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Ensemble Storytelling: Dramatic Television Seriality, The Melodramatic Mode, And Emotions

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There should be more than one word for love.
I've seen love that kills and I've seen love that
redeems. I've seen love that believes in the
guilty, and love that saves the bereaved.

Abstract

This chapter considers seriality in contemporary television dramas in light of arguments that most popular culture falls within melodrama as modality (to include legal shows, police and detective programs, westerns, and medical series), instead of narrow genres, such as soap operas. The recent success of fully serialized dramas is a noteworthy development, producing highly popular and highly regarded programming. The traditions of melodrama, including its deep commitment to the uses of emotionality, address story worlds and audiences in terms of social relations, in contrast to psychological realism's more individualized and inward turning tendencies. "Ensemble Storytelling" explores three specific strategies available in melodrama's engagement with emotionality, by turning to the example of the British serial, *River* (BBC, 2015). The first strategy considers emotions as a narrative structuring device, constituted by melodrama's abrupt shifts in emotive tone carrying viewers through fluctuating states. The second strategy focuses on melodramatic performative techniques as emotional expressionism, guided by the impulse to externalize feelings in communicative social interactions, instead of private introspection. Finally, the third strategy recognizes melodrama's ability to put into play multiple meanings attached to any apparently 'singular' emotion, creating complex narratives about emotions.

The above epigraph reflects the words of fictional Detective Inspector, John River (Stellan Skarsgard), from Episode 1 of the 2015 BBC series, *River*. DI River is struggling with the very recent murder of his female police partner, Detective Sergeant Jackie "Stevie" Stevenson (Nicola Walker). River explains his views on the term "love" to the police psychologist he has been assigned to see, following his partner's shooting.

River's declaration that the single word, love, stands as insufficient because it fails to capture the myriad of experiences we refer to, when we use the term, merits greater consideration. A single word is never adequate to account for any emotion. Further, compensating for the limitations of rational, linguistic explanation remains one of the reasons we occupy narrative worlds, with their emotionally resonant images, sounds, characters, and stories.

Narratives provide us with emotional pleasures, sometimes uplifting, for example when we laugh or feel hope. At other times the emotions experienced are more somber, but pleasurable nonetheless, as in the case of police and detective series. In many ways, film and television studies are ideally suited for detailed analyses of emotions, and scholars are starting to turn their attention to the processes, meanings, and purposes of emotionality in mediated narrative forms. Yet emotionality has always been central to how popular culture 'works,' to the ways it creates its impact. Popular culture's complex, intricate narrative deployments rely on widespread emotional appeals and resonances. Mediated texts remain fertile sources for exploring the diverse, always changing, and contested meanings of emotions.

I pursue a cultural approach to the study of emotions in popular film and television. Cultural emotion studies consider emotions as socially shared and historically developed. However, this approach moves beyond social construction perspectives which assume the pre-existing, autonomous presence of emotions that are then shaped, adapted, and made to conform to social norms through mechanisms such as socioemotional scripts, rules, or roles. Rather, cultural emotion studies regards the circulation of emotionality as a primary means of bringing social relations into existence to begin with. It attempts to account for the ways certain emotional configurations become possible at various points in place and time, why they might take shape as they do, and what purposes and functions they serve (Pribram 2016).

A cultural approach works to understand how emotions are experienced–which is to say, felt, practiced, and expressed–in continually varying conditions and in complex, nuanced ways. From this perspective, emotions are never solely individual or 'inner' phenomena but also, necessarily, some form of collective, communal event. To these ends, I borrow the delineation of emotionality used in recent affect theory, which regards emotions as acculturated affect (Gould 2010; Massumi 2002). In this perspective, emotions account for the quality or content of experiences, because they are caught up in processes of meaning making. Although intended as critique, affect theory's outline of emotionality proves productive because it circumvents radically biological, psychological, or individualistic accounts of emotions, precisely by locating the latter as thoroughly entangled with sociocultural existence.[1]

The boundless plurality and variability of emotions render a vast array of social relations and cultural meanings possible. They exist as unceasing continua of change, moving us, as their etymology suggests, from one encounter to the next. In narrative forms, emotions serve as a

fundamental means by which we make sense of characters, stories, and other aesthetic elements. Certain characters, actors, and narratives take on emotional significance, shared by groups of people, which allow them to express aspects of what they feel and, therefore, who they are. Or conversely, narratives may be used to constrain or refuse various ways of feeling.

