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Ph.D degree thesis

**The Concept of Sentimentality in
Critical Approaches to Film and its
Cultural Antecedents**

Declaration of Authorship

I, Charles Burnetts, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:



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Date: 22nd February 2011

Abstract

This thesis examines how sentimentality, as a term central to film criticism, has been mobilized, denigrated, quarantined or ignored over 300 years of aesthetic debate. It responds to the often vexed question of what the sentimental means, by unpacking the concept's intellectual and artistic history, tracing a transition from the Enlightenment use of sentimentality as a positive concept denoting pedagogy and moral feeling, to its entrance into the modern vernacular as a term connoting its own excess, as a function of its alleged appeals to indulgent or unearned pathos. A key question of the research concerns whether the sentimental can be recuperated within contemporary moving-image culture once we are re-familiarized with its early (lesser known about) critical applications. I contend in such a vein that the unpacking of such positive aspects of the sentimental very much colours our critical understanding of such cinematic figures as Charlie Chaplin, Steven Spielberg and those in their wake, both in terms of their films and the reception of those films. I argue that the early, classical and post-classical periods of cinema can be significantly differentiated in terms of how sentimental cinema fares critically, providing new insights into such intellectual spheres as naturalism, modernism and postmodernism in relation to the cultural reception of cinema. Theories of emotion (especially in relation to spectatorship and film theory) are also examined closely up to what I argue to be a now established, and indeed, valorised melodramatic 'mode' of contemporary mainstream cinema, as applicable to Hollywood and beyond. As a theoretical tradition that both validates 'feeling' in its pedagogical and idealist aims while remaining problematic ideologically, I show how the sentimental demands to be understood alongside the most contemporary of critical positions, not least in terms of the critical turn towards affect and the body.

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Introduction

SCOTTIE – You both hid behind there, mmm?... 'til everything was clear... then sneaked down and drove back to the city. And then? You were his girl. What happened to you? Did he ditch you? Oh, Judy!! When he had all her money, and the freedom and the power... he ditched you? What a shame! But he knew he was safe. You couldn't talk. Didn't he give you anything?

JUDY – (faintly) Some money.

SCOTTIE – And the necklace. Carlotta's necklace. That was your mistake, Judy. One shouldn't keep souvenirs of a killing. You shouldn't have been that sentimental.

At the denouement of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958, USA), standing with Judy (Kim Novak) at the top of the bell tower, James Stewart's Scottie delivers his final judgement concerning Judy's conduct, now that he has finally gathered together the details of the murder for which he was unwittingly set-up as witness. Judy has taken pity on him for the part she played in impersonating the now-murdered wife of Gavin Elster and encouraging Scottie's adoration and obsession for her depiction of a vulnerable, psychologically troubled Madeleine. Agreeing to be dressed up once again as the woman she had already impersonated in the film's first act (before the real Madeleine's murder) allows Scottie to unravel the mystery, the key clue constituted by her putting on the necklace that belonged to Madeleine without Scottie having instructed her to do so.

But what does Scottie mean here when he accuses Judy of sentimentality? Is it merely an experienced detective's advice that an accessory to murder should never have kept incriminating evidence of their criminal act? Or does this judgement carry more valences? It might suggest for instance that Judy should not have participated in an

impersonation that was otherwise so stringently overseen by Scottie himself. Or that she should not have felt the feelings of care or even love towards the distraught Scottie that allowed her to assist him in this way, motivated as much by pity for him as genuine love. Equally, perhaps she is admonished here for the poor moral character she exhibits for ever wearing a dead woman's jewellery and certainly for wearing it after the latter's death that she herself has caused. Finally, Scottie may in fact be addressing himself more than Judy with these words, rueing his ever allowing himself to be emotionally drawn into a web of lies and murder, of allowing a detective's aptitude for reasoned, shrewd deduction to be clouded by his vulnerable emotional needs (love for Madeleine) and psychological frailties (his recently acquired fear of heights).

In such respects, the 'sentimental' represents a diverse set of questions and concerns that relate to moral character, to the emotions and to the visual in contemporary aesthetic discourse. Now widely used to connote a sense of its own excess, as in the attribute of the 'grossly sentimental' deployed by so many critics, such a term is also 'over-determined' by its having had key pertinence to a wide set of aesthetic questions. The use of the term in the above scene for instance reveals a tension inherent to theories of the sentimental that will be examined in detail below – that between reason and emotion. Scottie is presented to us at the beginning of *Vertigo* as the ideal Enlightenment subject, an eligible bachelor and well-meaning private detective whose all-American charm and common sense are marred only by an unfortunate police accident that has left him with profound vertigo. Madeleine is presented as a quintessentially sentimental paradigm of female virtue in distress, lost in melancholic nostalgia for a long-dead ancestor (Carlotta Valdes) and seemingly

emotionally unequipped for survival in the rationalized metropolis of San Francisco. Yet ironically it is Madeleine (or rather Judy) that belongs to and serves the calculating menace of the city and Scottie that enters a lovelorn reverie and obsessional melancholia the minute he has seen her, the tragedy of the film resting indeed on a fundamental non-coincidence between their two subject-positions throughout. The final scene represents a moment that sees the two characters swap roles in relation to reason and emotion, where Scottie is finally allowed to resume his long-lost role of reasoned, sanguine detective and Judy reveals for the first time an affection for him uncompromised by pity or an ulterior motive of monetary gain. However, a relationship between them is just as untenable owing to an impossible contradiction between Judy's sentimentality and Scottie's hard-won rationality. If their love depends throughout the film on mistaken identities, false communication and fantasy, reality at the film's end delivers repugnance and recrimination, and delivers the film's second deathfall from the bell tower. A sentimentality that seemed throughout the film to be connoted by images of love, sadness, romance and the sublime (red sequoias, bell tower, the Golden Gate Bridge) turns out to be marred by the uncanny presence of death, doubles and repetition, signified by the blood-red ruby necklace worn by three dead women.

Yet what would *Vertigo* be without its thematization of distortion, lies and emotional manipulation? If the sentimental becomes the underpinning for much of the fantasy, desire and tragedy of the film, it is because its philosophical ideals, and its failures, resonate with those of aesthetics writ large. In its reversals and counter-reversals, the film serves as a philosophical working through of the ambitions of what philosophers in the eighteenth century termed 'moral sense', convinced as they were of the power

of ‘pity’, ‘compassion’ and ‘sympathy’ (invoked by art or otherwise) to inform, improve and produce a cultivated citizen. The sentimental, as literary or theatrical genre, and as the more pervasive social affect of ‘sensibility’, concerned itself above all with the theatrics of suffering of figures that remain virtuous against all circumstances. Yet while sympathy for figures of suffering and pity could inspire us to behave more humanely, charitably and with fine sentiments, problems were identified concerning the truth-claims not only of the sentimental person, object or artwork that courted sympathy, but also the spectator that claimed to have been moved (implicitly towards virtue) by it. Just as Madeleine’s invocation of pathos in *Vertigo* turns out to be motivated by a devious plan of exploitation and murder, so the sentimental quickly became distrusted as a site of genuinely assured ‘moral sentiment.’ Just as Scottie’s own apparently moral emotions in relation to a troubled woman become qualified by trademark Hitchcockian desire, voyeurism and fantasy, so the ‘cult of sensibility’ was often deemed to slide into cultish morbidity or self-regarding fetishism. If pathos could be staged in the service of a morally ambiguous or debased agenda, a key Enlightenment linkage between signifier and signified could no longer be assumed. Indeed, another aspect of Scottie’s rebuke of Judy, and certainly the most deeply felt, stems ultimately from his profound sadness that she ever agreed to embody the paradigm of virtue in distress that is the Madeleine of the first act. Once again, albeit in more descriptive terms, she should not have been ‘that sentimental’.

Such are the complex foundations of a term that for many now merely connotes the trite, the mawkish and the manipulative in relation to a host of films, plays, novels and magazine articles. The chapters below seek to critically examine such contemporary

manifestations of the sentimental in film specifically, for it has arguably been the cinema and its own enactments of the sensual that provide a particularly fertile ground for theorizing visual art's engagement with the spectator and his/her emotions. Informed by a central question concerning how and why the sentimental has come to court such derision as a byword for emotional manipulation, I seek to identify and historicise the textual signifiers, tropes and cultural figures associated with the term, leading inevitably although by no means exclusively to the genealogy of an undeniably kindred tradition, that of melodrama. Indeed, another goal of the discussion below is to explore the contours between the sentimental and the melodrama in a more thoroughgoing way than is usually undertaken, not so much in order to provide a definitive contrast between the two traditions but rather to produce an enriched and nuanced understanding of their interdependence. Furthermore, in the light of an enhanced understanding of the concept, I ask how, or under what aesthetic conditions, the sentimental might be recuperated from its now rather debased valence, analysing its continued applications (derogatory or otherwise) in modern film criticism and theory.

Literary and Historical Studies of the Sentimental

The 'sentimental novel' as a genre of the 18th century, usually referring to the novels of such British authors as Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, Henry Mackenzie and Laurence Sterne, has been in currency as a literary term since the early 20th century. Understood as a key cultural signifier of the 'Age of Sensibility' of the 1740s and 1750s, the genre has been extended to works in other countries of a similar period, such as Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, each work implicated in the period's obsession with the refined, melancholic

emotions that the novel could elicit in its reader. The term has been further appropriated for later periods too, notably in reference to revivals of the sentimental in such American novels as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* among many imitators, the German *Bildungsroman* and of course, in the many novels of Charles Dickens, particularly of his early period.

While examples of the genre have thus become particularly wide-ranging in terms of period and nation, key attributes of sentimental narrative remain largely consistent, not least in terms of the form's (often vexed) insistence on stock characters and clichéd situations. R.F. Brissenden suggests 'virtue in distress' as its principle theme, and most scholars agree that the rhetorical thrust of the sentimental derives from its often 'moralistic' or 'improving' purposes, as exemplified by the pedagogical aims of the 'conduct book' sub-genre.¹ Its key trope was commonly the figure of the sentimental hero or heroine whose innocence, idealism (and often chastity) render them 'too good' for the selfishness and pragmatism of the real world, often resulting after great struggle in a redemptive, yet tragic death. Unlike the Romantic hero, the sentimental hero possesses far less of a compulsively self-destructive or socially contrarian persona, more childlike and idealistic than the jaded, tortured souls of that later era's literature and poetry.²

Yet it was precisely owing to the sentimental novel's invocations of elevated feeling and admiration for a figure so idealized, dependent as it was on a particularly

¹ See R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*, Macmillan: London, 1974.

