub-consciousness or post-structuralist sign-sequences and discourses. Emotions are produced and simultaneously modified by expressing them in labeling terms. They represent a kind of reservoir, because they are shaped by experiences in the social sphere and they thus equally constitute collective and individual preconditions for volition and motivation.[10] It follows, then, that an individual attempts to fashion his or her own projected self by continuously activating the thought material involved in the complex task of personal goal-coordination, whereas communication with the world relies primarily on emotives, which may contain verbal expressions, gestures and facial expressions as long as they are intentional.[11] The "translation" of a multitude of impressions and inspirations (the "activated thought material") in the attentive consciousness ("attention") is thus fused with "emotives" as tentative exploratory speech-acts into a foundational model of world-appropriation that can be relied upon when information cannot be fully processed.[12] Reddy calls this tentative self-fashioning as a pursuit of current high-priority goals "navigation," avoiding Arlie Hochschild's term "management," because to manage – even though parallels in emotional activity abound – too strongly implies a clearly defined goal and the means for achieving it, which cannot be assumed in light of both the self-altering and self-exploring features of emotives. In emotional contact with the world, changes even on the highest level of goal-orientation are always possible, for example when feelings of love are unrequited by the desired person.

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This is where Reddy's explicitly political interpretation comes in, because conflicts in goal-orientation – for example, an arranged marriage pre-empting romantic love – allow the attribution of a socio-critical dimension to affect, when societal conventions (the "emotional regime") prohibit a personally desired goal adjustment. If "navigation" is a central, universal characteristic of emotional life, then "emotional liberty" can be understood as the freedom to modify personal goals for individual satisfaction according to new circumstances and experience. Without this freedom, emotional suffering sets in, exemplified for Reddy in a Western context by politically motivated torture or the aforementioned scenarios of unrequited love and arranged marriage.

The second part of his book tests this theory by applying it to the history of emotions in France between Sentimentalism and Restoration. In the protected emotional spaces ("emotional refuges") of the time, the Salons and Freemason associations, Reddy sees a strongly rising swell of sentimentalist rhetoric leading up to the Revolution, which following 1789 pursued the societal goal of transforming all of France into a similar emotional refuge. This undertaking was doomed to failure, in his view, due to feedback effects emanating from the faulty understanding of emotions in the eighteenth century and the political agenda of establishing welfare and sentimentalist culture by force. Within a mere four years, the protected space had been turned into a place of emotional suffering under the Terror:

> Sentimentalism's attack on the court ethos as artificial and hypocritical offered a slanted, exaggerated view of etiquette and *bienséance*, treating this ethos not as a system of emotional management but as a systematic falsity and hypocrisy. But sentimentalism equally denied its own status as a system of emotional management; by its own account sentimentalism opened the door for the true expression of certain (positive) natural feelings. […] The greater the success as an oppositional idiom before 1789, the harder its fall was bound to be. Sentimentalism's conception of liberty was so far from real emotional freedom that, in the end, the contrast was patent to all, even if it could not be put into words. It was wrong, and by 1794 most knew it was wrong.[13]

In this interpretation, the sentimental coding of emotions fails and even disappears after 1794, because the power of "emotives" to fascinate hearts had been linked to the claim of truthfulness in expressing natural feelings sincerely and honestly. Under the reign of the *Terreur*, this claim degenerated into mere rhetoric, used to save one's life against the suspicion of false

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consciousness or, more precisely: wrong sentiment. The very moment at which sincere, natural emotion ceased to be the appropriate emotion *per se*, due to political scrutinizing and interrogation – ironically – *in the name of sincerity* by the Jacobins, marks the demise of the sentimental revolution of emotion into the perversions of a revolution of empty words. For Reddy, sentimentalism is "the missing ingredient" for understanding the incredible dynamics of the French Revolution: not the breakdown of the monarchist order, not the intellectual proximity to Rousseau's dialectic of innocence and hermeneutics of the self, not the discursive power of abstract concepts like "nation" or "people", not the fear of conspiracies and not even the hypothesis of defaulting to pre-established patterns can explain the bloody finale. The emotional component that was missing from the record has now been supplied with his analysis of the sentimentalist "emotives" and their logic of naturalness and sincerity.[14] Summarizing Reddy's argument, then, a valid contribution to socio-cultural "emotional knowledge" and its practical history cannot be found in encyclopedias or by reconstructing emotional communities, but only by a theoretically correct manner of speaking about how one used to speak in the first person.[15]

Aside from much praise, a proposal reaching thus far theoretically and methodologically has inevitably also attracted several points of criticism,[16] which I am unable to address here, just as I cannot attempt a comprehensive presentation of the entire theory. My investigation of the status of the victim figure will focus on two important aspects which I will subsequently discuss together: on the one hand, Reddy's concept of suffering and, closely connected to that, his notion of the subject.

What Is "Emotional Suffering," What Is Reddy's Notion of "Subject"?

Reddy's basic definition for "emotional suffering" is: "An acute form of goal conflict, especially that brought on by emotional thought activations," encompassing the entire spectrum from dictatorships to liberal societies.[17] Torture is easy to understand in this context, but the application of the concept to capitalist democracies poses a number of problems; as one might ask, for example, how much disciplining is acceptable in education until it becomes a matter of suffering – a problem that Reddy recognizes well, and to which he replies with his maxim that one ought to reduce emotional suffering to a minimum.[18]

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Let us consider another example. Arlie Hochschild, whose work Reddy positively references, has not only described "emotional labor," especially that of female employees, as a necessary "management technique" in the globalized service industry, but has also drawn attention to the fact that we are losing authentic contact with ourselves under the increasing diktat of self-discipline.[19] Should this not be considered massive suffering, given that "emotional navigation" to plan one's own life has not been forbidden outright, even though one cannot actually execute it? Is this limitation in the workplace as minimal as possible or as maximal as it is scandalous? Are these employees not to be thought of as victims?

For yet another example, consider a young woman who has to decide between two life plans. Emotionally, one plan represents sexual satisfaction but brings uncertainty due to various partners being involved, and therefore poses a threat to self-worth. The alternative plan promises feelings of safety and satisfies the desire for a family, manifesting itself in a quiet man who is slightly boring but probably a suitable father. This is a real goal conflict that can produce emotional suffering, because two standards clash with each other: the imperative of sexual liberation and physical enjoyment collides with the traditional role of woman as mother.[20] Even though theoretically – that is, on a rational level – the woman in question is free to choose one option over the other, or even both, she feels emotionally torn and acts rashly, sometimes following one, sometimes the other. Week after week she throws herself into serial one-night stands, only to return to steadily dating an acquaintance – feeling bad and callow underneath all the while. According to Reddy's definition, the woman supposedly has full "emotional liberty," because she can submit herself freely to the experience of "navigating" her *not* knowing exactly what she ought to do (which goal to pursue) without having to fear external punishment or direct sanctioning. On the other hand, she is likely to perceive subjectively that she in fact experiences *real suffering* from the goal conflict created by these two different ways of living. How can all this be made to fit together? (And I am not even addressing here the question whether each of them is an "emotional regime" in the sense of a "set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them" – my position would be that each ought to be such a regime, but this would blur Reddy's political impulse.)

My questions aim to problematize Reddy's methodological base unit: the individual as an emotional subject. By hearkening back to the individual, his aim is a holistic gaze on society enabling him to analyze it normatively – to regain an integrated view of the social that was lost in the post-structuralist dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality.[21] Interesting as

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this aim is, it remains difficult to pursue it with reference to the coupling of "emotional suffering" and "regime." Expanding Rosenwein's critique that considers the notion of "regime" too "monolithic,"[22] I see the problem lying most of all in its consequences for the conception of the subject. If Reddy's main goal, a stable concept of the political as a substantial lesson in liberty, becomes plausible only once the political regime is doctrinally rigid, as in Jacobinism or Stalinism, then his concept of "liberty" is reduced to the negative freedom from coercion, which – as Charles Taylor has persuasively shown – misses a core feature of liberty.[23] Taylor delineates this conceptual core in a "positive" concept of realized liberty versus a "negative" concept of potential liberty: whereas in the former an elementary role in clarifying freedom *to-what* is played by desires, needs, feelings and life goals, the latter requires only atomistic freedom *from-what*, that is, the "absence of external physical or legal obstacles."[24] To be clear: Reddy's concept of emotion integrates the dimension of positive freedom as a matter of course; indeed, it can be read as the attempt conceptually to implement Taylor's deliberation.[25] But by connecting it back to emotional suffering, which is crucial for Reddy's normative concept of liberty, the free emotional navigation as a *rich* experience becomes a merely formal negative freedom. In so doing, Reddy neglects the vector of "biographical subjectivity" contained in our emotions that results in diverging valuations of given emotional states, so that one person's frustration is another person's suffering, which a third person in turn may not understand at all.[26] In my opinion, Reddy's proposal gambles away its heuristic power for integrative emotion research precisely because he wants to saddle emotions with a universal, normative payload as well. Torture for the purposes of gathering intelligence does not just create a breach of "emotional liberty" because, as Reddy writes,[27] it leads to a goal conflict between physical integrity (one's health, wholeness) and other values (honor, promises made, protection of a third party), but according to Western standards it violates the constitutional foundations of liberty because it is an infringement of individual dignity. The victim of torture may be described as an Islamic terrorist or as a fascist, were one to take his or her goals into account. Nevertheless, the human right to physical inviolability remains valid for individuals driven by such goals, too – even if, recently, such limitations have come under threat of obliteration in Guantánamo prison and elsewhere. The negative coupling of "emotions" and "navigation" to the freedom from "regime" coercion leads, with logical consequence, to emotion highlighting the void of the political (as distinct from the void of the law), and not to the political itself – as with the ubiquitous semantics of victimhood in contemporary melodrama.

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Manichean World Views, Empty Emotives, Obvious Oppression: The Hidden Melodrama

I discern a further clue leading to political freight and theoretical weakness in Reddy's sub-conscious use of the melodramatic topos of Manicheanism.[28] In his historic reconstruction of "emotions" and "emotives" in sentimentalism, passages such as these can be found:

> [T]he use [...] of plot structures that, to our eyes, simplified social perceptions often to the point of caricature and depicted good and evil in constant combat; [....]
>
> Yet even the increasing intolerance [...] had a sentimentalist basis insofar as it rested on a Manichean fear of immorality of plotters; [....]
>
> The plots of sentimentalist novels, plays, and operas were often Manichean in structure, that is, they pitted good against evil in an effort to arouse empathy and right moral judgment. Maza has shown how plot structures and intense emotionality could be easily exploited by lawyers to fashion compelling printed briefs for their clients, briefs that circulated in tens of thousands in the years before the Revolution.[29]

I call this use of the Manichean scheme (good against evil) by Reddy "subconscious," because he does not examine closely enough the reference system for one of his most important sources of information, the study *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* by the aforementioned American historian, Sarah Maza. In her book, Maza further develops Jürgen Habermas's ideas regarding the genesis of a bourgeois public sphere moving towards the formation of a social imaginary. Her investigations of *mémoires judiciaries*, mass-printed reports of popular lawsuits in pre-Revolutionary France from 1770 to 1789, elucidate how the private spaces of intimacy (love, marriage, child-rearing, friendship) and literature – as for Habermas – became the political, because these often spectacular court dramas enabled the emergence of a "flesh-and-blood" public through their thousand-fold distribution and reception.[30] Much more memorable than artificial figures such as those found in *Robinson Crusoe* or *Figaro*, argues Maza, the collective imaginary before the Revolution is peopled by the characters of the "debauched Grandee," the "virginal heroine" and the "man of feeling hounded by his enemies."[31] Much like Reddy, Maza does not trust an obvious (Marxist) interpretation of these figures as representing class

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barriers and asks, following a cultural-discursive reading, just how fiction and everyday perception relate to each other.[32] Her answer reconstructs a relationship of symbolic exchange between the theater, the courts and the public sphere, which serves centrally to *code social energy by melodrama*:

> Starting in the 1770s, trial briefs conspicuously adopted the idiom of the new *drame* as the theater, in turn, began to borrow its subjects from the courtroom: in both arenas the favored style was melodramatic, the genre that Peter Brooks has called the "mode of excess." The characteristics of melodrama, those of the *drame*, and increasingly of the *mémoire*, are instantly recognizable: extreme moral polarization, hyperbolic expressions and gestures, sketchy characterization, complicated plotting, and emphatic moral didacticism – some, if not all, of these are usually included in that which we term "melodramatic." [....]
>
> [I]n later-eighteenth-century France, the adoption of this new style by playwrights and lawyers testifies to their impulse to reach out to, and shape, an emergent "public sphere."[33]

By way of melodrama, the new public sphere is created as a democratic realm, giving each and every one room to participate in social discourse because they are able to read the signs of the community's most important symbolic goods.[34] Continuing this line of argument, Linda Williams has supplemented the demand for democracy with an egalitarian component and emphasized the call for justice.[35] Justice thus demanded is not to be confused, however, with justice realized: "We should make no mistake: a sense of justice is no substitute for actual justice. But it is the aspiration for justice that is melodrama's own, most important virtue."[36] Melodrama first and foremost serves an imaginary function, and even this is not without ambiguities, as Christof Decker has shown. To call melodrama reactionary, due to its longing for a return to the state of innocence, and to accuse it of an atavistic fixation on the past is misleading, he claims.[37] It is the admission of loss, rather, that is a prerequisite for re-orientation and the repeated attempt to maintain justice and social cohesion against the centrifugal tendencies of a post-metaphysical world.[38] All these central aspects of melodrama as a cultural mode (character constellation, world interpretation, aesthetics) are implied in Reddy's Maza-based presentation of how he interprets emotions in France. His presentation eventually takes on melodramatic features itself, when the good side, natural emotion, collapses into the "oppositional idiom" of terror, the "emotives" having been

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robbed of their meaning: "Sentimentalism's conception of liberty was so far from real emotional freedom that, in the end, the contrast was patent to all, even if it could not be put into words."[39]

Against this melodramatic background, the aforementioned problem of self-fashioning re-appears center stage in two other respects:

1) Reddy's importing of speech act theory into the theory of emotions makes "emotives" the central unit of analysis. Because of their ambivalent structure as "performatives" (both self-exploring and self-altering), they require a background conception of the subject as being uncertain at its innermost core about what it does in fact feel. Hence, concepts such as sincerity and self-deception have to be reconsidered:

> Because of the powerful and unpredictable effects of emotional utterances on the speaker, sincerity should not be considered the natural, best, or most obvious state toward which individuals strive. On the contrary, probably the most obvious orientation toward the power of emotives is a kind of *fugitive instrumentalism*.[40]

The individual expresses something and in so doing hopes that what he or she is saying is congruent with what he or she feels – whereas what he or she feels is changing while being expressed. This may be adequate in terms of a sign-theoretical definition and has been thoroughly discussed, especially with a view to emotional communication in the paradigm of writing,[41] but it becomes nonsensical when reduced to intentional instrumentalism, even if only fleetingly so. Within this conceptual framework it is impossible to understand the power of emotions, which is often manifest as non-intentional and unconscious, and which is not to be measured according to conditions of efficacity but according to conditions of truth.[42] Once again, these considerations are indeed included in Reddy's definition of emotives, but their methodological operationalization in the sequence "emotives – navigation – suffering" demotes this aspect to the background, with disastrous consequences. One could add, somewhat polemically, that he has understood nothing about cultural revolutions coinciding with the discovery of "nature as source,"[43] when he accuses the sentimental (or, as Reddy says, "sentimentalistic") code of failing to reflect itself as a set of *instrumental* "emotives": "But sentimentalism equally denied its own status as a system of emotional management; by its own account sentimentalism opened the door for the true expression of certain (positive) natural feelings."[44] As if a certain cultural semantics were a pre-planned act on the

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logical drawing-board of world history, Reddy denounces the emotional revolutions of the eighteenth century as rhetorical straw fire that burns people during the regime of Terror because they are not enacting what they are saying. Once concrete analysis and abstract theory are unfairly juxtaposed in this manner, the historical process may simply be declared false: "If the theory of emotives is right, then sentimentalism's view of human nature was wrong in interesting ways. (And in saying it was 'wrong' I am purposefully breaking with a relativist stance vis-à-vis the subject matter of my research.)"[45]

2) Declarations as resolute as this one – and as such, fairly questionable – in my view emanate from the fact that, although Reddy considers cognitive psychology, anthropology and philosophy of language, he does not spend much time reflecting on forms of display (media) and modes of story-telling (narrative) and therefore cannot understand the inherent logic of the aesthetic in the context of the collective imaginary.[46] Notwithstanding his references to Madame de Staël's program in her piece "De la littérature dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales" (1800), his highlighting of literary culture in the Salons as "emotional refuge" and his quotations from countless authors and theoreticians, for him all emotives (in other words, media and real emotions) lead up to the bloody finale and the complete demise of sentimental semantics: "I would [...] claim that this was an atmosphere of frank disillusionment, not just with Jacobinism, but with emotional self-training of the type sentimentalism encouraged."[47] Ironically, the theory of melodrama, indirectly quoted by Reddy (by way of Maza) as an important part of his argument, claims the very opposite: melodrama as a genre is born at the same historical moment Reddy chooses to lay sentimentalism in the grave. There is something here, apparently, that does not want to die – and that something, as I will argue in the final section, is the *imaginary* navigation of emotions, as it finds its place in the realm of fiction(s).

Who Suffers? Or: The Collective Imaginary "Navigation of Feeling"

We shall now return to the initial question regarding the status of the victim figure in the melodramatic mode and its conceptualization as a universal category – the solely relevant question, then, which in Reddy's words reads: "Who suffers?" The extensive discussion of his proposal above

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leads us to conclude that it is problematic to ground "emotional suffering" as a universal category in a concept that bases within the subject the category of freedom to "navigate" emotionally. As I have attempted to argue, victimhood can only draw its normative power from an unequivocally hegemonic "emotional regime" established as its adversary, which turns the freedom of heteronomous goal-influencing into a negative concept and thus misses the essence of the frequently nebulous articulation of our innermost desires.

This finding sheds light on the discourse of melodrama, inasmuch as one can say that the melodramatic mode performs in this very manner, but relies on entirely different means: it creates an opposition between good (victim) and evil (villain), but instead of using conceptual-theoretical means it uses descriptive-narrative ones. As briefly sketched in my introduction, it is for precisely this reason that the form of melodrama, that is, the assignment of subject roles or dominant schemata, may change depending on the cultural or historical context.[48] The overarching goal of melodrama in this process is not a metaphysics for the victim, but the demand for moral legibility of a complex world that is articulated in a demand for justice.[49] In so doing – reacting to the three core demands of the French Revolution – it does not then aim to establish a substantial concept of liberty (*liberté*), but works off the postulate of equality (*égalité*) and the command of solidarity (*fraternité*). The victim in this sense is functional: depending on the recognizable grievances in a given society, it can shape-shift from being a young bourgeois woman to a penniless workman to a dark-skinned immigrant. Martha Vicinus's dictum that "Melodrama sides with the powerless" sums up this notion perfectly.[50] Melodrama as a cultural mode is appellative in character, as it does not assume a pre-existing reason to act but rather, by interpellating the recipient with an emotionally engrossing story, eventually produces a reason to act. This structure is congruent with Reddy's argument concerning emotives, but it shows once again how much his approach gives up by being overburdened with universalism. While Reddy always has to presuppose the "emotional regime" as a stable framework for individual navigation and as an indicator for liberty, in melodrama, society as a normative framework is created principally from the shared fiction of a community of values. In this sense, Hermann Kappelhoff – drawing on Kant, Rorty and Rancière – has carved out the elementary function of art for the production of a community of feelings:

> The sense of community designates an affective expression of "loyalty to other human beings," which insists on emotional reciprocity and produces it in affective approval. The expression of this feeling is nothing more than the demand that everyone else feel him- or herself to be

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> part of a community. Whether it is the Kantian common sense, a feeling of belonging to the human community, or the appeal of the sense of communality – we are always speaking of a *feeling* that can neither be substituted by means of a grounding argument, nor can it be grounded in the emotions of empirical individuals. In this genealogical trajectory, the term "sense of community" becomes distinct and precise, which can be of great use if we want productively to approach the question of how genre cinema interacts with the range of political goals and values in a given cultural community.[51]

The scope of Kappelhoff's argument regarding the relationship between fiction and the social imaginary encompasses more than the genre cinema mentioned here.[52] But using the close connection to film, I will by way of conclusion address the question of to what extent the appellative function represents a category that is to be universally defined. A plausible proposal is offered by Miriam Hansen, with her concept of a "global sensory vernacular."[53] Classical Hollywood cinema *per se* had not been globally relevant or acceptable, but became so, because its specific approach to experiencing and working through the process of modernity was suitable for global linkages, both historically and culturally. Universalism, if one were to paraphrase her argument, is a category not of abstract justification without temporal or spatial features but rather of empirically diagnosable relevance in the narratives of cultures everywhere in the world. Such a notion of universalism is not philosophically normative; instead, it proffers an adequate embedding for the question of the status of victimhood in melodramatic mode and its transdisciplinary forms. The broad international reception[54] for this manner of morally interpreting the world points to the fact that, in emotional discourses of the eighteenth century, something began that helps to describe and modify modernity to this very day: namely, the collective imaginary "navigation of feeling."

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Notes

1. William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.
2. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chapter 1; see also Stuart Cunningham, "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 191-206.

3. *The Little Prince*, trans. Irene Testot-Ferry (Ware/Herts: Wordsworth, 1995), 82.
4. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43-69, here 46 [first published in *Monogram* 4 (1972)]; Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 5-39, here 20.
5. Thomas Elsaesser, "Melodrama: Genre, Gefühl oder Weltanschauung?," in *Das Gefühl der Gefühle: Zum Kinomelodram*, ed. Margrit Frölich, Klaus Gronenborn and Karsten Visariu (Marburg: Schüren, 2008), 11-34, here 33; and see his text in this volume.
6. Regarding the changes in victimhood rhetoric after 1968 in relation to a "new sentimental order," see also *in extenso* Fatima Naqvi, *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood: Western Europe, 1970-2005* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
7. Elsaesser, "Melodrama," 34.
8. Reddy, *Navigation*, 146.
9. Reddy, *Navigation*, 105 (italics mine): "[E]motives are similar to *performatives* (*and differ from constatives*) in that emotives do things to the world. Emotives are themselves *instruments* for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions, instruments that may be more or less successful. Within *the disaggregated self*, emotives are a dynamic tool that can be seized by attention *in the service of various high-level goals*. But emotives are a two-edged sword in that they may have repercussions on the very goals they intend to serve. It is here, rather than in some putative set of genetically programmed 'basic' emotions, *that a universal conception of the person* can be founded, *one with political relevance*."
10. Reddy, *Navigation*, 120.
11. This has led among other things to the accusation against Reddy of logocentrism and "linguistic imperialism"; see Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49 (May 2010), 237-65, here 241.
12. Reddy, *Navigation*, 128: Emotions are "[g]oal-relevant activations of thought material that exceed the translating capacity of attention within a short time horizon."
13. Reddy, *Navigation*, 209-210 (italics in original).
14. Reddy, *Navigation*, 177-178 and 199.
15. The publication *Gefühlswissen* [*Emotional Knowledge*] by the Berlin Max-Planck-Collective of authors edited by Ute Frevert investigates the historical semantics of emotions on the basis of dictionary entries; see Frevert et al., *Gefühlswissen: Eine lexikalische Spurensuche in der Moderne* (Frankfurt/M: Campus, 2011). Barbara Rosenwein has developed her concept of "emotional communities" in a study of the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and, in theoretical differentiation to Reddy's "monolithic"

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concept of "emotional regimes," in Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview," 255.

16. See the summary in Jan Plamper, *Geschichte und Gefühl: Grundlagen der Emotionsforschung* (München: Siedler, 2012), 297-313.
17. Reddy, *Navigation*, 124-29, 129.
18. Ibid., 127.
19. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling, Anniversary Edition with New Afterword* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 21.
20. See most recently Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (London: Polity Press, 2012).
21. Plamper, "Interview," 238.
22. Ibid., 255; Rosenwein, *Communities*, 23.
23. Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 211-29.
24. Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?", 212.
25. Reddy does not refer to Taylor. Taylor's monumental study, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), in many ways could have provided material for Reddy's object of inquiry, "sentimentalism."
26. Cheshire Calhoun, "Subjectivity and Emotion," in *Thinking About Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotion*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107-21, here 115.
27. Reddy, *Navigation*, 123.
28. Manicheism is not a specialty of melodrama, but a part of bourgeois thought, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown in *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 122. He points to a revivification of Manichean categories in the Enlightenment, especially in the polemic of Leibniz against Bayle, as well as to forms of dualism in the eighteenth century, both in secularized and eschatological form.
29. Reddy, *Navigation*, 185, 186 and 171.
30. Sarah C. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12-13.
31. Maza, *Private Lives*, 14.
32. Regarding this issue, Thomas Elsaesser has formulated a convincing thesis from the vantage point of melodrama research, which in turn appears to have been unknown to Maza with her focus on Brooks: "[T]he element of interiorisation and personalisation of what are primarily ideological conflicts, together with the metaphorical interpretation of class conflict as sexual exploitation and rape is important in all subsequent forms of melodrama, including that of cinema" ("Tales", 46).
33. Maza, *Private Lives*, 66-67.

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34. Maza, *Private Lives*, 67; here again following the classical argument of Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.
35. See Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42-88; and Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
36. Williams, "When is Melodrama 'Good'?", in this volume, 53-79.
37. For melodrama's fixation on the past, see Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 65: "The most classic forms of the mode are often suffused with nostalgia for rural and maternal origins that are forever lost yet – hope against hope – refound, reestablished, or, if permanently lost, sorrowfully lamented."
38. Christof Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick: Das soziale Melodrama in der amerikanischen Kultur, 1840-1950* (Frankfurt/M: Campus 2003), 42, and his article in this volume.
39. Reddy, *Navigation*, 209.
40. Ibid., 108 (my italics).
41. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Fink, 2003).
42. This is the central difference with Austin and the provocation of "performatives" in the philosophy of language; see Uwe Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff im Spannungsfeld von Illokution, Iteration und Indexikalität," in *Performanz: Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Wirth (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2002), 9-60, here 10.
43. Taylor, *Sources*, 355-67, chapter 20.
44. Reddy, *Navigation*, 209.
45. Ibid., 146.
46. See also the introductory quotation: combining "tragedy or injustice" is a category mistake, because they are conceptually mismatched as alternatives (even if "tragedy" is understood in the colloquial sense).
47. Reddy, *Navigation*, 201.
48. See also Elsaesser ("Tales", 47) as to the question of whether melodrama is subversive or escapist.
49. Williams has proposed that the core of melodrama can be preserved in this manner, without the Lacanian part that can be identified in Brooks's "moral-occult," in *Playing the Race Card*, 315.
50. Martha Vicinus, "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13:1 (1981), 127-43, here 130.
51. Hermann Kappelhoff, "Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema," in this volume, 86 (italics in the original). The argument can also be referred back to Linda Williams, who speaks of "empathically imagined communi-

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ties" with regards to the essential aim of melodrama in *Playing the Race Card*, 21.

