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MIMESIS, NEMESIS AND THE MELODRAMA, 'THE SEARCH  
FOR CERTAINTY IN THE EYE OF FATE':  
A CONSIDERATION OF MELODRAMA AND  
CURRENT AFFAIRS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts in Media Studies at

MASSEY UNIVERSITY

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1997

## ABSTRACT

### MIMESIS, NEMESIS AND THE MELODRAMA

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Melodrama, a type of theatrical performance existing from the beginnings of drama to today's Current Affairs programme, is the drama of the division between the Self and the Other as; the self and other people, (them and Us), or the Self and the ultimate Other (God).

Melodrama is also the drama of the Self against the exigencies of fate. While both Tragedy and Comedy each in their own way explore what it means to be human, Melodrama is the drama of being human in the world. Melodrama actualises the desire of the Self to make sense of what is happening in the world, and happening intrapsychically. (Hence the subtitle '**Melodrama Fiction and Faction The Search for Certainty In the Eye of Fate**'.) Melodrama is the exploration of the triumph of virtue over vice, of courage over disaster, of hope over experience. It is this polarisation within the Melodrama that gives it its Manichaeian character.

The psychological force which creates awareness of, and acting out of these divisions, is the dramatic impulse **mimesis**. The bridges between early drama and the Melodrama are ritual, and myth, embodied in their early written form, the epic. Classical eighteenth and nineteenth century Melodrama, with its presentation of a divided universe, is a motivating force in today's Current Affairs programmes. It infuses today's Current Affairs debates and documentaries as the accompanying video demonstrates.

In discussing the Melodramatic form I have considered polarisation and propitiation as psychological imperatives, with ritual representation as the structure for the primary dramatic form, and excess as the dramatic mode.

To demonstrate the existence of Melodramatic concepts and elements in Current Affairs programme I have analysed New Zealand produced pre-recorded television Current Affairs From TV One and TV Three for the two weeks 30<sup>th</sup> June - 7<sup>th</sup> July - 18<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1996. These weeks were chosen at random and the programmes broadcast during them analysed. My final analysis focused on *Holmes*, *The Tuesday Documentary*, and *60 Minutes*, TVNZ; and *Ralston*, *Inside New Zealand*, and *20/20 TV3*.

## PREFACE

I chose to write my thesis on this subject of Melodrama because I felt that it is a mode that, as one of the great modes of dramatic representation, has a value stretching not only forward from the Melodrama of the eighteenth and nineteenth century stage to the novel, the play, the film and the television of today, but also stretching backwards into antiquity. After being introduced to the work of Peter Brooks *The Melodramatic Imagination* I began to consider Melodrama in a different light. Hitherto I had dismissed it as 'cheap fiction' or 'lurid drama' and given it no further consideration. But reading Brooks changed all that for me. I now began to see Melodrama with its division of the world into black and white, good and bad, as one of the major methods of representation. For me it became clear that Melodrama is the method used by novelists, dramatists and script-writers to represent what it means to be human in the world, whether in a complex work like Margaret Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride* or in a straightforward work like the film *While You Were Sleeping*.

Another impetus towards my choice of subject for this thesis was my profession. I am a journalist by trade, specifically a documentary maker for radio. My reading of Brooks gave me a new understanding of my own work; of the premises under which I was working and of the structures I was recreating. We had often referred in the newsrooms of Radio New Zealand to the 'ping-pong' structure of a documentary. I now understand that this division into opposing camps is the essence of Melodrama. Even the 'ping-pong' effect of first one side and then the other has its origins in the theatrical structure of the Melodrama where victory alternates between the good and the evil sides. Reinforcing my interest in the theatrical origins of my craft is my personal interest in Theatre.

In order to appreciate the pervasive power of the Melodramatic impulse, I felt it was necessary to put Melodrama into the context of its long history: beginning

with the beginnings of drama, in worship and ritual, and tracing that development to the Melodrama of the nineteenth century stage with its technical innovations. These innovations were in part as a result of scientific development, development that led to the world of film and television. I then narrowed my focus to look at the use of Melodrama in the area that is my special interest, the area of Current Affairs. I chose television Current Affairs because the features of Melodrama are most immediately visible in them. But always I returned to the work of Peter Brooks because it was the key to my new understanding of the role of Melodrama in the world of representation. While I generally accepted his understanding and definition of Melodrama, I did not always agree with its limitations. Brooks limits Melodrama to a form that arose in the eighteenth century but I do not believe that its history can be cut so short. The quality of Melodrama is an enduring one and has long been an important vehicle for the expression of the nature of the human condition and to a certain extent Brooks agrees for in his work *The Melodramatic Imagination* he makes the following statement:

'...Melodrama at heart represents the theatrical impulse itself: the impulse toward dramatization, heightening, expression, acting out. ... to conceive Melodrama as an eternal type of the theatre, stretching from Euripides to Edward Albee, is a logical step,...here I think the term may become so extended in its meaning that it loses much of its usefulness, at least for our purposes. When Euripides, Shakespeare, and Moliere all become Melodramatists at least some of the time, and when Tragedy becomes only a special subset of Melodrama, we lose a sense of the cultural specificity of the genre.' (p xv)

On the contrary my belief is that if we limit the use of the term **Melodrama** to a certain dramatic form originating in the late eighteen and early nineteenth century, and still used extensively by film and television in the twentieth, we limit our ability to name an important dramatic form that has existed along with Tragedy and comedy since the dawn of drama. In doing this we lose the ability to recognise the central role this type of drama has played, and continues to play, in

our understanding of, and expression of, our lives as human beings in the world. Hence, I contend, it is necessary as humans 'to conceive Melodrama as an eternal type of the theatre,' and I would argue that though we may indeed 'lose a sense of the cultural specificity of the genre.' we gain an understanding of the role of **Melodrama** in the cohesive functioning of humans in groups i.e. in the life of the tribe, be it early human, post-revolutionary France, nineteenth century Polynesia, or contemporary New Zealand.

Melodrama is the 'personalised' form of the epic (e.g. the Illiad) which is itself the 'nationalised' form of the myths of the fall and resurrection. The myths themselves are dramatic expressions of the foundations of religious belief, which is based on the need to 'make sense of' i.e. give meaning to the universe. Therefore Melodrama is in fact a 'true' *genre*. The word genre has a variable meaning depending on the discipline in which one is working. I am not using it only in the context of film criticism, but am applying the meaning of 'a set of family resemblances' across various media to the word genre in my use of it; so that within the family of dramatised works, which includes works of 'fact' and of 'fiction' and works in the media of stage, film, television and radio, I can see a family resemblances which create three types or genres of drama: comedy, Tragedy and Melodrama.

In common parlance the genre of Melodrama and Tragedy are often confused. Just as Bernard Shaw defined comedy as a play in which everyone gets married, it is considered equally apt to describe a play, or any other representation, film novel television documentary or news item, in which everyone dies as a Tragedy. But it is important to make the distinction between Tragedy and Melodrama. As Brooks says in Conclusion: Melodrama A Central Poetry the final chapter of *The Melodramatic Imagination* this distinction gives us a name for the most common form of dramatic representation, a form that while it covers unpleasant events is not in itself Tragedy.

'It is particularly the distinction from Tragedy that matters, because we are persistently surrounded by spurious claims for the tragic, by erroneous tragification of experience. The drama of virtue misprized and persecuted, of innocence wronged, is regularly presented as tragic. So is the drama of disaster, as Robert Heilman points out, the intrusion of natural cataclysm or absurd event, of the fall of public personages whose abrupt eclipse, or assassination, leads to their automatic classification as tragic figures. The relevant aesthetic in most of these instances may be less Tragedy than Melodrama.' (p 203)

But while I agree with Brooks that

'It is valuable to distinguish between Tragedy and Melodrama and to avoid the spurious tragification of experience,' and that 'it is useful to be aware of the limits of Melodrama as aesthetic and cultural form, of what it cannot accomplish as well as what it can', (p 205)

where I differ from him is in his assigning to Tragedy the role of being the only form of drama which

'generates meaning ultimately in terms of orders higher than one man's experience, orders invested by the community with holy and synthesizing power.' (p205)

And of being the only form which derives its cathartic impact from

'... the sense of communal sacrifice and transformation.' (p205)

I do not accept Tragedy as the only form of 'unhappy' drama that directs the audience/spectator/ viewer to a higher power or a sacred universe; as the only form that contains the notion of sacrifice and transformation; nor do I accept that Melodrama be relegated to merely the drama of the abyss in a *post sacred* universe. Brooks says that Melodrama

'.... cannot, in distinction to Tragedy, offer reconciliation under a sacred mantle, or in terms of a higher synthesis. A form for secularized times, it offers the nearest approach to sacred and cosmic values in a world where they no longer have any certain ontology or epistemology.'(p 205)

I disagree. It is true that the hero in Melodrama, as opposed to the hero in Tragedy, is not the site of personal degeneration. S/he is the embodiment of the human resistance to, is the 'virtuous' bulwark against, the forces that seek to destroy the human community. These forces are represented in dramatic form by either the vagaries of nature or the machinations of other humans, the villain(s), as the virtues are dramatically presented in the hero/heroine and their respective families and friends. As the dramatic form that represents the human consciousness of the self, in opposition to the forces of the world, the Melodramatic Impulse is concerned with making present the forces of evil and disharmony so that they can be overcome and a state of balance, (reconciliation) can be restored.