² For a thorough introduction to the culture of sensibility and its tropes, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, London and New York: Methuen, 1986.

moralistic construction of the human capacity for emotion and its propagation by such novels, that the sentimental reached its cultural heyday. Moreover, if it later became increasingly implicated as a defining feature of kitschy, ten-a-penny stories and plays (and later of course, films), it arguably never lost such connotations of the moral and improving. Such associations with the artistically insignificant and non-literary has not however deterred thoroughgoing explorations of the sentimental age (in both Britain and France³), the ‘Cult of Sensibility’ recognized also as a key period in the history of the novel and moral philosophy. Through rubrics that are examined in more detail in the following chapter, the ‘moral sense’ philosophy of such figures as Shaftesbury, Hume and Smith have been explored as theoretical precursors to the sentimental novel or sentimental play.⁴ A primary assumption of ‘moral sentiment’ theory concerned the possibility that the classical dichotomy of Reason and the Passions (on in modern terms, cognition and emotion) might be allied rather than opposed, their antagonism established certainly since as early as Plato’s denunciation of poetry and its appeals to unwarranted emotion in *The Republic* and other works.⁵ Historically situated in the aftermath of the English civil war, the decline of feudal power and libertine wit, moral sentiment theory supplants the self-interested pragmatic philosophy of Hobbes in favour of a more moralistic, humanistic set of principles inspired by the psychological liberalism of Locke.⁶ Aligned from the start also with the values of an expanding urban bourgeois class, the sentimental model

³ See Anne-Vincent Buffault, *A History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France, 1700-1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, for a thorough account of sensibility in French society.

⁴ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, London: Penguin Classics, 2007.

⁶ See Todd, *Sensibility*, pp. 24-30.

becomes understood as the definitive code of a society now inspired by ideologies of family and domestic contentment alongside fantasies of social mobility, popular democracy and mutual sympathy.⁷

In such respects, and as explored further below, the sentimental represents a complex and in many ways contradictory concept for literary studies, its aesthetic connotations of mass art and kitsch offset by its historical importance to the development of literature and theories of literary reception. Numerous studies continue to be undertaken on the concept that are rather less focused on methodologies of textual analysis in relation to literature, theatre or film, and approach the term from more autonomous perspectives of analytical philosophy and philology. While such studies will not be examined as primary sources in this study, they nevertheless remain valuable contributions to an understanding of this particularly freighted of terms.⁸ With regards to the cinema in particular, only a handful of studies have chosen to consider film within the rubric of the ‘sentimental’ specifically. Charles Affron’s *Cinema and Sentiment* largely overlooks the specificity of the sentimental in favour of a largely ‘New Critical’ examination of cinema’s power for sensation *tout court*, an approach that was somewhat overshadowed by debates in film theory concerning the spectatorship, ideology and gender dynamics of melodrama.⁹ (see below). Lea Jacobs’

⁷ For an account of the association between a cross-national sentimental culture and American Revolutionary ideals, see Sarah Knott *Sensibility and the American Revolution*, Omohundro Institute, University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

⁸ See Michael Tanner, ‘Sentimentality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 77, (1976 - 1977), pp. 127-147; Mary Midgley, ‘Brutality and Sentimentality’, *Philosophy*, Vol. 54, No. 209 (July 1979), pp. 385-89; Mark Jefferson, ‘What is Wrong with Sentimentality?’, *Mind*, Vol. XCII (368) (1983), pp. 519-529; Deborah Knight, ‘Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality: A Meta-Aesthetic Perspective’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 411-420; Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*, Oxford University Press US, 2004.

⁹ Charles Affron, *Cinema and Sentiment*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

The Decline of Sentiment, however, follows a more recent call for more historically sensitive accounts of cinematic melodrama, by examining what she claims as a shift away from early cinema's sentimental ideology towards the new realism of the Hollywood film in the 1920s.¹⁰ Approaching cinema through the lens of literary sentimentality has also been profitably undertaken by James Chandler, who extends his concept of 'sentimental vehicularity' to the films of Griffith and Capra,¹¹ work that importantly underlines the connections between sentimental aesthetics and 'New Humanities' approaches to cinema and the body, as advanced by such figures as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault (see Chapter Six).

Nevertheless, this thesis proceeds from an assumption that an understanding of the sentimental in cinema can, and indeed must, acknowledge and build on the terms of the now established and long-running conversation surrounding the genre of melodrama. Acknowledged as a direct corollary and successor to the sentimental age, melodrama is arguably the chief vehicle of the sentimental through to the modern cinematic period. Although important distinctions are acknowledged and adhered to below with respect to the two terms, it is crucial nonetheless to account in particular for the rich and complex theoretical work undertaken with respect to this 'genre' in the film theory of the last 40 years.

¹⁰ Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.

¹¹ James Chandler, 'The Languages of Sentiment,' *Textual Practice*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 21-41. See also Chandler's forthcoming *The Sentimental Mood: From Sterne to Capra*.

Melodrama and Cinema

Once the mark of civility of a growing bourgeois class that had found new engagements with art through a rubric of shared tears and mutual sympathy, the sentimental soon crossed-over to a far wider mass audience of melodrama, a form that for Peter Brooks strived to make ‘the world morally legible’.¹² For Brooks, another literary scholar, melodrama served as a ‘moral occult’ in a ‘post-sacred’ world that had lost religious faith, its simple tropes argued to provide the modern world with a new mythological system (or ‘melodramatic imagination’) where recognizable forces of right and wrong do battle and achieve—or hope for--justice.¹³ Brooks’ arguments have formed an important foundation upon which film melodrama has been theorized in the last 40 years, cited directly by Thomas Elsaesser in his seminal article ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, published in 1972.¹⁴

Applying Brooks’ aesthetics to film specifically, Elsaesser proposed melodrama as a ‘mode of experience’ derived from the sentimental novel and popular 19th century theatre, a critical, ‘sophisticated’ dimension of which was deemed in particular evidence in the ‘family melodrama’ of the 1940s and 1950s. Films by Sirk, Minnelli, Cukor and Ray, among others, were claimed to foreground middle-class American family life as a site of individual struggle, frustration and inner turmoil, despite the nuclear family’s valorization elsewhere within the American culture of the 1950s (especially on television). Where an affirmative ‘classical realist’ mode of narration (ostensibly adhered to by these same Hollywood films) allowed character desire and

¹² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1995, p. 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1-15.

¹⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’ in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, London: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 166-89. First published in 1972 in *Monogram*.

pleasure to be indulged and ‘sublimated’ by the illusionistic thrust of classical narrative,¹⁵ melodrama for Elsaesser and other theorists strove to give expression to the social and ideological problems lying just below the surface.¹⁶ Auteurs such as Sirk were argued indeed to be intentionally seeking to foreground such problems through the skilful depiction of individuals trapped emotionally within a particular set of oppressive familial, social and ideological circumstances. The ‘excess’ of melodrama’s formal style and affect, in terms of colour, style, sound design, narrative contrivances, symbolism and performance, endowed the melodrama within such rubrics with a (modernist) palette of devices for achieving a Brecht-inspired ironic distance in relation to the ideology otherwise reproduced in such films.¹⁷ With a focus in particular on women’s experience as a site of ongoing pathos, such films were also polemicized by feminist film theorists as articulations of a specifically feminist spectatorship in relation to capitalism, patriarchy, class and family. Foregrounding the female experience in American society, melodrama and the ‘Woman’s film’ (the latter referring to films such as *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937), *Now Voyager* (Rapper, 1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945), provided a gendered

¹⁵ Examples of which Elsaesser provides in relation to the ‘strong actions’ of the traditional Western, Gangster or Noir genres, where ‘central conflicts’ are ‘successively externalised and projected into direct action’. See Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’, pp. 177.

¹⁶ See also Laura Mulvey, ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’, *Movie* Vol. 25 (Winter, 1977/78), pp. 53-6; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘Minnelli and Melodrama.’ *Screen* Vol. 18, no. 2 (1977), pp. 113-8; Chuck Kleinhans, ‘Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism,’ *Film Reader*, No. 3 (1978), pp. 40-47; D.N. Rodowick, ‘Madness, Authority and Ideology in the Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s’, *Velvet Light Trap* Vol. 19 (1982), pp. 40-45.

¹⁷ In accordance with psychoanalytic and Marxist (particularly Althusserian) rubrics and associated especially with a theory of ‘classical realism’ propounded in various articles in *Screen* in the 1970s, the melodrama displayed hysterical symptoms, betraying an illusion of social normativity inscribed in these ostensibly conservative, apolitical Hollywood films, ‘writerly’ (in Barthes’ sense) excesses that gave the lie to their illusory coherences.

expression of the problematics of female identity with a specifically modernist attention to image and ideology.¹⁸

The sentimental indeed might be posed as a good candidate for denoting the body of ideology (equated from a Marxist perspective with bourgeois or classical realism) that melodrama seemed to be subjecting to critique, according to such accounts. Elsaesser argued for instance that the stylistic excesses of ‘sophisticated melodrama’ displayed a ‘modernist sensibility working in popular culture’ that ironically problematizes the ‘incurably naive moral and emotional idealism in the American psyche.’¹⁹ In such respects, cinematic melodrama could be claimed to be providing a set of devices for making salient and problematizing a certain reproduction of the sentimental in Hollywood’s mode of narration, the latter’s assumed idealism and illusionism undermined by melodrama’s displacements and ironies. Problematically however, as covered in detail below, the extent to which the sentimental has historically itself been considered ‘excessive’ muddies such a dichotomy as norm/critique (sentimental/melodrama) considerably, despite their still different genealogies. Relatedly, these debates had defined melodrama rather narrowly in order for it to serve as paradigm for the polemical and theoretical propositions guiding the arguments outlined above. Designated by such theory as a discursive space concerned primarily with the ‘family’, the ‘female’ and/or the domestic, melodrama was under

¹⁸ See Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks,’ in Doane, M.A. et al (eds.), *ReVision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Los Angeles: American Film Institute, pp. 83-99, and ‘Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama’, *Cinema Journal* Vol. 24. 1 (Fall, 1984), pp. 2-27; Mary-Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire; The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1987; Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

¹⁹ Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’, p. 182.

particular strain semantically, dependent on a set of constructions that in some ways contradicted a more historical or reception-focused understanding of its genealogy.

