Jervis, John. "The Melodrama of the Modern." *Sensational Subjects: The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 159–182. The WISH List. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472593023.ch-008>>.

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The Melodrama of the Modern

The attack on the Twin Towers, and their subsequent collapse, constituted a sensational spectacle on a cosmic scale: this much, at least, was apparent from the start, as was the parallel with ‘special effects’ in Hollywood disaster movies.¹ In a discussion of Hollywood film, Linda Williams refers to a moment when villainy and innocence come into sharp focus in a ‘sensation scene’, which is ‘felt as sensation’ by the viewer, not just as detached information;² and this seems to fit the popular reaction here, the impact of the planes being mapped onto the impact on the spectator as the drama unfolded. It is likewise not difficult to see the justification for invoking the sublime, indeed the dynamical sublime, in its combination of the awesome, the spectacular, the terrible – in principle, fear-inducing, yet viewed from a position of relative safety. All this is appropriate enough, but perhaps the reference to villainy and innocence suggests a dimension that needs further consideration. After all, the events, then and subsequently, were characterized by an intensely *moral* language, indeed a language that imbued the responses of politicians and the media with vivid tones of outrage and denunciation: clearly we were confronted with a battle between Good and Evil. We have, indeed, become rather used to this, from Reagan’s battle with the ‘Evil Empire’ through to Bush’s obsession with an ‘axis of evil’.

‘Badness’ is a falling away from goodness, paying tribute to it; it is not an alternative value, a serious rival, on the same level. It is not Manichaeian.³ For that, we have to call up evil, so that there can be a real contest, real war between two opposing principles, which can easily be personified. Evil conjures up the idea of the *absolutely* bad, immeasurably bad, bad beyond all comprehension – ‘sublimely’ bad, one might say. But as a rival value, evil presents problems: either, in following it, you follow it because it is ‘not-good’, in which case it again remains derivative of the latter, not a separate principle; or you follow it because it is a distinct, different value system, in which case it becomes ‘good’ for you

and for others who follow it (just as the 'other' good becomes evil). But this is not just a problem for evil: it contaminates the good, too – it turns it against itself. Good has to recognize that something may masquerade as 'good' that is actually its opposite. The appearance of good, even doing good, may not be sufficient: the devil is infinitely cunning ... Hence, within the Christian tradition, God is needed to sort out the mess: the day of Judgement is the exercise of his omniscience; he alone can tell the difference with absolute confidence. In the absence of the immediate presence of God, the only certainties are that evil is a permanent possibility, as is the impossibility of being confident about identifying it, and, hence, rooting it out – just as it is, nonetheless, essential to try to do so.

From the point of view of the follower of the good, evil is always the ultimate transgression: it must retain its link to 'breaking the rules', since this is required if it is to be bad; yet it also goes beyond this, it is inherently excessive, since this 'excess' reveals the presence of these 'other' values that can never be allowed to emerge clearly as such, since they could then indeed emerge as a real *alternative*, rather than as signs of pure wickedness. Indeed, the fact that in practice evil must involve pure wickedness seems to be central to it, wickedness either as apparently unmotivated, or motivated by love of evil itself. Either way, evil becomes in some fundamental sense incomprehensible, beyond being explained (away), even though we can say more about its meaning and effects. What evil *signifies* is the attempted corruption or destruction of innocence; what it *does*, through this, is produce suffering. And this is a clue to two aspects of evil, as absolute value and as absolute deed, the other of rational morality and of rational self-control respectively, one as manifestation of the other. Evil as deed is evil as passion, excess of passion, desire unconstrained by morality, revealing a fusion of excess of mind, as imagination, and body, as drive, resulting in lust, the appetite for conquering the other through sexuality or death.⁴

If, in a post-Enlightenment world, reason is supposed to have taken over from God, it can be seen that the same structural tensions remain: reason, like God, can be given no non-circular justification for the universality and necessity of its diktats, just as 'universality' and 'necessity' are the whole point. The ever-present possibility of reason's unspeakable 'other side' is built into it, its grinning, malevolent caricature, as is its capacity for projection onto the other, its projection *as* other, carrying the evil it must disavow as its own condition of possibility, the other side of reason itself, in its universalizing pretensions, reason as Law.⁵ And hence this again reinforces the fact that the evil other is always 'inside', if only because there can be no real 'outside' here, just as good must always battle evil

and forever fail to vanquish it, condemned to misrecognize its own complicity in its production.⁶ The relentless pursuit of evil can indeed contribute further to this production and reproduction of evil itself: those who seek evil will generally not only find it, but will, in attempting to vanquish it, end up perpetrating their own version of it ('witch hunts'). Motives are impenetrable, reinforcing the sense that the evildoer may be among us, unrecognizable, apparently normal, and that evil is as potentially ubiquitous as it is irredeemably other, so that even when 'exposed' it retains its unending ability to subvert, corrupt, and destroy.

Let us return to Kant, and situate all this more firmly in post-Enlightenment culture. In its awesome immensity and power, the sublime indicates the limits of imagination and understanding, while those very attributes point us towards the grandeur of reason in its autonomy, its legislative capacity to define the good in itself as the imperative to will what is necessarily good for all. 'Practical' reason, as autonomous, appeals to nothing beyond its own principles of reasoning. The essence of reason is that it lays down principles that are necessary, universal, and internally consistent, hence principles that ought to be held to by all, whatever their cultural circumstances or personal situations. Yet notoriously Kant's own version of this has proved highly indeterminate in its moral and political implications. More generally, this Enlightenment vision, intended to define the direction of human emancipation, always presented the problem that, in practice, no single self-sufficient programme ever carried conviction as the only such; there was always the potential for radically divergent ideologies, including those generated by reaction against aspects of the Enlightenment vision itself. The politics of progress has swung between totalitarian imposition and conflictual pluralism, between the politics of mass mobilization and concentration and mass-as-dispersion into competing individualisms, subject to the gales of fashion and the media construction of unacceptable otherness, any consensus on values to resolve the frequently incommensurable or incompatible goals being very hard to come by and always precarious. In effect, Kant may have been right that the sublime forces us towards confronting these ultimate questions, but over-optimistic about the possibilities of their rational resolution.⁷

With the revival of religious belief – or the likelihood that it never really went away – in the context of increasingly visible multicultural communities, this effect is intensified. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre vividly illustrates the consequences of the inherent undecidability of disputes between rival post-Enlightenment ideals and their implications for action. If a belief system leads to the conviction that abortion is wrong, then one cannot take the easy

multicultural way out (you stick to your beliefs and I'll stick to mine), because, posed in these terms, the whole point is that if it *is* wrong, then it is wrong for everyone, universally.⁸ Ultimate values are precisely that, *ultimate*: there is no higher court of appeal, no arbitration and conciliation service to provide some messy but vaguely agreeable compromise. And a corollary is that the ultimate values of others can come to appear not merely misguided or wrong, but mad or bad with it. This is because if the practical incompatibility of the outcomes of rival positions is taken as evidence of the incommensurability of their underlying assumptions, then this carries with it a necessary element of mutual incomprehension; and the combination of these attributes makes it all the more likely that conflict and mutual denunciation will intensify. In effect, we have returned to the distinction between 'bad' and 'evil', and the conditions under which there is most likely to be a slide from one to the other.