In media studies, melodrama exists as the most notable exception to scarce close analysis of narrative deployments of emotionality. However, too often the opposite has been the problem: emotionality has been closely associated with melodrama's operations, only to then be dismissed as exercises in 'excess.' Instead of regarding its use of emotions as excessive, I consider a number of ways emotionality endures as essential to melodrama's aesthetic structure and cultural value.

The Melodramatic Mode

Considerable attention is currently being devoted to melodrama as a narrative and aesthetic *mode*, most notably in film/television studies through the work of Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (2018). Melodramatic modality refers to a trans-genre–and, indeed, a genre producing–storytelling system that pervaded nineteenth century theatre and sentimental literature and, subsequently, has shaped large swathes of twentieth and twenty-first century popular film and television.[2] And it is the aesthetic form that underlies and enables most contemporary Anglo-American television serials.

Prominent among melodrama's determining features stands the struggle for justice in a recurringly unjust world, a world in which we encounter "forbidden or deeply disturbing

materials" (Thorburn 1976, 80). Importantly, characters usually incur the depicted injustices as a result of oppressive social, economic, political, or ideological forces that, for its victims, exist "beyond their control and understanding" (Gledhill 2002, 30). Melodrama's wronged parties confront "avoidable fates" that could be ameliorated if the modern world were a different, more caring and equitable place (Williams 2014, 89). The contestation for a sometimes won, but often lost, sense of justice provides melodrama with much of its emotional poignancy.

For the study of emotionality, melodrama offers two significant benefits. First, melodrama as mode has long and deeply been associated with emotions, in both critical and popular reception. Second, more scholarly work has taken place around the centrality of emotions to melodrama studies than for other cultural forms, although it seems evident that emotionality (or its absence) plays a pivotal role in other aesthetic modes, such as tragedy, comedy, or realism.

Dramatically, melodramatic justice occurs as moral legibility: a recognition that "ethical forces can be discovered and made legible" (Brooks 1995, 20). Melodramatic morality demands awareness of the flawed ways things stand in the contemporaneous world and works towards identification of how they might exist otherwise. As Gledhill and Williams note, moral legibility is made evident as a "felt sense of justice" (2018, 5), a *felt recognition* among audience members that, in part, accounts for the centrality of emotions to melodrama. Audiences are meant to feel the events portrayed through their immediate emotional engagement, instead of having 'the moral of the story' relayed solely in cognitive or rational terms. That is, moral legibility is equally a matter of emotional legibility in melodrama.

Indeed, Peter Brooks describes melodramatic morality and emotionality as so intimately linked that they are "indistinguishable," referring to their combined effect as "moral sentiments" (1995, 42). As a phrase, 'moral sentiments' better elucidates the pivotal role emotions play in melodrama than Brooks' more frequently borrowed term, moral legibility.

Speaking of the daytime serial dramas known as soaps, Louise Spence points out that social and ideological issues may well be "experienced in emotional terms," in such a fashion that "emotional spectacle…makes the moment intelligible" (2005, 81, 93). Emotional spectacle emphasizes the meanings and impacts, the repercussions and costs, of social, economic, political, or ideological issues. Thus, melodrama functions on the basis of a dramatic emotionality lodged in sociocultural circumstances, in contrast to psychological realism that is more individualized and inward turning.[3]

Significantly, moments of emotional intelligibility require a tiered structure, involving at least two levels or aspects in order to arrive at felt recognition. Gledhill outlines melodrama's use of pathos as a complex emotional structuration in which audience members feel for a character's suffering and, simultaneously, are led to critique the causes of that suffering (Gledhill 1991, 226). She describes a double movement in the emotional positioning of audience members so that pity or empathy for the victim's tribulations might co-mingle with anger or sadness for the social or other factors causing the wronged person's pain.

Indeed, the enactment of moral sentiments or emotional spectacle may well concern a tripartite structure of felt recognition on the part of viewers. First, we are brought to recognize a character's feelings, for instance, terror, grief, or a deep sense of isolation as a result of the

circumstances in which they find themselves. Second, we engage with a felt response to that character's emotions, such as pity or empathy, as noted above. Finally, in recognizing the unjust source of a character's suffering, other emotions, like anger or frustration, may be evoked.

