



All That Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955)

All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture

Lynne Joyrich

I. Drama at Our Fingertips

In an emotionally charged scene in Douglas Sirk's 1955 melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*, the protagonist (Jane Wyman) receives a TV set as a gift. Wyman plays Cary Scott, a middle-aged and upper-middle-class widow in love with a man who is not only younger than her, but of a lower social class—she first meets Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) when he's pruning her trees. In the course of the narrative, Cary faces increasing social and familial opposition to the romance and is forced to leave Ron. She receives the present from her two grown children who offer it as an affirmation of her continued bourgeois status (her decision not to marry and leave the family home) and as a substitution for the love she has renounced. She is, in other words, given a typical media solution to the problems inherent in her gender and class position—consumer compensation in exchange for an active pursuit of her desire. As the TV salesman explains that “All you have to do is turn that dial and you have all the company you want right there on the screen—drama, comedy, life's parade at your finger tips,” there is an image of Cary's face, framed and reflected in the TV screen as she realizes the futility of her actions and the impossibility of her situation. Figured as the ultimately passive spectator, so tangled in the web of bourgeois culture that she is literally collapsed onto the picture of her misery, Cary's very subjectivity is incorporated into television.

In a recent article detailing the path of melodrama “. . . from its birth in the crowded city streets to its death in the television dominated home,” Laura Mulvey refers to this same cinematic scene.¹ In the late 1950s, television erupted in the American home and placed itself firmly within the realm of family, domesticity, and consumerism, the ground of the family melodrama. Noting Hollywood's response to this invasion, Mulvey writes, “It is as though, at the moment of defeat, Hollywood could afford to point out the seeds of decay in its victorious rival's own chosen breeding ground.”² Yet these seeds of decay were not enough to overthrow the new



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medium or its familial base. Instead, the consolidated family, with TV as its tool, seemed to triumph over critical melodramas. Mulvey concludes that the swing to political conservatism and the repositioning of women in the home gave order to the oppositions public/private, production/reproduction, and inside/outside whose tensions had propelled melodrama and allowed it a political dimension. The birth of television thus displaced, and seemingly even resolved, the genre's animating force. As TV brought popular entertainment into the home, national consensus triumphed over a potentially oppositional melodrama.

But has melodrama died? Or has it been subsumed into television, engulfing the medium as it engulfs its spectators and precluding its location as a separate category? This possibility is strikingly figured in *All That Heaven Allows* as the TV screen takes over the cinematic frame, enclosing Cary and the entire melodramatic *mise en scène* in a haze of consumerism, impotent spectatorship, and hyperreality associated with television. These are the terms of postmodern American culture in which history, subjectivity, and reality itself flattens out into a TV image and we are left searching for signs of meaning within an endless flow of images—a situation leading to nostalgia for past traditions and what may be a backlash against women's social and political gains.³ In this historical scenario, television draws us all, women and men, into a shared bond of consumer overpresence and powerless spectatorship as melodrama becomes the preferred form for TV,

the postmodern medium *par excellence*. In other words, rather than eclipsing melodrama, television incorporates it so as to bring the strands of passivity and domesticity associated with both melodrama and TV together in a simulated plenitude, thereby positioning all viewers as susceptible consumers. At the same time, the “feminine” connotations traditionally attached to melodrama—and to both consumerism and television viewing—are diffused onto a general audience, opening up contradictions of gender and spectatorship in the TV melodrama which invite further investigation. In this article, I want to explore such questions of TV melodrama and to map out the discursive connections forged between melodrama and postmodern consumer culture, focusing on the problems of gender constituted within this field.

II. Television: The Melodramatic Screen

With a broadening appeal to a general audience of viewer-consumers, melodrama moves to television and so dominates its discourse that it becomes difficult to locate as a separate TV genre. Of course, there are some television forms that are clearly marked as melodrama. Both the daytime and prime-time soap opera, for example, seem to employ many of the characteristic devices of the film melodrama. The use of music to convey emotional effects defines the basic attribute of melodrama in all its forms, and this same trait defines the soap opera. Music orchestrates the emotional ups and downs and underscores a particular rhythm of experience. This rhythm, in film melodrama and the TV soap opera, is one of exaggerated fluctuations, marking the discontinuities of emotional experience as the plots slowly build, amidst much delay, to dramatic moments of outbreak and collision before sudden reversals of fortune begin the movement again.

Dramatic intensification is also heightened by concentrated visual metaphors—the repetition of configurations of actors from one scene to the next, for example, to indicate similar or contrasting emotional relations, the references to visibly different styles of dress or color of hair to signify opposing positions within the program’s familial schemes, or the externalization of emotion onto representative objects that act as stand-ins for human contact. The meaning of everyday action, ordinary gesture, and standard decor is thus intensified so that the psychic strains and breaks or rise in feeling are made manifest. Like the film melodrama, soap opera expresses what are primarily ideological and social conflicts in emotional terms. Action then largely takes place within the context of the home or in sites at the intersection of public and private space that are central to personal concerns (the hospital room, a hotel, the private office available

132 for intimate conversations, etc.). The intensification of the significance of mundane objects and locations—the doorbells and telephones, doctor's offices and bedrooms so charged with connotations in the soap opera—works to displace the emphasis from social relations to material objects even as they express an anxiety about the uncertainties of daily American life.

While such patterns drawn from the cinematic conventions of the family melodrama seem appropriate for the typically domestic interiors of the soap opera, soap opera has lately expanded to include broader and more diverse settings while extending melodramatic conventions to a wider scope. Soap opera now combines with other genres—police, crime and spy dramas have been popular on *General Hospital*, for example, the world of big business has been taken on by prime-time soap operas such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas* (which also employs elements of the Western), and soap opera has even combined with elements of science fiction (seemingly the last domain of wide open space) in recent episodes of *One Life to Live* and last season's finale of *The Colbys*. It seems as if soap operas have been able to move into realms not usually associated with the melodrama, while at the same time, TV forms not typically seen as melodrama have become more and more melodramatic.

