

Voir Venir: The Future of Melodrama?

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What do I feel at the touch of this curtain? Holy fear trembles through my limbs. I believe I am touching the holiness of some divinity! Fool! It is stone; your own work. And what are the gods worshipped in our temple? Are they anything but matter?

J. J. Rousseau, *Pygmalion, a Poem from the French* 1779¹

THE WORD MELODRAMA IS A COMPOUND OF TWO GREEK DERIVATIONS: *MELOS* (MUSIC) and *drama* (deed, action, play). Melodrama is a mode, rather than a discrete genre, combining elemental mediums of sound and sight that, aimed at engendering thrill in the broad-based audience to which it has historically appealed, has been described as the primal dramatic form stirring base desires (Booth 38). Defined thus, melodrama might seem to describe all drama; some have argued that its form reaches back beyond Shakespeare to Ovid and Euripides (see, for example, Booth; Kaleva; Michelini). Nevertheless, Rousseau's *Pygmalion: Scène Lyrique* (written circa 1763 and first produced in 1770) is routinely named the first melodrama. Rousseau's one-act stage adaptation was just one of several experiments in, or reforms of, more traditional musical and theatrical compositions in mid-late eighteenth-century England and Europe. Rousseau not only composed his own melodrama but attempted to define the nature of his own and others' innovative compositions. Melodrama could be differentiated from opera, in Rousseau's view, through the way it combined elements of music and drama so that each of its parts—each part of its *melos* and *drama*—was given equal expressive weight. A rising or falling melody may follow on from or immediately precede a heartfelt declamation, a tragic

¹ This quote is from a printed edition that was copied from a live version of Rousseau's *scène lyrique. Pygmalion, a poem. From the French of J. J. Rousseau*. London, printed for J Kearby, 1779.

mood-change or a prosaically complex lyric or spoken piece of dialogue. Melodrama is thus continuous with the more culturally established and revered form of opera.

Since the late eighteenth century, the word '*melodramatic*' has become a term of abuse. While there is a dominant thread of critical scholarship about melodrama in recent decades that attests to its cultural power and influence as a pervasive modern mode, melodrama tends to be associated in this critical work with the primal or basic rather than elevated or transcendent forms of human consciousness. In Peter Brooks's influential argument, melodrama not only belongs to modernity, it is its pre-eminent 'imaginative' mode (Brooks; see also Booth) as melodrama's emergence marks, and gives expression to, a radical epistemological shift in how the world is viewed and experienced (Brooks 3). This argument has been taken further: in more recent scholarship, melodrama is considered to be both modernity's dominant aesthetic form and pre-eminent mediator of modern subjectivities and affective states (see Anker; Buckley; Gledhill; Williams; Zarzosa). In such accounts, melodrama is not only representative, it is also formative of the pervasive idea that we live in a 'post-sacred' world. For Brooks, it is the French Revolution that marks melodrama's occulted recognition of divine absence, the dawning realization that there is nothing beyond human consciousness and cultural production. His study, which begins with the theatre of the post-revolutionary stage, takes account neither of Rousseau's *scène lyrique* nor of how Rousseau's interest in melodrama might crisscross with his philosophical essays about language and being. Rousseau's *Pygmalion* is a melodrama that conveys, before the revolutionary event that organises Brooks' account, both a sensory interplay of music, dialogue and action as well as skeptical ideas about cultural production as self-determining and (melancholically) self-perpetuating. Both these aspects of Rousseau's melodrama are communicated when his artist declaims 'I believe I am touching the holiness of some divinity! Fool! It is stone; your own work'.

This essay understands melodrama as a mode of self-dramatisation that becomes both a popular and critical model for ideas about the capacity of language to account for presence or being and for attendant explorations of freedom, self-determination and the possibility of transcendence. Melodrama thus not only represents everyday existence, it also shapes how other lives are imagined and lived. As Lauren Berlant has shown in her study of the Hollywood women's film, melodrama dramatically models and organizes life and is especially important for thinking about how life is felt and affectively enacted.² My interest in

² Since first encountering her work while writing my PhD on *Imitation of Life* and other passing-for-white melodramas, my work has been strongly influenced by Lauren Berlant's reading of the intersections of the affective life and public culture as it is modeled in Hollywood women's film. My argument here is similarly engaged with

Rousseau's *Pygmalion* is in the way in which it brings together the affective with the philosophical, the 'heart' with the 'head'. Rousseau's melodrama is named after the story of Pygmalion, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which a sculptor falls in love with his own creation, the statue Galatea. In Ovid's myth, Pygmalion's motive for sculpting a statue is as a defiance of the propoetides—the hardened or painted ladies who the goddess Venus had turned into public prostitutes as punishment for their refusal of her divinity. When Pygmalion falls in love with his own creation, his ideal of the female form and one who seems to him more alive than the hardened prostitutes he spurns, he appeals to Venus to help him bring his statue to life. Rousseau's version of this myth dramatizes the erotic push and pull between the artist and his creation through pantomime, music and expressive gesture. It combines these highly affective and sensory registers with Rousseau's prose-poem through which Pygmalion's sophistry, his philosophical appeal to Galatea (and to Venus) unfolds. *Pygmalion* is at once a drama of self-actualisation through which primal drives and sexual differences are acted out, a poetic meditation on the nature of being and the possibility of transcendence, and a philosophical argument about the relationship between aesthetics, romance and the sacred.³

In tracing melodrama as a mode that emerges at the intersection of the theatrical and the philosophical, my reading necessarily risks reprising a dominant historical narrative whereby post-enlightenment ideas and aesthetics coming out of England and parts of Europe, in the late eighteenth-century, in turn influenced developments in popular and intellectual culture in North America and elsewhere. The following account does not, for instance, explore melodrama's role and asynchronic formation in cultural contexts such as India, Japan and China.⁴ My reading does, however, aim to renegotiate the terms of dominant discourses and understandings that have, perhaps melodramatically, become a model or touchstone for present-day readings. Critical scholarship reveals that it is not immune to melodrama's melancholic affects, recycled stereotypes, illusory moral frameworks and fantastical wish-fulfillment. Despite this, the overwhelming critical tendency has been to emphasise pathos and false promise over melodrama's other constitutive elements.

