PROJECT MUSE®

Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the "Classical"

Linda Williams

Modern Drama, Volume 55, Number 4, Winter 2012, pp. 523-543 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2012.0064

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/495879

Access provided at 19 Feb 2020 19:09 GMT from USP-Universidade de SÃƒÂ£o Paulo

Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the "Classical"[1]

LINDA WILLIAMS

Since the late eighties, American audiences have witnessed a quite literal expansion of the dimensions of movie and television melodrama. The movie screen has expanded *spatially*. Where it once grew wider in competition with television, it now grows deeper – with 3D certainly, but also through a new dynamization of the vertical space of the screen. In contrast, the television serial melodrama has expanded *temporally* as stories go on and on. Both of these expansions constitute the "mega" of my title, suggesting that, in an era of theatrical blockbusters and prime-time and cable serials, we need to rethink the very nature of the melodramatic space and time of the mass-market moving image.

VERTICAL SUSPENSE: BIG SCREEN MEGA-MELODRAMA

Suspense has been long recognized as a basic quality of melodrama. Consider, for example, the iconic scene in *Titanic* where suspense is measured by the prolonged upending of the ship before it sinks. Movies with evocative titles like *Cliffhanger* (1993), *Vertical Limit* (2000), *Die Hard* (1988), *Air Force One* (1997), *Matrix* (1999; 2003), *The Dark Night* (2008), *Avatar* (2009), and *Inception* (2010) enlist remarkable special effects that often depend upon either defying or succumbing to gravity. Film and media scholar Kristen Whissel has referred to some of these effects as the "new verticality" of digitally enhanced movies, defined by "extreme heights and plunging depths" (23). She argues that this "new verticality" of the blockbuster screen is well suited to an era defined by "economic polarization and new forms of political, religious and military extremism," which tend to evacuate previously available middle grounds (25).

Absence of a middle ground has been a hallmark of popular stage and screen melodrama ever since the early-nineteenth-century dramas with

music that gave the form its name. Peter Brooks calls melodrama the very "logic of the excluded middle" (15). If traditional "patterns of moral order" have become confused in a modern era in which good and evil are no longer clear, then it has long been the job of melodrama to reveal – through either the recognition of a villain with a tinge of the Gothic or the suffering of an innocent victim – a "moral legibility" that can discern both (Brooks, 20). Melodrama is the way a mega-melodramatic popular culture reassures itself that we – the good folks, the blue avatar – are good and those who threaten us are evil. It is not necessarily a drama of the defeat of evil by good but the all-important *recognition* of a good or evil that was previously obscure.

But if melodrama's drive is ultimately to reveal a good or to condemn an evil, it does not do so in the same ways from century to century, from place to place. Nor does it oppose the same figures of good to the same figures of evil. Indeed, as Christine Gledhill has recently argued "anybody can occupy positions of victim and oppressor, serving any ideological configuration, dominant or resistant" (Gledhill, Introduction 5; emphasis in the original). In other words, mutable melodrama, considered as a pervasive mode rather than a single genre, is a "leaping fish" (to use Henry James's metaphor for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a "text" that could not be pinned down to any one version or medium). We are sure to mistake melodrama if we think it only consists of moustachioed villains tying innocent women to railroad tracks.

There are many qualities of melodrama and many debates about those qualities.[2] For the purpose of this discussion, I want to isolate four features, beginning with the most obvious and primary one of suspense, figured here by the upended Titanic literally suspended before its inevitable fall. Suspense is the prolonged anxiety produced by awaiting the outcome of a dangerous situation. The second quality of melodrama is connected to the first: it is the drive to achieve moral legibility in the eventual resolution of the suspense. Who deserves to live, who to die? What do we make of the outcome of suspense in which lives hang in the balance? In *Titanic*, Jack and Rose and many other passengers are suspended at the highest point of the ship's gravity-defying emergence from the water. Why do we want them to survive more than all the others? It is not only because they are young and attractive and that Jack is smart about the physics of their upcoming plunge – in this case, he instructs Rose to hold his hand and to stay clear of the ship when they enter the water. It is also because Jack has already been a victim accused unjustly of theft and because Rose, as a first-class passenger, has refused the offer of a lifeboat to stick with Jack, who is in steerage. It helps also that they never push anyone out of their way or assume that their lives are more worth saving than others. Jack and Rose, in this most disadvantaged of positions will, nevertheless, show the characteristically American initiative not only to survive the plunge but also, somehow, to

enjoy the ride. That this ride resembles nothing so much as that of a roller coaster, we understand when Jack excitedly yells out to Rose and to any other of the passengers who are not too preoccupied by their imminent death to listen: "THIS IS IT!" "It" seems to designate the moment that begins the fall and for which they must be ready, the turning point that is the pinnacle they reach before the plunge to catastrophe and possible death, and the test of courage and ingenuity the heroes must show in the face of it. It is, thus, during this suspenseful moment that they seem morally to earn the right to live.

However, deserving to live does not mean getting to live, even though we know well from past action blockbuster experience that the white, American, usually male heroes will mostly, against all odds, survive; but, unless they are the branded superhero of a franchise, we know also that it could be "too late" – not "in-the-nick-of-time" – for some. Jack himself will not survive the wreck of the *Titanic,* though he passes on his will to live to Rose: if it is "too late" for some, it will be "in-the-nick-of time" for others. The death of some augments the *felt good* of the survival of others (see Williams, *Playing* 27–41).

The third quality of melodrama exhibited here and elsewhere is the need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home "space of innocence." A happy ending will recuperate something of this space of innocence; a sad ending will mourn it. In the present case, that space is a dream of equality, achieved briefly in the festivities in steerage where Jack and Rose dance and also glimpsed at the end in the portrait envisioned of the "ship of dreams," where rich and poor alike appear as belonging to the same group. Melodramas need this space in order to support the belief that moral good is possible. Most often that good is located in a distant childhood, or even an imagined "back in the day," but it is important to the forging of moral legibility that it at least *seem* possible.