The made-for-TV movie, for example, is often marketed as a form particularly suited for dealing with contemporary social issues. Yet like the fifties film melodrama, it manages these issues by inserting them into a domestic framework in which the family functions as the sole referent. Police and detective dramas also purportedly deal with the social issues of crime, drugs, prostitution, and so on, yet even while their emphasis on action seems to remove them from the domain of the melodrama, they exhibit many of its characteristics. Although they allow their protagonists to act freely against the criminals, the heroes of TV cop shows are still trapped within a confined world in which emotional pressure, familial concerns, and gender or class position take on heightened importance. Because of the economic and institutional demands of television, the good guys are never fully allowed to conquer their enemies—instead they are forced to repeat their actions week after week, trapping them within a restricted world of perpetual victimization and thereby lessening the gap between these dramas and the soap operas where perpetual suffering is the rule.

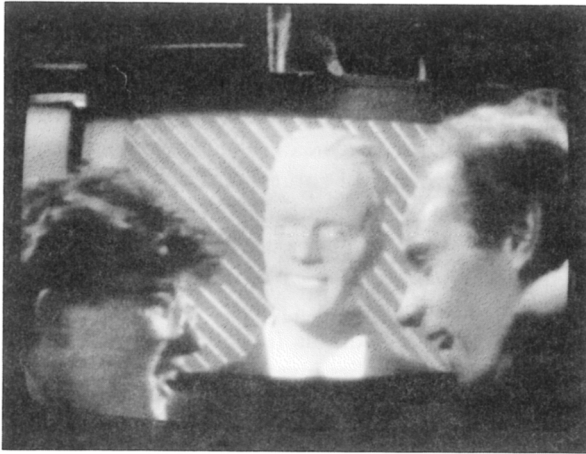
As direct action proves futile, the emphases of even the crime series shift to the more personal issues traditionally associated with the melodrama. In many cop or detective shows, the audience's emotional involvement is induced by a focus on the family in danger of dissolution. The officer or detective then must strive to save the family—either his own (*Heart of the*

City, Hill Street Blues), those of his clients (*The Equalizer*, *Stingray* and *Spenser: For Hire*, among many other shows, have featured such plots), or that of the police force itself. Very often the strains and tensions that exist between members of the police “family” are investigated, and the contrasts drawn between members of the team are used to explore issues of class, racial, or gender dynamics. For example, *Spenser: For Hire* can be seen as mapping out relations (and exposing contradictions) of race and class in the contrasts made evident between Spenser and Hawk, his “street-smart” black buddy who assists him with his cases. Gender, on the other hand, is made central on *Magnum, p.i.*, *Miami Vice*, and other shows in which the attempt to define masculinity is a crucial issue, often taking precedence over the specific crimes portrayed.⁴ As the focus shifts from problems of crime to questions of identity within familial and social roles, these television series move into the realm of melodrama.

Crime and social crises are the mainstay of network news programming as well, yet these shows too turn to melodrama to handle such “stories.” Peter Brooks concludes his study of the melodramatic imagination by noting its persistence in today’s dramas of natural disasters and political personalities, the stuff of newscasts “homologous to the dramas played out every day on television screens.”⁵ Like the cop/detective shows, news stories are often framed in personal terms as a way of avoiding the larger institutional, political and ideological issues they raise. By employing conventions taken from narrative TV melodrama (including a focus on the family—the news “family” and the families investigated), news programs can achieve the emotional intensification and moral polarization associated with dramatic serials.⁶

In other words, even programs or genres that seem far removed from the melodramas of the cinema employ devices that link them together. The series *Max Headroom*, for example, has been seen as TV’s most innovative and “televisual” show in its self-reflexive use of video and computer technology, innovative sets and costumes, distorted visuals and unusual camera angles, fast-paced editing, and up-to-date language (dialogue that only a techno-whiz-kid can fully understand). Yet even this “postmodern” program ultimately resorts to melodrama as it collapses back into a standard representation of good vs. evil. The good guys are, of course, hard working independent men and women who care about the common folk while the bad ones are associated with a powerful bureaucracy that feeds off human suffering. Such oppositions are made visible through contrasting clothing, styles, manners and possessions: the wealthy villains are well-groomed smooth talkers in black suits who guard their rare possessions while likable characters wear casual clothes, understand street talk, and treasure their old stuffed animals. In providing this typically

134 melodramatic scenario, even while attempting to remain informed and self-aware concerning television's power to construct identity, history and reality, *Max Headroom* exists in the tension between modern and post-modern forms. It solves this contradiction by splitting its protagonist into two—we have both the tough and dedicated TV journalist Edison Carter and his video-generated alter-ego Max Headroom who was created by a young computer genius while Carter battled crime. By so splitting the character, the program is able to displace all the cyborgian elements of postmodern subjectivity onto Max, leaving Carter free to play the role of hero who is nonetheless caught in a limited world—his actions, risks and sacrifices will never really free society of its problems or contradictions.



Max Headroom

Max Headroom thus fully demonstrates the extent to which television still relies on melodrama, even in TV's most "advanced" forms. Like the strategy employed by this show, it is as if we turn to melodrama to ward off the threat of a new form of culture and to buttress ourselves against a postmodern world in which even the distinction between video image and human identity becomes blurred. Despite Mulvey's claim that melodrama (or at least its potentially subversive mode) has died in the TV-dominated home, television melodrama stands strong. Its conventions are employed in a wide range of texts as television attempts to maintain the clarity melodrama provides through its strongly marked oppositions and heightened moral register. Yet as it spreads out across a number of TV forms from the soaps to the police dramas of masculinity, the news to the commercials, melodrama loses its specificity, becoming diffuse and ungrounded in its multiple deployments in the flow of TV.