52. Compare the intensive discussions of Rancière's theses on aesthetics and politics in, for example, Elsaesser's contribution to this volume.
53. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (1999), 59-77, here 72.
54. See Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); *Latin American Melodrama: Passion, Pathos, and Entertainment*, ed. Darlene J. Sadlier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, ed. Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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III. Collective Traumas and National Melodramas

III.1 Legacies of 9/11

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Introduction to W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Abu Ghraib Archive"

Scott Loren

Renowned for his work on visual culture and the Pictorial Turn, in "The Abu Ghraib Archive," W. J. T. Mitchell incisively positions discourses on the meaning of terror and torture post-9/11 in the field of the visual. The "iconographic associations" between emotively and morally coded Christian imagery and the photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners pictorially documented in a passion of pornographic humiliation, Mitchell claims, are inevitable – an automatic cultural reflex. The question is, rather, how to make sense of them. If one result of modernity's processes of secularization is that the narrative logic of tragedy becomes impossible without pre-secular determinism (*fate* no longer produces victims), these images nevertheless resonate powerfully in the Western iconic memory of the suffering Christ. They are, however, also melodramatic. With a visual quality that approximates the haptic, they emerge in direct relation to the public and politically situated melodramatic articulations of victimhood and villainy described in Elisabeth Anker's work, punctuating the post-9/11 moment with an aesthetic shock. The facile application of the *pathos formulae*, where victims are depicted pleasuring in their own pain, serves iconic memory on the one hand, while aligning with the melodramatic spectacle of suffering and with modes of victim-viewer identification on the other. What troubles these images is not the inter-iconicity of pornographic pleasure, Christian martyrdom and melodramatic victimhood *per se*; an intuitive continuity between these is, I should think, evident. Rather, for melodrama as a mode of sense-making or cultural myth, the emergence of the Abu Ghraib Archive deeply complicates the victim-villain-hero categories that were previously mobilized in State politics and public media. They present the odd situation in which a real material occult (the fact of torturing prisoners) is made aesthetically accessible to the masses with the potential effect of returning what had previously structured the condition of moral legibility to a morally occulted position. What happens, then, to the relay of pathos and retributive action? And how is one to align one's sympathies? Does the emergence of the Abu Ghraib Archive present a fissure in the mythology of melodrama that lent narrative form to the post-9/11 moment? And if it does, what does this fissure make visible – the limits of melodrama, its inappropriateness

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to the material and social reality of this particular moment? Or does the fissure point to the inextricable, entrenched tensions and contingencies of history that, in its most fundamental form, melodrama seeks to cover? There is no little irony in the conflation of victim and villain positions, or in the transformation of the Muslim jihadist into a martyred Christ. In this anti-Manichaean grey area, what potentially remains is melodrama's structural sentimentalism that evacuates the authenticity of real human suffering and the potential horror, empathy and acts of solidarity that the spectacle of suffering might otherwise induce. As a point of entry to Mitchell's essay, which the editors are honored to reprint here, I wonder to what extent this structural sentimentalism is retroactively applicable to the iconicity of Christianity in its time of hegemony.

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The Abu Ghraib Archive

W. J. T. Mitchell

> The question of the archive is not [...] a question of the past [....] It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come.
> – Jacques Derrida[1]

> Criminal identification photographs are [...] designed quite literally to facilitate the *arrest* of their referent.
> – Allan Sekula[2]

For about three months in the fall of 2003, Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq became the site of production of some of the most striking and disturbing images in the entire war on terror. Images of naked, hooded men being beaten, sexually humiliated and subjected to "stress positions" were captured by digital cameras, stored on hard drives and CD-ROM disks, and disseminated over the Internet. In the winter of 2004, the US military began a series of internal investigations into the incidents of torture and abuse, with special emphasis on the photographic record. An attempt was made to recover and suppress the photographs, offering amnesty to anyone who turned them in. But the containment effort failed, and by April 2004, the photographs had been revealed to the public by CBS News's *Sixty Minutes* and Seymour Hersh's *New Yorker* articles.

Thus was created what I shall call the "Abu Ghraib Archive," a body of texts and images, recordings and remembrances that is centrally constituted by, but not limited to the 279 photographs and 19 video clips gathered by the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID). These images, first brought to CID on 13 January 2004 by Specialist Joseph Darby, are only a small portion of the total information in the CID archives (over one thousand photographs remain classified), and it took two years for this partial record to be released to the public. They were leaked by "a military source who spent time at Abu Ghraib," and published by *Salon* magazine in February 2006, at which time investigative reporters Mark Benjamin and Michael Scherer produced "The Abu Ghraib Files," an annotated, chronological archive that follows the CID timelines, supplemented by material from the numerous

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investigations, including classified material.[3] The Abu Ghraib archive now includes the numerous investigative reports by military and non-military agencies, journalists and scholars, and "secondary elaborations" by various interpreters, from the first analyses of the meaning of the images by Susan Sontag and Mark Danner, to more recent book-length studies such as Stephen Eisenman's *The Abu Ghraib Effect* and collections such as *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture*, with articles by Barbara Ehrenreich and David Levi Strauss, among others. In addition, a large body of graphic secondary elaborations has gathered, from early protest posters, videos and works of art, to fraudulent images of staged (usually pornographic) Abu Ghraib "fakes." In 2007 and 2008, a third wave of interpretations gathered in the form of documentary films on the scandal, beginning with Rory Kennedy's The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib, first screened at the Sundance Festival in February 2007, and a year later, Standard Operating Procedure directed by Errol Morris.

No matter how extended this archive becomes, however, it was and is centrally constituted by the still photographs. Two images in particular have established themselves as the "icons" of Abu Ghraib: the pyramid of seven naked Iraqi men, and the Hooded Man on the Box. It hardly seems necessary to reproduce or to look at these images any more. They have been shown so many times that they are imprinted on the collective memory, and need only a verbal mention to bring them to mind. These two images define, illuminate and exemplify the imaginary and spectacular character of the entire archive of Abu Ghraib, both its images and the discourses that whisper around them. These are contrasting icons of what might be called "sex" and "stress" (assuming, of course, that these two concepts can be rigorously separated). From a formal standpoint, at any rate, the contrast is clear: the one is a chaotic pornographic tableau, a pile of hooded, naked male bodies, while the grinning faces of Charley Graner and Lynndie England greet us over the human pyramid of bodies. This scene (which was photographed from a variety of angles) exemplifies that large proportion of the archive that represents simulated sex acts and other forms of sexual humiliation. The other, by sharp contrast, is a formally simple image, still, statuesque and symmetrical. It exemplifies the "stress position" techniques employed by CIA interrogators, the shackling of inmates in uncomfortable positions that make any movement painful. In this case, the stress is mainly psychological: the Hooded Man has been told that if he steps off the box he will ground the electric wires attached to his hands and genitals, and suffer electrocution. The whole strategy of the stress position is to put the

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human body in a position of self-torture, any movement to ease the stress resulting in an increase in pain.

The archive of stress position photographs is, perhaps inevitably, resonant of Christian iconography, with the Crucifixion as its iconic tableau. Specialist Sabrina Harman, who took a substantial number of the photographs in the Abu Ghraib Archive, was first prompted to begin taking pictures when she noticed that an inmate with his arms shackled to his bunk "looked like Jesus Christ."[4] The Hooded Man evokes, in addition, the entire image repertoire of the Passion of Christ: the hood recalls the mocked, blindfolded Christ; the pedestal recalls the Ecce Homo and the mock coronation of the King of the Jews; and the arm position recalls the Lamentation or "Man of Sorrows," as well as images of the risen Christ engaged in gestures of welcoming and rescue. The figure also resonates with antithetical images from the Inquisition, the Ku Klux Klan and other cults and secret societies, religious and secular. It captures the uncanny similarity between the figures of the torturer or executioner, on the one hand, and the victim, on the other – the only difference being the presence or absence of eye-holes in the hood. This iconographic "rhyme" was exploited by a famous Iraqi wall mural pairing the black Hooded Man with a white hooded Statue of Liberty, portrayed as a Klansman/torturer reaching up to pull the electrical switch.

Behind the archive of Abu Ghraib, in other words, is a double archive of pornographic and religious images – a mixture of obscenity and uncanny holiness that (as Stephen Eisenman has shown) evokes the central *pathos formulae* of Western painting in which "victims are shown taking pleasure in their own chastisement and pain."[5] Eisenman argues that this familiar tradition is indissolubly linked with the glorification of imperial power, and the aesthetic justification of domination and torture, producing the "Abu Ghraib effect," which inures spectators to the moral horror of what they are seeing. This explains, in Eisenman's view, why the images were so easily contained politically and psychologically, why they failed to stir the proper public outrage.

One could argue, conversely, that the pathos formula is exactly what makes the images memorable and powerful. (I lay aside for the moment the fact that there are few signs that the abused bodies at Abu Ghraib are portrayed as beautiful sufferers.) But whatever side one takes in this debate, the fact is that the images seem to keep coming back to haunt the nation in whose name they were produced, while eliciting screen memories of lynching photographs, martyrdoms and scenes of torture. It was as if we had already seen them when they first appeared, as if we were recognizing the return of a whole set of familiar images, but in a new context, and carried by a new technology.

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The film-maker Errol Morris has predicted that, a hundred years from now, the American memory of the Iraq war, and perhaps the entire episode known as the "war on terror" will be centered on the photographs made at Abu Ghraib prison. Mark Danner may be right that there is an over-emphasis on the images, a kind of voyeuristic fetishism that tends to distract attention from the system and the stories behind them, but Danner's own resistance is testimony to the way this collection of images dominates the scandal. In fact, if there were no pictures, there would be no scandal. Verbal reports, no matter how detailed or credible, would never have had the impact of these photographs. Abu Ghraib has many lessons to teach us about the nature of the war in Iraq and the larger framework of the war on terror. It reveals essential things about the ideological motivations of the war, and the fantasies that accompanied its execution. In particular, it illustrates vividly the fantasies about the "Arab mind" and its susceptibility to certain taboos that tell us as much about the American torture regime as they do about the realities of Arab culture.[6] But it also provides an important case for analyzing the role of digital images, digital archives and their role in contemporary political culture. To utter the name "Abu Ghraib" is to name a place, an institution and an event; but it is also to name a photographic archive and its widespread circulation in contemporary visual culture, a circulation that seems unlikely to abate any time soon.

What is the meaning of the Abu Ghraib Archive? What are its boundaries? Is it complete or finished? What does it leave out, and what remains to be filled in? I ask these questions, not with any illusions that I can offer a final assessment of the event and its trail of monuments and documents, the detritus of collective memory and nascent history. It is still too early to say what Abu Ghraib is going to have meant, whether it will be a symbol of national shame, a revelation of its political and religious unconscious welling up in obscene, pornographic – which to say, sacred – images, or whether they will be safely quarantined as an exception, an anomaly, a peculiar episode of no special interest, quickly absorbed into the flow of mass-mediated images. One thing seems certain. These images will not be forgotten. This was not so certain only a short time ago, when it seemed that they were to be flushed down the memory hole by a coalition of political spin-meisters with the mass media and its amnesiac audience. The US government has done everything in its power to contain, control and close the case. So when I say the images will not be forgotten, I mean only that an archive has been constituted which is not going to go away: this is a case that has been repeatedly declared "closed", and which has shown an uncanny ability to re-open itself to further reflection and interpretation. I of course recognize that many people will

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try to forget about the images, or want to forget about them, or dismiss them as embarrassing reminders of something that (like Vietnam and its indelible images) needs to be "put behind us." Their relative unimportance compared with the images of My Lai or the Holocaust will be adduced to minimize their significance. Rush Limbaugh's notorious comparison of them to harmless fraternity initiation rituals will aid in this process, and the "already known" character of the images as originary repetitions (the pathos formulae, the comparison to lynching photos) will sustain the rhetoric of dismissal: move along, nothing to see here. Or if there is something to see, it is "already known," fully understood and accounted for by judicial processes.

The fragility of these disavowals may be seen in the self-contradictory character of the fundamental judgments that accompany them: these are bad images, but not *that* bad (and terrorism requires stern measures); or, these images (with a few exceptions) are not exceptional, but represent "standard operating procedure." Or (conversely) these images *are* exceptional, not representative of what goes on systematically in the secret prisons of the "war on terror," and what happened at Abu Ghraib was the responsibility of "nine bad apples" (the original title of Errol Morris's film) who should not be allowed to spoil the whole barrel, much less indict the whole system that made them inevitable.

Perhaps the most insidious and tempting form of disavowal takes the form of a "more is less" judgment. The very circulation of the images, especially the central icon of the so-called "Hooded Man" or "Abu Ghraib Man," is regarded as reducing the image to an empty signifier or "brand," like a corporate logo. The fact that the Hooded Man is now arguably as familiar as the Nike swoosh or the iPod advertisements has the effect, it is argued, of neutralizing and coopting its political impact. Even a clever bit of "culture jamming" like Forkscrew Graphics' "iRaq/iPod" is regarded as evidence for the weakness of the image. As Jacques Rancière puts the question in his general reflections on "the future of the image":

> Have not all the forms of critique, play, and irony that claim to disrupt the ordinary circulation of images been annexed by that circulation? Modern cinema and criticism claimed to interrupt the flow of media and advertising images by suspending the connections between narration and meaning [...] But the brand thus stamped on the image ultimately serves the cause of the brand image. The procedures of cutting and humour have themselves become the stock-in-trade of advertising, the means by which it generates both adoration of its icons and the positive attitude towards them created by the very possibility of ironizing it.[7]

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But Rancière hesitates over the adequacy of this conclusion: "no doubt the argument is not decisive," and it is possible to imagine circumstances in which the criticality of this montage is made evident, when it is re-located, for instance, "in the space of the museum" where it will acquire "the aura of the work damming the flood of communication."[8]

It seems clear, however (and Rancière notes this as well), that such a critical re-location need not occur in the museum, but can transpire in the seminar or lecture room, in everyday conversation, or in the momentary double-take which first notices the tactics of re-location embedded in the montage itself *in situ* – on a subway platform or billboard. The iPod/iRaq silkscreen is itself a reflection on the re-absorption of images in the media flood. It explicitly juxtaposes two forms of contemporary self-absorption, the narcissistic self-pleasuring of the wired dancers with their iPods, and the obverse image of a very different kind of self-absorption experienced by the wired torture victim. Both images are reduced to anonymous silhouettes, both displayed as objects of indefinite serial repetition. Together they produce a metonymic linkage of two images that may or may not be noticed, much less interpreted. As Rancière notes, "the effect is never guaranteed."[9] But this raises the further question: what would it mean to have an image with a *guaranteed* effect? Is this not precisely Clement Greenberg's definition of kitsch, which prescribes and attempts to program the predictable, guaranteed response?[10] More fundamentally, is the power of an image *ever* something that can be guaranteed by its autonomous, self-validating presence? Or do we need to ask some further questions: power of what sort, over whom, in what situations?

The only guarantee that comes with the Abu Ghraib images is that they will not be forgotten as long as the war in Iraq and its larger framework, the war on terror, are remembered. Like the indelible images of the destruction of the World Trade Center which launched these wars, they will be forever associated with this epoch, and will mark a kind of termination point for both these wars. One sentence that inevitably accompanies the icon of the Abu Ghraib Man is "The War Is Over," a sentiment rendered graphically in an installation over a crowded Los Angeles expressway by Freewayblogger.com. This is a statement that also reflects the common military wisdom that recognized the appearance of the Abu Ghraib Archive as a decisive defeat for the American military adventure in Iraq. Captain Dan Moore, the commander of Naval ROTC, Northwestern University, a military theorist and historian, recognized the "terminal" character of the images on their first appearance. As he put it at one of the first teach-ins on the photographs at Northwestern in June 2004, "these images are more damaging to the

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American war effort in Iraq than any weapons of mass destruction." Given the previous discrediting of the claims about weapons of mass destruction and links to 9/11 or to al-Qaeda, the images spelled the end of the last remaining alibi for the war, namely, that it represented a moral, even religious crusade of liberation. Of course FreeWay Blogger's claim that "The War Is Over" is, within the composition of this photograph, immediately ironized by the oncoming stream of cars filled with oblivious motorists who will drive by without ever noticing the image. These are what Rancière calls "the poor morons of the society of the spectacle, bathing contentedly in the flood of images"[11] and driving on their freeways in vehicles fueled by cheap oil from the Middle East. *In situ*, the photograph re-frames the Abu Ghraib Man in a tableau that says *both* that the war is over (morally) and that the war goes on (physically, materially). Any claim for what Rancière calls an "exorbitant power" in the image to overcome the indifference of the spectacle is (as he insists) as simplistic as the over-estimation of the spectacle itself and the under-estimation of the morons under its influence.

Perhaps it is the language of the power (or weakness) of images, and the attendant longing for "guarantees" of political or aesthetic efficacy that needs to be questioned. Stephen Daniels notes that the FreeWay Blogger image echoes the famous John Lennon poster, "War Is Over (If You Want It)," an association that provides a better clue to the efficacy of this image.[12] What I have been proposing in place of the language of power is a language of affect and desire, what we want from images, and what they want from us, with "want" implying "lack" as well as positive demand or need.[13] Certainly there has been a longing for the Abu Ghraib images to have a decisive power and effect that has so far eluded them. This desire was especially acute in the immediate aftermath of their unveiling, when it was hoped that the images were the "smoking gun" that would bring down the government that had produced them. But this longing contains an implicit acknowledgment that images (like smoking guns) do not carry around with them a reservoir of power like storage batteries that can be tapped at will. Or rather, any power they do have is like that of dreams, a crystallization of desire that awaits interpretation and action, or like smoking guns, a constellation of evidence that awaits a proper judgment day.

Jacques Rancière's classifications of the three major categories of contemporary art may provide us with a way of precisely characterizing the central icon of the Abu Ghraib Archive. Rancière differentiates what he calls the "naked," "ostensive," and "metaphorical" sorts of image, the first corresponding to documentary and forensic images, the second, the iconic image with its instant recognizability, and the third, the image in

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its mobility and mutability across different media environments.[14] The Hooded Man (like many of the pornographic images) clearly fits Rancière's "naked" category of "non-artistic" images, exemplified by photographs from the concentration camps. Its formal simplicity and frontality links it to the ostensive images' "obtuse presence that interrupts histories and discourses" with "the luminous power of the face-to-face," the characteristic power of the cultural icon or idol, an effect that Meyer Schapiro long ago called the "theme of state," a format especially suitable for portrayals of the sovereign.[15] And in its viral circulation across different media environments, it typifies the operations of the metaphorical image, as in its insertion into the iPod advertisements. Seen this way, it is difficult to think of another image in the contemporary media-sphere that does so many things while seeming to accomplish so little. This is why its only guarantee is memorability, and its only power is to awaken the desire for a justice to come.

But this raises the related question of the material and technical foundations of cultural memory as such. The other meaning of the Abu Ghraib Archive is its importance in redefining the very concept of the archive. It may be the case that Abu Ghraib represents a radically new moment in the history of archives as such. An archive, as traditionally understood, is a collection of documents, objects and records that preserve some aspect of the past – an event (the Civil War) or a period (a presidency, a literary or artistic career). It is instituted by some authority, and is based on an authoritative decision to preserve, remember, collect and make available the traces of a history that is open to a future. While the objects in the archive are relics of the past, aids to memory, the archive as an institution always points toward a future. As Allan Sekula notes, early photographic archives had a double mission in another sense: to extend the dignity of portraiture to middle-class consumers, and to serve the policing of society by archiving the deviants, the poor and the criminal classes. Politeness and policing produced what Sekula calls a "shadow archive" that "encompasses an entire social terrain."[16]

What is it that makes the Abu Ghraib Archive new and different? Certainly it must be in part the fact that the central collection of documents is virtual (a body of digital images accompanied by the metadata encoded in their files), and that the archive itself – its location, structure and retrieval system – is also virtual. The digital character of the images has had momentous consequences for their circulation, of course, giving them their notoriously viral character, resisting all attempts at quarantine and containment. The digital camera is a radically different technical apparatus from the analog camera: lightweight, easily concealed. Sabrina Harman's

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Sony Cybershot – I own one myself – can be slipped into a pocket, and linked up to a computer to offload its images in mere seconds. We have to think of the digital camera not only as an extension of the eyes and memory of an individual, but also as linked very intimately to a global network of collective perception, memory and imagining via e-mail and postings on the Internet. Some of the Abu Ghraib images were already serving as screen-savers on laptops at the prison.

It is important to recognize as well that the digital photograph produces a new dimension of legitimation and credibility, a new claim on the real.[17] If the Abu Ghraib photos had been taken with traditional analog cameras, it would be much more difficult to establish their provenance, to establish the date and time they were taken. But digital photographs carry metadata with them. What Sekula calls the "truth apparatus" of the photographic document is no longer divided between its optical authority and the "bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of 'intelligence'" that archives the document.[18] It is as if digital images were directly connected to the filing cabinets where they are stored and the retrieval system that makes their circulation possible, carrying their own archiving system with them as part of their automatism. Brent Pack, an investigator for the CID, was able to specify the exact date, time and camera of every photograph by examining the headers of the files. Pack won the Timothy Fidel Memorial Award in computer forensics for his masterful work of organizing the photographic archive of Abu Ghraib. An experienced detective, Pack remarked in his interview with Errol Morris that "more than half of crimes are solved because the criminal did something stupid. Taking these pictures was incredibly stupid."

But it was not *merely* stupid, and in the open past and future of this archive, it becomes more and more evident that there was kind of "cunning of history" at work in their production. The dominant interpretation of the photographs has been that they were taken as "trophies" to be shown off, a common practice of soldiers since time immemorial. But that was not the only motive (it probably explains only Charlie Graner, the leading sadist of the "Nine Bad Apples"). Seymour Hersh has speculated that some of the photographs were encouraged by the CIA and "Other Government Agency" (OGA) interrogators as part of the "softening up" of prisoners, letting them know that their humiliating nakedness was being witnessed and recorded (often by women), and possibly using the images as blackmail to help extort information about the insurgency.[19] (The insurgency was, of course, the principal motivation for "Gitmo-izing" Abu Ghraib in the first place. Who knows when we will see the photo archive from Guantanamo or Bagram?) But at least one of the MPs, Sabrina Harman,

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wrote letters to her girlfriend back home at the time that described her own motives as *forensic*.[20] "I took more pictures now to record what's going on. Not many people know this shit goes on. The only reason I want to be here now is to get the pictures to prove the US is not what they think." The first "detective" at Abu Ghraib, then, its first forensic archivist, may have been Sabrina Harman, the pretty, smiling lesbian who appears as the "thumbs up" girl in a number of photos. Harman's conduct has been roundly condemned, and is often associated with the cheerful expressions on the faces of white folks in lynching photographs. Her own explanation is worth pondering. She claims that she was simply doing what she always does when she has her picture taken, as a kind of automatic reflex: smile and give the thumbs up sign. It is as if Harman were blurring those two contradictory purposes that Allan Sekula claims are inscribed in the practices of early photography: the politeness of the portrait, and the arresting gaze of the camera in the criminal's mug shot.

But everything about the Abu Ghraib Archive and its central collection of photographs seems to have a double, ambiguous character. Were they produced with official sanction for the purposes of intelligence gathering? Or were they produced in violation of relevant rules and regulations? Certainly they constituted a violation of the Geneva Convention and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, but as we know the Geneva Convention had, by this time, been declared "quaint" and obsolete by the President of the United States and his lawyers. And Geoffrey Miller had been sent to Abu Ghraib with the authority of the Secretary of Defense behind him to "get tough" on the prisoners being dragged in by the hundreds during nightly raids.

It is not just that the photographs are evidence of a crime, a kind of forensic body of clues that can be studied like the evidence (mug shots, crime scene photos) in any case file, but that the making of the photographs was *in itself* the crime. The strangest anomaly about Abu Ghraib is that the actual perpetrators of torture, the persons who were physically beating and killing Iraqi prisoners, are still largely unknown. They are the "shadow archive" of intelligence operatives, independent contractors and OGAs who are outside the frame – and the frame-up – constructed around these images to contain their criminality. The only persons convicted of crimes are those who witnessed the crimes and took photographs of them, and especially those who allowed themselves to be photographed at the scene of the crime. Specialist Sabrina Harman, for instance, did not physically abuse any prisoners. The only crime she was convicted of was taking the photographs, for which she received six months.[21] Megan Ambuhl contends that the entire scandal would never have been revealed if the "image amnesty" had been effective and all the photographs had been returned. Charlie Graner, who took the majority of the pictures, surely did physically abuse some

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prisoners. But he seems to have been doing this with the full encouragement and guidance of the "ghosts" beyond the frame. In the midst of the abuse, Graner received an official letter of commendation for his good work.[22]

There is, as Derrida notes, a fundamental tension in the notion of an archive as, on the one hand, architectural – a place, an institution, a building, even an *ark* where the documents are preserved – and on the other hand, a law, judgment, the decree of the father, the *archon*, the voice of tradition, memory, admonition which is oriented toward a present and future time "to come." A prison is the perfect instantiation of this double principle. It is a place, a concrete architectural structure that is instituted to enforce the law. Its inmates and the documents that classify their crimes and determine the length of their sentences go to make up the archive of a penal system. Abu Ghraib exemplifies the transformation of this image of the archive into its obverse as the first legal institution *visibly* to enforce the exceptional legal regime of the war on terror. A place of lawlessness verging on total anarchy in the darkest days of October 2003, it was riddled with undocumented prisoners and jailers, "ghost detainees" and equally spectral interrogators. Out of the dark labyrinth of this archive, the photographs emerged as shafts of light that threaten to open up all the dark passages. So it is hardly surprising that the official containment operation took the form of condemning the images themselves as the crime, while the unofficial strategy is one of exaggerating their power, and then condemning them for their impotence in bringing the war to an end. But the Abu Ghraib Archive is far from exhausted. The containment operations have failed. And the real perpetrators, those who created the system of lawless law that it exemplifies, await the judgment that it demands and the lessons that it still contains.

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Notes

1. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.
2. "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 343-88; here, 347.
3. I wish to thank Mark Benjamin for giving me access to the master disk of Abu Ghraib images.
4. Harman testified about this observation in her court martial, and repeated the remark in interviews with Errol Morris. She also made the observation in her letters written during her time at Abu Ghraib prison.
5. Stephen Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

6. Raphael Patai's notorious encyclopedia of Orientalist stereotypes, *The Arab Mind* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), served as the textbook for the neocon intellectuals who provided the theoretical framework for the invasion of Iraq, and it seems to have filtered down to the military and intelligence communities as a guide to practice.
7. *The Future of the Image* [*Le destin des images*] (New York: Verso, 2007), 27-28.
8. Ibid., 28.
9. Ibid.
10. Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Fall 1939), 34-49.
11. *The Future of the Image*, 28.
12. Daniels made this remark in response to my seminar on this subject at the University of Nottingham, 5 July 2007.
13. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), for a detailed elaboration of this approach to images.
14. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 22-24.
15. Schapiro, "Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text," in *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language* (New York: Braziller, 1996).
16. "The Body and the Archive," 347.
17. This claim directly contradicts the commonplace notion that digital photographs have somehow lost their former connection to the Real, and are uniquely open to manipulation and alteration. For more on this argument, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Realism and the Digital Image," in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art*, eds. Jan Baetens and Hilde van Gelder (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007).
18. "The Body and the Archive," 351.
19. Among the as yet unreleased photos from Abu Ghraib are images of naked women and children.
20. Charlie Graner made a similar claim for the documentary as opposed to the "trophy" character of his photographs in his testimony to the CID investigation, but his testimony was not, in contrast to Sabrina Harman's, supported by any correspondence written at the time (source: Mark Benjamin of *Salon* magazine).
21. According to her interview in *Nine Bad Apples*, the majority of the court wanted to let her off, but one judge was arguing that she should be given five years in prison. The sentence was a compromise.
22. Graner received the commendation in November 2003, in the midst of the torture scandal. See "The Struggle for Iraq: The Jailer; Guard Left Troubled Life for Duty in Iraq," by Paul von Zielbauer and James Dao, *The New York Times* 14 May 2004. See also *Wired* for Lynndie England's testimony about the official commendation that Graner received, as well the praise from CIA officers who reviewed the abuse photos he had taken, http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2008/03/convicted-abu-g/.