Through moral sentiments, then, melodrama holds the capacity to put into play a myriad of emotions. In addition to empathy and anger, we may feel shame or guilt at the induced pain, or experience admiration and affection for those who survive, and occasionally thrive, in hapless social circumstances. Here, I've outlined a potential network of emotions aroused by a single character type, she or he who is made to suffer. Clearly other characters, such as villains or wrongdoers, have the ability to prompt quite different webs of felt recognition. For example, the process of creating wronged characters may well be dependent upon cruelty on the part of wrongdoers. Historically, melodrama's impulse for social justice has been played out through binary relations of good and evil, as embodied in the tripartite character formulation of heroes, villains, and victims. While still motivated by concerns for social justice, contemporary, revamped melodrama is more likely to blur clear distinctions between good and evil, making us question who or what exactly qualifies as heroic, villainous, or victimized (*The Wire, Breaking Bad).*

One of the strengths of melodrama's deployments of emotionality can be found in the mode's capacity, through moral sentiments, to tie individuals to larger institutional frameworks. Addressing the depiction of historical events in recent Chinese melodramas, Kenneth Chan argues the "personal is always political, just as the political ruptures, transforms, and sometimes disfigures the personal," in melodrama's use of emotionality (2014, 143).

Melodrama's particular use of an aesthetics of emotions enables the placement of individual characters within social contexts, in order to trace how we might be disfigured or otherwise transformed through the life-worlds we occupy. In the next section, I consider three specific strategies taken up in melodrama's narrative engagement with emotionality, applied to *River* as a serial television drama.

Dramatic Televisual Seriality

As a connected web of genres, crime or detective dramas exist as generic variants of the melodramatic mode, for example, cohering around their role "in civic society as a fantasy of morality and justice" (Shepherd 1994, 25).[4] Williams traces the development of contemporary televisual serial melodramas "from nineteenth-century serial fiction, radio and television soap operas, family saga miniseries" (*Roots; Rich Man, Poor Man*) through prime-time serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (2014, 47). Of course, specific genres also build upon other traditions. In the case of serial crime dramas, they emerge from a lineage linked to detective fiction, gangster, noir, and police films, as well as mystery and police procedural TV programs all of which, as nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century genres, are themselves influenced by melodrama.

In the generic network of crime dramas, the central injustice most often deals with the loss of human life through murder: death as avoidable fate. In the instance of DI River, the primary mystery concerns the unsolved shooting death of his partner and closest, perhaps only, friend, Stevie. Following the traditional generic pattern, the principal plot arc for the six-episode series turns upon the enigma of who has killed her and why. The accompanying main

character arc, as central and complexly delineated a narrative enigma, revolves around how her death affects River, and why it so deeply debilitates him.

In what follows, I explore three specific strategies found in serial melodrama's engagement with emotionality. I invoke the particular example of *River* to elucidate how melodrama mobilizes emotionality towards its aesthetic goals. The first strategy considers emotions as a narrative structuring device. The second concerns melodramatic performative techniques as forms of emotional expressionism. And the third recognizes serial melodrama's capacity to put into play multiple meanings and practices attached to any seemingly singular emotion.

Emotion and Narrative Structure

The first strategy allied with melodrama is the activation of emotions as narrative structuring devices. An expanded form of storytelling is a signature feature of television serialization, in which plot developments are ongoing, concluding only when the program ends its run. This model is often differentiated from an episodic format that follows a more circular pattern in order to return to the position of balance, at the end of the episode, from which it began. In simplified terms, episodic television commences from an established equilibrium that weekly events throw out of kilter. Characters then work to restore stasis by episode's end, in preparation for the same circular movement in subsequent weeks. Serialization, in contrast, pushes ever ahead, over time and evolving circumstances. It cannot establish an equilibrium, but must pursue constant change, preferably unanticipated in order to provide the audience with such pleasures as surprise and shock.

Speaking of early theatrical melodrama, Matthew Buckley describes its core aesthetic structure as based on movement from emotion to emotion, quite intentionally swinging among opposing or contrasting emotional effects. Through this process, we are engaged by conflicting "scenes of fracture and reconciliation, flight and refuge, horror and comedic relief, and exilic loss and restorative justice" (2009, 182). Critical work on daytime serials has described a similar pattern of continual emotional shifts. For example, Jennifer Hayward notes that soap operas offer:

> several ongoing storylines, carefully balanced to satisfy very different levels of interest–romance, humor, intrigue, suspense–and to unfold at different rates so that the crisis of one subplot is juxtaposed with the exposition or complication or another. (2009, 149)

