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## 'Unusually Compassionate': Melodrama, Film and the Figure of the Child

In film and media studies a revisionist discourse on the melodrama has gained momentum in recent years. Scholars like Christine Gledhill or Linda Williams have argued that the history of American film and, indeed, American culture as a whole should be reinvestigated from a perspective acknowledging the importance of the melodrama as a *mode of representation*, rather than a genre like, for instance, the so-called women's film of the 1930s. In this discourse, to consider the melodrama as a mode of cultural representation transcoding individual genres is meant to emphasize its importance as an aesthetic and rhetorical form that has shaped American popular culture in various, often ambiguous and contradictory, ways.

Following these suggestions, which have helped to reevaluate the importance of emotionalizing strategies in fiction, this essay addresses an aspect that up to now has received surprisingly little scholarly attention even though it has engendered crucial melodramatic scenarios: the figure of the child in the history of American cinema. I will begin by discussing briefly some of the main ideas of the revisionist discourse concentrating eventually on one of its core difficulties: the reassessment of melodrama's cultural function. I will then turn to the figure of the child as a complicated case in point for this difficulty arguing that the depiction of disfranchised and marginalized groups, like children, has shaped melodramatic narratives yet that their role for the democratization of American culture has been highly ambiguous. The sentimental fiction of an 'unusually compassionate' being has helped to express major themes of injustice. However, like visions of race and gender the figure of the child has been used for a rhetoric characterized by the representational dilemma of first having to label subjects as victims in order to (re)establish their equal status as human beings (cf. Wil-

liams *Playing*). How the revisionist discourse may come to terms with this dilemma will be taken up in my concluding remarks.

### 1. Melodrama as a Mode of Representation

The revisionist discourse on the melodrama has been developing for over thirty years in literary, theater and film studies. There is no need to retrace this in detail here, since excellent overviews are readily available, yet I briefly want to highlight some of the major issues of the debate.<sup>1</sup> The derogatory notions of sentimental literature and the film melodrama traditionally found fault with two related aspects: first, the aesthetic quality of the melodrama, and second, its social and political implications. On the one hand, the excessive, overwhelming and hyperbolic melodramatic aesthetic was devalued and criticized from the perspectives of both realism and modernism. On the other hand, the political functions of the form were seen to be not just manipulative by controlling emotional states but conservative or even downright reactionary on account of melodrama's nostalgic bias.

Scholars of sentimental literature have made the convincing case that considering texts designed to evoke strong emotions through the lens of realism or the avant-garde was bound to miss the complex cultural functions they were meant to serve (cf. Tompkins, Fluck, Barnes). As to the political argument against sentimentality and the melodrama, the line of defense was established that the form was not only hugely popular but that its popularity had in fact been maintained by its continuous adjustment and modernization. As Linda Williams puts it, 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" (Williams, "Revised" 80).

However, pointing out the popularity of the melodrama alone does not suffice to claim that it is a mode of representation whose significance, especially for American culture, has been underappre-

<sup>1</sup> Important early contributions came from Brooks, Cawelti and Elsaesser. They were complemented and extended by, among others, Neale, Gledhill "Field", McConachie, Mason, Williams "Revised", Singer, Gledhill "Rethinking", Williams *Playing* and Decker.

ciated. The revisionist discourse has therefore been attempting to radically redefine the relationship between its hyperbolic and excessive aesthetic on the one hand and its cultural and political functions on the other. One of the basic ideas for this redefinition has been that strong emotions evoked by the melodrama have historically served the purpose of creating the social glue and affective bonds characterizing a democratic culture based on the ideals of justice and equality (cf. Brooks, Williams "Revised").

Scholars like Peter Brooks traced the evolution of melodrama as a modernized variant of tragedy to the democratic revolutions in France and the United States, where certain aesthetic forms developed in order to counter the social and affective ruptures caused by the dramatic political changes. The revisionist accounts have therefore inextricably connected melodrama's cultural function with two related developments: first, the process of secularization severing the moral order from religious and metaphysical beliefs, and second, the process of democratization which, in Alexis de Tocqueville's sense, makes it necessary to create the moral order from within a social system which lacks the hierarchical structure of aristocratic societies and is based, instead, on the idea of equality (cf. Tocqueville).

According to Linda Williams core elements of the melodrama are a space of innocence, usually the home; victim heroes, whose virtue is recognized through moral legibility, a dialectic of pathos and action; and a reductive, Manichaeian depiction of the characters (cf. Williams "Revised"). The crucial idea of moral legibility was introduced by Peter Brooks with his concept of the moral occult, "the domain of operative spiritual values" (Brooks 5). It represents a hidden moral quality that has to be uncovered and made visible by the hyperbolic rhetoric of the melodrama, or as Linda Williams puts it, by a "quest for a democratic, plain-speaking recognition of innocence and guilt, a guilt or innocence that can be spoken out loud and seen by all" (Williams, "Revised" 81).

