

From Dysfunctional Families to
Productive Pathologies:
Melodrama Trauma
Mind-Games¹

In 1972, when I published “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” in the 4th issue of the film magazine *Monogram* that I edited as a graduate student at the University of Sussex in England, I had no idea – nor the intention – of creating a new filmic genre: that of melodrama. In fact, the essay was the second of three extended articles devoted to Hollywood classical and post-classical cinema between 1971 and 1975. I was trying to define and defend Hollywood, at a time when most writing about the American cinema was extremely critical and hostile, mainly because of the Vietnam War and what was seen as America’s imperialist war against liberation movements in Latin America and East Asia.

Since then, almost everyone writing about melodrama has noted parallels between my essay of 1972 and Peter Brooks’ book *The Melodramatic Imagination* of 1975. The parallels were a coincidence, since I had not heard of Peter Brooks, and it is unlikely that this professor of French Literature teaching at Yale would have come across my essay, published in a relatively obscure film journal in Britain. So: was melodrama something ‘in the air’? Yes, probably, insofar as my essay was taken up by feminists, such as Laura Mulvey, Christine

Gledhill, Barbara Klinger and many others who were looking for a historical, as well as an ideological entry-point, in order to both critique mainstream Hollywood picture-making while rescuing for a distinct feminist agenda some of their favorite films, especially those featuring strong women characters, such as *Stella Dallas*, *Mildred Pierce*, *All that Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life*. But there was also a more direct link to Peter Brooks' literary studio of 19th century melodrama. My academic background is in Comparative Literature, and in particular, French and English literature of the Romantic period and the 19th century. In 1972 I had just finished my PhD, which was on Literature and Historiography, that is, on the narrative, theatrical and melodramatic tropes in the Histories of French Revolution written by Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle: in other words, I was examining more or less the same constellation that Brooks did, in his chapters on Balzac and Dickens, or indeed as Hayden White did, in his book *Metahistory* of 1973, which –like myself– examined “the deep structure of the historical imagination of Nineteenth century Europe”.

All this is ancient history, and I have not been following the transformations of melodrama as a distinct film genre in the transnational and global context, except that in the 1980s, I supervised one of my most brilliant graduate students for his PhD – one Ravi Vasudevan, who wrote on Indian Melodrama, and to whom I owe my present visit to India. But also around the same time – the mid 1970s – I began writing about the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who used the strategies and resources of Douglas Sirk's melodrama more explicitly and perhaps more successfully than any other filmmaker since. Films like *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, or *Fear Eats the Soul* try to reinvent Hollywood melodrama from the 1940s and 50s for another generation. He created strong women characters, often played by Hanna Schygulla, and devised conflicts that depended on discrimination based on race, age or sexuality. Fassbinder in turn inspired the American independent director Todd Haynes to remake Fassbinder's remake of Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows*, which is called *Far from Heaven*. There are thus multi-coloured threads of Revolutionary France, German Romanticism, the bourgeois novel and historiography, Hollywood's émigré directors, French New Wave cinephilia, New German Cinema and Hollywood Independent Cinema running through this tapestry of genre motifs, modes or representation, social issues and political aspirations we summon up when we speak of melodrama. But across the different facets also runs a common philosophical debate about the mind and the body, affect and reason.

Affect and emotion: Elements of a debate

Western Enlightenment philosophy (and common sense) usually makes a clear distinction between a (cool) head and a (warm) heart, between reason and emotion, the rational-logical and the irrational-associative. The Romantic poets often challenged this position, whether one thinks of the Schlegel Brothers and Novalis, Mme de Stael and Chateaubriand, or Wordsworth and Coleridge. The division was also attacked by Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom reason and morality were invariably the rationalisation of the 'will to power' and the civilized cover for the innate egoism of any living organism. Psychoanalysis, too, does not recognize a sharp distinction between the conscious mind and its affective or libidinal drives. More recently, the relation between sense-perception, the brain and the body has come under scrutiny also by the cognitive sciences, many of whose practitioners now tend to look at *affect* and *emotion* as cognitive factors, governing most of our choices and regulating even our goal-oriented, so-called 'rational-agent' behaviour. They tend to speak of the 'embodied mind' rather than of the Cartesian 'mind-body split'.

Such dialectical or holistic positions, in contrast to the dualist one, is not exactly alien to the study of cinema, where scholars have also been guided by the notion that watching films or moving images is a particularly affective - and affecting - experience, psychically charged, somatic and tensely-intensely emotional. The most



Douglas Sirk, *All That Heaven Allows*



Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Fear Eats the Soul*



Todd Hayne, *Far From Heaven*

consistent body of theory to have investigated the psychic component in film was psycho-semiotics, the combination of psychoanalysis and structuralism. But psychoanalysis does not deal with emotions; it concerns itself with *drives* and *desire*: libido and the death-drive, *eros* and *thanatos*. It has much to say about psychic ambivalence, but relatively little about the emotions that accompany these ambivalences.