The final quality of melodrama I want to discuss is one that many scholars, including Brooks, have assumed goes with the territory but that, I argue, is no longer true of melodrama's more modern forms. This is the deeply engrained idea of the inherent excess of melodrama – a quality that has, for far too long, served as the *sine qua non* of the mode. Excess is measured in several ways: in terms of degrees of emotion (the suspense of action, the tears of "women's films"), degrees of aesthetic ornamentation (colour in a Douglas Sirk or Vincente Minelli film), degrees of intensity of *melos* [music], and finally, degrees of spectacle. In theory, the more any of these qualities is deployed, the more melodramatic a work is. In practice, however, melodrama is rarely so pure: the emotions are always mixed in action films (there is no greater weepie than *Titanic*), the stylistic excesses of a Sirk film are not necessary to moral legibility, and an emotionally powerful work can still have minimalist music (e.g., composer John Adams's

score for the over-the-top *Io Sonno l'amore [I Am Love]*). These qualities are not the hallmarks of melodrama, though it is possible to revel in them. My argument, rather, is that melodrama has become so basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment that it is futile to continue to define it as "excess," since these apparent excesses are not necessary for melodrama to do its work nor are they of the essence of the form. The real issue, however, is what we presume to compare this "excess" to.

In this essay, I want to do everything in my power to disabuse scholars in film studies of a habit of thought that consistently aligns melodrama – whether action blockbusters or more emotionally resonant "women's films" – with stylistic or emotional excess and thus, implicitly or explicitly, opposes it to a "classical" norm. It is this supposed norm that is the real problem. For what we habitually call the classical is even more protean than the supposed excess of melodrama. Indeed, the very norms of melodrama are what we often mistake for the classical.

Consider this brief history of the concept: for André Bazin, "classical" cinema consisted of a notion of balance and ideal form derived from the "ripeness of a classical art" (20). It was a sign that American cinema had grown up and become a mature art by the thirties. But, for seventies "apparatus theorists," it meant something very different: "classical realism" resembled the realist novel and was viewed as complicit in accepting the dominant ideology as that which naturally and simply is (see, e.g., Metz 94). For Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, in the eighties, the classical was no longer an ideological but rather a stylistic notion of "decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship and cool control of the perceiver's response" as well as psychologically motivated, character-centred linear causality (3–4).

If film and media scholars continue to oppose melodrama to the excess of such a shape-shifting ideal of the "classical," they will end up being blind to crucial changes taking place within the very mainstream of popular visual storytelling. Indeed, the value of Whissel's addition to the discussion of our contemporary fascination with the wonders of the digital spectacle is to point to an actual change in the vectors of motion that drive the action "blockbuster" from horizontal forward movement into a high/low dynamic of suspense and suspension which allows the films to acknowledge economic polarization and "thwarted upward mobility as significant aspects of their global audience's condition of existence" (25). This is, indeed, an important change within the very category of the blockbuster.

I would add, however, that if we were willing to recognize that this new vectorization of the energy of American motion pictures characterizes a whole network of generic affiliations – action films, sci-fi, thrillers, national epics, romances, or superhero franchises – under the larger *mode* (not the singular genre) of melodrama, then we might better understand what is at

stake in this suspense that has gone so vertical. The hero of the blockbuster displays his or her virtue not only in spectacular actions but initially in forms of suffering that make this subsequent action seem morally legible. This pathos of the suffering victim turned into righteous action is part of the alchemy of melodrama's cultural power. To suffer, to be injured, is, according to certain Christian and many other cultural frameworks, to earn empathy and to acquire virtue. The very injury that makes me see the evil in my injurer and the good in myself is the basis for a fundamentally resentful form of moralism – a Nietzschean *ressentiment* – at the heart of much melodrama (Anker). We see this in mass-entertainment action melodramas as much as in pathos-oriented stories of thwarted romance as well as in the stories we tell ourselves about our righteousness as a nation. Whether it is the oft-told story of the conquest of the West or the more recent story of the invasion of Iraq, in our popular imagination, we inevitably portray ourselves as suffering from the attacks of others. Because *we* have suffered, we believe we morally deserve to conquer and invade. Such is our often fickle melodramatic sense of justice. It is, however, precisely the different forms of this melodrama of justice that it is important for us to better understand.

The bigger the blockbuster, the more vivid the suspense. But there is moral legibility in this suspense, for the question ultimately posed is, Does the hero and his girlfriend/wife, child or cohort deserve to live? Does his selfless activity prove that he is the good person who might help us return the nation, the colony, or the "ship of dreams" to a "home" space of innocence, wherever that may be in a newly topsy-turvy world?

THEORIZING MELODRAMA AND THE CLASSICAL

Ever since Tom Gunning borrowed the term "attractions" from Eisenstein and applied it to early cinema by way of contrast to a later cinema of narrative absorption (a.k.a. "classical" narrative), a certain unfortunate dichotomy has predominated between a cinema supposedly designed exhibitionistically to *show* versus a cinema designed linearly to *narrate* through character-driven, goal-oriented cause and effect, with little extraneous complication or subplot (Gunning, "Aesthetics" 122–24). One of the reasons I believe Gunning's attraction/astonishment essays have been so popular across so many aspects of the field of film study is that they valued spectacle and "attraction" at a time when it was still habitual in film studies to see any possible rupture of the ideologically suspect "classical" narrative as potentially subversive.[3] Back in the days when classical was code for hegemonic ideology, anything that disrupted the seemingly dominant "classical narrative" was valued as a disruptor of questionable norms. Today, however, when film scholars are a little less likely to think that any interruption is subversive, we are left with an awkward heritage. Having so successfully established a dichotomy

between spectacle and attraction, on the one hand, and so-called linear "classical narrative," on the other, the field was left with no appropriate way to designate the affective powers of "moving" movies except as "ruptures" deemed anti-classical. Yet such films were not so much breaking the rules of a dominant classical cinema as they were obeying the conventions of a dominant melodrama.