In summary, the melodrama as a mode of representation is characterized by two central elements: first, it is designed to create what Noël Carroll has called core emotions such as pity, sympathy, compassion, empathy or admiration for the virtuous who have been victimized (cf. Carroll); second it is meant to reveal the moral good and bad by staging a quest for the legibility of hidden moral qualities (cf. Cawelti, Brooks, Williams "Revised"). In many ways, then,

the melodrama can be related to a cultural development that Norbert Elias has investigated as the civilizing functions of emotions (cf. Elias). Viewed against this background, however, I believe that the revisionist discourse has sometimes failed to acknowledge the degree to which the emotionalizing logic of the melodrama is not merely aiming at an intensification of affective appeals. Rather, depending on the kind of injustice at stake, the mode is characterized by a highly selective way of adjusting emotional levels. While certain aspects of the victimization narrative may be highlighted and intensified, others are toned down. The emotional logic may thus combine contrary strategies of affect stimulation and affect control (cf. Decker).

Where the melodramatic mode is meant to further democratic rights, compelling means of presentation will have to be used in order to produce outrage and emphasize the need for existing norms to be applied. On the other hand, where ideas of equality or equal value are to be championed, emotions that might take their pleasurable appeal from differences in status or behavior will have to be toned down. In this case, a form of democratic sensibility evolves. This strives to disregard fundamental differences, or, as Raymond Williams writes about the inevitable 'fiction' of a democratic culture: "to have *democratic* manners or feelings, is to be unconscious of class distinctions, or consciously to disregard or overcome them in everyday behavior: acting *as if* all people were equal, and deserved equal respect, whether this is really so or not" (Williams, *Keywords* 97). Thus the sensational melodrama revolves around the idea of a symbolic redistribution of values and claims, while the sentimental melodrama focuses on creating compassion for the marginalized and disfranchised; it is the key to the forging of a democratic sensibility (cf. Cawelti, McConachie, Mason).

These different ways and functions of interrelating emotionality, morality and justice in melodramatic narratives represent a crucial, if largely unresolved and contested, issue in the revisionist discourse. For instance, in *Playing the Race Card* Linda Williams writes that she is not trying to make the book "a rehabilitation or defense of melodrama as an aesthetic form" (309). But the whole thrust of recent debates has aimed at establishing a conception of the melodrama as less simplistic in terms of an aesthetic mode, and as less conservative concerning its cultural functions. Williams herself repeatedly links the melodrama with the idea of an American-

style democratic culture, a vernacular form that has been more influential than classical realism or other, less hyperbolic representational modes. However, the relatively abstract claim that it is "concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering" (Williams, *Playing* 15) seems to mask the issue how, specifically, the melodrama has furthered or obstructed the democratization of American culture.

In part, this hesitation appears to be triggered by the book's topic of the race melodrama. Williams argues that it has been utilized to both racist and antiracist ends: "Its key, however, is not simplistic, 'black and white' moral antinomies, but what stands behind them: the quest to forge a viscerally felt moral legibility in the midst of moral confusion and disarray" (*Playing* 300). Yet if we argue that the melodramatic mode is a particular way of engaging with, and making operative, the democratic norms of justice, how can we separate the process of deciphering the moral occult from the notion of the moral good that it eventually reveals? Or to put it differently, can a melodrama utilized to racist ends be an expression of American democratic culture?

While Williams correctly highlights the popular appeal and continuous modernization of the melodramatic mode, she seems to be—as she herself points out—unable to assess this popularity in a coherent functional model. If we assume that the mode is employed to further elements of a democratic culture, are we working with an implicit normative model of democracy in order to be able to discriminate between different kinds and uses of the melodrama, or are we instead positing a discursive space in which anyone may potentially use the rhetoric of melodrama for his or her ends?

In order to reevaluate melodrama's cultural functions I therefore want to argue that two aspects have to be (re)considered more thoroughly. First, as Williams and Gledhill have shown, in the melodramatic mode realistic strategies of representation are employed to make its appeal convincing and persuasive (cf. Gledhill "Field", Williams "Revised"). Yet we have to acknowledge more comprehensively that this peculiar mixture inevitably creates tensions within the fictional text and its referential claims. For instance, the character as rhetorical figure in the layout of a melodramatic constellation may clash with the character as realistic subject and the concomitant aspiration to historical verisimilitude.

Second, even though the mode is, in a sense, merely a rhetorical form without an invariable function, we have to identify and evaluate the conceptual framework which informs the depiction of (in)justice in order to assess its particular contribution to the process of cultural democratization. If, as Peter Brooks writes, melodrama "becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (15), we still, as with other representational modes, have to ask: on what normative basis concerning its depiction of wrongdoing or injustice, and to which ends?<sup>2</sup> To summarize these objections, two questions may be helpful: First, how does the melodramatic mode incorporate or 'negotiate' its relation with the discourse of realism? Second, what are the evaluative grounds for our assessment that the mode enhances or obstructs the process of cultural democratization?