I am not proposing to unroll the entire discussion of the relevance of affect and emotion, suffering and self-righteousness, shame and embarrassment, pathos and ethos to the film experience. This is now a field of inquiry right across the discipline and beyond. Instead, I want to chart the transformation of the melodramatic world view, and how it intersects with politics on the one hand, but also with personal and national trauma, as well as with a more general dis-orientation and re-orientation of identity, agency and the body. What is striking is the way a particular form of theatrical spectacle first migrated into literature and the novel, from there to the cinema, and across the cinema began to permeate both popular media and populist politics. Notably thanks to television, melodrama gives expression to a special kind of testimony, but also to a special form of agency, which paradoxically, marks both the absence of the modern and signifies a place for contemporary subjectivities. Elsewhere I argue that its main subject-effect, namely victimhood, is in fact an empty place, a placeholder, or a shifter, i.e. a linguistic marker that floats and therefore can be claimed by everyone. Yet this melodramatic conception of the victim has in many ways become central to our sense of being in the world, indeed of us existing and ‘mattering’ to the world, insofar as melodrama – both historically and in its relation to the subject – is bound up with democracy, with ideals of social equality, political representation, and ultimate justice. This makes melodrama political and topical, because it performs the vanishing divide between private and public, and to a lesser extent, between the universal and the particular. It is a form of agency or empowerment that manifests itself negatively, as suffering, or more generally, as ‘performed failure’.

I have dealt elsewhere with the fact that melodrama also implies specific temporalities, being a prime example of ‘out of sync’ time: the time of the ‘too late’, but also – in relation to justice – of the ‘too soon’.² It thereby challenges notions of history as an (ordered, cogent) sequence of cause and effects: melodrama as a mode of feeling and a ‘politics of the personal’ has become, since the latter half of the 20th century, symptomatic of a crisis in historical agency, of linear temporality and the body as locus of that agency. This makes

melodrama and trauma the recto and verso of each other, as possibly the most symptomatic – and contradictory – manifestations of the private self in the public sphere.

Hollywood melodrama as successfully performed failure

Before arguing this in more detail, I need to briefly recapitulate the debate around Hollywood melodrama, as a style, genre and mode. For about thirty years, from the early 1970s to around 2000, it was melodrama as a typically American filmic genre, combining a poetics of (stylistic and emotional) excess with a politics of gender, which filled the gap in the debate over affect in the cinema, giving ‘emotional reasoning’ a distinct historical rhetoric, as well as situating it in the public realm, not omitting its role in urbanising the masses and delivering ‘justice’ in the courtroom.³ But however central the role of melodrama in film studies – as well as in cultural studies – during this period, the term came to be used in several distinct contexts:

It designates a sub-genre of women’s picture (what I termed ‘family melodrama’ with reference to Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli), or of the ‘maternal melodrama’ like *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945), typical for the 1940s and 1950s and thus socio-sexually determined: it gives body and voice to a critique of the American post-war family; of gender and generational conflict; of the disenfranchised, subordinate position of women after having been active and professionalized during the war; of gays, blacks and other minorities since the 1960s.

It is a general, initially literary genre that has existed since the 19th century stage melodrama, originating in the wake of the French Revolution, and brought to a first peak in the cinema thanks to D.W. Griffith’s films from the early 1920s, then merging with the woman’s film of the 1930s, as well as the gothic paranoia film of the early 1940s, before re-emerging after the war, and subsequently migrating to television, in genres such as soap opera, courtroom drama, and finally, talk shows and ‘reality television’.

It is an attribute that in Hollywood industry discourse applies across the genres (action melodrama, serial melodrama, Western melodrama: in short, any film that features the family unit, dramatizes a couple relationship, and contains stark choices, contrasting conflict and a

Manichean world picture), as claimed and argued by Steve Neale, and more recently, by Ben Singer.⁴

It is a 'mode', in the rhetorical sense (it typically uses such figures of excess as hyperbole, oxymoron, metaphor). Cultural theorists have spoken of the melodramatic imagination (Peter Brooks),⁵ and even of a melodramatic worldview, and what might it mean to talk about the 'melodramatic style' in public life and politics (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama).⁶

In these distinct but overlapping contexts, melodrama – literally, the combination of music and drama – has come to stand for drama identified by a number of features:

Initially used in a *pejorative* sense, the adjective 'melodramatic' names a special type of narrative structure and its regime of verisimilitude and lack of plausibility. As a set of negative connotations, *melodramatic* therefore signifies a work of fiction riddled with improbabilities in its plot and coincidences in its story turns, has frequent and obvious dramatic ironies, emphasizes moments of pathos and bathos, is sentimental and nostalgic in its emotional register, calculating and even cynical in its effects, uses a *deus ex machina*, such as a chance encounter, a last minute rescue, or the intervention of an external agent, in order to produce a happy ending or to bring matters to some sort of closure.

As a noun, melodrama implies a stark (and often exaggerated) *contrast between good and evil*, virtue and vice, innocence and corruption. For Peter Brooks, stage melodrama of the 19th century embodied a Manichean worldview of either/or, black or white: no nuances, no shades of grey, no both/and.