Berlant's work but departs from her contention in her most recent book, *Cruel Optimism*, that we are in a 'post-melodramatic' moment.

³ See also Zarzosa who writes, via post-enlightenment philosophy, about melodrama as devotional aesthetics. Anker's essay 'Left Melodrama' about the melodramatic rhetoric of a certain strand of hard leftist criticism, is also relevant here.

⁴ See, for example, the important anthology *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* in which Dissanayake notes that suffering and pathos play an important role as part of processes of modernization but that the place and significance of these melodramatic elements are considerably different(4). See also Nathaniel Dorsky's melodramatic reading of Yasujiro Ozu's *The Only Son* (1936) in *Devotional Cinema*.

From its emergence on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century stage, elements of which can be seen (as Peter Brooks argues) in the Victorian novel, melodrama moves not only into early cinema and classic and later Hollywood but also into the (sometimes melodramatic) responses of critics and intellectuals who have responded to popular cinema and television's cultural effects. In its itinerary through stage, screen and now digital media, melodrama's surprising adaptability suggests that elements of unpredictability and uncertainty are carried in its very form. As a popular mode that has combined sensational characterizations and exaggerated emotion with often highly complex and involved storylines, characterizations and dialogue, melodrama relies not only on affective modes such as pathos but also elements of often violent and dangerous action, thrills and surprises. These defining characteristics of melodrama, I suggest, incorporate thematic as well as temporal uncertainty, that which cannot be predicted, into its very structure.

Melodrama has often been described as a mode that is preeminently about pathos as it registers impossible melancholic longings for a fantasy escape, a utopian dream world (see Bentley; Booth; Grimstead), for life as it 'should' be rather than as it is (Booth; Gledhill) and even for an alternative past; in other words, melodrama is said to articulate a 'what if' or an 'if only' (Elsaesser; Neale; Mulvey). The latter is the subjunctive or conditional tense of melodrama, expressed by countless melodramatic characters who long for a past that might have delivered a more satisfying moment than that which is being lived. Critical emphasis on this affective aspect of melodrama's aesthetic and rhetorical structure sees it as a mode complicit in perpetuating a restless, endlessly dissatisfied mode of being, one that is attached to impossible wish-fulfillments and inevitably thwarted desires. In such readings, pathos is melodrama's dominant affect as its subjects are bereft, without divine guidance, and unable to make proper ethical judgments. Critics have emphasized how, in this disenchanting situation, the characters of melodrama tend to seek escape from, rather than face, the alienating effects of modernity. This depiction of melodrama as a vehicle for false consciousness is identified in the popular melodramas of the revolutionary stage in which innocent waifs, suffering at the hands of manipulative villains, were destined to be rescued by a gallant hero (Brooks; Buckley). In the apparent absence of the sacred and of faith, melodrama is presented, by Brooks and others, as justifying personal suffering, as its prime narrative arc sees virtue (often associated with victimhood) always rewarded and vice punished.

Arguments about melodrama as dialectic of suffering and moral certainty, pathos and action, are not confined to its role in the aesthetic domain.⁵ Melodramatic

⁵ See Linda Williams, for whom melodrama is a 'dialectic of pathos and action'.

scripts also animate everyday responses to suffering, trauma and loss. As Elisabeth Anker has persuasively argued, mainstream media and government responses to the attacks on New York's World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, fuelled the idea that victims, their families and communities, and the state itself, were innocents exposed and vulnerable to perpetrators of absolute evil. At its height, this rhetoric was widespread and expunged the possibility of ethical ambiguity, helping to justify the state's aggressive retaliation for the attacks (Anker, 'Villains'). Arguments such as Anker's are invaluable for the way they demonstrate the often occluded relationship between politics and the cyclical theatrics of the media-sphere and other populist narrative engines. Yet, I wonder if one effect of such an approach feeds the critical tendency to simplify melodrama and, in particular, to overemphasise the role of melodramatic pathos and to overlook the surprising elements and unpredictable effects, doubts or uncertainties that are also an intrinsic part of its mode.