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The Melodramatic Style of American Politics

Elisabeth Anker

The Melodramatic Style

On the night of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush wrote in his diary, "The Pearl Harbor of the 21st Century took place today."[1] As early as mid-afternoon on 9/11, many politicians, journalists and news commentators were comparing the day's attacks to Pearl Harbor and claiming that it was a new "day that will live in infamy." Despite the proliferation of this comparison there were fundamental distinctions between the two attacks, and they were articulated through different genres of political discourse. The tenor of political discourse had shifted throughout the intervening sixty years, and these changes had implications both for the representation of political events and for the expansion of violent state action that followed them. This essay investigates how these changes formed a melodramatic genre of American political discourse.

President Roosevelt's speech the day after Pearl Harbor was grave. In his first nationwide radio speech, he called December 7, 1941 "a day that will live in infamy." He proclaimed the attack's "unprovoked" nature and catalogued Japan's deceptions leading up to it. His assessment, however, was not depicted through a trans-historical narrative pitting goodness against evil. Instead, in an even-keeled voice it listed examples of Japanese hostilities to the US and other nations, each example tied to a specific action and political grievance. The speech contained few descriptive adjectives for the Japanese or the attack. The prose was relatively dry, lacking emotive expressions or a detailed description of the suffering on the ground in Pearl Harbor. Describing the effects of the attack, FDR only states: "[I]t caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that many American lives have been lost." Roosevelt argued that the "American people in their righteous might will win through absolute victory," but he did not categorize the upcoming struggle through categories of victimhood or villainy. His speech the following day would be more moralist, more adjectival, more stirring in its announcement to an isolationist nation that it was going to war; the term "evil" is mentioned, but only once, and is used to describe a wartime tactic, not a fixed moral position or an inherent quality

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of the attackers. But in this first speech, FDR assessed the situation in a terse way: "So far, the news has all been bad." Japanese actions are described as "treachery," but victimization is not used to characterize America or Pearl Harbor. The speech ends not with an exhortation of inevitable retribution and victory, but with a call for shared sacrifice and "hope for liberty under God." The speech employs what we might name a genre of objective rationality, popular in mid-century US politics and media, that uses moderated affects and the flair-free pronouncement of factual evidence to claim authority for depicting events. Roosevelt's speech emphasizes the political justification for going to war, the ability of war to promote an eventual peace for Americans and for the world, and the sacrifice the nation will be making in the months ahead.

Sixty years later, President George Bush spoke to the nation to explain a new surprise attack on US territory, but the intervening years had seen significant changes in political discourse. This president's speech was quite different. The speech was televised live on September 11, 2001 and began by explaining that "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack." In this speech, the ideal of "freedom" is the target for destruction. It describes the motivation for the 9/11 attack not through political strategy but through a moral worldview both outside and above concrete political strategy. Bush exclaims that "today, the nation saw evil" and "thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror" – he uses the word "evil" four times, and it shapes a moral economy for situating the attack and its agents. The speech identifies the people who died: they were "secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers, moms and dads, friends and neighbors," people the audience can empathize and identify with, people just like themselves. Bush emphasizes the experience of suffering caused by the attacks, and describes the pain that the nation is collectively experiencing through heightened language and descriptive adjectives: "The pictures … have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger." He goes on to explain that the government is responding to the attack and will "find those responsible and bring them to justice." The speech highlights the nation's grief, constructs a moral economy of good and evil to describe actions and their perpetrators, individuates the victims of the attack, and promises the heroic triumph of the United States over evil. The focus and the structure, the affect and the tone, are far from FDR's address.

What could have generated different discursive descriptions of these attacks? For one, although many people likened 9/11 to Pearl Harbor, the events themselves are obviously different: Pearl Harbor was a military

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attack perpetrated by another nation on a military base, and was part of an ongoing, larger war. 9/11 was perpetrated by non-state actors on financial and military buildings using unconventional weapons, and occurred in a vacuum of information about its agents and its cause. The 9/11 attacks were intentionally spectacular, crafted to be broadcast live on television throughout the nation; the Pearl Harbor attacks were not viewed live but were transmitted retrospectively on radio and newsreel. And yet aside from the difference in events, there is a fundamental difference in the political discourses used to depict them. There is a change in the contouring of crisis, in the description of injury and nationhood, in the framing of political agency, and in the individuation of the victims; differences too large to be reduced to the personalities of the speakers. This is not to argue that either president was unreflective about his discursive practices or un-responsible for the effects of his rhetoric, but it is to shift critical scrutiny beyond elite figures in order to investigate the larger conditions of representation and responsibility they draw upon to depict political life. The important question for this essay is *what*, rather than *who*, depicts the events.

Melodrama marks the difference between Bush and FDR. In the second half of the twentieth century, melodrama increasingly shaped American political discourse, becoming one of its most prominent genre forms. Political depictions of national events and state power began to employ moral polarities of good and evil, innocent victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, race-to-the-rescue chases, grand gestures and astonishing feats of courage. They conveyed stories about the suffering of virtuous people overwhelmed by nefarious forces, and thematized broad political and social conflict through outsized representations of unjust persecution. Literary, film and cultural studies scholars have long understood the importance of melodramatic genre conventions to US cultural production, and have examined their influence in theater, literature, and cinema from silent films to women's weepies, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Rambo, from Birth of a Nation to The Terminator. Linda Williams even identifies melodrama as the most prevalent mode of US popular culture since the mid-nineteenth century.[2] In this essay, I argue that melodrama is not only a film or literary genre but also a political genre, more precisely a genre of national political discourse. Melodramatic genre conventions shape political rhetoric, governing processes and formations of national identity in US politics. Melodrama affects the stories of popular culture, but it also affects the legitimation strategies of national policies and the operations of state power.

What I call "melodramatic political discourse" casts political policies and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the

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nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action; it locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in the cruelty of its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of national emancipation and global control.[3] Evoking intense visceral responses to wrenching injustices imposed upon the nation-state, melodramatic discourse aims to solicit affective states of astonishment, sobs and pathos from the scenes of persecution it shows. It demands that the redemption of virtue obligates state power to exercise heroic retribution on the forces responsible for national injury. In melodrama the US is both the feminized, virginal victim and the aggressive, masculinized hero of the story of freedom; it is the victim/hero of global politics. The national injuries that melodrama depicts morally legitimate the violence, centralization and consolidations of state power it posits as necessary for undoing the suffering and redeeming the goodness of the citizenry, and for reestablishing the nation-state's capacity for sovereign freedom. Melodramatic political discourse provides the *tableaux* and the legitimacy for the late-modern expansion of US state power.

This essay investigates the development of the melodramatic style of American political discourse in the twentieth century.[4] I begin to collate an archive of American melodramatic political discourse by examining four examples of presidential political rhetoric in the later twentieth century and by reading these speeches as instances of melodrama. I argue that melodrama became its own genre of political discourse at the onset of the Cold War, as its spectacle-driven story of the heroic triumph of innocent and virtuous people was taken up to describe American political power in the wake of the nation-state's triumphs after World War Two. Melodrama's popularity in postwar American politics drew from the widespread popularity of the melodramatic tradition in theater, novels and film, but also from other national discourses, political conditions and technological changes in American life that consolidated around a national identity grounded in the assurance of America's virtue, committed to fighting villainy. This is not to say that melodrama had not been politically influential beforehand, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Birth of a Nation make clear, nor is it to say that there were not prior instances of melodrama in political discourse, as melodramatic elements might arguably be found in the rhetoric of westward expansion, in the newspaper coverage leading to the Spanish-American War in Cuba, and in discourses urging entry into World War One.[5] Yet only after World War Two did melodrama shape political discourse on a regular basis, as the binarism of the Cold War was mapped onto and nourished by a melodramatic moral worldview of good and evil, victims and villains. At

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this historic moment, the melodramatic style became part of the official national narratives that legitimated the national security state.

Two changes occurred that encouraged its pervasiveness: first, the rise of televisual communication. Melodrama's rise was enabled by significant changes in the medium of political discourse itself, which took new form with the invention of television. Political communication via the news media drew on melodramatic visual spectacle as it entered the living rooms of Americans, connecting domestic life with a nightly world-political spectacle of important events. Postwar political knowledge circulated mainly through visual media and its imbrications with daily life. By the end of the 1950s, 90% of Americans had televisions, the most rapid uptake of new communications technology in American history.[6] Melodrama also made the media shift from film to television, as its visual tableaux brought the spectacles and events of *public* life into the daily lives and *private* spaces of Americans, working to connect the ordinariness of daily domestic life to extraordinary global events.[7] The domestic environment was filled with visual spectacles previously associated only with the public sphere, and the televised evening news became, in the words of media scholar Michael Schudson, "the symbolic center of the national agenda and the national consciousness."[8] Melodramatic genre conventions proliferated as a way to conceptualize political events though a gestural and visceral language that could unify the nation and personify state power as the virtuous and sovereign hero of melodramatic geopolitics.

Second, political changes after World War Two, which included the dramatic rise in American political, economic and military strength, could now guarantee or at least make credible a melodramatic narrative promise of heroic triumph. The shift in American influence that contributed to melodrama's political popularity was due to the rise in US global power after World War Two, as the nation became a world superpower, and as foreign policy shifted toward shaping the world in America's interests.[9] A popular national self-understanding arose to depict America as the hero who saved the world, and after the war America found the need to save the world again: this time, from the forces of communism and Stalinism. In their emphasis on heroism and spectacle, melodramatic genres of political discourse differ in key respects from their film genre cousins, as their key conventions are not from the woman's film or domestic drama, but from early cinema and action-oriented spectacles that highlight the triumph of heroes and emphasize thrills, astonishment and moral clarity.[10] Sheldon Wolin argues that postwar developments rendered state power restless and expansionist, and marked the moment when power was viewed not in terms

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of constitutional limits on different branches but as a potentially unlimited power that operated in the service of American needs and universal freedom, thus "creating forms and magnitudes of power hitherto unknown."[11] Postwar state power expanded through military engagement, executive branch growth, economic privatization, technological surveillance and mass media in which bureaucratic power extended and consolidated the national-security state as well as the regulatory intensifications that shaped how individuals qualified for benefits in the welfare state.[12] Melodramatic political discourse helped to justify these continued expansions of American power, both at home and abroad, deemed necessary for ensuring the freedom enabled by global supremacy. The confusion of post-World War Two politics was eventually mapped onto a global binary of the US versus the USSR, and the Cold War became legible in part through the heightened language of melodrama. I will cite examples from four iterations of melodrama in official political discourse in the second half of the twentieth century to flesh out these claims.

Sentimentalizing the Domino Theory

One of the most significant early moments in the development of melodramatic political discourse was the Truman Doctrine speech given in 1947. President Harry Truman sought support from the American people for his aggressive postwar foreign policy toward communism, and wanted to convince Americans that a massive accumulation in arms, military personnel and financial means was necessary to ensure American global power and national security. Truman used the speech to ask Congress and the American people to support the build-up of American power while offering military and financial aid to Greece and Turkey. Relying on the concept that would later be known as the Domino Theory, which made the protection of other countries a necessity for American freedom, Truman assumed that one communist nation would spread its ideology to surrounding nations and all would "fall"; Greece and Turkey became the symbol of potentially falling dominoes. The Domino Theory linked the internal policy of other nations directly to the welfare of the United States. While explanations of foreign suffering had been used throughout the twentieth century to legitimate war, in the logic of melodrama the nation needed to be either a victim or imminent victim itself in order to legitimate foreign intervention. The Domino Theory thus became the crucial link that made Greek and Turkish suffering portend America's own, and that began to justify large-scale exercises of US state power across the globe.

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On March 12, 1947, Truman laid out his doctrine in a speech that drew upon melodramatic conventions to make its claims. It was seen and heard not only throughout America, but throughout the world; it was first broadcast live and rebroadcast the next day, translated into 25 different languages by the State Department.[13] After reading a first draft, Truman told his speech-writer to toughen the speech, simplify and clarify its dictates, and expand its scope – to make it more like melodrama. Truman explained, "I wanted no hedging in this speech. This would be America's answer to the surge of expansion of communist tyranny. It had to be clear, and free of hesitation and double-talk."[14] Its message about freedom had to be morally unambiguous and be expanded beyond Greece to encompass America and the entire world order.[15] The Truman Doctrine speech simplified the complexities of postwar politics into a melodramatic binary that sentimentalized European populations, and in so doing legitimated not only enormous expansion in state power but also an entirely new position on US foreign policy.

The speech began with a sense of urgency: "The gravity of the situation that confronts the world today necessitates my appearance." From its first moment, the speech stages the "race to the rescue" that must be performed by American power. It opens onto the initial scene of victimization and marks the compulsion for heroism brought about by dire worldwide conditions.[16] Truman details the suffering of the Greek people, described through melodramatic tactics that make vivid, through humanizing details and broad stroked images, the unjust suffering of a virtuous people:

> this industrious, peace-loving country has suffered invasion, four years of cruel enemy occupation, and bitter internal strife … More than a thousand villages had burned. Eighty-five percent of the children were tubercular. Livestock, poultry and draft animals had almost disappeared. Inflation had wiped out practically all savings. As a result of these tragic conditions, a militant minority, exploiting human want and misery, was able to create political chaos which, until now, has made economic recovery impossible.

Greece is virtuous and hardworking yet cruelly mistreated, an innocent, child-like nation – it is no coincidence that the plight of sick children is mentioned here, as melodrama often links virtue to childhood – on the verge of seduction by the violent forces of evil. Truman's speech stages the scene of victimhood to generate a critique of communism through its heightened and pathos-laden description of villainy.

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Yet the speech presents a melodrama only mid-way through its story: the conclusion of heroic triumph has not yet been achieved, and can only be achieved through the use of military and economic power. The hero, as state power, is conjured into being by the rhetoric of the speech. Truman warns that no other country but America has the capacity, the power and the will to help Greece defend itself from totalitarianism. "The very existence of the Greek state" and "the future of Turkey" are at risk: "We are the only country able to provide that help." The world is presented with a stark opposition, according to Truman, as

> every nation must choose between alternative ways of life … One way of life is based on the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions … freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies on terror and oppression … and the suppression of personal freedoms.

Truman organizes the world into two all-encompassing conditions, one of freedom and individual liberty, the other of "terror," "oppression" and "suppression." Truman uses the scene of injury and the bifurcation of political agendas to legitimate his request for heroic, expanded power to fight against the encroaching un-freedom of communism: "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." America is the most powerful nation in the world and thus its special mission is to protect worldwide liberty; the ability of America to save other nations – proven, in this discourse, just two years before with the conclusion of World War Two – implies both that America had the capacity to end the suffering of others, and that, if it does not act, it condemns the world and itself to totalitarian subjection. And virtue is accrued doubly to the nation in his melodrama: both in the act of rescue, and in the nation's own potential for unjust suffering. The United States, in this speech, is both the victim and the heroic force of good that will rescue the victim. Truman's language is dire, as he warns that the legitimation of the heroic expansion of state power is an urgent request: if choice number two wins out, the consequences "would be disastrous not only for [Greece and Turkey] but for the world."

At this point in the speech, Truman put forth the Domino Theory to highlight how the Greek and Turkish problems affect his listeners; the Domino Theory is the lynchpin that transforms Greek domination into a foreshadowing of America's own. "We must take immediate and resolute

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action ... The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – *and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.*"[17] Greek and Turkish suffering from un-freedom foretells America's own suffering if it does not intervene. Truman used a pathos-laden description of Greece and Turkey to connect Americans affectively to the plight of these nations, subsuming postwar complexities into a moral imperative that mandated American intervention to ensure the freedom not only of two virtuous nations but also of the United States of America. Truman creates for his listeners an emotional identification with the suffering victims, encouraging them through his heightened language and small-scale examples to identify with the plight of the Greeks and to *feel* postwar Greek suffering as if it were their own. Melodramatic political discourse thus departs from other generic formulations of melodrama as it began to generate legitimacy for state action. Primarily, the victim/hero is now combined into one character, a national character, so that the nation-state became both at once. The virtuous victim/hero signifies America: a single entity that garnered the moral superiority of virtue and innocence as well as the physical power and righteous retribution of heroic rescue. This combination had occurred in past forms of cultural melodrama, but became the norm when melodrama structured American political discourse.

Truman's scene of overwhelmed suffering, dramatic language, moralized options, heightened emotionalism and dire circumstances yoked together melodramatic cultural conventions to support a policy that broke squarely with America's past – a break that was recognized immediately as a world shift. *The New York Times* contended that America's foreign policy had "Undergo[ne] radical change in the space of twenty-one minutes," and called America, not un-admiringly, the new "world police force."[18] This new national purpose, manifesting in the Truman Doctrine, transcended concrete national, economic, military and social issues – a transcendence that highlighted melodrama's ability to generate cosmological significance at the expense of historical specificity. The affective power of the Domino Theory made the Truman Doctrine less about humanitarian intervention or doing what was good for others, and more about melodrama or doing what was necessary to protect one's own nation from villainy. It thus shaped a different form of national identity than that which was found in humanitarian forms of political discourse, because in melodrama the nation is not just the hero called in to fight un-freedom, but un-freedom's victim, too.[19] The nation is not just a third-party heroic intervener but also the injured first party, and this position as a victim/hero compels its necessity for action.

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Melodrama deepens the moral justification for international interventions, as the nation is motivated not only by altruism but also by its own survival.

The Domino Theory, framed melodramatically, legitimated the Truman Doctrine's large expansions in state power, arguably the largest increase in the national security state until 9/11. Within the next year, the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan were enacted, the National Security Council, the CIA, and the Department of Defense were all created, and NSC Policy Paper Number 68 was written, which called for America's "immediate and large scale build up in military and general strength;" NSC 68, in particular, required America to "assume unilaterally the defense of the non-communist world."[20] Truman's second inaugural address two years later draws even more from melodrama: an American Way of Life is defined through the victim/hero character that takes identity as the exact opposite of communism. The heroization of American state power is now in full effect: "Peoples of the earth … look to the United States as never before for good will, strength and wise leadership."[21] The nation, which only wants "peace and freedom," finds itself "directly opposed by a regime with contrary aims and a totally different concept of life." In his speech, Truman lists communism's evils in overwrought language: "they believe man is so weak and inadequate that he is unable to govern himself." Then he counters with America's liberal virtues, in which democratic "government is established for the benefit of individuals." He repeats this circular pattern multiple times: "Communism holds that the world is so deeply divided into opposing classes that war is inevitable … free nations can settle differences justly and maintain lasting peace," until the opposites become symbiotic upon each other and America's goodness is predicated upon communism's tyranny. America, as the world hero, was responsible for the world's "justice, harmony and peace" and therefore unlimited in the power it needed for its task. The threat of communism to the nation's welfare mobilizes the nation's virtue and legitimates its exercise of military and national security power. As in all melodrama, identity depends on injury to generate its heroism.

Melodrama continued to gain ascendancy after World War Two because of the way its themes so easily worked to legitimate state power. It gained credence as it formulated a virtuous and heroic national identity; it enhanced state power by depicting it as heroic action necessary to fight the villainous foes of freedom. Yet within its narrative logic, melodrama could only justify power if that power operated in the service of righting American victimization and safeguarding global freedom; thus, with increasing frequency, political life was framed in these terms, and the victim/hero national character shaped early postwar political discourse as it affectively

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linked American citizens to the unjust suffering of other peoples. When read through melodramatic political discourse, state action seems not to be shaped by *realpolitik*, and its aim is not limited or practical or amoral; it is a form of statehood that has the moral and physical strength to overcome the problems of the world and exist beyond its dictates, a world where freedom can become a static and settled achievement of US power.

Going Public with Good and Evil

The early 1950s took melodramatic political discourse to a more developed level, visually and verbally, as the Eisenhower administration began explicitly to use the terms "good" and "evil" to define a bipolar political world. Eisenhower also took advantage of television to speak directly to the American people, giving greater credence to his worldview through the sheer spectacle, at the time, of watching the president speak, and of being able to do so in one's own home. The rise of mass visual communication became an important aspect of melodrama's rise in political discourse. Viewing the president speak live, in intimate close-up shots which made it seem as if the president were talking directly to each individual, was itself an astonishing attraction. Throughout its transnational and multimedia formations, melodrama's heavy use of visual spectacle to prove moral truths placed great purchase on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights and spectacles of physical peril.[22] Many politicians began to capitalize on televisual media, bringing their policy demands and worldviews directly to American viewers through the visual spectacle of the televised public speech. Samuel Kernell's study "going public" investigates the executive branch's strategy, starting in the 1950s, of using television to communicate its desires directly to the American people.[23] Presidents began to promote their policies and rally public support for their agendas by televising speeches and adapting new methods of communication in order to shape the national agenda. Far from an equal exchange of information between representative and represented, it was a clearly unidirectional imparting of knowledge, yet it allowed the president's views and statements of national need to bypass traditional filters – congressional representatives, journalists – and enter right into the homes of the American people. The intimacy created by seeing the face of the president in close-up shots heightened the affective power of the speeches. Through the use of visual props, including symbols of US power or signifiers of presidential compassion, the president could mold the sphere of political communication by pushing national political discourse on the use of power directly, simultaneously and visually to the

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nation. "Going public" more deeply linked state action to the mobilization of public opinion, helping the executive branch to legitimate political power framed in affectively galvanizing ways.

Employing the strategies of going public, in 1953 Eisenhower harnessed melodramatic conventions and the rise of television to his first inaugural speech. Eisenhower capitalized on television's personalization of power to generate an affective sense of legitimacy for the actions he proposed. For his first inaugural speech, the entire country gathered together in living rooms across the country to watch a presidential inauguration live for the first time in history. While Truman's second inaugural address was also televised, only a few people owned televisions at the time. Eisenhower's speech was offered right when television began to saturate the American home space, and it thus became an exciting national viewing event in and of itself. The speech was a spectacle of presidential intimacy, its very televised live-ness a way of making his speech an extraordinary event in which average citizens could participate by watching the president give his speech from within their own home.

Eisenhower's inaugural speech focuses on the specter of communism and the United States' political and moral mandate to inhibit its spread. It reads nationalist moments as communist threats to American existence, necessitating the expansion of American power to overturn foreign governments around the globe. He outlines the global condition in a heightened drama right at the beginning of the speech: "We sense with all our faculties that the forces of Good and Evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history … This fact defines the meaning of this day."[24] The speech structures the world through a "fact" of melodramatic moral bipolarity that organizes world power into a violent stand-off that simultaneously valorizes the nation. This political moment has heightened trans-historical significance, as "the forces of good and evil are massed, armed and opposed as rarely before in history." The intimacy of the speech's transmission brings this historic significance into the daily lives of citizens. Jodi Dean argues that Eisenhower was the first modern president to use evil as a way of defining America as its opposite; evil demonizes the nation's "enemy" through a moralization of its nature, and maps goodness onto the pursuit of freedom as it takes shape in US foreign policy.[25] In the speech, Eisenhower argues in overheated language:

> The enemies of [the spirit of the free] know no god but force, no devotion but its use. They tutor men in treason. They feed upon the anger of others. Whatever defies them, they torture, especially the truth … No principle

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> or treasure that we hold, from the spiritual knowledge of our free schools and churches to the creative magic of free labor and capital, nothing lies safely beyond the reach of this struggle. Freedom is pitted against slavery, lightness against the dark.

This is villainy that would make the darkest villain blush, so horrific that anything done in defense against it is already legitimate. Its power is so overwhelming that it requires a heroism matched in its potency. Detailing the scene of victimization in dramatic and spectacular imagery, everything that Americans hold dear as freedom is now under attack, from the magic of capitalism to the spirituality of the classroom. As Rogin would note, communism infiltrates all aspects of life in a way that makes public and private spaces indistinguishable and desecrates them all, even as it makes these spaces weighted with extraordinary significance simply by the very threat held against them. The explanation of present dangers reveals that they are also part of something much bigger: the trans-historical fight for freedom, the generic fight against darkness.

After detailing the dramatic conditions of victimization, Eisenhower moves to another melodramatic trope: the valorization of the hero. Luckily, America is now at "a summit unmatched in human history" – he draws, as Truman before him, on American exceptionalism to frame American global power in melodramatically heroic terms. Americans "are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall be free." Eisenhower uses the term "history" multiple times, paradoxically to de-historicize America's global position as a generic opposition of good and evil, a position that will require a dramatic yet abstract expansion of US power in the service of freedom. "How far," he asks rhetorically,

> have we come in man's long pilgrimage from darkness toward light? Are we nearing the light – a day of peace and freedom for all mankind? Or are the shadows of another night closing in upon us? … [Our] domestic problems are dwarfed by, and often even created by, the questions that involve all humankind.

This language is ripe with transcendent significance placed on US military power. Humankind's generic problem of darkness trumps domestic squabbles, and American power must be in the service of these historic fights that it alone has the capacity to win. Eisenhower discusses the precariousness of the present moment and the ambiguity of its outcome, but states that America "can help defend freedom in our world" and that the nation is "a

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trust upon which rests the hope of free men everywhere" – assuming both America's *capacity* to defend worldwide freedom, and a *compulsion* that it *must* do it. "Destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world's leadership." His claim for explosive heroism places agency for state action elsewhere, on destiny rather than on mere mortal political calculation. This is only possible in the postwar context, as it presupposes sufficient state power to carry out such a moral vision and weighty imperative.

Like Truman's speech, which conflated military and economic expansion with heroism, this speech is narrativized midway through the melodrama story in order to motivate the support for heroism. Because of his moral bifurcations and the melodramatic tones in which they were outlined, Eisenhower managed to galvanize support for the heroic measures he deemed necessary to fight villainy. He received a blank check from Congress to do, literally, whatever he thought needed to be done to protect freedom.[26] Congress's blank check was a monumental shifting of political power, one that primarily congealed in the executive (and military) branch, yet one that passed without protest in Congress. Due in part to melodramatic modes of legitimating state power in spectacular and morally compulsory ways, in the following decade the national bureaucracy expanded exponentially, economic control of foreign markets grew significantly, multiple invasions of foreign lands were conducted, nuclear proliferation grew, and what Eisenhower criticized as "the military-industrial complex" also solidified its existence in no small part through his speeches that valorized its power as a massive force to reshape the global order for freedom.