One might draw briefly here on another aspect of the modern project and its consequences. The endeavour to dominate and control the world (of nature and society), exploiting it in the name of ideologies of human secular progress, has itself contributed to our sense of paradoxical powerlessness in the face of the unpredictable aspects of that same world. In the world of disease, for example, the more we know the more we become aware of how much we don't know, and this generates fear, and indeed the attempts to extend knowledge can make matters worse (drug-resistant bugs flourishing in hospitals ...). This can readily be combined with the previously mentioned capacity of the modern project for dynamic processes of exclusion and antagonism, involving the demonization of tendencies, groups and individuals defined and denounced as 'other' (the onset of AIDS in the 1980s providing a vivid example). We are thus simultaneously reminded of the promise of the modern project, and of its outcome, in the tension between control, concentration, and the spectacle of a distracted, dispersed, world, a tension readily available for dramatization in the pursuit of an ever-problematical closure, some overall 'meaning'. So, with the bad sensationized into evil, pushed beyond its own limits, and the spectacle sensationalized into a whole cosmos, a moral drama of extremes, we find ourselves at the mercy of forces, of powers that can never be adequately explained, understood or controlled, and which are endlessly productive of suffering – forces which we are encouraged or tempted to experience and represent in the form of a battle between good and evil. Hence our sense of living in a distinctively modern form of the *theatrum mundi*, a stage across which post-sacred or multi-sacred conflicts can be played out. And we have a word for it, a word that has indeed been around for as long – and only as long – as the modern period. That word is:

Melodrama

'Vice and virtue make the destinies of the world: these are the two opposed spirits that fight over it', proclaimed Robespierre.⁹ And if the politics of the French Revolution could be said both to manifest and to inaugurate the age of melodrama, this also suggests that the traditional perspective on melodrama, as a specific genre in the arts, particularly in the theatre, needs to be broadened out.

We can say that melodrama develops from the late eighteenth century as a distinctive form of theatrical entertainment, directed at a mass audience. It conjures up a world of powerful, mysterious forces, reinforcing this through an intense use of special effects, and through an obsession with moral polarity and moral absolutes; these stereotypical contrasts are more important than traditional novelistic virtues like 'development of character', here replaced by a portrayal of character as 'a theatre for the interplay of manichaeistic forces, the meeting place of opposites', as Peter Brooks puts it.¹⁰ By the 1820s melodrama had become 'a source of heroic identification and an aesthetic model for the artist of modernity', claims Mary Gluck, adding that melodrama 'satisfied the newly awakened taste for public excitement and passionate spectacle that had originally been nourished by revolutionary events', also providing a language and an ideology to make sense of it all.¹¹ If, by the 1840s, it was going out of fashion in the theatre and among the avant-garde, it was spreading into, and influencing, other areas of culture, notably literature (very clearly so in the case of Dickens), and was spreading as a distinctive mode of mass media expression and popular consciousness. With W. T. Stead's 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' reports in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1885, a founding moment of modern media sensationalism, aptly summarized by Elaine Hadley as 'the melodramatic story of virtuous heroines sold into sexual slavery by the despotically mercenary drives of pimping villains', the potential for melodrama on the mediated public stage became fully manifest. Hadley adds that villains in melodrama 'embody all the ills of modernizing Victorian capitalism', but are always defeated, in the end.¹²

Melodrama never really goes away; it returns – endlessly – in the great twentieth-century cultural innovation, film. 'Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures', a democratic form that 'seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action', argues Linda Williams. 'It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie.'¹³ We know about Hollywood 'domestic melodrama' of the 1940s and 1950s,¹⁴ but if her claim is to stand up, it clearly entails revealing melodrama in places where we are not conventionally taught to look for it.¹⁵

Williams unearths the fact that as late as the 1960s a whole series of what we tend to see as separate genres – including science fiction, the Western, crime – were being classified as sub-genres of melodrama in AFI film catalogues. In effect, melodrama has functioned as a ‘basic mode of storytelling’: exciting, sensational, moving.¹⁶ Male action movies can be presented in these terms: the films of Ford, Coppola and Spielberg all combine realism, sentiment, spectacle and action to reveal virtue that is at least partially hidden and has to be manifest in moments that are ‘climactic’, in a drama that is simultaneously ‘special effects’ and emotional release. In the first Rambo film, the hero breaks down and cries in the arms of his former commander.¹⁷ Such moments are easy to pass over – particularly, perhaps, for a male audience – but are crucial to the overall effect, in that they reveal how narrative thereby serves melodrama, rather than vice versa. Such moments *display* ‘spectacles of pathos and action’,¹⁸ though one might say that they thereby position action *as* pathos, and, in the process, express or project such ‘meaning’ as a film is capable of, in its relation to its audience.¹⁹ Stardom itself, the projection of the actors beyond their roles, can also be presented as a vehicle and instance of melodrama, with implications for our notions of personal identity, whether in film or everyday life.²⁰

‘Melodramatic moments’ in a film are distractions – but they are the distractions that reveal what the film is most fundamentally *about*. Such moments *subsume* narrative, give it its ‘point’, beyond any point that exists purely as narrative end point. They bathe the film in meaning, but it is a ‘meaning’ that is as much a matter of feeling as of thought or sense. And this reveals the problem of purely *narrative* closure: the end, like the start, is in a sense arbitrary; the problem solved, the life ended, leave an infinity of ‘loose ends’, of the unresolved. The closure of melodrama is, in an ultimate sense, just as arbitrary, the meaning of the ‘whole’ just as forced, but the change in register, the emotional high, carrying layers of meaning *and* feeling, makes it potentially more effective. The ‘whole’ is indeed an *effect*, not an attribute of the film ‘in itself’; it is an immanent product of the filmic relation to the viewing subject, the embodied subject whose own body, in its reaction, becomes the ‘completion’ of the film.