As an indication of a moral stance, or a mode of experience, melodrama suggests that the world can be viewed and acted upon through an *affective response*, which gives rise to a *public moral emotion*, such as *righteousness*, as well as its opposite, *shame*. As a form of subjectivity, melodrama can imply an experience of the self that is re-active and *performative*, as opposed to being pro-active and goal-directed. This is important when it comes to deciding whether the melodramatic mode constitutes the exception to classical Hollywood narrative (with its goal-oriented, action-driven protagonists) or the 'norm' of American cinema (in that melodrama is its traditional way of both posing and resolving moral dilemmas or social conflicts).

In light of the latter, melodrama has been regarded as a narrative whose aim it is to generate moral legibility for *the recognition of virtue*, i.e. the virtuous need to be tested through trial and tribulation, sometimes even undergoing

abjection, shaming or self-abasement. The central characters see themselves (and are seen by the spectator) as victims, who generally do not ‘learn’ from their misfortune, even if they could. They are *serial sufferers* and *paragons of rectitude*. As a consequence, melodramatic narratives are generally told from the point of view of *the victim*, implying a special kind of pathos that arises from the positive valorisation of helplessness or of being wronged. Besides women, it is children that often feature as chief protagonists, since they, too, naturally provide a perspective of innocence and helplessness.

A film like *Slumdog Millionaire* uses many of the standard motifs of melodrama: orphaned children, a virtuous brother and a criminal brother, a powerful villain (or gang of villains), a long lost love, mistaken identities, blindness and second sight, etc., etc. – but it does so, mostly by way of recognizable clichés, in order to tell a different kind of story. But a hugely popular adolescent adventure story like the Harry Potter series of both novels and films also relies on the stock dramatic situations of melodrama. To quote a recent writer: “Melodrama is the dominant art form of modern, industrialized democracies. In any given year since the cinema was invented, most of the top-grossing films are melodramas, continuing themes and expectations established on the 19th-century stage, especially characters identified around binary moral struggle (good versus evil, innocence versus corruption, dignity versus exploitation). Other characteristics of melodrama include set-piece spectacle (explosions and train wrecks), thrilling narrative episodes (chase sequences and last minute rescues), and (super-)heroes who are victimized and are misunderstood (Rambo, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Spiderman). The conclusion of melodrama usually involves both stopping the villain and clarifying the victim-hero’s status—he was really right, or she was really virtuous, all along!”⁷

Thus, unlike the heroes of tragedy, those of melodrama do not have a flaw (*harmartia*), but like those of tragedy, the moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*) usually arrives *too late*. Because of these comparisons, and because the excessive feelings displayed can have an unintentionally comic effect, melodrama is sometimes regarded as *failed tragedy*, i.e. as a mode that wants to be genuinely tragic, but that rigs its conflicts and engineers its solutions in such a way that it does not attain the metaphysical or cosmic dimensions of tragic conflicts, as in *Oedipus Rex* or *Antigone* – two of the crucial tragedies of the Western canon written by the Greek dramatist Sophocles. But I want to turn this negative judgment – melodrama as failed tragedy – on its head, and claim that melodrama is the only authentic form of tragedy that a secular age (or a world of immanence that knows no transcendence) can have, so that its purported

'failure' is actually a "successfully performed failure" – insofar as melodrama performs an absence (of equality, of justice, of the pursuit of happiness) and that it is in its witness to failure that it preserves both the tragic view of life and the promise of some eventual justice. Its status as failed tragedy is melodrama's ultimate historical truth – perhaps the truth even for our age, but certainly for the 20th century's dominant art form, namely the cinema.

Guilt management and victimhood

From this follows my second reversal of the standard view: Melodrama is about victimhood, but I would argue, it is also about the power of the victim, about the paradoxically active role of suffering, and about the desirability of calling oneself a victim. This implies a move from the cinema to the broader field of television, of daytime soap operas, but also talk shows, and even beyond that, into the realm of politics and public life, where melodramatic modes of expression and especially the category of the victim have become preferred ways of describing oneself.

In other words, what strikes me as significant about the legacy of melodrama today, is the extent to which "victimhood" has become a sort of universal and universalizing category in Western societies, and what this could be symptomatic of: why do we like to think of ourselves as victims? My hypothesis is that it has to do with a number of political changes in modern democracies that have affected the social contract, our relation to governments, and our sense of belonging to a larger symbolic unit, such as the nation. The most important among these changes is probably the shift from the competing ideologies of the Cold War (Marxism/Communism versus Liberalism/Capitalism) to competing post-Enlightenment-ideologies, such as universal human rights versus 'multi-cultural diversity', or 'humanitarian interventions' versus 'sovereignty' and 'religious self-determination'. In Europe especially, there has been a shift from 'politics' as party politics and collective action, to politics as crisis management and security operations, as well as from an understanding of 'ethics' as 'living the good, i.e. justified life', to 'ethics' as 'living in the shadow of death and disaster'. Under these conditions, victim status constitutes part of a very contemporary condition. It is only as victim - of discrimination, of harassment, of domestic violence– that you have the power and public credibility to claim rights and entitlements: rights which used to be the result of political struggles and organized action, but are now more a matter of self-presentation in the media, and especially television. Other forms of militant victimhood reflect the changing role of women in modern societies,

or the relative scarcity of children in the developed world, and a corresponding sense of their vulnerability, their preciousness and precariousness.