More recent work has sought indeed to expand the parameters within which melodrama has been traditionally understood in film studies, moving the discussion away from ideology, spectatorship and the 'Woman's film', towards a more historical consideration of melodrama as a 'mode' that Barry Langford has noted as being 'at once before, beyond and embracing the system of genre in US cinema as a whole.'²⁰ Steve Neale's analysis of reception materials surrounding the release and circulation of early film melodramas, showed for instance how an understanding of the genre could no longer be confined to the categories of 'maternal' or 'family' melodrama. With the term used as much, if not more so, in relation to early Westerns, crime dramas and adventure films, melodrama comes to encompass a particularly wide array of early Hollywood films.²¹ Scholars such as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams have in turn 'revised' melodrama from a film genre designating a largely female spectatorship to a far more expansive 'mode', derived undeniably from 19th century melodrama, that for some time has constituted the dominant mode of address of the classical Hollywood film, and one that importantly also accommodates a male spectatorship.²² Williams, for instance, recognizes melodrama's logic in such traditionally male-oriented tales as Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or films such as *Rambo*

²⁰ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 31.

²¹ Steve Neale, 'Melo Talk: On the Meaning and the Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press', *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 22 (Fall 1993), p. 66-89. See also Rick Altman's discussion of melodrama as a 'phantom-genre' in *Film/Genre*, London: BFI, 1999, pp. 27-33.

²² Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and Woman's Film*, London: BFI, 1987, pp. 1-39; Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised', in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 42-88..

(1982). Once more alluding to the arguments of Peter Brooks, melodrama's historical purpose of making morality 'legible' is foregrounded, Gledhill arguing for instance that it depicts 'less how things ought to be than how they should have been', the form resting on tensions between a moral idealism and the representation of social realities that too often fall short of such ideals.²³ Steve Neale likewise foregrounds the temporality of melodrama as one that only comes to a real or imagined resolution (or at the very least, recognition) of problems established by narrative at a stage when it is too late. A tragic sense of the 'if only' is invoked in the idealism of melodrama's narrative closure, one that is always qualified by pathos or mourning for that which has been lost or sacrificed to achieve it.²⁴

Sentiment and Cognition

The debate has thus shifted from a theoretical, polemical engagement with melodrama (foregrounding gender and ideology) to a more historical contextualization of melodrama's more wide-ranging aesthetics. An equally important, and certainly more strident, shift away from 'theory' has been led by scholars working within the sub-field of cognitive film theory, for whom the sentimental provides a more psychologically grounded framework for understanding film emotion.²⁵ Many of these scholars would agree with Carl Plantinga's assertions that scholarly attention

²³ Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, p. 21.

²⁴ Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and Tears', *Screen*, Vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), pp. 6-22.

²⁵ See Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Ed. S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, Barbara Fasting (trans.), Hillsdale, NJ : L. Erlbaum Associates, 1996; Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures : A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. For an effective overall account of the field, see Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (ed.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

should shift away from notions of fiction as emotional escapism (or ‘epistemic illusion’) to a more thoroughgoing analysis of the ‘narrative concerns’, ‘hypotheses’ and ‘evaluative judgements’ that characterise actual film spectatorship. Theorists such as Plantinga argue moreover for how sentimentality in particular might be most profitably considered as an ‘ideologically neutral or even beneficial’ form of rhetoric.²⁶

In such a vein, Ed Tan and the Nico Frijda approach ‘sentiment’ as an ‘action tendency’ as opposed to a specific emotion. The latter argue that sentiment may be motivated by various emotions but is in fact best characterised as a ‘change in an inner process[...]an abrupt giving up of coping effort or expectation.’²⁷ Although the film events (or cues) that determine such affect are extremely varied, they identify a common response wherein the spectator has come to feel that he is in a subordinate relation to the events before him.

We admit that we are smaller than the events taking place and the spectacle we watch, in the magnitude of the sorrow or joy, or of the manner in which the protagonists carry their fate[...] a sense of being faced with something we have to accept and to submit to, as the way things go.²⁸

By situating sentiment as a ‘submission response’, they then provide a theory of why the sentimental response runs counter to some well-established doctrines of critical analysis. They explain the embarrassment that often characterises the ‘helplessness’

²⁶ Carl Plantinga, ‘Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism’, in Murray Smith & Richard Allen (ed.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1997, pp. 386-7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

response as an undermining of the spectator's preferred self-image of being an 'autonomous self.'²⁹ Such an attitude, they argue, is traditionally associated with a male spectator that feels embarrassed by his tearful response to certain stimuli. As a 'submission response,' they argue that the male, in particular, will resist his tears or indeed could even avoid any further situations or viewing situations where such a response could be potentially elicited involuntarily.

In such a vein, according to such scholars as Carl Plantinga, established approaches in film theory remain wedded to theories that maintain a philosophical cynicism in relation to emotion that renews Plato's original 'emotional stoicism' in relation to art. Stemming from 'neo-Freudian' models of pleasure and desire and the Marxist-inspired theory of Brecht, and extending onwards to New-Lacanian models and postmodern Deleuzian affect theory, Plantinga aligns an orthodoxy of 'ideological film criticism' with an intrinsic distaste in relation to 'spectator emotion.' Whether the spectator adopts a critical attitude autonomously or is forced to do so through such Brechtian techniques as 'distancing' or 'alienation,' Plantinga argues (like other cognitive scholars) that such theory rests on faulty philosophical assumptions regarding the cinema's influence on spectatorial emotion as a chief tool in ideologically regulating the subject.³⁰

However, such allegiance to 'piecemeal theorizing' has not prevented scholars like Tan and Frijda from identifying melodramatic narrative tropes such as 'virtue in

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ This particular application of critical theory, moreover, has come under severe criticism in the last 20 years of film scholarship, in terms of its alleged failures in addressing issues surrounding filmmaking and developments in film technology with sufficient historical scrutiny, as critiqued most forcefully by such figures as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll. See note 13.

distress', 'justice in jeopardy' or 'awe inspiration' as key cues of a 'sentimental' spectatorial affect.³¹ In this, such theory corresponds with accounts by Thomas Elsaesser, Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill as an acknowledgment of a long genealogy, if not ideology, of sentimental representation, from the sentimental novel and the stage melodrama through to *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1935) or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977). While Tan and Frijda's area of focus rests on how 'sentiment' can be understood as a specifically psychological phenomenon, centralizing the spectator (and her psychological experience of film) as the chief object of enquiry, the cinema is certainly comprehended here as a medium that invokes emotions that share continuities with a long history of melodramatic tropes in a variety of media.

Such a tradition is also emphasised by Plantinga, who discusses the pleasures of 'negative emotions' in film in both historical and cognitive terms. Citing both Aristotelian catharsis and Hume's discussion of tragedy as key precursors to modern theoretical speculation on film emotion, Plantinga rejects a catharsis that involves 'purging' as the mere elimination of (irrational) emotion by art in favour of discussing the 'negative' emotions invoked by melodrama, such as pity, fear and sadness. If such emotions might be deemed ostensibly unpleasant as giving cause to be avoided by the subject, Plantinga argues that notionally 'sympathetic' films such as his chief example *Titanic* (1997), and many other films including Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982) and *Schindler's List* (1993), allow and encourage the spectator certain 'fantasies of assurance and control' in relation to their overall narrative logic. The cognitive

³¹ Ed S. H. Tan and Nico H. Frijda, 'Sentiment in Film Viewing', in Carl Plantinga & Greg M. Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 48-64, 261-2.

apprehension of love, hope and awe in relation to either form or content serves to counter-balance or 'replace' the 'negative' feelings associated with pathos, in order to produce a gratifying experience overall. Moreover, Plantinga deploys psychological research in noting how pathos primes the spectator to experience such rhetoric with greater intensity than without it, deploying certain affirming tropes of 'secular redemption', 'durability of love' and 'quasireligious ritual' to both inspire the spectator through feeling via the communication of sentimental values.³²

Of particular interest to the forthcoming discussion concerns the extent to which Plantinga identifies the 'sympathetic' film as part of a pervasive melodramatic tradition inherited by cinema while noting its porosity in relation to what he terms the 'distanced' film. For while the latter is noted by Plantinga as fostering a spectator's emotional detachment through the comedy, fast narrative speed or realism of an 'ironic mode' that pertains to many films, he argues that the two attributes ultimately coexist in many films, serving a complex variety of rhetorical aims. While *Titanic* certainly may epitomize a 'sympathetic' mode of address, other films may be less monolithically sentimental without altogether abandoning its core elements.

Alongside such observations for Plantinga rest ongoing questions concerning the extent to which the sentimental constitutes an ideology in its own right. While Plantinga has argued in the past for how sentimentality might be best considered in an 'ideologically neutral' sense, (i.e. as an affect that operates independently of 'values, belief and assumptions'), his discussion turns to and qualifiedly defends critical objections to sentimentality thus:

³² Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, pp. 184-96.

I would agree that the simplistic vilification of the Other and exaggerated and simplistic divisions between good and evil are likely to be harmful. So some forms of sentimentality are bound to be wrong. Yet in other cases, presenting idealized representations may encourage and invigorate the spectator towards positive action even while the fiction misrepresents the real world.

[...]Although I am inclined to be suspicious of all sentimentality, I would argue that it should not be dismissed *tout court* as ideologically pernicious or cognitively unhealthy; its effects must be gauged on a case-by-case basis.³³

In the above Plantinga both articulates the possibility of a melodramatic ‘mode’ that distorts reality and defends a critical cynicism held in relation to some of its ideological consequences, while underlining the importance of reading individual films in their specificity as a means of determining the extent to which sentiment is operating in ideologically regressive or non-regressive ways.

Revising Melodrama

In its casting of ‘orthodox’ film theory as a neo-Platonist philosophy that insists on the upholding of a reason-emotion dichotomy, the cognitive approach has arguably had to overlook some crucial contributions to film scholarship that has sought, like it, to analyse the pleasures and affect of the cinema. Nevertheless, a movement away from theory, towards historical research on the one hand and cognitive research on the other, has been undeniable and continues to inform the research directions of new work on melodrama. Such shifts have likewise challenged scholars to address ‘orthodox’ film theory’s initial approaches to emotion and identification, not least in relation to the depiction of the oppressed heroines of melodrama and the ‘Woman’s film’. The eponymous heroine of *Stella Dallas*, for instance, who sacrifices her

³³ Ibid., p. 195.

relationship with her daughter so the latter might marry into high society, remains a contested figure within such debates, signifying both an expressed hope for, and failure to achieve, a better configuration of class and gender relations. In Linda Williams' summary of such debates, she addresses in particular the problematic of the tearful response of the 'emerging liberated woman' addressed by feminist discourse at that time. She writes:

I would say that the entire *Stella Dallas* debate was over what it meant for a woman viewer to cry at the end of the film. Did the emotion swallow us up, or did we have room within it to think? Could we, in other words, think both with and through our bodies in our spectating capacities as witnesses to abjection?³⁴

This summary clarifies some of the sentimentalist issues underpinning this debate, situating it around the central problematic of what it meant to be resistant to one's own tears. Carefully revising her own assumption of the time, Williams highlights the 'importance of pathos itself and the fact that a surprising power lay in identifying with victimhood.'³⁵

Williams in such respects revises some key assumptions concerning the gendered spectatorship of melodrama. For earlier feminist theorists, melodrama could situate the (implicitly female) spectator in a subject-position of politically 'masochistic' passivity and resignation as opposed to fostering emotions of (male) oppositional indignance or critical irony. By fostering identification with victims and resolving conflict within their micro-situations (i.e. the family unit) the melodrama necessarily avoids a complete articulation of its socio-political underpinnings, resulting in its also

³⁴ Williams, 'Melodrama Revised', p. 47.