Like Buckley, Hayward outlines swings among contrasting emotional effects, from romance or humor, to intrigue and suspense. Additionally, she points out that serials are structured so that the beats, or scene segments, for each subplot do not align emotionally with the other storylines in motion. That is, every subplot in an episode occurs at varying stages (crisis, exposition, complication) in its emotional progression so that, for instance, tension and suspense recur routinely in one of the subplots. Similarly, happiness or sorrow at the resolution of specific subplots remains an ongoing affair. Spence argues further that resolutions in daytime serials are purposefully structured in a temporary fashion, in which any resolution contains within it the kernels generating "the potential for new tensions and new suffering" (91). Resolutions are designed to be fleeting, serving as momentary answers that, in themselves, generate a renewed set of conflicts, problems, and dilemmas. Emotional structuration, therefore, may be present in manifold ways.

The character ensembles and multiplicity of plots pursued by recent television serialization prove conducive to such emotional fluctuations, so that we often careen among a dizzying array of events and felt responses. The juggling of concurrent and sequential events that render the multiple parallel actions of a film like *Inception* intriguingly complex and difficult to follow has been taken up as the seemingly effortless, narrative norm in TV serials.

One way to think about serialized narrative structure, then, is by tracking its emotional trajectories, in particular, pinpointing its nodes of emotional transition. Following Buckley's and others' arguments, the emotional trajectory of melodramatic serials ought to be constituted by abrupt shifts, composed through frequent, disruptive contrasts in tenor. Although Buckley speaks of conflicting scenes as the building blocks of emotional structuration, such tonal switches also occur as specific moments located *within* scenes. We can find such junctures that trigger movement in alternative emotional directions in the case of *River*. Established as a pattern early in the series, 'feeling switches' embedded in the internal operations of scenes become a running motif, recurring throughout *River's* narrative.

The series opens with River and his partner, Stevie, in the drive through lane of a fast food restaurant. As they wait in the car to get and then eat their food, the two hold a lively conversation, during which Stevie expresses her opinion that River needs to take a holiday. Established immediately as antisocial and curmudgeonly (he doesn't 'get' fast food), River replies that he hates holidays. Undeterred, Stevie tells him that his holiday should include sun and karaoke. She then turns up the radio and sings along to Tina Charles' 1970s disco hit, "I Love to Love (But My Baby Loves to Dance)." River refuses to join in with her, but he smiles

and laughs throughout their time together, establishing their relationship as one of fun, camaraderie, and deep connection.

Only later, when River and Stevie find themselves at a crime scene at which other police colleagues are present, do we see a shot of the back of her head hollowed out and surrounded by bloody, matted hair from the bullet that has killed her. It is fully nine and a half minutes into the 58-minute episode before the audience realizes Stevie is already dead. This is certainly a moment of shock, and a transition in narrative and emotional trajectory, positioning viewers to reevaluate everything that has come before and to journey through what follows in an entirely different manner. However, the signature emotional switch, serving as motif running throughout the series, comes immediately after we realize Stevie is a dead figment, rather than a 'living' character. River and Stevie walk along the exterior corridor of the apartment complex that constitutes the crime scene, talking animatedly. The camera cuts to a wide shot of the same scenario, in which we see that Stevie is absent and River is talking to himself.

Cutting to the wide shot occurs as movement to an 'objective' view, positioned from the perspective of his colleagues or the public, to indicate River's mental health troubles. It is utilized in a recurring manner, as brief punctuation at the end of sequences in which River has been interacting with Stevie or other dead characters. The single, wide shot clearly is intended as a reminder of what is physically or materially 'real' in this narrative world, thereby fulfilling a plot function. But the wide shot also serves as a recurring emotional switch that throws the audience, in this instance, from the felt intimacy we have shared with River and Stevie to an objective, externalized reality in which River's behavior, due to the depth of his

loss of his partner, is both poignant and troubling. The wide shot functions as a visual *and* emotional transition in which the audience is abruptly ejected from sharing whatever felt experience immediately precedes it for River, whether happiness as in the instance with Stevie, or sadness or anger in other scenes, to an external position from which we observe and are invited to judge.

