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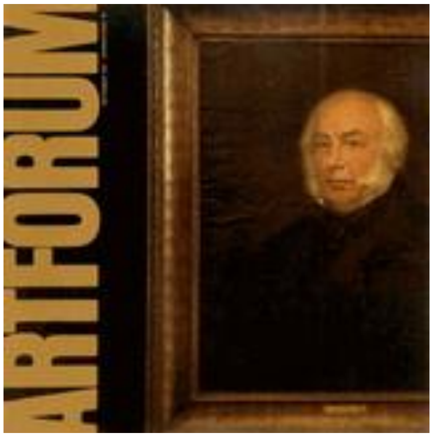

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MELODRAMATIC TACTICS

Kate Linker

WITH ITS CLOAK-AND-DAGGER plots, Manichaean contrasts, and lurid lights, melodrama was popular from its origin—an art of spectacle and entertainment. It was the offshoot of 19th-century industrialism which transformed the workers into an urban mass and produced, in the process, a public eager for diversion. “I am writing for those who cannot read”:[1] Pixérécourt’s statement describes the terms of such “democratic” theater, newly constituted as a commodity and subject to the market’s sway. The demands of low literacy and limited taste were met by the simple scenarios of melodrama, by its excessive imagery, cloying sentiments, and clear-cut moral codes. Nor was this confined to the theater, for melodrama was less a genre than a mode. In the broadsheet, the *feuilleton*, the Gothic novel and the popular fictions of Balzac—all crammed with sentiment and coded airs—we find the rudiments of a vernacular literature, designed to the pre-existing, inherently “vulgar” needs of the modern urban crowd.

Yet if melodrama supplied the period’s dominant mode, it soon developed into a vital force within the modern imagination, a 20th-century “type.” It permeated the nooks and crannies of culture, sounding recondite regions as well as traveled highways. German Expressionism, for example, provides an “Early Modern” instance of melodrama, while Brecht used melodrama in his Epic Theater as a vehicle for Marxist thought. The Grand Guignol, as employed by lonesco, is the medium for a vision of modernity. When Hollywood directors embarked on large-scale production they turned toward common melodramatic formats, at once expanding, elaborating, and shaping their grounds into central perceptual codes. But these are only examples in a vast and varied list. For there are B-movies and horror films, science fiction and detective stories, comic strips and “women’s pictures,” TV spectaculars and soaps. The plots and devices of today’s advertising are based on melodramatic conventions, while the TV news, with its focus on fires, earthquakes, and sinking ships, offers equivalents to disaster scenes. As a “mode of excess,"[2] of extravagant and reductive representation, of exciting fabulation and extreme effect, melodrama cornered a market.

It is against this discourse of popular culture, whose extreme gestures tend towards urban banality, that we can place the recent revival of interest in the "impoverished" melodramatic mode.[3] And against the same background we can place melodrama's relevance to certain contemporary artists, who quote from, refer to, or engage its central tenets. Clichés of danger and desire, of high seas adventure and criminal intrigue, pervade the current paintings of Richard Bosman. Walter Robinson's scenarios of passion and sex are culled from pulp magazines and books. The conflicts of love against hate, evil against good, or solitude versus communion in Michael Mogavero's work invoke primal melodramatic oppositions. Isolated examples among many, such copies and appropriations, based on wholesale plots and extreme representations, all call attention to rules.

Melodrama's formulaic character, which stems from its restricted rhetoric and accounts for its esthetic impoverishment, has historically provided its social power. Generally organized by antithesis and hyperbole, melodrama presumes a clear and reliable relation to its audience, encouraging it to be absorbed in, and engaged by, the flow of events. It does this both through stereotyped characters and standardized plots, to whose lineaments we immediately "relate," and through exaggerated effects, produced by settings, lighting, pose, and paint, whose expressionistic distortions cue sympathy. As an art of patterns, using narrative forms derived from other narratives, and personae from the repertory of character-types, melodrama is a medium of unproblematic classification. For no matter how its plots are varied by incident, no matter how unexpected the surface event, a predictable and reassuring reality is always rendered. All of its formal apparatus—the unfolding of mysteries and coincidences, the hyperbolic gestures and antithetical groups—work to articulate a stable universe, free from doubt and ambiguity.

Such a synthesis of experience into known and knowable patterns, as Christopher Prendergast has written, leaves "little room . . . for the autonomy and indeterminacy of the individual consciousness";[4] it evokes a universe underwritten by laws. And the same period that witnessed the rise of mass society (and of its contingent phenomenon, the market) saw the emergence of a mode of analysis, sociology, based on generalities and absolutes. The qualities which remove melodrama from the sphere of "pure" forms that privilege unique, individual perception, place it within the compass of ideology. For if melodrama has served as wish-fulfillment, providing the sensations absent from daily life, it also performs the role of locating the subject within a transparent world of representations, of making available, and legible, social codes. Historically, it functioned as a structure through which the 19th century represented reality to itself, and defined its underlying terms. The universe was moral: villains were punished and the system cleansed; the happy ending common to melodrama, like the successlul resolution of its mysteries, performed this operation of affirmation. But it was also more broadly social, inscribing, through particularities of gesture, action, and dress, the norms of behavior that are common to any period. Shards of collective opinion and general belief, such codes appeal to and underwrite the intelligibility of individual texts. And they naturalize, as reality, an inherently fictional construct. In melodrama, then, the dominant codes within a culture are both inscribed and enforced through strategies of marketing, which anticipate and condition response, and through audience manipulation, so that we imitate, and learn, proper conduct. Melodrama, then, is both entertainment *and* instrument, social diversion and societal constraint.