As the various parts of melodrama (music, action, expression, dialogue) often function in a supplementary relation to one another, in that the parts do not entirely unify to create an absolute synthesis of meaning, melodrama's form can be said to be (non) dialectical. That is, melodrama's *melos* and *drama* are elements that are complementary but also to some extent irreducible to one another. By drawing attention to the presence of the asymmetric—that is to combinations of music, action, dialogue and emotions that do not necessarily produce a totalizing meaning or resolution—I am suggesting here that, alongside its predictability, melodrama might have more contradictory affective, ethical and political effects. This reading of melodrama as an interplay of differential elements is important for thinking about the role of melodrama to formations of the historical, modern subject and for considering the relation between aesthetics and the possibility of ethical and practical judgment in a world apparently devoid of enchantment, of divine or absolute models. In relation to arguments about melodrama as either ineffectively nostalgic, or as only capable of perpetuating melancholic dissatisfaction with the present, it also provides an approach that accounts for melodramatic preoccupations with the *future*, as well as the past and present, of the modern subject. Paul de Man's reading of Rousseau as an allegory or figuration of the (negated) self, as well as Catherine Malabou's work on 'plasticity', prove useful to my argument. These frameworks enable a re-thinking of melodrama as a mode that is both formative of, but also receptive to, new and unforeseeable ideas and events that play a role in the constitution of modern subjectivity.

Pygmalion: Scène Lyrique, Rousseau's, lyrical adaptation of the Ovidian myth, contained his stage directions as well his directions for the pantomime that accompanied the music (composed by Horace Coignet) and spoken lyric. While Rousseau named *Pygmalion* a *scène lyrique*, he used the term *melodrama* in

reference to Gluck's *Alceste* (1767). He also outlined the (melodramatic) principles of his and other composers' musical and theatrical experimentations when he defined the existence of a new form in which the 'spoken phase' of the drama 'is announced and prepared by [the] musical phase' ('Letter'; see also Kaleva; Preston). Goethe praised Rousseau's *scène lyrique*, and it is now often cited as the first known melodrama (Anker 'Left'; Booth; Buckley; Holmstrom; Kaleva; Smith; Steele). Less common is a consideration of this innovative production as inextricably linked to Rousseau's philosophy, which in turn influences later work, including deconstruction. Rousseau plays a central role in *Of Grammatology*, in which Derrida's theory of supplementarity is based on an extended analysis (it runs to almost 200 pages) of Rousseau's *Essay on The Origin of Language, which Treats of Melody and Musical Imitation*. Indeed, Derrida draws attention to the latter, full title, of the essay and of the importance of music and melody to Rousseau's career and philosophy when he conjectures that Rousseau's composition of the *Essay*, which was published posthumously in 1781 in a treatise on music, took place over many years and informed the thinking taking shape during this time (*Of Grammatology* 171). While Derrida draws connections between the argument of Rousseau's *Essay* and his sentimental novel, *Emile*, there is no mention of *Pygmalion* in *Of Grammatology*. In his analysis of *Pygmalion*, however, Paul de Man reads Rousseau's implicit exploration of the relationship between language and being. For de Man—and in a reading that is informed by Derrida's argument about supplementarity—*Pygmalion* is a play that from the point of view of absolute 'truth and falsehood' is one in which the self is not so much a 'privileged metaphor' as a figure that demonstrates selfhood through reference to a pliable work of art that is also 'radically other' (187).

Catherine Malabou, whose dissertation on plasticity in Hegel was supervised by Derrida, also cites the influence of deconstruction when she emphasizes the role of the surprising and the accidental to what she argues is essentially a 'plastic' conception of the historical subject. Malabou's notion of plasticity refers both to that which can be moulded (clay, plaster) and to he or she who moulds (a sculptor or a plastic surgeon). Plasticity, in Malabou's terms, gives a name to being as a self-sculpting that takes place through a mutually constitutive play between self and language. The Hegelian 'substance-subject' is, for Malabou, one that schematizes itself into being as the development of an autonomous self in the absence of divine presence or absolute knowledge, a self-sculpting which takes place through habitual self-cultivation but also through receptiveness to elements of accident or surprise. Plasticity thus names the elements of both give and take in (Hegelian) subject formation. Important to Malabou's concept of plasticity is the notion of *voir venir*, which literally translates as 'to see (what is) coming' but also means, in the French vernacular, wait and see. *Voir venir* thus

carries a double meaning. It implies both *to know what is likely to happen* (based on what has happened already) and also *to not know what might be coming*.

Writing before Malabou, de Man's reading of Rousseau's *Pygmalion* also theorises a state of being that vacillates between give and take. In de Man's reading, Rousseau's artist encounters himself via his sculpture, Galatea, as a figure, a metaphor, rather than a substance or an essence. *Pygmalion's* depiction of Galatea as divine art-object and beloved self-creation amounts, however, to more than a representation of the artist's narcissism. Galatea represents both more and less than a figural externalization of Pygmalion's primal being through the event of her happening, her coming-to-life, through which elements of surprise or accident are incorporated. *Pygmalion* is thus, for de Man, an allegory of a form of self-production that is open-ended, or future-oriented, rather than (deterministically or fatalistically) closed. The apotheosis of this structure is the moment when Galatea comes to life but, in doing so, she does not extinguish the fear or the desire that, throughout the play, is expressed by the artist who created her. Nor does her animation bring a satisfactory closure: the ending of the play acts out not a bringing together of opposites, but an infinite deferral of reversals and substitutions in which artist and statue, lyric and drama, fail to be reconciled to one another:

"Galathea (touches herself and says): Moi. *Pygmalion* (transported): Moi!" (1:1230). The supplementary exclamation mark records the imbalance acted out in the final exchanges. Galathea setting herself apart from the material stone ('Galathea takes a few steps and touches a marble stone: It is no longer I') is clear to the point of redundancy, but her statement after touching Pygmalion is as ambiguous as Alkmene's famous Ach! at the end of Kleist's play *Amphitryon*: 'Galathea goes in his direction and looks at him. He rises precipitously, stretches out his arms toward her and looks at her ecstatically. She touches him with one of her hands: he trembles, takes her hand, presses it against his heart, then covers it with kisses. Galathea (with a sigh): Ah encore Moi'. The tone is hardly one of ecstatic union, rather of resigned tolerance towards an overassiduous admirer. (de Man 185)