There is a moment near the end of *Schindler’s List* (Spielberg, 1993), when Oskar Schindler, the war profiteer who has saved over a thousand Jews, breaks down, revealing his regret at not having saved more. Noticing this, Omer Bartov denounces the ‘positively repulsive kitsch’ of the concluding scenes, the ‘emotional catharsis’ with which Spielberg apparently wanted to end the film, and the ‘banal humanization’ of his hero.²¹ We, in turn, can notice the intensity of Bartov’s response, and wonder whether those who denounce melodrama are

at some risk of suffering from it themselves. But he is certainly right to see this as a response to the audience expectation that a history film be both 'authentic' and reveal 'a final triumph over the forces of evil'.²² Unquestionably this is a significant moment in the film; and it is not present in the book the film is based on. Williams observes that it is clearly out of character for Schindler, in terms of codes of realistic representation.²³ It is indeed clearly melodramatic, revealing weakness as goodness, mute pathos. And this is its point: whereas heroism is exceptional, tears are the tears of Everyman. 'Suffering gives him the moral recognition that melodrama – not realism – requires. Without it, Schindler is merely heroic.' Williams concludes, controversially, that Schindler thereby 'relieves the rest of us ... of the historical burden of guilt',²⁴ which is certainly *one* possible interpretation of the effect of it all.

Let us take another moment in the film: the Nazi camp commandant, Goeth, is shown taking random pot shots from his office at Jews who happen to cross the exercise yard below. If you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, you get killed; it is death out of the blue, capricious, with no meaning, no rationale, in terms of the individual victim. This appears to contrast with the Schindler example, in that it seems consistent with what we know of Goeth's character. The point here, though, is that in terms of their impact, good and evil actions can be seen as *never* sufficiently 'motivated', rationally explicable. This is where the randomness of Goeth's action works powerfully, because the very capriciousness carries the message that *nothing* here can ever be sufficiently accountable, in terms of rational justification: neither the selection of individual victims in this episode, nor the very selection of the Jews overall, as objects of Nazi denunciation, persecution and hate. And we may recall here a famous episode in Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, where the 'hero', Raskolnikov, murders an old lady and her sister. The murder is essentially unmotivated. She *is* a moneylender, and he resents her, but this is not presented as in any way an adequate explanation. It is, in short, a totally wicked act, an *evil* act, and that reinforces a point already hinted at: that whatever counts as evil is in some sense a challenge to our comprehension, both in terms of causal explanation, and in terms of its moral enormity. It always seems to be in excess of what we can rationally grasp – a fundamental challenge to our imagination. And it is deeply paradoxical: it can serve both as the ultimate explanation, and as the ultimate *failure* of explanation (does 'he is just evil' explain anything at all?).

As a strong believer in the reality of evil in the world, Dostoevsky is significant here. Evil – 'radical' evil, evil for its own sake – is fundamental to the

human condition. Charles Guignon suggests that he had little patience with utopian reformers who thought that 'humans are fundamentally good, and that it is only their upbringing or socialization that causes evil', as if 'there is no real evil; there are only dysfunctional families or unfair social conditions'.²⁵ So if we take the key hate figures of our time – serial killers, mass killers, terrorists, paedophiles – we can point to the simultaneous need to 'explain', in terms of social and psychological problems, 'predisposing factors', and to sense that these explanations are never adequate; indeed, not infrequently these individuals turn out to be relatively 'normal' on most scales of psychological assessment or social upbringing. In the context of cases like that of Jamie Bulger, the toddler killed by two boys in 1993, the journalist Nick Cohen defended the public's attitude: 'If its concept of evil did not exist, it would have to be invented to cover the gaps in all great crimes between understandable causes and inexplicable consequences.'²⁶ One might add that whether or not there is any useful sense in which the perpetrators of these crimes are 'really' evil, it is as if they must be *made out* to be so; they have to be sufficiently *different*, lest they pollute the 'normal'. If they are 'merely' bad, they become potentially reformable; if they are evil, we can safely condemn them, expel them, or worse. Hence Phillip Cole suggests that when there are thought to be evildoers in the community, *inside* it, 'there can be no negotiation and no compromise ... they can only be hunted down and destroyed'. 'Evil' drives us to understand, just as it makes it imperative that we *not* understand. One can agree with Cole that 'evil closes off all possibility of understanding'.²⁷ And evil, as that which must not be understood, but only fought and destroyed, is central to melodrama: there is always a gap between our sense of the world as something that can be understood, and our sense of the presence of evil within it; and our very way of posing it in these terms contributes to its perpetual recreation.

Surely, one might reply, there is a real sense in which the Holocaust itself represents some kind of 'absolute evil', a sort of ground zero of evil? Certainly it has been widely discussed in these terms; indeed, this constitutes something of a shared presupposition of 'Holocaust discourse', even when there can be plenty of scope for disagreement within the discourse. Yet, the effect of this is to reconstitute the Holocaust *as melodrama*, as a cosmic battle between the forces of Good and Evil, beyond any conceivable *historically grounded* level of explanation or framework of understanding. Far from being a perversion of Holocaust discourse, *Schindler's List* becomes an appropriate exemplification of it, perpetuating it in the powerful context of film, reinforcing its place as melodrama in the cultural imaginary. Can *any* event have this status, as not only

unique but uniquely evil? If its 'uniqueness' is merely the attribute of any event, in its distinctive particularity, then – however horrific it may have been, and undoubtedly was – the Holocaust can be reinserted into history, given a context, related to other events. We can see it, perhaps, as a culmination of the 1930s and 1940s, the decades of the terrible killing fields of Eastern Europe, when millions lost their lives in systematic 'ethnic cleansing' regimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – and, yes, most probably the worst of these cases, the most systematic, the most deliberate, the most thorough; but not 'evil' in some incomparable, absolute sense.²⁸ And if we are left with a 'gap' in our understanding here, a gap that *disturbs* us, makes us *feel* deeply uncomfortable, this is the gap between cause and effect that we find in so many other contexts too, that does indeed contribute to the powerful emotional drive out of which the melodramatic sense of the world is constructed, and constantly reinforced.

Here we can point to another aspect. Seen by the Nazis as a classic case of the 'enemy within', the Jews were thought to be particularly dangerous, always in principle difficult to identify (like 'terrorists' today), and spreading their tentacles through respectable society, corrupting it. They were, indeed, a *conspiracy*, and conspiracies always have something of the melodramatic about them. In his study of what he calls 'conspiracy culture' in the contemporary West, Peter Knight points to the 'baroque speculations', the 'omnivorous drive to interpretation', evidence that 'The figuration of conspiracy articulates otherwise uncoordinated suspicions that daily life is controlled by larger, unseen forces which cannot be the result of mere coincidence'.²⁹ But whether we think of society or the self, this can have paradoxical results. By imagining the individual self as threatened by all these invisible forces, conspiracy culture helps bring this about: 'By imagining a self immersed in a global environment of risk, or caught in a vast web of anonymous interconnecting forces, popular paranoia in effect undermines the logical coherence of the very thing it was seeking to defend'.³⁰

An important part of our difficulty in locating these 'deep connections', and hence gaining any sense of control, is a crisis of authority. It is not necessarily that we distrust experts in any absolute sense, but that we do not know which experts to trust; and since they, and the politicians who draw on them, can consequently come up with a range of contradictory findings, along with the resulting divergent policies on any given issue that arises, the effect is to cast doubt on the whole notion of 'expertise' in itself. Knight suggests that the Kennedy assassination was a key moment here: not only did it spawn several generations of conspiracy theories, but it produced, arguably for the first time in the era of mass communication, the spectacle of alleged 'experts' endlessly

disagreeing about every conceivable aspect of the events in question and the nature of the evidence,³¹ and thus contributing strongly to a corrosive effect on popular confidence in the whole notion of an expert – with implications today in the total confusion in the popular consciousness surrounding the ‘global warming’ debate.