The national victim/hero in melodramatic political discourse raises issues of responsibility for social problems. In this discourse, the nation-state is free of accountability for effecting conditions of un-freedom, or for instituting problems that caused the victimization of innocents. Instead, the nation has only a mandate unilaterally to reign triumphant over the forces of evil. Problems are generated externally by others, and America is only responsible for diminishing villainy and restoring freedom to the world. As a victim/hero, the nation embodies the trait of unsullied innocence, as it discursively only aims to do what is right while under constant threat from the evil forces set on acquiring its capital and destroying its freedom. It is a national body morally un-riven, free and clear of blame. Melodrama's un-riven virtue thus effects two things in political discourse: it mandates the state toward unilateral heroic action, and at the same time insists on the virtuous motives of nation-state violence in the pursuit of state sovereignty. Eisenhower articulates it in this way: "We feel this moral strength because we know that we are not helpless prisoners of history. We are free men. We

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shall remain free, never proven guilty of the one capital offence against freedom, a lack of staunch faith." It is the nation's moral requirement to buck pre-determinism, indeed to emancipate itself from the very prison house of history while refusing any responsibility in its efforts to push for freedom.

In linking national identity to the expression of state power, melodrama became a site of convergence for multiple ideas already circulating in American politics. It yoked together manifest destiny, exceptionalism and individualism into a form of political demonization, doing so through its already enormously popular cultural thematics. Melodramatic political discourse also drew on circulating narratives of exceptionalism and manifest destiny, weaving together exceptionalism's claims that America serves as a model for just governance commanded by God and that Americans are uniquely virtuous with manifest destiny's notion of divinely-inspired imperialism. According to the doctrine of exceptionalism – at an all-time high after World War Two – the nation's heroism is rooted in its unparalleled goodness and love of freedom. Exceptionalism assumes America to be a trans-historically inspired nation, one that is not only uniquely virtuous but that also serves as a model for all governance on earth. As seen in Truman's speech, melodrama relied on exceptionalism to figure the justness of foreign intervention and the mandatory quality of national retribution. Manifest destiny, too, has always contained a moral component; not just that America has a right to the land, but that its destiny was compelled by a moral ideal that takes precedence over other concerns. Its mandate comes from a "higher law" that makes spreading democracy obligatory for the state.[27] Melodrama draws from both of these ideas to articulate the expansion of state power as a melodramatic imperative.

Melodrama was also an aspect of what Michael Rogin has diagnosed as political demonization, a form of counter-subversion that names as monstrous any form of opposition to state policy and mainstream politics.[28] Melodrama is a specific form of demonization in which oppositional enemies are not just monstrous but evil, and thus cast outside what is properly inside "America." In melodrama, America is not only the monster's opposite, but retrospectively becomes both good and innocent through the contrast, and thus, through exceptionalism and manifest destiny, becomes *compelled* toward global heroic mastery. Melodrama's demonizing named the moral superiority in the nation; however, because this demonizing discourse operated through the terms of melodrama, the nation had to be seen as a victim in order to justify its superiority. When Rogin looks at this moment in US politics through demonization, he reads national discourse as something closer to *noir* or horror. He observes a doubling in which

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US national identity mirrors the very qualities it vilifies in communism, acting out "forbidden desires for identification with the excluded object."[29] Communism, in Rogin's analysis, is viewed as a form of sexual seduction that penetrates the family sphere; in order to prevent this penetration the US state must itself penetrate family life by expanding surveillance techniques and regulating familial behavior. Rogin's reading allows us to see how Cold War discourse projected onto communism the nation's own violent qualities, yet his reading does not exhaust the different ways in which political discourse was pitted against communist villainy, nor does it account for how the moralizing qualities of political discourse could work as a form of state legitimacy. Melodrama, unlike the *noir* features that Rogin diagnoses, uses moralization, detailed scenes of innocent suffering and the personification of state actions to contract the state as the spectacular and heroic avatar of a freedom-loving and virtuous citizenry un-riven by domestic problems. In melodrama, the nation is not a source of evil, in contrast to Rogin's reading; in melodrama, the problem is not a weak and susceptible family structure but a form of villainy external to internal US life. Melodrama's themes contributed to its rapid uptake in post-World War Two America, as it articulated the exceptionality of the American character and the moral legitimacy of state expansion.

Lovable Dogs and the Domestication of Melodramatic Political Discourse

During the postwar era, one of the most ingenious and visually spectacular engagements with melodramatic discourse came out of presidential campaigning, fortifying the links between individual citizens and national state power by extending melodramatic tropes to explain individual relationships to domestic politics. Richard Nixon's 1952 "Checkers" speech was intended to save his faltering bid for the vice-presidency amidst accusations that he had accepted large gifts from constituents. It situated Nixon himself as the victim/hero of American politics, and rerouted melodrama to internal national politics. Using televisual communication in an unprecedented way, Nixon gave an extended public service announcement on his candidacy in which he presented himself as the victim of a ruthless smear campaign. His announcement attempted to demonstrate how he could singlehandedly overcome unjust smears on his reputation by publicly performing his virtue. Nixon showcased his suffering and turned himself into the virtuous victim, with whom his audience could identify. He was a man just like them, thrust into extraordinary circumstances that required dire action. He

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demonstrated his integrity (by appearing in front of the American people), his honesty (by detailing out loud his modest financial circumstances), and his moral courage (by standing up to his bullies in an unprecedented and media-saturated way).[30] He declared: "it isn't easy to bare one's life on television as I've done." Nixon sentimentalizes his pain; he tells the entire nation that he is poor but virtuous, and that, even though he has been cruelly attacked by entrenched wealth and greed, he can stand up for himself by the sheer force of his moral rectitude and can-do spirit. Revealing the details of his modest mortgage, and referencing his wife Pat's "plain-cloth coat," Nixon succeeded in making himself ordinary, victimized and heroic at once, both like the people and able to achieve heroic feats of strength out of adverse and injurious circumstances.

Nixon's most effective astonishment of ordinariness was his reference to his lovable little dog, Checkers. Checkers was the only gift from a constituent that Nixon kept, because the dog became a gentle companion to his young daughter. Checkers was the only "truth" to the claim that Nixon took bribes, and his reference to Checkers turned a damning accusation of corruption into a childlike misunderstanding of his own big heart. Checkers symbolized Nixon's innocence, his average-family-ness. Nixon even asked his audience to contact their representatives directly about whether he should resign from the Republican vice-presidential ticket – using the strategies of going public to motivate Americans to act upon the ill treatment of a virtuous family man. He controlled the televisual spectacle by using a studious library setting, and interlaced the speech with reverse shots of his wife gazing up adoringly at him while he talked. The segment choreographs a sequence where Nixon stands up to demonstrate his heroism visually and punches his fist upward to emphasize how he will clean up Washington if elected. Nixon embodied a melodramatic celebration of the underdog – "They want to smear me … but I'm not a quitter" – to usher in a new popularization of melodrama that spread beyond Cold War strategy and into the fabric of the individual performances of domestic politics.

Reagan's Neoliberal Heroes

Throughout the Cold War and up until the 1980s, melodramatic discourse was periodically deployed to justify foreign and domestic policy. Other genres of political discourse rivaled and overshadowed melodrama at this time, especially during the Vietnam and Watergate years, when the jeremiad arose again to limit state power, damp down America's Manifest Destiny language, and mollify Cold War passions by requiring the nation to

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examine the effects of its violence both inside and outside the country.[31] The jeremiad's claim that evil is partly caused by one's own actions counteracted melodrama's refusal of responsibility for state violence, even as the source of blame for the horrors of the Vietnam war shifted, whether prophecy was used to generate political arguments by the left or the right, whether blame was to reside in government turpitude and military aggression or a permissive and undisciplined youth culture that harbored no respect for authority.

Yet in the 1980s melodrama resurged in political discourse, and with it the expansion of securitized and neoliberal state power under Ronald Reagan intensified. Perhaps the culminating exemplar of Cold War melodramatic discourse was Reagan's inaugural address in 1981, one just as rhetorically powerful as his famous Evil Empire speech, but more visually spectacular and given two years previously. Deeply attuned to the power of melodrama and the strategy of going public, Reagan's administration changed the location of the inaugural address for the first time in history to a more visually arresting spot. News cameras could now simultaneously cover him as they looked onto the vista of the Washington Monument and various memorials to other presidents, all of whom Reagan names as heroes and yet who also serve as homage to the heroism of Reagan and the America that he will explicitly embody in this speech. In the media coverage, over ten different camera angles capture Reagan against different backdrops, with varying levels of closeness. Some are extreme close-ups so that Reagan can communicate intimately without any other visual distractions, while others show Reagan at the helm of hundreds of thousands of admirers present to hear him speak. The media coverage of the speech took advantage of new developments in cinematic technique, including one astonishing shot that starts from Reagan's face and zooms outward, capturing first the White House, then expanding to the hundreds of thousands of people watching him, broadening again to the national monuments, and finally encompassing the expanse of all Washington, DC. Through scripted camerawork, these iconic American images are seamlessly linked to Reagan as he performs his melodrama in the service of individual American heroes.

Reagan begins his speech by inscribing his very presence on stage with miraculous significance. He states, "This every-four-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle." As Peter Brooks argues about melodrama more generally, Reagan succeeds in making the ordinary moment extraordinary by revealing the hidden majesty in what would otherwise appear to be the business-as-usual of liberal democratic politics. Setting the tone in this way, Reagan then immediately addresses the plight

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of the nation mired in an economic recession. He starts out at the origin point of all melodramatic plots – the scene of victimization:

> These United States are confronted with an affliction of great proportions. We suffer from the longest and one of the worst inflations in our national history. It distorts our economic decisions, penalizes thrift, and crushes the struggling young and the fixed-income elderly alike. It threatens to shatter the lives of millions of people. Idle industries have cast workers into unemployment, casing human misery and personal indignity.

Reagan uses overwrought language to convey the suffering of American people embattled by an economic recession, using emotively powerful terms such as "affliction," "threaten," "shatter," "distort," "crush," "penalize" and "misery" to describe their plight. He sentimentalizes the economic recession in its production of national victimhood; his pathos-laden language would have been unheard of even during the darkest days of World War Two to describe America. Like Truman, Reagan aims to create an emotional connection to the suffering he depicts, but unlike Truman the victims are not filtered through a third-party proxy but are directly his audience: namely, Americans.

Americans are the virtuous victims of the economic recession, and Reagan asks his audience to interpret their living conditions as political victimization caused by an unjust oppressor. The villain is quite different from the villain in Truman's and Eisenhower's speeches; not exclusively a communist enemy outside proper American life (the "evil empire" that Reagan will describe two years later), the enemy is internal, part of the fabric of American nationhood. Melodramas often use victimization to point out oppression and injustice, and here – in a cruel but not unusual melodramatic twist – injustice is caused by the very force that claims to protect individuals: the government. The villainous cause of national suffering is government's unjust domination of American individuals; its bloated regulation of business and its provision of social services are the direct cause of national pain and conditions of un-freedom. America, according to Reagan, can push beyond its suffering if it adopts his neoliberal plan of tax cuts and limited social services, and only then will it regain its strength to "preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom."[32] Government regulation is now the external enemy, banished from its role as a constitutive factor in American goodness. Of course, this plan for limited government does not limit expanding power but merely diminishes its accountability,

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as it limits financial support for needy individuals but also increases the subsidization of corporate power, with former state functions going to private firms not beholden to any electorate. Reagan's rhetoric of limited state power obfuscates the ways in which state power will deepen and disperse its penetrations into individuals and other nations during his presidency, as neoliberal corporate-state mergers will deregulate cannibalistic growth while still increasing corporate and state-organized disciplinary control over individual agency.

In this speech, the solution to the economic recession will be a personal one. The only solution to emancipate the nation from the recession, according to Reagan, is not reliance on a paternalistic government but the heroic self-reliance of the individual American; economic and social un-freedoms can be righted by individual heroism and voluntary private action. Reagan transfers responsibility for ending the recession from government to the individual: he wants to "unleash the energy and individual genius of man" so that Americans "are ready to act worthy of ourselves." He describes his solution through a quote written by a man who died in World War One: "America must win this war. Therefore I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the whole struggle depended on me alone." Reagan's speech asks its listeners to develop individual self-reliance by referring to their effort against economic hardship as a war, a war to the death against the debilitating dictates of the welfare state. As in many melodramas, the larger economic problems of injustice, inequality and fear that Reagan diagnoses through the language of victimization can be righted by "individual genius" or by the personal capacity to "work," "save" and "fight cheerfully." Reagan draws from melodrama's conventional trope of individualizing structural problems to find accountability in personal action alone.

Heroism, in Reagan's melodrama, is found in performing the drudgery of work under neoliberal capitalism. Reagan tells his audience: "You can see heroes every day going in and out of factory gates, others produce enough food to feed all of us and the world beyond. You meet heroes across a counter – and they are on both sides of that counter." Reagan's examples of heroism are solely related to employment, devoid of political, civic or communal action. Surprisingly, none involve engaging or checking governmental power, even though governmental power is the enemy in this speech. Instead, the speech brings heroism to the daily toils of the ordinary person, the everyman, and makes the daily toils of that life seem deeply meaningful. Reagan's melodramatic individualism valorizes ordinary heroes and the benefits of perseverance, and is thus not founded in state action; though it will be

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two years later in his Evil Empire speech, where state power is directed to expand in the realms of national security and military power. The heroism he outlines in this speech is found by sanctifying the ordinary person who becomes extraordinary in situations of government-organized duress by eschewing government support and relying on this inner moral core. This version of heroism models the depoliticized citizenry that Reagan will use melodrama to cultivate throughout his presidency. The neoliberal policies he outlines here, articulated and legitimated through the melodramatic discourse of heroic individualism, will lessen social safety for individuals and families at the same time as they demand individuals' increased responsibility for their own economic and social well-being. Yet perhaps most cruelly, the melodramatic formulation of neoliberalism makes the cancellation of policies that aim modestly to support human flourishing, however flawed, seem *desirable* in the pursuit of a heroic individual freedom.

Just in case his viewers have not yet understood his message, Reagan cements viewer identification with the description of heroism he is painting in a clear and unambiguous way:

> I have used the words "they" and "their" in speaking of these heroes. I could say "you" and "your" because I am addressing the heroes of whom I speak – you, the citizens of this blessed land. Your dreams, your hopes, your goals, are going to be the dreams, hopes and goals of this administration, so help me God.

This gambit is a double move: first, it alchemizes his listeners into the celebrated ordinary heroes he has outlined. Reagan links the heroes he paints with me and my life; my personal daily toil is now explicitly transformed into heroism. All Americans are thus heroes individually and collectively at once. Second, the end of the quotation makes Reagan the ultimate heroic savior of all ordinary heroes. Not only am I a hero, but Reagan will make my heroism his heroism – conflating my identity with the actions of his administration, and refashioning the melodramatic trope of nation-state individualism into the body of the president. Reagan anoints all citizens with heroic virtue, then immediately harnesses their heroism for himself in one bold stroke, further depoliticizing citizenship in asking Americans to experience heroism by relying on his policies – a particularly stunning move in a speech about self-reliance as the cornerstone of freedom.

The speech ends by using melodrama to couple the individual and the state further together, and yet also to keep citizens politically powerless in the face of state expansion. America's "crisis requires … our willingness to

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believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds … After all, why shouldn't be believe that? We are Americans." By not asking Americans to perform great deeds, but merely to *believe* that they can be performed, Reagan leaves his heroic citizens in their workplace and outside politics. Their role is to go to the factory or the farm or the counter, and to believe, but not to perform politically – that role can safely be left to Reagan, in his capacity to enact my dreams for me. In fact, there is no political role available to this heroism other than belief. The mode of heroic political action, for citizens, is no action; Reagan uses the melodramatic framework he both inherits and rearticulates to outline a neoliberal citizenry that is victimized by the welfare state, heroic when it performs economic reproduction, and simply believing when it comes to the practice of citizenship. After all, "We are Americans."

Lamenting Melodrama at the End of History

In Reagan's neoliberal melodrama, individuals are simultaneously expected to take personal responsibility for the burdens of a life lived under the strictures of unaccountable state and corporate power, while also being expected to legitimate the massive expansions in the national security state that are deemed necessary to maintain their heroic individualism. Reagan's later concept of an Evil Empire both expands and depoliticizes state power even further, not only by reinstantiating Eisenhower's bifurcated world order and reinscribing evil outwards, but also by moralizing and necessitating all state action that is done for the protection of good in the pursuit of global freedom. In the 1980s and beyond, domestic and foreign policy expansions not infrequently depended on evil both for their moral tenor and for the obligatory positioning of the nation as a victim/hero to justify the expansion of foreign, neoliberal and governmental power.[33] The end of the Cold War, like the end of World War Two, fortified America's heroic triumph and virtue in relation to the global order. The downfall of communist evil consolidated melodrama's power as both a clarifying political discourse and a triumphalist national identity.

The end of the Cold War seemed to prove the truth of melodrama's narrative promise that virtue and heroism would win in the end, that freedom has been achieved by the expansions of US state, military and economic power. The fall of communism would seem the ultimate proof of American triumph, the end of a longstanding narrative that could finally climax with heroic victory. This climax signaled not just the triumph of American power

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but, in Francis Fukuyama's wildly popular and infamous phrase, the "end of history" itself. Fukuyama's Hegelian claim in "The end of history" – that liberal democracy had dialectically overcome its communist other and would usher in a new global order of peaceful coexistence underpinned by free enterprise – became the tagline of 1990s foreign policy, shorthand for explaining why the USSR's downfall was a global triumph. At an earlier moment in melodramatic political discourse, Eisenhower argued that Americans had liberated themselves from the prison of history: now, Fukuyama explained, the virtues of American-style governing liberated the entire world from history, making the world free for sovereign and self-determining actors. The communist melodrama had ended with a resounding triumph for liberal capitalism: America had overcome evil and the world was unipolar, guided by the success of America's pursuit of freedom. The post-1989 world would also be a post-melodrama world.

Yet the end of the communist era left America's self-definition in a temporary position of ambiguity. America was again the dominant superpower, but it was also without a bipolar world order with which to map its virtues and showcase its strength. Without a constant threat of evil, the melodramatic promise of national virtue could not be invigorated; without villainy, virtue had no defining negativity. All it had left was an "end of history" mentality that, while proving the heroism of the US nation-state, also left it bereft of a constitutive evil other. Yet in a surprising twist that received scant attention when the essay first appeared, Fukuyama also lamented the loss of communist evil. He feared that the nation would now lack the vivifying effect that monstrous villainy has on American power, and even referred to the end of history as "a very sad time."

He wrote:

> The willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technological problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands … I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed … Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again.[34]

Fukuyama's argument ends, then, not with triumph but with the affective pull of lamentation. He mourns not merely the rise of economic rationality, but the loss of a melodramatic way of viewing global politics, and thus the

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capacity for courageous melodramatic heroism. He bemoans the end of a national and individual ethos that requires intense struggle to prove its heroic courage and self-determination. He yearns to inhabit a melodramatic identity that gains its legibility from standing against evil. Fukuyama points to a larger condition in which the nation-state gains strength and self-legitimacy primarily through a world order mobilized by melodrama's moral economy, when the state and individual fight daringly on the side of unconditional good for the very survival of human civilization.

What will we become, Fukuyama fears, without the affective force of a heroic state power fighting treacherous villainy, a power that exists beyond the individual citizen and yet to which each individual feels personally connected? Fukuyama believed that melodramatic modes of galvanizing national purpose would founder after America's 1989 triumphalism. This caused his despair about the end of history, a non-time in which US power and identity would be unable to survive without pathos-laden struggles with evil. A victim/hero with no villain loses the capacity for moral power and remains mired in the drudgery of ordinary life – a life, Fukuyama emphasized, without extraordinary significance; a life without melodrama. Yet, a decade later, 9/11 would re-galvanize America's extraordinary victim/hero identity as the nation-state battled a new villain intent on destroying the US. As articulated in melodramatic political discourse, 9/11may have served to get history started once again.

Notes

1. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 24.
2. Linda Williams argues: "Melodrama is still the best, and most accurate, description of the serious narrative and iconic work performed by American mass culture, broadly conceived … [Melodrama is] what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions." *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to OJ* Simpson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 12, 17. See also Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute Press, 1987), 5-39; David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*: *American Theater and Culture 1800-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute Press, 1987).

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3. For an extension of this argument, see Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
4. I examine post-9/11 melodramatic political discourse in "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media and 9/11," *Journal of Communication* 55:1 (March 2005), 22-37.
5. In "The Little American," Kristen Whissel suggests that melodrama helped to generate new forms of political engagement during World War One. With the rise of WWI melodramatic films, citizenship began to adapt to spectatorship: citizenship became a form of spectatorship, as political subjects are those who watch from a distance. The citizen became an astonished spectator converted to support America entering the war by means of film scenes of its atrocities. In Mandy Merck, ed., *America First: Naming the Nation in US Film* (London: Routledge, 2007).
6. John L. Baughman, *Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 30-31.
7. Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 2.
8. Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 172.
9. The historian Stephen Ambrose writes about the postwar moment: "Politicians looked for areas in which American influence could dominate, businessmen looked for profitable markets and new sources of cheap raw materials, and the military looked for overseas bases. All found what they wanted as America inaugurated a program of expansion that had no inherent limits." *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (New York: Longman, 1998), Introduction.
10. Steve Neale's research into the film industry showed how melodrama, in the trade press, was a category limited to action-oriented spectacles; domestic dramas and the woman's film were called not melodrama but "adult films." This conceptual lack of clarity about what melodrama is powers reams of scholarship that draw and redraw melodrama's boundaries. See Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and the Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press," *Velvet Light Trap* (Fall 1993), 66-89; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of *Attraction*: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-garde," *Wide Angle* 8:3-4 (1986); Scott Higgins, "Suspenseful Situations: Melodramatic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film," *Cinema Journal* 47:2 (2008); Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in Nick Browne, ed., *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-41.

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11. The immense national mobilization of industry during WWII perpetuated post-war expansion. Sheldon Wolin explores how the momentum of wartime continued by systematic policies dramatically expanding the scope and penetration of state power, and Michael Rogin examines how a Cold War demonology of invisible communist agents spawned an enormous government bureaucracy engaged in surveillance and countersubversion. Sheldon Wolin, "Democracy Without the Citizen," in *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
12. Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, esp. 21-29.
13. "Speech Broadcast Throughout World," *The New York Times* 13 March 1947, 10.
14. Steven Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 80-81.
15. Ibid.
16. Harry Truman, "The Truman Doctrine Speech," 3 December 1947, www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/trudoc.htm.
17. Italics mine.
18. C. P. Trussel, "Congress is Solemn: Prepares to Consider Bills After Hearing the President Gravely," *The New York Times* 13 March 1947, 1.
19. On post-WWII humanitarian discourse, see Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
20. Steven Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 111.
21. Harry Truman, "Second Inaugural Address," 20 January 1949, www.bartleby.com/124/pres53.html.
22. Ben Singer argues that melodramatic spectacle is experienced viscerally as well as visually, generating agitation caused by seeing "vicious power victimizing the weak." Exotic locations, festivities, natural catastrophes, extreme violence, use of animals ("horstrionic dramas"), crowd and battle scenes, mobile ships on stage, optical illusions and elaborate machinery all became central parts of the attraction and entrenched melodrama's moral lessons. *Melodrama and Modernity*, 40, 149-50.
23. Samuel Kernell, *Going Public* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2006).
24. Dwight Eisenhower, "First Inaugural Address," 20 January 1953, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dwighteisenhowerfirstinaugural.htm.
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26. Only six out of five hundred members voted against it; see Steven Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 142.
27. Kenneth Stevens, "Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18:3 (Autumn 1998), 579.

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28. See Michael Rogin, "Political Repression in the United States," in *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*.
29. Rogin, *Ronald Regan, the Movie,* 231.
30. "The Checkers Speech," videocassette recording in *Great Speeches Video Series*, Vol. 3, 1988.
31. On prophecy, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
32. Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address," videocassette recording in *Great Speeches Video Series*, Vol. 4, 1988.
33. Dean, "Evil's Political Habitats."
34. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), 18.

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Tears of Testimony: Glenn Beck and the Conservative Moral Occult

Scott Loren

> [...] moral consciousness must be an adventure, its recognition must be the stuff of heightened drama.
>
> – Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*

On 15 October 2009, the talk show host Glenn Beck cried on national television.[1] Of course, crying on television is nothing new. Think of the tears shed on daytime soaps; think of *Oprah*. Beck's tears, however, were shed neither on a soap opera nor on *Oprah*. This spectacle of suffering took place on an evening news program available to over one hundred million US households. He was moderating the program, as he had been every night for nearly a year. While there may always be occasion to cry given the general content of the nightly news, more disorienting than a newscaster crying on national television was the proclaimed reason for Beck's tears: namely, nostalgia for simpler times in America. In the sense used here, the notion of America elicited by the word "America" refers not to the continental geography known as America, nor simply to the United States of America in its physical, political and historical specificity, but to a fantasmatic projection at once bound to material and historical specificity while also free from it. It is to this impossible space of an always-already lost innocence or wholeness that Beck wishes to return: an other space conceptually structuring the setting and giving form to a plotting of historical events in a dramatic story of innocence lost and, potentially, regained.

In the span of Beck's first year with Fox Television, as well as those to follow, it was not unusual for the moderator to become visibly agitated. Being moved to tears, though, had yet to become a fixed part of his repertoire. On this particular evening, Beck's tears were prompted and aesthetically punctuated by an old Kodak commercial staging a middle-class, ethnically discrete, suburban American familial idyll stylized as being from the 1950s and 1970s, and accompanied by Paul Anka singing "Times of Your Life." That is to say, what purportedly drove Beck to tears had nothing to do with the inhumane misadventure that all too often characterizes the spectacle of suffering in news media. It was an advertisement staging a cliché of

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nostalgia intended to evoke the sensation of nostalgia in its audience that had done the trick. Suspect as this may seem, Beck's strategy of tears has brought him enormous fame as a media personality; and though his strategy of tears may serve to discredit him amongst his detractors, it also has the opposite effect for a broad segment of the viewing public. Who is Glenn Beck, you might ask, and why has he been crying all over the American mass-media-sphere?

Looking back at American talk radio and television during the first decade of the 2000s, for better or for worse one will inevitably be confronted with the figure of Glenn Beck. His launch into mainstream popularity started with *The Glenn Beck Program*, first aired on AM radio in 2000 from Tampa, Florida. While the afternoon timeslot that he had taken over was trailing (eighteenth) in local ratings, the new moderator pushed the program to number one within its first year on the air. This local radio success opened up other opportunities for Beck. By 2002 he had a nationwide broadcast featured on 47 different stations. Within six years, Beck was broadcast on over 280 stations nationwide to some six-and-a-half million daily listeners.[2] In 2008, the National Association of Broadcasters awarded Beck the Marconi Radio Award for Network Syndicated Personality of the Year.[3] Beck had become a household name, and not only on the airwaves. In 2006 he took over a prime-time slot on CNN's Headline News, a Time Warner news channel broadcasting since 1982. In the new medium of the televisual, Beck once again gained ratings rapidly, and within two years Headline News had become the channel's second-most-watched program.