For de Man, Galatea's melancholic 'encore Moi', or 'me again', does not (as the reader or spectator might expect) represent the statue's capitulation to the artist's seductions. This final sentence is less a conclusion than 'one more vacillation in a sequence of reversals, none of which have the power to close off the text' (186). Crucial to De Man's reading therefore is the idea that, in *Pygmalion*, the self is recognized to be a figure, or form. This recognition does not correlate, however, to the idea that the artist has total possession of his creation and, by extension, that we (modern subjects) are completely in control of the language that gives us form. Rather, for de Man, Rousseau's *Pygmalion* is about the art work as the artist's encounter with a quasi-divine presence, an aura (in

Walter Benjamin's sense); in this literal object of desire, the artist confronts multiple failures – the failure of desire, failure of the attempt to possess his aesthetic creation and failure to control his self-representation. For de Man, *Pygmalion* is an allegory in which the artist encounters the 'knowledge that he is the agent of his own production as radically other' as 'the surprises of self-reading' are found to be 'inexhaustible' (de Man 179).

My reading, via de Man, of Rousseau's *Pygmalion* is that it exemplifies Derridean supplementarity and that it draws attention to the plasticity of melodrama. It would seem therefore to argue for Rousseau's pre-Romantic text as one that is foundational to melodramatic ideas, aesthetics and affects. This is however partly misleading since, as a philosopher famously associated with an eighteenth-century 'culture of sentiment', Rousseau has historically represented that valuing of a refined, cultivated, sensibility that differed in both style and substance to the more popular and sensational pantomimes and dumbshows that were beginning to be performed in the cities and towns of England and France. By the last decades of the eighteenth century, playwrights and theatre directors—evading official sanctions on theatrical dialogue—created plays that expressed desires and struggles of common people and that communicated libertarian ideals, including possibilities for resistance to authority. In this context, melodrama communicated revolutionary ideals and fervour, not always through complex dialogue or elevated lyric, but often through mime, pantomime, spectacle and sensational, even risky and violent, action. Compared to the sentimental exemplarity of Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, the melodramas performed in late eighteenth-century popular theatres were more likely to be populated by stock characters (villain, hero, heroine, fool), to feature Manichean opposites and extreme moral polarities and characterized by often breathtaking action.

Yet there are continuities between Rousseau's cultivated sentimental play and the more popular eighteenth-century stage when, as Jacky Bratton argues, 'in its Romantic first flowering, the epitome of goodness was often made so innocent as to be incapable of verbal expression: a child, a mute character, a wild man, or indeed a dog or a horse. The Rousseauvian appeal to the language of the heart, rejecting the potential deceptiveness of words, was effectively embodied on the melodramatic stage, where all the resources of music, spectacle and pantomime action, could spell out the message that here was innocence, threatened but for ever true to itself' ('Romantic' 119). In his study of early nineteenth-century American theatre culture, David Grimstead also notes the way in which melodrama favoured a hero who learned from his heart and from nature: 'emotional sensibility was the real criterion for virtue' and moral truth (11). This is cognate with Peter Brooks's reading of popular stage melodrama as a spectacle of witnessing and redemption in which innocence (often in the shape of a young woman) learns to recognize itself through encounter with the presence of

villainy (which exemplifies knowledge itself). While they often took a more sensational form, the melodramas of post-revolutionary France and England do have overlaps with Rousseau's composition, particularly in their characterization of a mute innocent who, like a latter day Galatea, becomes a recurrent melodramatic character. This mute woman who is transformed through her encounter with knowledge, figures the adaptability of melodrama itself. Whether as a stony sculpture that comes to life, or as an art-object that metamorphoses once in public circulation, the melodramatic form both transforms and is susceptible to being transformed. Melodrama is a plastic mode, a vehicle through which artist and art-object, self and other, shape one another. It not only performatively names and brings the self into being, it also contains elements that negate the absolute self-determinacy or agency of new forms of selfhood.

Importantly, writers of the new popular form of post-revolutionary melodrama drew on previous fiction as well as on the dramatic, often sensational environments and situations, in which their audiences were living. Revolutionary French dramatist Guilbert de Pixerecourt is widely credited as the pioneer of stage melodramas that appealed to a broad-based audience. Among Pixerecourt's first plays were *Victor, Or The Child of the Forest* (1798) and *Coelina, Child of Mystery* (1803)—the latter, which played for over a year, is the story of a poor orphan who, driven from her home, is robbed by a villainous uncle and pestered by lecherous men. However, while Pixerecourt wrote for a largely illiterate public (see Kavela), it is possible to see how he and other melodramatists did not so much break with the past as merely re-form what had been done previously (see Buckley). Pixerecourt and other theatre writers and directors wrote new productions and recycled older forms and adaptations that appealed to a growing populace that, living in a sensational environment, were themselves hungry for entertainment and distraction. The unpredictable events and situations affecting this populace in turn had an effect on Pixerecourt's dramas, which brought together elements of the old and new as Pixerecourt responded to the revolutionary, democratic energies of the moment and to the rise of a new social consciousness animating his public.