‘Connectivity’ has become central to our view of the world, and our experience of living in it.³² This has important ramifications. In complex systems of connectivity, the properties of the systems are not reducible to those of their constituents, nor are causal connections easy to trace. Indeed, cause and effect can appear disparate in scale, or even completely unconnected, just as seemingly random connections can produce ordered interaction in resultant systems that can be in varying degrees self-regulating, while retaining sufficient links with their ecosystems to render them finally unpredictable and uncontrollable in their long-term consequences.³³ And while a lot of this is not new – both the science and the world it attempts to theorize have deep roots in the nineteenth century – we nonetheless have a growing sense that modernity, as the result of our own technological and economic impact on the world, is heavily implicated. Hence the contemporary theorization of risk,³⁴ together with the salience of debates on accountability and responsibility, the pursuit of someone or something to *blame* when things go wrong – as they do, often or always. David Rodowick suggests that our notions of connectivity imply currents and forces that flow through us, and history is experienced as a wave or tide ‘whose energy derives from immense and invisible forces of technological change that are too complex and too enormous for individuals to fathom fully’;³⁵ but if, as individuals, we cannot feel responsible agents in this situation, we tend to assume that someone *else*, somewhere, must play this role, if any sort of satisfactory ‘closure’ is to be obtained for the manifold tragedies or traumas, large or small, of everyday life, magnified as they readily are through media exposure. None of this guarantees the presence of melodrama as a mode of experiencing all this, or as an inevitable framework of response to it, but it is the necessary backdrop that helps give melodrama its distinctive cultural potential and power.

Melodrama involves dramatizing³⁶ the sense of a whole, because only by doing so can one ‘realize’ it, bring it about. It thereby includes ‘rationalization’, the drive to make the whole intelligible, the search for ‘the hidden principle’, the key to unlock the secret that reveals the whole *as* whole, as totality, beyond the world of apparent dispersion and distraction. It is not, however, restricted to this, it is not a ‘merely’ intellectual grasp; it ‘realizes’ the world as battleground of good and evil in which we are inherently involved as agents; it displays the

cosmos as a field of forces, with humans playing the parts of heroes, villains and suffering victims. Hence, again, the 'dialectic of pathos and action',³⁷ in which the excesses – of action, spectacle and explanation – can never conclusively provide the 'closure' to which they aspire. Indeed, this closure, this appearance of completeness, is necessarily inseparable from simplification, distortion, hence falsity, although this is fully compatible with intense, lively credibility. Melodrama thus aspires to a total closure of meaning, A and not-A together, while avoiding the emptiness of that resolution by instituting a manic fullness; hence the void at its heart is masked by the frantic battle of absolutes and the rapidity and decisiveness of action, reinforcing the sense of excess so central to the melodramatic experience of the world.

And the suffering victims? Bartov and other critics of *Schindler's List* have pointed to the way the film seems to diminish the Jews, making them as anonymous and shadowy as they may perhaps have seemed to their guards. This is an accurate perception, but it is not unique to this film, or inherently to do with the plight of Holocaust victims rather than others in situations of mass suffering: it reveals an aspect of the logic of melodrama itself. Brooks has claimed that we live 'within a system of melodramatic struggle, where virtue and evil are fully personalized'.³⁸ The latter dimension, clearly present in the film, means that melodrama either has to display suffering in small-scale scenarios, or, where this is not possible, concentrate on exemplars, on 'exemplary instances', to stand in for, figure, mass suffering through their individual 'embodiment' of it. In fiction, Eliza or Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would of course be classic instances; but the television screen produces instances too, every day, and not just in the frequently parodic excesses of soap opera which can, indeed, distract us from the sense in which little everyday scenes can so easily be presented in, or slide naturally into, the language, emotion and postures of melodrama. Hence we encounter the scenes of parents attempting to articulate distress and despair at the death of a son in Iraq or Afghanistan, or anguish at the sudden murder of a 'loved one' in some meaningless knife or gun attack, coupled with the anger, the demand for answers, for vengeance as 'closure'. Always these little scenes have two features in common: they manifest a standard form, of language and gesture – nothing original is ever said, or shown – and they invade the viewer's space, not always in predictable form. They can engage us emotionally, in a straightforward enough way; or they can make us feel uneasy, as if reacting to the very standardization of these scenes, as if distrusting them, or distrusting our own capacity to be potentially seduced by them. And this reminds us that, at this point, melodrama incorporates the sentimental as an essential dimension of its language of feeling.³⁹

Those who suffer evil are always virtuous: the two terms are locked in a mutually affirming embrace. In these everyday scenes, the dead are always described in a language of hyperbole: they are always heroes, wonderful sons and daughters, generous, loving, universally popular; in short, perfect beyond all credibility. This is both intensely understandable, in context, and also an innocent reaffirmation of the language of innocence and virtue in which these issues are cast in the mode of melodrama. Ben Singer notes the pathos, 'a kind of visceral physical sensation triggered by the perception of moral injustice against an undeserving victim'.⁴⁰ There is also a subtle universalization here. Everyone is potentially a victim of evil, hence everyone can potentially be enclosed within the community of the virtuous; and since suffering becomes an index of virtue, evidence of it, evil does not just seek it out, but retrospectively constitutes it *as* virtue. Evil indeed *desires* virtue, embraces it as evidence of its own power, its reality; it needs what it must destroy, hence must reconstitute it eternally or face its own oblivion.

In the context of modern culture, it is hardly surprising that this dialectic has become most apparent in the 'child abuse' scenario. Childhood has, after all, been constructed since Romanticism as the heart of innocence and purity, reaching an appropriate apotheosis in Victorian childhood deathbed scenes,⁴¹ coded as the perfect child's departure for the perfection of the hereafter, before the child can be corrupted by the adult world of sexuality and temptation; hence the view that 'the child and the soul are somehow interchangeable, and that consequently children are the keepers and the guarantors of humanity's reputation', as Marina Warner puts it.⁴² Despite the best efforts of Freud and the theorization of childhood sexuality, this model has been bizarrely reinforced in the recent decades of media and public panic over paedophiles and the reconstruction of childhood as a zone of endangered, vulnerable purity. So powerful is this model that when children themselves behave badly, they are likely, in extreme cases, to be reclassified as not 'really' children at all (they are 'little monsters' perhaps – certainly evil).⁴³ 'Childhood' has become a classic site of melodramatic struggle, with good and evil in contention across the hapless body of the child.