Established via the dual-platform programming of cable television and national talk radio, Beck soon became one of the most well-known conservative news-media personalities of all time. His radio show, *The Glenn Beck Program*, has garnered some of the highest ratings in radio since its first national broadcast in 2002.[4] At the height of its popularity, his televised show, *Glenn Beck*, reached a viewership of over three million on a single evening. Beck has also authored six *The New York Times* bestseller books, making him a one-man mass-multi-media phenomenon. One might ask how crying on national television can facilitate such success. It had worked for Oprah. Indeed, in many respects Beck has inherited Oprah's tradition of subjective sentimentalism and the aesthetic spectacle of suffering that is inextricable from contemporary American media practices. But where Oprah captured the heart of America with teary daytime confessionals that encouraged individuals to find their true selves and realize their full potential, Beck's specialty is an admixture of anti-government, anti-humanitarian, racist, polemical right-wing politics, farcical conspiracy

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theories and a hyperbolic melodramatic style. If you were wondering when a backlash to Oprah's philanthropic spiritual uplift and to a short era of affirmative racial mixing and queerness on primetime television would hit mainstream media, it did so with Beck.

If Oprah's "therapeutic style" and the tears it evoked seemed to make sense in its mass appeal to daytime television audiences,[5] Beck's detractors have often had a hard time coming to terms with his hijacking of the evening news through a strategy of tears. Logically, many of his detractors point to the shoddiness of his One-World-Government and communist takeover theories, as well as to the wild inaccuracy of the self-proclaimed so-called faction that he presents on his show, but these critiques miss the point of what has made Beck so appealing. If it seems sheer madness to claim, for example, that "Jesus doesn't want a cap-and-trade system," or that Sen. Joseph McCarthy "was right," or to equate Al Gore with Hitler or Barack Obama with Satan, it is precisely the madness of Beck's method that sells. Despite having occupied the media space of what is ostensibly news, where listeners and viewers might expect a habitus of something that strives toward an objective presentation of perspectives on historic events, or may have been conditioned to believe that this is where so-called facts are presented, Beck's spectacular dramas do not deal in facts. They deal in feelings.

In the plotting of affective structures linked to non-inclusive modes of national identity, Beck's economy of emotion is evident at every turn. When he speaks to a cheering crowd of thousands in Norfolk, Virginia, about the world as they know it coming to an end in ten years' time, the superfluity of approximating fact in his rhetoric becomes wholly evident. His rhetorical and aesthetic strategies have been effective due to their efficiency in tapping strong objectless feelings such as anxiety or nostalgia and emotively anchoring them to objects of distrust and resentment. Rather than being problematic, the condition of nostalgic longing as attached to a phantom of a non-existent past serves Beck's melodramatic purpose, where a reflexive sense of hope is concomitantly sustained through and frustrated by sabotaging that which it purports to strive for as its goal.[6]

Beck's particular emotive economy is also reflected in the social issues, cultural myths and abstract associations that he links together: big government, progressivism, the national debt, the federal reserve, religion, gun control, libertarianism, the Holocaust, National Socialism, Stalinism, Marxism, socialism, communism and community organization, the last of which Beck effortlessly equates with those preceding it. "Social and ecological justice," Beck has been known to say, is "bullcrap."[7] Perturbing

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as it may be to ascribe reason or grant recognition to Beck's popularity, or affectively to digest his fear-mongering, hate-crime-inducing and racist politics, my purpose here is not to discredit nor attack Beck; at least, not in the first instance. Rather, I wish to make clear the extent to which Beck's operative mode is melodrama.

Melodrama studies is an area of research that has traditionally been a sub-category of genre studies via literary and film studies, but one that, as this volume evinces, is increasingly employed in sociological contexts to analyze a range of cultural phenomena and historical events, such as race relations or the representation of national trauma in the media.[8] Peter Brooks describes the cultural advent of melodrama in relation to the secularization that occurred as a reaction to the social upheavals following the French Revolution.[9] The Enlightenment's critique of religious and other institutions led to a radical displacement of hierarchies that had formerly legitimated moral code systems and provided a worldview with clearly accessible notions of good and evil. The destabilization of clerical and monarchic authority thus obfuscated "moral legibility," according to Brooks. Beyond the various practical causes that facilitate melodrama's prominence as a popular dramatic form (from laws regarding the use of language in public entertainment to social effects of rural displacement and urban growth), its extra-generic status, constituting a cultural mode or ontological lens, has to a considerable degree been ascribed to its ability to rehabilitate a system of Manichean moral codes that lends deeper meaning to action and being by grounding them in what Brooks termed "the moral occult."[10]

With secular modernity, melodrama fills an important gap: "It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life is of immediate, daily, political concern."[11] Here we find a clear connection to Beck's political strategy and rhetorical style. His primary concern, as he has so often intimated, is to expose the Good and the Bad by promulgating hidden truths about unethical practices, policies and agendas on the left. The good conservatives of Beck's "Real America" are in the greatest danger of becoming the victims of liberal villainy. The urgency of his claims is evinced through his end-of-times rhetoric: it is not about gaining or losing House majority, but rather about life and death. The truth that can save you, Beck claims, is lurking just beneath the appearance of things and is in dire need of exposure.

Melodrama, as Brooks perceived it, is achieved through a narrative exertion of pressure "upon the surface of things," turning the "banal stuff

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of reality" into "an exciting, excessive, parabolic story."[12] This story is characterized by hyperbolic figures of villainy and virtuousness, and by monopathic moral polarization between good and evil, in which the villain "betrays and undoes the moral order" through "plotting, evil, [and] conscious obfuscation."[13] The strong pathos induced by the virtuous victim's loss incites the necessity of action that will restore honor and the moral order. Elisabeth Anker has argued that the central characteristics of stage and screen melodrama can and do migrate into popular non-fiction contexts, such as political rhetoric. Synthesizing various central characteristics of melodrama as articulated by theorists such as Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser and (most prominently in the following) Linda Williams, Anker enumerates five distinctive qualities of melodrama:

(a) a space of moral virtue signified by pathos and suffering and increased through heroic action;
(b) the characters of a ruthless villain, a suffering victim, and a heroic savior who can redeem the victim's virtue through an act of retribution (the latter two can be inhabited in one person: the virtuous victim/hero);
(c) dramatic polarizations of good and evil;
(d) a cycle of pathos and action;
(e) the use of images, sounds, gestures and nonverbal communication to illuminate moral legibility as well as to encourage empathy for the victim and anger toward the villain.[14]

Through the various functional means (thematic, temporal and aesthetic),[15] all elements serve to make a position of moral integrity easily identifiable, thus emotionally and ideologically aligning the viewer with the victim, who is both virtuous and righteous by dint of having been made a victim. Melodrama "is a discursive practice that makes truth and justice legible by demarcating a clear boundary between right and wrong,"[16] echoes of which can be found in Beck's repeated partisan claim that "it's not about left and right, but right and wrong." Such reductive and inclusive statements are typical of Beck's rhetorical style. When Anker claims that "the precise 'sublimity' of melodramatic rhetoric" is achieved through "the emphatic articulation of simple truths and relationships, the clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures," Beck's rhetorical style, conceptual content and sought effect will easily be recalled.

Using melodramatic aesthetico-narrative techniques and temporal structures, Beck plots a story pattern that he repeatedly mobilizes. First, the public is turned into victims. There are many ways in which this is achieved,

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but Beck's core narrative is that the "Real America" he repeatedly refers to has lost its innocence, having strayed at times but more importantly having been taken advantage of or cheated on the sly by evil villains who want at all costs to destroy the nation; and indeed have nearly done so. The villains are democrats and social institutions; the biggest villain of all is President Obama. As a loyal citizen, a patriot and an individual who is able to see the truth behind the lies where others cannot, it is Beck's duty to expose the horrible inequities and those who perpetrate them to his public, who at the end of the day are good honest Americans who have fallen victim to the evil lurking amongst them. Naturally, exposing the hidden truth is of utmost urgency, but this alone cannot save the good people of Real America. Like any unwitting victim besieged by evil forces, Real America needs to be rescued before all is lost; and a rescue requires a hero.

Within Beck's fundamental plotline sketched here, characteristic elements of melodrama become explicit: the triad of villains, victims and heroes; the space of domestically localized lost innocence; tyranny and moral corruption; heightened pathos; the urgency of action; occulted knowledge and an aesthetically articulated, hyperbolically punctuated moral legibility. However, unlike the tradition of social melodrama where the masses are united against a powerful few, Beck's melodrama of a Real America does not divide those masses from their inequitable leaders, but rather divides both governing bodies and the masses internally along party lines, setting them vehemently against themselves. The unfortunate result is visibly reflected on a larger social scale, where democratic (and here I refer to the system of democracy, not the political party) political procedures are made lame through vindictive partisan acts of obstruction. The relationship between sentimentality and melodrama is important in this context. Where social melodrama can position the masses in a sentimental state of suffering together (or commiseration) that validates the victim position as virtuous, belligerently setting the masses against one another disperses evil, as opposed to localizing it. Thus the mechanism by which moral legibility triggers a pathos/action relay becomes overloaded, producing a "residue of unruly emotion that cannot be accounted for" properly,[17] but that can be harnessed for other purposes; which is to say, a residue that might be redirected with intention.

Where Beck's politics might be described as an admixture of conservative ideals, libertarian ethics and Mormon theology, his peculiar style and the hyperbolic mythical figures that haunt his conceptual universe are all conjoined with uncanny ease under the generic formulas of melodrama: ill-willed socialists seeking national destruction and world domination

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versus morally upright, gun-toting, white, working-class "Real Americans" standing on the shoulders of the Founding Fathers.[18] Three examples from Beck's repertoire illustrate the extent to which Beck employs the melodramatic mode: his attacks on Barack Obama, his "Restoring Honor" rally in Washington, and, of course, his televised strategy of tears.

In the Beck universe, there are many villainous hats that President Obama might wear for the construction of a melodramatic victim-villain paradigm. But in order to generate the negative national pathos that Beck seeks, the very embodiment of evil in the American imagination is required. Within the social imaginary, no other historical figure can call up associations of evil like the figure of Adolf Hitler. He is set apart from the common lot of murderous dictators who have made ethnic cleansing their daily business. If there were anything like a close second in the scale of metaphysical evil to the conservative American mind, this would be communism, the Red Scare. Beck draws on affective and iconic cultural memories of Hitler and Stalin, harnessing and redirecting these messy residual traces toward Obama. In his wild equations of Stalinist communism, National Socialism and American social services, Beck facilely interchanges a modern history of fascist regimes with American democratic ideals and community-building social practices in the public sector. He has likened Obama's healthcare reforms and expansion of AmeriCorps[19] to conditions in Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Third Reich. In Beck's nationalist melodrama, Obama is a "socialist" with "Marxist tendencies," "marching us to a non-violent fascism" that is to blame for "the destruction of the West."[20] In a segment called "Comrade Updates," Beck showed images of White House policymakers with Hitler and Stalin mustaches painted onto their faces, claiming "I'm going to show you how these things [...] happening today line up with some of the goings-on in history's worst socialist, fascist countries."[21] In another segment showing images of Obama and the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown opposite Hitler and Stalin, Beck declares: "those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." Of course, there is no attempt to provide accurate historical information, nor even something vaguely resembling a logical or reasonable argument. It is not even narrative coherence that Beck's circus of signs seeks, but rather a kind of affective knee-jerk reaction: an overloading or stoppage of the signifying process, in which incongruent iconic images are knotted together in an associative, non-logical figuration of past horror and present anxiety. This is melodrama at both its best and worst. It achieves the linguistically inarticulable production of an affectively charged, morally resonant sign through a hyperbolic, punctuated aesthetic field, vibrant with surface tensions, on the one hand, while on the other,

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inciting fear that divides the masses in bitter resentment as opposed to uniting them in a common cause.

While the melodramatic gesture of comparing Obama to Stalin and Hitler might constitute a hyperbole hyperbolized, reaching dizzying new melodramatic heights, this is not the only cape of villainy that Beck has reserved for the United States' first black president: Obama is also a racist. Linda Williams has shown how a tradition, both fictional and non-fictional, of black vs. white racial melodrama is inseparable from race discourses in American culture. Although melodrama has a "propensity to side with the powerless,"[22] Williams points out that it has also been "employed by resentful whites whose own sense of powerlessness dangerously exaggerated the perception of a black threat to white hegemony."[23] Beck mobilizes this melodramatic scheme, playing a race card that frames his so-called "real" America as victims of a villainous, extremely dangerous "black man in the White House":[24] "The president has, I think, exposed himself as a guy, over and over and over again, as a guy who has a deep-seated hatred of white people, or the white culture, I don't know what it is."[25]

The US journalist and author Alexander Zaitchik has suggested that in order to understand Beck's particular brand of racism, you first have to understand what he means by "the white culture." This "white culture" is synonymous with "an entire moral, political, and cultural universe, which Beck [...] has nicknamed the Real America."[26] Beck's myth of a "Real America" is "at once geographic and non-geographic, racial and nonracial, real and imaginary," and is inextricably rooted in the mythology of an American heartland: primarily white, working-class, rural Middle America where Christian values and conservative morals supposedly dominate.[27] The cultural associations with an American heartland inevitably evoke imagined nostalgic projections of national innocence for those who can relate positively to the cultural and racial hegemony that Beck promotes. Conceptually, Beck's Real America is juxtaposed with a villainous "fake America" that is "urban, socialist, godless, educated with all the wrong ideas [...] By threatening to overwhelm and extinguish the Real America, the fake is hostile in every way: anticapitalist, antifamily, and – the part of the triad that usually dares not speak its name – antiwhite."[28] Beyond his racist claims that Obama's policy is prompted by a desire for slavery reparations, and his support of conspiracy theories that paint Obama as an insidious foreigner lacking the possession of legitimate US citizenship, Beck's particular style of playing the melodramatic race card is interesting in its coupling of racial demonization with the threat to a space of national innocence. Beck's Real America and American heartland constitute his

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fantasmatic melodramatic space of innocence to which his audience can only wish to return. It is the very wish of returning to an originary space of innocence that drives melodramatic pathos and the subsequent action needed to restore the virtuous victim's honor.

On 28 August 2010, nearly 100,000 people gathered in Washington DC at the Lincoln Memorial to celebrate America's "heroes and heritage."[29] The tone of Beck's "Restoring Honor" rally was both spiritual and patriotic, encouraging Americans to unite in their belief in God, to honor war veterans, and to recall and return to the core American ideals as represented by the Founding Fathers. Purportedly, Beck's original intention was to hold a political rally to introduce his hundred-year "plan to save America," which he would outline in detail in an upcoming book, *The Plan*.[30] As a political ticket would have made taxable the charity funding he intended to raise, the rally assumed an apolitical appearance and the funds raised would partially go to the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides scholarships for children of Special Operations officers killed in service.[31] The shift was one from a promise to rehabilitate lost innocence and virtue to one focusing on reparations for victims. Employing this particular structure of victimhood guarantees patriotic pathos and action constructed around the space of lost familial (i.e. domestic) innocence. Beck's original intention to "restore America and restore her honor"[32] on this particular date creates a very peculiar constellation of Manichaean black vs. white racial melodrama.

There are few sound bites in US history that are as prominent in memory and emotionally resonant as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream." These four words from his speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom have been a potent cultural artifact in the history of civil rights, racial equality and national identity. In choosing the anniversary and exact location of King Jr.'s address, Beck's rally to "restore honor" was guaranteed a high level of emotive cultural resonance, but a resonance that is necessarily conflicted. It draws from the emotive well of sympathy within and with the African American community while at the same time "restoring" the date to predominantly white American conservatives by symbolic usurpation. If Beck was unable to capitalize on the proclamation of having a dream himself – no doubt the aim of presenting his hundred-year plan at this particular time and place – this was not an end to his "attempt to flip the imagery of Dr. King."[33] His tactic here is similar to the one seeking to imbue the image of Obama with an association to fascism, but temporally and axiologically inverted. Where "Comrade Updates" recalled troubling images from the past to destabilize and haunt the present in an aesthetically punctuated visual

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field, the melodramatic rally call to "restore honor" constituted a troubling choir of voices from the present that might rattle the bones of the past and chase them (for some, at least) from memory. With such a platform for co-presenter Sarah Palin's vice-presidential nomination and for what would come to be known as the inaugurating event of the Tea Party, nowhere else would this kind of socio-political, ideological and historical usurpation find such a receptive audience. The implications of restoring honor are thus two-fold, both melodramatic and both racially significant. First, there is the longing for a former innocence; next, we find the production of a pathos/action relay fueled by Manichaean oppositions of good/evil, victim/villain and white/black. According to Beck, regaining honor means a nostalgic return to a set of ideologies personified in US cultural mythology by the "founding fathers" whom Beck idolizes (in a literal sense); a time in which slavery was integral to the organization and material practices of social life in America. Symbolically, this necessitates a retroactive, fantasmatic construction of history in which Beck's "Real [White] America" has fallen victim to the illicit appropriation of civil rights by an Imposter America, an illegitimate dark charlatan America that, in the end, even manages to seize and occupy the White House.

Theories of melodrama explain that the archetypal victim-villain-hero triad functions to elicit pathos and action by legitimation through the "felt truth" of the moral occult. The felt truths to which Beck appeals through his rhetoric of virtuous victimhood and his strategy of tears, however defamatory and racist they may be, seek affirmation in an index of deeper moral values. Recourse to a register of morality in Beck's Restoring Honor rally is mirrored in the event's religious and conservative overtones, creating a dense layer of racial, religious and partisan melodrama, where a Manichaean split between good, God-fearing, conservative, white virtuous victims and evil, heathenish, democratic, dark degraded villains further polarizes and emotionally charges partisan politics in America. Evacuating any necessity for logos and centralizing pathos, polarization and emotive intensification through reference to a moral occult is precisely what is at stake in Beck's strategy of tears. The mute aesthetic hyperbole of melodramatic tears serves to make moral truths legible. When Beck cries for love of his country, the gesture is one of authentication: his virtuous tears of suffering are evidence of his moral credibility and the verity of his claims – emotionally at least, but that is what counts. It is worth noting that while discovering the emotive potential of melodramatic rhetoric in political debate, Beck also discovered his affinity to Mormonism, where the shedding of tears is common in the rituals of revelation. A man moved to tears by faith is a man testifying to

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the power of his convictions.[34] In Mormonism as in melodrama, "moral consciousness must be an adventure, its recognition must be the stuff of heightened drama."[35] Placing Beck and his mass appeal in a media-specific cultural genealogy thus also means contextualizing them within a tradition equally known for its hyperbolic punctuated aesthetic, a Manichaean rhetoric of evil versus good, dark versus light, and of victimhood, virtue and redemption.[36] Counterpoised (though not contradictory to) his strategy of tears, Beck's brash dogmatic tone descends from that many-headed hydra at the gates where bizarre Americana and mass media meet: televangelism, itself deeply imbricated in the American melodramatic mode. Beck is at once a quintessentially American media-affect event and cultural artifact. Pandering to feelings of being overwhelmed by the irreducible complexities of contemporary social existence, of constituting the demos in a perpetual state of national emergency, he is both a symptom and etiological condition of his times. If Beck's strategy of tears evinces the protean capacity and prominence of a melodramatic mode in American culture, it also troublingly reframes the question of what melodrama's aesthetic strategies can tell us about the ideological discourses that contain or mobilize them.

Lauren Berlant has proposed a theory of "cruel optimism" to describe the juncture of affect, mediation and ideology that has come to characterize contemporary American sensibilities. Her theory can help explicate the emotive reflexes and discursive logics at play in Beck's public spectacle of affective moral conviction via cultural archetypes such as melodrama, Mormonism, a "real America," the heartland or the founding fathers. She proposes cruel optimism as an "affectively stunning double bind" in which there are passionate attachments to (A) fantasies that ultimately function as obstacles to that which they purportedly seek as their goal, and to (B) the optimistic hope of fulfillment that such fantasies falsely represent. The cruelty of cruel optimism, she claims,

> is apprehensible as an effective event in the form of a beat or a shift in the air that transmits the complexity and threat of relinquishing ties to what's difficult about the world. What remains, therefore, is to specify how the activity of affective attachment can be located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field in ways that clarify the process of knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation.[37]

Perhaps there is also a sustaining reflexivity structuring the relation between Berlant's cruel optimism and the cultural myth of melodrama.

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On the one hand, a cultural sensibility of cruel optimism might be viewed as facilitating the structural contingencies of melodrama. At the core of any *if I could just … then everything would be alright, good, like it used to be* logic is a nostalgic fantasy of utopic wholeness, which in turn necessitates systems of classification that will allow feelings to be attached to objects and thus be transformed into emotions. A feeling of frustration or discontent might be directed toward an individual or institution, thus establishing an obstacle. Obstacle status allows an object to refine amorphous discontent into something more discrete and local, something like contempt, for example, which in turn renders a greater degree of stasis in the plotting of axiological positions: there is me, the opponent-obstacle, and my goal; or in the terminology of melodrama, there is the victim-hero, the villain-enemy, and the lost space of innocence that might be regained. Plotting Beck's nostalgic fantasy of simpler times in America according to such a scheme produces the following narrative logic: *if we can revert to times of greater hierarchical stringency, when there was less equality among races, sexes and political views, and less potential access to power for the disenfranchised and marginalized, things would be simpler and life in America would be free of all that now ails it*.

Fantasies of wholeness cathect objects with positive or negative value, thus engendering a personification of that which blocks access to wholeness. However, as wholeness is strictly a nostalgic phantasm, object cathexis can only perpetuate the fantasy, and thus the solipsistic impossible hope of regaining wholeness. Rather than seeing in cruel optimism an articulation of melodrama (which in many regards it may be) as a cultural myth, I would view melodrama as reflexively fueling cruel optimism. As myth or worldview, melodrama can help to account for the spread of misdirected, self-defeating optimism that Berlant describes. The problem is not with optimism *per se*, but with the manner in which historical events and societal conditions are stubbornly plotted through particular types of optimism; and at the end of the day, the optimism of melodrama is cruel.

Notes

1. *Glenn Beck*, Fox News Channel, 2009.
2. "The Top Talk Radio Audiences," *Talkers*, 24 March 2008.
3. See http://www.nab.org/documents/events/awards/marconiAwards/2008Winners.asp, last accessed 19 January 2012.
4. "The Heavy Hundred," *Talkers*, 2009.

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5. See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
6. In a partial reformulation of Freudian repetition compulsion and Lacanian desire, Lauren Berlant has convincingly rearticulated this type of culturally situated cognitive-emotive reflex as an "affective structure" she calls "cruel optimism" (see Berlant's introductory chapter, "Affect in the Present," in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
7. Fox News, 13 May 2010, http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,592785,00.html, last accessed 20 January 2012.
8. See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media and 9/11," *Journal of Communication* 55:1 (March 2005): 22-37.
9. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
10. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 20-21.
11. Ibid., 15.
12. Ibid., 2.
13. Ibid., 33 and 43.
14. Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes," 24.
15. See Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, *Irritation of Life: The Subversive Melodrama of Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars von Trier* (Marburg: Schüren, 2013), and the Introduction to this volume.
16. Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes," 23.
17. Julia Straub, "Melodrama and Narrative Fiction: Towards a Typology," *Anglia* 132:2 (2014), 225-41, here 227.
18. See Beck, *The Real America: Messages from the Heart and the Heartland* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005).
19. AmeriCorps is a nationally funded non-profit organization that seeks to fight illiteracy, help disadvantaged youth and "help communities respond to disasters," http://www.americorps.gov/about/ac/index.asp, last accessed 26 January 2012.
20. Beck, *The Glenn Beck Program*, 2 October 2009.
21. Fox News, 4 February 2009.
22. Martha Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended': Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13:1 (Autumn 1981), 130.
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24. See Christopher S. Parker, Mark Q. Sawyer and Christopher Towler, "A *Black* Man in the *White* House? The Role of Racism and Patriotism in the 2008 Presidential Election," *Du Bois Review* 6:1 (2009), 193-217, on how symbolic racism and patriotism have affected Obama's public reception.
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III.2 Holocaust Legacies

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The Cultural Construction of the Holocaust Witness as a Melodramatic Hero

Amos Goldberg

> The generation that lived through the Holocaust is dwindling. The presence of witnesses – the remnant who survived – ensured a certain moral strength; their absence creates a moral, cultural and educational vacuum. Given these processes, it would seem that memory of the past is doomed to fade and lose its validity and significance.

These words, by Avner Shalev the Chairman of Yad Vashem, the Israeli national authority for Holocaust remembrance, taken from the institution's website,[1] reflect a public feeling that has become familiar over the last couple of decades. The words express an anxiety that, as the witnesses who experienced the horrors of the Holocaust pass away, their memories and the memory of the Holocaust will be lost too.

This view, which is seen as natural and obvious in many circles, is in fact questionable. While witnesses and testimony have always played a role in the creation of history, memory and culture, it would appear that the status of witnesses has never been so iconic, almost sanctified, as is the case with Holocaust witnesses. It follows that it is extremely unusual for the memory of an event to be identified so absolutely with the personal stories of its subjects and victims as in the case of the Holocaust; so much so that it almost seems as though Holocaust memory has become identical to testimony and the concept of testimony itself has become a super-metaphor of knowledge, truth and ethical authority in regard to trauma, suffering, victimhood and catastrophe – themes that dominate our public sphere.

As is well known, this was not always the case. In the first years after the war the witnesses were not encouraged to speak publically about their experiences and they themselves were not always very eager to do so.[2] When they did, they were not always listened to. The memory of the Shoah in those days was not very central in Europe and America, nor did it have its current significance even in Israel.[3] The witnesses were not such cultural heroes as they are now.

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The emergence of the witness to catastrophe as an influential public figure has its roots, as Jay Winter has shown, in the aftermath of the Great War[4] – mostly in France. The invention of the eyewitness, as Andrea Frisch indicated in a book bearing this title, also has a very long genealogy.[5] However, a turning point in the emergence of Holocaust witnesses and the witness as such, as a prominent cultural figure, is undoubtedly the Eichmann trial that took place in 1961. This trial, which was a worldwide media event and which gave center stage to the victims as witnesses, signified the beginning of what the French historian Annette Wieviorka critically called the era of the witness.[6]

It is important to distinguish here between two types of witness that dominate the Christian, Moslem and Jewish traditions. The difference between the two is not always clear-cut, but is valid nevertheless: namely, between the reporting witness and the foundational witness. The reporting witness is the legal witness, who observes a crime from the sidelines and helps to shed light on the truth based on what is assumed to be his or her objective and disinterested gaze. The role of this witness is to be a kind of clear window onto events whose details are otherwise insufficiently apparent.