As indicated, the difficulties within the revisionist discourse seem to be particularly pressing when one is considering the long and painful history of representing race relations. I want to suggest, however, that they also apply to other areas; in particular, the relationship between the melodrama and the figure of the child.

## 2. The Melodramatic Child

The depiction of children in melodrama has a long history in American literature, theater and film. If we consider the twin designs of emotionalizing and moralizing inherent in the mode, it is easy to see why the vulnerable yet morally uncontaminated figure of the child has been a staple of American cinema from D.W. Griffith to Steven Spielberg. The close relationship between stage and film melodrama in the early years of silent films secured the importance of children for the big screen. Here they evolved from the stereotypical victims or angelic presences of the one-reelers to the

<sup>2</sup> One could, for instance, argue that the melodramatic mode was also of major importance for the cinema of fascist Germany. A film like *Heimkehr* (Gustav Ucicky, 1941) is characterized by a very drastic and emotionally compelling portrayal of how Germans living in Poland feel to be victimized by the indigenous population. In this case, melodrama is in the service of Nazi propaganda, so that in order to differentiate this kind of use from other uses we have to analyze the conceptual and normative assumptions implicit in the fictional text.

relatively complex, and modern, screen personae of actors like Shirley Temple, who epitomized the first era of the child-star.<sup>3</sup>

The discourse on the cultural history of childhood has stressed the importance of two basic notions of the child: on the one hand, the depraved child of Puritan thought, tainted by original sin and needing to be tamed, on the other, the Romantic notion of primal innocence incapable of evil (cf. Jackson *Images* 14-30, Jenkins "Innocence"). It is tempting to link these notions with a generic classification that would relate the evil child with fear and disgust codified in the horror genre, and the innocent child with the pity and admiration of the melodrama (cf. Carroll). Yet this would be an oversimplification and it suffices to say that the exemplary and purifying quality of the innocent child has played by far the bigger role in American cinematic history. For the melodramatic imagination, in particular, the figure of the child can be seen to have represented three primary qualities. First, it is exceedingly vulnerable and thus easily victimized; second, it signifies a specific form of innocence, lacking the knowledge, prejudice and preconceptions of adults; finally, it has been regarded as the promise of a different, less painful and depressing future.

The first representational function of the child figure revolves around the melodramatic constellation of the perpetrator and the victim. The physical weakness of the child's body, his or her helplessness and need of protection together with the susceptibility to being fooled or misled all create a sense of exceptional vulnerability. Though James Kincaid has bemoaned the hystericized discourse on physical and sexual child abuse, it is plain to see that this experience has recently been added to melodrama's list of abhorrent and immoral violations of the body (cf. Kincaid).

The sense of a body and mind not yet fully developed has also created more subtle sentiments. The idea that children are 'unusually compassionate' which is expressed in *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) may indeed be considered a fundamental

<sup>3</sup> On the early history of melodrama and the cinema cf. Singer, Maltby; the history of child figures in American film is sketched by Jackson *Images*, Sinyard. Much of the literature on child figures belongs to the outdated school of image studies. More complex insights have been generated by psychoanalytic interpretations yet much work on age-, gender- or class-related aspects of child figures remains to be done.

characteristic of their depiction. The melodramatic child is not only made out as more natural, being beyond morality and reason, but also as purer and more authentic in its feelings (cf. Jackson *Images*). The violation of the child's body has thus to be seen as one element of injustice which is complemented by the emotional and psychological treatment or rather mistreatment of the child.

Early melodramas like *The Champ* (King Vidor, 1931) narrativized this treatment in a decidedly social fashion by depicting the affective dilemmas as a result of class conflicts. Yet more contemporary films have psychologized these social tensions into the ubiquitous theme of the child as an outsider or 'freak'. In this more abstract and universal sense the melodramatic child appears to be the quintessential figure for dramatizing what Tan and Frijda have called the separation-reunion theme in which the desire for attachment and intimacy is replayed over and over again through narratives of leaving, returning home, or, ultimately, also of dying (cf. Tan/Frijda).

The second representational function of the figure of the child, its innocence, is also a major ingredient of the melodramatic mode. Lack of knowledge and a high degree of susceptibility to temptations are prerogatives for the notion of vulnerability (shared, for example, by the young female victims of sentimental literature), yet the particular notion of a childlike lack of prejudice and preconceptions goes further. On the one hand, the presence of the melodramatic child helps to define a network of relationships between adults and children that shapes crucial categories like domestic space, family, or home (cf. Sobchack). On the other, its presence also creates an eroticized or sexualized narrative space that includes but ultimately goes beyond the observation that the child figure is closely connected with the ideology of motherhood.<sup>4</sup> Both the social and the sexual implications of the melodramatic child are grounded in its attribute of a particular kind of innocence transcending not just the boundaries between child and adult but also the barriers within the adult world (cf. Jackson *Images*).