Here, we have the multiply tiered movement Gledhill describes as central to melodramatic pathos. The audience joins in the energy and upbeat mood of the opening exchange between River and Stevie, only to be thrust from the intimacy of their interaction into recognition of something much more disturbing. The abrupt switch to an external position provides a *felt* recognition of River's two-fold tribulation of mental illness and his partner's murder. Audience realization registers as shock, certainly, but also disturbs in the awareness that, akin to River, what we have previously witnessed is our misprision of the circumstances.

As narrative structure, we have been lulled into one emotional mood based on our perception of the camaraderie that underpins River and Stevie's relationship, only to be confronted with an emotional reversal, resulting in a startlingly different comprehension of the pair's connection. Thus, the series signals the multiple structuration of pathos quite literally, by means of the externalizing wide shot. The dual positioning of audience members is made apparent through camera framing, relocating us from sharing in their intimacy to occupying the diagnostic view of the lone, and lonely, River.

The emotional tone of camaraderie that precedes the audience's sudden removal to an objective reality is crucial to the narrative's workings. Although dead, Stevie remains a living,

breathing, palpable presence for River. And through the upbeat, easy intimacy in which her relationship with River is presented, she remains narratively 'alive' for the audience. We spend more time in the company of River and Stevie than with any other relationship depicted in the series. River genuinely smiles and laughs only when in her presence, seeming most himself when they are together. She exhibits a vitality and energy that draws us to her, that makes her feel like a more tangible force than other characters, particularly living ones. And River, in response, is never more 'alive' than when he is with her.

At the end of the first episode, a dispirited, near-broken River goes to a karaoke club, following Stevie's suggestion from the beginning of the episode that this is what he needs. When he hands the cashier his ticket, she notes that it is a two-for-one voucher although he is there alone. Once inside, when he turns on Stevie's song from the show's opening, "I Love to Love," we see that he is not alone after all. In a series of medium close and medium shots, Stevie urges River to sing, and joins in with him, both laughing and enjoying themselves as they let loose. Then, from a medium wide shot of River singing alone, the camera dollies back so that we are positioned on the exterior of the karaoke space. The wide shot punctuating this sequence, and making our observational distance clear, is captured through the porthole-like window of the door, secluding River in an isolated room as we watch him singing by himself, his visually and emotionally confirmed loneliness, painfully poignant.

As in the case of *River*, serial melodrama may well be constituted by abrupt swings in emotive tone, rather than following a linear, cause-and-effect emotional track. Additionally, a roiling, non-linear emotional path can be carved out even when situated within the bounds of causally determined plot trajectories. Considering emotionality as a structuring mechanism

holds the possibility of productive, alternative ways to think about narrative configurations in television seriality, particularly for programs built around expanded storytelling practices, through ensemble casts of characters and multiple plot lines. Further, conceptualizing *emotional* structuration offers a means of augmenting the traditional dominance, in narrative theory, of plot analysis as linear causality and teleological unity of purpose.

Emotional Expressionism

The second strategy found in melodrama to mobilize emotionality concerns its aesthetics of emotional expressionism. This is an aesthetics based in performance, focused on externalizing feelings rather than on private, psychological introspection (Pribram 2016, 49-53; Pribram 2018). Historical melodrama has long been associated with lack of character depth, when the latter is understood as interiorized, psychological development (Brooks 1995, 35). Traditionally, "dramatic conflict is not enacted *within* such characters, but *between* them and other external forces," whether those forces take the shape of other people, social institutions, or natural events (Gledhill, 1991, 210; italics in original). Current melodrama is much more likely to incorporate aspects of psychological characterization, an example of how the melodramatic mode is constantly updated in order to reflect the contemporaneous culture in which it exists, in this case by adjusting to criteria of psychological realism. We find the introduction of psychology in *River*, in the significant subplot concerning the DI's interactions with his police psychologist, Rosa (Georgina Rich). Additionally, we are offered an explanation for River's susceptibility to envisioning dead people through the familiar, psychological trope of personal childhood trauma. Yet, although psychological motifs are

engaged in *River's* narrative world, they neither convince nor succeed, as discussed below. Instead, melodrama's brand of performative emotional expressionism prevails.