David Bordwell – the most vociferous advocate of the idea of a dominant "classical" cinematic style – sees almost all popular American films as conforming to linear "goals," "rising action," and eventual "closure," even in the blockbuster action films that offer so much suspense. Yet Bordwell is, at least, one film scholar who does not believe that spectacular action ruptures narrative. For him, however, this is because the "classical" is so dominant that it can absorb anything into its regime (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 104). For Rick Altman and Tom Gunning, on the other hand, the "classical" merely attempts to "tame" the excesses of attractions. The primary problem with this opposition is that it sees melodrama as the older form and classical narrative as new, even though it is obvious that the very notion of the classical belongs to older, Aristotelian traditions.

Melodrama is thus unfairly and anachronistically relegated to the position of the perpetually old-fashioned from which an understated, more realistic, psychologically motivated classicism only occasionally borrows. Despite the fact that melodrama is historically a more recent invention than even neoclassicism, the idea that Hollywood had produced its own special kind of classicism, despite its many inheritances from the melodramatic stage, has been very popular (for a different view, see Williams, *Playing*).

Perhaps the most important challenge to the idea of a dominant classical Hollywood norm has come from Miriam Hansen, who has questioned the ahistorical, anti-modernist tendencies in the very term. She calls "classical" an anachronism when it is used to refer to a cultural formation such as cinema that was "after all, perceived as the incarnation of *the modern*" in its methods of industrial production and mass consumption (337; emphasis in the original). Hansen's solution was to invent a better term: "Whatever the economic and ideological conditions of its hegemony . . . classical Hollywood cinema could be imagined as a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity, as an industrially produced, mass-based, vernacular modernism" (337).

Notice, however, that even as Hansen invented a new and most welcome term "vernacular modernism," she still held on to the old. She pointedly asked, "Can there be an account of classicality that does not unwittingly reproduce, at the level of academic discourse, the universalist norms mobilized, not least, for purposes of profit, expansion, and ideological containment?" (339). Unfortunately, Hansen did not answer her own question with the resounding "no!" it deserved. Almost any account of classicality

necessarily reproduces universalist, anachronistic norms. In her argument for the term "vernacular modernism," Hansen asserts that Hollywood "produced and globalized a new sensorium" (344); it constituted, or tried to constitute, new subjectivities and subjects, a different possible organization of the daily world. There was nothing "classical," she admits, about its aesthetic mode. And so she asks us to understand the "classical" in American cinema as a "metaphor of a global sensory vernacular" so that we might see it as a "mass-mediated public sphere capable of responding to modernity and its failed promises" (344).

But why hold on to the term "classical" at all, even as a metaphor? What does it yield? If we revisit Bazin's original list of the popular American genres, where he first denominated American cinema as "classical," we see that every one of the genres in the list aimed to move bodies in sensory ways: comedies and burlesques, dance and vaudeville films, crime and gangster films, horror films and westerns, psychological and social dramas (Bazin 28). (His examples of this last – *Back Street* (1941), *Jezebel* (1938) – include what would later be called women's films or melodramas.) Indeed, these are all highly sensory and affective classes of films, including some that I have called "body genres" (Williams, "Film Bodies").

In 1991, I used the term "body genres" as a way of signalling the insufficiency of the "classical" as a descriptor for mainstream cinema ("Film Bodies'). In doing so, however, I was still thinking of melodrama only as a genre (rather than a more pervasive mode) and as exceptional excess in relation to all other types of cinema which, like everyone else, I called "classical." Today, I would not use either term because, like Gunning's attractions and Altman's notion of melodrama as a non-dominant, alternative tradition, it only signals exceptions to the putative rule of a dominant "classical" that is itself a chimera. Rather, I argue that this sensory and experiential horizon of cinema (and television) *constitutes* the mainstream: strong affect combined with moral legibility to create a felt good is what these popular moving pictures do. Body genres, melodramas, or attractions are not the exceptions. They are the rule, and they are melodrama even if the word we use to describe them is now "vernacular modernism."

Melodrama, in fact, was the term that so-called classic Hollywood itself used to describe and sell its various genres. As Christine Gledhill and I have both argued, movies have been called "western melodramas," "crime melodramas," "sex melodramas," "backwoods melodramas," "action melodramas," "society melodramas," even "comedy melodramas" (Gledhill, "Melodramatic Field" 12–13; Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 58–62). As the dramatic form inherited from the stage, melodrama remains the backbone of popular global cinema; individual genres have been its variations. Why, then, has melodrama been ignored by much film theory (until recently), except as an exceptional drama of excessive and often feminized emotion?

The answer, I think, is that melodrama has been so derided as an excess to, and as the contrary of, so-called "classical realist" norms that we have failed to see it for what it is; that is, the process by which what is a new, previously unrecognized problem or contradiction within modernity becomes morally legible to its viewers.

It is the protean leaping fish of melodrama – as a mode working in relation to the other modes of realism, comedy, and romance – that emerged triumphant from the "loss of the sacred" (Brooks 18) that is Anglo-European modernity. It is melodrama as a mode that replaced the rules and harmony and unities of the Greek and Roman or French neoclassical stage, with large amounts of pathos and action in the service of discovering where goodness and justice lie. And if we only look for contemporary melodrama in its most familiar and cliché aspects – pounding music, victims tied to railroad tracks, villains twirling moustaches, rescues that happen in the nick of time – then we mistake its mutable contemporary forms and its protean nature. Melodrama renews itself and makes itself modern by adapting the most recent awareness of social problems and failures of justice to melodramatic ends. Finally, melodrama is in no way inherently opposed to the changing forms of what we recognize as realism. Rather, it enlists realism to generate outrage against realities that could and, to its creators should, be changed. Melodrama feeds upon the problems of these realities – the very injustice of them.