III. Simulated Sentiment

It is not surprising that today's media-saturated society has been linked, in Mulvey's analysis for example, to the end of melodrama. As Fredric Jameson remarks, postmodernism is repeatedly marked by such "senses of the end of this or that . . . the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s," the death of melodrama in the TV-centered home being one more example of this phenomenon.⁷ Yet melodrama's popularity has historically coincided with times of intense social and ideological crisis, and the postmodern age is certainly characterized by its many theorists as *the* age of crisis.⁸ Aligned with the rise of multinational and consumer capitalism, it replaces determining machines of production with weightless models of reproduction, dissolving any possible distinction between aesthetic and commodity production and proclaiming the end of meaning, the liquidation of the referential, and the dissolution of identity. With this crisis in representation comes a crisis in power, authority and legitimation as the traditional "master narratives" fail to function. It would then seem that postmodernism multiplies the contradictions that animate melodrama—contradictions between production and reproduction, average and excess, topicality and timelessness, public and private, the Law and desire, masculine and feminine—further dissolving the stability of Western culture. Given this state, Jean-François Lyotard announces that "[t]he narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements."⁹ In other words, we face the death of the great male story. As Lyotard claims, all is dispersed in a cloud of dramatic fragments held together through

136 only surface relations and tensions—a description corresponding remarkably well to both melodrama and network television.

Other critics have recognized the ties between contemporary media culture and melodramatic form. David Thorburn, for example, claims that “television melodrama has been our culture’s most characteristic aesthetic form,” and in his discussion of this broad category—encompassing made-for-TV movies, westerns, lawyer, doctor, cop and adventure shows as well as the more easily recognized daytime and prime-time soap operas—Thorburn argues for the specific suitability of melodrama for television.¹⁰ Like television, melodrama is scorned for its moral simplification, reassuring fantasies, and immediate sensation in its effort to portray behavior shocking to its time. TV parallels melodrama in its form as well as content as it centers on familial space, a situation fostered by the size of the screen and its location in the home. Together with the low visual intensity of the medium and the smaller budget of its productions, these factors encourage television’s reliance on background music, the close-up, confined interior, and intimate gesture rather than action—elements that resonate with melodramatic conventions.

TV melodrama is then ideally suited to reveal the subtle strains of bourgeois culture with all the contradictions it entails. As market commodities structured according to rigid schedules and commercial interruptions, such strains include the tensions that emerge in the juxtaposition of the drama proper and the mini-melodramas seen in the commercials—stories which convey the hopeful sensibility of advertising (even as they reveal the daily problems of dirt and stress) and jar with the claustrophobic and pessimistic worlds of prime-time soap operas (which nonetheless mask the labor required to maintain their luxury). Yet Thorburn claims that such commercial limits are merely formal conventions guiding the genre. While he notes that as both aesthetic and commodity creations, TV melodramas may reveal the ambivalence of industrial society, Thorburn does not fully explore the discord expressed by this form—contradictions grounded in consumer culture and tied to the shifting gender and class relations of postmodern America. In fact, Thorburn argues that television resolves melodrama’s basic conflict: TV’s ability to present intimate detail and intense emotion in a small and familiar space minimizes the tension between ordinary reality and an excessive emotional heightening brought together in the genre.¹¹ Yet as the medium which best illustrates the fluctuating ground of a media-created world, TV cannot resolve the contradictions of postmodern culture. It may be a desperate attempt to evade these tensions by reclaiming meaning and tradition, but this attempt is doomed to failure and TV melodrama is forced endlessly to replay its contradictions—contradictions which must be investigated so as to open a space for renewed feminist analyses and politics.

According to Jean Baudrillard, the discord of contemporary culture infects even the “certainties” of rational discourse, meaningful history, and coherent reality. Postmodernism is “hyperreal”—an age characterized by simulation. No longer tied to origin, reference, or identity, our culture is ruled by simulacra—copies without originals. Not only are objects and texts reproduced, their very production is governed by demands of reproducibility. In this case, the territory of the real is no longer mapped onto a representation, but the map precedes the territory—events are already inscribed by the media in advance as television is diffracted into reality and the real is diffracted into TV. With the breakdown of the distinction original/copy comes the breakdown of other such polarities—real/imaginary, true/false, cause/effect, subject/object—and according to Baudrillard, the subversion of Western logic, historical determination, and meaningful identity entirely. Simulation is thus the ruin of representation, giving the lie to our faith that a sign can exchange for meaning since it only exchanges in itself—we find only more signs and images in a circuit without reference or direction.

Paradoxically, while capitalism was the first system to destroy the referential by establishing a law of equivalence in which all is exchanged in the medium of money, it must now protect itself from the subversion of order inherent in the simulacrum. America has thus hardened itself against its own hyperreality—a weightless play of signs which decenters power as it destroys the gravity of rational discourse and grounded meaning. As Baudrillard remarks, a “panic-stricken production of the real and the referential” today overtakes even the drive toward material production. We exhibit an obsession with signs of reality, tradition, and lived experience as nostalgia engulfs us in an hysterical attempt to find stakes of meaning. Thus we stockpile the past to guarantee authenticity, and we create fantasies (Disneyland is his example) to convince ourselves that a separate imaginary is possible—to assure ourselves, in other words, that the real exists apart and distinguishable from Disneyland.¹² The production of such fictions of the real defines the role of TV in both its “realistic” (news, live television) and imaginary (narrative) forms—both provide the illusion of actuality and bolster our sense of the reality of the stakes.

Melodrama might at first appear to be an odd form in which to search for signs of the real. But as Peter Brooks has argued, the melodramatic mode, above all, expresses the desire to find true stakes of meaning, morality, and truth. It thus emerges in times of doubt and uncertainty, employing signs which may seem overdetermined and excessive in order to mark out values left cloudy by a disintegrating sacred system. Combating the anxiety produced by a new order which can no longer assure us of the operation, or even existence, of fundamental social, moral, or “natural” truths, melodrama “arises to demonstrate that it is still possible to find and to show

the operation of basic ethical imperatives, to define, in conflictual opposition, the space of their play. That they can be staged ‘proves’ that they exist.”¹³ That is, moral struggle is made visible, announcing itself as an indisputable force. By enacting irreducible imperatives, melodrama serves to reassure a doubting audience of essential truths while its “logic of the excluded middle” acts to focus feeling into pure and immediate knowledge.¹⁴

The staging of melodrama’s Manichean conflicts as a strategy to counter the decentered consciousness arising in a society in which fundamental meaning and morality have been thrown into question, then, sounds strikingly like the strategies Baudrillard outlines for the postmodern world. Both may be seen, in other words, as desperate attempts to map out artificially a real which is in danger of being lost in the shift to a new social and discursive field. While Brooks calls melodrama “a peculiarly modern form,” it is also particularly suited to our postmodern sensibility. As the political, social, and aesthetic representations of modern society lose their legitimacy, we are forced once again to find new stakes of meaning, and melodrama is the form to which we turn. In a simulated society which typically stages reality in order to “prove” its existence, melodrama offers a way to assert the “actual” drama of life.