The domestic or sentimental story of the abandoned waif was only one of many, often complex, story forms: these included prison escapades, crime thrillers, nautical adventures and other genres.⁶ Audience numbers for sensational entertainment rapidly grew in number, eventually overtaking attendances for sentimental comedies and operas, which had been catering to a more restricted, polite audience. Melodramatic stories also crossed national boundaries and geographical distances, and imitations and adaptations of earlier forms

⁶ See Gillian Russell, 'Reality Effects: War, Theatre and Re-enactment Around 1800', forthcoming.

proliferated through both print-media and travelling shows. From its earliest incarnations, melodrama was a highly transportable, adaptive mode. Thomas Holcroft translated Pixerecourt's play *Coelina* into English (without acknowledgement) where it was performed in England as 'A Tale of Mystery'. A common charge against melodrama—that it is formulaic and artificial or inauthentic (in the sense of un-original)—may derive from the way in which, in its earliest incarnations, melodramatic productions freely borrowed from other sources, including gothic novels. Pixerecourt's *Coelina*, for example, was taken from a romance of the same title by gothic writer, Ducray-Duminil. Matthew 'Monk' Lewis's long-running melodrama, *The Castle Spectre* (1797), is another example of the immense popularity of a form that also quickly spread across geographical boundaries. Originally opening in Drury Lane, London, *The Castle Spectre* (1797) the next year opened in a theatre in New York (1798). It was just one of a flood of imports that crossed from Germany and France to England and North America. Melodramas not only adapted plots from more ancient sources (such as Greek and Roman tragedies and medieval romances); theatrical adaptations were, from early on, adapted from theatre into prose-poems and novels.

While melodrama's heyday is said to have been the final decades of the eighteenth century (Booth), Jacky Bratton's important work on nineteenth-century theatre and music halls demonstrates its enduring popular appeal amidst theatrical sanctions and licensing acts that restricted where and how melodrama could be performed. As Bratton shows, the 1843 Theatre Licensing Act decreed that any performance containing narrative, whether expressed in dialogue, song or dance, was now supposed to be the preserve of the theatres (not music halls) (165). While this engendered a cultural divide between theatres aimed at more cultivated audiences and those catering to more sensational taste, it was a schism that was not absolute, as many people were part of both audiences. Nevertheless, this institution of an official divide helped to shaped the style of entertainment presented in music halls and other establishments which, catering to mass audiences, emphasised dramatic spectacle and sensational action over elevated dialogue.

In Peter Brooks's argument, melodramatic techniques and themes, derived from theatre history, cross from stage to (literary) novel and animate the late nineteenth century novels of Balzac and Henry James. Particularly important, for Brooks, is how a preoccupation with theatrical gesture gets transferred to the novel and becomes a signifier of emotional excess in late Victorian fiction. In the context of the emergence, by the late nineteenth century, of a mass market and industrial-machine culture, Brooks identifies plenitude that, often expressed via the non-verbal, registers anxiety about the possibility that such excess is also a lack, as if a plenitude of meaning is unable to be extracted from the ubiquitous,

machine-made surfaces of Victorian culture. In Brooks' account, and like the sculpture that comes to life in *Pygmalion*, the melodramatic work of art functions like a fetish object; melodrama invests meaning in the 'surface reality' of things, as if that surface holds some secret promise that it also refuses. This meaning exists amidst and between a plethora of spectacular signs and non-verbal expressions that promise but also thwart stable interpretation. As Brooks writes, melodrama's pleasure is in the process of naming this imminent but also unreachable, signficatory presence. He refers to desire in melodrama as a force '[that] cries aloud its language in identification with full states of being' (41). It's worth noting here that both de Man and Brooks were influenced, in their remarkably similar formulations about melodramatic metaphor as both excess and lack, by Jacques Derrida's reading of the supplement, in *Of Grammatology*, a book (as noted earlier) in which Rousseau's *Essay* about language as an absent presence is crucially featured. To return to Brooks, his argument is that it is theatrical gesture that finds its way into the late nineteenth-century novel in the form of metaphor or, more especially, in the form of catachresis—a forced metaphor that, often in the shape of neologism, creatively names that which lacks a proper name (73).

Such naming practices can be seen in Victorian melodramas, in the fiction of Balzac and Dickens, and in theatrical productions of the time. For example, Dion Boucicout's immensely popular production *The Poor of New York* is set in New York in the immediate aftermath of the 1857 financial panic. In this melodrama, the likes of Captain Bloodgood, a corrupt banker, attempts to swindle money from the virtuous Lucy Fairweather. This kind of melodramatic naming (abounding in Dickens's novels)—which forges a link between the literal and the figural, function and form, in characterization—continues today in contemporary soap opera and 'quality' television. In the American soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*, the lead character, originally an orphan, re-named himself Victor Newman and, in doing so, augments his victorious new identity and his rise to fame and fortune. Similarly, Don Draper is the name of the lead character in AMC's long-running melodrama, *Mad Men* (2007 – present). A fraud who has fabricated a new identity for himself by stealing another's, Draper's name (referring to a dealer in cloths and textiles) catachrestically refers to his role as ad-man or creative who both (re)creates and conceals (drapes) advertising copy to sell the latest consumer commodity.