If today's big screen mega-melodramas increasingly leave their heroes hanging – between life and death, between one outcome and another, suspended in a suspenseful time, hoping against hope that they might be able to return to the good time before it is "too late," then we could say that this kind of mega-melodrama most effectively summons up audiences who respond to this moment of highest intensity, suspended, sometimes literally, at the exact turning point between catastrophe and triumph. Action melodrama has always delivered suspense. What we find in the new verticality is a pivotal shift of a formerly forward moving energy into a new kind of vertical suspension. That suspension is spatially located, an "it" that can be pointed to. Like the stage tableaux that used to hold action before a curtain to prolong suspense or astonishment, it is visible, apprehensible as a place in space.

HORIZONTAL SUSPENSIONS: MEGA-MELODRAMA ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Television does not ignore suspenseful action spectacle. It is, after all, the place where we see it first and the place where we see it "live." World Series, World Cups, oil spills, trapped miners, Cairo revolutions and that quintessentially vertical spectacle of 9/11 are all forms of melodramatic suspense.

But the "its" of these spectacles mobilize a different kind of attention, one that we may need to continue watching much longer than the two-hours plus of a movie, one that cannot be concentrated in a single turning point in space, and one that may need to be seen in something approaching real time. For the biggest catastrophes, commercials themselves may be suspended, as the events unfold uninterrupted (see Doane).

Long ago, television scholar Horace Newcomb wrote that, except for the day-time soap operas, television had not exploited the one resource it had in abundance: time (254). Now, it seems that the medium has harnessed that resource in the increasing serialization of what used to be more or less discrete episodes. In roughly, the same twenty-year period that the action blockbuster has gone increasingly vertical in its utilization of space, television has gone increasingly horizontal in its utilization of time, expanding narrative flows, borrowing important qualities from the greater liveness of news and reality shows and, of course, the soap opera, which used to move at a pace almost as slow as, and in parallel to, the duration of "life itself." Those unending day-time melodramas, once aimed primarily at women, are now gradually dying off, but their DNA seems to have been passed on to melodramatic serial dramas, with the difference that the appeal is no longer primarily to women and that these stories can eventually come to an end.

Descended from "soaps" and more distantly from nineteenth-century serial fiction, brought to prime time in the eighties with the likes of *Dallas* (1978–91) and *Dynasty* (1981–89), today's television serial is an adaptation of the familiar weekly episodic drama into a more "cumulative" and serial form of storytelling (Newcomb; qtd. in Sconce 98). Extended time is the essence of the "mega" of these melodramas. At one end of the spectrum of this temporal accumulation is a story that can end tidily with each episode, leaving only a few threads of the ongoing situation open. At the other end of the spectrum are a large number of series that do not tidily resolve themselves at the end of an episode or even a season and to which we return, if we are "hooked," like addicts of narrative.

Most television critics today agree that, with the advantage of more "cumulative" stories and the ability to write and produce them more rapidly than movies, television has become more aesthetically interesting, complex, sophisticated, timely, and relevant than most movies or than previously episodic television drama. Of course, there are many different kinds of "sophistication" and "complexity." There's the kind that comes with numerous commercial interruptions on the networks, and which, like soaps, must build sufficient redundancy into the program for the non-regular viewer (e.g., the popular cult blockbuster, *Lost*). Then, there is the complexity and sophistication of the shows on premium cable channels that may count on viewers to pay better attention and remember. My sole example here will be *The Wire*.

It is in the sheer linear extension afforded by the unprecedented length of viewing time – not the high and lows and depths of the big screen – that we must measure the horizontal extension of television serials. Today, if the 46-minute episode convention endures on networks, while the longer nearly full hour convention holds sway on cable, and a mini-series might last anywhere from 4 to 18 hours, the time spent watching the entire narrative can extend to the 60 plus hours of *The Wire*, or to the six seasons of (twenty-four episodes on average, equalling 171 hours) of *Lost*. In other words, if we watch a "show" on television today (and "on television" certainly no longer means watching it at the time prescribed *by* television, or even watching it *on* a television) and if it "holds" our attention (our interest in many series has a way of petering out), we may end up watching for a very, very long time.

Here especially the "classical" norm of the unity of time and space does not adequately describe the interweaving of multiple stories over a vast expanse of viewing time and elaborate convolutions of plot. *Lost*, for example, has a narrative that moves forward from the moment of the plane crash on the island, regularly flashes back to pre-island stories, then forward to the future, and then to an altogether parallel universe. It is also conventionally melodramatic in its alternations of equally strong doses of pathos and action, amazing coincidence and frequent and sometimes even literal cliff-hangers, though, as serial continuations, these can never constitute the singular "THIS IS IT!" climax about which Jack enthuses in *Titanic*. Contemporary television critics point to some of the most complex, convoluted, even "baroque" moments of these serials as well as to a "poetics" of seriality that is inherently opposed to classical beginnings, middles, and ends as well as to the usual Hollywood conventions of a character-driven causality (Mittel 29; Sconce 109). Thus, Angela Ndalianis's "Television and Neo-Baroque," for example, speaks of a "polycentric" "open" structure that is neo-baroque to the point of losing totality in favour of "instability, polydimensionality, and change" – a system of the labyrinth (Ndalianis 85; quoting Omar Calabrese; 87, quoting Umberto Eco).

Many critics approach this labyrinth through melodrama. Jeffrey Sconce, for example, argues that, "by focusing less on episodic treatments of crooks and patients and more on the serial development of melodrama involving private eye, cops and doctors" (98), the serial melodrama can become more complex. Yet, if critics such as Sconce adopt some of the terminology of melodrama, they do so as a kind of default: what else could a form adopted from soaps be? We thus do well to ask what the new horizontality of the serial form has made possible for television melodrama. What is the nature of the small-screen mega-melodrama?

Time affords longer arcs of characters that, with time, can change. It also affords the possibility of many more characters that can change. Time

affords a more expansive economy of storytelling that can build and intersect multiple worlds. As Jeffrey Sconce puts it, “What television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for in depth and *duration* of character relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment” (95; emphasis added). This expanded time of the serial narrative is not easy to get one’s mind around, for it requires us to think about time without relying, as Jack did in *Titanic*, on a precise spatialization – the pause that permitted him to grasp the suspenseful turning point between up and down and say, as if it existed right here in this space, “THIS IS IT!” Indeed, from the fact that movement can only exist in time and can only be divided by taking a snapshot of a false halt, Bergson argues for the impossibility of that spatialized turning point (188–97).