- *Righteousness*: the combination of melodrama and righteousness used to be a complex process of gaining recognition and attaining a voice through suffering made visible and public. In the 19th century, the virtuous were considered victims because evil and the wicked ruled the world. But given the rather different faces of wickedness as well as the forces of evil and disaster in the late 20th and 21st century – for instance, the feeling that these forces are disembodied, invisible, systemic and endemic, rather than personified in a single evil individual or in a localizable power-structure, the whole nature of the equation between victimhood and virtuousness changes, and something of a slippage has occurred between righteousness and rights, between suffering and virtue.

Today, victimhood is, more than ever, a way of making one's voice heard, in a public sphere that does not recognize all that many legitimate speaking positions. For instance, if we take as an example of the public sphere the media sphere of television, there are really only three roles that are legitimately occupied by a member of the public: first, that of the expert or pundit (say in talk shows, or as commentator on political questions or public affairs), second, that of the talent or idol (in talent contests, celebrity shows, reality television), and thirdly, that of the victim or survivor (of a disaster, a civil war, a divorce, a new piece of legislation or any other event that might befall a person). In the ensuing division of labour, the victim has assigned not only a certain circumscribed role (for instance, to produce affect and emotion, and to refrain from having an opinion or promote an argument), but also a certain power, namely that of filling the slot of 'authenticity', righteousness and subjective truth – but only on condition of consenting to being a victim. In this sense, the voice and suffering of the victim is as much 'harvested' by television as the scandal of the celebrity or the ambitions of the wannabe. It is the combination of victimhood and power, negative agency, rights and entitlements, which makes melodrama both topical and modern, but also morally volatile and politically precarious. Victimhood, in short, becomes a strong subject position, when narratives of the self no longer make sense as either retrospective biographies or prospective life-projects. Melodrama may be the name for some of the forms that the narratives of the self take under such pressure of making sense of the senseless, not least because being a victim might give you a new and universally understood myth of origin – that of 'trauma', 'abuse' or of suffering quite generally.

- *Politics and Victimhood*: However, the political side of victimhood is also the sheer scale inequality in the world, the massively uneven distribution of goods and vital necessities across the globe, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of forms of injustice both small and large, the depredation of life and the environment in so many parts of the world. To all of this, we – the haves, the world’s middle classes - have been silent witnesses, involuntary perpetrators and guilty beneficiaries over the past decades. This, too, is a subject position, and may well be one of the reasons why victimhood, considered as a universal, and through melodramatic modes of public life made part of the human condition, has become a desirable subject position. It helps alleviate (or “manage”) guilt, by indirectly acknowledging the facts of the matter, making victimhood stand for a symbolic act of solidarity. But it is a compromise and thus also a compromised act, allowing us as individuals to carry on with our lives, to stay below the radar of personal responsibility, while still staking a place in the world, even if our mode of participation in is world merely testifies to our helplessness.

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls this the Starbucks system: Starbucks knows about your guilt feelings of being an involuntary perpetrator, so it overprices its coffee: “You know, when you enter a Starbucks store, it’s usually always displayed in some posters, their message, which is: “Yes, our cappuccino is more expensive than others,” but, then comes the story: “We give 1% all our income to some Guatemalan children to keep them healthy, for the water supply for some Saharan farmer, or to save the forest, to enable organic growing for coffee, or whatever or whatever.” Now, I admire the ingenuity of this solution. In the old days of pure, simple consumerism, you bought a product, and then you felt bad. “My God, I’m just a consumerist, while people are starving in Africa . . .” [...] What Starbucks enables you, is to be a consumerist, without any bad conscience, because the price for the countermeasure, for fighting consumerism, is already included into the price of a commodity. [...] It’s, I think, the ultimate form of consumerism.”⁸

Melodrama: Placeholder of justice and equality to come

To summarize my argument so far: Melodrama is essentially political, a child of the French and American Revolution, and a way of bringing the values of equality, social justice and the pursuit of happiness into the private sphere, the domestic domain, the family – before projecting these values once more outwards into the political realm (rendering them visible, investing them with affect, casting them as narratives of victimhood, suffering and redemption) by

way of popular media representations (cinema and television).

Melodrama is “secular”, in that it emerges whenever a legitimate authority that could mediate or establish justice is absent, discredited or shown to be ‘evil’. This authority might be God, the aristocracy, patriarchy or ‘the system’, and to that extent, melodrama is a crisis mode: it steps in or re-emerges in societies and at historical moments when there is a gap or a lack of legitimacy, and a felt sense of injustice. But melodrama is not a substitute for this legitimacy, rather it is a symptom of this lack of legitimacy or justice.