It is crucial that this mediated focus on the individual is a focus on the *embodied* individual: melodrama thereby re-enacts the spectacle of suffering in sensational mode, with suffering itself, in the form of the suffering victim, duly sentimentalized. The body becomes the site of violation, the field of battle, both sensational and sensationalized, and it thereby becomes the key subject and resource of the melodramatic framing of the world. Always the victim

as embodied self is reinvented, the self as everyman, threatened, violated, yet surviving, with threats to bodily integrity, the body as potentially subject to trauma, becoming central to modern self-identity. From this point of view, the distinctive Christian tradition of the sacred leaves a powerful residue: for the Christian sacred is not just transcendence, disembodied spirituality; it is also the body, the sacrificial abjection of the torn body, the body of Christ on the cross. Melodrama plunges the sublime into the bathos of the abject, forces us to confront this yet also respond in a way that is a choice, the yea or nay of the body in the immediacy of impact being rationalized into the moral, as the outgrowth of the ethical out of the aesthetic, hence facing both ways, towards gesture and language, body and thought. Either way, both ways, 'The melodramatic body is a body seized by meaning,' as Brooks puts it.⁴⁴

Gesture and language can be taken as code for nature and culture: and here one might note a final, significant feature of the melodramatic mode. If language is hopelessly enmeshed in particularity, in cultural specificity, always subject to uncertainties of translation and meaning, melodrama yearns for the clarity of meaning as immediacy, manifest in some direct way: gesture as the 'language' of the body, the promise that the universal body of humanity, in its suffering, can be read in its purity, nature transcending the chaotic Babel of multiple tongues. Yet, as has been seen, melodrama is also rationalization. Hadley indicates the conundrum: 'Melodrama attempts to turn all gesture into rational discourse but at the same time to retain within that discourse the passion and simplicity of gesture.'⁴⁵ Since the eighteenth century, argues Brooks, gesture has frequently been seen as conveying 'the message of innocence and purity, expressed in an immediate, inarticulate language of presence': whereas language can dissemble, bodily expression reveals truth. Yet the paradox here is never resolved: ultimately, in avoiding the arbitrary conventions of language, truth becomes muteness; nothing must be left unexpressed, yet expression without language is ultimately incommunicable, inarticulate. Brooks concludes that 'the total expressivity assigned to gesture is related to the ineffability of what is to be expressed.'⁴⁶ The expressive body is ultimately the silent body.

It is worth pointing here to an intriguing aspect of this: the way this possibility of a 'universal language' beyond or beneath 'languages' resonates in the promise of early, particularly silent film, where the impact of the visual was seen as having a potential for engaging audiences cross-culturally. Miriam Hansen thus observes that the 'seemingly unmediated appeal to sympathy and sentiment was one aspect of the promotion of the film as universal language.'⁴⁷ This dimension of melodrama gives it real cultural strength: for if, in the

modern world, suffering – in its very ‘muteness’ – is taken as the mark of our irreducible individuality, by that very fact it can be seen as testifying to our common humanity. The cultural work of suffering, what suffering *does* for us, in its social and ideological implications, is convey this duality, confront us with it, reconciling the modernity of our individualism with the universality of our aspirations. So long as we draw on the twin meanings of ‘pathetic’, Williams is surely right to observe that ‘Virtuous suffering is a pathetic weapon against injustice, but we need to recognize how frequently it has been the melodramatic weapon of choice of American popular culture.’⁴⁸

Moving towards a conclusion, we can note the suggestion by Brooks that ‘Perhaps melodrama alone is adequate to contemporary psychic affect’, in that it has the flexibility and range ‘to dramatize and explicate life in imaginative forms that transgress traditional generic constraints, and the traditional demarcations of high culture from popular entertainment’.⁴⁹ We have seen that it also transgresses the demarcations between everyday life, culture and politics. The term itself, of course, is rarely used, doubtless because it does indeed, as Brooks implies, retain these links with disparaged aspects of ‘mass culture’. This makes it all the more important to be clear about those patterns, those connections, that do indeed justify invoking ‘melodrama’ as a key cultural configuration of our times, drawing on its own past incarnations in the modern period while being able to adapt to new challenges.

Melodrama can be characterized as a singularly dynamic version of the Kantian dynamical sublime, not now as experience so much as active appropriation, whereby the aesthetic moment is rationalized to ‘make sense’ while simultaneously demanding an engagement that is essentially moral. We can map its deep structure by addressing the two gaps it both draws on, reproduces, and attempts to bridge, in the process producing its own distinctive form. There is the gap between cause and effect, the disproportion of one to the other, the unpredictability of the relation, given that the connection depends on the complexity of the whole; and then the gap between action and reflection, the gap that enforces – just as it subverts – the construction of the integrated subject, as self. If sensation is what traverses these gaps, producing feeling, then the sense of the whole, grasped reflectively, is manifested in the image. If the sublime in sensation is what forces us ‘beyond’ sensation, as has previously been argued, then melodrama can specify, elaborate this ‘beyond’, taking it through figuration into the dramatization that re-presents the gap as fullness, as excess. This elaboration carries the excess and the rationalization *simultaneously*, the excess *in* or *as* rationalization, conveying a fusion of understanding and involvement. The

form this takes is both pictorial and narrative, but here melodrama meets its own distinctive tension, for this simultaneity is difficult or impossible to bring off – hence the ‘gap’ in melodrama itself, the dynamic tension of tableau and action⁵⁰ that drives it on while enforcing ‘closure’ in the only way possible, as emotional release through climactic excess.

The mediated public sphere

First and foremost, then, melodrama embodies a dramatization of the public sphere in the era of mass media sensation and spectacle, always liable to be traversed by ‘currents of feeling’, transformations of popular emotion, unpredictable in both origin and outcome. We thereby encounter the distinctive late modern mix of the dramas of media dissemination, political manipulation, and varying degrees of public involvement, with individuals and issues subject to the vagaries of fashion, the rise and fall of celebrities, heroes and villains, and the sentimentalization of suffering. All this seems a long way from the image of the eighteenth-century coffee-house in which men – always men – allegedly sat around sedately debating issues of the day in the terms of an emergent ideal of calm, abstract, disembodied rationality. One can of course point out that this construction already rests on a distinctive structure of feeling and accompanying language of bodily expression, that of sensibility, hardly an *absence* of body,⁵¹ just as we can extend this to point out that women, too, participated in the wider discursive structures opened up by this, as readers and writers of novels, as correspondents, as full agents in this broader – if nonetheless always gendered – conception of the public sphere. And one can further point out that this public sphere was itself traversed, by the turn of the century, by these emerging currents of melodrama, which linked up with the processes of exclusion whereby emergent modernity expelled ‘other’ patterns of life and culture as inimical to itself, beyond the pale, whether remote or dangerously ‘inside’. And in the light of this, and the preceding analysis, one might want to turn this around, and ask: is melodrama so pervasive that it totally subsumes the contemporary public sphere?