Like the serial narrative that is always in the process of unfolding and becoming, time has its own value and cannot simply be mapped onto space. The present is always in motion and in two directions at once: toward a future to which we attend because we may be required to act and toward a past which we remember. Serial television, by virtue of its sheer ongoingness, encourages us to recognize this quality of time as that which does not coincide with space. Its motion toward an often uncharted, as yet unscripted future, along with its ability to evoke and for viewers to remember (with or without flashbacks) long swathes of an accumulated past, invites us to live more vividly in the materiality of duration. This in not to say that a television serial *mimics* human consciousness. However, all serials that have not been precisely plotted out in advance and that do not know, when they begin, where they will end participate in a relation to time that is more “live,” more responsive, as Bergson writes of consciousness, to the present moment as moving time not static space. This responsiveness to a time that accumulates a greater and greater thickness is more alive to possibility, more able to alter course than a narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end.

Now, I hope it is already obvious that television serials are quite obviously melodramas, even if, for the time being, we only mean the clichéd and “excessive” sense of that term: emotion-laden, coincident-driven, loudly orchestrated narratives that endlessly prolong, as Jason Mittell has put it, their second acts (32). And, indeed, only rarely does a serial designed to greatly prolong its second act have an opportunity to conclude with an actual finale – cancelled serial shows must often end abruptly, indeed. But what about “quality TV” – those exceptional serials that have been singled out for critical acclaim and that do sometimes, have the luxury of a proper end? What about David Simon’s *The Wire*, which ran on HBO from 2 June 2002 to 9 March 2008 and which many critics, myself included, have claimed to have been the best TV series ever? In fact, Walter Benn Michaels has gone so far as to say that *The Wire* is the best *American novel* (n)ever

written (see, also, Klein; Goodman). *The Wire* is composed of sixty hour-long episodes with no commercial interruption, organized into five seasons averaging twelve episodes per season, and it did have ample warning as to when it would end.

This serial has been considered so good, so "realistic," so "authentic," so "tragic," that it couldn't possibly be associated with something so lowly as the standard understanding of the term "melodrama." It has even been disassociated from television itself (as in HBO ads, "It's Not TV, It's HBO"). Simon himself has led the charge: it's not a cop show, he insists, even though the premise of the story begins and ends with cops pursuing inner city drug dealers. Rather, it's a realist "visual novel," following in the footsteps of *Moby Dick*; or it's urban tragedy following in the footsteps of the Greeks (Simon 23).

Melodrama in *The Wire* is actively disavowed by fans and auteur alike, and especially when comparisons are made to Charles Dickens. This particular comparison, made by many critics and intended as praise so enraged Simon that he created a venal newspaper editor in the fifth season, who demands of a long-suffering lesser editor on the city desk that he develop the "Dickensian aspect" of a story about homelessness. The point, of course, was to critique the media for deploying the cheap sentimentalism of suffering victims. The problem, of course, was that Simon deployed the most obvious tools of melodrama – uncomplicated victims and villains in the person of the lesser editor and the fat cat one – in order to disavow the Dickensian project of telling stories with overdrawn victims and villains. Why did Simon get caught up in such a contradiction?

The story Simon claims to tell is the tragic fall of a once great city. Yet tragedy, even contemporary tragedy, is not adapted to the sort of angry social protest that *The Wire* encompasses. Tragedy, as one critic has pointed out, may depict the plague in Thebes, but the social problems presented by that plague are not at issue. Tragedy is not interested in the catastrophes of society or in society's ordinary victims. It is more interested in the dividedness of the great soul of the tragic hero (Heilman 79). Indeed, Simon states, "We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy and applied it to the modern city-state . . . the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason . . . it's the postmodern institutions" (qtd. in Talbot). Because melodrama has a low status and tragedy has an intrinsic cultural prestige, it is certainly natural for Simon to call his serial "tragedy," especially in a culture that has forgotten what classical tragedy is and simply conflates it with disaster or an unhappy end.

Simon wants to view the postmodern – or shall we say "neo-liberal"? – institutions as the fates against which his characters struggle. And indeed,

whenever an individual character tries to improve an institution – whether it is the practices of the drug trade, city government, police or the schools – that reform will usually fail. Yet there is too much hope for change in *The Wire* and too much pathos for helpless victims (like young Wallace of the first season, or the young Dukie, who grows so much in the last two) to say it is tragic.

This is not to say that this series does not have tragic qualities. Witness, for example, the fates of both Frank Sobotka and Stringer Bell; but it *is* to say that these fates run against the larger ambition of *The Wire*'s serial melodrama and its patterns of repetition within extended time. Tragedy, even though it may extend to a cycle of plays, does not have "world enough and time" to effect gradual change and multiply intersecting worlds. Nor can it be called "dissent," which Simon also claims his work to be (qtd. in Talbot), for even dissent requires a hope of change. Tragedy is one thing that truly *is* classical. Its unities work to produce a strong peripeteia and final catastrophe that do not fit into the ongoing rhythms and the repetitive patterns of this series. For example, by the fifth season, we discover that a younger generation of characters will carry on and repeat many of the trajectories of the older. Thus, Michael is the new Omar and Dukie is the new Bubbles. If Simon wanted to claim his serial as tragedy, this claim was simply a way of saying that he resisted the facile endings of Dickensian melodrama, not that he overthrew melodrama altogether.

