Molloy University

DigitalCommons@Molloy

2018

Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion

E. Deidre Pribram Ph.D.
Molloy University, dpribram@molloy.edu

Recommended Citation

Melodrama Unbound **ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams**

Chapter 14

Melodrama and The Aesthetics of Emotion

E. Deidre Pribram

Melodrama has long been associated with emotion, frequently in a pejorative sense due to its apparent emotional excesses. Conversely, scholars have argued that the melodramatic mode expresses "forces, desires, fears which…operate in human life," for which we have "no other language" (Gledhill 1987:31, 37). This chapter investigates how emotionality serves melodrama as an alternative "language" precisely in order to express forces, desires and fears that operate beyond cognitive or ideological explanation.

Melodrama should not be viewed as an indication of narrative failure or weakness. Indeed, its apparent emotional "excess" can be conceptually reworked to recognize the mode's acknowledgement of emotions as a significant presence in our life experiences. The project of this chapter is to ask: what happens if we accept melodrama's commitment to emotionality not as excessive but, rather, as key to its aesthetic structure and cultural value? Such an undertaking necessitates developing ways of conceiving and speaking about emotionality in both aesthetic and social terms, with greater range, nuance and complexity than hitherto, in order to trace the processes, meanings and social purposes of emotional life. Thus analysis of emotions augments ways of

understanding melodrama as a dramatic narrative form, while melodrama becomes a means of exploring specific cultural conceptualizations and deployments of emotions. Expanding understanding of emotions as sociocultural phenomena retrieves a melodramatic vision focused on culturally embedded beings operating within or contesting social institutions and practices. Melodrama, therefore, provides an alternative to the focus on the internal psychology of characters, conceived largely as self-governing entities.

The following discussion turns, first, to an analysis of "affect" and "emotion" as formulated in current cultural theory. While in cultural studies emphasis has largely been placed on "the turn to affect," I believe that the neglect of emotions, as defined below, results in the loss of potentially significant theoretical paths forward. Next, I consider how emotionality surfaces in, and may be read from, historical accounts of melodrama. Emotions may have long been acknowledged as central to melodramatic aesthetics, but a historical shift occurs in Western thinking from the late nineteenth century onwards, coinciding with developing concepts of psychological subjectivity, for which melodrama's use of emotionality is troubling. Finally, this chapter addresses the role of emotions as they play out in the contemporary melodramatic format of dramatic serialized television, a popular and critically valued aesthetic development. I offer a discussion that indicates how the notion of an aesthetics of emotion proves helpful in interpreting the narrative and social worlds depicted in current television series or serials.

Emotion and Affect

The current turn to affect has largely been received as long overdue, with which I concur. However, in the recent emphasis on "affect," emotionality is often tacitly overlooked or purposefully set aside. In the introduction to *Feminist Theory's* special issue on feminism and affect, Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead argue that the affective turn has moved beyond a previous focus on text and language towards a "vital re-centering of the body," which "cannot be reduced to either 'discourse' or 'emotion,' but exceeds these categories" in favor of the "material intensity" of "embodied encounters" (2012:116). They note that not all feminists are comfortable with the affective turn, citing Ranjana Khanna's concern that "the idea of affect's movement beyond the subject, beyond expressiveness" is tantamount to a "suspicion of content" (2012:118).

Nevertheless, a number of feminist scholars regard the affective turn as a way to preserve the recent extensive rethinking on the body (Gibbs 2002; Probyn 2004). Affect, here, serves as a corrective against a return to the invisibility of the body, subordinated to mind, culture, or ideology. Anna Gibbs, for instance, resists the notion of the corporeal as "largely . . . a body of words, the sum of discourses about it" (2002:336). Thus, Gibbs posits affect as inherent in the body and "outside of awareness," in contrast to "emotions" and "feelings" as culturally constructed (337).

Feminist scholars are not the only theorists who seek to move beyond the discursive. Larry Grossberg locates the affective within a social formation composed of multiple economies (1997:241). He believes cultural theory has

narrowed such multiplicity to meaning and representation, with the result that some, including the affective, are reduced to sub-functions of ideology (1997:397, 251). Grossberg (1992) defines affect as a form of energy, a motivating force or intensity invested in our experiences, practices, and identities (82). By disconnecting affect from meaning or ideology, Grossberg differentiates it from emotion, which he sees as mediating between affect and cultural signification. Thus, emotion encompasses affect, in its manifestation as immediate bodily sensation, while also incorporating the cultural meanings we give to those affective experiences.

Likewise, in Brian Massumi's influential account of affect, emotion is identified as the quality or content of an experience, achieved through language, logic, ideology, structure, narrative and other forms of signification (2002:26-27). Emotion functions in the realm of meaning production through the "sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience" (28). In contrast, affect is equated with intensity, vitality and force in ways that are "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" in nature, manifesting primarily in the skin, "at the surface of the body, at its interface with things" (28, 25). Affect theory emphasizes the movement, indeterminacy and life potential that exist before signification (7). In contrast, signification functions in ways that freeze mobility into fixed, socially determinate positions, just as thought "stops" an onrushing world in the attempt to explain something about it. In this conceptualization, affect is a non-conscious state that registers the intensity of experience, in its strength and duration. Though affect may be qualifiable, that is, capable of transformation into an emotional state,

Massumi cautions that there is no direct correspondence between intensity and quality, or between affect and emotion (26). Indeed, because the two "follow different logics and pertain to different orders," he argues the need "to theorize the difference" between them (27, 28).