³⁵ Ibid.,

being equated with the simplified, the emotive and the ideological (or for some simply the sentimental). For proponents of ‘excess’, ironically, it was precisely the dominance of pathos (as invoked by the clichéd situations, stereotypes and formulae of melodrama) that was as much the problem as the solution, notwithstanding the status of such an attribute as a core, and indeed a distinguishing, feature of melodrama (and the sentimental) writ large.³⁶

It is indeed with such ironies in mind that Williams now argues for melodramatic pathos as a legitimate affect in its own right, freeing it from its being positioned as a device of ‘excess’, and echoing indeed some key arguments of the cognitive field. Such a re-orientation opens up an important new field for the analysis of melodrama (as a film genre and otherwise), grounded in a more historical analysis of its earliest forms and critical valences, a field indeed where the sentimental looms very large as a guiding rubric. The melodrama debate can indeed be seen to have rehearsed rather more longstanding objections to popular genres more generally conceived, where the sentimental (in a similar vein to the melodramatic) stands as that which has come to represent the formulaic and the emotionally gratuitous in contrast to a more restrained ‘realist’ style.

In order to understand these wider currents, I would suggest one needs to look even further, as this study does, to discussions that go beyond those that have taken film as their primary object. It is within literary studies in particular that theorisation of the forms taken by high and low culture has predominated historically, with the

³⁶ Williams’ chief interlocutor in this regard is E. Ann Kaplan, for whom the maternal melodrama invoked a position of masochistic identification. See Williams, ‘Melodrama Revised’, p. 44-6, and E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, New York: Methuen, 1983.

sentimental standing indeed as a key term with which such discriminations have come to be implemented and understood. Such discussions nonetheless have great relevance to film studies, particularly if one is mindful of the discipline's arguable shift towards a historical methodology and a sometime neglect of theatrical melodrama and its own antecedents. As a body of knowledge that responds to questions posed by both film theory and cognitive theory, I would suggest that the sentimental model provides renewed insights in relation to the emotional appeals of film and indeed other media.

The methodology of this project's first three chapters is informed by its 'meta-critical' aims of reviewing the intellectual history, or genealogy, of the sentimental tradition. By analysing the period antecedent to that of cinema's arrival, the discussion seeks to historicize the thought of particular critics and theorists for whom the sentimental was in either direct or more implicit ways vital to theories later inherited by film theory and criticism. While textual analyses of specific texts (and in Chapter Three, films) seek to draw out the continuities and problematics of the sentimental tradition as artistic genre, a focus remains on establishing the critical contours of the term's cultural history. The section's particular aim is to trace the concept's fall from grace while nevertheless establishing its full theoretical significance in relation to aesthetics, and its attendant significance to speculation about the cinematic image in the first half of the 20th century.

Chapter One charts the chronology of two strands of sentimental aesthetics in the 18th century: 'moral sentiment' theory as a philosophical movement and the 'sentimental novel.' Pathos as connoted by tropes of innocence and virtue, and the textual and contextual display of tears are traced as key sentimental concerns of the culture of this

period. Such debates set the terrain for how sentimentality becomes a morally questionable aesthetic and a term of evaluative derision in this period and future eras, while nevertheless never fully evading its roots in an ethics of feeling.

Chapter Two examines the continuance of key sentimentalized tropes in the ‘genteel’ art of the Victorian era, while charting the renewal of a sceptical critical dismissal of its effects in proto-modernist discourses that pave the way for the 20th century and the arrival of cinema. Theatrical melodrama and its influences on the novel (those of Dickens in particular) is traced in order to show how sentiment comes to intersect with notions of bourgeois subjectivity and the latter’s veneration of an increasingly hackneyed set of idealized objects.

Chapter Three traces the limits to which the sentimental constitutes a central cluster of critical concerns for writing on film in early to mid 20th century theory. In such a vein I explore the thought of some key exponents of ‘classical film theory’, both familiar and less well-known texts, using a critical lens attuned in particular to the contours of a sentimental aesthetic. While the high-modernism of that historical period is traditionally associated with ideals of critical detachment, the non-mimetic and a pervasive anti-humanism, I argue that the sophisticated thought of such figures as Eisenstein, Benjamin, Bazin or Balázs is less than easily categorized within such rubrics.

Having established the contours of sentimental theory in relation to cinema and its forerunners, the second section of the thesis maintains a meta-critical goal of examining the vicissitudes of the sentimental as it continues on through to the

cinematic period. Although the sentimental had certainly crystallized as a term denoting kitsch and emotional manipulation by the time of Hollywood's rise, what and how the cinema invokes sentimentality remains a complex and underexplored area. At the centre of this debate arguably rests a conflict between the aesthetics of modernism and that of a 'bourgeois', classical Hollywood tradition (as inherited by historical melodrama), yet my analysis time and again reveals the extent to which a critical modernism remains highly nuanced in relation to Hollywood's key sentimentalists, as does any clear notion of a designated bourgeois ideology underpinning Hollywood film. As proponents of a mass culture rather than a more monolithically conceived bourgeois art, these figures (and their appeals to the sentimental) might be more productively understood I argue, within a rubric similar to that which scholar Miriam Hansen has termed 'vernacular modernism', than as a merely regressive ideology.³⁷

The second section thus explores specific figures of the cinematic era in order to examine the alleged continuities between their work and a sentimental aesthetics, with textual analysis of specific films and their modes of reception serving to provide a theoretically informed elucidation of such considerations. My choices of Charlie Chaplin and Steven Spielberg, despite the wide gulf in time-period between them, allows the discussion to chart the success of the sentimental in surviving from the period of early cinema to its classical period and beyond. As dominant cultural figures of their time period, both figures, I argue, allow us to analyse the cultural work of the sentimental as both critical and textual feature. Chaplin's Tramp comes to represent

³⁷ Miriam Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,' *Modernism/modernity* Vol. 6, no. 2 (1999), pp. 59–77.

the figure of virtue threatened by modernity (in its embrace of the machine and the functional), thereby becoming a touchstone of Hollywood melodrama. Spielberg's work represents the continuance of such a 'mode', operating nostalgically, yet pedagogically, in the fallout of New Hollywood's general 'decline in sentiment.' Sentiment functions for both I argue as renewed appeals to the human, to compassion and to the child-like, if not childish, individuals struggling within technologically overwhelming and emotionally sterile modernities of advanced industry, war and entertainment.

Chapter Four's case-study focuses on the reception of Charlie Chaplin as a historical landmark of cinematic sentiment in the early period. I explore a key link between the sentiment of Chaplin's features and the tastes of a middle-class audience and how the perception of Chaplin as a modernist hero within other critical constituencies underlines contradictions concerning his sentimental legacy.

Chapter Five focuses on the work and reception of Steven Spielberg, a film-maker that has provoked much serious scholarship as well as ongoing questions concerning his trademark sentimentality in relation to children, family, the documentation of history and the political identity of America. I examine his critical re-evaluation from purveyor of (a reductively formulated) sentimentality to a figure that has provided a post-classical and post-auteur cinema culture to a taste of its classical period.

Artificial Intelligence, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* are analysed as films that manifest various versions of Spielberg, sentimentalist (in relation to war, family and modern subjectivity) as well as virtuoso craftsman, historical rhetorician and postmodern bricoleur.

My final chapter looks to those areas of filmmaking where sentimentality is commonly presumed to be almost entirely abandoned as an aesthetic priority, often representing indeed that which more ‘independent’, arthouse or auteur-driven films aspire to oppose on diversely ideological, political and aesthetic grounds. I examine the work of Quentin Tarantino, Lars von Trier and Todd Solondz as filmmakers from divergent modes of production and reception in order to show how all however might be considered within revisionist rubrics of sentimentality.

I argue in the chapters below indeed that, notwithstanding wide-ranging dismissals of the sentimental, the latter represents a still fertile mode of discourse for considering the emotional mechanics of cinema. Indeed, I would suggest that a discursive grey area exists between critical dismissal and euphoric celebrations/recuperations of melodramatic pathos, requiring a more fine-tuned, media-specific and historically sensitive analysis of its tropes and paradigms. As a body of theory that both validates ‘feeling’ in its pedagogical and idealist aims while remaining problematic ideologically, the sentimental requires a renewed critical scrutiny. In relation to film, the sentimental represents both that which the medium was almost destined to embody in terms of its eclectic sensual palette, while at the same time a property of predecessor arts that many might have wished film to one day overcome entirely. In such respects, I have situated my discussion specifically around the aesthetics of cinematic and political modernism, examining how the sentimental might be considered to conflict with modernist aesthetics, at the same time that they share certain historical precursors and aesthetic concerns. A key assumption in such regards is that such tensions between the minimalist and the mannered, fact and fiction,

restraint and excess, reason and emotion, frequently imply one another in their own signification, an interdependence that a film such as *Vertigo* so eloquently reveals as a key to the sentimental itself. Reason cannot operate independently of emotion and where one becomes a dominant over the other, a set of tragic misrecognitions and disruptions eventually serve to restore narrative stability and psychological equilibrium.

Chapter One

The Rise and Fall of Sentimentalism in the 18th Century

[...]for, you must know, that what we admire in *you*, are truth and nature, not studied or elaborate epistles. We can hear at church, or read in our closets, fifty good things that we expect not from you: but we cannot receive from any body else the pleasure of sentiments flowing with that artless ease, which so much affects us when we read your letters. Then, my sweet girl, your gratitude, prudence, integrity of heart, your humility, shine so much in all your letters and thoughts, that no wonder my brother loves you as he does.