Melodramatic expressionism insists on externalizing and socializing feelings, rather than focusing on internalized, individual psychologies. Its aesthetics of performance employs extroverted, expressive behaviors that *enact* emotional states, in order to provide audiences with moments of felt recognition. Melodrama's dynamic is not primarily self-reflective, but an impulse to communicate, to make sense of a world of social relations. Gledhill notes that glances, gestures, and body movement become "major channels of communication when verbal exchanges fail to express" or actually obscure the import of events and felt experiences (1992, 119). Alternative forms are called upon to extract the linguistically inexpressible, in which category emotions feature prominently. Gesture, facial expression, physical action, and other categories of nonverbal communication (spatial relations, paralanguage, silence), as well as formal elements such as music, mise-en-scène, and editing are invoked to reveal what words alone cannot. Melodrama relies on numerous techniques to make apparent experiences that would not otherwise be adequately recognized or acknowledged.

We can turn, again, to *River* to illustrate how melodrama's aesthetics of emotional expressionism plays out. River has seen, heard, and existed in the company of the dead since childhood. When meeting with his psychologist, Rosa, River adamantly denies that the dead who engage with him are ghosts. Instead, he describes them as "manifests." It is a small leap to assume he describes them as such because they manifest or externalize his feelings. But I do not believe they operate solely or simply as reflections of his internal feelings, with which

he must come to terms. On the contrary, these manifests help constitute a portrayal of River's social relations.

The series emphasizes the abysmal way River interacts with other people, whether they are living or dead. Much is made of his social ineptitude, involving relationships that are effectively nonexistent or awkward disasters. Most of his manifests are, or were, 'real,' just as Stevie was: once living characters in this narrative world, in the sense of deriving from a material, social plane. They are not figments of his imagination but the remnants of his disastrous social relations. However, River interacts differently with the deceased than with the living. To a significant degree, he displays greater honesty about his feelings with manifests, as if he finds more safety in their company than with the living. With the dead, he seems able to express himself, to communicate with them, whether to convey his joy, sorrow, or fury.

The series works to depict something about emotional life in the context of our existence as social beings. The emotions displayed by River in his encounters with manifests, as well as the emotions expressed by them, exist only by virtue of relationships with others. River's troubles occur when he interacts with other social beings. If Stevie and Rosa pose different solutions to River's problems–the first towards a relational world, the second in the direction of a private self–it is Stevie who wins out. Rosa is presented as a sympathetic figure who wants to aid River by helping him make his manifests disappear. Yet River seems strangely unconcerned about this. Instead, what he most wants is to make sense of his relationship with Stevie. At one point, Stevie wryly comments on the appropriately named Rosa for a psychologist, referencing her optimistically tinted world-view. In this, Stevie suggests that the

psychologist's proffered solution to River's difficulties is somehow inadequate or unrealistic. No one can make emotional relations disappear, as troubling as they often may be. They exist because we are social beings who always live in the complicated company of others.

None of this is to minimize the program's treatment of mental illness. Quite the contrary, emotions are central to those categories of existence we understand as mental disorders (Pribram 2016). But I do believe the series tries to get at the complexity of our emotional experiences in broad terms, as part of our individual, felt existence and as part of the social worlds we occupy. Here, we can return to the recurring wide shot that punctuates River's encounters with the deceased from an observational, public view. Earlier, I described this shot as an emotional switch, repositioning the audience from sharing in River's emotions of the moment to a more distant, poignant position of assessment. Expanding on this, the repeated cuts to wide shots also transpose us between the worlds of felt experience and material existence.

At one point in episode three, River rides an elevated commuter train. Stevie appears seated across from him, as he tries to figure out the unknown 4-digit user code for a cell phone that belonged to her. Stevie tells him to try 4496, the day they first met. He does; it fails. She next suggests 4458. He looks at her quizzically. She explains it's their combined ages. He shouts in response, "59; I'm 59," annoyed that she has forgotten his correct age. We see two people seated behind him, staring at River as he yells out loud. An immediately following, second shot reveals other passengers dismayed at River's outburst, whom we now see is seated alone.[5] He is the 'crazy' person we encounter in public places talking to himself and whom, out of fear, we do our best to avoid. At the same time, in narrative terms he also depicts an

externalized, performed version of human emotional life. People sitting quietly, in apparent silence, on subways, buses, or trains, may well be engaging in arguments with non-present family, friends, and colleagues, or exchanging stories and laughter with them. The life of his mind and emotions are more real to River than the material world that surrounds him, as is true for all of us, on occasion.

In its visual and audio presentation, River's behavior constantly transports us between our experiences of a physical world and the life of our feelings. In Spence's terms, River's public outbursts function as moments of emotional spectacle that make intelligible the felt effects of social issues, in this case, both mental disorder and grief over the death of others. Such moments of emotional legibility are not rendered moral sentiments solely because we feel sorry for River, registering pity or empathy for him. The transposition *from* narratively sharing his perspective *to* the observational wide shot pushes us to recognize how we, as the public, understand persons 'suffering'–in melodrama's terms–from mental illness.