It is this division that I seek to challenge. To exemplify the "excess" that is affect—the surplus that lies beyond or outside signification—Massumi uses a twenty-eight minute film, aired on German television in the 1970s, about a snowman with no dialogue or voice-over. It became the subject of an empirical study investigating child viewers' emotional responses to its effects (Sturm and Grewe-Partsch 1987). Massumi's description of the film reads as follows:

> A man builds a snowman on his roof garden. It starts to melt in the afternoon sun. He watches. After a time, he takes the snowman to the cool of the mountains where it stops melting. He bids it good-bye and leaves. (23)

Massumi contends that the children's powerful responses to the film, most notably fear but also pleasure, demonstrates "*the primacy of the affective in image reception*" (24 original emphasis). His assumption is that once language as dialogue or voice-over is subtracted, what remains incorporates neither narrativity nor signification.[1] By disavowing a link between images and narrativity, Massumi makes this instance of "image reception" non-discursive, non-ideological, non-signifying and, therefore, an expression of unmediated affective intensity. In equating affect-in-image as that which "resonates to the exact

degree to which it is in excess of any narration or functional line," Massumi

believes he has located pure affect (26). Instead, I argue that what he has

located, within the specific parameters of his own definitions, is *emotion*,

precisely because he has not exhausted the narrative or signifying functions of

the images.

The question then becomes how much do the film's "affects" depend upon

a basic awareness of what a snowman is? On recognizing that it is an

anthropomorphized weather phenomenon (snow/man)? On understanding, in the

context of this particular sequence, that the snowman melting symbolizes death?

Arguably, the ability to make this link accounts for the reports of frightened child

viewers. Rather than autonomic, meaningless affective responses, the children's

reactions are emotional in that they rely on shared cultural and aesthetic

knowledge.

Maintaining that affect, "disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from

narration," is a-signifying, Masumi assumes it is asocial, confined to discrete,

atomized individuals (25). Conversely, the moment we acknowledge the social,

we come face-to-face with emotion as affective experience transformed through

cultural engagement. In these terms, it resonates with all the splendid

implications of communication, whether shared or contested, as the effect of

meaning-producing communities existing within specific cultural contexts. And

once the socio-cultural is invoked, we are indeed in the realm of emotions. The

advantage of affect theory rests in its engagement with the material, the visceral,

and the embodied. Yet to neglect emotionality is to lose the considerable

analytical productivity promised if we linger, for a time, in the company of emotions as felt experiences thoroughly entangled with the sociocultural.

While affect theory has sidelined the study of emotions by limiting them to conscious, cognitive, articulated phenomena, emotions do not necessarily involve either conscious awareness or articulation. Given the diversity of ways we experience emotions, the notion of conscious awareness stands as a limiting threshold. Further, affect theory has tended to conflate articulation ("socio-linguistic fixing") with the entirety of meaning. Yet, non-linguistic systems of communication are meaningful in that they produce associations, representations and narratives, even when they remain inarticulable—as melodrama demonstrates. Nonverbal communication occurs largely in bodily terms, including gestures, facial expressions and appearance. Even when the human voice is involved in non-semantic or 'contentless' paralanguage, it remains thoroughly emotion-laden, conveying culturally contextual or contingent meanings. While any "body" can feel or gesture, nonverbal communication, like emotions and images, emerges in the specific configurations that result from the work of human systems of meaning.

Considering the multitude of ways emotional relations are experienced and expressed in different socio-cultural contexts is to address *meaningfulness*. By definition, forms of visual or nonverbal signification function on the edge of semantic availability, rather than by means of linguistic articulation. As Gledhill reminds us, the emotional, visual and performative practices of melodrama derive their cultural purposes and power, in part, through the ways they enable

7

the recognition of, and put into dramatic motion, experiences beyond linguistic or ideological expression (1987:31, 37).

Emotions and Melodrama Past

Writing about melodrama's consolidation in the wake of the French Revolution, Matthew Buckley argues that the event produced, "not a widespread sense of newfound freedom but a terrible sense of loss" and "a seemingly unstoppable wave of retributive violence and mass execution" (2009:179-180). In this respect, as Buckley and others have argued, French melodrama, rather than offering a utopian understanding of the world, emerged to deal with deeply dystopian circumstances.

Melodrama's morality has long been tied to its emotionality, in which melodramatic aesthetics and dramatic narrative structure use emotional means to arrive at moral legibility. However, Buckley argues that although a sense of a greater moral good has usually been understood as melodrama's central feature, it is actually emotionality that defines the mode and its subgenres. Thus, the aim of melodramatic tactics "was not moral didacticism, but emotional force and intensity of affect" (181). Emphasizing stage melodrama's relationship to audience awareness of a dystopian reality, Buckley believes that what it acknowledges is a desired world of "love, honor, and order" constantly "surrounded and threatened by irrational hatred, cruelty, and chaos" (186). To whatever degree melodrama's moral legibility offers consolation, such attempts are overwhelmed by the intensity of the contradictory, disturbing affects and

8

emotions it generates. For Buckley, melodrama's most effective expression rests in allowing audiences to recognize their felt history and their felt experiences. By the 1840s in England, he argues, critical and public discussion made it clear that melodrama's emotional aspects accounted primarily for its popularity and had become the genre's most "enduring" feature (181).