As we have seen, to prove his supposedly anti-Dickensian credentials in the fifth season, Simon has the evil patrician editor who urges Dickensian story development demote the good city editor while the lying reporter who fakes a story with "Dickensian aspects" wins a Pulitzer. Villains win, victim-heroes lose, and the Dickensian melodrama is seemingly discarded as pandering, sentimental journalism. But Simon mistakes the very nature of melodrama: it is the recognition of virtue and villainy, not the foiling of evil and the triumph of good that is its essence. Indeed, *The Wire* does not denigrate melodrama, only its more obvious archaic forms. The series is, in fact, a reinvention of a newer, better melodrama capable of incorporating larger swathes of realism. Just as *Titanic* could encompass the physical mechanics of a shipwreck, digitally constructing the iceberg, the upended ship, and the fatal falls, so *The Wire* could depict, over time, the multiply interacting and ethnographically accurate worlds of Baltimore. In both cases, we are impressed by the realism. In *Titanic* or *Avatar*, however, we are well aware of the moral shaping by melodrama. This is less the case in *The Wire*, which we still may compare to Dickens not forgetting that, in addition to being a great realist novelist who drew his characters and stories from headlines, he was also a great melodramatist.

Because the series is so well grounded in detailed ethnographic study of multiple problems in twenty-first century Baltimore, we appreciate this

realism in relation to so many worlds: cops, drug dealers and their "corners," dockworkers union, schools, and in the final season, the city paper. Out of day-to-day ethnographic detail in each of these sites and building upon a familiar cops and drug-dealers conflict, the series grows to a portrait of initially opposed and then multiply intersecting institutions of undeniable Dickensian proportions. But where Dickens tackled the flawed workings of a single institution – say the Inns of Court in *Bleak House* – and stuck with the stories of the individuals caught up in its machinations, *The Wire* performs a multi-sited study of multiple institutions as they interact over time.

If an important feature of melodrama is its ability to modernize by addressing previously unaddressed social problems, then the great innovation of *The Wire* is not, as Simon seems to think, the inversion of happy to sad ending (which is not actually the case anyway, since there are many sad-ending melodramas), but the way the series orchestrates major recognitions of virtue in more subtle ways and across institutions. For example, at the end of the third season, the police major Bunny Colvin is fired. His season-long experiment of creating the drug-zone of Hamsterdam has enabled many of the other neighbourhoods in his district to resume normal life. Hamsterdam has been a brave experiment, proving that a de facto legalization of drugs can reduce crime, but the police and the Mayor's office shut it down. This is an obviously sad ending. Then, in the final scene of the third season, we have a coincidental meeting of two characters – the big-hearted drug fiend Bubbles and the fired Major Colvin, now out of uniform.

The scene begins with Bubbles scavenging metal through the bull-dozed ruins of the old drug zone until he comes across the defeated Colvin surveying this ruin. Both face the pile of rubble, as Bubbles remarks that it looks "like someone took a big eraser and rubbed across it." Colvin, defeated, just stares as Bubbles continues, "But before, a dope fiend come down here, cop a little somethin' – ain't narry a soul hassle him . . . they just let him be." To this, Colvin cautiously asks, "It was a good thing, huh?" Equally cautious, unsure to whom he is speaking, Bubbles back-pedals a little: "I'm just sayin' . . ." but as he walks away to join his partner and continue scavenging with his shopping cart, he explains, "[Y]ou probably don't know, but its rough out there baby; cops be banging on you; hoppers be messing with you." Colvin stands alone again before his failed experiment as Bubbles moves away, but his experiment has been recognized as "a good thing," and he softly answers, "Yeah, thank you."

This is a remarkably Dickensian moment, when two characters we have come to love and admire, inhabiting two entirely different social strata and institutions, not only cross paths but unwittingly sympathize with and understand one another. Its realism, like that of Dickens in his time, consists in the depiction of Bubble's language and the utter ruin of the street.

Colvin is not the melodramatic victim of yesteryear, standing onstage, ruined, while another character recognizes his undivided virtue. Nor does Bubbles easily perform the requisite recognition of virtue. He quickly retreats, but as he leaves, he gives his assent as best he can to Colvin’s question of whether this was a good thing. In other words, and not in *so many* words, the recognition of virtue is uttered in the language of the streets and to someone on whom Bubbles may even think his explanation is wasted. But as the crane up and back signals in a rare flourish, and as we hear the extremely rare *melos* of the music that marks the end of each episode, and in this case the end of a season, we have just heard and seen the one person in the series qualified to pronounce upon the “good” that was once Hamsterdam and thus the good that *is* ex-Major Colvin. The moral legibility of melodrama is served. Colvin suffers and his good is recognized, as is the villainy of those who shut his experiment down to save their political skins.

However, it is not simply these occasional moments of the “recognition of virtue” that make *The Wire* the most ambitious and powerful melodrama to have come along in the new form of serial television. What cannot be achieved in a movie is the mega-melodramatic temporal extension of serial television – something that is not easily encapsulated in a single moment. In this case, it is partly because we have known Bubbles since the first season and have come to know the scavenging and pedagogical routines of his life – including the favourite lesson to a new protégé about thinking one is brown (cool) when one is really green (inexperienced) – that we have a strong temporal sense of the trap of repetition in which Bubbles is caught. In other words, his pathos is as evident as Colvin’s. This scene does what all good melodrama does when it is still new: surprises us with a moral legibility pulled out of the despair of pain and suffering. This is better than anything a tragedy of individual flaws, tragic pride, and fall could deliver.

The institutions that contain and constrain each set of characters – whether police, drug dealers, union, city government, schools, or news media – are all kept in play by richly comparative cross-cuts and by the fact that a few figures like Bubbles travel between them. *The Wire* also digs deeply into character without making private goodness or evil the final cause of narrative outcomes, thus putting a less individualistic spin on melodramatic conventions. This may be the series’ greatest innovation and its biggest challenge to the old-fashioned melodrama with a “Dickensian aspect.” For, if melodrama borrows from topical and politically relevant realisms, then what is extraordinary in this series is what I have elsewhere called the multi-sited ethnographic imaginary of so many institutions in play with one another over such a long time (Williams, “Ethnographic Imaginary”).