Others have argued that melodrama, in crossing from theatre to novel to early cinema and now television, has combined its spectacular and sensational elements with aspects of other modes or genres, such as realism and naturalism (see Gledhill; Parchesky; Postlewait; Williams). There are however important distinctions between melodrama and these other modes. In naturalism, as Raymond Williams argues, environment has a determining effect on character

action, creating a play of cause and effect between environment and character ('The Case'). In theatrical melodrama, by contrast, environment tends to get evoked pictorially and, in later cinema melodrama, environment is often rendered as surface ornamentation or as a backdrop that adds to the melodramatic sensation. I'm thinking about the thrill audiences experienced as they watched the slave, Eliza (in theatrical renditions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous race melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) cross a treacherously icy river and escape to her freedom. Or when, in D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East*, the hero rescues Lillian Gish, playing a lowly servant, from falling to her peril. Sensational natural landscapes, in these instances, add a dynamic visual element to staged or screened drama.

Raymond Williams makes connections but emphasizes differences between late-nineteenth-century naturalism and melodrama ('The Case').⁷ And, while there is no entry for 'melodrama' in Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, he does provide a gloss on the keyword 'dramatic'—'the sense of an action or situation having qualities of spectacle and surprise comparable to those of written or acted drama' (94). Connections are also drawn between understandings of the 'dramatic' and the 'theatrical' and modern conceptions of personhood. While the word 'role' refers to a character in a play, it also describes the position 'taken up in social action or organisation' (*Keywords* 94). And in his keyword entry for 'personality', which Williams sees as essentially linked to 'dramatic', he notes that the word 'person' dates back to the thirteenth century and was first understood as 'a mask used by a player' (95). This intertwining of modern conceptions of subjectivity with the theatrical—through which Williams seems to propose a conception of the modern self as one that is based in stage history—is further qualified when he associates the rise of the individualised or personalised with understandings of dramatic and fictionalised character:

But a personality or a character, once an outward sign, has been decisively internalized, yet internalized as a possession, and therefore as something that can be displayed or interpreted. (95)

Here, modern personality is associated with the internalisation of a fictional persona, observed on stage or screen. Williams' linking of stage and screen culture with notions of 'possessive individualism' is thus consonant with Michel Foucault's theorisation of the modern subject as one who comes into being through biopolitical regimes of power. For Foucault, individuality is an effect of the subject's recognition of self through state-sanctioned systems of discipline and regulation—a recognition which in turn consolidates his or her position in a power structure.

⁷ See also Mark Seltzer on the relation between melodrama and naturalism in Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893).

Such theorisations of modern personhood are also a feature of formulations of the melodramatic imagination as a structuring condition for the rise of bourgeois or liberal-humanist agency. Yet, as discussed earlier, the way in which melodramatic characters are represented not according to specific or unique attributes but as named generalities or types (ie, the Lucy Fairweathers or Victor Newmans of Victorian stage and contemporary soap opera are named according to their function) pose a challenge to associations of the form with the seemingly autonomous, self-possessed, liberal-bourgeois subject. Further, melodrama's re-enactments, its perennial re-stagings of primal dramas, can also be understood as a form of resistance to the temporal calculations and regulations of modernity, to clock time, and to the reduction of the body to statistical accountability. The theatricalisation of the self, that takes place in melodrama, can be thought of as a way of asserting a self that is not entirely reducible to the machinic. The tensions and contradictions and uneven patterns at work in melodrama also trouble formulations of the self as simply the product of a state-regulated system. This scholarship focused on what is lost via (melodramatic) reproduction is cognate with the way scholarship about American film melodrama has overwhelmingly focused on the role of pathos in sentimental genres even though, as Ben Singer has shown in his detailed work on early cinema, surprises, thrills and accidents played an essential role in a vast array of melodramatic genres in which melancholy was not so prominent.⁸

Nevertheless, through cinematic close-up and other camera techniques, the expressive face became a primary (art- object) for conveying pathos. The close-up, it can be argued, also amplified the plastic nature of the cinematic art-object and can reveal elements of its (non) dialectical logic. In D. W. Griffith's melodrama of repressed desire, *Broken Blossoms* (1919), set mainly in turn-of-the-century London, Lillian Gish plays an illegitimate fifteen-year-old girl, Lucy—an innocent who is sadistically dominated and beaten by her father, Battling Burrows. That the villain is a tyrannical father suggests that this family setting is an oedipal scene of moral retribution and judgment. Lucy, described as 'this child with tear-aged face', is the subject of many of the film's close-ups and the primary vector for its pathos. Completing the oedipal triangle is a third character, the Yellow Man, an effete Englishman turned Buddhist who has travelled to London from China and whose status as ambiguous 'racial' other complicates the Cockney family drama: it is the 'Yellow Man' who offers Lucy refuge from domestic abuse and abandonment. However, in the midst of its bleak picture of the London underclass, the film offers what Robert Lang refers to as 'a sense of resurrection' or redemption. It does this primarily through close-ups on Gish that turn the human face into a cinematic work of art that, in Paul de Man's

⁸ See also Higgins and Ross on contemporary action films, sensation and melodrama.

terms, evokes a divine presence that also negates deterministic formulations of selfhood.

In a similar mode to de Man, Roland Barthes writes—in terms expressing religious intensity and drawing on metaphors of plasticity—about the power of the cinematic close-up as a ‘face object’ that evokes not particularized or personalized beauty but a ‘Platonic Idea of the human creature’ (56). In his essay, ‘The Face of Garbo’, Barthes writes that ‘Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still [sic] plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh’. Barthes continues ‘it is not a painted surface, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of its colour, not by its lineaments’ ... and ... in ‘spite of its extreme beauty, this face, not drawn but sculpted in something smooth and friable, that is, at once perfect and ephemeral, comes to resemble the flour-white complexion of Charlie Chaplin, the dark vegetation of his eyes, his totem-like countenance’ (*Mythologies* 56). Barthes’ description of audiences ‘lost in the philtre’ that is Garbo’s cinematic face-object is similar to de Man’s reading of Pygmalion; in each case, the art-object brings together the general with the particular, evoking an artistic desire to see self-resemblance in a production that is also radically other.