Applying Carolyn Williams' description of Victorian melodrama as "an oscillating movement between absorptive, introverted moments of sympathetic identification and highly spectacular, extroverted scenes of shocking violence," Buckley depicts melodrama's aesthetic structure as grounded, precisely, in its deployments of emotion. Buckley's point is that melodrama's core structure is based on movement from emotion to emotion, swinging among opposing or contrasting emotional effects. This sharp oscillation structures melodrama's dramatic form, carrying us along through conflicting "scenes of fracture and reconciliation, flight and refuge, horror and comedic relief, and exilic loss and restorative justice" (182). The shock of contrast–-Buckley refers to it as "compressive shock"—occurs also between melodrama's characters whereby victims evoke "sympathetic pathos," while villains elicit "recoiling antipathy," often at the same moment (182). Melodrama's structure, lodged in unceasing emotional events both on stage and as audience experience, is described by Buckley as "a coherent aesthetic technique," which he labels "sensational expressionism" (181-182; 188).

In Buckley's argument, the terms "affect" and "emotion" often appear together, as if similar but not quite identical concepts, for example, his reference

to the appeal of melodrama's "affective and emotional sensations" (181). In this instance, the "sensational" of "sensational expressionism" appears to encompass both affective and emotional events. Yet, at another moment, in referring to "the genre's sensational and emotional solicitations," "sensational" replaces "affective" as if to equate the two, rendering "emotional solicitations" as an addition to, or beyond, sensational expressionism (181).

In analyses of melodrama, the "sensational" is often associated with physical action, the awe of special effects, and audiences' visceral responses. In film studies such effects are often termed a cinema of sensations or attractions--replicating the shocks of modernity on the human senses. Such conceptions of visceral response correspond to current affect theory as sensory, autonomic, non-conscious and a-signifying. Equally, melodrama's supposed lack of restraint—its emotions often appearing as a surplus beyond rational, ideological or articulable explanation—may well be regarded as excessive. Yet this surplus is worth seeking out because in it are located some of the most meaningful, most moving aspects of the melodramatic mode. Tracing the emotional recognizes new dimensions in aesthetic activity, beyond those identified as either "cognitive" or "sensational"—dimensions that have enormous cultural significance.

In this respect, Buckley's positioning of melodrama as a named theatrical form within the aftermath of the French Revolution engages with emotions thoroughly entangled with the sociocultural. No doubt there were visceral responses to the French Revolution in melodrama and elsewhere. But to the

degree that the Revolution was a shared, historical event, of almost
unfathomable political and social impact, responses to it were also decidedly
socio-emotional. Through recognition of emotions, we are able to acknowledge
our history, our cultural experiences and our felt existences. An audience's felt
moments of recognition are acts of emotion stimulated by the aesthetic practices
of melodrama and other popular cultural forms, arising out of shared, lived
experience and knowledge. Such acts of emotion, when recognized, allow us to
accept, appreciate, admit or deny that which we suddenly apprehend as familiar.
In these senses, melodrama can justifiably be viewed as grounded in an
aesthetics of emotion.

Ben Singer's exploration of late theatrical and early cinematic melodrama
(2001) locates the form in the larger circumstances of modernity as a whole. He
returns to the question of excess: "melodrama . . . showcases emotional excess"
from the rhetoric of the villain to the excess of "the spectator's visceral
responses" (39). Generally using the term "visceral" rather than "affective,"
Singer sees melodrama's sensational effects as operating primarily on the
sensate, material body, even when dramatizing situations of moral injustice (40).
However, concepts such as "justice" and "injustice" cannot be solely visceral
because they rely on social norms, expectations, beliefs and traditions sustained
through communally exercised behaviors and practices. Recognition of justice
and injustice depends on various, complex forms of acculturation, a process that
combines social notions of morality and emotionality–how we ought to feel about
and respond to events—for example, with outrage at acts of injustice. This is to

say, our recognition of and reactions to depictions of morality and immorality are located in narratives of emotion.

Identifying strong pathos and heightened emotionality as key constituents of melodrama (7, 44-45), Singer expands the commonly acknowledged range of emotions to include the "hatred, envy, jealousy, spite or malice" expressed by villains and the "hatred, repulsion, or disdain" felt by audiences towards them (39, 40). Recognizing other forms of melodramatic emotionality redresses the disproportionate critical attention devoted to pathos in melodrama. This is a compelling concern if we wish to approach melodrama as an aesthetics of emotion. For example, Singer notes of blood-and-thunder melodrama that veneration for the action heroine or hero may be a more appropriate description of audience attitudes, rather than the pity reserved for those who are victimized (55-56). Melodramas also evoke fear, anger, anxiety, tension/suspense, admiration, exhilaration and so on.

The pathos of a melodramatic situation calls on audiences (and, sometimes, characters) to respond to a wide range of socially-induced or socially-charged emotional states, including vulnerability, isolation, terror, panic, grief, outrage, and so on. Although felt by individual characters, such emotions are generated by the distressful or insurmountable social circumstances they face. In this sense, such depictions do not displace social issues into privatized or personalized concerns, as some critics have argued. Rather, they foreground the individual as "socio-emotional." This concept is differentiated from both the visceral and cognitive being, so that specific characters embody or realize the

effects of particular social conflicts, leading to audiences' feelings of fear, pity, anxiety, admiration, or outrage.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an alternative to melodrama's perceived heightened or overwrought emotionality took shape as dramatic realism, combining, in Singer's words, "ordinary quotidian reality, with an attempt to portray fully developed, psychologically multidimensional" characters (49). The focus on psychology as the basis of characterization contrasts with the concept of the socio-emotional individual—of culturally embedded beings operating within or contesting social institutions and practices. The psyche emerges as a competing reality to socially located experience, at the historical moment that the dominant notion of self, in the West, develops into the psychological individual.