LETTER XII - From Lady Davers to Mrs. B
Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, by Samuel Richardson (1740)¹

The above praise of Richardson's (1689-1761) heroine Pamela exemplifies the rhetoric of the 18th century sentimental novel and provides an insight into the early meaning of 'sentiment' that is distinct from its modern, often pejorative connotations. Sentiments, and the sentimental novel, were meant to cut through the artifice of cant and mannered prose, revealing more genuine, benevolent impulses of virtuous human subjectivity. At the same time, however, such qualities are appreciated as attributes of an always *rare* virtue, the possessor of which is subjected to suffering and social marginalization, recognition of their virtue far from guaranteed. Thus while Pamela's virtue would be eventually 'rewarded', Richardson's subsequent novel *Clarissa* would be far more pessimistic:

Let me repeat that I am quite sick of life; and of an earth in which *innocent* and *benevolent* spirits are sure to be considered as *aliens*, and to be made sufferers by the *genuine sons* and *daughters* of *that earth*.²

¹ Vol. 2, London: J.M Dent, 1955, p. 32.

² Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, first published in 1747, London: Penguin, 1985, p. 1020.

The above lament of the eponymous heroine indeed equally epitomizes sentimental rhetoric in its invocation of pathos for one that lives a life of virtue and innocence in a world of cruelty and greed. Clarissa refers to her own plight in which she has been persistently pursued, tortured and raped by the rakish aristocrat, Lovelace. Contrary to the high hopes of an Enlightenment philosophy of natural benevolence, Clarissa's virtue and attendant suffering fail to change the corrupt forces that surround her until too late, including her avaricious family and lecherous suitor. Like Pamela, Clarissa becomes a paradigm of what R.F. Brissenden, in his account of the British 'novel of sentiment', termed 'virtue in distress.'³ Moreover, if Pamela's rewarded virtue was exemplary, Clarissa's virtue-in-distress was even more so for the Puritan Richardson, conveying 'sentiment' through the pathos of martyrdom.

Where a contemporary meaning of the 'sentimental' is offered by the OED as an 'indulgence in superficial emotion,'⁴ 'sentiments', for Richardson, are always 'moral and instructive.'⁵ His novels were accompanied by a plethora of guidebooks and manuals that advised readers on how to best interpret them and discover in them 'maxims' for their own proper moral conduct.⁶ To be 'sentimental' or to exhibit 'sensibility' would be related in the mid-18th century to a certain sympathy towards

³ R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*, Macmillan: London, 1974.

⁴ The full OED definition of 'Sentimental' is as follows: 'Of persons, their dispositions and actions: Characterized by sentiment. Originally in favourable sense: Characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling. In later use: Addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion; apt to be swayed by sentiment.'

⁵ Such as in Richardson's *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflexions, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison*, C. Hitch and L. Hawes, 1755.

⁶ *Ibid.*,

society's victims, a benevolent impulse towards reform and the alleviation of misfortune. It would become the mark of bourgeois civility, the approval and tearful enjoyment of the capacity for sympathy with others' tales of woe. However, the first recorded instance of the use of the word 'sentimental' as reported in the OED is by a close correspondent of Richardson, Lady Bradshaigh, who enquired of him in a letter from 1749,

What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental*, so much in vogue among the polite... Every thing clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word...I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk.⁷

It is telling that this quotation expresses confusion as to the term's exact meaning. For no sooner had it been invented than 'sentimental' becomes a byword for a whole array of concepts, characterising a variety of activities. Where, 'moral sentiments', for Richardson, were available to anyone that learns the Christian message from his novels and guides, 'sentimental' appears to originate in a 'polite' and vogueish milieu that names its own supposedly distinctive capacity for sentiment. Hence the OED's definition of 'sentimental' as referring, at least in an 'original' and 'favourable' sense, to persons 'characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling.' Clarissa's moral elevation becomes a pleasing symbol for the elevated status of those whom the Romantic poet Robert Southey, in 1823, would refer to disdainfully as the 'sentimental classes.'⁸

This sentimental ideal would be in vogue for much of the mid-18th century in Britain, France and Germany. It was a stance toward emotion strongly identified with the rise

⁷ Lady Bradshaigh in Samuel Richardson, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, (1804) Anna Laetitia Barbauld (ed.), New York: AMS Press Inc., 1966, IV, p. 282.

⁸ Robert Southey, *The Quarterly Review*, 28, 1823.

of the novel (although sentimental tropes were certainly present in all art forms including poetry, theatre and painting). It was also integral to much of the 18th century's moral philosophy, especially in its concerns with the possibility of a virtuous subject in an increasingly urban society. It would signify, most centrally, an inexorable link between emotion and morality, as distinct from a morality determined solely by reason (see below). Sentimentality became part of an Enlightenment optimism in the benevolent impulses of man, mediated by Christian and philosophical values, producing a sentimental literary hero or heroine exhibiting in all contexts an exemplary capacity for moral judgement. Rather less optimistically, however, such virtue would render the subject at odds with cruel, worldly forces. To accept, with a tear in one's eye, the pitfalls and hopes of a perilous, moral engagement with the world would come to exemplify the 'sentimental' sympathies of the age.

This chapter will trace the concept of sentimentality as it reached its apex in moral philosophy and canonical literature in order to historically situate the vexed and confused place of the sentimental in contemporary art, art criticism, and popular media. What, exactly, did sentimentality mean to those who would use it as a basis for their literary art? What philosophical and/or didactic value was it thought to have? How, and why, did it fall out of favour with high-minded artists and thinkers so soon after it came into vogue? How also did it live on? I will begin with a discussion of the historical context of the idea of sentimentality in 18th century moral philosophy, primarily as it played out in Britain. Such figures as the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1631-1713), David Hume (1711-1776) and Adam Smith (1723-1790) emerge as important theorists of 'moral sentiment' as it became known, all concerned with the role of the 'passions' in ethics. The sentimental trend in moral philosophy is

echoed in the rise of what has become known as the ‘sentimental novel’ in Britain, and so it is to the novels of Samuel Richardson and Henry Mackenzie that I then turn. The chapter will then explore the reception of British novels such as Richardson’s in France and consequently the French understanding of ‘sensibilité’, as discussed by Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and then both celebrated and critiqued by his *philosophe* contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). The discussion will lastly consider the suspicions of tearful enjoyment of art in Britain that came to concretize the meaning of sentimentality as it is widely understood today, the term largely failing to escape its connotations of mawkish self-indulgence as a function of rhetorical manipulation.

The Seeds of Sentimentality: Hobbes and Locke

R. F. Brissenden claims that the sentimental ideal was an individual in whom ‘reason and feeling were properly balanced.’⁹ The belief in the possibility of this balanced and therefore virtuous subject was thought of as a key paradigm in Enlightenment philosophy. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke (1632-1704) posits that individual human ‘Experience’ is the source of all knowledge, a main contention of *empiricism*. The knowledge one gains is of either ‘external sensible objects’ or ‘the internal operations of our minds.’¹⁰ Gaining knowledge of the former would correspond to ‘sensation’, of the latter to ‘reflection.’ This contrasts

⁹ Ibid., p. 24. The genealogy of both concepts will be discussed below.

¹⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Tegg, 1836, p. 51.

with a rationalist tradition that argues for the existence of ‘innate ideas,’¹¹ of knowledge present in the mind at birth, rather than gained through sense experience.

The mere mention of ‘Sensible objects’ immediately invites speculation as to what the subject may have to experience, which may not be determined by introspective reflection alone, in order to become a moral being. For Locke, the answer is unequivocal:

That we call good which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure, or preserve us the possession of any other good, or absence of any evil.¹²

Locke believes that the experiences of pain and pleasure are essential to our becoming moral beings, as the idea of the good is entirely allied with that which elicits pleasure or diminishes pain; in other words, he posits a psychology of self-interest. At first glance, such a psychology would seem to promote little more than warring self-interested parties rather than moral and socially-minded beings; but Locke’s solution to this problem resides in imagining a ‘law-maker’ with the power to reward and punish – i.e. mete out pleasure and pain, so that human self-interest conforms to the social. This lawmaker for Locke may be a state power, but since such authorities are eminently corruptible, Locke’s ultimate legislator and judge is God, and his laws consist of vague but immutable Judeo-Christian values.

According to Locke’s philosophy, then, people educated in the fundamentals of a divine law of benevolence and social justice, and consequent divinely rewards and punishments, will incline towards obedience and moral goodness. But Locke would

¹¹ Ibid., p. 71.

¹² Ibid., p. 146.

still have to contend with the question of why the promise of heaven or hell—eternal pleasure or pain—so frequently failed as a sufficient motivator for human behaviour. In other words, why would anyone, possessed with rational choice, choose sinful behaviour over that which would lead to the greater good? Locke responded to this query by reaching to the emotions to fill the gap left by the intellect. A person would have to experience not only *knowledge* of the greater good, but *desire* for it: ‘the uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of any thing, whose present enjoyment carries the idea of delight with it.’¹³ Without this feeling, this passion, a person cannot rationalise moral choices whose benefits are quite distant; in order to arouse this desire, a person must reflect on the good continually until it becomes second nature.¹⁴

Locke’s theory followed a time of great social turmoil in England encompassing religious, political and economic conflicts. The 17th century produced a bloody civil war in England where religious and political tolerance was undermined by the necessity to make stark choices of allegiance between royalist Cavaliers and parliamentary Roundheads. The despotic military rule of Cromwell as Lord Protector had been ended with the Restoration of a less powerful monarchy (Charles II and subsequently James II). Locke was himself a physician to the First Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the first parliamentary Whigs that campaigned determinedly against the Stuart dynasty and its alliance with Catholicism. Locke’s famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was first published two years after the Glorious Revolution in 1688 (where James II was overthrown) and the enacting of the Bill of

¹³ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁴ See the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on ‘John Locke’ for discussion of the indispensability of emotion in Locke’s ethics.

Rights, to which he contributed many central ideas. By the time William and Mary were 'constitutional' monarchs (a monarchy with minimal influence on parliament), feudalism would be finally surpassed by capitalism - symbolized by the creation of the Bank of England in 1694.

The cruelties of the absolutist rule of the Stuarts were represented in a culture of courtly wit and libertinism. A feudalist aristocracy that runs amuck to the detriment of the lower classes was illustrated in some Restoration drama and was exemplified by the poetry of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester and others in the court of Charles II.

The figure of the libertine would connote a misogynistic male aristocrat that considers himself intellectually and legally free of moral restraints. Seducing women without any further commitments such as marriage or family, he would be a recurring figure in the following century's literature and drama as embodied by Mr. B and Lovelace in Richardson's novels.