Brooks believes that Tragedy is no longer possible in a post enlightenment universe. He says

'The status of the Sacred as "wholly other" - In Rudolf Otto's phrase- as a realm of being and value recognized to be apart from and superior to man, is gone and is irrecoverable.'(p 17)

Therefore he says Tragedy too has gone. But as I trace the development of Melodrama in this thesis I will seek to show that the 'wholly other' exists not in Tragedy but in the Melodramatic form. The other of Tragedy, is the personal other, the split contained within the psyche. Therefore, not only is it possible for Tragedy to still exist in a post-enlightenment universe, but it is also possible that Melodrama as the descendent of the drama of the sacred, continues to be, a propitiation ritual and as such still has at least the vestige of its original transcendent power.. Brooks says of Melodrama that it



'Melodrama regularly simulates the experience of nightmare, where virtue, representative of the ego, lies supine, helpless, while menace plays out its occult designs. The end of the nightmare is an awakening brought about by confrontation and expulsion of the villain, the person in whom all evil is seen to be concentrated, and a reaffirmation of the society of "decent people."' (p 204)

That the Melodrama is a direct descendant of the propitiation drama of ritual is evident in the form which has tight storylines, limited characters and characterisation, specific perceptible, if not realistic causation, sustained rhythm and pressure towards confrontation, and a psychological emphasis on the casting out of evil.

Another attraction for me to the consideration of the Melodrama was the intense focus on performance. The expressive freedom given by the high performance quality of the Melodramatic mode allows room for the cosmic forces for good and evil, for human desires both lofty and base to be given expression. Whether that performance element is manifest in the display created by the spectacle scenery commanding(ed) the attention of the audience/viewer, or in the physicality of its acting style, with its gymnastic displays and use of heightened gestures, or the transparent emotionality, or the clear cut psychological and moral divisions, or the invocations of a magic and mystical world; for one of the strengths of the Melodramatic form is in its dramatic bravado. The Melodrama as a form is 'up front' It creates a world that is larger than life, and as such is close to the world of our dreams. Melodramatisation, which is essentially externalisation, then is the mode that allows the complex of ideas and situations, the hopes and fears inherent in the drama of disaster to be 'acted out', whether the method is ritual, or dramatic enactment or documentary representation.

Brooks, in his concluding chapter notes the applicability of **Melodrama** to the life of public figures and it is the drama of the public arena played out nightly on our radios and television that I wish to make the final consideration of this thesis.

But before considering the use of **Melodrama** in public life I wish to trace the development of the Melodramatic Impulse to its modern embodiment.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Doctor Graeme Bassett of Massey University for his work in supervising this thesis.

Claudia M Thompson and Dorothy Alexander for their careful reading of the manuscript and helpful comments

Ruth and Madeline Cook for putting up with a mother who was constantly looking at either a television or a computer screen.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter One INTRODUCTION: THE ENDURING QUALITY OF MELODRAMA.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter Two ART, AND IMITATION.....</b>	<b>13</b>
The function of art	14
Art and Mimesis	21
<b>Chapter Three MIMESIS AND PERFORMANCE .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Mimesis and Melodrama	31
Mimesis the first experience.	33
Mimesis the heart of drama	34
Mimesis and the religious experience.	35
Mirror Images and Copies	39
Magic	43
Performance and Excess	47
<b>Chapter Four MYTH, AND EPIC .....</b>	<b>60</b>
Myth	61
The epic	62
Myth and Society	65
<b>Chapter Five FROM RITUAL TO MELODRAMA.....</b>	<b>72</b>
Polarisation as a structural device.	72
The Manichaeian	73
Ritual	76
From ritual to drama	80
Ritual a basic dramatic structure	82
Propitiation: the psychological need for ritual	85
Symbol	93
<b>Chapter Six MELODRAMA: THE INFLUENCE OF 'SOCIAL TYPES' AND THE SPECTACLE STAGE.....</b>	<b>97</b>
The development of theatrical Melodrama.	97
Acting	101
Melodrama and the rise of scenery	104
Romanticism	108
Musical Tradition	112
'Virtue Triumphant' and 'Brutal Realism'	114
From Spectacle Stage to Television	117
The Melodramatic form and television	119
<b>Chapter Seven PLOTS THAT (CONTINUE) TO THRILL ....</b>	<b>126</b>
The use of the Melodramatic impulse in Current Affairs programmes in New Zealand in 1996 .....	126
Structure	126
Purpose	126
Style	126

The Video	127
Selection Criteria	127
Structure	130
Style	134
Purpose	142
<b>Chapter Eight CONCLUSION</b> .....	152
Implications for Current Affairs	152
Current Affairs and Agendas	153
Current Affairs and Performance	155
The Problems of Stereotypes	155
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	i
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	1

## LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Number</i>	<i>Page</i>
Figure One Classical Theatre Masks	40
Figure Two Comedy Mask	40