This move accompanies the advent of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis as emergent scientific and professional disciplines (see Day-Mayer and Mayer chapter 6). As a result, emotions retreat to the interior of the human subject to be experienced individually and privately, if consciously experienced at all, for they may well be hidden in the unconscious. Two competing conceptualizations of human experience come into existence in which the location of emotions proves key: expressionist, exteriorized displays of emotions versus notions of deeply internalized, private selves (see Pribram 2016a chapter 2).

Accompanying these cultural changes, an aesthetics of deep interiority takes critical precedence over a still ongoing aesthetics of emotional

expressionism. Dramatic realism, influenced by new understandings of psychological being, rendered Victorian melodrama's narrative and performative techniques, and their associated audience responses, critically outmoded. However, as noted above, melodrama's emotional functions were closely aligned with its moral purposes, in which the audience's strong emotional reactions to the narrative and its characters was key to the dispersal of its desired values. More than simply pleasurable releases, the experience and expression of emotions, such as tears, were signs of a person's capacity for deep feeling and, therefore, of their virtue (Gledhill 1987:34; Hyslop 1992:74).

In contrast, dramatic realism signaled a new set of techniques that encouraged audiences to focus more intently on "the inner life and private personality of the characters" (Gledhill 1991:219). In Northern Europe and the United States, a move in aesthetic values occurred from public sentiments—emotion aligned with morality—to psychology (see Pribram 2016b). Restrained performances and dialogue became critically respected above melodrama's physically and emotionally extroverted, gestural qualities. In contrast to melodrama's widely-perceived lack of character development or depth, psychologically-based characterization and narrativity was and continues to be viewed as capable of journeying to the interior of the individual heart and mind. In influential intellectual and artistic circles, and contemporaneous with the invention of the psychic subject, the psychological as source of "truth" displaces the social. The shift from sentimental morality to psychological interiority thus signals a moment of historical change in the understanding of emotional

14

subjectivity. In the twentieth century, the prevailing notions of high art win over

melodrama and emotion.

In melodrama, emotions and the public sphere are closely intertwined, in

both textual content and social activity. David Mayer notes that the term "real"

comes to be employed as a sign of critical approval only late in the nineteenth

century (1999:12). But when "high art", in opposition to mass-produced popular

culture, claims realism for itself, emotions shift from public manifestation to a

more privately introspective or repressed mode. In this new organization, the

psychological subsumes the emotional, and the public display of emotionality, for

instance tears, declines. Emblematic of this shift is the cessation of the earlier

Victorian practice of viewing theatrical performances with full house lights on,

enabling audience members to be seen as much as to see (Mayer 1997:100).

The dimming of house lights resulted in a more isolated, less communal viewing

experience, in which the darkened playhouse, in psychoanalytic terms, could be

said to represent the retreat into a private psyche.

Similarly, Singer contrasts the earlier "raucous interactivity between

audience and stage" as "a ritual part of the melodramatic experience" (179). He

quotes from a 1902 British theatrical review that speaks of modern drama as "the

repressed quietude of realism" (50). Emotionality as repressed quietude was

taken up as a new, middle-class social and critical ideal and, at the same time,

served to produce(?) the supposed emotional excess of melodrama. A cultural

reconceptualization of emotions creates altered circumstances in which

externalized displays of emotion, along with melodrama in general, are increasingly considered overwrought or exaggerated.

Melodrama represents a pervasive narrative mode in which emotions are recognized and accepted as fundamental to its aesthetic functions. Yet melodrama's emotionality also rankles and disturbs, a discomfort that continues to the present day, too often resulting in accusations of excess or dismissive disinterest. However, melodrama's characters, widely viewed as lacking in psychological depth, often portray human subjects planted firmly in the difficulties and dilemmas of particular sociocultural contexts. In this sense, it can be argued that the specific traditions of melodrama and its emotional "excesses" retain characters and audience members as culturally embedded beings, operating within or contesting social institutions and practices. As such, melodrama's critical dismissal marks a displacement of emotions as socio-cultural phenomena and the attendant loss of an aesthetics of emotional expressionism.

Emotions and Melodrama Present

Linda Williams has argued that melodrama is the narrative mode that underpins most forms of American popular culture, including film and television (2009:341). If emotionality is melodrama's most central and enduring feature, we should expect to see emotions structuring melodramatic narratives over time and across media. At the same time, identifying changes in the mode of contemporary melodrama helps us see past the presumed emotional "excesses" associated with earlier performative and aesthetic techniques, allowing a clearer assessment

of the role of emotionality in current depictions of the socio-culturally entangled individual.