On the other hand, what melodrama involves in more abstract terms, at the level of narrative and drama, is that it takes the most extreme contrasts, the most discordant and jarring elements, and pitches them into action and conflict, in order to draw from them the terms of balance, poise, and equilibrium, when none of these ways of achieving justice and equality are actually available or feasible. Melodrama is the opposite, but also the complement of, for instance, Jacques Derrida’s infinite deferral of justice, as well as of Jacques Ranciere’s radical equivalence. The opposite, because it presses for justice in the here-and-now (as does Ranciere), and the complement, because (like Derrida) it knows about the impossibility of achieving justice, at least not without residue or remainder.

Melodrama is also symptomatic, in that it is the mode of the ‘what-if’ and of the ‘if-only’, which means that its supposed sentimentality and its ‘happy endings’ can be read as the very opposite: as gestures of refusal to accept things as they are, and insists on the validity of the demands, even in the face of persistent evidence of failure and defeat. Melodrama can be stubbornly utopian, even in the face of the wrong means (what Marxists would call ‘false consciousness’) or no means at all (the state of abjection and the powerlessness of the victim), in order to achieve justice. But this very negativity in the relation between means and ends is also a way of drawing in the spectator, which is why the victim in melodrama has the status of an agent: melodrama knows that suffering can be a most potent form of agency.

However, by universalizing the figure of the victim, and making victimhood something like a civic duty, it relieves the individual of his/her responsibility and thus victimhood can also function as a form of guilt management, as Žižek so vividly suggests in his attack on “green consumerism”. He also confirms why it makes sense to consider *melodrama to be a placeholder*: a placeholder for all the asymmetries and imbalances, for all the excesses seeking appeasement, for all the outrages yearning for redress, and all the injustices thirsting for retribution: melodrama would therefore seem to be *the appropriate world-view for an age that*

not only has lost faith in utopias, but has given up on trying to find solutions. It is also the mode appropriate for those who proclaim the 'end of history' but cannot claim to put an end to conflict and warfare, to inequality and injustice. Melodrama, in short, marks a gap, but does not – and probably should not – fill it: that of political action.

Trauma and mind-game films

One aspect of the victim's discourse that I already briefly touched upon is that it tends not only to identify the subject with a particular form of discrimination by society, on the basis of sexuality, class, religion, caste, race or colour, but that it locates this victim status in the subject's biography, by invoking a personal trauma. For instance, in the televisual mode of melodrama, which I have elsewhere analysed, the Oprah Winfrey Show can be taken as typical for a form of globalized empathy. Oprah encouraged her guests to affiliate themselves not according to ethnic or religious or national characteristics, but instead to define their identity according to the trauma that gives their lives both a seemingly never healing wound, as well as direction and meaning: abuse by a parent, eating disorder (obesity, anorexia or bulimia), a deviant sexuality, an addiction, a traumatic divorce, witnessing a terrible accident, etc. This not only promotes the standardization and circulation of a specific kind of post-therapeutic discourse, which models lives into specific forms of autobiography, usually around such traumatic moment of suffering and victimization. It also recognizes that trauma and survival have become universals, i.e. immediately recognizable markers of the human condition: each one of us can associate his or her own moment of change, the turning point in one's life: instead of seeing change in the future, as something to be attained and achieved, it is now located in the past, as something you need to return to, and to work over. This is the secret of her success: Oprah achieved the global following her show enjoyed, across different cultures and geographical locations, by having found the formula for 'standardizing' intimacy, rather than promoting or implementing universally applicable values or moral norms (as the American government tries to do by 'bringing democracy' and doing 'nation-building' or the European Union tries to do by insisting on the implementation of universal human rights). Instead, Oprah makes trauma into the common currency – even if it means making the term more trivial in the process.

It would take too long to recapitulate the complex process whereby this originally clinical and medical term "trauma" – indicating a psychic wound that may be invisible, but has nonetheless profound consequences for the constitution of a subject – how this term trauma came to move from the

medical realm to the humanities, across the interest in memory, both personal and collective, and how trauma became almost a substitute for history – not just in the personal sense, in that one’s own history, i.e. one’s sense of origin, of personhood and identity had formed around a traumatic core, but also how entire nations began to rethink their history around trauma. In a recent book on this subject, *German Cinema – Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945* I argued, among other things that the European Union has effectively redefined its cultural and moral identity around the trauma of the Holocaust, and the memory of the destruction of so many lives, but also so many values promoted by the European Enlightenment Humanism, such as the value of each human life, the belief in reason and progress, the striving for equality and social justice. In literary and film studies, trauma became associated also with formal qualities such as latency, unrepresentability, the invisible trace, the temporality of belatedness.

Trauma is what takes hold of the subject, rather than the other way round, thus it reversed agency: “The pathology [of trauma] consists [...] in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.” In other words, trauma implies agency, but one where I feel the force of it but am not in charge of that force. More generally, it is possible to identify several distinct trauma discourses that have become significant in cultural debates and in social theory over the past decades:

1- The trauma-discourse around racial, ethnic or political persecution, often directly modeled on the Holocaust, or on subsequent and analogous genocide and other forms of mass killings or threats of annihilation.