Figure 1: Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) gifts Lucy (Lillian Gish) a doll in D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

Broken Blossoms' focus on Gish's emotive face, including during scenes of extreme violence, also conjures a kind of plasticity. Before she is beaten to death by her father, Lucy finds refuge with Cheng Huan ('The Yellow Man') who gifts her a doll [Figure 1] and these scenes are some of the most extraordinary in the film—not only for the way in which they toy with an alternative to the Anglo-familial unit but also because Gish's childlike adoration of her doll seems to mirror the cinematic gaze focused on her [Figure 2]. The image of Gish staring at her doll, like Barthes' Garbo and de Man's Galatea, also has elements of the Freudian uncanny. As with Hoffman's Olympia (a lifelike doll), as is referred to in Freud, Gish's animated yet doll-like face looks searchingly into the face of the doll that she holds as the screen becomes an infinitely receding mirror of refracted, beguiling gazes.



Figure 2: Lucy (Lillian Gish) in D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

It seems significant that, in the case of *Broken Blossoms*, the oscillation between self as subject and self as object is thematised in a familial scene – Lucy's adoration of her doll conjures, in particular, the absent mother of the drama. Such a primal subject/object relation is interestingly reversed in Douglas Sirk's 1959 melodrama, *Imitation of Life*, in which a teenage girl, Susie (played by a doll-like Sandra Dee) expresses frustration at her self-absorbed mother (Lana Turner) and her ambitious drive to be a great actor, crying out 'Oh Mother stop

acting' [Figure 3]. In relation to melodramatic plasticity, it's interesting that Lana Turner represents, for German émigré director Douglas Sirk, a hardening of the cinematic image as commodity form. While he worked within the Hollywood system, Sirk was highly critical of what he saw as its peddling of 'cheap imitation' (Halliday 148). Sirk's highly ironic mid-twentieth century films are commonly read as critiques of the Hollywood product and, more generally, of consumer capitalism and its alienating affects. Yet his films also bring ironic distanciation together with classic melodramatic techniques in ways that explicitly crisscross the philosophical with the affective.



Figure 3: Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) and Susie (Sandra Dee) in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959).

Sirk's films can also be thought of as critiquing the aspirational subject, an exemplary figure in American cinematic melodrama. This is a character who desires movement from a cultural margin to the centre of public life. Through its

perpetual re-plotting of an aspirational trajectory, melodrama is justifiably critiqued for continually re-staging the (false) promise of consumer capitalism—the illusion that it is possible to achieve the good life, for all to achieve fame and fortune and/or that such an achievement is desirable. As Lauren Berlant has so eloquently shown, the 1930s and 40s Hollywood woman's film exemplifies just such images of suffering, self-pity, thwarted longing as shared affects that mediate what Berlant refers to as 'intimate public', a readership or audience that experiences generalised pain as personal pain (*The Female Complaint*). Jean Mitry similarly describes melodrama as the bourgeois drama *par excellence*. This is not to say, as Mitry writes, 'that the bourgeoisie takes a special pleasure from melodrama, but that melodrama would appear to be an avatar of bourgeois morality and ideology' (quoted in Lang 132; see also Parchesky). This view of melodrama is of a conservative mode that, affirming class difference but not class struggle, tends to perpetuate the status quo. However such a view perhaps downplays the contradictions and tensions at work in melodrama, including its deliberate, generic focus on the typical over the individuated, and its interest in temporal revolutions, including perpetual returns to primal dramas that have historically appealed to the culturally marginalised or subordinated. This latter view speaks to the work of a generation of feminist film scholars, including Laura Mulvey, Mary-Anne Doane, Linda Williams and others, whose analyses of 1930s and 40s Hollywood cinema explored what it meant for women to be depicted as pathologised or neurotic subjects on screen, the effect of polarised divisions between home and work for which women often bore the burden, and the gendering of spectatorship.

There is no question that many of these 30s and 40s melodramas, with their romances and happy endings, affirm a particular status quo and consolidate women's role within that. Yet some of the best family melodramas of 1930s and 40s explored the contradictions and tensions of the capitalist dream that melodrama would otherwise seemed to uphold. King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) endorses the generalised appeal of the 'good life' but does so through a story that enacts some of the contradictions also present in de Man's reading of *Pygmalion* and through its exploration of the rewards as well as the costs to a woman of identifying with the dream of a better life offered via the silver screen. In doing so, in other words, it critiques aspirational subjectivity via representation of a woman who initially desires but ultimately rejects cultural capital and the acquisition of social distinction offered through marriage. In King Vidor's film, Barbara Stanwyck plays Stella, a working class girl who, desiring escape from her poor home life, declares to her soon-to-be-husband: 'I don't want to be like me ... I want to be like the people in the movie'. However, while marrying Stephen Dallas and becoming mother of his child brings improvement to Stella's material circumstances, the contradictions in this melodrama arise from Stella's ultimate rejection of the signs of bourgeois materialism she had initially pursued.