The dual perspective, originating within the visual and aural expressions of River's emotional state and then abruptly shifting to an external position, creates the pathos demanded by moral sentiment. Transition from one spectatorial position to another accomplishes a moment of felt recognition, in which we more fully realize how River hears and speaks with manifests but, also, by switching to the perspective of other people on the train, carries us to an uneasy awareness of the depths of River's isolation. Moral sentiments require an audience's felt recognition towards the emotional harm confronted by individuals, in conjunction with some degree of social complicity or neglect, which results in the experienced, and expressed, emotional situations witnessed in narratives.

Narratives about Emotion

Third and finally, the mobilization of emotionality in serialized melodrama enables an exploration of the compound meanings attached to and conveyed by specific emotions. Any singular word or idea that stands for an entire network of emotional meanings and relations can never be straightforward, transparent, or self-evident. Rather, every emotion involves countless variations, dependent upon the cultural, contextual circumstances of its use. This is true in the social worlds we occupy, and applies also to the narrative worlds we visit. Serialization's expanded form of storytelling, and prolonged time spent with characters who evolve, enable the creation of narratives *about* emotions. Similarly, melodrama's longstanding alliance with emotionality offers complex depictions of particular emotions, ranging from their expansiveness to their most minute intricacies. Here, we can recall River's caution concerning the failure of singular words to describe complex systems of feeling. As he tells us: "I've seen love that kills and I've seen love that redeems. I've seen love that believes in the guilty, and love that saves the bereaved." More than anything else, *River* is a series about love. But only in its most complicated sense.

Television serialization has become closely associated with ensemble casts of characters whose stories are told through an alternating pattern of numerous plots and subplots. However, *River* does not follow such a model, in that there are only two principal characters–River and Stevie–and we stay with River, as protagonist, throughout the series. Yet, *River's* narrative structure coheres by means of another sense to "ensemble storytelling," in Michael Newman's phrase (2006, 18). In addition to serialization's complex development due to

ensemble plots and characters, Newman points to "thematic parallelism" in which multiple, diverse stories interrelate so that they "inflect and play off each other, revealing contrasts and similarities" (21). *River's* serialized charge relies less on an extensive range of plots or a community of revolving characters; instead, it unfurls as variations on the emotional theme of love.

The main plot arc driving the series concerns solving Stevie's murder, which River helplessly witnessed without being able to intercede. As discussed earlier, in the generic terms of the detective series, 'solving' refers to finding out who killed her. However, for the show's meditation on love, 'solving' her murder means coming face-to-face with losing her. The first episode of the series also involves a self-contained murder case–self-contained in the sense of being resolved within the episode's 58 minutes. This second case focuses on the death, two and a half months previously, of a young woman, Erin Fielding (Shannon Rivers), who functions as another of River's manifests. Her boyfriend, Aten (Fady Elsayed), confessed to her murder and sits in prison awaiting trial. However, he refuses to divulge to River how he murdered Erin or where he left her body.

Although technically solved with the arrest of the culprit, the case remains open due to Erin's mother, Marlena (Cathy Murphy). Marlena remains steadfast that the case cannot be considered closed until her daughter's body has been retrieved so that the grieving mother can bury her. A soft-spoken woman, Marlena nevertheless manages to make her presence felt through the action of delivering to River's police station, on a weekly basis, items that once belonged to Erin: a teddy bear, her journal, a videotape of Erin as a child. In doing so,

Marlena's intent is to remind River that he, and Stevie, promised they would find Erin's remains. When River meets again with Marlena, her pain is raw.

> Seventy-two days and still no body… She's mine. I made her. And I will bury her. I have to bury her, so I know where she is.

Marlena cannot rest until she has put her daughter to rest. She has made it her mission to take care of her daughter in death, just as she did in life. Marlena and her determination to bury her child is "love that saves the bereaved."

River visits Erin's boyfriend, Aten, in prison in order to pressure him, once again, to reveal how he killed Erin and where he left her remains. Breaking down into sobs, all Aten will say is, "I killed her." Ultimately, River discovers Erin's body, concealed within the tree from which she has hung herself. When he finds her, Erin–as manifest–explains to River that the couple had a suicide pact, with which Aten could not go through at the last moment, although she did, leaving him tortured with shame. Returning to the prison, when River tells Aten he will be released and not charged because Erin's death was not murder, Aten attempts suicide. His feelings of shame are "love that kills."