Writing in 1976, David Thorburn considers television melodrama to be one of the United States' most characteristic, complex and serious aesthetic forms, operating across an accumulation of genres (legal shows, westerns, police and detective programs, medical series) in a manner comparable to a dramatic-narrative mode. Acknowledging criticisms of television melodramas' " fantasy of reassurance" through their "happy or moralistic endings" (78-79), Thorburn argues that this convention allows melodrama's narratives to encounter "forbidden or deeply disturbing materials: [representing] not an escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but an instrument for seeing" (80). This claim rests largely on melodrama's emotional elements and effects. Thorburn contends that TV melodrama's narrative structure follows characters' emotional responses and behaviors, as they intensify over the course of an episode or series. Although melodrama's concentration and intensity of emotional events departs from reality, he maintains that the emotions themselves are not unreal (80). Quite the contrary, TV melodrama's "various strategies of artificial heightening permit an open enactment of feelings and desires" that largely remain unrecognized or unacknowledged in the ongoing rush or "muddled incoherence" of lived experience (84-85). Conversely, melodrama's viewers encounter a coherent narrative world in which "harm is the norm" (79).

Thorburn's description of TV melodrama thus anticipates Buckley's aesthetics of expressionism, but has had little influence in current televisual

17

narrative theory. Seemingly taking up Thorburn's perspective, Jeffrey Sconce

(2004) argues that increasingly serialized (as opposed to episodic) shows have

become popular because they provide "depth and duration of character relations,

diegetic expansion, and audience investment," establishing whole, complex

narrative worlds that "viewers gradually feel they inhabit along with the

characters" (95, 111). Yet, he locates the lauded "quality" of such narratives in

structural ingenuity and self-reflexivity, while, for the most part, neglecting just

those serial elements he had previously noted (95).[2]

   In similar terms, Jason Mittell (2006) suggests that innovative television

series should be grouped together under the label "narrative complexity," which

constitutes "a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial

narration" (29, 32).[3] However, he distinguishes the seriality of narrative

complexity from melodramatic forms: "narrative complexity moves serial form

outside of the generic assumptions tied to soap operas … rejecting or

downplaying the melodramatic style and primary focus on relationships" (2006:

32).

   To value recent serial dramas for plot and structure over character

development and interpersonal relationships is highly questionable. Serial shows

like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* emphasize audiences' emotional investment in

the development of characters and in their changing relationships. It is such

changes that enable the expansion of their diegetic worlds (see Williams 2014).

Of course, serials also involve intricate plots to achieve their aesthetic purposes,

as well as stunning action sequences in a manner similar to early melodrama's

spectacular exploits. But they do not do so to the exclusion of character

relationships or the narrative role of emotionality.

Although recently Mittell (2015) has acknowledged that "complex

television dramas" deploy melodrama's emphasis on "relationships and

characters' struggles" and rely on "affective morality," this figures as

supplementary to narrative complexity (241, 245). However, recognition of

melodramatic aesthetics necessitates a more thorough reworking of the ways we

make sense of contemporary television. In an era when television series,

including shows associated with "quality TV," are moving from episodic-serial

hybrids to full serialization,[4] understanding the fundamental difference serial

melodrama brings to narrative processes is crucial. For instance, as Linda

Williams notes, seriality entails movement over time–transformation–not an "it"

moment of epiphany in which the "true" nature of a character or fictional world is

revealed (2012:531-533; see chapter 10). The "truth" exists in the movement

itself, through continuous alterations in situation. Thus, we cannot say of

Breaking Bad that one single moment depicts the "real" character of Walter White

(Bryan Cranston). He exists as the accumulation of those he interacts with, the

actions he takes, how he feels, and how we feel about him over the evolving,

prolonged existence of the series. Seriality's meanings and emotional effects

rest in its succession of moments, not necessarily significant in themselves but

important in their accumulated relationality, in the way they are gathered for

audiences over narrative time. Whether presented in a structurally ingenious or

a straightforward, linear manner, such emotional accumulation itself involves complex narrative processes.

In this regard, we can consider Preston "Bodie" Broadus (J.D. Williams) from *The Wire,* who appeared over a four-year period (2002-2006) as a secondary rather than central character. When we first encounter Bodie, he is sixteen or seventeen years old and involved in the drug-trade in a low-level capacity. In Episode 12 of Season One ("Cleaning Up"), Bodie is ordered to murder his friend, sixteen-year-old Wallace (Michael B. Jordan). An endearing character, Wallace looks after a group of young children in the projects, living with them in a squat, feeding them and making sure they go to school, although he is little more than a child himself. As a viewer, I felt shocked when Bodie shoots and kills his unsuspecting friend, believing it unforgivable. Yet by Episode 13 of Season Four ("Final Grades"), when Bodie meets his own demise, his all but inevitable death I found deeply moving. Over the course of four seasons, the nature of the audience's emotional engagement with the character may change in generative ways, in my experience, for example, through stages from anger to empathy.

Bodie's story is not a psychological account, focusing on the character's insights or not about himself and his individual flaws. We know relatively little about him as an interiorized, private entity. He never experiences a moral epiphany, an "it" moment that results in his transformation. To the end, he remains a drug dealer who has only marginally made his way up the ladder. In

his early twenties, when he is shot to death, Bodie seems like an old man of the streets, disturbed by the way the drug trade has changed.

Rather than vested in character interiority, the felt "moral legibility" in Bodie's storyline belongs to audience members, through their emotionally charged recognition of the economic and social conditions that determine his existence, which mean that Bodie cannot live his life differently. This is a *felt* recognition—not simply an intellectual judgment—one developed over narrative time and accumulating events. Bodie's function as a character is to lead us to care about him differently than at the outset of his story. As such, he functions as a socio-emotional character in a narrative world in which "harm is the norm."