The effects of such entertainments which mediate between society and self, imposing on reality a ready-made system of meaning, are well known to a generation "educated" by TV, advertising, film. Yet the shape of melodrama, as it developed to contain a new social content in the 19th century, also involved a new problematic of the sign, radically opposed to the plane of representation conceived as surface or formal text. Pixérécourt's statement articulates not only a general turn from text to spectacle—to an essentially anti-literary mode—but also a concern, growing under the century's urban dynamic, for the plastic figuration of meaning. Interest in gesture and tableaux ("speaking pictures"), in pantomime, dumb shows, and the "speech" of mutes are its symptoms. In this sense melodrama should be placed against a period when phrenology was popular and typology became common, and which spawned the urge, epitomized by Freud and Marx, to seek meaning in all latencies, to regard everything as inherently significant. The progression from form to code, signifier to signified, or external vehicle in toward inner state involved a reinstatement of the conventional structure of the sign according to a new "expressive" logic. Hence, melodramatic grimaces, stereotypes, mannerist gestures, and suggestive interplays of shadow and light indicate a situation in which the plane of expression strains to convey, with heightened force and legibility, a newly significant weight.

This attempt to signify, using the devices and gestures of theatrical expression, found its literary embodiment in Balzac, whose novels belong within the "popular" mode. The example is important, for if the current recourse to melodrama can be placed within reaction to the previous textual esthetic, so Balzac's interest in significant latencies, in meanings and codes, can be opposed to the stylistic practice of Flaubert, for whom the manufacture of form was a signifying act. Balzac's practice is metaphoric; his is a world of hypersignificant signs, in which the slightest gesture—whether personal or social act—is mediated by reference to a code. A grammar of smiles, glances, and revealing looks—but also clothes, streets, and interiors—comprises a kind of visual language, a hieroglyphic system that requires deciphering. And this focus on reading, on the interplay between surface and depth, frames a new address toward the reader or viewer, that product of social discourses.

It is not hard to move from this still-provincial world, with its signal intimations and allusive gestures, to the mediated styles and consumer products that characterize the postindustrial world. Nor is it hard, in grasping melodrama's semantic definition as a "tableau of represented meanings," to make parallels to the many tableaux and constructed situations being developed by contemporary artists. Unlike assemblages, whose internal relations are formally determined, the dimensions of tableaux delineate a semantic confine; objects, characters, and settings are not neutral elements, but signaletic ones, referenced by cultural or historical codes.

Such projects do not pertain to a period of "classification," such as the 19th century, but to one of manipulation and analysis of the mechanisms underlying codes. Central among them are certain works by William Leavitt, who has used film, performance, and full-scale tableaux to examine the mythical patterns of experience transmitted by Hollywood. In these melodramatic scenarios of romance and intrigue, seasoned by suspense and advanced by conventional character-types, the props, furnishings, and lighting play seminal roles both in the generation of atmosphere, which evokes the basic tone of unease, and in the delineation of those ideological types whose broad social reach cues sympathy. Necklaces, crystal, or spotlit palms function as signs for relationships which are themselves already determined by tacit social representations. In a similar manner, this semantic paradigm underlies the “Mystery Environments” of Mac Adams, who uses the thriller idiom, with its crossed and scrambled clues, shadowy enigmas, and disquieting effects, as an allegory of interpretation. In Adams’ melodramas of blackmail and passionate crime, the play of multiple codes, carefully-chosen objects, and tense imbrications of shadow and light develops independent systems of signs, minute meaning-machines which are ignited by narrative sparks.

Such staged scenarios, as they are developed in media ranging from painting to photography to film, show an extreme awareness of the cultural centrality of types. When Izhar Patkin presents a television performer against a painted framework of shadow and light, it is as a faceless gesture, a persona both reduced to, and encoded in, pose. When Michael Mogavero paints his melodramas treating the “urban” themes of isolation and despair, his figures become ciphers, stylized forms rendered only by characteristic details.

Similarly, Cindy Sherman’s photographs appeal to both the types and devices of melodrama—to feminine roles and exaggerated effects as developed in *films noirs* and TV soaps, in B-movies, women’s pictures, and magazines. As quotations, they engage a collective vernacular, exploiting our freedom of visual recall and, as quotations, they are both dependent on, and revealing of, the rituals of conventional response. Her heroines are shot at a distance or, more recently, in close-up; they are either placed against the horizon of atmospheric suggestion or appear in grandiose, “cinematic” script. And it is significant that they are figured through muteness, in states of extreme or heightened emotion that, literally, strike them dumb. Gesture, make-up, costume, and other external signs bear the semantic burden of pointing toward problematized meanings.