In order to find such meaning and make it universally legible, melodrama leaves nothing unsaid. Its hyperbole and emotional heightening correspond to the difficulty of naming the reality it strives to locate. But with the loss of traditional guarantees, meaning becomes sentimentalized and individual. As Brooks explains, “melodrama represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms. . . . The decision to ‘say all’ . . . is a measure of the personalization and inwardness of post-sacred ethics, the difficulty of their location and expression.”¹⁵ Personality becomes the new value and sole referent—a condition central to today’s consumer culture in which TV takes the leading role. Personality is one of the primary selling points of television, the basis of its performers’ appeal. Producing a sense of intimate contact, personality on television is an effect of TV’s fiction of presence. Unlike the enigmatic aura of the cinema star (who is desirable insofar as he/she is distant, absent, and mysterious), the television personality seems immediately available to us.¹⁶ Personality is then constructed as an outer layer, readable to all and there for us to have—or, as the commercials imply, to buy. In this way, it becomes a key element in the marketing of almost all commodity goods.

Americans’ preoccupation with personality in the form of emotional satisfaction, psychic health, and images of well-being is tied to the rise of a therapeutic discourse that is central to media culture and consumer

society. Like the melodrama, this therapeutic ethos is “rooted in peculiarly modern emotional needs—above all the need to renew a sense of selfhood that had grown fragmented, diffuse, and somehow ‘unreal.’”¹⁷ While the growth of the therapeutic ethos and a consumption-oriented secularism has been linked by T. J. Jackson Lears to a sense of weightlessness found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these are today almost fully institutionalized.¹⁸ Yet rather than fulfilling the need for self-realization and the experience of “real life,” the therapeutic prescriptions offered by advertising and the “leisure industry” have exacerbated the problem, further enmeshing us in a web of consumer interdependence and ego diffusion. As consumers continue to search for the path to the “real” self, they are led in circles, a situation which reinforces rather than resolves this sense of weightlessness and the process of rationalization. The same sense of unreality that nourishes the melodramatic imagination, then, fosters a consumer culture bent on supplying a simulated image to make up for our sense of loss of place and identity.

IV. The Space and Time of Consumerism

While melodrama, like advertising, figures social turmoil in the private, emotional terms of self and experience, it rejects the psyche as a realm of inner depth. As both Brooks and Elsaesser point out, psychological conflicts are externalized so that they may be clear as fundamental forces. It is in the clash and play of their visible oppositions that melodrama’s meaning becomes both legible and consumable. Elsaesser thus emphasizes the genre’s “non-psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*, who figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation.” Charting a relational field, melodrama may be seen as architectural rather than literary, “a combination of structural tensions and articulated parts.”¹⁹ It is through its connecting points, rather than the interior depth of its characters, that melodrama expresses a particular historical consciousness.

Television has also been criticized for its failure to portray fully rounded characters, and as a medium composed of disjointed parts that are only held together in overlapping networks of shared commercial time, TV creates a constellation of consumption. Postmodern culture in general has been linked to such a space—a hyperspace of “constant busyness” suppressing depth, a packed emptiness “without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume.”²⁰ Depth is replaced by multiple surfaces across which codes play and flow. In the words of Baudrillard, the psychological dimension has given way to the “forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of exteriority.”

Even the fiction of autonomous subjectivity vanishes as our sense of inner space collapses. Identity is instead caught up in the circuit of “connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication. With the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era—our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen.”²¹

The spatial logic of postmodern culture has its counterpart in a weightless relation to time, history and memory—a construction also found in television melodrama. As images and narratives become fragmented and spectatorship more and more dispersed, we begin to inhabit “the synchronic rather than the diachronic,” leading to what has been described as a crisis in historicity. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson, our relationship to the past is one of “historicism effacing history”—as even the illusion of a full or authentic relation of lived experience to history dissolves, we are left with a random collection of images to which we turn in a frantic effort to appropriate a collective past.²² In its endless replaying of yesterday’s shows, nostalgic fondness for former styles, and obsessive announcements of its own historical weight, television contributes to both the dissolution of the aura of tradition and the attempt to reformulate a new historical connection. History is constantly invoked as a reassuring anchor, but as it is dispersed in a pastiche of partial testimony and resituated in the flux of media production, it is deflated and eclipsed in a frame of eternal “nowness.”²³ TV narrative provides a present method of consuming the past.

Television melodrama in particular plays on this hollow sense of time—its artificially contrived plots vacillate between both the compression and extension of time as old plots and stereotypes are recycled or rehearsed rather than fully developed. By replaying its own formulas, TV fosters a sense of living tradition, a continuously available history that appeals to the nostalgic mode of postmodern culture. With no agreed transcendental value to be achieved, melodrama can offer no final closure, and thus its narratives—in both continuing serials and episodic series—are circular, repetitive and unresolvable. This is clear in the case of melodramatic series—weekly doctor or detective dramas, for example—in which characters are doomed endlessly to re-enact the dilemmas propelling their shows. Daytime and prime-time soap operas, on the other hand, provide continuing stories that seem to demand a historical sense of time. Yet comparable to the series, soap operas ultimately reject the notion of progress, the belief in a visible difference between past and future. In a genre whose form has been described as “an indefinitely expandable middle” lacking beginning or end, the viewers as well as the characters are trapped in an eternally conflictual present.²⁴ Such melodramatic serials thus create a strange sense

of time as they run vaguely along “real” time, stretching it at some points—when a climactic diegetic moment fills up several episodes or time freezes to hold a tableau—while compressing it in others—when young children leave for boarding school, for example, and return in a season or two as teenagers. Noting this “curious holding of memory and forgetfulness” that is specific to television narration, Rosalind Coward exclaims, “if these programmes require such feats of memory, how is it that they also require equally spectacular acts of forgetfulness?”²⁵ Invoking history and memory even as they refuse historical grounding, TV melodramas deny the spectator any sense of coherent time, position, or identity, thereby allowing the manipulation of past TV history to instigate present viewing and consumption.