The second type of witness, the foundational witness, is someone who establishes, by his or her very presence as a witness, a kind of cultural covenant. The martyr and the *shahid* (both terms mean literally a "witness") are classical examples of this witness. Testimony here is a kind of speech act that is extremely charged emotionally.[7]

The Holocaust witness has a reporting and a foundational function. This witness enriches us with much and varied knowledge.[8] It seems, however, that his or her special cultural status is not based on the validity of the facts that he or she has told us about. It is not historical truth we are looking for from this witness, who is far from objective, but rather another kind of truth, which creates a sort of covenant and identity. It is a truth to which only the one who was there can bear witness.

It is also important to indicate that in most cases, the witness who is sanctified in this culture of witnesses is not the perpetrator, but the victim. Hence victim-witnesses are solicited all over the world in order to be taped for various archives – the most well-known being the Spielberg, Yad Vashem and Fortunoff collections; they are the major protagonists of newly built museums such as the Berlin memorial, the new Yad Vashem Holocaust museum and the Bergen-Belsen exhibition. Beginning with Lanzmann's film *Shoah,* victim-witnesses also dominate documentary cinema and have become the subject of endless theoretical reflections, of which Shoshana

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Felman's and Dori Laub's, Berel Lang's, and Giorgio Agamben's are some of the best known.[9]

The final field to open its gates to the victim-witness was history, which is usually very suspicious of personal narratives and prefers official documentation. However, this changed with Saul Friedländer's recent magnum opus, *The Years of Extermination.*[10] This book, which integrates a mosaic of individual voices – mainly, though not only, those of victims – into the comprehensive historical narrative, became a canonical work of Holocaust history immediately upon publication. This book, which signifies the end of the era of the great political, cultural and historiographical debates about the Shoah, also signals the consensus that has formed around the canonical status of the Holocaust witness as an historical hero and a major cultural figure.[11]

It should be noted that the witness-victim seems to have usurped other modern figures as bearers of truth and meaning in times of oppression and crisis, including the freedom fighter, the revolutionary, the partisan and the engaged intellectual.

Some view the advent of the witness as a very positive development that makes culture and society more sensitive to the voices of the weak, the powerless and the victim. It helps the victims of history to regain their dignity and acquire respect in their society. By letting those victims speak and by empathically listening to them, culture and society help them to recover from their extreme traumatic experiences.[12] Moreover, some see this cultural trend as embodying the legacy of Walter Benjamin, acknowledging that every great historical event should be told from its victims' perspective – as though brushing history against the grain. Some also celebrate these processes as part of a nascent diasporic cosmopolitan ethical memory, believing that it is a significant factor in the contemporary human rights regime as the most powerful ethical and juridical discourse that enables the victims of history to be heard and to demand restitution, apology and compensation.[13]

In this essay I would like to complement these positive claims by offering a more critical analysis of this phenomenon and by placing it in a more general political and cultural context. I will try to point to some of its (to my mind) dire political consequences, and to set out an alternative understanding of the moral role that the victim-witness should play in current public life. I will do so within the conceptual framework of melodrama, which I consider to be useful in this case. I will focus mostly on the Israeli political arena, given its intimate relationship with what has become widely accepted as the global memory of the Holocaust.[14]

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My point of departure will be Peter Brooks's assertion that melodrama is first and foremost about excess.[15] According to him, the melodramatic flourishes as a cultural response to radically excessive events, such as the French Revolution, which cause fundamental existential and moral uncertainties and destabilizations. The melodramatic confronts fears by expressing them in a highly hyperbolic and expressive emotional fashion, which therefore tends to simplify complex situations into binary oppositions. The audience in the melodrama knows exactly with whom to identify and with whom they should certainly not. Thus, the melodrama is a kind of performance that expresses great horror and crisis, but at the same time immediately restores the moral and social order and its authority. Good is good and bad is bad; black is black and white is white. With the demand for unqualified identification from the viewer stimulating an affect that Robert Heilman terms monopathy,[16] the melodrama tends to avoid any "grey zones" of complexities, to use Primo Levi's famous term.[17] So the melodrama, according to Brooks, does two contradictory things at the same time – it acknowledges the excessive and immediately denies it. Melodrama opens itself to the traumatic and immediately turns its back on it, as if we were still standing on solid moral, social and political ground.

Melodrama could thus be seen as a counterpart of fetishism, which arguably functions according to the same logic. As Slavoj Žižek had put it:

> The symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. Let us take the case of the death of a beloved person: in the case of a symptom, I "repress" this death, I try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma returns in the symptom; in the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I "rationally" fully accept this death and yet I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death.[18]

Fetishism, like melodrama, is not about simple denial; on the contrary, they are both about acknowledging and expressing the excess that uncontrollably erupts. But they both immediately twist it, so as to make it look as though nothing really happened. Fetishism and melodrama are very different in their emotional mode: whereas the melodramatic is very emotional, the fetish makes one appear reasonable and rational, but the logic is the same: acknowledging and denying excess and trauma at the same time. In this sense, they both belong to the politics of reassurance that could easily lend itself to conservative politics.

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This discourse of excess seems to me extremely useful when talking about the Holocaust witness who, in the first years after the war, was undoubtedly the bearer of excess. His or her traumatic experiences were so extreme that they were a real, destabilizing scandal that no contemporaneous cultural or political discourse could tolerate. Their stories had literally no place in the public sphere. To draw on Lacanian terms, they were the actual embodiment of the unbearable traumatic Real that as such had no place in the social structure. It is therefore no wonder that Primo Levi's manuscript, to mention only one very famous example, was rejected by Natalia Ginzburg on behalf of the prestigious Einaudi publishing house in 1947; Levi had to publish his memoir *If This Is a Man?* with a small and unknown publisher. The same thing happened to Elie Wiesel, Robert Antelme and many others whose works later became canonical texts in testimony literature. But in the postwar years, when the optimistic, humanistic, heroic national resistance and anti-Fascist discourses reigned supreme in Europe, and in different ways also in America and the new-born Israel, these voices were indeed extreme and excessive. They challenged the most fundamental assumptions about the nature of mankind, culture and society. The voices simply did not fit into any grid of contemporaneous political or cultural discourse. The year 1961 and the Eichmann trial signaled a turning point.

The general attorney of the state of Israel, Gideon Hausner, decided to conduct the trial primarily on the basis of the victims' testimonies, in stark opposition to the Nuremberg trials, which were based on endless (mostly Nazi) documentation and in which the witnesses played a very marginal role. The Eichmann trial was the first time that the victims-witnesses received the opportunity to speak out publically and tell their excessive story to the Israeli and international public. This was a dramatic change. One after another, some hundred witnesses came to the stand and told their amazing stories under oath to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For the first time they were heard in Israel and worldwide, with great respect but also with empathy. The excessive and unbearable started to become bearable, and to find its legitimate place in the public sphere.

As is well known, Hannah Arendt vehemently opposed this procedure. She claimed that the testimonies that were heard in court had nothing to do with proving the guilt of the accused. She considered Hausner's decision to conduct the trial primarily on the basis of the victims' testimonies as mere Zionist propaganda.[19] The judges permitted the avenue taken by the trial, but ignored these testimonies almost completely in their written verdict.

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In a famous essay on the Eichmann trial, Shoshana Felman, one of the most influential theorists of testimony, defended Gideon Hausner's decision against Arentdt's criticism:

> Because history by definition silences the victim, the reality of degradation and of suffering – the very facts of victimhood and of abuse – are intrinsically inaccessible to history ... But the Eichmann trial, I would argue, strives precisely **to *expand* the space available** for moral deliberation through law. The trial shows how the unprecedented nature of the injury inflicted on the victims cannot be simply stated **in a language that is already at hand** ... [T]he trial struggles to create a new space, a language that is not yet in existence. This new legal language and this new space in which **Western rationality** as such shifts its horizon and extends its limits are created here perhaps for the first time in history precisely by the victims' first-hand narrative.[20]

According to Felman, the great significance and achievement of the Eichmann trial is not only due to the fact that it gave the witnesses central stage to speak publically about their horrible experiences. Something much more fundamental was at stake here: the very nature of the legal discourse of Western rationality and its relationship to the excessive. Here something fundamental had to be changed, so as to expand the language already at hand in order to deal with this excessiveness. According to Felman, it was not only that the legal system had to broaden its scope in order to be able to deal with excess. It needed first and foremost to acknowledge the excessive itself, which transcends its own rational universality. In a way, the system had to acknowledge that from time to time, it has to invent itself anew in order to deal with the unpredictable and excessive. In short, it had to accept, "perhaps for the first time in history" as Felman puts it, the very idea of excessiveness, which changes the legal system's nature as a discourse that always has a language at hand. It had to acknowledge the principle that, in order to do justice, it had to open itself to excessiveness and transform itself into something that was unheard of till then. It had to give up its structural stability.

This analysis is typical of Felman's postmodern theoretical framework; she and postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard, Blanchot, Levinas, Agamben, Laub, Hartman[21] and others have dwelled extensively on the figure of the witness and on the issue of testimony within the conceptual framework of "after Auschwitz" (*nach Auschwitz*). These thinkers have established what could be called the "ethics of testimony."

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This discourse acknowledges the radicality of testimony, but also transforms it into an ethical challenge. The witness must testify to what is beyond words or symbolic representation and therefore opens up a fundamental lacuna, a kind of void that deconstructs the substance and continuity of the self. This is a witness who seeks to testify to what they cannot fully comprehend and which therefore haunts them, leaving the listener speechless in astonishment and horror. Even if the testimony involves many words, silence lies at its core, which paradoxically establishes it and unravels it at the same time. The ethical challenge to the listeners is to have the empathy that will enable the witness to utter their incomprehensible testimony. Listening to the witness and recognizing the impossibility of the testimony, of the endless wrong done to him or her, the listeners enable the witness to reestablish him- or herself as a subject, albeit a partial and ruptured one. That is why Giorgio Agamben concludes that to be a subject and to bear witness are in the last analysis the same thing.[22] Post-structuralist scholarship often bestows upon this witness the status of an exemplary cultural figure emerging from the void of the Real and embodying something so awful that it is beyond linguistic or symbolic representation. As such, the witness establishes the ethics of testimony.

The witness-victim and her or his testimony therefore stand for the radical otherness that destabilizes the self – individually and collectively – and disrupts our cultural and symbolic structures.

In this sense, the Holocaust witness stands for radical otherness, which became the great ethical and political challenge of the West after two world wars and the Holocaust. They stand for the great challenge of being able to tolerate and accept, within political, cultural and social structures, elements that are extremely alien to these very structures. The witness stands for the imperative always to expand the space available and the language already at hand in order to include, within one's moral universe of obligation, those who actually disturb one's own narcissistic, beautiful and full self-image. So the witness obliges one to show empathy for those who are very different, and to construct a moral relationship to those others without reducing them to part of the self. In this sense, the imperative of the witness stands in stark opposition to the tendencies of the melodrama and the fetish. Whereas the latter acknowledge excessiveness but deny any change – on the contrary, as we saw, they reaffirm the existing social order – the former acknowledges the constant need for changes to the existing order, so as to come to terms with the challenges of excess and otherness. And while the latter reestablish the force of authority in the face of excess, the former, as we saw in Felman's analysis of the legal system, loosen the total grip of authority in order for the system to invent itself anew in the face of radical excessiveness.

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So if one broadly identifies, as I do, with this postmodern logic and ethics, one might be expected to be satisfied with the ethical status that the witness in general and the Holocaust witness in particular have gained in the global cultural arena. Should we really celebrate the emergence of the witness, however, as Felman celebrated the witnesses' role in the Eichmann trial? I have my doubts about this. More than half a century has passed since the Eichmann trial. In this long period, the cultural status of witnesses and of their stories has changed dramatically. What may have been considered a daring leap in the 1960s is not necessarily so in the second decade of the third millennium.[23]

Indeed, as stated above, we are now living in the "era of the witness" – an era in which every historical or newsworthy event is mediated to the public by victims and eyewitnesses. We can sense this everywhere: in the popularity of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, as Eva Illouz has shown, in the ways in which terror attacks are reported in the media, in documentaries, and in Holocaust museums all over the world.[24] "The individual and the individual alone became the public embodiment of history," concludes Wieviorka.[25] Owing to this development, the voices of the victims and witnesses appear to have lost their radical political and ethical force – especially in regard to Holocaust witnesses, who play such a hegemonic role in our culture. They no longer seem to bear the excess of history, and can thus hardly claim to be the moral guardians of otherness and the embodiment of the excessive.

In other words, in a culture addicted to the excessive that has given rise to what Eva Illouz calls the "homo sentimentalis,"[26] in a culture that has adopted a fundamentally therapeutic narrative of the self, Holocaust witnesses provide the most expected excess for which there is already plenty of space and for which a very structured language has been created in the last few decades. Excess and testimony have become the most commonplace cultural topoi and are embodied in the figure of the Holocaust witness, a figure who might even be considered as emblematic of this newly born *homo sentimentalis*. There is no longer any need to expand the space available, because this space is already very well structured; and therefore I contend that, in our current culture, the excessive voices of the witnesses have to a certain extent exchanged their epistemological, ontological and ethical revolutionary functions for an aesthetic one. They operate according to the pleasure principle in order to bring us, consumers of Holocaust images, the most expected image of the unimaginable, which therefore generates a melodramatic pleasure.

My premise here is that there are no essential elements within the witnesses, not even the Holocaust witnesses, that make them bearers

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of excess, and that whether they do so is always dependent on cultural factors. So, while in the 1960s the victim-witness managed to produce what the formalists demanded of literature – namely, alienation and de-automatization – thereby returning horror to the horrors (to paraphrase Shklovsky's expectation of poetry, "to make the stone *stony*"[27]), in the current culture these voices produce the opposite, namely pleasurable identification with human suffering according to familiar and expected protocols. They need no new language to be invented for them because, in a way, they are the paradigmatic bearers of the contemporary language of suffering and trauma.

As we have seen, the categorical imperative in the post-structuralist ethics of testimony, as articulated *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust witness, is: "thou shalt listen empathically to the witness and identify with her." But one should note that the moral imperative here is always directed, as Michal Givoni points out, towards the paradox of a story of the past, and is completely distanced from the political arena. This is its fundamental critical weakness: testimony indicates a retrospective position in face of wrongdoing more than an involvement with the reality creating it.[28] In a sense, all that testimony demands is to enable the impossible voice of the witness to break through, and to make us listen to it, especially the voice of the witness whose politically-generated suffering has come to an end. Testimony does not demand a change in reality in order to diminish, to use Adi Ophir's term, the "superfluous evil" of this world.[29]

The historian Charles Maier's observation, in his controversial 1993 essay on the surfeit of the Holocaust memory, is very pertinent:

> My own belief is that at the end of the twentieth century Western societies have come to the end of a massive collective project. It is not just the project of the … Left … It is also the end, or at least the interruption of the capacity to found collective institutions that rest on aspirations for the future.[30]

According to Maier, moreover, two narratives compete in explaining the twentieth century: the Holocaust narrative and the post-colonial narrative.[31] Broadly speaking, one may say that during the 1950s and early 1960s these two served as political narratives and were closely bound up with each other. This is clearly apparent in the work of Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Alain Resnais, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charlotte Delbo and many others.[32] These two narratives, however, have parted company,[33] and while the post-colonial narrative has sustained its criticism of Western societies and their liberal democracies for their ongoing structural involvement in acts of domination,

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racism, extreme violence and criminality, the Holocaust has paradoxically become a somewhat reassuring narrative. It was the "bad guys" – the Nazis – who messed it all up, or so this narrative has it, and as long as we stick to our democratic values and strengthen our civic society while moderating radical ideological trends, we can protect ourselves from slipping into criminality, thereby reinforcing our identity as the "good guys," the upholders of democracy and freedom. This is indeed a melodramatic scheme.

When speaking about Anne Frank, Adorno recalls a German woman who reacted by saying that at least this girl should have been saved, implying that the others could have perished.[34] This might be considered the most dangerous outcome of melodrama. According to the Israeli literary critic Yitzhak Laor, who has produced a thorough study of English melodrama, this genre focuses on the misery of a single individual or family, which, "more than it extracts tears, remains silent about a greater suffering that prevails all around. It is constituted from a kind of identification that does not demand any real moral action."[35] In a way, the figure of the Holocaust witness lends itself to this kind of identification. It is so easy to identify with the Jewish victim when the Jews – collectively and many times individually – are no longer the victims of history but rather powerful historical agents, and thereby to silence any empathy toward currently suffering victims, an empathy that would demand moral and political strength and a far more courageous and complex engagement.[36]

These issues are far from being theoretical, at least in Israel, but perhaps also elsewhere, including Europe and America. In contemporary Israel, the imperative to empathize with Holocaust victims and witnesses has never been so powerful and ubiquitous, and the imperative to listen to the Palestinian voices bearing witness to the *Nakba* or to the severe deprivation and violation of fundamental collective and individual human and civil rights has never been so weak. The latter imperative is not only weak but fundamentally denied, silenced and punished when uttered by Palestinians, and condemned as treason when expressed by Jews – as in the case of the *Breaking the Silence* group of soldiers who testify to the evils of the occupation.[37] Silencing the Palestinian victim's voice is one of the major undertakings of the current Israeli Parliament[38] and seems to function as the other side of the melodramatization of Holocaust testimony.

In current Israeli political culture, Holocaust witnesses have gained such a role that, much more than encouraging us to acknowledge excess and consequently expand the political space available for those who have no access to the sharing of power, they sustain the current political structure that privileges the ones perceived as the heirs of past Holocaust victims

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– namely Israel – over current suffering victims. I would like to elaborate this point and connect it to the issue of fetishism, which I mentioned earlier.

This logic of the Holocaust witness points to a fundamental tension within contemporary global Holocaust memory in which, as Dirk Moses has noted, the particular and the universal tend to become confused.[39] On the one hand the Holocaust, to use Alon Confino's phrase, is becoming a foundational past:[40] a kind of defining metaphor which sustains global human rights regimes, while on the other hand being intimately linked to a particular historical agent, namely its Jewish victims, bestowing special privileges on them and placing an obligation on the historical victimizers – first and foremost Germany – to compensate them.

On the one hand, the Holocaust has become an ethical symbol that generally underpins a liberal cosmopolitan position extolling individuals and their rights to an extreme degree.[41] Paradoxically, however, the Holocaust at the same time delineates a clear-cut boundary to these same rights. It is the only event whose denial constitutes an unthinkable infringement. Such denial is, moreover, a criminal offence in twelve countries, carrying a severe penalty.[42] These countries thereby limit freedom of speech to an unprecedented degree, bearing in mind that this is one of the most fundamental individual freedoms, generally curtailed only in cases where there is substantiated suspicion of a direct and imminent threat to public security. Precisely because the Holocaust as a memory constitutes for many people a liberal ethical and perhaps even multicultural or cosmopolitan commitment, it has itself become a fundamentalist pillar of belief that is not, under any circumstances, to be destabilized. It enjoys the status of "absolute meaning"[43] as conceived by Žižek, or is, in other words, a fetish.

One may thus refer to Holocaust discourse as the foundation of Western anti-fundamentalism. This is a difficult point located beyond the discourse that it itself constitutes. It is as though the Holocaust generates a liberal discourse that cannot be applied to itself and its direct agents since, were this essential belief to be cracked, the entire discourse would collapse. Should the Holocaust lose its sanctity and become a political event, which, transgressive and horrific as it was, nonetheless happened within the boundaries of history and not outside it, how would it be possible to justify the commitment to a cosmopolitan discourse of human rights linked to its memory as a global ethical imperative?

The same paradoxical logic is at work in the cultural functioning of the Holocaust witness: it sustains the universal regime of the victim's right to be empathically heard, but at the same time it silences the voices of those victims who confront the righteousness of the particular political agent

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identified as the heir of the victims of the Holocaust. So in this sense, the Holocaust witness constitutes (as we saw in the cases of Felman, Agamben and others) anti-foundational ethics from which he or she is exempt. Such an ethics must be fetishized so that it does not fall prey to its own anti-foundational logic, thereby destroying its own authority. The next step would inevitably be to melodramatize her or his testimony, so as to avoid it destabilizing its own regime of truth and morality.

So is there a way out of this deadlock of melodramatizing and fetishizing the Holocaust witness? Is there a way to come to terms with the excess of testimony without denying its urgent and constant demand for political change, for expanding the place available, and for creating a new language that will enable current victims to speak their story in order to gain justice? Or in the Israeli context: is it possible to create space and a language in which the voice of the Palestinian witness could also be heard? Can we avoid the melodramatization of the Holocaust witness that, by drawing total identifications, disguises other current and ongoing evils? Can we recharge Holocaust testimonies with their essential destabilizing power?

I believe we can, and it should be done by subverting the core issue of identification. Following Hannan Hever,[44] I will try to elaborate on this option by referring to Dominick LaCapra's concept of empathic unsettlement.[45] LaCapra distinguishes between empathic unsettlement and identification. Whereas the latter tends to block the transformative potential of excess, the former puts it as its great moral and political challenge. What empathic unsettlement propels is not only an identification with suffering or the sufferer *per se*, but also with their fundamentally traumatic uncanniness and otherness which forces us, contrary to the denial of melodrama, to expand the place available. Empathic unsettlement does not reduce identification to the narcissistic or melancholic pleasure of sameness. On the contrary, it demands that the otherness of the witness's traumatic story strike the listener and demand change. This empathy is based on difference and not sameness. One lets oneself be infected, so to say, by the witness's traumatic story, so as to acknowledge the challenge of its transformative unsettlement. This unsettlement corresponds to Lyotard's ethical position, so elegantly summarized by Saul Friedländer: "The striving for totality and consensus is, in Lyotard's view, the very basis of the fascist enterprise."[46]

Let me conclude by illustrating briefly how this empathic unsettlement works in a Palestinian narrative that is paradigmatic here. In his novel *Bab al-Shams – Gate of the Sun*,[47] Elias Khoury tells, perhaps for the first time in a comprehensive way in fiction, the story of the ongoing Palestinian *Nakba*.[48] Khoury, a Lebanese novelist who joined the Palestinian struggle

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and was injured in the civil war in Lebanon, collected hundreds of Palestinian testimonies and life-stories over several years in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, from which he constructed the narrative of the novel. This novel is to my mind an exemplary text of empathic unsettlement. The entire novel is a monologue uttered by the narrator, Khaleel, talking to Younes, one of the great Palestinian heroes, lying unconscious in one of Beirut's hospitals as he is about to die. Like Scheherazade, the narrator wishes to suspend death by narration. Khaleel asks critically:

> But tell me, what did the nationalist [Palestinian] movement posted in the cities do apart from demonstrate against Jewish immigration?
> I'm not saying you weren't right. But in those days, when the Nazi beast was exterminating the Jews of Europe, what did you know about the world?
> I'm not saying – no, don't worry, I believe, like you, that this land must belong to its people, and there is no moral, political, humanitarian, or religious justification that would permit the expulsion of an entire people from its country and the transformation of what remained of them into second-class citizens … But tell me, in the faces of the people being driven to slaughter, don't you see something resembling your own?
> Don't tell me you didn't know, and above all, don't say that it wasn't our fault. You and I and every human being on the face of the planet should have known and not stood by in silence, should have prevented that beast from destroying its victims in that barbaric, unprecedented manner … because their death meant the death of humanity within us.[49]

What the narrator actually demands from his Palestinian compatriot is not a total, uplifting melodramatic identification with the Jewish Holocaust victim. Neither is he willing nor able to reduce radical difference to sameness and to give up his own political and moral vantage point on the events that took place in Palestine. But nonetheless, he does demand empathy towards the Jewish Holocaust victim. The faces, as he says, bear some kind of similarity: they bear witness to some very complex truth – to the fact that, even from a Palestinian point of view, the Jews in Palestine could not be perceived only as colonialists, but also as refugees who fled the worst of persecutions.

Are there immediate political consequences to such empathy and acknowledgement? Not necessarily – this is explicitly asserted. But to some extent, the empathy destabilizes and complicates the conventional Palestinian national narrative. It creates a new discourse and expands the space available. That is precisely the core of empathic unsettlement. It demands

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of the listener to open him- or herself to the radical traumatic otherness of the witness in order to destabilize something in his or her own stiff and exclusionary structures. It obliges the subject to feel empathy towards the victim-witness and at the same time to acknowledge his or her otherness, and therefore assume otherness as the very basis of the social and political structure. In this sense, this empathy is a mild rupture that opens one up to structural change. It is the precise opposite of melodrama.[50]

It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on this impressive novel, but what is clearly at stake here is a process of empathy with the Holocaust victims that critically unsettles the Palestinian-Jewish mutually exclusionary identity structure. I will therefore conclude by saying that, to my mind, in the Israeli-Palestinian context for Jews and for Arabs alike, the only way to politicize that structure is to de-fetishize and de-melodramatize Holocaust testimonies, as well as *Nakba* stories, so as to let their inherent excessiveness expand the space available and to find new ways to tell these testimonies together.

Notes

1. http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/mission_statement.asp. The last sentence quoted appears only in the Hebrew version. See http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/he/about/chair.asp.
2. It now seems, though, that the survivors spoke much more than had been assumed. On this revision, see Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
3. See Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). But this view should also be revised; see Anita Shapira, "The Holocaust: Private Memories, Public Memory," *Jewish Social Studies* 4:2 (Winter 1998), 40-58.
4. Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War and Historical Memory in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 238-74; Jean Norton Cru, *A Study in Historical Criticism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1988). See also, in regard to German colonial atrocities in South-West Africa, Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, eds., *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia, An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
5. Andrea Frisch, *The Invention of the Eyewitness* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
6. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

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7. On the theological context of modern testimonies, see Samuel Moyn, "Bearing Witness: Theological Roots of a New Secular Morality," *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), chapter 6.
8. See, for example, the book by Christopher Browning, one of the most distinguished historians of the Holocaust, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). This is a study of the Starachowice slave labor camp that is based almost entirely on 292 survivors' post-Holocaust oral testimonies, thanks to which he manages to reconstruct the history of the camp.
9. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999); Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). See also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
10. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
11. Jeffrey Herf, "The Whole Horror," *New Republic* 9 October 2007; Dan Diner, "Jahre der Vernichtung," *Die Welt* 30 September 2006; Richard Evans, "Whose Orders?," *The New York Times* 24 June 2007; Ulrich Herbert, "Die Stimmen der Opfer," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 29 September 2006; Hans Mommsen, "Fassungslosigkeit, die sich mitteilt," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 4 October 2006; Karl Schleunes, "The Years of Extermination: Book Review," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22 (2008), 340-42; Ada Pagis, "The Dead Will Not Stop Living," *Haaretz* 12 December 2007 [Hebrew]; Klaus-Dietmar Henke, "Die Stimmen der Opfer," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 4 October 2006.
12. See, for example, in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog, *The Country of My Skull* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).
13. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
14. See also Amos Goldberg, "The 'Jewish Narrative' in the Yad Vashem Global Holocaust Museum," *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:2 (June 2012), 187-213.
15. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
16. Robert Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).
17. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1993).
18. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13-14. See also Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 27, 34-39.

