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BOOK REVIEW

A Queer Perspective on Melodrama's Social Life

Jonathan Goldberg. 2016, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. ISBN 9780822361916 RRP \$23.95 USD (pb).

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In certain critical circles it has long been understood that melodrama—at least of the classical Hollywood kind—is a gay genre. Emotionally excessive, tender and painful, melodrama remediates a specifically gay structure of feeling and its feminine modes of identification. This might partially explain why each time I go to pick up Jonathan Goldberg's new book on melodrama—its cover gorgeously embossed with a screenshot from Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* that captures an out-of-focus reflection of Jane Wyman trapped in a brittle domestic mise-en-scène—I realise that I have misremembered its subtitle as 'A Queer Aesthetics of Impossibility'. Rather than the sign of a failing memory, my wanting to insert the term 'queer' into the title of Goldberg's book indicates the degree to which his project veers away from the critical tradition that links melodrama and gay identity. Goldberg's starting point is not melodrama as gay genre, Hollywood family drama, or even popular mass cultural mode, but rather melodrama understood in strictly formal terms as the melding of music and drama. Considering diverse media—opera, auteur cinema, the modernist novel—Goldberg takes as critical licence Thomas Elsaesser's influential formulation of melodrama as relating to 'problems of style and articulation'.¹ Centered on questions of aesthetics, Goldberg's approach to melodrama can seem as stylistically retro as a Todd Haynes film. These days, questions of

style are more often surpassed by an understanding of melodrama as preeminent cultural mode or mental framework through which social forces and their alienating effects are productively remediated. Goldberg's book is just one of several recent contributions to a growing body of work that seek to reexamine the genealogy of melodrama and its purchase as a critical concept in relation to historical and contemporary heterogeneous media forms.²

Investigating the aesthetics of 'melos + drama' through a series of inventive close—sometimes too close—readings of works by Beethoven, Alfred Hitchcock, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Haynes, Patricia Highsmith and Willa Cather, Goldberg traces melodrama's capacity to suspend the regulatory truth-effects of social identities and sexual categories while it opens up, however temporarily, moments for feeling and being otherwise. The significance of melodrama for Goldberg lies not in its capacity to render the world morally legible but rather in its capacity to make the world inhabitable. Melodrama accomplishes this in paradoxical, always compromised terms. It functions as a portal to an alternative—if impossible—aesthetic space that is just as important as the social for sustaining queer life. The core of this argument surfaces most clearly in the final chapter, when Goldberg states that Cather's short story 'Paul's Case', which deals with a proto-gay suicide, 'summons up aesthetic existence, living by and as music, as a way to figure this other life'. (150) In this sense Goldberg's work might be placed in a trajectory with works such as Christopher Nealon's *Foundlings*, Annamarie Jagose's *Inconsequence*, Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards* and Peter Coviello's *Tomorrow's Parties*, projects that trawl through the archive of modernity to recover queer sensibilities, identities and ways of living already under pressure from an intensifying identity-obsessed regime of sexuality.³ Goldberg's persistent interest in the capacity of music and drama to sustain alternative, or better, non-social forms of queer relationality reminds me of late nineteenth-century pioneer of modern dance Loïe Fuller and her sometime manager and longtime partner Gabrielle Bloch, who understood their relationship less in terms of lesbian identity or personality than aesthetic form. While I detect in Goldberg's project a utopian desire to identify and sustain a queer, aesthetic life—and who hasn't felt ever this desire?—he is always at pains to trace the structuring effects of narrative and music and their articulation with larger fields of power.

Part of Goldberg's stated ambition is to queer the field of melodrama studies since, as he rightly states in his preface, the most influential scholarly works tend to locate melodrama within 'a heterosexual matrix'. (xi) Yet readers interested in melodrama studies could well be disappointed since, despite name-checking the most influential scholars and citing Linda Williams's recent book-length discussion of *The Wire* as a transformative instance of American melodrama, he seems little interested in the historical and theoretical questions that currently animate the field. Whereas the much anticipated *Melodrama Unbound* collection co-edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams will likely offer provocative arguments on melodrama's *longue durée* from the French Revolution to post-World War II and its recent transnational circulations, Goldberg's formalist approach departs from such concerns. Indeed the critical keywords of melodrama studies—pathos, suffering, sentiment, pain—don't appear until the second part of his book and then only in passing.

Goldberg prefers to deploy melodrama as a formal concept to open up other questions about the relation of aesthetics to sexuality, feeling, subjectivity and relationality. It is the latter term that most inflects his book which is threaded through with references to the impossibility of the couple and the double bind of modern sexuality. While it might cut somewhat against the grain of Goldberg's project, it is here that I think the book has something to offer studies of melodrama as mass cultural mode and its relation to the history of sexuality. The 'heterosexual matrix' that dominates influential critical accounts of melodrama turns out to be

inattentive to the genre's queer couples and also reflects a failure to recognise its capacity to register the historicity of sexuality. Following Goldberg's account, the aesthetics of melodrama register the felt imposition and transformation of social forms such as the couple or the family and the various social categories—husband, wife, mother, daughter—on which they depend.

For readers unversed in queer theory, this book will at times seem a demanding, even opaque study. Goldberg tends to substitute fleeting references to scholarly proper names and condensed theoretical phrases for more in-depth argument. Combined with a Wildean preference for aphoristic sentences, his writing seems to gesture to rather than perform critical work. This circumlocutionary style is one sign of the challenge of his argument: how to trace in critical language the intricacies of melodrama's elusive moments of the impossible. While I appreciate Goldberg's desire to reconsider the foundational texts of melodrama studies, I was surprised not to see any references to more recent, innovative work, such as that of Agustín Zarzosa. While publishing timelines may have hindered this engagement, Goldberg might have considered—if only to revise or extend—Zarzosa's ahistorical claim that melodrama is best considered not as a genre but as a more basic representational mode that redistributes suffering and presents significant ethical questions. Most relevant to Goldberg's project is Zarzosa's claim that in capitalist culture melodrama functions to dramatise 'the quality of things and people that should remain beyond exchange, use, and value altogether'.⁴ While Goldberg's book offers a distinctive, even idiosyncratic, contribution to film, literature and theatre studies, it is hard not to think that his formally narrow conceptualisation of melodrama is almost unnecessary to the discussion of queer aesthetic potential and impossibility he puts forward. To be sure, his is not a straightforward recuperation of melodrama as art and thus good critical object. Rather, at its best—and as his final all too short discussion of Terence Davies's *The Long Day Closes* (1992) demonstrates—Goldberg's book is an argument for and recognition of the queer value of melodrama for scholarly criticism, artistic practice and everyday living.

About the author

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Notes

1. Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: The Family Melodrama', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, British Film Institute, London, 1987, p.50.
2. See, for example, Agustín Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2013; Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2014; Monique Rooney, *Living Screens: Melodrama and Plasticity in Contemporary Film and Television*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London, 2015; Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann (eds), *Melodrama after the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2016; Rielle Navitski, *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2017.
3. Christopher S. Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2001; Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2002; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2009; Peter M. Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America*, NYU Press, New York, 2013.
4. Zarzosa, p. 68.

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