What Stella eventually casts aside is the desire to 'be' that which she had identified with on screen—a desire which had augmented a marriage that improves her material circumstances. When she finds that her husband is ashamed of her vulgar ways and lower class friends, Stella separates from him, symbolically rejecting a patriarchal law with its expectations of her gendered and class based aspirations. Stanley Cavell includes *Stella Dallas* in a class of films he calls the 'melodrama of the unknown woman', which he sees as being in tension with another group of films he calls the '(re)marriage comedy' genre. Unlike the woman of the '(re)marriage comedy' who learns to see herself through a man's eyes, the unknown woman genre (of whom Stella is an exemplary character) learns 'the futility of appealing to the taste of those who have no taste for her' (203). Stella's recognition of her own desires, her own sense of self, take place at the cost of her own lack of intelligibility. Her self-willed negation of (a socially validated) self is part and parcel of her unknownness.

The unknown woman, in Cavell's reading of melodrama, exists both inside and outside a masculinist, social system and it is the exploration of her desires and her demand that she be recognised as separate within a conformist domain that is so important. This is thematised when Stella expresses a wish to her departing daughter: 'I want to see you in my mind's eye'. While 'in my mind's eye' implies an internal Stella whose love for her daughter is central to her identity, the statement also refers back to Stella's earlier wish to be like the people in the movies. In a Galatea-like move, Stella recognizes that she was formed through those machine-made images and decides to separate herself from them. Like Gish's Lucy's gaze at that doll and Galatea's melancholic 'Encore Moi', Stella Dallas recognizes her part within an infinite play of substitutions and reversals. In doing so, she resists her complete incorporation into the system that originally defined her.

However, for Thomas Elsaesser and others, *Stella Dallas* exemplifies not the 'unknown' of feminine self-definition but rather the pathos and the thwarted wish-fulfillment of melodrama. This is the structure that is said to be based on an 'if only' or a 'what if' of hopeful possibility that can only be thwarted. Such a subjunctive or conditional (melodramatic) grammar has also been conjured in evocations of the modern or postmodern condition. A grammatical 'what if' is, for example, a feature of Jean Baudrillard's theorisation of the reign of the simulacra in late capitalism—the consumer image that has become dissociated from its original referent and, in doing so, has become the real, a simulation that refers only to, or masks, another simulation. Significant also is that, in *Simulations*, Baudrillard draws attention to a melodramatic simulation that takes the form of reality television. I'm referring here to Baudrillard's description of the 'Loud

Family', who allowed cameras into their home and their daily lives be televised for public consumption. Baudrillard writes:

This family was in any case already somewhat hyperreal by its very selection: a typical, California-housed, 3-garage, 5-children, well-to-do professional upper middle class ideal American family with an ornamental housewife. In a way it is this statistical perfection which dooms it to death. This ideal heroine of the American way of life is chosen, as in sacrificial rites, to be glorified and to die under the fiery glare of the studio lights, a modern *fatum*. (51)

In Baudrillard's thrilling, melodramatic prose, the Loud family in 'delivering themselves into the hands of television' performed 'a sacrificial rite' as they became a 'spectacle offered to 20 million viewers' and 'the liturgical drama of a mass society'. As a result of the eventual disintegration of the Loud family unit—the various members went their separate ways after the filming—Baudrillard asks 'What *would* have happened if TV had not been there' (my emphasis). Baudrillard's use of *would* reflects the conditional grammar that critics have identified as structuring the thwarted longing and pathos of melodrama. But is not Baudrillard's question, a kind of death sentence, itself melodramatic? What was the future of that 'ornamental housewife'? Rather than being certain that she met a sad fate, might not her unknown destiny, in Cavell's terms, spark an excess of doubt rather than certainty about her destiny?

Half a century or so after those Hollywood melodramas, and thirty years after Baudrillard's *Simulations* was first published, we find ourselves in a situation in which screens are more ubiquitous than ever. Digital screens, big and small, mediate and continue to melodramatise our everyday lives. In a recent interview, the American filmmaker Harmony Korine was asked about what it meant to direct films in a digital age. Korine intriguingly described this—his and our—contemporary moment as 'post-articulate'.⁹ Although he did not use the word, I wondered whether melodrama was what was being spoken of here. This is the era of social networking (*Facebook* et al) when everyday participants not only create avatars that screen and dramatise their own faces/bodies, they also curate their own melodramatic narratives through the combining and/or assembling of images, music and other media. The ways in which such uses of sounds and images, in digital space, work to supplement the communicative power of the 'written' word brings my argument full circle, that is back to Derrida and his re-reading of Rousseau's privileging of the spoken over the written, melody over harmony, accent over articulation. Melodrama is an important keyword, the

⁹ Harmony Korine, 'Spring Breakers and the Place Beyond the Pines'. ABC Radio National. 9 May 2013. <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/finalcut/fct-may-9-2013/4680208>> Accessed 30 May 2013.

consideration of which has enabled exploration of how an aesthetics of dramatic spectacle and sensation is coterminous with, and constitutive of, philosophies about being and/in language. From the aesthetics of theatre to that of new, digital formats, and from post-enlightenment metaphysics to post-structuralism and deconstruction, melodrama metamorphoses but also seems to return to itself. This shifting, changing form continues to adapt and, in returning to old form, to undo the possibility of (total) adaptation to change. In response to new situations, new technologies, new happenings, will melodrama continue to re(form) itself in surprising, unpredictable ways? The future of melodrama? In the absence of absolute knowledge about what did happen, we should wait and see.

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