The civil chaos and aristocratic excesses of the 17th century would also be mirrored by the 'egoistic' philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), emphasising the inherently self-interested nature of man and a default 'state of nature' of conflict and war. Hobbes' philosophy and his well-known work, *Leviathan*, published in 1651, emphasises the inevitable brutality of man who acts only in the interest of self-preservation and whose life is best described as 'nasty, brutish and short.'¹⁵ As a result, war becomes the most natural state for man to be in, where the 'two Cardinall vertues' are 'Force, and Fraud'.¹⁶ His solution to this anarchic 'state of meer

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes and Richard Tuck, *Leviathan*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Nature¹⁷ is *Leviathan*, an absolute authority or sovereign to which all men must defer and which subjugates their inevitably destructive and conflicting instincts.

The context for the proposal of this tyrannical form of governance was indeed the threats to the sovereignty of the king in 17th century England. As parliament and those it represented in the commercial sectors of society grew more powerful, the absolutism of the king became questioned in economic and moral terms. The monarchy's chief rival in an earlier medieval period would have been the Church and the dogmas of Catholic authoritarianism. England, however, had already broken away both religiously and monetarily from such authority and great power had become vested in the monarch. Hobbes was a vehement Royalist who defended the power of the sovereign in rational terms, believing that choice and free will had to be surrendered by a country's subjects once an absolute ruler had been chosen. *Leviathan* would not be subject to legal constraints – the rule of law's chief function, in fact, would be in forcing *Leviathan*'s subjects to be kept entirely under his authority. Hobbes believed this to provide the only hope for harmony among inevitably warring individuals. Indeed, the civil war that followed between Charles I and parliament in the 1640s was attributed by Hobbes to the flawed division of power between monarch and parliament.

It would be quite misguided to say that the historical events of 1688 and the publication of Locke's *Essay* proved the Hobbesian doctrine wrong. Although such events produced better social conditions for many citizens and a less turbulent political and religious climate, the ascendancy of the doctrine of a balanced

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Enlightenment subject brought with it its own problems. It would carry over to the next century, with renewed urgency, the debate as to how to characterise the ideal subject of this newly democratized and urbanized environment.

The Importance of Benevolence: The 3rd Earl of Shaftsbury

The sentimental literature that would, in the mid-18th century, move readers and theatre audiences to tears, would espouse virtues that had been valorised by a variety of discourses antecedent to it. Such themes as charity to the poor, virtue as its own reward, a woman's chastity and the capacity for pity and compassion would be established as key markers of the benevolence of mankind by the time of the publication of Richardson's first novel in 1740. There were others aside from Locke that had been far more vociferous in their repudiation of Hobbesian notions. To assert the selfish nature of the human spirit was contrary to various core Christian beliefs. 20th century scholars such as C. A. Moore and R. S. Crane find opposition to both Hobbes and Christian orthodoxy in the writings and preachings of various theological schools such as the Latitudinarians, Cambridge Platonists and the Deists, all prominent in the last quarter of the 17th century.¹⁸ While more orthodox Christian groups were antagonized by the recent scientific discoveries in physics or astronomy, these more moderate groups would regard them as a means to better understand the divine. The deistic proposition, according to Moore, was that 'the Deity is sufficiently revealed through natural phenomena, and that reason unaided is capable of forming an adequate notion of God.'¹⁹ The 'Latitude-men', as Crane refers to

¹⁸ R.S. Crane, 'Suggestions Toward A Genealogy of the "Man of Feeling"', *ELH*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Dec., 1934), pp. 205-230; C. A. Moore, 'Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England, 1700-1760,' *PMLA*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1916), pp. 264-325.

¹⁹ Moore, 'Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England', p. 267.

them, would also oppose the Puritan doctrine of the limited importance of moral works (such as charity) as compared to a compulsory faith in god. He goes on to argue that many preachers at the time would have been sermonizing on the importance of charity and having benevolent feelings towards man. One of these 'divines', as they were called, John Tillotson (1630-1694), writes in a typical vein, 'How much better it is to do good, to be really useful and beneficial to others.'²⁰

Both the liberal doctrines of Locke and the theological trends of the 17th century would be combined and popularized in the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury, like the Deists, was concerned about the theological doctrines of reward, punishment and self-preservation that underpinned both Christian orthodoxy and Hobbes' arguments. In both, the subject is provided with incentives to living a moral life through obedience to either a vengeful deity or an omnipotent sovereign. In both, the subject cannot be trusted to his/her own good inclinations. Shaftesbury's main assertions, however, state that a life of virtue can be followed through instinct rather than having to be enforced by a system of incentives and penalties. His work was to be particularly influential for later philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith (discussed below). His *Characteristics*²¹, published in 1711, was a much read work throughout the early 18th century. Shaftesbury's confidence in the subject's instinctual drives towards benevolence contrasts sharply with Hobbes' image of a self-interested and inevitably destructive figure.

Benevolence would be manifest by the subject's 'affections' for everyday social activities such as:

²⁰ Cited in Crane, 'Suggestions Toward A Genealogy of the "Man of Feeling"', p. 211.

²¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, (1711) Lawrence E. Klein (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

parental Kindness, Zeal for Posterity, Concern for the Propagation and Nurture of the Young, Love of Fellowship and Company, Compassion, mutual Succour, and the rest of this kind.²²

Here, Shaftesbury makes clear that benevolent feelings such as ‘love of fellowship’ and ‘compassion’ are just as instinct-driven as self-preservation and reproduction. Indeed, benevolence, exemplified by this variety of social virtues, was a natural inclination that his hypothetical ‘creature’ would not need reasoning, education, or coercion to access:

Let us suppose a Creature, who wanting Reason, and being unable to reflect, has, notwithstanding, many good Qualitys and Affections; as Love to his Kind, Courage, Gratitude, or Pity. ’Tis certain that if you give to this Creature a reflecting Faculty, it will at the same instant approve of Gratitude, Kindness, and Pity;²³

Shaftesbury thus believed not only that unselfish emotions were instinctual, but also that were one to acquire a ‘reflecting Faculty’ it would support those same benevolent emotions, such as ‘gratitude’ and ‘pity’ as well as corresponding behaviours, such as kindness. Cognition and altruistic affect were allied rather than opposed.

For his hypothetical ‘Creature’, there moreover could be nothing ‘more amiable’ than a ‘shew or representation of the social Passion’²⁴; a benevolent subject would inevitably enjoy watching or observing real ‘shows’ or fictional ‘representations’ of generosity and kindness.²⁵ For Shaftesbury, such representations have more of a purpose than mere entertainment – they instill virtue.

²² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 192.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁴ Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, (1699), David Walford (ed.), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977, p. 32.

²⁵ ‘Social Passion’ is Shaftesbury’s term for the unselfish, i.e., social instinct.

So that if a Creature be generous, kind, constant, compassionate; yet if he cannot reflect on what he himself does, *or sees others do*[my italics], so as to *take notice of what is worthy or honest*[my italics]; and make that Notice or Conception of Worth and Honesty to be an Object of his affection; he has not the Character of being virtuous;²⁶

In other words, for Shaftesbury, to be benevolent was not necessarily to be of ‘virtuous character.’ One did not need to reflect to be naturally benevolent, but to become a truly virtuous character, one needed to reflect on one’s own and others’ actions, and have a second-order affection for benevolence itself. In accordance with Locke’s dyad of sensation and reflection, Shaftesbury regards the witnessing of virtuous actions of others as complementary to a reasoned reflection on one’s own actions, and fundamental to the shaping of a virtuous character. Indeed, suggested in Shaftesbury’s notion of the observation of moral behaviour is a key premise of aesthetics:

Thus are the arts and virtues mutually friends and thus the science of virtuosos and that of virtue itself become, in a manner, one and the same.²⁷

For Shaftesbury, ‘the arts’ and ethics are aligned, as evidenced by the notion that artistic beauty and moral beauty were ‘one and the same’. Moral experience was equivalent to aesthetic experience - both involved a perception of, and openness to, beauty.

At times, Shaftesbury’s writings seem to advance the notion of an infectious transmission of benevolent emotions between subjects that would later be taken up by Hume. For Shaftesbury, the ‘Admiration or Love of Order, Harmony and Proportion’,

²⁶ Shaftesbury, *Inquiry*, p. 18.

²⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 150.

presumably either represented in art or as theoretical concepts would be ‘naturally improving to the temper.’ Considering, then, that a subject’s virtuous character must be formed by observation and reflection, a kind of education, Shaftesbury faced a problem of how to disentangle such a learning process from any notion of authority, given his disinclination for benevolence based on incentives. He describes a liberal education thus:

Yet the same Master of the Family using proper Rewards and gentle Punishments towards his Children, teaches them Goodness; and by this help instructs them in a Virtue, which afterwards they practice upon other grounds, and without thinking of a Penalty or Bribe. And this is what we call a Liberal Education and a Liberal Service: the contrary Service and Obedience, whether towards God or Man, being illiberal, and unworthy of any Honour or Commendation.²⁸

The above description contrasts sharply with a Hobbesian language of absolute submission to authority. The transition from obedient child to self-regulating, liberal adult is described with the adjectives ‘gentle’ and ‘proper’, suggesting that the child’s benevolence might perhaps lie only just below the surface. However, it seems inconsistent for him to argue that behaviour determined by ‘Obedience’ is wholly ‘illiberal’, whilst his liberal adult seems still subject to a kind of internalised and unconscious obedience. Rewards and punishments are not totally dispensed with in Shaftesbury’s moral universe but ought only be applied as a carefully controlled pedagogy for children. For adults, virtue might no longer rely on anything as crude as a ‘Penalty’ or ‘Bribe’ yet it is left ambiguous as to what ‘other grounds’ there may be for it to thrive.

²⁸ Shaftesbury, *Inquiry*, p. 39.

Shaftesbury would furthermore set limits on the scope of his code of gentility, writing that philosophy is best conducted in a ‘Circle of Good Company’ composed exclusively of the ‘better sort’. The elitist in Shaftesbury was less optimistic about the usefulness of the passions in the everyday ‘sort.’ Indeed, much criticism of Shaftesbury sees him as a complacent aristocrat that regards the characteristics of his own class as exemplary.²⁹ For it is when he speculates upon passions ‘raised in a multitude’³⁰ (passions that every member of society can indulge in) that he alludes to their all too easily turning to ‘panic’. For him, it can bring ‘disorder’ to ‘the general society of mankind’ and, problematically in relation to his own ruling class, sedition.³¹ Such anxieties about an emotional openness that might cross class boundaries indeed represent early expressions of what in later centuries would become a far more commonplace debate about the emotions mediated by mass culture, and indeed the cinema. Whether foreshadowing critiques of the stale, mawkish Victorianism of the following century, or of Hollywood entertainment and the ‘culture industry’ of the century following that, this would certainly not be the last time that the idea of an ‘open-access’ sentimentality gives pause to elitist intellectuals.