The oddest case of TV’s deployment of history, memory, and time, examined in a provocative paper by Mimi White, is the 1986–87 season premiere of *Dallas* in which the character Bobby Ewing—who had been hit by a car in the final episode of the 1984–85 season and lay dead and buried in 1985–86—returns through an incredible rewriting of diegetic history.²⁶ The explanation tested even viewers accustomed to soap operas’ ability to resurrect dead figures. In the new diegetic “reality,” Bobby’s accident and death did not really happen—the fatal episode, with all the other episodes in the 1985–86 season, was merely Pam Ewing’s bad dream. Here the demands of demographics (Bobby was an extremely popular character) overruled any sense of rational history, and the *Dallas* spectator, not to mention the viewer of the *Dallas* spin-off *Knots Landing*, is left with some troubling but unanswered questions: Did Pam dream *all* of the events, involving all of the characters, in 1985–86? Why haven’t the characters in *Knots Landing* (who mourned Bobby in 1985 but haven’t yet realized their mistake) awakened from Pam’s dream? Whose dream is this anyhow? If anything, it is the dream of postmodern culture in which consumer desires can alter history while providing present pleasures. In fact, “Pam’s dream” has been used to sell programs other than just *Dallas*—rival series *Dynasty* and *The Colbys* ran ads in *TV Guide* and other magazines in the fall of 1986 stating, “This is no dream” and “What we dream, they live,” in an attempt to play off the viewer’s knowledge of events on *Dallas*.

V. Consumer Closeness and Constructions of Femininity

History and memory are allowed to wander as emotion provides the only stake, a situation giving free rein to consumer fantasies. With the elision of history comes the promotion of the image (of both the commodity and the self) which is now personal and self-referential. Space flattens out and



TV Guide (Jan. 14, 1987), pp. 17–18

history dissipates, making it difficult to ground any unified position. It is then no surprise that melodrama, television and postmodernism, which all share this particular construction of flattened space and weightless time, have been linked to the dissolution of a stable site of mastery, the ideal of masculinity. They are thus aligned with the threat of the feminine, the gender assigned to consumer passions.

The melodrama, for example, seems to disallow the achievement of a masculine ideal even as it reflects the lack of such mastery—not only is melodrama motivated by the anxiety of a decentered existence (as Brooks argues), but it lacks powerful protagonists with whom to identify, thus maintaining the spectator in a powerless position. As film theorists have noted, there is a split in the American cinema between those forms considered “feminine” in which a passive heroine or impotent hero suffers (the melodrama) and those deemed “masculine” (by both critics and audiences) which feature an active hero immune to suffering (typified by the western).²⁷ Placed on the side of femininity since its claustrophobic and implosive world precludes the direct action of a masterful ego, melodrama has been noted for its exploration of feminine subjectivity and its appeal to a female audience.

Yet like Cary in *All that Heaven Allows*, the female viewer thus addressed can become only a “spectacle of the impotent spectator.”²⁸ While the

spectator may have greater knowledge than any of the characters, she is still unable to determine the course of the narrative and is thus helpless. With no controlling protagonist to provide her with a lead, the spectator is at the mercy of the story and must simply wait (as is so common for the characters) for time to unfold. According to Steve Neale, it is this powerlessness that drives melodrama's viewers to tears—we cry from the lack of coincidence dramatized on the screen, a lack we are powerless to change: the gap between our knowledge and that of the characters, between what should happen and what actually does, between the “rightness” of a union and its delay. Invoked in these gaps are deep-rooted fantasies of fusion, of a perfect coincidence of both communication and desire—yearnings related to the nostalgic fantasy of union with the mother, the wish for maternal plenitude.²⁹

By engaging such wishes, melodrama is able to *move* the spectator, to manipulate emotions to a degree that seems to many critics to go beyond aesthetic or rational justification. This assessment is conveyed even in the labels commonly applied to melodrama: “weepies” and “tearjerkers”—terms that imply the strength of the genre (powerful enough to shake emotion out of the viewer) even as they discredit the presumed female spectator. This spectator, overinvolved and displaying an excess of feeling, is figured as powerless to attain any distance from the sentimental fantasies portrayed. In the popular imagination then, the woman's relationship to the screen is an overly close one—she is so bound to the drama, so susceptible to the image, that it can even evoke a physical reaction in her tearful response.³⁰ What the female spectator lacks is the distance necessary for “proper” viewing and judgment. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, while the cinema appears to offer a plenitude of sensory experience, it necessarily depends upon an absence and the irreducible distance between viewer and object. Yet the cultural place assigned to women as viewers acts against the maintenance of such distance:

A distance from the image is less negotiable for the female spectator than for the male because the woman is so forcefully linked with the iconic and spectacle or, in Mulvey's terms, “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Voyeurism, the desire most fully exploited by the classical cinema, is the property of the masculine spectator. Fetishism—the ability to balance knowledge and belief and hence to maintain a distance from the lure of the image—is also inaccessible to the woman, who has no need of the fetish as a defense against a castration which has always already taken place. Female spectatorship, because it is conceived of temporally as immediacy . . . and spatially as proximity . . . can only be understood as the confounding of desire.³¹

For the female spectator, there is an overpresence of the image—she is supposed to *be* the image—and her desire thus seems to be trapped within

144 the confines of narcissism (as she becomes the object of desire) or masochism (as she overidentifies with the passive character). Unlike the man, whose voyeuristic and fetishistic distance allows him to master the image and whose cinematic counterparts control its flow through time, the female spectator is cast as too close to the image to achieve such mastery, and melodrama, the genre most often addressing a female audience, exploits this closeness through its tearful fantasies of (maternal) union.