The Wire thus does differ from a Dickensian model of melodrama. There are, for example, very few scenes of characters in purely domestic

situations, except in the Sobotka family story in Season Two. This is not a melodrama in which the private life determines the outcomes of public life. It is truly a police procedural in its focus on the life of the police as an institution composed of certain procedures that, if practised correctly, might yield more effective policing. But, at the same time, it is also a drug-dealing and drug-users procedural, a union procedural, a government procedural, a school procedural, and a media procedural. The cumulative histories of these institutions, not private loves or good or bad fathers, determine fates (although there is an unfortunate whiff of mother blaming).

It is the institutions that provide the ultimate moral context for this melodrama. *The Wire* recalibrates the very meaning of the melodramatic recognition of virtue to the level of institutions: the institution of the police either can or cannot recognize the "good" of effective community policing; the drug dealers either can or cannot recognize the good of avoiding the casualties of "dropping bodies"; the unions either can or cannot provide work without engaging in corruption; the city government either can or cannot recognize the good of real reform, not just the appearance of it; the schools either can or cannot recognize the good of teaching and learning with the benefit of "soft eyes" – a way of teaching and detecting that can take in the whole scene without looking hard at any one thing and which can intuit the whole. And the city newspaper either can or cannot recognize the good of truthful, scrupulous reporting.

The fact that finally, these institutions *cannot* embrace the good in any full way, *as* institutions, despite the many individuals who try to achieve justice within them, is the basis of the series' famous anger and "dissent." But, except for the case of union leader Sobotka, it is not the basis of individual tragedy. Indeed, if there is tragedy in *The Wire*, it is the institutions themselves that are tragically divided and ultimately doomed to fail, while individuals may be either good or evil. In the end, we find a city that remains in the grip of self-serving, short-sighted police, ever-more ruthless gangsters, unions that cannot survive without corruption, a city government that will always "disappoint," schools where the best an individual teacher can do is control a class, and media that miss all the important stories that the multi-sited ethnographic imaginary of *The Wire* has already told.

However, we recognize the good that could be because, throughout the series, we have learned to recognize the good that has presumably been lost. This is the good home that Baltimore may never really have been but that melodrama must posit as its lost good. Ultimately, not to believe in this space of innocence, is not to love Baltimore, the love of which, in this series, is an unquestioned good – the good that melodrama invests in its victims. An intriguing case in point will be my final example.

In the last episode of the last season, the gangsters are regrouping. Their former kingpin, Marlo, has quit the game. Marlo represented a new level of

ruthlessness in a drug game that only valued profit and did not care how many bodies must fall to gain it. It is time for the two gangs to determine who will rule and how – the inheritors of the old Barksdale Westside gang, the inheritors of Proposition Joe's eastside operation, or the inheritors of the ruthless Marlo. Cheese asserts his authority and offers to put in the largest amount of money to purchase "the connect." Although Cheese is the nephew of Proposition Joe, he does not propose to carry on Joe's more co-operative way of doing business. Rather, he proposes to be the biggest investor and to thus upset the balance of power in the Proposition Joe tradition of a co-op. When one of their number presents the argument that things were "good" back in the day when his uncle ruled the eastside, Cheese pulls gun on the speaker and recounts the recent history of hegemony in the drug trade: "Joe had his time and Omar put an end to that. Then Marlo had his time, short as it was . . . But now motherfucker it's our time, mines and yours. But instead of just shutting up and kicking in you gonna stand there crying that 'back in the day' shit." Emphatically, moving the revolver closer, he yells, "There ain't no back in the day, nigger – ain't no nostalgia to this shit here! There's just the street and the game and what happen here today." In other words, Cheese is as ruthless as Marlo.

But it is not just a question of the street and the game. There is also the sense of justice that melodrama insists upon. In this case, an alarmingly swift justice is achieved by the pulling of another gun and a quick bullet to the head of Cheese on the part of Slim Charles, a Westside former lieutenant of the Barksdales. When yet another gangster complains that now they lack the $9 million needed to buy the connect, Slim Charles answers, "[T]hat was for Joe," the uncle whose memory Cheese failed to respect. At this point in the series, we are not so shocked by the abrupt violence to miss the fact that, according to the morality of the series, a kind of justice has been rendered – though it is not one that can end the cycle of violence. Once again, virtue – that of the disrespected recent past of "Prop" Joe – has been recognized. In the only language they know, the other gangsters disapprove of Cheese's proclamation that "there's no back in the day" and that there "ain't no nostalgia." Such is the gangsters' own "sentimental" code of melodrama. They cling, as *The Wire* clings, to the good of "back in the day."

Just as all American melodramas have posited the unquestioned good of a "home space of innocence" from Uncle Tom's old Kentucky Home (despite its questionable associations with slavery) to *The Birth of a Nation*'s Lincoln log cabin and its even more problematic association with white supremacy, so Simon reinvents a new kind of racial melodrama that does not look too closely at the actual "roots" or "true justice" of this good home. Melodrama, as we have seen, needs a victim in whom to recognize virtue, and it needs a lost "space of innocence," however brief, however flimsy. The very fact that the virtue in which we are asked to believe is as

flawed as either Hamsterdam, in my earlier example, or Proposition Joe, in this later example, suggests a certain questioning of the always relative good posited by melodrama. If we look too closely at either, we see the flaws of a morality doomed to worship a flawed past and an only felt good.

In the final episode of the final season of the series, ex-detective Jimmy McNulty surveys the horizon of Baltimore and proposes to a homeless man whose life he has wantonly manipulated that they now "go home." This gesture toward a home that the homeless man no longer has – and that perhaps McNulty no longer has either – is the series' final homage to Baltimore. For even if there is no home for either, Baltimore serves as the "felt good." It is a city that is fiercely loved for what it once was – or even what it might have been and thus what (it could possibly be imagined) to be again. Such nostalgia for a home rarely depicted in this institutionally focused series and that only a very few of the characters actually find is, nevertheless, the animating affect of the series – the *felt good* we are asked to share.