This whole distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres needs examination. The two terms can be seen as mutually interrogatory or interpenetrating. Taking the street as the pre-eminent site of the public, Benjamin thus suggests that ‘*flânerie* can transform Paris into one great interior’, adding that ‘the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.’⁵²

Here, Benjamin is setting public and private off against one another, showing that they interpenetrate, or become mutually encompassing. But if the street can become 'interior', how is it that the home, as the classic locus of the private, can also become 'exterior'? If we remain in the 1930s, we can bear in mind that when the *flâneur* – or his successors – returned home, they would be sure to find the radio (the 'wireless') positioned there, and Gillian Beer reminds us that 'Radio produced a new idea of the public, one far more intermixed, promiscuous and democratic than the book could cater for', and that 'intimacy' was central to a radio experience in which 'No secure boundaries prevail between private and public'.⁵³ Later, of course, there would be a new box in pride of place inside the home: David Morley points out that the television set is 'at the junction of the "inside" and the "outside", the channel through which the news of the public world enters the domestic realm'.⁵⁴ This in turn suggests that the media can indeed be positioned as 'mediators' whereby 'public' and 'private' only exist in a constant *process* of dynamic interaction and transformation.

The private could be seen as what, at any time, is *kept from* being public, just as this sets up a contest in which the public seeks to (re)claim, to invade or 'expose' the private and, in so doing, *constitutes* it as such. One might say, with Misha Kavka, that 'privacy only comes into existence when it is on the verge of being lost, extruded in retrospect from its opposing term, publicity'.⁵⁵ The core of the private becomes the *secret* – with all its melodramatic potential – just as secrets are always there to be revealed, and are always already known by someone, somewhere, are already in some sense 'open' secrets. Such 'secrets' become endlessly 'negotiable' – selling one's secret, or just exposing it, becomes a route to publicity; indeed, a route we must take, if we seek to gain purchase on the equivalent 'secrets' of others. In her study, Kavka presents 'reality TV' as a core site for exploring this dynamic interrelation between secrets created, shared and exposed, with participants variously sharing or excluded from situations of 'intimate knowledge' of which the viewing public may be – or become – well aware.⁵⁶ This also reminds us that intimacy has become an arena where these negotiations over privacy can be particularly intense, with much perceived to be at stake over the fundamentals of self and self-identity. This returns us to the centrality of the body, and its relation to the self, as the heart of the modern notion of the private,⁵⁷ and we can see why Kavka argues, *contra* Habermas, that 'the public sphere only *matters* when affective particularity is taken into account', while we need to remember that *neither* pole can be taken as pre-constituted: the very notions of body and self, and the experiences of selfhood and embodiment, cannot escape these criss-crossing fields of force

that define the public and the private as currents traversing the terrain of the modern. As she observes elsewhere, of television generally, 'the medium itself works through channels of feeling',⁵⁸ though not, one should add, through these alone; or at least, their *effect* brings into play those imaginative acts of reflexive appropriation and figuration that we have already seen as constituting problems for any focus that is too exclusively on sensation and affect.⁵⁹

In her work on the mediated public sphere in relation to perceptions of suffering, Lilie Chouliaraki adds an emphasis on the cosmopolitan, arguing that 'a group of spectators may turn into a cosmopolitan public only if the spectators break with any particular identification'.⁶⁰ While unpredictable in its effects, sensationalism can play a role through *disturbing*, breaking down, these existing boundaries.⁶¹ For Kavka, the transmission of affect is crucial here, and since 'affect is a form of knowledge produced from the very movement of crossing a boundary', it is involved not just in embodied person to person relations but in relations between self and other more generally, including relations between the boundaries that both separate and relate different communities. These boundaries, now, are *mediated*: television works through 'the creation of intimate relations across a screen', and the 'across' here refers not just to what is happening on the screen, but *between* screen and viewer. She concludes that 'the public' is 'increasingly a construction of mediated intimacies, a collective performance of private relationality which opens up a space of public interest';⁶² it is, in short, more about implicit, affective 'knowledge' than explicit discussion and debate.

One might conclude from all this that while 'community' and 'public sphere' cannot be wholly distinguished – which is why a purely impersonal, universalizing, rationalist approach to the latter cannot work – neither should they be totally assimilated. The mediated public sphere thus emerges as the sphere of endlessly unstable communities, with affect, reflexive awareness and debate, occurring at and through boundaries that are permeable, facing both ways, inside and out; and such communities can thereby be 'mediated' in both senses, in that the media can be said both to 'publicize' and to 'mediate', hence becoming partially *constitutive* of possibilities of communal life. In thus harnessing linguistic, pictorial and sensory resources, the media show how, as Chouliaraki puts it, 'the formation of publics is an aesthetic operation'.⁶³ Universality exists as process rather than form or content: it designates communities as ever-emergent and simultaneously in dispersion, in principle porous in relation to each other, and with the media being central agents in these processes. 'Publicness', one might say, is horizontal, structural, involving relations between

bodies both as subjects of experience and sources of reflexive thought and imaginative projection, rather than organizing them in more hierarchical and increasingly abstract terms, with each higher level being more disembodied, and contextually disembedded, than the one below.⁶⁴

One can use a historical perspective to suggest another area where the notion of the public sphere requires some revision. Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson,⁶⁵ Burgett suggests that 'print culture seems to trace the circulation of a simultaneity of social time, the homogeneous, empty time that it fills with events,'⁶⁶ thereby reinforcing the sense of community *in* time and space. For John Thompson, this entails the decline of the 'traditional publicness of co-presence' and makes possible the discovery of 'despatialized simultaneity,' as in telephone conversations, signalling the rise of forms of mediated interaction that have, in time, amounted to a 'reinvention of publicness.'⁶⁷ The 'modern' perspective on space and time in effect presents them as an abstract framework, imagined simultaneously as a kind of container, divisible into measurable units, *within* which events occur, lives develop, and communities evolve. 'Presence' and co-presence, whatever their precise meaning, are specified relative to this taken-for-granted framework.