Certainly, audience members will not all follow the same emotional trajectories. But tracking various socio-emotional arcs in response to melodrama's narrative techniques is productive. For me, Bodie's story, culminating in his death during a shootout he cannot win, feels simultaneously futile and oddly heroic. Futile because his attempt to protect the street corner on which he deals from encroaching, more hardened competition is a lost cause. But heroic, as well, in laying claim to his economic subsistence, trying to safeguard his livelihood and identity, represented by his corner, the sole location where he exists in the world. Melodramatic seriality enables increasing and changing emotional engagement through story expansion, so that we do not forget or negate the earlier Bodie; rather, we accumulate socio-emotional nuances and complexities in our perceptions of the character and his circumstances.

The Wire has been heralded as exceptional, precisely because it encompasses the inter-workings of a complex social world that constructs and constrains its denizens. Similarly, the socio-emotional dynamics of *Breaking Bad* demonstrate melodrama's capacity to embed emotional stakes in social contexts. Consider, for example, Walter and Skyler's marriage crisis in Season Three's Episode 3: "I.F.T." (4/4/2010). The melodramatic aesthetic frames their story "socio-emotionally" through feelings of betrayal that arise from the institutions of gender, marriage, and domesticity. Rather than offering introspection, the aesthetics of emotional expressionism reveal how Walter and Skyler (Anna Gunn) externalize their feelings in actions aimed at affecting or altering each other's emotions. Utilizing melodrama's performative "language" to express what cannot otherwise be articulated, the couple deploy extroverted gestures conveying emotional states. Rather than taking feelings of betrayal as self-evident, *Breaking Bad* uses melodrama's socio-emotional aesthetic to dramatize a conflict over what betrayal means: asking who has the right to feel betrayed, to expect loyalty, on what grounds.

Walter's circumstances derive from his subsistence as an underpaid, undervalued high-school chemistry teacher who, just as he turns fifty, learns he has lung cancer. Realizing that a dutiful life as husband, father and teacher has failed to bring either financial success or respect, he turns his talents at chemistry to the drug trade. Skyler, having learned that he is involved in illegal activities, and fearing for the safety of the family, demands that Walter leave home and begins divorce proceedings. Walter, growing increasingly angry at her refusal of

reconciliation, breaks into the house. Following a failed appeal to the police,

Skyler feels trapped in her own home by his imposed presence. Walter pressures

Skyler to accept his drug money, insisting he has *earned* it—for the family's sake.

He feels betrayed by Skyler's refusal to acknowledge that he is fulfilling his role

as economic provider.

Skyler's sense of domestic entrapment is visualized when she barricades

herself and her infant daughter in the master bedroom, in order to escape him.

One morning as Skyler slips out to work, a large duffel bag of cash obstructing

her path makes Walter's economic point. Barring her way, he insists she listen to

him without interruption, mistakenly taking her imposed silence for

acquiescence.

Later, Skyler makes her own point of view felt through an action with

enormous emotional reverberations. While he is fixing a hopefully idyllic family

dinner, Walter is stunned when Skyler returns home to state just three words: "I

fucked Ted" (referring to her boss and giving the episode its title, "I.F.T."). This

gains both Walter's attention and his silence, as Skyler stakes *her* counter-claim

on the rights of marriage and family. She makes him pause in his own self-

justification—but only when confronted with what appears as sexual betrayal.

Now it is Walter who feels alienated in his claimed domestic space. In

performing an act she understands Walter will feel as marital betrayal, Skyler

enacts her own feelings of betrayal by Walter's failure to consult her over drastic

changes to the circumstances of the family, which threaten both physical danger

and emotional harm. Skyler conveys her sense of betrayal through an action she

emotionally recognizes Walter will perceive as breaking trust. The emotions expressed and exchanged between Walter and Skyler are effective precisely to the degree that they link closely to the meanings and ethical values marital relations have for the characters, and for audience members (see Pribram 2014).

Walter and Skyler's tribulations are not primarily a story about individual dissatisfactions but, rather, concern the social pressures and cultural expectations placed on husbands and wives in contemporary Western middle-class life. Primarily, Walter's anger is about being cheated, lied to, the values of his era, class and gender having failed to deliver the rewards promised in return for his own commitments. Walter and Skyler's roiling feelings and actions can only be understood within recognized cultural values—in this episode, concerning justice and injustice in terms of gendered marital relations. *Breaking Bad*, then, foregrounds marriage as an emotional institution as well as an economic, social, and legal one. Walter and Skyler's feelings are not private or only personal; rather, they engage in a high stakes struggle, involving repeated acts of emotional contestation over the ethical meanings of, and their respective identities as, spouses and parents.

The realization of Walter and Skyler's relationship uses another facet of melodrama: an aesthetics of performance based on emotional expressionism. Their relational dynamic is not primarily self-reflective but a drive to communicate, as both attempt to affect the feelings and, so, the behaviors of the other. Over the course of these three episodes, their relationship plays out as a continually escalating series of emotional contestations. At one instance, when

24

two police officers join the couple in the living room—Skyler having called them to complain that Walter is in the home against her will—their infant daughter starts crying. Skyler's fear for the baby has led her to physically separate the newborn from Walter. But in the presence of the officers, Walter reaches the baby first, picking her up and soothing her, while Skyler helplessly watches.