CONCLUSION

We like a melodrama if it seems realistic and if its politics, or sense of the just, coincides with our own – when the good *we* believe in suffers and is, at least briefly, recognized. The undeniable innovation of *The Wire* is its effort to tell a melodramatic story at the level of social and political institutions that have failed justice. Seriality enables a new energy for establishing the "good" of justice. This article is not meant as a rehabilitation of melodrama through the exceptional excellence of *The Wire*. For all its efforts at justice, *The Wire* may be just one more form of what Wendy Brown has called "left melancholy" (53–57) – an exaggerated mourning for a liberal democracy that may never have actually existed, certainly not for Baltimore's black inhabitants. If we rejoice at the quick justice that kills Cheese, this may be a sign that the justice sought in *The Wire* – the restoration of a nostalgic back in the day – is a terribly limited vision. Melodrama is a limited vision of justice, but it finds new imaginative possibilities in serial melodrama.

Movies and television have both been expanding – becoming "mega" in new ways. The spatial vertical mega of the action blockbuster may be symptomatic of the contemporary culture of both disaster and depression, but rescues in the nick of time cannot deeply address the social and political problems of the contemporary world. The mega of the television serial, with its expansion of both world and time, opens up the traditional focus of melodrama on the good to larger moral and political dimensions. In both cases, the mode of melodrama continues to hold us in its grip. We should recognize it in television, even, or especially, when it is "good."

NOTES

1 Many people aided me in the preparation of this article, most especially Kelsa Trom, Patrick Ellis, Paul Fitzgerald, and Christine Gledhill. Audiences at Leigh High, Bryn Mawr, University of Washington, Rutgers, and U.C. Berkeley were also very generous in their advice. A version of this article was delivered in the 98th Annual Faculty Research Series, 4 April 2011, University of California, Berkeley and elsewhere.

2 Some of the most influential works on melodrama inspiring my own contribution, here, include Brooks; Elsaesser; Gledhill, "Melodramatic Field; "Signs of Melodrama"; Altman; Postlewait; Buckley.

3 See, e.g., Gunning "Cinema"; "Aesthetics"; also, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.

WORKS CITED

Altman, Rick. "Dickens, Griffith and Film Theory Today." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88.2 (1989): 321–55.

Anker, Elisabeth. *Orgies of Feeling: Melodramatic Politics and the Pursuit of Freedom*. T.S.

Bazin, André. "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema." *What is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray. Vol. 1. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 23–40.

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone, 1991.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203358818.

Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006.

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1976.

Brown, Wendy. "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005.

Buckley, Mathew. "Refugee Theater: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss." *Theatre Journal* 61.2 (2009): 175–90. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.0.0192.

Doane, Mary Ann. "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe." *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 222–39.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." *Monogram* 4 (1973): 2–15.

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

Gledhill, Christine. "Signs of Melodrama." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. New York: Routledge, 1991. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203400425_chapter_16.

Gledhill, Christine. Introduction. *Melodrama Revisited*. Brussels: PIE. Rethinking Cinema / Repenser le cinéma. T.S.

Goodman, Tim. "Yes, HBO's 'Wire' Is Challenging. It's Also a Masterpiece." *San Francisco Chronicle* 6 September 2006: E1.

Guerlac, Suzanne. *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2006.

Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." *Wide Angle* 8.3/4 (1986): 63–70.

Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator." *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 31–45. Rpt. in *Viewing Positions.* Ed. Linda Williams. New Brunswick, NJ: Rugters, 1995. 114–33.

Heilman, Robert. *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1968.

Hansen, Miriam. "The Mass Production of the Senses." *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Bloomsbury, 2000. 332–50.

James, Henry. *A Small Boy and Others*. 1913. New York: Scribner's, 1941.

Klein, Amanda Ann. *"'The Dickensian Aspect': Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text." The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*. Ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2009. 177–89.

Metz, Christian. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.* 1977. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982.

Michaels, Walter Benn. "Going Boom." *BookForum*. BookForum, Feb./Mar. 2009. 25 Oct. 2012 <http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_05/3274>.

Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Televison." *Velvet Light Trap* 58.1 (2006): 29–40. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2006.0032.

Ndalianis, Angela. "Television and Neo-Baroque." *The Contemporary Television Series*. Ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. 83–101. http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748619009.003.0007.

Newcomb, Horace. *TV: The Most Popular Art*. New York: Anchor, 1974.

Postlewait, Thomas. "From Melodrama to Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama." *Melodrama: the Cultural Emergence of a Genre*. Ed. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou. New York: St. Martin's, 1996. 39–60.

Sconce, Jeffrey. "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 93–112.

Simon, David. Introduction. *The Wire: Truth Be Told. By Rafael Alvarez*. New York: Pocket, 2009. 1–31.

Talbot, Margaret. "Stealing Life: The Crusader behind 'The Wire.'" *New Yorker* 22 Oct. 2007: 150–63.

Titanic. Dir. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox Studios, 1997. Film.

Thompson, Kristin. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.

Whissel, Kristen. "Tales of Upward Mobility: The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects." *Film Quarterly* 59.4 (2006): 23–34. http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/fq.2006.59.4.23.

Williams, Linda. “Melodrama Revised.” *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*. Ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998. 42–88.

Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.

Williams, Linda. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess.” *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2–13. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1212758.

Williams, Linda. “Ethnographic Imaginary: The Genesis and Genius of *The Wire*.” *Critical Inquiry* 38.1 (2011): 208–26. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/661650.

The Wire. Seasons 1-5. HBO, 2007.

ABSTRACT: “Mega-melodrama!” describes blockbuster action films that occupy more and different kinds of space than previous films and serial television programs that occupy more and different time than previous episodic television. This article defines melodrama anew and attempts to disabuse scholars of a habit of thought in film studies that consistently aligns melodrama – whether action blockbusters or more emotionally resonant “women’s films” – with stylistic or emotional excess and thus, implicitly or explicitly, opposes it to a “classical” norm. For what we habitually call the classical is even more protean than the supposed excess of melodrama. Indeed, the very norms of melodrama are what we often mistake for the classical.

KEYWORDS: melodrama, film, serial television, *The Wire*, *Avatar*