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19. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).
20. Shoshana Felman, "Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust," *Critical Inquiry* 27:2 (Winter 2001), 201-38; here 229, 225 (bold emphasis mine).
21. On all these postmodern thinkers in this context, see Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
22. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 158.
23. I have elaborated on this point in relation to Saul Friedländer's recent book *Nazi Germany and the Jews* in "The Victim's Voice in History and Melodramatic Esthetics," *History and Theory* 48 (October 2009), 220-37.
24. Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Louis Bickford and Amy Sodaro, "Remembering Yesterday to Protect Tomorrow: The Internationalization of a New Commemorative Paradigm," in *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, eds. Yifat Gutman, Adam Brown and Amy Sodaro (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 72-78.
25. Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 97.
26. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*.
27. Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader,* ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 16-30; here, 20.
28. Michal Givoni, "Witnessing/Testimony," *Mafte'akh* 2 (2011), 147-69, esp. 151-55; Givoni, "Beyond the Humanitarian / Political Divide: Witnessing and the Making of Humanitarian Ethics," *Journal of Human Rights* 10 (2011), 55-75.
29. Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Towards an Ontology of Morals* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).
30. Charles S. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial," *History and Memory* 5:2 (Fall-Winter 1993), 136-52; here, 147.
31. See Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 165:3 (June 2000), 807-31.
32. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
33. In the last decade and a half there has been a strong tendency in historiography fundamentally to re-explore these connections. See, for example, A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler* (New York: Palgrave, 2004); Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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34. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89-103; here, 101.
35. See Yitzhak Laor, *Description of the Development of a Genre for Mass Consumption: The English Melodrama during the Early Nineteenth Century* [Hebrew], MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1983. The quote is taken from his beautiful short essay "Rose's Silence," *Haaretz* 15 August 2008 [Hebrew].
36. I follow here Peter Novick and others, who search in vain for a true commitment to the values of human rights and freedom in Holocaust consciousness. See Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 239-62. In Jewish and Israeli political contexts one may even make the opposite case. See Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "From Auschwitz to the Temple Mount: Binding and Unbinding the Israeli Narrative," in Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman and James Phelan, eds., *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 291-313. For a controversial (to say the least) book that nevertheless contains more than a grain of truth, see Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2001).
37. A bill drastically limiting funding to *Breaking the Silence* and other human rights groups was dropped only due to heavy international pressure. See for example *Haaretz* 4 December 2011, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/u-s-warns-israel-over-bill-to-limit-foreign-funding-to-ngos-1.399442.
38. See for example the "Nakba Law" which was approved by the Israeli parliament on 22 March 2011. The law grants Israel's finance minister the power to reduce the budget of state-funded bodies that openly reject Israel as a Jewish (and democratic) state or that mark Independence Day as a day of mourning.
39. Dirk Moses, "The Holocaust and World History: Raphael Lemkin and Comparative Methodology," in Dan Stone, ed., *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 272-89.
40. Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
41. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). Regarding claims for restitution and the return of property, see Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
42. See Deborah Lipstadt's book on the prosecution of Holocaust denier David Irving: Deborah E. Lipstadt, *History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

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43. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), chapter 4. In a political context, see Žižek, "Shoplifters of the World Unite," *London Review of Books* 19 August 2011, http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite (last accessed 20 May 2012).
44. Hannan Hever, "The Post-Zionist Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012), 630-48.
45. See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
46. Saul Friedländer, "Introduction," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5.
47. Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun* (*Bab al-Shams*), trans. Humphrey Davies (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006).
48. *Nakba* means "disaster" in Arabic. This term came to signify first and foremost the loss of Palestine in the 1948 war during which some 700,000 Palestinians fled the country and became refugees. It also signifies the ongoing processes of Palestinian oppression by Israel.
49. Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun,* 295-96.
50. For similarly unsettling texts by Zionist writers, see Avot Yeshurun's poem "Passover over Caves" and Hannan Hever's discussion of this poem in Hever, "The Post-Zionist Condition;" see also Yoram Kaniuk's novel *The Last Jew*. See also R. Binyamin's especially interesting writings: for example, in English (trans. Shmuel Sermoneta-Gertel), "A New Israeli Message to Our Infiltrator Brother (A Vision Seen in a Dream)," http://mondoweiss.net/2012/11/a-vision-seen-in-a-dream-a-leading-religious-zionists-1956-call-for-the-palestinian-refugees-to-return.html. See also S. Yizhar's short stories, *Khirbet Hiza* and *The Captive*. For commentary on Yizhar's writing in this context, see Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 113-49. Elias Khoury critically explores the absence of the voice and identity of the Palestinian or his or her ambiguous presence through indirect engagement with his or her story in modern Israeli literature. Identifying the absence or the ambiguous and indirect presence of the Palestinian in Israeli literature demonstrates what Khoury calls "the muteness of language" in this literature. One form that this muteness takes is drawing fairly clear lines that cannot be crossed when engaging with the Palestinian tragedy/story. See Khoury, "Rethinking the Nakba," *Critical Inquiry* 38:2 (2012), 250-66.

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Nation and Emotion: The Competition for Victimhood in Europe

Ulrich Schmid

Nations need narratives in order to constitute themselves. Homi Bhabha claimed in his seminal study *Nation and Narration* that nations are "systems of cultural signification" and that they promote "foundational fictions."[1] National consciousness is based on a plot that allows for an identification of individuals with an "imagined community."[2] Elements of such a narrative can be found in the preambles of constitutions,[3] in political speeches,[4] in canonized works of literature,[5] and in popular culture such as folk songs[6] or blockbuster movies.[7] The outlook of these national narratives differs widely in time and space. Most often nations rely on a heroic epos as a basic narrative; a good case in point is the United States of America. The American national consciousness often invokes the foundation myth of the New World: a free individual has to fight for his own existence and ends his *pursuit of happiness* by creating a home.[8] In the US context, the state and social concerns are secondary – what is most important is the self-attribution of US citizens to a nation of free, independent men who are responsible for their own fate. For a long time, this heroic narrative[9] has served as a model for other nations in the world.

The late twentieth century, however, witnessed the rise of another master plot for the construction of a national identity: namely, victimization. Not victory but defeat, not heroic self-assertion but tragic self-abasement stands at the center of this variety of nation-building. Both heroism and victimization allow for the delineation of an in-group: the heroes are considerably stronger than their enemies, while the victims are considerably weaker than their enemies. Nevertheless, common suffering may tie a national community together with even stronger bonds than does common triumph. Suffering opens an ideological vacuum that needs to be filled with sense. Victory is replete with triumphal sense that needs to be dispersed – but this reservoir of ideology may be exhausted quite quickly. Suffering lasts longer than triumph, and it needs narrative support for its endurance.

Narratives of suffering and victimization have a special epistemological status: they are *veridictions* in the Foucauldian sense. The victim always claims to tell the truth – a truth that may not be challenged or questioned. If the veridiction of the victim were open for debate, the

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victim would lose his or her own identity. This is why the exemplary discourse of victimization, the Holocaust, does not tolerate comparisons and insists upon its uniqueness.[10] The extermination of the European Jews is seen as a singular event – not so much regarding the number of victims, but regarding the evil intentions and the criminal energy of the perpetrators. Bearing witness to the Holocaust means establishing a truth that is then validated by its absolute cruelty. Any attempt to explain the behavior of the perpetrators psychologically would derogate from the narrative counter-power of the victim. The unconditional truth of the Holocaust endows the author of a narrative with absolute authority. This claim holds true for almost all discourses of victimization. Nations that build their identity basically on self-victimization do not allow for a new perspective or even a new assessment of their history of suffering. On the contrary, they even try to turn their own veridiction into *jurisdictions* by other nations. For instance, the Armenian genocide (1915) is officially recognized by the parliaments of Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, Vatican City and Venezuela. In addition, the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932-1933) has been recognized as a genocide by the parliaments of Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Slovakia and the United States. In both cases, pressure groups from the national elites lobbied heavily among the representatives of foreign parliaments in order to achieve their goal.

These endeavors show that truth is nothing without recognition. For the absolute claim of truth in a victimized nation, an acceptance of this narrative in public opinion is not enough. The veridiction of victimization demands institutional recognition; governmental acts, memorials, ceremonies, anniversaries and the like must guarantee both the importance and the validity of the national narrative.

Of course, there is a certain inflation of insistence on the truthfulness of a victimized discourse. The jurisdictions depend on the results of a parliamentary vote, and obviously such votes are not able to produce a truth, but only an opinion. Still, the added institutional prestige of all the parliaments that passed a bill of recognition strengthens the victimized nation's claim to truth. The veridictions also presuppose a kind of canonization of a certain historical discourse. Most national societies that are based on victimization have erected taboo zones around their historiography and public opinion. It is very hard to discuss or openly challenge victimizing narratives in such nations. In the following, I shall try to explore some cases in point and

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to analyze their specific use of victimization in their ongoing discursive project of nation-building.

Israel

Until recently, the Holocaust was *the* basic narrative for the *raison d'être* of the Jewish state. In the last twenty years, this exclusive position has been challenged from within and from without. In Israel, more and more voices are claiming that the state should emancipate itself from its Jewish history and identity and assume a more modern notion of citizenship that encompasses Palestinians as well. One of the most fervent critics of the concept of a "Jewish state," Avraham Burg, accuses Israel of "owning" the Holocaust and making political use of it.[11]

Other authors go even further in their criticism of the role of the Holocaust. Roman Frister, himself a survivor of the Shoah, does not even deplore the destruction of the traditional Jewish habitat by the Nazi occupants:

> Years afterward, when nothing was left of the Jewish shtetls of eastern Poland, their pathetic world would be remembered with sentimental longing for a lost culture. Their poverty, their filth, and their backwardness all forgotten, they would be honored for the charm of Peretz's stories, the legendary jokes of Hershele of Ostropolye, Chagall's airborne fiddler, the spiritual heritage of Hasidism.[12]

Criticism of the Holocaust-centered political culture in Israel may take various stances; there is also a more general critique of the political use that is being made of the Holocaust. In recent years, many authors and politicians have used the Holocaust as a generalized metaphor for genocide. This inflationary use has lessened the significance of the category: if genocide is everywhere, it is nowhere. The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut maintains: "Used in contexts to which it does not apply, weakened by its metaphorical use, and degraded by needless repetition the term genocide is wearing out and dying. The exhaustion of meaning makes it easier for the workers for negation to do their job."[13] Peter Novick interprets the Holocaust as a secondary conceptualization for the extermination of the Jews during World War Two, and stresses the meaning of the Six-Day War for the remembrance of the Holocaust: in 1967, it became palpable that the state of Israel was threatened existentially, and the memory of the Holocaust served as the main legitimizing discourse for the actions of the Israeli army.[14] Norman

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Finkelstein goes a step further when he speaks about the "exploitation of Jewish suffering" in a veritable "Holocaust industry." He accuses pressure groups in the US of manipulating world public opinion in order to elevate Israel to the status of a victimized nation and to draw political advantage from this interpretation.[15]

This ongoing debate shows how victimization in the case of Israel is both crucial for the existence of the nation and subject to heavy criticism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become clear that a great many other nations and interest groups have copied the Holocaust discourse, which they perceive as a success story for the establishment of a nation state in an adverse context.

Poland

Of all European nations, Poland probably has the longest tradition of a national consciousness that grew out of victimization. After the three partitions (1772, 1793 and 1795) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Polish state ceased to exist on the map of Europe for 123 years. In Polish culture, the three partitioning powers – the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg Austria – became synonymous with oppression and tyranny. Russia, in particular, was reproached for its ruthless brutality towards occupied Poland. The otherwise strong Polish Romantic nationalism was almost entirely built upon self-victimization.[16] Poland was likened to Christ, who sacrificed himself for the redemption of mankind. Another metaphor used by the Polish Romantics was the Swiss mythical hero, Arnold Winkelried. At the Battle of Sempach in 1386, Winkelried allegedly opened a passage through the Austrian front line by throwing himself onto the enemy pikes. Both figures – Christ and Winkelried – are heroes and victims at the same time. The same holds true for Poland's construction of its own historical fate: Poland was defeated at the end of the eighteenth century, but with its own death, it allegedly saved Europe from the aggression of the barbaric East. Of course, this narrative downplays the fact that Prussia and Austria were equally responsible for the Polish partitions. The rhetoric of the heroic defeat is still very much present in the official national anthem. It harks back to a patriotic soldier's song from 1797 that puts the victory into the future tense: "Poland has not yet perished, / So long as we still live. / What the alien force has taken from us, / We shall retrieve with a sabre. We'll cross the Vistula and the Warta, / We shall be Polish. / Bonaparte has given us the example / Of how we should prevail." The expectation of a splendid victory became a

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leitmotiv in Polish political culture. Two uprisings in the nineteenth century (1830 and 1863), the Polish-Soviet war (1918-1920) and the beginning of World War Two in September 1939 were all interpreted as tragic events with the Poles as innocent sufferers and the foreign powers as vicious perpetrators.

Only one of these historical events had a happy outcome for Poland: the Polish-Soviet war ended with the unexpected victory of the Poles over the Red Army near Warsaw. Since this result did not fit the usual plot of victimization, it was readily termed the "wonder of the Vistula." Not only was the military result a miracle, but also first and foremost, the fact that for once it was not necessary to turn a defeat into a heroic deed. It is interesting, however, that the military victory of 1920 was not seen as an isolated event, but rather as a chapter in the Polish history of salvation. Even today, the Battle of Warsaw is presented not so much in terms of triumph, but in terms of suffering that is crowned by a military success. In 2010, Polish Television aired a melodramatic serial with the epic title *1920: War and Love,* in which the country's military success is bought at the high price of personal tragedy. The same holds true for the monumental film *The Battle of Warsaw* by Jerzy Hoffmann, which came out in 2011.

Victimization in the Polish case often means the disempowerment of individual action. A victim is thereby not only subject to the actions of the perpetrator, but also plays a role in a mostly hidden master-plot. One of the most prominent events in Polish cultural history that reinforces the victimized version of national history is the massacre of around 4,400 Polish officers held captive at Katyn in 1940. Soviet historiography blamed the Nazis for the crime, and only in 1990 did Mikhail Gorbachev admit that the Red Army was responsible for this mass murder. In 1997 Andrzej Wajda made a film about Katyn, evoking, in the long final scene that shows the murder of the innocent and defenseless Polish victims, the shocking imagery of the Holocaust and Auschwitz. The political message of this kind of visualization amounts to the claim that the Poles also have their Holocaust – just with the crucial difference that Katyn is not sufficiently recognized abroad.

Serbia

On 28 June 1989, Slobodan Milošević gave an important speech at the site of the Battle of Kosovo. The celebration that day was centered on the 600th anniversary of the battle, which eventually ended with the defeat of the Serbian Kingdom at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Contemporary Serbia is one of the nations that bases its foundational myth on a tale of defeat. The main argument of this myth is the readiness to fight – and, as in the Polish case,

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the defeat does not entail resignation, but resilience. The more destructive the defeat, the more decisive is the will to rise again. Milošević's speech is seen today as the starting point for the bloody wars in Yugoslavia of the 1990s.

Milošević, however, was not the creator of the Serbian victimization that eventually grew into a fervent and aggressive nationalism. Most important here was a memorandum by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts from 1986, which interpreted the history of Serbia as an ongoing genocide against the Serbs.[17] In this view, victimization served one main goal: it both entitled and empowered the victims to defend themselves.

The myth of Kosovo was elevated to a narrative of the promised land that had to be regained. This discursive argument did not even allow for a choice: the Serbs must fulfill a metahistorical mission and re-take the holy land of Kosovo into their possession. In the 1990s, the situation of the Serbs was repeatedly likened by Serbian intellectuals to the fate of the Jews: the Serbs had to suffer from Serbophobia, just as Jews had to endure anti-Semitism. The Serbs even had their own Holocaust during World War Two, the Croatian death camp Jasenovac being considered an Auschwitz for innocent Serbian victims. The estimate of victims at Jasenovac is very imprecise, the number of deaths ranging from 50,000 to over a million. Maintaining a high number of Serbian victims was crucial for the Serbian argument: if the number were to fall below 700,000, the Moslems and Croats murdered at the hands of Serbs at the end of the war would outnumber the Serbian victims, and thus put the basic narrative of Serbian victimization into question.[18]

The Serbian example shows how a tale of the constant, alleged humiliation of a great nation can be turned into an argument for war. In the Serbian narrative, the Serbian military actions in the former Yugoslavia were not aggressive, but a form of self-defense. In a way, the Serbian tragedy continues today. From a Serbian point of view, Europe still suffers from Serbophobia – and, unlike anti-Semitism, which has been banned from public discourse since the Holocaust, Serbophobia is a widely spread and even fashionable discourse that allows for the further exclusion of the Serbs from the economic, political and cultural benefits of the European Union.

Ukraine

Apart from a short period of national independence after World War One, Ukraine gained statehood only in 1991, and the newly founded state could not count on a homogenous national consciousness. In the West there was a strong Ukrainian movement, whereas the Donbas and the Crimea featured a

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mainly Russian ethnic and linguistic population; moreover, the Crimea had been part of the Russian Soviet Republic until 1953. Post-Soviet Ukraine for a long time had only one official language (Ukrainian), but since 2012 other languages (mainly Russian) have been acknowledged in specific regions as second state languages.

In this complex situation, it is clear that a national identity that should encompass the whole territory of Ukraine can hardly be built upon historical narratives. Ukraine is not only torn into two parts, a mainly Ukrainian-speaking West and a mainly Russian-speaking East, but is also fragmented into at least 22 regions with highly different traditions.[19] Ukrainian citizens do not have a strong notion of a common descent; on the contrary, heterogeneity in culture and political attitudes prevails. In this situation, victimization can provide – or at least is more likely to provide – a common narrative for a Ukrainian national consciousness.

In Stalinist Ukraine, all ethnic groups and all social layers fell prey to repression, hunger and annihilation. Therefore victimization may provide an apt narrative for the precarious process of nation-building in post-communist Ukraine. At the heart of this narrative lies the dreadful famine of 1932-1933 that claimed millions of victims in Ukraine and in Southern Russia. The first Western scholar to draw attention to this tragedy was Robert Conquest in his path-breaking book *Harvest of Sorrow*.[20] In 1978, the term *Holodomor* appeared in the Ukrainian émigré press,[21] and ten years later it was prominently used by the writer Oleksa Musienko in an address to the writer's union in Kiev.[22] Holodomor is a neologism that literally means *killing by hunger;* the assonance of the Ukrainian term for hunger (*holod*) with the first two syllables of *Holocaust* is an etymological coincidence, but of course also an intended connotation.

For the *ukrainophile* government of the Orange Revolution led by Viktor Yushchenko, the Holodomor was on top of the foreign policy agenda. Ukraine lobbied heavily abroad in order to get recognition for the interpretation that the Holodomor was perpetrated by the Russian elite in order to exterminate the Ukrainian nation. Historians and politicians pointed mainly to the correspondence between Stalin and Kaganovich, which was supposed to prove that the Holodomor was not just a consequence of the collectivization but also a genocide. In the foreground of the debate stood the 1948 UN convention, which defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." This notion of genocide was applied to the Ukrainian famine – with the explicit or tacit goal of establishing an emotional unity in Ukraine based on common victimization.

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There is a certain contradictory element in today's treatment of the Holodomor. On the one hand, the Holodomor serves as a homogenizing element for all victims of Stalinism on Ukrainian territory, regardless of their ethnic background. On the other hand, it is interpreted as a genocide perpetrated by Russians on Ukrainians. This would, however, exclude the numerous ethnic Russian victims from the narrative of victimization. Moreover, such an interpretation ignores the official Soviet ideology that was intended to destroy all traditional nationalities and to replace them with a Soviet patriotism that was based on a communist class identity. In 2010, Viktor Yanukovych, a declared Russophile, assumed the highest office in Ukraine. Under his presidency, the Holodomor was downgraded to a form of collateral damage of industrialization – corresponding to the official Russian view of the tragedy. On 17 May 2010, the Ukrainian and Russian presidents Yanukovych and Medvedev laid a wreath at the memorial of the Holodomor in Kiev, near the Saint Sophia cathedral. Shortly before this, the outgoing president Yushchenko had upgraded this memorial to a national site.

Western historians tend to accept the view that the Holodomor was a genocide; however, they point to several differences between the Holodomor and the Holocaust. The Holodomor did not aim at the extermination of a whole nation, it did not kill people directly and it was motivated politically rather than racially.[23] This may be true, but the claim of collective victimization in Ukraine is obviously based on the model of the Holocaust.

Russia

Astonishingly enough, even Russia has – at least partially – adopted a discourse of victimization in the last few years. Triumph and victory continue to dominate, however, as the last functioning link in the weakening contract between the generations in Russia. Today, young people reproach their parents for quietism, for complete economic, social and political failure. The only remaining achievement of the Soviet generation (and in fact, in Russia there were three of them, as opposed to only one in Western Ukraine and Poland) is thus the victory over Nazi Germany. In the official historical discourse and in the minds of many older Soviet citizens, the Nazis were defeated mainly by the Red Army, and the death toll, at least, proves them right: during the war, the Soviet Union lost twenty million of its citizens, more than any other nation in the world.[24]

In a survey conducted in 1999, 84% of all Russians held that the victory over Nazi Germany was the most important historical event of the twentieth

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century; more important than the October Revolution, the Stalinist Terror or the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[25]

Central episodes of suffering, however, were singled out in Russian history. A case in point is the Leningrad blockade (1941-1943), which had horrible consequences, from starving to cannibalism. More than one million inhabitants lost their lives during the nine hundred days of siege. The official historiography claimed that these victims played an important role in the defense of the Soviet Union, and as early as 1 May 1945, Leningrad was awarded the title of a *city-hero*. The suffering of the population of Leningrad became one of the few topics for literary coverage that was exempted from official optimism. Otherwise, writers still had to adhere to the Socialist Realism that had been decreed for Soviet literature at the first conference of writers in 1934.

During the Soviet era, the Holocaust was a taboo. The main reason for the official silence was the official policy, which did not allow for a particularistic victimization. The communist discourse bemoaned the death of comrades, not of Jews or members of ethnic minorities who were deported systematically during World War Two.[26] A good example of this strategy is the memorial site at Babi Yar, where in 1941 over 50,000 Jews from Kiev were shot. In 1976 a monument was erected commemorating the "Soviet citizens" who were murdered by the Nazis. It was only in 1991 that it became possible to mention the massacred Jews of Babi Yar explicitly in the inscription of a new monument.

The Soviet regime also feared the Holocaust for reasons of comparability with the Gulag. Ironically, there was a point of intersection between Eastern and Western discourses about the Holocaust: the Kremlin could have taken advantage of the Western imperative regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust and thus rejected comparisons with Stalin's labor camps on these grounds. But this did not happen; there was too great a fear of a generalization of the Holocaust and an identification of the Soviet postwar system with a national-socialist dictatorship. Such precautions were not ill-founded: the leading Western interpretive concept for Soviet communism after World War Two was *totalitarianism,* which encompassed both Hitlerism and Stalinism.[27]

Since the breakdown of the communist system, Russia, the leading nation in the Soviet Union, has very much fostered the feeling of being the victim of a historical catastrophe.[28] This holds particularly true for the relationship between Russia and the former Soviet republics. The Russians believe that they liberated the national republics from oppression and then provided them with funds and services in order to develop their own education,

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industry and governmental structures. From a Russian perspective, they have only received sheer ingratitude in return. This clash of historical interpretations has fed the feeling of victimhood among Russians: after all, they sacrificed themselves for the greater good, and the beneficiaries did not even take notice of their offering.

It is important to take this general background into account when issues such as the Holodomor are discussed in Russia. As a rule, Russian historians deny the categorization of the Ukrainian famine as a genocide and point to the similar suffering of the Russians during the Great Terror. In fact, the Russian ability to suffer is an important part of Russian cultural self-description. In a way, Russia is a double victim and has to endure a twofold hardship: it has suffered no less than other nations on Soviet territory, but in addition, it lacks recognition for its suffering.

Germany

For many decades after World War Two, Germany was the nation of perpetrators *par excellence*, and it is only in recent years that German suffering during the war has been addressed. There are basically three topics: the expulsion of the German population from the Eastern territories, the bombing of major German cities, and the raping of German women after the invasion of the Red Army. Each of these topics has generated massive interest in German mass culture: in 2001 the TV serial *The Great Escape* by Guido Knopp was aired, reaching an audience of five million viewers; in 2002 Jörg Friedrich published his book *The Fire,* which sold over 200,000 copies in hardback alone; and in 2003 the diary *Anonymous in Berlin* climbed the bestseller lists in Germany.[29] Interestingly enough, each of these events triggered quite an ambivalent debate among the German public. Guido Knopp was reproached for having forged melodramatic clichés and an over-simplified interpretation of Nazi history; Jörg Friedrich was criticized for having *emotionalized* the bombing of Dresden;[30] and the authenticity of the shocking account of *Anonymous in Berlin* was questioned. Others welcomed these narratives and saw them as the breaking of a taboo that had made German suffering during the war a non-subject. Today there seems to be a consensus among the German public that German narratives of victimization are legitimate as long as the German responsibility for the outbreak of World War Two and the Holocaust is accepted.

The German debate acquired a new dimension in 2006, however, when the Nobel Prize laureate Günter Grass confessed in his autobiography

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Peeling the Onion that he had belonged to the Waffen-SS as a young man. In 2002, Grass himself had engaged in the ongoing discussion about German suffering by publishing his novel *Crabwalk* about the vessel *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine while evacuating German refugees from Eastern Prussia. The catastrophe led to over nine thousand causalities. After Grass's confession, this text could be read as a revisionist narrative about World War Two with an emphasis on German victimization. Even the wording of his confession made the membership in the SS appear more like an inflicted fate than a conscious choice.

The German case of victimization is unique, because this topic may not be touched upon without simultaneously raising fundamental questions. German suffering must always be weighed against German war crimes, since it is impossible to speak of the former and to remain silent about the latter.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a veritable rally of collective victimization can be observed. This hardly contestable phenomenon begs the question: what makes self-victimization the most prominent nation-building discourse at the beginning of the new century? One possible explanation points to the fact that we are not only in a postmodern, postnational and postheroic age, but also a post-historical one. Our sense of being part of history has weakened considerably since 1991, and at least in the Western world, there are no historical narratives left that would locate us in a temporal movement coming from somewhere and going to somewhere. If we do not know where we are in time, we need at least to know where we have been. Collective traumas can fulfill this task: we thus fill up our posthistorical void with posttraumatic emotions. National consciousness in the twenty-first century relies not so much on "imagined communities" as it does on incited and staged emotions that stem from collective victimization. The archetypal model for this discourse is, of course, the Holocaust. The imperative interpretation of the uniqueness of the Holocaust has not only been imposed by the victims, but also by the perpetrators. Today, there are only two public spheres in the world that do not allow for a comparison or a relativization of the Holocaust: Germany and Israel. Perhaps it is just this absolute claim to a victimized truth that makes the Holocaust a model for other nations that resort to victimization as a unifying discourse. Serbians have replaced their military fight with a discursive battle for the recognition of their suffering, Ukrainians even

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model the name of their national trauma on the Holocaust, the Poles refer to a tragedy in which innocent victims suffer an attack by an evil force, and the Germans maintain their respect for the Holocaust, but simultaneously establish a hitherto hidden narrative that points to the misery of human beings who bear no responsibility for the horrors of World War Two.