The baby, like the duffel bag of cash, becomes the material repository of their feelings, over which the two perform their competing claims, set against the backdrop of a familiar domesticity. The significance of the dramatic element, in this instance the baby, lies in the meanings and emotional valences each character attaches to her, meanings made available for audience recognition, whether conscious or not. The baby, for Skyler, is the being she most wants to protect, to make safe, over whom she has come to feel almost constant terror. For Walter, estrangement from his infant daughter is unfair, because everything he has done has been for her sake. He believes he has acted to safeguard her future, in his eventual absence. The child embodies the couple's conflict, lodged in the incompatibility of what each feels most intensely about her wellbeing.

If we return to the climactic scene of the third episode, in which Skyler announces, "I fucked Ted," the narrative's emphasis on emotional expressionism rather than psychic introspection becomes clear. We have witnessed Skyler's decision to have sex with her boss when, encountering him in the office's photocopier room, Skyler approaches Ted and kisses him. The scene then cuts directly to Skyler pulling into her driveway at home later that evening. None of the sexual activity between Skyler and Ted is shown, an unusual choice for

25

contemporary programming. That the physical act is implied rather than visualized accords with Skyler's motivations; she is not driven by sexual desire or love for Ted. The significance of her act resides in the emotional impact it has on Walter. Thus the narrative dwells on the subsequent encounter between Skyler and Walter and the shock of her announcement. Theirs is not, as in realist drama, a journey of self-discovery but a performative series of actions aimed at the other, as they fight over changing, emotionally charged situations, each infused with cultural values and valences. Sometimes the characters attempt to articulate their positions in rational language, as Walter does around the cash-filled duffel bag. But the most gripping moments occur when the two express their feelings through actions intended to wound or defeat the other, as when Walter breaks into the house, refusing to leave, or when we grasp that Skyler has had sex with her boss in order to unnerve Walter.

Here, Buckley's description of melodrama's core structure, careening from emotion to contrary emotion applies. Melodramatic serialization offers scant equilibrium, as arguably occurs in episodic structures that regularly depart from, only to reinstate in circular fashion, a comforting status quo. In serialization, forward narrative movement results from accumulated emotional states, activated not in the steady linear progression towards improvement or decline, but lodged in fluctuating twists of temporary amelioration and newly encountered harm.

Breaking Bad relies upon melodrama's practice of producing multiple versions of what an emotional act—betrayal, trust, fidelity—might or ought to be,

rather than presuming a taken-for-granted, self-evident notion of what constitutes "betrayal" or any other emotion. Melodrama's socio-emotional trajectory demands exploration of the ways betrayal takes shape according to specific and varying contexts and characters. Thus, besides offering narratives *about* emotion, televisual serial narrativity is structured by, in Buckley's terms, oscillating emotionality. *Breaking Bad* draws out a narrative of emotion; in this specific instance, a narrative about feelings of betrayal between spouses, between individuals and social strictures and, ultimately, through characters following different paths, which address the varying positions of different audience members.

The climactic finale of "I.F.T." provides a compelling example of how such narratives of emotion become operational. We recognize that Walter is stunned into silence by Skyler's declaration. Yet, in a dramatically effective sequence, the audience too feels shock in this moment, despite the fact that we already know Skyler has had sex with her boss. Audience shock cannot derive from surprise at Skyler's action, but must arise from its implications. Some will feel aligned with Walter, empathizing with his devastated sense of marital betrayal. Others may be startled because this is the first time they clearly recognize Skyler's motives: to turn against Walter her own sense of betrayal. Viewers in the former group may well be dumbfounded by the cold, succinct way Skyler informs Walter of her adultery, intended for maximum, destructive impact. Viewers in the latter case, like myself, feel astonishment at Skyler's skillful recuperation of some feeling of control over her existence, even if limited and temporary. In all

27

instances, audience members are left to determine whose feelings of betrayal they most sympathize with or respect. As befits the complexity of an emotional assemblage such as betrayal and the complicated circumstances surrounding it, that judgment may not be easy or consistent. Certain spectators may well be left with mixed emotions.

In the case of the conflict within the White marriage, a number of largely young male viewers vocally expressed on various Internet forums their antipathy towards Skyler (see Mittell 2015:347-348). Despite Walter's numerous, highly questionable acts, affecting both his family and his moral status, these viewers blamed Skyler for refusing to stand by her spouse. Hers was the series's unforgivable, ultimate betrayal. In response, actress Anna Gunn wrote a much-publicized *New York Times* editorial, accusing Skyler-despising viewers of misogyny (2013). In subsequent seasons, perhaps in response to objections on the part of an important viewing demographic, Skyler's character was altered so that she championed Walter, becoming complicit in his illegal pursuits, until his actions finally brought the family to ruin.

Reactions to Walter and Skyler's relationship illustrate the potential cultural impact of narrative depictions grounded in emotionality, and the multiple forces that play a part in the felt experiences available to audiences. Whether embedded in non-linear or reflexive structural ingenuity or not, the constantly evolving and socio-emotionally saturated relations portrayed in *Breaking Bad*, and other contemporary TV serials, offer up astonishing narrative complexity at the emotional level. Pursuing an aesthetics of emotion requires tracking intricate

deployments of a potentially extensive range of auditory, visual and performative expressions to convey an equal diversity of emotions among an often large cast of characters sharing a narrative world. We can thus follow the drama of shifting emotions embodied by characters responding to varying social conditions. Such an analytical emphasis recognizes socio-emotionality as an important facet of subjectivity, alongside rational, affective/visceral or psychological being.