<sup>4</sup> On the history of childhood and sexuality cf. Jenkins "Sensuous", deMause. For an interesting case study of Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson cf. Vered; on the eroticized body of the little girl cf. Brinckmann, Sinclair.



The domestic space or home that is created by the presence of a child has often been extended metaphorically to address the needs of the American nation. At this more abstract level the child is often placed into a social system that is lacking stability or balance, and it helps to readjust a sense of coherence and order. A representational figure emerges that Virginia Blum has called the go-between child, able to transgress and shift boundaries which have caused the systemic disequilibrium that the melodrama, in its Manichaeic logic, strives to overcome (cf. Blum, Jackson *Images*). As the child manages to connect and integrate social classes, foreign and American culture, black and white America, or rational and supernatural elements, it becomes a linking device of binarisms whose lack of preconceptions and discriminating feelings represents the implicit norm for a better, more humane and harmonious world.

The lack of (sexual) knowledge and preconceptions of the child who is at the same time trying to readjust an instable domestic space often leads to a reversal of roles and behavior. The adults regress to an earlier, infantile stage, while the precocious child takes on, at least temporarily and provisionally, their responsibilities (cf. Jackson *Images*). This temporary reversal of roles also allows the adults to imagine themselves as more victimized than the children, an illusion that will usually be corrected in the course of the narrative. The fantasy of making it easy for adults who are incapable of organizing their life, then, seems to be one of the most enduring, and obtrusive, notions connected with the melodramatic child. It is based on the idea that the child is blessed with a kind of innocence that makes it at the same time exceptional as an individual and exemplary as a cultural and social force.

The third representational function of the melodramatic child, its utopian dimension, may be regarded as an element that further enriches and complicates the melodrama. If the melodrama is characterized by the yearning for an idealized past that no longer exists and whose absence is felt all the more painfully in a present characterized by suffering and lack, we can contend that the utopian dimension of the child figure introduces a certain twist to this time scheme. The concept of childhood can signify the nostalgic realm of a less depraved, materialistic or corrupted past to which the characters wish to return in an effort of self-purification and renewal (cf. Williams "Revised"). But it can also serve as an emotional escape route out of a depressing present when the protagonist who has

been seen suffering and who has been granted poetic justice is still a child at the beginning of his or her life.

One might argue that, as a utopian trope, the child is not really regarded to be an individual, i.e. a person who has formed an unmistakable and distinct personality, but rather a resource for the development of the group or society as a whole. Worse still, the innocent child figure in many cases appears to be a mere projection of the hoped for (or, in the case of the evil child, dreaded) development of the adult world.<sup>5</sup> Inevitably, this seems to raise the question of whether the depiction of the melodramatic child itself should be seen as a kind of injustice committed in the name of humanity, as a vision of the moral occult designed for the pleasure and healing of adults. Some studies on the representation of children make this case, yet for the purpose of this essay it suffices to emphasize the artificiality of the fictional child figures we are dealing with (cf. Blum).

The basic dilemma of the representation of children, especially of young children, lies in the necessity of having to construct the figure of the child from the perspective of the adult. As Blum puts it: "In the effort to present the 'reality' of the child and its perceptions, we cannot help but interpret the child in light of adult motives; we cannot help but interpret *ourselves* through the child" (Blum 5). Since the child lacks the necessary means of expression and reflection, the childlike perception of the world can only be inferred by adults who must try, by various strategies, to reenvision the workings of a mind in the process of being formed.

The representation of children can and will therefore never be created by the historical subjects themselves. As a result, whether in the social sciences, in instruction manuals of child-rearing, or in the world of fiction, the child has first and foremost been used as a blank signifier, onto which adults have projected their particular visions of children and childhood (cf. Jenkins "Innocence", de-Mause). Thus, keeping the impossibility of any effort "to speak for or speak as the child" (Blum 6) in mind, it should be clear that by studying the figure of the child we can primarily examine the role or function of this discourse for the (melodramatic) imagination of the adult.

<sup>5</sup> On the depiction of the evil child cf. Jackson *Images*; an early example, *The Bad Seed*, is discussed by Jackson "Little".

