popular culture, our students might like to learn a little more about it, and I suspect that there is still plenty for us to learn too.

NOTES

1. Matthew S. Buckley, "Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 2 (2009): 175–90.
2. David Mayer, "Encountering Melodrama," in *Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145–63, 146.

# Melodrama

CAROLYN WILLIAMS

I have been arguing recently that we need to pay more attention to melodramatic form. Currently no comprehensive account of it exists. I have suggested that we should focus on the way the dramatic action is interrupted by still pictures, the tableaux, and, correlatively, on the way the music starts and stops, segmenting the dramatic action into "passages." (Even when the music is nearly continuous, it swells and recedes in volume, calibrated so that the actors' declamations can be heard; and thus, even when fairly continuous, the music participates in the formal segmentation of the action.) This way of thinking hypothesizes an audio-visual field for analysis, constituted by dialectical relations between dramatic action and pictorial representation; movement and stillness; speech and music; sound and silence. The relative strength of this method will be tested through the readings it can generate and support.

I'm not the first to concentrate on the interruptive nature of melodrama's genre form. Juliet John has stipulated: "the emotional economy of melodrama is best figured as a series of waves."[1] Martin Meisel drew a formal analogy between melodrama, painting, and novels of the nineteenth century; he called their shared narrative form "serial discontinuity" and emphasized the pictorial dramaturgy of the nineteenth-century stage overall.[2] Recently, Ellen Lockhart has attended to melodrama's "stuttering" form,

its "stop and go meta-meter."[3] I've claimed that in response to the form the spectator feels a rhythmic oscillation between absorption and shock.[4]

Further, I've asked: how might the spectator experience those moments when the dramatic action is interrupted by a still picture? Here, I engage in an argument with Michael Fried's work on the tableau and its beholder. Following Diderot, he has explained that the still picture "calls" to its beholder, then holds that beholder fixated or enthralled before it. Though Fried does note that Diderot also commented on the tableau's function within the drama, he focuses chiefly on the beholder's responses to painting (the original meaning of 'tableau').[5] Within the temporal unfolding of melodrama, however, the sudden appearance of the tableau has a different effect. Absorbed during the dramatic action, the spectator experiences a shock when the action suddenly stops in a picture. No longer absorbed, the spectator is suddenly catapulted, through shock, into a state of aesthetically distanced contemplation, when astonishment and fixation are accompanied by reflection and interpretation. This way of understanding imagines the spectator of melodrama as curious, intelligent, and able to "read" the pictures.

Concentrating on the form of melodrama in no way excludes or fails to emphasize its sociopolitical significances. On the contrary. Focusing on the form allows us to see how melodrama makes its sociopolitical points—polemically, aesthetically, and above all affectively—at the moment of tableau. The "pointed style" of melodrama—gestures coming to their points in the "attitudes," plot coming to its points in the charged "situations"—culminates with the dramatic action coming to its points in the tableaux. These pictorial moments are indeed "pointed" in two senses, for they pierce their spectators with feeling, but they also suggest—and make the time to concentrate—their intellectual points. In this dynamic, affect, aesthetics, and sociopolitical awareness are intimately conjoined. In other words, I'm not recommending a "mere" formalism. It is through form that we can see and feel the sociopolitical points. That is what the form is for.

Melodramatic form sums up the historical trajectory of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics, as it moves from a focus on epistemological procedure based on sensory perception and toward the prestige of fine art (especially painting) and the nascent discipline of art history. Melodrama spans these two poles of English aesthetic thought with an affective form based on bodily feeling roused and orchestrated by dramatic action and speech, music and tableaux. This is one way to historicize the genre of stage melodrama to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, we already know

that this is the period of English stage melodrama; but, placing the genre against the history of aesthetics might help to explain the significance of this periodization.

Thus, the pun on "moving pictures"—often invoked in studies of melodrama as well as in film studies—brings into focus the way the pictures are moving because they are so very still; their sudden stillness moves their spectators into affective states of sentimental or violent feeling accompanied by aesthetic detachment. For me, this pun on "moving pictures" also offers another way to state the historical argument about periodization, seeing that melodrama reaches—as a historical continuum—from forms of sentiment and bodily sensation toward film.