In this discourse, it is often a matter of identifying some deep ambivalence surrounding historical traumata, also concerning the blurred line between the victim’s trauma and what has been called “perpetrator trauma”, as the two sides of national or cultural memory that often converge or compete, notably in the cases of civil war, or where it is a matter of unresolved conflict situations, which continues to be a source of violence. The cinema seems particularly attuned to these ambivalences. While it seems evident that in German cinema, for instance, it is the aftermath of the Holocaust that constitutes the central national trauma, I found that in Hollywood cinema, such ambivalences of agency and responsibility tend to be centered on race, but may often be articulated in films that seem to have little directly to do with race, such as *Back to the Future*, *Forrest Gump* or even *Saving Private Ryan*. More recently, Israeli films that deal with the War in Lebanon, such as *Waltz with*

Bashir, *Beaufort* or *Lebanon*, are indirectly about the Occupation of Palestine, and in subtle, but distinct ways raise the possibility of perpetrator trauma, and in particular, wrestle with the question of how the historical victims of persecution can come to be regarded as perpetrators, in different historical circumstances.¹⁰ I understand that Indian films dealing with Partition also show certain post-traumatic symptoms.¹¹ This national trauma-discourse often has a generational dimension, insofar as it can make not only the survivors, but their descendants ‘traumatized’.¹²

2- Closely allied but nonetheless distinct from the national trauma discourse is the case of soldiers as traumatized persons – a category emerging in the US during 1970s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The idea that soldiers return from battle not just with physical, but also mental wounds is not new, and was especially prominent after WWI in Europe, when the phrase shell-shock emerged as the synonym for trauma. But it took the defeated and disheartened soldiers returning from Vietnam in 1975, for the American medical association to classify “post-traumatic stress disorder” as a recognized mental illness, which then became the legal basis for these veterans to be able to claim financial compensation and gain public attention even if they did not show actual wounds. This recognition of trauma has subsequently been applied to other kinds of traumatized persons, whether traumatized by man-made or natural disasters, whether actively involved or mere passive spectators, such as in the case of the trauma of 9/11 which was said to have ‘traumatized’ the entire nation of the United States. Likewise, the trauma of the Fukushima nuclear accident, or the trauma of the Philippine hurricane: each one treated as a national trauma – implying that the act of witnessing, across repeated media images, triggers a kind of secondary trauma of spectatorship, thereby also implying that our 24-hours news cycle and the endless replay of images of disaster are themselves the agents of trauma – modern media coverage and information overload being inherently traumatic modes of experience.

3 - This suggests that trauma is a category of experience that serves several distinct functions, including that of being a second-order phenomenon, emerging within certain contemporary configurations yet to be specified. These can be defined formally, abstracted from any specific historical referent and seen distinct from of its primary associations with a particular somatic state or psychic wound that refuses to heal. It is this turn to generic or formal characteristics (reflected also in the term “trauma studies”) that permits me to bring together melodrama, trauma and mind-games as three affective modes of crisis, linked to crises in our conceptions of the body, time and agency, that

have given rise to specific cinematic forms or even genres.

There is, for instance, the crisis in our conceptions of temporal flow, chronological time and uni-linear cause and effect chains, which came into modern physics with Einstein's relativity theory, but has over the past hundred years, percolated into all areas of the humanities: philosophy (Henri Bergson), literature (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf), history (Niall Ferguson's *Counterfactual History*) and cinema (the popularity, for instance, of time-travel films). Yet the prevailing preoccupation with memory, notably with personal, generational, but also collective or cultural memory – as a challenge to traditional models of historiography – also reflects a contest over linear time and an opening up towards different kinds of temporality.

All three affective states and cinematic modes, i.e. melodrama, trauma narratives and mind-game films, deviate from a single cause and effect logic, not least by virtue of the fact that *coincidence and contingency* often play a decisive role in motivating the action, determining the turn of events, and defining the protagonists. In melodrama, contingency is the form in which misfortune can strike at any time, but contingency can also show its providential sides, as in a sudden rescue from peril or in the moments of recognition, when some birthmark reveals the villain to be the long lost brother. In trauma narratives, contingency manifests itself as trauma's power to strike at any time, with the apparent trigger having only an indirect or hidden connection to the originary cause, while in mind-game films, such as *Donnie Darko* or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, time can run backwards, and cause and effect may find themselves reversed, in the form of retro-action.

Furthermore, all three genres manifest crises in agency, where passive suffering and victimhood can become a form of agency, but also where forces that are, in terms of human scale, either too large or too small, either cosmic and cataclysmic or invisible and intangible, exert themselves as agents.

Finally, they are genres of crisis, in that negative states of being and of the body, notably physical disabilities, such as blindness or deafness, mental illness such as schizophrenia or autism, amnesia or bipolar disorder and even addiction, can turn out to have positive and productive consequences – a situation for which I have coined the term “productive pathologies”. Such pathologies are especially frequent in mind-game films, but they can also feature in melodramas, for instance Douglas Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession*, or Jane Campion's *The Piano*.

Trauma narratives – part of the solution

In other words, part of my argument is that *trauma* – considered in this more generalized form, and occurring in a wide variety of situations – *can become part of the solution to the problem*, rather than the problem. The question then becomes: what problem?