### 3. The Compassionate Child in *Pay It Forward*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Artificial Intelligence*

The late 1990s saw a revival of sorts of the child-star, particularly with actors like Haley Joel Osment who will serve as my case in point for the following discussion. In the course of two years, Osment appeared in three successful and widely seen films which all introduced child characters as their main protagonists. In *The Sixth Sense* he plays Cole Sear who is visited by dead people. With help from child therapist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) who was recently shot by a former patient and now also moves among the ghosts, Cole overcomes his fear of them by accepting his 'mission' of having to help them. In *Pay It Forward* (Mimi Leder, 2000) Osment is cast as Trevor McKinney, a pupil in seventh grade who takes his teacher's assignment in social studies so seriously that he manages to start a charitable pay-it-forward-movement but, on trying to complete his third altruistic favor to a fellow pupil, is killed at the end. Finally, in *Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001) the young actor, who was born in 1988, plays a robot-child called David who, in a post-apocalyptic world, is designed to fill the need of families not allowed to have children. David, however, is abandoned by his foster mother who prefers her real son, recently recovered from a coma. Waif-like and vulnerable to the wrath of a human underclass he begins to wander through America in search of the mythical blue fairy—suggested to him by Carlo Lorenzini's story of *Pinocchio*—who might change him into a real boy and thus win back the love of his foster mother. Eventually everything freezes to ice lasting for two-thousand years and after David is discovered and 'restarted' his mind serves as an inspiration for a superior brand of post-human machines who are now in control of the planet.

None of the films is advertised as a melodrama yet all three firmly belong into the tradition of the melodramatic mode. In generic terms, *Pay It Forward* might be called a social drama, *The Sixth Sense* a mystery or horror film, and *Artificial Intelligence* science fiction. But these classifications should not distract us from the fact that, at a deeper structural level, the presence of the child figure is coded primarily in melodramatic terms. Thus the films emphasize the qualities of vulnerability, victimization, innocence, domestic space and utopian promise, all of which are presented with narrative

strategies aimed at a maximization of the interdependent emotional and moral impact.

Of the three examples *Pay It Forward* is certainly the most traditional melodramatic narrative. In school, Trevor proves himself to be an idealist, at home he is the prototypical go-between child negotiating between his alcoholic mother Arlene McKinney (Helen Hunt) and his social studies' teacher Eugene Simonet (Kevin Spacey). The assignment for the seventh graders is: "Think of an idea to change our world—and put it into ACTION!" Trevor comes up with the pay it forward system in which a person who has been helped, pays his or her gratitude forward by helping three other people with 'big favors'. Although most of his attempts at putting his plan into action seem to fail, the movement gets started via his mother who decides to make up with her own mother, a homeless alcoholic living in the streets.



Fig. 1: *Pay It Forward*

Trevor's proposal for the assignment is praised by his teacher yet, by the reaction of his fellow pupils, it is also shown to be overtly optimistic and naive, i.e. childlike in its overabundant and innocent faith in the good of the people. At home, on the other hand, Trevor and his mother slowly reverse their roles as he attempts to bring her and his teacher together as a romantic couple. Eventually he is turned into a mature partner, more controlled and rational than his mother, taking over responsibilities for the creation of a stable and emotionally rewarding domestic space. The child figure of *Pay It Forward* can therefore be seen in the tradition of 'fixing' a system that has lost its inner balance and thus as a fantasy of renewal for an adult world that is corrupted (cf. Jackson *Images*).

On the surface we might call *Pay It Forward* a progressive social melodrama, yet if we look closer it becomes clear that the moral function of the child figure who overcomes emotional and class barriers finally displaces the political dimension of the film. The romantic coupling that Trevor is working for only becomes successful after the child is dead. The two adults are overwhelmed by the display of sympathy and caring which the film stages at the end when people from all over the city join them, candles in hand, and we hear an extradiegetic song to connote the feeling of mourning. However, with this moving finale the collective mourning for the innocent victim Trevor, stabbed by hispanic-looking school kids, overwhelms the social space and, possibly, also the viewers. Just like the temperance tracts of the nineteenth century and the one-reelers of the silent period, *Pay It Forward* ultimately eschews the analysis of the social and political system that has implicitly been made responsible for the state of disequilibrium in favor of an appeal to the individual's conversion and self-improvement.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated, this makes it a relatively traditional example of melodramatic morality. In terms of narrative and thematic concerns, *The Sixth Sense* and *Artificial Intelligence* can be regarded as more complex and innovative. Yet both films also partake in the basic dilemma of the melodramatic child; they create it as a function for the adult world, not as a fictional being to be valued or appreciated in or as itself. While *Pay It Forward* presents the child figure as an idealist who appears to be a self-chosen outsider ready to die for the greater good, both *The Sixth Sense* and *Artificial Intelligence* create the child figure as a freak who is rejected by his peers or society at large. Cole Sear is an unpopular child, an outsider and misfit, an *emotional* freak. David, on the other hand, the robot-child, is, as his creator admirably says, the first of a kind, yet to himself he is neither real nor artificial but a *categorical* freak.

In *Pay It Forward* Trevor can act as a go-between because in this instance the adults are victimized and the child signifies the purer morality of the (bygone) past. This constellation changes in *The Sixth Sense* and *Artificial Intelligence*. Cole Sear, the child visited by the dead, is shown to be victimized, i.e. wounded and intimidated by their presence, and thus becomes an object of therapeutical attention and eventually also a healing power. *Artificial*

<sup>6</sup> On the history of the stage melodrama cf. Mason, McConachie.