Melodrama as a genre form can be historicized in another way, if we see its historical period as a segment within a longer continuum. This takes us to genre theory—and can help us clarify the issue of the relation between the historical genre and the transhistorical mode. If we see melodrama as a theatrical genre, again we can specify it historically to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within this framework, its history is usually described as a sequence of subgenres (not as a sequential march of one subgenre after another, but as a layered unfolding with survivals and overlaps along the way[6]). On the other hand, if we see melodrama as one form of "music drama," then we can see how it distinguishes itself from opera in the late-eighteenth century (a distinction formulated by Rousseau at about the same time that Diderot theorized the tableau) and how it eventually becomes film in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This modal view (obviously) posits a long continuity, but it can nevertheless also highlight breaks, shifts, and changes within the overarching continuum. Then, through this modal lens, we can also see melodrama's expansion outward into other modes and genres, discourses, media, artforms, and other national and international cultures of circulation.[7]

The process of melodrama "becoming" film is well documented.[8] (From the modal point of view on genre, the process of media shift can be seen as a shift from one phase to another of the "same" thing.) Early film often dramatizes the plots of stage melodramas; it uses the acting style and gestural language of melodrama; and it is accompanied by live music, whether by one musical instrument or many. (Even before film has a sound track, in other words, the performance is not silent.) What I want most to emphasize, however, is that, like melodrama, the film strip is a form of serial pictorialization.[9]

So, whenever you are watching a film—or a digital moving picture—and you are met with a suddenly still picture, you should think of the sedimented presence of melodrama in the later form. The flickering of early film emphasizes the discontinuity in "serial discontinuity," the space between the still shots, rather than the illusion of continuity we see in later moving pictures. More precise technology as well as later styles of editing create a more smoothly moving picture that covers the residual melodramatic discontinuity; yet, the gesture of stopping time in a still picture—a camera shot within the diegesis, say, or a freeze frame imposed extra-diegetically—lives on to remind us of the history of melodramatic form.

This aspect of melodramatic film form has usually been treated predominantly as a function of the technology. And, of course, I don't want to minimize the history of photography, optical toys, and the magic lantern—among the many other histories important to the development of film. But my point is instead like Geoffrey Batchen's in *Burning With Desire*, where he argues that the world was "burning with desire" for the photograph (and its "burning" of the image onto a prepared surface).[10] In this view, the technology follows from the desire. My point about melodrama is analogous: the melodramatic tableau prefigures the development of photography and is a marker of the "desire" for fixing time in the still picture. And it was the work of the nineteenth century first to develop the still picture, and then to get the picture moving. In this view, aesthetic determination wins out over technological determinism. Thus, though the still picture is the dialectical opposite of the moving picture, it is also a fundamental constituent of the picture's movement.

## Notes

1. Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.
2. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 38.
3. Ellen Lockhart, "Forms and Themes of Early Melodrama," in *The Melodramatic Moment, 1780–1820*, ed. Katherine Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
4. Carolyn Williams, "Melodrama," in *The New Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 193–219.

5. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 92–94. Peter Brooks also takes up the analysis of spectatorial enthrallment as "The Aesthetics of Astonishment," in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 24–55.
6. The best account of the subgenres may be found in Matthew Buckley, "Early English Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
7. This is the argument of *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
8. See for example Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949) and Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theater to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
9. Other forms of the strip include William Hogarth's serial paintings and comic strips—at the earlier and later historical moments of stage melodrama. Erving Goffman's frame analysis offers a later, sociological version of strip-thinking.
10. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). But see also Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

# Memory

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IN 1869 John Stuart Mill published a new edition of his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829), with a critical apparatus intended to update this foundational associationist psychology by reference to more recent discoveries in mental science. But the apparatus's explanatory power breaks down in the chapter on memory. As the elder Mill wraps up his demonstration that memory is a form of association,