One of the more striking symptoms or indications of the productive consequences of trauma is the fact that, especially in contemporary Hollywood, blockbuster films tend to present us with protagonists that are motivated by some kind of personal trauma. Whether we think of the already mentioned *Harry Potter* series, of *The Lord of the Rings*, but even more surprising, in the case of *Spiderman*, *The Hulk* (as directed by Ang Lee) or the *Batman* franchise (especially as re-worked by Christopher Nolan) – virtually all the superheroes of American cinema have as their dark secret a personal – often a childhood trauma, and it is this trauma that makes them capable of extraordinary feats of strength or ingenuity, but it also makes them troubled, solitary, deeply melancholy and unhappy creatures – always searching for a lost object or trying to recover from some unimaginably wounding experience of shock or abandonment.

One way in which such traumata represent the solution to a problem is that they help refigure the general decline (in Western societies) of patriarchal authority and the crisis in heterosexual masculinity. Trauma-narratives retain a grounding of identity in family relations – quintessentially the domain of melodrama – but it plays significant variations on the Oedipal constellation that still tends to determine family melodrama, with its implicit challenge to patriarchal authority. Trauma-narratives, on the other hand, are *post-Oedipal* (as I try to show in a chapter on *Back to the Future*) reflect the decline of this patriarchal masculinity in Western societies, by being centered on an absent father rather than on the over-present father figure of melodrama (e.g. *Home from the Hill*). In this sense, several trauma narratives involving superheroes can be understood as male melodramas, in which the trauma not only lies at the origin of a personal pathology, but can motivate the superhero to selfless acts of sacrifice. An example of trauma re-energizing a protagonist, and make them develop special determination and will-power, would be Sandra Bullock's character in *Gravity*, whose traumatic memory of her dead child stops her from letting herself go in space, and thus helps her return to earth, and thus to accomplish at least part of her mission. Here trauma functions once more as something close to a productive pathology, by suggesting a kind of re-birth.

Other ways in which trauma, as the true but hidden cause of origin and

identity, has a number of crucial advantages for new narrative possibilities, concerns seriality, open-endedness and multi-strand, intersecting plot-lines. Thus trauma, as the wound that never closes, can in and by itself be a sufficient explanation for repetition and non-closure, which in the cinema of superheroes, allows for sequels or prequels. Important for franchise blockbusters, it is also an advantage for televisual forms of melodrama – the daytime soap, the prime time drama series, both of which generate open-endedness of its narrative conflicts, of a kind that allows them to return as unexpected or unintended consequences and thus give rise to further complications (and spawn another season).

Since trauma is by definition experienced as an effect whose cause remains hidden, or whose origins cannot be recalled, its manifestations are not only governed by the selective temporalities of memory, but it also becomes an instance par excellence of deferred action or *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning that trauma narratives can exemplify a more ‘distributive’ relation between cause and effect, to the point where the effects retroactively create or imagine or find their causes.

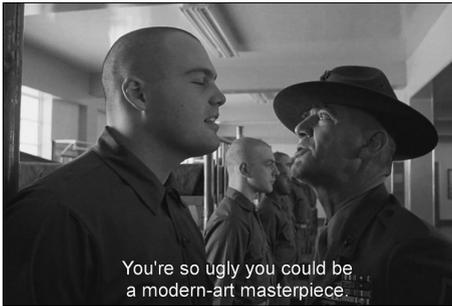
This aligns trauma narratives with time-travel films: a genre that has some affinity with both melodrama (*Back to the Future* and *Twelve Monkeys*, for instance, or a time travel family comedy such as *About Time*) and with mind-game films (think of the many adaptations of Philip K Dick sci-fi stories, such as *Blade Runner*, *Paycheck*, *Total Recall* and especially *Minority Report*: another film heavily invested in trauma and guilt, this time of a father feeling guilty about the death of his son, and faced with an apparently irresolvable dilemma).¹³

Trauma narratives allow for the protagonists to display seemingly erratic behavior, to act in apparently inconsequential ways, to display a sort of post-mortem zombie personality, or to appear driven by strange urges and follow illogical sentences. This description covers, above all, the films of David Lynch, such as *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. All three turn on traumatic events never fully explained or causally motivated, and on psychologically damaged or wounded protagonists. These very same films, however, are also mind-game films and even time travel films, in that their jumbled chronologies can be reconstructed by way of retroactive causalities or reverse order logic, even down to snatches of dialogue, as in the “rabbit sitcom” sequence in *Inland Empire*.¹⁴ Besides providing some of the best examples of trauma narratives and mind-game films, Lynch is a director who can instill in the spectator an uncanny feeling of epistemological and even ontological doubt. Traumatized psychopaths as some of them are, his characters do not

seem to know what is real and what is imagined, a state of mind and body conveyed to the spectator as a hesitation over the reality status of the events we are witnessing: we can never be quite sure whether what we see is actually happening or instead the (unmarked) delusional version of events as imagined in one of the protagonist alternate realities.