*Intelligence* takes this idea one step further; David represents the simulacrum of a melodramatic child whose emotions have been programmed and who is victimized for just this uncanny ability to simulate what human beings can hardly detect as artificial ('purge yourself of the artificial' is the motto at the flesh fairs where slave-like robots are ritualistically destroyed). In a world that is completely dependent on advanced technologies, David enacts the old-fashioned drama of the outsider who dreams of belonging while in reality he is forever excluded. The simple idea behind this conflict is the hope of being accepted for what one is. Yet the hybrid child figure for whom the film tries to evoke sympathy seems to be trapped in a perennial state of yearning to be something else.

Although *The Sixth Sense* contains elements of a mystery and horror story, the deeper pattern contains a melodramatic constellation.<sup>7</sup> The child has to convince the adults about the truth of a certain experience which for the viewers has been established as beyond doubt. The viewers thus witness a struggle for recognition, credibility and acceptance characteristic of child figures in melodramatic fiction since the days of Charles Dickens (cf. Decker, Tan/Frijda). Clearly the film is less traditional than *Pay It Forward*, but there are also striking similarities. Class consciousness and conflict, especially between the mothers and their environment, are primarily expressed by the status of the children as freaks or outsiders. Furthermore, both films introduce guardian figures, the teacher and the therapist, who come to the aid of the helpless mothers and are, just like the women, moved to tears by the pleas of the children.

<sup>7</sup> La Caze discusses the psychological realism of the film but misses its secondary role vis-à-vis the melodramatic mode, cf. La Caze.



Fig. 2: *The Sixth Sense*

The higher level of complexity in *The Sixth Sense*, however, is created by a more multi-faceted concept of communication. There is not only the connection between the supernatural and the real but also the one between therapist and patient and between mother and son. All of these connections intersect at the crucial notion of *helping* that structures the emotional and dramatic economy of the narrative: Malcolm Crowe seeks to counter his feelings of guilt for having failed one of his former patients, while Cole has to overcome his fear of the dead in order to be able to help them. His mother, lacking intellectual sophistication but unwavering in her emotional support, prays to God for help. Though the professional helper, Crowe, is most eager to undo the one fatal error in his career, the strongest emotional impact is created as Cole finally manages to convince his mother that he has the ability to see dead people. At this point, as Cole is able to deliver the message from the dead grandmother that she is proud of her daughter, the communication between mother and son, hitherto painfully blocked and ineffective, is reestablished.

In this case, readjusting a domestic space in disarray and disequilibrium is not achieved by reinstating the heterosexual nuclear family but rather by dramatizing the separation-reunion theme. As both mother and son find their particular emotional needs recognized, on the one hand gaining the affection of the grandmother, on the other being accepted in spite of a terrifying secret, they demonstrate that this act of recognition, signified by the shedding of tears

and the long embrace, is the prerequisite for the genuine form of attachment each person has been striving for.

The interweaving of different plot lines addressing in a similar fashion the affective tissue of recognition and attachment thus creates a dense network of cross-references that is also underlined by the film's narration. The point of view in *The Sixth Sense* is an interesting blend of omniscient narration and internal focalization. On the one hand, the viewers share the perspective of the child who perceives the ghosts at the same level of perceptual reality as the (truly) living people. On the other hand, they also share the perspective of the therapist, who, as it turns out, is dead and only imagining himself to be alive, thus suffering from a delusion. The film therefore combines the internal focalization of the child struggling to have his supernatural visions accepted as his individual reality (his gift or curse), and the internal focalization of a highly unreliable narrator seeing only, as the child explains, what he wants to see.

At the end of the film, aided by various flashbacks, the self-delusions of the therapist Crowe are revealed to the viewers. At this point they realize that while they were watching Malcolm's story—e.g. meeting his wife in a restaurant, watching her new lover from the basement—they were actually sharing Cole's ability to see dead people even though he is absent from these scenes. The combination of reliable and unreliable focalizations thus retroactively supports the struggle for recognition of the melodramatic child. If Cole has trouble to convince the adults of his special power to see ghosts because he risks being labeled a freak, as in the violent outburst of his teacher, the end reveals to us that unknowingly we, the viewers, have shared his power. We realize that the film's narration has privileged and made plausible the dubious gift of the child all along.

It might be argued that Cole's ability to see dead people is one more problematic example of the go-between child, a linking device that helps to fix what has gone wrong in the adult world. Yet the film does not seem to glorify or harmonize this messenger function. Rather, it creates a more ambiguous image of the child as a communicational medium. Therapist Crowe recalls that Vincent Gray, the child whom he couldn't help and who, as a young man, threatens and kills him, was 'unusually compassionate'. Cole, just like Gray, interprets this gift negatively, as a curse responsible for his self-image as an emotional freak. But this category of compassion,



crucial for the melodramatic mode, also allows him to see beyond the smug middle-class façade of contemporary America. Both the therapist's and the child's stories are tales of victimization yet I would argue that only Cole's has significant moral implications.