All the nations considered here play upon the strings of emotionality. Nationhood in the twenty-first century no longer relies on common dreams of hegemony or territorial expansion, as had been the case in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Today, emotional nationhood is incorporated into enthralling narratives about honor, sacrifice and suffering.

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Perspectives

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Interview with Christine Gledhill

Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann

Scott Loren/Jörg Metelmann:
Twenty-five years ago, you described melodrama as a "cultural category." Over the past two decades, work in melodrama studies seems to have confirmed this assertion. How would you qualify your description now, not only in response to recent developments in melodrama studies, but also in relation to the current political and cultural climate?

Christine Gledhill:
I suppose I would say that all aesthetic practices have a cultural dimension to them. They have their own histories, situated within their cultural formations. I was interested in melodrama as a mental framework that went beyond simply a dramatic practice in the theater and became a way of seeing how the world worked. Marx's *Das Kapital* and Freud's psychoanalysis have suggested to several critics the polarized conflicts of melodrama – a moral polarization that of course has come back since 9/11 with the war on terror. And I suppose it is melodrama as a mode of imagining, of thinking, which links melodrama to the concerns of the political sociologist. But a few years ago, when I was writing a piece about genre and trying to think through the relation between genre and melodrama as cross-generic mode, I was confronted by the question: what do we mean when we invoke "melodrama"? And that led me into thinking how melodrama entered the film studies field and what it has meant as a cultural category, critically speaking. It seems to me that you could see its cultural function shifting across decades; that whereas it had initially contributed to creating a broad-based popular audience in nineteenth-century France and England, by the end of the nineteenth century it had the function of dividing audiences. It is extraordinary that, except as a taken-for-granted pejorative, "melodrama" did not appear in the vocabulary of film studies until, I suppose, the 1970s. So there is a long, long period of film history in which we could not think about melodrama as a serious category. It came into film studies via Sirk and the search for progressive film-making, and then got taken in a feminist direction through the importance of family melodrama for female audiences. Both of these moves, I think, made it difficult to reach a full understanding of melodrama. And then it was reclaimed for the early adventure serials and crime melodramas (see Steve Neale, Ben Singer and Rick Altman),

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but not applied to contemporary action movies. So it continues to divide critical opinion, to divide audiences and to pull them together around particular melodramatic conjunctures. So in this sense it has performed very interesting cultural work.

We like the idea of melodrama as something that does cultural work. Melodrama as a category-transcending genre or meta-genre already implies that it has a special socio-cultural status. It is one of these overarching frameworks that have the capacity to classify and contextualize diverse genres, but also run the danger of becoming too inclusive. You suggest that it has been worked with or revised perhaps too extensively, which brings up the notion of the protean. In theory on melodrama over the past four decades, melodrama's protean character has repeatedly been stressed, not only regarding the generic styles it might subsume, but also the political discourses with which it engages. If you will permit us to push the point, we are wondering where melodrama is currently most relevant. If we have been through psychoanalytical discourses, and gone through, quite fruitfully gone through, a variety of gender discourses, do you have a sense of where we might be landing with melodrama now?

I think why everyone wants to talk about melodrama now is something to do with the access it gives to emotion and aesthetic affect. I see this connection coming up in the increasing number of conference calls on affect or on melodrama, and it is one I personally feel is important. It feeds into the issue of personalization, which is central to melodrama and, I think, is now crucial. I first came to film studies during the Neo-Marxist period when we were taught to be very suspicious of humanism and aesthetics. There were all those conferences and volumes titled *Aesthetics and Politics,* and really this was about aesthetics as a kind of trap, a disguise, a means by which bourgeois politics infiltrated art and media, so aesthetics really meant aestheticization. But I have increasingly come to think that we cannot escape either the individual or that dimension of experience that art speaks to in a broad sense. I'd like to see art as one of Louis Althusser's semiautonomous spheres, determined in the last instance. In this respect, I think melodrama enables us to avoid collapsing aesthetics into politics, to avoid displacing one into the other. If we shift away from that notion of displacement we have the potential to understand how social forces and economic-political forces actually get realized in human actions, materialized into action through psychically-driven, personally-motivated performance and practice. I am still looking for the vocabulary to conceptualize the necessary cathexis between social, economic and motivating desire. But melodrama helps

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us because it is about that two-way process; it makes us feel the unseen but forceful discursive and institutional pressure on the human being, through which social relations materialize as personalized actions between individuals. This is not to suggest that we are simply free individuals. Rather, cathexis between social-political forces and individual psychical investments has become crucial to understanding action in the public sphere, so that what appears to be private has large public consequences. Melodrama dramatizes this process in a high-octane way because it looks for the emotional core at the heart of an action, where social and psychical meet; then it orchestrates plotting that will force the consequences into public view. So this is a process of circular transference between public and personal and back again, rather than a one-way displacement of the public into the personal. But if melodrama captures the short-circuits and consequences of this conjunction, it does not necessarily do so in a way that enables us to translate the process into specific political situations or ideological formulae. So I think what melodrama gives us is often indirect. It is not going to give us meanings *about* a particular social content – which is how I think we used to attempt to translate films back into a social-ideological core.

Can we unpack what you suggest here a bit further with an additional question? On the one hand, there is the notion of not aiming at specific ideological or political content, but rather stressing the importance of the personal. If we understand you correctly, shifting the focus to a personal or inner world returns us to the notion of melodrama as striving to make something hidden visible.

Yes, I like that, as long as we understand that the experience of a personal or inner world is not autonomous but shaped in culture.

So we are still focusing on the centrality of the individual. Peter Brooks famously marked the rise of melodrama as accompanying the rise of Western democracy in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Melodrama becomes symptomatic of the cultural turn toward the individual's experience in and of modernity, and at the same time validates this experience by dramatically aestheticizing it. In your opinion, the centrality of individual experience – in particular, the internal process of making sense of one's individual experiences – has not only persisted in melodrama, but has even gained in relevance?

I think I'd say we need to recognize the way art provides an aesthetic outlet for emotional apprehension and that this probably has gained in relevance, because I think the notion of displacement focuses attention on the social

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that is displaced but exists somewhere else outside the work. And in a way, that becomes extremely predictable; once you have the method of translation, it is fairly easy to do. I always end up thinking, well, you have told me what it's displacing, disguising, aestheticizing, what it's not doing; but you haven't actually told me what it *is* doing, you are not telling me about where it reaches its audience. I think that we have to ask what it is that melodrama *does* rather than what it displaces. But to rethink the nature of personalization and the role of the individual is not about free-floating or autonomous individuals. If social forces and conflicts are relayed through the energies of individual actors, energies that coalesce with social pressures or are resistant, we need ways of conceptualizing how such transactions drive social movement and change.

You've noted the recent trend of theorizing melodrama through the lens of affect following the so-called "emotional turn." Following Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi proposes a fundamental element of affect theory that would appear to be contradictory to melodrama's concern with the individual: namely, that affect is not about the personal, nor the individual, but about processes of desubjectivation. As such it is concerned not with subject formation, but with decentering (discourses on) the subject. How would you relate melodrama to this particular strand of thought? And where do you see the most potential for interaction between melodrama and theories of emotions?

Melodrama is not Deleuzean. But for de-subjectified "affect" to create social *effects* requires its channeling into the action/performance of human agents. I think there is another route into emotions via cultural studies, which comes from Deidre Pribram's work on emotion. Her argument, drawing on Sarah Ahmed and others, is that although we think of emotion as inward and arising from individual psychology, it is socially and culturally directed to its objects and named. Pribram's argument interests me in the way it suggests a circulation between social and emotional being. If you go back to, say, morality plays, you have got emotions that are figured allegorically, you know, avarice, vice, virtue, envy, vanity: these are very clearly identified emotions, socially designated, given physical personality types and carrying moral status. Nineteenth-century melodrama bears traces of that process; figures have names that imply their moral identities, which in turn imply their behavior to others; and even contemporary films choose names that seem to identify a protagonist's moral and affective quality. Melodrama is able to inhabit whatever arena of thinking, feeling or knowledge we've got. For example, popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis identifies new

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emotions and conflicts – giving us the psychologically realist character whom we now recognize as truer than, say, allegorical figures of avarice or greed. However, it might be said, those emotions are again being named in relation to bankers – you could almost just say "banker" and you get the allegory of greed!

So I think the process of privatization and personalization that Thomas Elsaesser describes in his founding piece of 1972 marks processes of cultural and aesthetic change in the field of emotions: partly a change in what is culturally recognized, partly a change of form where the emotional identities are expressed through personalized relationships rather than as allegorized moral qualities. Peter Brooks provides us with notions of loyalty, betrayal, duty, honor, all of which are about how human beings relate to each other, social but also personal emotions; then psychoanalysis expands the range of available emotions and gives us different stories about where they come from. So the issue is partly about how the social and the emotional become identified and inter-related in successive cultural frameworks, any of which melodrama can inhabit. So, if feminism produces new concepts of sexism and patriarchy, heterosexual relationships offer a new source of melodramatic moral investment, demand and conflict; in some forms, masculinity or femininity – the psyche itself – can be figured as a site of danger, of evil. So social forces are channeled through and into personalized interactions as sites of melodramatic antagonism and opposition that may not have been available in earlier times. Such interactions are where the social plays out, not displacements of what is going on in a social or political sphere established somewhere else. Contrariwise, the emotions that are playing out in the heterosexual or personal encounter have been shaped and named in the social, and in conflicts of the political public sphere we see these personalized emotional forces driving events.

Beyond aesthetic strategies, victimhood has always been the most prominent component of the melodramatic mode. What, in your opinion, has changed in the semantics and functionality of the victim position over time?

I have been quite puzzled about this, because I do not entirely agree: I think the villain is also important to the effects of melodrama. While reading Linda Williams's work, I became aware that she was emphasizing suffering and the victim and that the villain hardly figures. I thought what she is identifying is the specific historical cultural formation of melodrama in America, to which victimhood is central. I understand this in the context of a country that is established on the basis of equality and escape from the

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oppressions of Old Europe, but then accumulates its wealth and its power on the basis of slavery. American melodrama has a real ideological problem: it wants to regain its founding promise of a paradise on earth, and so suffering becomes extremely vital to regaining that lost innocence. But Peter Brooks, who wants to delineate melodrama in relation to the French Revolution, certainly thinks that the villain is central, that the villain drives the plot. It is the villain who makes things exciting. I think what the villain does is to tap into the unthinkable, bringing it to the surface. That is what's exciting about melodrama: the villain breaks open the arena of moral certitudes, he challenges what is presumed to be the ethos by which we live; he challenges the moral order; he embodies the danger to it. In this respect, he's iconoclastic. And I think that is partly what makes melodrama, what makes you sit at the edge of your seat. There is a delight when Alan Rickman in Die Hard first enters with this little prayer book and hitches his shoulder in this wonderfully villainous way. We know where we are. The fact that he is willing to break just about every code of human decency opens up the possibility of rethinking what we mean by virtue; it stops virtue becoming routine, a norm, it makes virtue oppositional, it forces virtue to declare itself. I suspect you cannot have a productive use of victimization, of suffering without that kind of call from somewhere else. I remember re-reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the light of its importance to Linda Williams's work, and thinking that Simon Legree is actually a very interesting figure, a complex and significant villain. Against the current notion of the public sphere as full of suffering, we need to remember it is also full of tyrants and powerful people operating on the verge of madness. It is true perhaps that the TV talk show focuses only on the victim, siphoning off and indulging in pathos; that television›s public sphere is too polite – television being perhaps too dependent on governmental license and/or corporate sponsorship – to acknowledge or name the perpetrators among us. What melodrama, as an aesthetic, does is to bring victim and perpetrator into confrontation, so stopping the world simply becoming a place of needless suffering. The perpetrator makes suffering and what it stands for meaningful. In the end it is an aesthetic experience, not a political program. And if only one side is exercised – villainy without the resistant victim, victimhood without recognition of the perpetrator – we possibly have bad melodrama.

But then I stopped watching television; I stopped watching the reality shows and the kind of confessional shows that are partly fueling Thomas Elsaesser's thinking about twenty-first-century melodrama, identifying a shift from suffering as the test of virtue to the notion that suffering in itself constitutes virtue. In terms of cinema, however, we still have melodrama's

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action genres and it is largely in action and horror films that we find the explicit villains. However, thinking back to nineteenth-century villainy – I've just been re-reading Douglas Jerrold's *The Rent Day*,[1] where we find at the end of the play that the villains themselves have been victims in the past. So after a series of unthinkably cruel, malicious, seemingly motiveless acts, at the end, when the villain is exposed, it often emerges that there has been something in the villain's past which has produced the greed or desire for revenge – eliciting the cry, "revenge is my name" – because of something that was done to a parent or to a child in the past but that was unknown to everyone else, including the audience.

Are you suggesting that in film we are increasingly seeing the psychologization of the villain? The villain also has an inner world, has also suffered damage and loss, thus becoming what he or she is.

Well, not an inner world in the sense of psychological realism, but an internalization of a social force as it impacts on an individual's life and becomes externalized along emotionalized routes – for example the villain's psychologized malevolence – as revenge, grievance, drive for power. What Brooks calls "the melodrama of psychology" (as opposed to the psychology of melodrama) appears most clearly in the Hollywood family melodrama, the 1940s-1950s subgenre that Thomas Elsaesser wrote about, which for a long time and in many cases still stands for the totality of melodrama in the cinema. As Laura Mulvey argues, the family melodrama split along gender lines: the female-oriented form – for example, the maternal sacrifice melodrama – emphasizes the dimension of sentimental pathos, tears and suffering (though there are debates about how to assess the emotional dynamic of these films), while the male-focused family melodrama of the 1950s redefined the villain as the tortured self-destructive anti-hero. In these melodramas villainy is located in a social system that distorts human capacities and produces tragic or happy-sad outcomes – for instance, Written on the Wind or Home From the Hill.

We don't get a familial background there? So that is not the point you are making?

All I mean is that the family melodrama is where you get overbearing patriarchs. And here it is patriarchy that becomes the source of the evil, the corrosive personality, whether male or female. That is a site of psychologizing melodrama. We find it more strongly in the family melodrama than in the action film. But I still think action movies often carry the patriarchal,

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heterosexist burden. I am thinking about my recent experience at a melodrama conference here in New York, where I showed a clip from The Long Kiss Goodnight, the water torture sequence, and was challenged as to why, with its "cardboard" villains and focus on violent action, I considered this melodrama. Actually the jibes and smirks of the film's two villains capture the language of gender and heterosexist antagonism, and misogyny constitutes the core villainy. They may not be psychologically or politically motivated, but their characterization as villains draws on cultural gender and sexual reference in terms which, as feminists, we recognize as a social force field of misogynist feeling that generates opposition – and which is countered in the film's melodramatic fantasy by its amnesiac heroine, who regains sufficient memory of her past CIA-trained identity to overcome her current victimhood. No tears, but jubilation!

You appear to be doing for the villain what you've done for melodrama previously: to ask what its function is, no? Instead of asking what the victim is doing, what his or her function is, you redirect the question toward the villain. This led us immediately to think of the lesson of Antigone. *With* Antigone, *you have to transgress; this makes the law evident, makes it "legible" and functional. You were taking a more detailed line, though, not generalizing the villain's function as implicitly upholding the law, but historicizing it. So your point is that the villain helps us to articulate normative perspectives on virtue at any historic moment in a given cultural context.*

Yes. That takes the thought forward, yes. I would agree with that.

To return to the question of psychologizing the villain: it seems everyone, including villains, has become a victim. We completely agree with you on this point. It is not only evinced in cinema and popular culture, but also in institutions like the justice system. To take a rather obvious point of contrast, think of the role phrenology once played in criminology, where criminal behavior could be rationalized through biological factors. Not only do we now live in a psychologized society, where criminal behavior is contextualized in relation to psychological profiles, but we also live in a melodramatized society, where we tend to displace the culpability of a villain onto some formative experiences of loss and suffering that engender psychological profiles.

I am not saying that our interest in the villain lies in his or her victimhood, although this certainly can happen. Embodied villainy allows us to see how social forces work through the corrosive power of malign personality.

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There appears to be a good deal of consensus that melodrama itself has become more complex: for example, with the obfuscation of clear (*Manichaean*) *subject positions, with institutional evil as an embodiment of villainy, or the massive extensions in narrative duration* (*as in Linda Williams's approach to the HBO series* The Wire *as a "mega-melodrama"*). *What, in your estimation, might the core of melodrama be defined by, if not Manichaeism, clear-cut moral positions and temporal compression?*

I don't entirely agree with the premises of the question. Melodramas can be good or bad, and the good ones have always been complex – but complex perhaps in ways we don't now recognize, because nineteenth-century melodramas deal in public registers and discourses, even if carried in individuated modes of behavior. The moral field can be very complex, but the plotting will still work to produce clarification – as Peter Brooks argues of Balzac and Henry James. However, it seems today that critics assume that emotional intensity means melodrama irrespective of the issue of ethical conflicts. But I think we need to beware of equating melodrama with emotion or emotional intensity *per se*, as if other modes – realism or romance – don't or can't deal in emotion. Melodramatic emotion works to certain ends and is produced by a certain organization of plotting and *mise-en-scène*. I have, for example, had arguments about whether melodrama is the appropriate term to understand Indian cinema, which draws on longstanding traditions that don't come out of the same historical context and imperatives of melodrama. Nevertheless, I concede that when practices are developed in one cultural context and then circulate in another, they are absorbed into their host cultures to which they offer resources: for example, melodrama travels into Indian popular culture and eventually cinema, through theatrical companies traveling along the routes of colonialism and later through imported Hollywood films. Peter Brooks set out to investigate how nineteenth-century melodrama worked in order to explain the ethical framework of Balzac and Henry James. He claims there is something going on in the moral dimension of those works that you could only identify through the lens of melodrama. So he turned to the popular base of melodramatic theatrical culture as an explanatory tool. I don't think he is claiming that Henry James's work *is* melodrama, but that melodrama can show us what Henry James is aiming for and that there is something shared between their perspectives.

I think melodrama *becomes* such a protean form because historically it has generated such a complexity of sub-genres and practices in the interests of serving different audiences – of creating the first mass audience through

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market-led production and multiple companies, traveling theatrical circuits in much the same way that the film industry does today. It has therefore developed a diversity of strategies for different purposes and different audiences; it can do so many different things. Trying to define melodrama is practically impossible; there is no neat definition. But the question is not really what melodrama *is*, but what it *does*. And I suppose that comes back to your point about the function of the villain, that melodrama performs aesthetic, epistemological procedures.

I would also to some extent question your second point about melodrama's time compression and *The Wire*. Theatrical and film melodrama may be time-compressed (although 1950s family melodramas and Indian melodramas cross generations and are very long), but in print form melodrama has always been able to extend across serial formats. If you look back to the nineteenth century, you have Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* serialized in ninety parts and imitated by G. M. Reynolds as *The Mysteries of London*; or William Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, not to mention Dickens's serialized novels. Melodrama has always been able to function across far-flung spaces and to extend over centuries – as with *The Wandering Jew* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Serialization also emerges from the fact that the villain will always come back. In horror films, you think the monster is destroyed but suddenly it's back. Similarly, the underlying systems embodied by the villains return. So at the end of *The Rent Day*, grandfather's armchair is smashed and suddenly his hidden savings fall out, they can pay the rent and are saved. But then one of the cast comes downstage and warns the audience to "remember the next rent day." So there is a circularity to events; you are never done with melodrama, so there is no reason why it can't go on in a serial format or be "mega." It always had mega-ambitions.

Would you agree with the thesis that melodrama might be considered a form of modernism if the latter is to be understood as aesthetic articulations that respond to and attempt to process the challenges of modernity?

In *Home Is Where the Heart Is* I contrasted three aesthetic trajectories: realism, which thinks it can understand the world through rational means; modernism, where there is no reality beyond the means of its construction, so the quest is, in Godard's terms, to show "the reality of the reflection," to reveal reflexively the work's own mechanisms and processes of construction; and then melodrama, which straddles the two, implicitly recognizing the void while insisting on significance, based on the ethics of justice.[2] That was a very Brooksian definition.

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I guess the perception of the void, of instability and reversibility, is a perception or experience of modernity. But there is also this sense of home where we've come from and we want to get back to: a space of innocence, as Brooks would say, or an atavism that got melodrama identified as old-fashioned. Critically speaking, melodrama languished all those years, regarded as a Victorian aesthetic constructing a simplistic kind of reality, using simplistic aesthetic strategies. And then, suddenly, we see that those strategies are not simplistic at all. And if you start reading those plays and understand how they were performed and staged, they prove to be neither simplistic nor illiterate, and their dialogue can be highly important, intermeshed with musical underscoring and visual staging; it just does not work in the way that realism demands, the psychological realism that came to dominate the scene in the first half of the twentieth century. I think it is really interesting, the way cinema continually seeks to return to the condition of "silent" cinema – which also doesn't lack words and was never silent – in order to work with a gestural repertoire, with a musical repertoire. Melodrama feeds off crisis, because crisis demands that you show your cards against all the uncertainty of modernity, the sense of everything being in flux and over-determined by hidden forces we cannot control. I follow Brooks in recognizing melodrama in its offer of clarification, its demand that protagonists in the end will show where they stand and what they represent. And I think that is not simple, that is not simplification.

Excellent, that really took us where we were looking to go. It shows you where figures stand. In thinking about modernity not so much as a specific period in time but as a characteristic set of processes, your claim about melodrama forcing the cards onto the table might then be understood as melodrama forcing (or enabling or reflecting) categories of meaning specific to such processes. This comes back to your claims about what melodrama is performing or doing, what it has to do with epistemological procedures. So, melodrama is related to processes of meaning-making, processes of categorization. And crisis fits in here quite nicely.

Yes, but melodrama is as much about bearing witness to significance as a condition of being rather than producing particular meanings and identities, which is where I think the difficulty lies of getting something like the action film taken seriously – a genre that seems to be right at the bottom of everyone's list. I think this is partly because it is so hard for professional critics to forego their skills in analyzing meaning, identifying ideological positioning. But I do think that melodrama meets us through its aesthetic effects, it exists in the frissons it

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creates. What it does is say: "Look, things are significant but they are not necessarily going to be telling you what the significance is." Melodrama provides the experience of intensity – a kind of stimulus, making us feel connected again to a disenchanted world. Reclaiming aesthetics from an earlier Marxist relegation as aestheticization, idealization, is to recover a source of renewed energy, the conviction that there *is* significance to human life, things *do* matter. And in a way it is not what the work is actually saying that is significant.

That kind of experience, I think, also connects with a renewed interest in the idea of the sublime and/or affect, noticeable in calls for conferences or new publications on the sublime and on melodrama. In a way, what melodrama does for modernity is to offer a new route into the sublime, a way of producing a visceral, bodily level of experience, of committed energy. Melodrama can rarely be translated into political outcomes whereby audiences leave the theater or cinema to change the world (although Daniel Gerould documents such events during the French and Russian revolutions). We tend, I think, to expect art to somehow effect what political action should be doing. It can't. But it can energize and motivate its audiences. And I suppose that is what I respond to in melodrama.

I [Scott] *have had this suspicion that much of Brooks's theory is based on Roland Barthes's work. Look at the "World of Wrestling."*[3] *It's all there: the villain, the victim, the good, the bad, the priority of the spectacle; even the prioritization of identification through moral legibility. What is stressed, of course, are processes and practices of signification; not specific political content.*

I guess I have been stressing that along the line of the villain, the emphasis on excitement and sensation. But there is the other aspect which comes with the victim and the prospect of suffering, which is tears, an overwhelming sorrow, pathos, which I think in a way performs something in the same direction. I think Linda Williams argues this when she is talking about the relationship between tears and hope. Pathos reminds us of our connectedness in a different kind of way. It is not the overwhelming significance of things, but it is the connectedness that comes with sorrow for others. We do not want to forget the dead or missing. It can feel good to be overwhelmed by tears for those we have lost: sorrow and tears maintain the connection that would otherwise fade away. That is the happy cry, the happy sad ending. I guess that is what happens at the end of *Oprah Winfrey* shows.

You brought Linda Williams up again. You said that her reading of the melodrama in Uncle Tom's Cabin *seems very specific in its cultural relevance to*

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the United States. Would you say that foundational myths play a role here? Thinking of the work of Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, US foundational myths are largely organized around the notion of a return to the space of innocence, a space that is spiritual, but also geographical and political.

Yes, I think so: there is the idealism associated with the idea of the American pioneers, people who were escaping oppression at home. We are familiar with the West as garden, the space of innocence. But Linda Williams also talks about the role of Calvinism in its strict adherence to the idea of personal guilt, which I think would also be a part of this culturally specific structure of feeling. I think her argument is very persuasive in relation to films like The Deer Hunter, or the Rambo films. These work to recuperate innocence in the face of what seems like a betrayal of America's founding myths, betrayal of what is rare in human history – a second chance, an opportunity to begin again.

Before we close there is one in your list of questions relating to the equation of melodrama and the woman's film: I want to say something about that, because I do think the woman's film and women's cultural forms differ at some level from melodrama. I subtitled *Home Is Where the Heart Is* "Melodrama *and* the Woman's Film." But that yoke produced a back cover blurb that described the woman's film as "melodrama *par excellence*"; I didn't write it but, despite misgivings – I was already arguing that melodrama was a trans-generic mode – I let it go. Later on, as I worked more on the woman's film and soap opera – another form too easily elided with melodrama – I found that early American radio and TV soap opera and British radio serials weren't recognized or even produced as melodramatic. It was the arrival of soap opera on evening television, with a stronger emphasis on male activities, which turned the soap opera in a melodramatic direction. Meanwhile scholars of female-produced "women's fiction" – which provided sources to film and TV – found that, like early soap opera, it had been heavily criticized by the male critical fraternity for qualities that are anti-melodramatic – for example, for having no narrative shape, but being full of talk working over problems, the "drip of domestic dialogue" as one British TV critic termed it. This connects to the critical history of melodrama – the way in which at a certain point it divided its audiences on gender as well as class lines. So while, as Steve Neale and others show, the American trade press retained melodrama to describe adventure serials and crime genres, theatrical and press film critics – later to be followed by film scholars – displaced the emotional dimension of melodrama onto female audiences and therefore women's cultures. A film like Now, Voyager, now regularly discussed as

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melodrama, was sourced from a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty that falls into the category of women's fiction and is a more-or-less realist psychological staging of Charlotte Vale's problems.[4] This then became melodramatized through Max Steiner's score, heavily underlining the pathos, and a certain gothic rendering of Charlotte's Victorian mother, while, contrariwise, Bette Davis fought to have dialogue from the novel put back against Warner Brothers' judgment. I think there is something very complicated in terms of gender aesthetics going on there.

Thank you. You noted this as one of the first things in our list of questions you did not entirely agree with. It is of course important that we addressed it, at least in the end.

It is probably because I was jolted by this memory of the back cover of *Home Is Where the Heart Is* when, in connection with the New York melodrama conference, that phrase was repeated to me thirty years later.

That is affective impact! Christine Gledhill, thank you very much!

Thank you.

Notes

1. Douglas William Jerrold, *The Rent Day: A Domestic Drama* (London, 1832).
2. Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).
3. Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
4. Olive Higgins Prouty, *Now, Voyager* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

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