The image of the overinvolved female spectator not only occurs in the popular imagination, but can likewise be found in theoretical accounts of feminine desire—there is a convergence, in other words, between the popular and the critical discourses on femininity. Tropes of proximity and overpresence have been used by feminist and psychoanalytic theorists to explore basic constructions of feminine subjectivity and sexuality, particularly in relation to the maternal origin and object of desire. Just as film theory posits the female spectator as “too close” to the cinematic image to adequately command the text, psychoanalytic theory represents women as too close to the maternal and their own bodies to claim the gap required for mastery of signification and desire that is granted men by the phallic signifier (representing the possibility of loss). Within this discursive field (and aligned with popular representations of femininity), women are seen as suffering the lack of a firm subject/object dichotomy. Michèle Montrelay, for example, describes femininity as “one chaotic intimacy . . . too present, too immediate—one continuous expanse of proximity or unbearable plenitude. What [is] lacking [is] a lack, an empty ‘space’ somewhere.”³² Similarly, Luce Irigaray describes female subjectivity as that which resists a separation of isolated moments and locations, thereby allowing woman a self-caressing eroticism in which she can touch herself without mediation. Again the notion of an overpresence that disallows mastery over discourse and the object is suggested (even though Irigaray offers her constructions in resistance to traditional psychoanalytic theories of femininity): “Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible.”³³ In the discourses of psychoanalysis and feminism, woman is figured as too close to the object to become a full subject.

While feminist theorists may posit such nearness as a subversive alternative to the male model, proximity is also bound to consumer desires. The same closeness that ruptures the boundary between subject and object, allowing women a multiplicity of identifications and a self-embracing eroticism, also makes the female subject susceptible to the lure of consumerism which plays on her fluctuating position and the narcissism it implies. It is the focus on self-image that invites the consumer to attend to the images of advertised products, and the woman, whose role is to purchase in order

to enhance her own status as valued item, becomes the prototypical consumer—the same overpresence that ties her to the image allows her to be situated as both the subject and the object of consumerism at once. As Mary Ann Doane writes, “the increasing appeal in the twentieth century to the woman’s role as perfect consumer (of commodities as well as images) is indissociable from her positioning *as* a commodity and results in the blurring of the subject/object dichotomy. . . .”³⁴ The proximity that defines femininity in psychoanalytic discourse then corresponds with women’s social position under capitalism—women are assumed to be the perfect consumers, devouring objects, images, and narratives just as they have been said to “devour” their loved ones.

Yet the discursive link forged between consumerism and femininity, both related to an overidentification with the image or commodity object, affects the whole of Western culture. Not only are women presumed to be the best of consumers, but all consumers are figured as feminized—a situation yielding tension in a culture desperately trying to shore up traditional distinctions even as its simulations continue to destabilize such attempts. As the distance between subject and object diminishes in the weightless space of postmodern culture, the threat of feminization as well as an all-encompassing consumerism hangs over all subjects. This relationship between the hyperreality of the simulacrum and consumer overpresence is prefigured in the theory of Walter Benjamin who, in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” explores the rise of a society geared toward mass reproduction, a condition fully realized by our own society of simulation. In this mass-mediated world, the aesthetic object, just like the commodity, loses its unique presence—what Benjamin calls the “aura”—and thus its claim to autonomous existence, historical testimony, and traditional value.³⁵ The aura is defined as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,” and its destruction is linked to a particular historical consciousness, a consumer subjectivity that resonates with femininity:

Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.³⁶

Here then, the closeness and empathy traditionally associated with femininity is tied to the liquidation of the referent found in postmodern culture and key to consumer consciousness.

With the media now indissociable from consumerism, the discursive equation established between consumer and feminine subjectivity produces

curious tendencies in the way media culture is represented. Symptomatic of this discursive conflation of femininity and consumerism is the way in which both postmodernism, the cultural dominant of consumer capitalism, and television, so central to consumer culture, are themselves often figured as feminine. Just as melodrama is seen to collapse distance, particularly as it appeals to the female spectator, tropes of proximity have also emerged in discussions of television viewing and postmodern culture in general, implying that TV places all viewers in a position traditionally associated with women. Building on this link, for example, TV theorist Beverle Houston argues that television situates all spectators as feminine.³⁷ Yet even critics not explicitly making this claim often allow gendered imagery to creep into their analyses, thereby also figuring TV as somehow “feminized.”³⁸ Comparing television to film, for instance, John Ellis argues that while cinematic narration constructs a scenario of voyeurism, centering the look on the female body and granting the spectator power over the image, TV offers itself as an immediate presence, lacking the “present absence” central to cinema’s voyeuristic regime. Rather than the cinematic gaze, TV involves what Ellis calls “the glance,” a domestic, distracted, and powerless look. The TV viewer then delegates his or her look to television itself, forging a sense of intimacy and co-presence as events are shared rather than witnessed.³⁹ Television’s inclusive space spills over to media culture as a whole, involving all of us in an implosive sphere of consumer overpresence. As the media now create what count as “real events,” we can no longer fully separate the image from our own position of viewing. Describing this hyperreality in which television functions as almost our genetic code, Baudrillard writes:

We must imagine TV on the DNA model, as an effect in which the opposing poles of determination vanish according to a nuclear contraction or retraction of the old polar schema which has always maintained a minimal distance between a cause and an effect, between the subject and an object: precisely, the meaning gap, the discrepancy, the difference. . . .⁴⁰

The operations of postmodern culture—with TV as its exemplary mode—thus seem generally to involve the overpresence and subject/object confusion that have been linked to consumerism and “feminine” cultural forms. Dissolving classical reason, decentering identity, and abolishing the distance between subject and object, active and passive, that upholds the masculine gaze and the primacy of the male subject, postmodern culture threatens to draw all viewer-consumers into the vacuum of mass culture—an irrational and diffuse space coded as feminine.⁴¹