Moreover, despite valorising the benevolent emotions and seeing them as instinctual, Shaftesbury did not go so far as to regard them as a substitute for ‘Reason’, and still advised caution in allowing the passions free reign. In addition to possibly causing sedition, an:

²⁹ See Robert Markley, ‘Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue’, in Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (eds.), *The New Eighteenth Century*, London: Methuen, 1987. pp. 210-30.

³⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 10.

³¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 52.

over-great Tenderness destroys the Effect of Love,
and excessive Pity renders us incapable of giving succour. Hence
the Excess of motherly Love is own'd to be a vitious Fondness;
over-great Pity, Effeminacy and Weakness;³²

Shaftesbury believes in the above that emotions could be both fallible and excessive.

'Beyond a certain degree,' even 'kindness' and 'love' could become 'vitious'. There is also little doubt, from the above, that Shaftesbury also preferred such 'Excess' to remain tied to his idea of femininity.

Shaftesbury's philosophy remains cautious therefore with respect to the sometimes overpowering effects of emotion, in that he would never go so far as to posit emotional display in the subject as the only evidence of genuine moral subjectivity. Shaftesbury's moralism and its contradictions set the template for a debate concerning how virtue can be evidenced by, and communicated between, subjects. The human inclination for benevolence would, for him, be characterised by kind and compassionate emotions learned by genteel custom (even if this must imply the customs of a particular social class), which would be most in evidence in its relation to benevolent and charitable displays such as 'parental kindness' or 'nurture of the young.' However, as much as the facilitation of good 'sentiments,' through moral pedagogy and civilized custom, constituted vital components for a civilized society, the passions nevertheless remained unpredictable if they went unchecked.

Sensibility: Addison and Hume

Shaftesbury's above reference to an 'over-great Tenderness' and 'Effeminacy' would foreshadow later concerns with 'sensibility', the latter term referring indeed to a very

³² Shaftesbury, *Inquiry*, p. 15.

comparable attribute. In 1711, in an article from the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison would argue:

Modesty..is a kind of quick and delicate Feeling in the Soul... It is such an exquisite Sensibility, as warns a woman to shun the first Appearance of every thing which is hurtful.³³

In the above, ‘sensitivity’ denotes a sense that aids the subject’s intuitive powers, that would facilitate a particular alertness to nuance and particularities, as if it were a fine instrument that is easily blunted or made inaccurate. The use of ‘delicate’ would become a key adjective for how sensitivity and its implicit benevolence would come to be regarded throughout the century. It immediately suggests a vulnerability in one that possesses it. Addison asserts that the use-value of a ‘sensitivity’ is for protection against that which is ‘hurtful’, yet the status of such hurt remains ambiguous. If such hurt exists irrespective of whether one has sensitivity to detect it, then the latter would seem to be an advantage in detecting it at its ‘first appearance.’ Conversely, if such hurt exists only as detected by a delicate sensitivity, the latter might well be considered a mixed blessing.

In his 1742 essay ‘Of the Delicacy Of Taste And Delicacy Of Passion’, the philosopher David Hume would also apply the ‘sensible’ to a subject with a certain potential for suffering:

SOME People are subject to a certain delicacy of passion, which makes them extremely sensible to all the accidents of life, and gives them a lively joy upon every prosperous event, as well as a piercing grief, when they meet with misfortunes and adversity.³⁴

³³ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*. No. 231

³⁴ David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, E. Miller (ed.), Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985, p. 3-4.

This capacity for sensibility implies in the above passage the same perceptual propensities as Addison's 'exquisite sensibility.' However, it again seems a cause for celebration mixed with some unease as to the 'Sorrow' that it leaves one open to. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*,³⁵ in 1739, writing on 'Goodness and Benevolence,' Hume aligns a similar term, 'tender sentiment,' with a subject that is 'actuated' by 'Love.' It remains ambiguous what Hume means by 'actuated', for we can infer both a direct experience of love towards oneself or a witnessing of a benevolent act of love. However, its effects upon the subject would be described with a vocabulary similar to the writing style of the 'sentimental novel':

The tears naturally start in our eyes at the conception of it [Love]; nor can we forbear giving a loose to the same tenderness towards the person who exerts it. All this seems to me a proof, that our approbation has, in those cases, an origin different from the prospect of utility and advantage, either to ourselves or others.³⁶

For Hume, tears are evidence of a subject's genuine approval of a benevolent concept, such as love. The contemplation of such concepts affect us more deeply than when we contemplate either self-oriented or social goals. To follow this logic the more one has tears, the more one is contemplating moral concepts that transcend those of 'utility and advantage.'

Hume was a major figure of what has since become known collectively as the 'Scottish Enlightenment' including other philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames and Adam Smith, all of whom would contribute to the formulation of

³⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), London: OUP, 1973.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 604.

‘moral sense’. With the publication of the *Treatise*, Hume would follow Shaftesbury’s legacy in applauding ‘goodness and benevolence.’ However, as in the above citation, Hume argues that ‘love’, which is elsewhere referred to as ‘sympathy’³⁷, cannot be explained solely on the grounds of a perceived utility to society. He believes sentiments to arise through a ‘spark of friendship’ that is felt by the subject and from which all social behaviour should be derived. Writing on the human capacity for ‘sympathy’, he argues that ‘no quality of human nature is more remarkable.’³⁸ The closeness of friends and acquaintances, the harmony of their passions and beliefs communicated within close contact and cultured discussion constitute sympathy’s templates. Sympathy, would be the ability ‘to receive by communication [others’] inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.’³⁹ He employs a metaphor of contagion as a means of describing the infectious nature of good sentiments, mentioned above, implying that if benevolent emotions were not intrinsic to man, their diffusion throughout society would be at least inexorable and welcome:

The passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts. Where friendship appears in very signal instances, my heart catches the same passion, and is warmed by those warm sentiments, that display themselves before me.⁴⁰

Indeed, the above passage demonstrates a great optimism in ‘friendship’ and the easiness with which emotions are transmitted between subjects. The intentions underlying the display of ‘warm sentiments’ are always assumed to be transparently

³⁷ Ibid., p. 316.

³⁸ Ibid.,

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 605.

benevolent. He describes their dissemination as ‘correspondent movements in all human breasts’ - shared bodily experiences as much as shared beliefs. For Hume, being moved, as we would most commonly refer to it, which includes tears of course, are genuine expressions of a successfully transmitted passion, more genuine than verbal interaction.

In his famous maxim, Hume maintained therefore that reason ought only be ‘the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them’.⁴¹ This quote is often cited as evidence of Hume’s key contribution to the ascendancy of feeling over reason.⁴² Indeed, this position contrasts with Shaftesbury’s appeal to the social ‘affections’ as a means of returning those that are ‘easiest affected with pain or pleasure’ to a ‘*right balance within*, and to maintain them in their duty.’⁴³ Shaftesbury’s ‘affections,’ for Hume, would probably seem too much governed by ‘reason’ if their chief task were to restore balance, for balance here seems to valorise an absence of reactions to pain and pleasure, and ultimately a less passionate subject. Pain and pleasure are precisely what Hume wants to see registered in ‘bodily movements’. For him, the visuality of such movements allows them moreover to be ‘contagious.’

This is fine, as long as warm sentiments or benevolence motivate such movements.

But what if they are motivated by false beliefs or less noble sentiments? What if they

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 415.

⁴² The 20th century scholar Basil Willey argued that Hume’s thought was a water-shed between ‘Nature and Reason’ before him and his own ‘Nature and Feeling’. Brissenden, in *Virtue in Distress*, argues that such an assertion underestimates much of the fervour and passion of a 17th/18th century theology that precedes Hume.

⁴³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 199.

are faked? Passions, within Hume's rubric, could not be inauthentic in such respects. The 'bodily movements' become privileged *because* he regards them as the most visible, genuine registration of pain or pleasure. To visibly display one's passions on the body would be the mark of a transparent personality, conveying an honesty in expressing pleasure and pain. Such display, for Hume, would signify a 'delicate sensibility.' Although exhibited only by some individuals, it would reveal exemplary honesty and virtue, irrespective of the ambiguous cognitive processes that could underpin such feeling. Affect would be more visible than cognition and thus warm sentiments could, for Hume, inevitably flourish. Such a scenario of infectious benevolent emotions indeed becomes exemplified by the many tearful scenes of the sentimental novel, such as the heroine's famous death in *Clarissa* death and many of Mackenzie's tableaux, where suffering envelops the scene and is intended to spill over into reader reaction. This would be a moral affect transmitted between moral characters and between novel and reader.

Feminine Sensibility in the Novel: Samuel Richardson

The ambiguity concerning the benefits to the subject of 'moral sense' would put the condition of women at centre stage for an enquiry into the benevolent condition. By 1753, Samuel Richardson had published all three of his most celebrated novels: *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. All Richardson's central heroes and heroines are each held up as paradigms of virtue in their fictional worlds. For *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, such virtue is proved by their exemplary endurance of suffering - for *Grandison*, plot becomes subordinate to acclamations of his virtue by women friends. For Richardson, women had a monopoly on 'sentiment' which, when pushed to its limits, becomes a language of wordless gestures, sighs and weeping, conforming to

Hume's description of 'delicate sensibility.' *Pamela*, in particular had become immensely popular, spawning a sequel, the second part of *Pamela*, and various moral guidebooks linked to the story. Pamela's tale turns on the repeated threats to her virtue from her master, Mr. B, and the torments that she must endure in being coerced to become his mistress. The story is told through her own letters, recounting the many ordeals that she is put through before he gets his way. She is kidnapped, tricked and sexually threatened by him but she resists his advances until he finally offers her marriage - which she accepts only once he has expressed sympathy for how she has been treated. The perception of her suffering, as recounted in her journal, leads him to be so touched by her virtue that he reforms his brutal behaviour.

The 'sentiments' that Pamela lives by are principles that, when challenged, are defended by tearful emotions. Weeping, as the most appropriate response to her victimized condition, is time and again underscored as evidence of the value of her principles. Where, for Shaftesbury, excesses of effeminate emotion could indicate irrationality, Pamela's wordless sighs and sobs are defended as proof of her adherence to the maintenance of her virtue under threat. In such a vein, the representation of sensibility as visual spectacle becomes of paramount importance in the registration of virtue both on the part of rake and reader alike, and indeed foreshadows the intimate relationship between sentiment and the visual that the melodrama of later eras (and the cinema of course) would come to exploit in their own contributions to the sentimental tradition.