In his school and former court house he has the vision of a child, a black man and an older woman who were hanged. They look at him accusingly as if he could right the wrongs they suffered, among them, as another scene indicates, slavery.



Fig. 3:  
*The Sixth Sense*  
*Sense*

Later he helps reveal a murder and it becomes clear that he not only sees dead people but, being unusually compassionate, he sees dead people who have been victimized and have suffered some form of grave injustice. The melodramatic child in *The Sixth Sense*, therefore, helps adults to communicate in a more authentic and open way but he also emphasizes the moral imperative that mourning and coping with loss ought not to be limited to a personal level. Rather it must be extended to those national crimes and traumatizations within American history that are still haunting the present. As with Trevor in *Pay It Forward*, the child figure in *The Sixth Sense* takes on the daunting metaphorical function of healing the nation.

In this way, both films attest to the revitalization of the melodramatic child figure in recent mainstream films. This might be linked to a heightened feeling of crisis within American society, possibly also to an apocalyptic sense of fin de siècle, yet these links usually turn out to be rather tenuous. For the present purpose it is more interesting to examine how the depiction of a child interrelating emotional and moral registers is complicated in *Artificial Intelligence*. In the first part of the film, David is adopted and 'im-

printed', i.e. emotionally activated, by his foster family; in the second part he is abandoned by his foster mother and searches for the blue fairy; in the third, after staring at the blue fairy for two-thousand years, he is restarted and reunited with his mother in a fantasy world recreated out of his mind or, rather, memory chip.

This final section, supposedly the emotional climax, is largely drowned out by a male voice-over narration, possibly coming from one of the sex- and genderless machines in control of the earth, and ends as a completely conventional cliché: David meets the simulacrum of his (foster) mother, recreated from her DNA, for one day and has 'the happiest day of his life'. The internally more consistent yet much bleaker ending of the film, therefore, seems to be the conclusion of the second part, where David keeps his eyes desperately open hoping the statue of the blue fairy will eventually heed his wish and transform him into a real boy.



Fig. 4: *Artificial Intelligence*

These tensions within the narrative development seem to be indicative of a destabilized deep structure that ultimately makes the film more ambiguous than both *Pay It Forward* and *The Sixth Sense*. The robot-child David in *Artificial Intelligence* is designed to epitomize the regressive fantasy of oedipal fulfillment—the love between mother and son minus the threatening competition from brothers and fathers. But being a robot he also emphasizes the industrial process by which these imaginary creatures are constructed. Intradiegetically, David may come from a high-tech company yet his soul is manufactured by Hollywood's movie making industry.

*Artificial Intelligence* thus thrives on the analogy between future societies creating robots who slowly turn into hybrid beings, and the myth-making power of the film industry which can bring these animated characters to life and convince the audience to love them like human beings. But can it really? The most moving scene of the film occurs, as indicated, when David is praying to the blue fairy at the bottom of the devastated and flooded city of New York to make him into a real boy. The fairy, a blue-eyed statue from the ruins of Coney Island, turns into a rather harrowing signifier of a lifeless, powerless and abandoned entertainment industry incapable of giving the boy what he wants. This is not a nostalgic image of a more innocent and simple world of make-believe but the nightmarish vision of a genuine yearning indefinitely frozen in a gesture of unattainability. Indeed the whole scene turns the act of looking at an imaginary object into a demonstration of the failure of a fiction to fulfill the most basic desire of its audience.

The strong presence of an explanatory and intrusive voice-over at the end is an indication of a fundamental anxiety permeating the film that the ability to dream in a simulated world—which *Artificial Intelligence* itself metamorphoses into at the level of digital technology as it moves along its narrative trajectory—may not be considered a very attractive proposition. Indeed, the hyper-commercialized world of consumer culture in Rouge City is as nightmarish as the amusement of the flesh fairs is gruesome. It seems, therefore, that the apocalyptic vision of destruction and death structuring the film cannot be counterbalanced by the nostalgic evocation of a childlike imagination enduring against all odds.