The *effect* of modern technologies of media and communication, however, is to subvert this, and it is easy to miss the subtle transition here. In an era when we increasingly find 'face-to-face interaction' occurring via the internet, perhaps we need to think of 'co-presence' as being transformed, rather than replaced. 'Presence' becomes a relative, almost a negotiable concept, no longer tied to any fixed notions of space and time: those I interact with are 'co-present' to me; I might want to 'locate' them, in more conventional spatio-temporal terms, but this isn't essential. 'The present' is what expands to fill the time of interaction, wherever and whenever it occurs. (The internet is a no-place, and, like the city, never sleeps.) Presence can be diffused, and differentiated, just as it can be concentrated; it is not static, a given, but must be seen in terms of relation and process. It also has an element of the vicarious. 'Presence' is what we can carry off as presence; it is *as if* presence, good enough, but not without the element of simulation. Thus we can regard presence as increasingly inseparable from these processes of mediation. As supposed universals, space and time still have their 'place', but are increasingly defined in terms of relation and process, rather than defining them, hence becoming relative to presence. Space and time are not fixed coordinates that uniquely define events; rather, events, as explosive or congealed concentrations of process, become the nodes or markers to which space and time are related. Thus Rodowick can argue that

'digital culture presents us with mixed, layered, and heterogeneous audiovisual images unfolding in a nonlinear space and time', and hence the 'elimination of a felt sense of space and distance as we interact in computer networks'.⁶⁸ And Paul Virilio suggests that we live in an age of 'polar inertia', of speeds so frantic that they amount to a virtually instantaneous, 'generalised arrival' of images, messages, and voices, an implosion of space and time.⁶⁹

'Presence' becomes the ever-shifting horizon of experience. In the era of 'mediated experience', both presence and its horizon become transformed. Thompson suggests that mediated experience involves experiencing events which are spatially distant, so that 'experience takes place in a context which is different from the context in which the event actually occurs', adding that this 'recontextualized character of mediated experience is a source both of its charm and of its ability to shock and disconcert'.⁷⁰ Taking into account the points just made, we could say that these different contexts do not slide together harmoniously; there is a *jarring* of contexts, a friction as they rub against each other, and it is out of this that sensation emerges. After all, the body itself is subject to this tension: the 'distance' senses (sight, sound) can live in this new regime of co-presence, but the other senses, and, therefore, something of the sense of 'embodiment' itself, are left behind, further emphasizing the potential for sensation to flash across the fissure. Something of this tension is also apparent in Samuel Weber's claim that if television *overcomes* distance and separation, the fact that it is a mode of transmission necessarily also *involves* separation: hence it 'overcomes spatial distance but only by *splitting the unity of place*'. Again the television set as 'Trojan horse', inside yet also outside, is in play here.⁷¹ Yet the result is a new sense of presence as trans-contextual, disjunctive, or perhaps of context as relative to presence, rather than vice versa, and manifest in the affective discontinuities of mediated experience. And one can agree with Thompson that this necessarily transforms our sense of community: 'commonality is no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale'.⁷²

Here we can further elaborate the distinctive features of television. Thompson suggests that 'it combines audio-visual presence with spatio-temporal distance', but, as already implied, that doesn't go far enough, and perhaps keeps the experience too close to that of film.⁷³ For Kavka, it is 'a technology of intimacy' in that there can be 'a collapse of distance and time through the production of affective proximity'; hence we can move 'beyond the semiotics of representation to the affect of presentation'.⁷⁴ Jeffrey Sconce makes suggestions that help clarify the tension here. Television is not like film; as an electronic rather than a photographic medium, the television image is in perpetual motion, so the

image as the product of a series of electric impulses is necessarily experienced 'as it happens'. He argues that television seems 'live' because 'its scanned images are always in the process of "becoming"', hence 'producing a "living" quality that pervades the medium and its programming'. Thus television's distinctive effect – and affect, one might add – 'emanates from this illusion of direct, personalized, and immediate contact with the audience, the medium consistently staging a form of simulated first-person address ... that always seems to be unfolding in the present, the now'.⁷⁵ The time of the image and the time of events shown are assimilated, which is different from the 'presence in absence' of film.⁷⁶ For Kafka, too, the effect of 'liveness' is to collapse the time of action and the time of viewing; such liveness involves 'belonging to an imagined community of viewers *at the moment of watching*'.⁷⁷

In effect, what we are presented with here is the suggestion that mediated experience, particularly in the context of television, manifests an essential element of the vicarious. As we move away from the classic face-to-face scenario, as experience becomes mediated, so the representational forms become more trans-contextual, and the potential of the vicarious as the mediated experience of otherness intensifies. As experience becomes mediated, it incorporates its own distance from its object; in becoming trans-contextual, it can only do so as other to itself, hence the vicarious as a reflexive distancing from self and other. Thus, one engages with 'reality television' – a category which could, in many ways, be said to incorporate the 'news' – by being aware of the 'performance of reality in a way that *matters*', whatever the elements of simulation and manipulation, of staged event as against actuality, thereby engaging spectacle *as* experience. Hence 'something can *feel real* precisely because it is mediated, because of the affect transmitted to our responsive bodies across a screen', as Kafka puts it.⁷⁸ Reality television 'works to catch and represent the reality of watching itself, that is, to catch and represent viewers to themselves; it is they who are more deeply exposed through the affective reality of this "exposure" being relayed back to them'.⁷⁹ Between self and other lies the mediated image, with its potential for vicarious identification: the vicarious is the way this transgression of the boundary is 'lived' in experience. One is not really the other – but neither is one really not the other. The vicarious is our mode of experience in spectacle; it corresponds in experience to simulation at the level of representation and reality.⁸⁰ And if there is something of the theatrical here, it can remind us of the possibility of an over-identification that can result in both sentimentality and melodrama, the excesses of the subject in the vicarious, escaping into itself as other, through the excesses of feeling and emotion.⁸¹

Now, however, it is time to incorporate sensationalism more directly. To gain attention, it is necessary to be sensational. To be heard above the hubbub, hold the attention despite all the distractions, even just to convey information in a world of ever-present excess noise, one has to resort to further excess, to eye-catching intensity, or to transgression. This is effect rather than teleology, more like a survival of the fittest, of the sensation with the greatest attention-grabbing power, a response enforced by the exigencies of the modern environment of rapid change and media-inflected experience – in short, life as ‘special effects’. In a culture of hyperbole, everything has to be hyped up, sensationalized. Thus do we encounter the anaesthetics of the modern: feelings are numbed, as we live in a cocoon of half-awareness, and shock defence, with ‘feeling’ itself becoming alien to us; hence, again, sensation has to become sensational, to make an impact, whether external or through our response (in ‘feeling’). If this is so, then we can also return to melodrama; for it, too, in its wider ramifications, can be positioned as an extreme point in cycles of sensationalism, whether as the climax of one or the dramatic start of another; and it, too, can never in principle escape the ‘fatigue’ that marks the excess of the same, desperately though it may try to incorporate even this into its all-encompassing dramas. But just as there are always new opportunities for sensation (and its recuperation in melodrama), due to the very impossibility of an ever-intensifying linear process of uniform sensationalism, so the very *breaks* in this process offer potential for critical and ethical engagement. In short, if all this implies further potential for sensation, for mediated experience as ‘sensational’, it nonetheless gives no grounds for assuming that these problems *necessarily* have to be seen as somehow inherently threatening any possibility of a meaningful, albeit transformed, public sphere in which communication can ‘embody’ the sensory and the affective, in the context of mediation, without being *reducible* to these. Least of all does one have to conclude that even a sensationalized pattern of communication must *necessarily* be cast in the mode of melodrama. But this invites further reflection.