For its part, River's despair over his relationship with his murdered partner, Stevie, becomes "love that redeems." But he must journey through numerous other kinds of love, over the course of the series, including bereaved love, ashamed love, joyful love, angry love, and so on, in order to reach a form of love for Stevie that feels redemptive. His relationship with Stevie proves more of a saving grace than anything or anyone else in the series, including the interactions with his psychologist. *River* focuses most centrally on River and Stevie's relationship, rather than on his internal psyche, because the series is a story *about* love.

Brooks reminds us that melodrama renders "the world we inhabit one charged with meaning, one in which interpersonal relations are not merely contacts of the flesh but encounters that must be carefully nurtured, judged, handled as if they mattered" (1995, 22).

For River, Stevie's case is not 'solved' until he acknowledges the depth of his love for her. In the end, that love is redemptive precisely due to his capacity to feel so intensely about her, despite his social ineptitude and the circumstances of his social isolation. The series emphasizes River and Stevie's relationship because it unfolds as an extended foray into one emotion: love as a complex, sometimes joyful, oftentimes painful state of experience that can *only* exist in a social world comprised of other beings. Notable in the series are the multitude of ways that love is depicted, the host of different stories told about love: the narratives surrounding this one emotion.

River stands as an illustration of ensemble storytelling because its emotional arc provides us with multiple variations on a theme, instead of driving towards one universal, singular determination on what love must be. Melodramatic serialization holds the capacity to circle carefully around its emotional themes, progressively unveiling layer upon layer of complex circumstances, along with their assorted implications and outcomes. The extended, ensemble mode of television seriality does not strive towards stasis but, rather, builds complex variations on a theme, accruing contradictions, continuities, and relentless change. Much of contemporary television's narrative configurations rely on the intricate patterning of parallel action *and* parallel emotion. Another way of making sense of televisual seriality, then, is to explore how its narratives engage not only with plot and character arcs but, also, with emotional arcs.

Conclusion

Emotions are central to most forms of popular narrative. Because of the scholarly attention that has been devoted to it, the melodramatic mode's mobilization of emotionality is particularly useful in understanding television seriality's distinctive dynamism, intensity, and power to make us care. The melodramatic mode sheds light on an array of ways that emotions contribute to the multifaceted narrative processes of contemporary television seriality. Here I have traced three potential strategies by which the presence of emotionality helps shape serialized narrative: as structuring device, performatively as emotional expressionism, and in the form of intricate thematic content.

However, my discussion is far from an exhaustive account of emotionality's role in narrative processes. Emotions are too vast, complex, and pervasive a form of both life and storytelling experience to be that neatly, concisely accounted for in seriality or in narratives beyond. Yet the endeavor to do so remains worthwhile. The effort to make sense of emotionally resonant images, sounds, characters, and stories offers up alternative ways to journey through the narrative worlds we often care about so passionately.

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[1] For a more detailed explanation of these arguments, see Pribram 2019.
[2] The idea of melodrama as a trans-generic *mode* dovetails with Steve Neale's research into the Hollywood trade press (*Variety, Hollywood Reporter)* between 1938 and 1960 (1993). He found the term 'melodrama' was used consistently to describe adventure films, thrillers, horror films, westerns, and other genres. Similarly, Daniel Gerould outlines how, in 1926-27, Russian theorists like Sergei Balukhatyi and Adrian Piotrovsky referred to "judicial, criminal, adventure and detective variants" of theatrical melodrama, as well as the "American adventure melodrama" in cinema, with its detectives, policemen, "break-neck chases and racing trains" (qtd. in Gerould, 1978, 162, 167).
[3] It is important to note that Gledhill takes pains to argue that the melodramatic mode works *with,* not in opposition to, various forms of realism, in part, as a means for melodrama to continually update itself in changing historical circumstances and, therefore, evolving notions of realism (2002).
[4] For more on crime, detective, and other related genres as a complex generic network, organized around concepts of justice and injustice, see Pribram 2013, chapter 3.
[5] In fact, River is so caught up in his preoccupation with Stevie that he can only imagine her choosing a phone code that has something to do with him and their relationship: the day they first met, their combined ages.