Productive pathologies

Yet Lynch's films are not my primary examples for what I call "productive pathologies". A productive pathology is a particular skill set that proves to be important if not crucial to society, yet it does not necessarily lead to personal happiness. It is perhaps the modern form of heroic sacrifice, when there are no more heroes, because – like melodrama and like trauma narratives – films of productive pathologies are essentially about impaired bodies and other forms of limited agency or scope for action. When all avenues are blocked, and there is no way forward, a productive pathology may be the resource of last resort.



Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*

An early example of a productive pathology in action can be found in Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket*. There, the recruits in their boot camp training are being deliberately and systematically traumatized, in order to become more efficient killing machines. Trauma here becomes not a consequence of warfare, but a condition for (effective) warfare. It is a thought that also runs through several of the more recent Iraq war films, where a certain inadaptability to civilian life, a certain misfit pathology is necessary in order to develop extraordinary skills on an increasingly unconventional battlefield. While a film like *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007)

features an Iraq war veteran, traumatized by what he saw and did in the field, turn into a psychopath (framed as a father-son melodrama), Katherine Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) by contrast, shows us a character who is

particularly good at defusing booby-trapped cars, tackling suicide bombers or sniffing out roadside bombs and other explosive devices. Yet these skills are directly linked to the protagonist's history of domestic violence and other social maladjustments. For instance, when returning home after his last dangerous mission, he finds himself so much at a loss in civilian life and unable to fulfill his domestic role as a father that he signs up for another tour of duty.



Christopher Nolan, *Memento*

The Hurt Locker would thus be an example of a productive pathology, in that its hero's particular dysfunctionality in ordinary life makes him highly functional in some of the extraordinary situations that a nation at war encounters, or a society increasingly dependent on machine intelligence requires of its "specialists". A different kind of productive pathology would be the amnesia from which the hero of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) suffers, even though his pathology – also the result of trauma, incidentally: the trauma of perhaps having accidentally killed his wife – is "productive" less for himself or for society, and more for the people he trusts, but who use him as a perfect weapon to eliminate their respective partners or enemies. *Memento* uses its modality of experience as trauma, in order to put forward a new model of the body as somatic-sensory medium of inscription. Such a conception of the body bypasses perception, affect and cognition by making the protagonist an amnesiac, unable to remember events or recognize his surroundings other than through visual aids, scriptural traces and acts of repetition. He becomes a medium in both sense of the word, with his traumatized body the main storage medium, rather than – as we are used to – using our brains as our main storage medium, in the form of memory. *Memento's* amnesiac mind makes the pathologized body "productive" by "outsourcing" memory to other media: an allegory, perhaps of a more generalized reliance on "software" to be our (cultural and personal) memory.

I come to my conclusion: I began by outlining the changing role of victimhood in advanced societies, and hope to have now reached a more general point, namely by noting that what unites melodrama, trauma narratives and mind-game films is a common – seemingly negative, failed, pathological – relation to agency. More precisely, these ‘deviant genres’ may represent the response to a blockage of agency at one level (societal and political), resulting in the formation of a different kind of agency at another level (engaging differently the body, time, causality). While in each of the genres I mention, the cause of the blockage may be distinct – in the case of classical melodrama, it was often the social position of women, or the powerlessness of children, and in trauma-narratives it is the traumatic event which retroactively can make itself felt at any time, and in mind-game films it is usually a psychic or physiological impairment, such as amnesia, schizophrenia, autism, blindness, immobility, paranoia etc. – the manifestation of this different kind of agency can be given a common denomination, i.e. “productive pathology”. In the past such productive pathologies tended to be reserved for artists – we easily accept that their creativity may have abnormal sources or pathological roots – but what popular culture and especially contemporary Hollywood films seem to indicate is that this kind of “creativity” (needed, and indeed harvested by society) is now no longer reserved for artists, but can inhabit – for good or ill – any human body.

References:

¹ This essay is a preview of the Introductory chapter of my forthcoming book: *Melodrama, Trauma Mind-games – Affect and Memory in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

² Thomas Elsaesser, “Between Erlebnis and Erfahrung: Cinema Experience with Benjamin”, *Paragraph* 32:3 (2009), 292–312.

³ If the beginnings can be dated very precisely to my article and Peter Brooks’ book in 1972/75 (see notes below), the (provisional) end-points are Ben Singer’s *Melodrama and Modernity* (Columbia 2001) and Linda Williams’ *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, 2002).

⁴ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁵ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.

⁶ Elisabeth R Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014)

⁷ Marc Bousquet, „White Hat, Black Hat: From the French Revolution to Harry Potter“, www.marcbousquet.net/MelodramaSyllabus.pdf

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The Delusion of Green Capitalism”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzcfsq1_bt8

⁹ Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 4-5

¹⁰ On perpetrator trauma, see Raya Morag, *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2012)

¹¹ See Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009.

¹² Marianne Hirsch has coined the phrase post-memory. See M.H., *The Generation of Post-memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) and her website <http://www.postmemory.net/>

¹³ Thomas Elsaesser, “Philip K Dick, the Mindgame Film and Retroactive Causality”, in Warren Buckland (ed.), *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 143-164

¹⁴ Warren Buckland, “The Accousmatic Voice and Metaleptic Narration in *Inland Empire*”, in Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 236-249