Conclusion

We must reflect, one more time, on melodrama, where the supposedly rational world of modernity encounters its nemesis in the dark side of the force, a cosmos of extremes. The obsession with trauma, the identification with the suffering victim, the overflow of pity into sentimentality, the concentration and

transformation of the reality of misfortune into the experience of a force of evil, the figuration of evil in human terms, as a person or group: from sensationalism to melodrama, the return of the *theatrum mundi* as nightmare, is a small enough step, though with massive implications. Here we encounter the simultaneous escalation of intensity and sensation into spectacular spectacle, with aesthetics, ethics and politics fused in the battles that rage across the infernal terrain of the world. The great strength of melodrama, after all, is its apparently all-encompassing *openness* to experience, its absorption of the contingencies of the world into a unifying vision that incorporates our own fundamental responses *to* it as part *of* it, our capacity for moral involvement at its most profound. This also is the problem it poses: in being open to the world even to excess, in its frenzy of sense-making, melodrama nevertheless endeavours to close off those disturbing chinks of light, the flickerings of difference, so that they serve merely to generate the enormous energy needed, in putting the *drama* into melodrama. But this very fact reminds us that, as we have seen, the melodrama alternative is not inevitable. It can only succeed at the cost of empty circularity; if that drives it on to renewed efforts, it also opens up a gap for reflexive awareness and the challenging contingencies of experience.

We can recall 'dispersion' here, the 'distracted' experience of the modern world as plethora, representing the irreducibility of the experience of culture to rational, goal-seeking projects and the orientation to control, the irredeemable multiplicity of the world, a world beyond utility and necessity, a world of excess. *This* excess points beyond the excess of melodrama itself, seeing that the latter, too, escapes its own control, cannot but reinforce the diversity of the world it seeks to harness. In the light of this, we can say that modernity swings between two ethical orientations. Firstly, an ethic of degree, a continuum of small differences, varying shades of grey. The drive to knowledge and control, with its ethos of 'reform' and 'improvement', contributes to this relativist continuum. And this is also continuous with the world of everyday life, that of the 'humble narratives', impregnated with moral dimensions that have to be endlessly mediated, finessed in practical situations where right and wrong can only be questions of degree. One can try to live this with integrity or with cynicism, and these dilemmas are central to the moral dimensions of the humble narratives of our lives; but in practice these can slide into each other anyway, for this is also where we encounter the grubby compromises of politics, business and bureaucratic life, the world of rationalization, measurement and money. As for the challenge of integrity, one can further observe that a 'heroism of the everyday' can produce scenarios in which we star in moral dramas where good and bad do have real

meaning, even if this is partly a function of our own determination to live our lives in precisely that way, recreating the endless possibility of melodrama, the second orientation. Ultimately, then, this duality of the moral dimension permits us to return to the everyday, but the everyday as a navigational problem, as it were: a problem of negotiating the Scylla of melodrama and the Charybdis of moral squalor, when those two figures of temptation loom uncertainly all around, themselves evading clear definition.

There is hope, then, after all. The murmurings of the world, registered as sensory inputs, as perceptions, always have some priority over subsequent constructions placed on them, even if without these constructions we cannot know just what it is we are registering, and even though these murmurings may themselves be irredeemably marked by previous such constructions, now opaque in their reappearance. The 'sensation' of the image represents this ability to respond to inputs as novel, to revivify our sense of the world, *disturb* our interpretations, even though it can never challenge them directly, for thought (cognition, theory) is as reflexively irreducible to image (aesthetics) as vice versa, albeit rooted in that very domain. Perception, *aisthesis*, retains some independence of the values that can be elaborated out of it, even if the possibility, even the necessity, of such elaboration is there in the very fusion of passive reaction and active orientation, the 'facing both ways' that characterizes the very moment of its occurrence.

The news broadcasts the endless dispersion of the world; sensationalism works as a practice of concentration, breaking into the intimacy of our feelings. This is where everything is at stake, where everything depends on which direction we take. In his thought-provoking discussion of the media, John Peters reminds us that theories of communication are ultimately, in effect, theories of communion, of relationship conceived under the figure of love. Contrasting the Socratic model of dialogue with the Gospel model of dissemination, he writes: 'The fundamental question is whether the epitome of love should be the love that occurs between equals who are present to each other in body and soul or the love that leaps across the chasms.' The former emphasizes unity, even identity; the latter, 'making do with the fragments we find in ourselves and others.' The Socratic dialogues 'figure love as the yearning for oneness; the synoptic Gospels as compassion for otherness.'⁸² 'Dissemination' has the effect of taking our attention away from origins and causes, and focusing on outcomes; in the parable of the sower, the seed is 'scattered', so whether it germinates is due largely to the accident of the terrain where it happens to land, and this is not in the control of the sower. Kavka hints at this, referring to the

television screen as 'a dispersal mechanism of affect', scattering seeds that can 'take root and generate effects.'⁸³

Applied to broadcasting – and one does not really have to *apply* it, since one can already talk of 'broadcasting' the seed over a wide area – this has a radical effect, encouraging us to go beyond the uniformity of the original message and its producer to consider the diversity of outcomes ('reception'). In his account, Peters points out that there can, of course, be potentially totalitarian aspects to this, but is keen to point out that this can be just as true of dialogue: it is not necessarily egalitarian, nor does it necessarily conform to rational ideals, despite the prestige this particular version has had in philosophy and in (Habermasian) theories of the public sphere. The history of sound transmission can be said to incorporate both, with the early priority of dialogue (the telephone, and the years of individual-to-individual 'wireless') giving way to broadcasting ('radio'), but with the latter incorporating elements of the former, rather than eliminating them.⁸⁴ And could the internet, too, be said to include both, or incorporate dialogue into dissemination?

So, at the point of sensation, do we continue with the intensity of concentration, incorporate the other into unity with the self in a sphere of intimacy, expelling those others – or aspects of otherness – that fail to fit, with melodrama as *possible* outcome? Or do we make a reflexive move, distancing our self from itself, locating ourselves in the mode of dispersion so as better to encounter the difference of the other, thus liberating feeling, and permitting sympathetic engagement across the gap? For there is to be found here a framework that can make this engagement possible, the possibility of the vicarious immersion and distancing in the otherness of life, a meeting ground in the plane of dispersion, a perspective in the scatter: the spectacle of sympathy, of sympathetic engagement, that distinctive relation between feeling, imagination and judgement that remains in place, that characterizes the cultural imaginary as a space of dissemination that can modify and hence incorporate dialogue. Beyond melodrama, then, we can still encounter moments of intensity, and visions of compassion, in the infinite scatter of the world.