Emotions, in both narrative theory and cultural theory, have largely been ignored or, in the specific case of melodrama, treated as excess. Yet, understanding the processes of emotionality within the specific traditions and parameters of melodrama allows us to retain a sense of characters as culturally embedded beings operating within the contexts of social institutions and practices; to appreciate the communicative, expressionist functions of emotionality; and to pay better attention to the narratives of emotion that surround us. Melodramatic modes of storytelling, grounded in emotions and felt recognition—involving us in perceptions of how we do, might or ought to feel things—enables us to connect with and understand the narrative and social worlds we occupy.

One of the motivations for the development of affect theory has been to counter too-pat conceptualizations, lodged in rationality, provided in recent decades by linguistic, psychoanalytical, and ideological theories. However, turning to emotions addresses similar concerns without reduction to a largely neuro-biological, autonomic version of human activity. Through emotions, as both sociocultural and narrative phenomena, we retain a sense of meaningfulness,

without necessarily having to explain those meanings in cognitive or ideological terms. Critical scholarship, through the analytical, articulable means available to it, cannot provide an exhaustive account of the emotional expressions and experiences that are performed via narrative media, but we can do better in acknowledging emotionality's pervasive, vital presence in our stories and in our lives. Emotions, in their role in the circulation and expression of meaningfulness, in their centrality to human relations and in their entanglement with the sociocultural, remain indispensable to the appreciation of the aesthetic structure and cultural value of melodrama.

[1] I use "narrativity" as Massumi does, to refer to the broad activity of storytelling.

[2] Sconce's list of innovative television series includes *Northern Exposure, Star Trek, Twin Peaks, Seinfeld, Xena: Warrior Princess, ER, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Friends, The X-Files, The Sopranos,* and *The Simpsons* (95)*.*

[3] Mittel cites *Seinfeld, Lost, The West Wing, The X-Files, Twin Peaks, Alias, Malcolm in the Middle, Arrested Development, Veronica Mars, Firefly, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Wire, The Simpsons, Oz, Deadwood, My So-Called Life, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *24*

---

[4] For example, *The Wire, Breaking Bad, Lost, The Following, The Bridge, House of Cards, Dexter, Under the Dome, The Walking Dead, True Blood, Game of Thrones, Ray Donovan, The Affair, How to Get Away with Murder, Blind Spot, Fargo.*

References

Buckley, Matthew. 2009. "Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss."
   Theatre Journal 61, no. 22 (May): 175-190.

Gibbs, Anna. 2002. "Disaffected." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural
   Studies.* 16, no.3: 335-341.

Gledhill, Christine. 1987. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." In *Home Is
   Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed.
   Christine Gledhill, 5-39. London: BFI.

------. 1991. "Signs of Melodrama." In *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine
   Gledhill, 207-229. London: Routledge, 1991.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1997. *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural
   Studies.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

-------. 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and
   Postmodern Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Gunn, Anna. 2013. "I Have a Character Issue." *New York Times* August 24: A21.

Hyslop, Gabrielle. 1992. "Pixérécourt and the French Melodrama Debate:
   Instructing Boulevard Theatre Audiences." In *Melodrama*, ed. James
   Redmond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.*

      Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mayer, David. 1997. "Learning to See in the Dark." *Nineteenth Century Theatre*

      25, no. 2 (Winter): 92-114.

------. "Which Legacy of the Theatre? Acting in the Silent Film: Some Questions

      and Some Problems." In *Screen Acting*, ed. Peter Kramer and Alan

      Lovell,10-24. London: Routledge.

Mittell, Jason. 2006. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American

      Television." *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall): 29-40.

------. 2015. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling.*

      New York: New York University Press.

Pedwell Carolyn and Anne Whitehead. 2012. "Affecting Feminism: Questions of

      Feeling in Feminist Theory." *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2: 115-129.

Pribram, Deidre. 2014. "Feeling Bad: Emotions and Narrativity in *Breaking Bad.*"

      In *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and*

      Reception of the Television Series, *ed.* David Pierson, 191-207.

      Lanham, MD: Lexington/Rowman & Littlefield.

------. 2016a. *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders: Psychological and*

      Aesthetic Interpretations. Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations.

      New York: Routledge.

------. 2016b. "How 9/11 Changed the Movies: The Tony Scott Barometer." In

      9/11: New Narratives of Disaster, Crisis, and Change, ed. Arin Keeble,

Victoria Bryan and Heather Pope, 233-255. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar.

Probyn, Elspeth. 2004. "Everyday Shame." *Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2/3 (March/May): 328-349.

Sconce, Jeffrey. 2004. "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." In *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, 93-112. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Singer, Ben. 2001. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Sturm, Hertha and Marianne Grewe-Partsch. 1987. "Television—The Emotional Medium: Results from Three Studies." In *Emotional Effects of Media: The Work of Hertha Sturm*, ed. Gertrude J. Robinson, 25-36. Montreal: McGill University.

Thorburn, David. 1976. "Television Melodrama." In *Television as a Cultural Force*, ed. Richard Adler and Douglass Cater, 77-94. New York: Praeger.

Williams, Linda. 2009. "Melodrama Revised." In *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, 336-350. London: Routledge.

------. 2012. "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical.'" *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4: 523-543.

------. 2014. *On The Wire.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.