The film thus aims at a narrative that interrelates emotional and moral registers, but it ultimately radicalizes and partially deconstructs certain aspects crucial to the melodramatic mode. Introducing the child figure as a categorical freak creates a profound sense of ambiguity concerning the question of how emotions are generated, and who decides how real or unreal they are. It also problematizes the ontological status of emotions: do they primarily serve a cultural function or are they an integral part of a personality? Finally, even though among the three examples discussed it is the film most concerned with its child character, *Artificial Intelligence* also raises most clearly the point that the concept of childhood may merely be an escape fantasy for adults, an imaginary space less

troublesome than William Butler Yeats's world 'full of weeping' to which the film alludes intertextually.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Ambiguous Politics of the Melodrama

As the analysis of *Pay It Forward*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Artificial Intelligence* has shown, the late 1990s witnessed the reemergence of the melodramatic child in its go-between or fix-it variety, but also in more subtle and profound variations. The interaction with the child figure serves as a major emotionalizing strategy affecting both women and men. To this end, the child's body is primarily presented as a signifier of vulnerability while, following the Romantic notion of innocence, the child's mind is established as an emotionally and morally superior force of purification. Thus, the child figure is seen as exemplary and a utopian inspiration for the adult world. Helping, communicating, initiating social change, or preserving the memory of the human race, it becomes a force of improvement.

Following Blum I have argued that the representation of the melodramatic child must primarily be seen as a discursive category aimed at the emotional and moral economy of the adult imagination (cf. Blum). On the one hand, child figures have played a crucial role for the melodramatic logic of making the residual moral qualities legible. They have dramatized over and over again the twin desires of recognition and attachment. In this sense, as objects of victimization highlighting a particular experience of injustice, they can clearly be seen as contributing to the discourse of a democratic culture. On the other hand, they must also be considered in the contrary, indeed, oppositional and deeply problematic tradition of using, or rather abusing, historical subjects who have no voice and whose representation by others is based on self-serving motives. This may be a peculiar and insurmountable paradox of representing children, since the only possible normative vantage point from which it could be criticized would have to be the critique of a child. Yet it is also an aspect of the melodramatic mode that makes its politics more ambiguous than has been admitted in the recent revisionist discourse.

According to the reassessment of the mode initiated by Brooks, Gledhill, Williams, and others, a post-sacred and democratic society

shaped by the concepts of equality, freedom and justice must create its emotional bonds from within. Helpful as the melodrama may be in this regard, it also seems to require a paradoxical strategy of reception: on the one hand, the viewers have to become immersed in its excessive and overwhelming emotional and moral design. But they also have to resist accepting the claims this design makes on them without a further, more distanced analysis. A basic aporia may be, then, that the viewers want and need to know which residual moral quality is made legible through the depiction of suffering even though, in the end and in retrospect, they may have to reject the representational shape in which it has gained its concrete form: as a falsification, a lie, a crime.

In order to address this aporia I want to emphasize in my concluding remarks that, in Raymond Williams's sense, the creation or maintenance of a democratic sensibility by fictional means must necessarily take place in an idealized form. This idealization is predicated upon a strategic denial of reality in order to uphold the fiction that all people are equal, and it is in this respect that the ambiguous politics of the melodramatic mode must ultimately be assessed. Rather than being deliberately deceitful, the mode is characterized by the tensions created in trying to maintain and enforce the necessary fictions of a democratic culture.

This can be shown by returning briefly to *Artificial Intelligence*. As a whole, the film is trying to create compassion for the victimized robot-child. Yet it does so by staging radically divergent states of feeling. The human villains organizing the flesh fairs and, to a lesser degree, the foster mother, emphasize the categorical difference between organic and mechanical beings, real child and robot-child. In contrast, the depiction of the desperate plight of the robot-child and the final scenes of wish fulfillment tone down and work against this notion of categorical difference. Instead, by stressing the emotional vulnerability and human-like desires of the robot-child, they make him seem to be similar to his human counterparts. Thus, the melodramatic rhetoric of the film, which is clearly modeled on the historical experience of slavery and the (racist) categorical distinctions between blood types, at the same time stresses *and* denies difference. It eventually privileges the sentimental notion of *likeness* with its consequent denial of differences and by so doing inadvertently illustrates Williams's claim that the ideal of a democratic culture is to treat all human beings (or, in this case, all human

and artificial beings) *as if* they deserved the same kind of respect and love (cf. Williams *Keywords*).

A mode of representation attempting to uphold these fictions of a democratic sensibility is always vulnerable to attacks from a realist perspective, and, as I have argued with respect to the figure of the child and its appropriation for the desires of adults, this must be acknowledged as a major dilemma. Yet if we are, in the tradition of Norbert Elias, trying to assess the civilizing functions of emotions, it is necessary to realize that the internal contradictions of the melodramatic mode do not stem from an inbuilt predilection toward simplification but from the contradictions of the cultural ideals to which it is related. Both behind the sentimental melodrama with its pity or compassion for the victims and the containment of emotions thriving on difference, and the sensational melodrama with shock effects and compelling reversals of categorical differences, we can discern the basic desire for the recognition of human beings as equally valuable and of their having equal rights. If we can thus conclude that the significance of melodrama lies in the modeling of democratic sensibilities on the basis of different conceptions of justice then the internal ambiguities and contradictions we have noted should not be seen as a deficiency but rather as a sign of the powerful hold that the ideals of a democratic culture still have, however fictional they may be.

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