Because they are all portraits in which she appears in a range of preexisting roles, Sherman’s photographs indicate the function of types as tools, reinforcing, through ritual repetition, the very generalities they embody. The availability of types, which coincides with melodrama’s origins as a commercial form, has been exploited by advertising, along with melodrama’s rhetorical means. For it is in advertising that the role of props or products is central to the mediation of desire, promising fulfillment of those wishes that underlie the melodramatic scenario. Amorous encounters, *liaisons dangereuses*, fantastic voyages to islands fringed by exotic palms are only a few of the settings for these dramas of commodity fetishism, keyed to codes and reinforced by extravagant effects. And it is here that Richard Prince’s work falls within the reach of the melodramatic, for his practice has been to isolate, present, and, inherently, undermine, the strategies of commercial persuasion. Gestures naturalized through repetition, objects cued to formulaic appeals, images referring to stereotypical situations through the rhetorical seductions of hues and shapes provide the structures of viewer address.

However, in presenting these virtual melodramas usually employed for the solicitation of desire Prince renders them so as to indicate their emptiness. Because they are presented in series, and with the distance of convention, they are shown in their formulaic cast—as structures that can be alternately filled and voided, invaded and emptied of meaning; as structures that are, ultimately, meaningless, rendered sterile through repetition.

Prince's tactics are not uncommon. The recourse to melodrama on the part of contemporary artists must be set against the reification process of consumer culture in late capitalist society. That "background," filled with received idiom and reshuffled clichés, is one of endless production, opaque to truth and closed to the possibility of meaning. For the 19th-century theatergoer was able to enter into the simple melodramatic experience in a way that a media-constituted age cannot repeat.[5]

Indeed, current melodramas, in their focus on mediation, are intended to declare our distance from these supposedly "speaking" pictures. Images of horror—shootings, stabbings, suicides, tortured heroines and victims—are rendered through the filter of convention, using slick, shimmering, superficial techniques or sham-Expressionistic paint. Richard Bosman's scenarios, for example, are depicted with irony, in thick and frenzied strokes which suggest the impossibility of evoking the "authentic" sentiments they once conveyed. When Thomas Lawson makes use of this dark side of melodrama, appropriating disaster images of mutilation and death, he places these forms at a distance, using masked strokes of agitated paint which testify to our inability to be moved. The images "mean" something—something that once carried specific emotive weight, but has now been anaesthetized by the media's repetitions. And with these paradoxical images, at once seductive and unmoving, melodrama—born of the masses, commerce, and audience address—achieves its own circular closure.

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NOTES

1. An early 19th-century French melodramatist. For a discussion of his and others' work, see David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt, eds., *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

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3. See Louis James, "Was Jerrold's Black Ey'd Susan more popular than Wordsworth's Lucy?", in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*.

4. Christopher Prendergast. *Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama*, London: E. Arnold, 1978, p. 130.

5. See James, "Was Jerrold's Black Ey'd Susan more popular than Wordsworth's Lucy?", in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, p. 6.

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With its cloak-and-dagger plots, Manichaean contrasts, and lurid lights, melodrama was popular from its origin—an art of spectacle and entertainment. It was the offshoot of 19th-century industrialism which transformed the workers into an urban mass and produced, in the process, a public eager for diversion. "I am writing for those who cannot read":[1] Pixérécourt's statement describes the terms of such "democratic" theater, newly constituted as a commodity and subject to the market's sway. The demands of low literacy and limited taste were met by the simple scenarios of melodrama, by its excessive imagery, cloying sentiments, and clear-cut moral codes. Nor was this confined to the theater, for melodrama was less a genre than a mode. In the broadsheet, the *feuilleton*, the Gothic novel and the popular fictions of Balzac—all crammed with sentiment and coded airs—we find the rudiments of a vernacular literature, designed to the pre-existing, inherently "vulgar" needs of the modern urban crowd.

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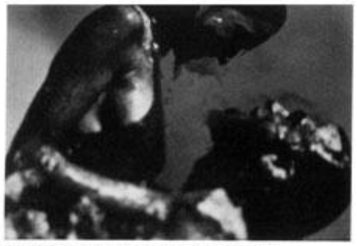
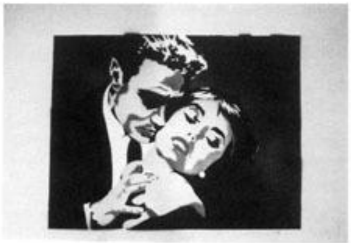
Izhar Patkin, You Can't Escape the Body, 1982, enamel on rubber gloves, 16 × 12".



Richard Prince, untitled, 1982; color photograph, 30 × 44".



Walter Robinson, untitled, 1981, spray enamel on paper, 22 × 28".

Film still of Rita Hayworth in Gilda, 1946. 35mm black and white film.

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