The “threat of feminization” lurking over all American culture, now

fully implicated in consumerism, poses serious problems for a culture desperately trying to retrieve and maintain its traditional distinctions. Postmodern culture decenters oppositions even as it attempts to resuscitate them (feminization “infects” everyone just as renewed efforts to define sexual difference are launched across the political spectrum) and in this swirling movement, strains and contradictions emerge in both media criticism and media texts. Such stress must then be managed, and the melodramatic mode is once again employed to ease these tensions. Melodrama is then a privileged forum for contemporary television, promising the certainty of clearly marked conflict and legible meaning even as it plays on the closeness associated with a feminine spectator-consumer. Melodrama allows us both closeness and certainty through its appeal to a pre-linguistic system of gesture and tableaux that aims beyond language to immediate understanding.⁴² In its attempt to render meaning visible and recapture the ineffable, melodrama emphasizes gestures, postures, frozen moments and expressions. Television strengthens these conventions as it clearly directs attention to the revelations of facial expression, providing close-ups that disclose “what before . . . only a lover or a mother ever saw.”⁴³ TV melodrama, like its precursors in the theater and cinema, thus tends to deny the complex processes of signification and to collapse representation onto the real, assuring its audience of firm stakes of meaning.

This assurance, however, comes with a price. Melodrama has historically been associated with female audiences who are figured in popular and critical discourses as unsophisticated viewers. “For there is a certain naïveté assigned to women in relation to systems of signification—a tendency to deny the processes of representation, to collapse the opposition between the sign (the image) and the real.”⁴⁴ Yet the attractions of the melodramatic mode need not be judged so negatively, and the security it provides today appeals to men as well as women. Melodrama helps us place ourselves in a confusing world—its insistence on the validity of moral or experiential truths and its faith in the reality of the stakes creates a space from which to act. The “naïveté” associated with a feminized spectator may in fact reflect melodrama’s suspicion of linguistic and cultural codes, a suspicion that is now well-founded in today’s flood of mobile signs and codes. While melodrama—and its female viewers—have been seen as suspect, there is something offered in this stance. Melodrama’s promise of universally legible meaning seems to be particularly compelling in the postmodern era, experienced by many as desperately in need of some kind of grounding. It is the panic provoked by this sense of weightlessness that adds to the mode’s present appeal—a panic which may serve the political right as much as it does consumer capital.

Melodrama is thus an ideal form for postmodern culture and for television—a form which arises from a fragmented network of space and time yet still seems to offer a sense of wholeness, reality, and living history. Raising conflict to the level of fundamental ethical imperatives, melodrama provides a world into which we can fully immerse ourselves and evokes emotions with which we can immediately identify. In the struggles it presents, there is no doubt that real forces are at stake. As Ien Ang explains in connection to the prime-time melodrama *Dallas*:

The melodramatic imagination is therefore the expression of a refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with existence here and now. . . . In a life in which every immanent meaning is constantly questioned and in which traditions no longer have a firm hold, a need exists for reassurance that life can in fact have meaning and therefore life is worth the trouble, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.⁴⁵

While the banality and meaninglessness of everyday life might historically be most pronounced for women (given the material conditions of their labor in the home and workplace), the frustration provoked by a shallow ungrounded existence is one that seems quite common today. Lacking a sense of tradition, place, and meaning in their own lives, many Americans turn to the media to find such values.

Making up for our want of these certainties is TV melodrama which plays on and profits from our shifting reality. But also profiting from this lack of stable ground are neo-conservative politics and multinational capitalism, both of which have been linked to postmodern culture. Simply because melodrama has been seen as emblematic of feminine subjectivity is no reason for contemporary feminists uncritically to applaud its rise on American television. We are reminded by Thomas Elsaesser of the “radical ambiguity attached to the melodrama” which may “function either subversively or as escapism—categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context.”⁴⁶ It is often the status of the “happy ending” which determines melodrama’s political meaning—whether the ending convincingly solves all the problems and closes the issue, or on the other hand, whether conflicts remain a bit open, leaving the viewer to consider their import. This ambiguity is even more apparent in regard to television melodramas—lacking the “happy ending,” in fact never really ending at all, TV melodramas may not have the ability to draw attention to unresolved contradictions and excess, the key to film melodramas’ subversive potential.⁴⁷ While melodrama has at times functioned as a politically progressive form, it is not clear that TV melodrama allows for this possibility.

Yet it is also not clear that TV melodrama has precluded this potential. Peter Brooks remarks that melodrama has been such an enduringly popular form because it is both “frightening and enlivening” as it exists on the “brink of the abyss,” allowing us the comfort of belief in the importance of our lives as well as the challenge this entails. As such, it may give a false sense of strength, but it also “works to steel man for resistance, it keeps him going in the face of threat.”⁴⁸ As a feminist concerned with the historical connections between women, melodrama, and consumerism, I hope it may work to steel women for resistance too. Film melodrama has been able to call attention to the contradictions in our class and gender system through its use of formal conventions which stand as ironic commentaries on otherwise conventional narratives. By reading TV melodramas against the grain and providing our own ironic commentaries, feminist criticisms may continue to bring out the contradictions of the TV age so that these issues do not get lost in the flow of media images. Such work might then make more apparent the sites of stress and contradiction in postmodern culture, its construction and deconstruction of the terms of gender and consumption, so that the boundaries thus drawn may be stretched in new directions. To define these directions, we too may turn to the melodramatic mode. But by recognizing the provisionality of these heightened dramas even as we play them out, we open up the space for both pleasure and resistance, activating melodrama’s contradictions in our struggle for new meanings.

NOTES

1. Laura Mulvey, “Melodrama In and Out of the Home,” *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), p. 82.
2. Mulvey, p. 82.
3. For a discussion of postmodernism, nostalgia, and tradition, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Huyssen mentions the relationship of postmodernism to the “emergence of various forms of ‘otherness,’” including feminism, which are perceived as a threat to cultural tradition and so provoke nostalgic reactions, see pp. 199 and 219–220. Also raising this issue is E. Ann Kaplan who suggests that certain critics have been drawn to postmodernism because “it seems to render feminism obsolete” precisely when women have begun to win demands in this system. E. Ann Kaplan, “Television/Feminism/Postmodernism,” paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Montreal, May 21, 1987.

4. For a discussion of this issue, see, for example, Sandy Flitterman, "Thighs and Whiskers: the Fascination of *Magnum, p.i.*," *Screen* 26:2 (March-April 1985), pp. 42–58 and Jeremy Butler, "Miami Vice: The Legacy of Film Noir," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13:3 (Fall 1985), pp. 127–138.
5. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 203–204.
6. For analyses of the news, see, among others, Margaret Morse, "The Television News Personality and Credibility: Reflections on the News in Transition," *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 55–79; Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), pp. 23–43; and Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," *Regarding Television*, pp. 12–22. All of these articles indicate the ways in which news shows promote a sense of familial unity—a news "family," which extends to the viewer, linked together by the anchor's glances and a sense of shared space and time.
7. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984), p. 53.
8. On the relationship between melodrama and periods of ideological crisis, see Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 (1972), particularly p. 3. For an account of postmodernism as crisis-ridden see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . Or the End of the Social and Other Essays* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
9. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.
10. David Thorburn, "Television Melodrama," *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 628. For an elaboration of this argument, see pp. 630–631 and 638–641.
11. For these arguments, see Thorburn, pp. 631–634, 638.
12. On the production of the real see Baudrillard, *Simulations*, particularly pp. 13, 23–25, 71. For his discussion of capitalism, see pp. 43–44.
13. Brooks, pp. 200–201.
14. Brooks, particularly pp. 15–18.
15. Brooks, p. 16.
16. On the distinction between the cinema star and the TV personality, see John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 91–108.

17. T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 4. Also providing a cogent account of therapeutic discourse in American television is Mimi White who argues that while "therapeutic and confessional modes of discourse have frequently been affiliated with female audiences, especially in forms of melodrama and 'woman's fiction,' . . . they figure as pervasive influences on prime time television in general." I would argue that this is in part due to the fact that melodrama has engulfed much of television's discourse. Mimi White, "Mediating Relations: Therapeutic Discourse in American Prime Time Series," paper presented at the 2nd International Television Studies Conference, London, July 1986, p. 31.
18. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1881–1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
19. Elsaesser, pp. 2, 13.
20. Jameson, pp. 82–83.
21. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 132, 127.
22. Jameson, pp. 64, 65.
23. Mimi White has provided a compelling account of TV's invocation of history in "Television: A Narrative Ahistory," paper presented at the Television and History Symposium, National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, March 1987.
24. Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *College English* 38:8 (April 1977), p. 783. See also Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 75.
25. Rosalind Coward, "Come Back Miss Ellie: On Character and Narrative in Soap Operas," *Critical Quarterly* 28:1–2 (Spring-Summer 1986), p. 172. In this article, Coward deals with the phenomena of actor substitution in the roles of continuing characters, a situation producing many unusual memory effects. Similarly, adding actors who are well-known for earlier roles may also play with TV history and viewer memory in order to promote further viewing and consumption. Note, for example, the recent *TV Guide* ads featuring Genie Francis, famous for her role as Laura on *General Hospital*: "What do you do when you've had it with doctors in white, white hospital walls, and a white wedding to end all weddings? . . . You switch to *Days of Our Lives*." Here the ads play with the viewer's memory of Francis' previous role in order to promote present viewing.
26. White, "Television: A Narrative Ahistory."

27. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," *Screen* 18:2 (Summer 1977), p. 115.
28. Griselda Pollock, "Report on the Weekend School," *Screen* 18:2 (Summer 1977), p. 111. Also on the disempowerment of the female spectator due to this lack of a single controlling protagonist, see Tania Modleski's chapter "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas" in *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982), particularly pp. 91–92.
29. Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* 27:6 (November-December 1986), pp. 11, 17, 19.
30. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), particularly the chapter "The Desire to Desire," and Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade—Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23:3–4 (September-October 1982), pp. 74–88.
31. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 12–13.
32. Michèle Montrelay, "Inquiry Into Femininity," *m/f* 1 (1978), pp. 88, 91.
33. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 31.
34. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 13.
35. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 220–221.
36. Benjamin, pp. 222–223.
37. Beverle Houston, "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9:3 (Summer 1984), pp. 183–195.
38. Accounts that figure television as somehow "feminine" include: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (New York: Methuen, 1978); and Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Analyses of gendered rhetoric in TV studies are provided by Patrice Petro, "Mass Culture and the Feminine: The 'Place' of Television in Film Studies," *Cinema Journal* 25:3 (Spring 1986), pp. 5–21, and Lynne Joyrich, "Good Reception? Gender Inscription in American Television," paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Montreal, May 21, 1987.
39. Ellis, pp. 131–132, 137–139, 141–143.
40. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 56.

41. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, particularly pp. 30–31 and 49–58, and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, particularly pp. 9 and 30–33. For an analysis of the historical alignment of mass culture and femininity, see Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” *After the Great Divide*; and Tania Modleski, “Femininity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture,” *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, which includes a reading of Baudrillard’s use of feminine imagery.
42. Peter Brooks discusses the importance of gesture and tableaux for the melodrama in terms of a crisis in meaning in which language is inadequate, fueling the desire for a primal and immediate expression which melodrama’s visual composition seems to provide. See Brooks, pp. 66–67. While TV melodrama similarly employs facial expression, gesture and tableaux to crystallize meaning, there is nonetheless a complexity of dialogue, particularly in the soap opera, which is polyvalent. The soap opera then seems to exist in a certain tension, exhibiting both the urge to express the essence of experience through direct expression (the summarizing close-ups held at the end of every scene) and the recognition that meaning is often veiled or ambiguous (when characters refuse to say all, say more than they intend, or mask their “true” feelings as they play with the network of meaning and its failures).
43. Porter, p. 786.
44. Doane, pp. 2, 1.
45. Ang, pp. 79–80.
46. Elsaesser, p. 4.
47. For a discussion of the difference between television and film in terms of the status of “the ending,” a summary of the debate regarding melodrama’s subversive force, and an analysis of the political significance of television melodrama, see Jane Feuer, “Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today,” *Screen* 25:1 (January-February 1984), pp. 4–16.
48. Brooks, pp. 205–206.