Nevertheless, what converts Mr. B ultimately to sympathy for Pamela are not the episodes of her weeping before him but her own sad reflections confided to her

journal that he eventually gains access to. If visual suffering serves to underscore virtue in *Pamela*, it also often fails as much as succeeds in effectuating change in those that witness it (until too late). Where written testimony converts the sinful, its visual counterpart has limitations, not least owing to its status as sensually engaging spectacle. In a more ambiguous vein, sentiment becomes an aesthetic enjoyment that exceeds the parameters of the merely morally improving, with a woman's tears often shown to repel and attract (but not reform) the men that elicit them in Richardson's novels. In one of the many scenes in which Mr. B tries to make a sexual advance on Pamela, he says to her,

O how happy for you it is, that you can, at will, thus make your speaking eyes overflow in this manner, without losing any of their brilliancy! You have been told, I suppose, that you are most beautiful in your tears!⁴⁴

In the above, competing discourses are contained in how B. interprets Pamela's tears. In one sense, it can be inferred that he finds them suspect, that they signify the skill she employs to produce them, one of her 'Tricks and Artifices,' as much as real virtue.⁴⁵ However, it is also possible that he is simply saying this as provocation and either truly believes in the integrity of her tears or is unsure. At any rate, he finds the sobbing Pamela attractive to watch as an aesthetic pleasure. Her tears succeed in making him refrain from further attack, although this may be only because he prefers the spectacle of her body caught in emotional distress anyway, such that when she begins to weep, B. steps back and resumes his gaze at her body,

See, said he, and took the glass with one hand, and turned me round with the other, what a shape! what a neck! what a hand! and what a bloom on that lovely face!—

⁴⁴ Richardson, *Pamela*, Vol. 1, Duncan Eaves & Ben Kimpel (eds.), Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971, p. 162

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*,

A distressed Pamela thus becomes the key fetish object for B., with different parts of her body segmented and analysed individually. Visual control and physical control fluctuate in such episodes, yet the former form of control is preferable to Richardson's males than the latter – it lasts longer and is more intellectual. The dominance of visual possession fulfils an ambiguous role for the author also. It becomes a device whereby tears are seen to defend the woman's chastity (a moral affect bringing about a moral outcome) yet they also sustain Pamela's status as an aestheticized spectacle of suffering that prolongs the novel exponentially.

Pamela as a picture of tearful innocence therefore satisfies a problematically conflated sexual and moral appetite in rake and reader alike, a possibility that worried Richardson and spurred his constant revisions to his novels. For Richardson, the recognition of beleaguered innocence in his novels ought to have had a solely educational function. Signs of genuine sensibility, weeping and suffering, become clearly legible templates for moral correctness. Those that do not recognize it when they see it, for Richardson, would be blinded by a disabling cynicism. Hume's hypothetical contagion of benevolent emotions is impeded more than he would have liked in Richardson's novels by the rake's suspicion of tears. Such suspicions, however, are eventually shown to be without foundation and when characters learn of their mistaken beliefs, tears also often become proof of their realisation, repentance and moral conversion. In *Pamela*, the heroine is exemplary because, for her, tears are never anything else but evidence of character integrity, both in relation to others and herself. Tears also identify for Pamela those that have honest intentions towards her, and it curiously never occurs to those plotting against her to feign them.

When Mr. B eventually reforms his ways, he says he has learned to speak the ‘sentiments’ of his own ‘heart’.⁴⁶ Richardson is at pains to highlight an educational and reforming function of sensibility – those surrounding Pamela become affected by her potential for suffering and learn a sensitivity they had not known. The virtue she imparts is not one of complex maxims or stylized verse but simple assertions of her beliefs in her own and others’ virtue. When accused of deceit, for instance, Pamela says to B., ‘I know I don’t remember all I wrote, yet I know I wrote my heart, and that is not deceitful.’⁴⁷ Later, she defends her husband’s benevolence in writing to Lady Davers, B’s sister: ‘His heart is naturally beneficent, and his beneficence is the gift of God for the most excellent purposes,’⁴⁸ In reply, Lady Davers writes, ‘what we admire in *you*, are truth and nature, not studied or elaborate epistles.’⁴⁹

Unlike *Clarissa*, Richardson’s second novel, *Pamela* ends rather happily, if not satisfactorily by modern tastes. Pamela becomes accepted into an aristocratic family and succeeds in reforming her husband, despite his having an affair in Part II. The novel’s full title, indeed, was *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*. The term ‘sentimentality’ in its modern sense is often applied to unrealistically happy endings, for they produce emotions in readers or spectators which are often judged, by more critically distanced readers, to be unwarranted by the preceding narrative events. *Pamela*’s resolution can certainly be charged with a sentimentality invoked by a lack of realism. For Terry Eagleton, it conforms to a simple scheme of ‘fantasy wish-fulfilment in which

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 338.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 200.

⁴⁸ See Note 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 31.

abduction and imprisonment turn out miraculously well, the rough beast becomes a prince charming and the poor kitchen maid a beautiful princess.⁵⁰ In this way, *Pamela* seems to gloss over what could be argued to remain an uneven and sexist relationship between husband and wife. It speaks to women's dissatisfactions but ultimately repeats an adherence to patriarchal conventions and ends with an artificially optimistic resolution.

However, sentimental emotions would rarely be invoked by a happy ending without the prior establishment of pathos, suffering and virtue. Richardson's second novel *Clarissa* ends with a long and protracted scene at Clarissa's deathbed and proved in its popularity that nothing was so emotive as a martyr's death, a trope that would remain embedded in the sentimental novel. The heroine here fails to reform the 'rake' Lovelace, with whom she escapes her scheming family that wish her to marry someone else for money and status. Lovelace turns out to be a sadistic abductor that plots to have her under his full control. Despite her persistent resistance, he both drugs and rapes Clarissa, leading eventually to her death owing to a 'noble heart' that is 'broken.'⁵¹ As she dies, the heroine is attended by an audience that for the first time is sympathetic to her misfortune - a final realisation of her virtue that comes all too late. In one sense, Clarissa suffers, in her words, a 'death from grief', a thoroughly disheartening end that shows the ultimate retreat of one that cannot participate in a hostile, masculinized world. However, the reader is offered consolation by the tearful moralizing of those present, such as the formerly rakish friend of Lovelace, John

⁵⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 37.

⁵¹ Richardson, *Clarissa*, p. 1206.

Belford, who having summarized the scene to Lovelace, exhorts what we should learn from Clarissa's experience: 'This is penitence! This is piety! And hence a distress naturally arises that must *worthily* affect every heart.'⁵²

Clarissa thus becomes a symbol of virtue not rewarded, but sanctified. Her experience becomes paradigmatic of the sentimental mode, for here she becomes a symbol of martyred sensibility, of course also invoking its Christian forbear. The final scene serves as the climax of a set of events in which suffering becomes the inevitable experience for a subject of 'delicate sensibility'; it is precisely in such scenes that virtue is most manifest by being threatened and not recognized. Richardson would be explicit on its educative potential, with Clarissa claiming the 'the school of affliction' as:

an excellent school ... in which we are taught to know ourselves, to be able to be compassionate and bear with one another, and look up to a better hope.'⁵³

In other words, Clarissa asserts that she has attained self-knowledge and the capacity for benevolence, not through the observance of role-models or fidelity to social custom, as Shaftesbury would have it, but rather through suffering itself. In being moved by suffering, she and others learn to perceive the contours of a non-verbal, bodily code of morality. Her words demonstrate the inverted logic of sensibility wherein tales of great suffering and defeat can elicit scenes evoking 'hope' through

⁵² Ibid.,

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 1121-22.

shared understanding and tears.⁵⁴ Clarissa's sad fate is acknowledged by various characters, including Lovelace, as ultimately a 'triumph.'

Whereas Hume's *Treatise* would not have had anything like the readership of Richardson's novels, the latter would seem to epitomize and animate his concept of 'delicate sensibility'. If tears signified sentiments that often failed to be 'contagious' in relation to other characters in such novels, they would fulfil the compensatory purpose of being extremely contagious on the part of the novels' readership. In Richardson's universe, tears signify both sympathy for an abused sentimental principle and connote a genuine and benevolent hope for a better world. As characters and readers absorbed such principles as they wept over virtue rewarded, the spectacle of suffering and visual representation itself come centre stage for their newly realized pedagogical functions.

France and 'Sensibilité'

In France, in 1762, the *philosophe* Denis Diderot (1713-1784) would write of a benevolence felt vicariously through his emotive consumption of Richardson's novels. He claimed that, 'the passions he portrays are those I feel within me; the same things arouse them, and I recognize their force in myself.'⁵⁵ Moreover, such praise is characterised by a strong conviction of the moral worthiness of reading the novels. As an elegy to Richardson, who had died in 1761, he would write:

⁵⁴ Richardson, having been brought up Puritan is no doubt heavily influenced by, and invokes the paradigm of Christ's divine goodness and his sacrifice at the crucifixion.

⁵⁵ Denis Diderot, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremner, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 83

How good I was! How just I was! Wasn't I pleased with myself!
When I had been reading you, I was like a man who had spent
the day doing good.⁵⁶

The proud celebration of reading as an explicitly moral activity may seem slightly absurd and reductive of literature's wider aesthetic aims by today's standards, yet typifies the values of those that recommended the practice of reading 'for the sentiment'.⁵⁷ To read of virtuous characters was taken to a logical extreme as a vicarious practice of good deeds without the attendant difficulties of doing the same in reality. Reading became a moral act through the assumed transmission of virtue between text and reader.

In fact, Diderot, in 1755, had offered a definition of 'sensibilité' which was thoroughly infused with moralistic discourse:

Sensibilité is that tender and delicate disposition of the soul which renders it easy to be moved and touched.... It gives one a kind of wisdom concerning matters of virtue and is far more penetrating than the intellect alone. People of sensibility because of their liveliness can fall into errors which men of the world would not commit; but these are greatly outweighed by the amount of good that they do. Men of sensibility live more fully than others.... Reflection can produce a man of probity; but sensibility is the mother of humanity, of generosity; it is at the service of merit, lends its support to the intellect, and is the moving spirit which animates belief.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.,

⁵⁷ Samuel Johnson's ironic term for how Richardson's novels should be read, exasperated as he was by their repetitive storyline: 'Why, sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment.' In James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Wordsworth Editions, 2008, p. 341.

⁵⁸ Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres*, J. Assezat (ed.), Paris: 1875; cited in Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, p. 115.

With this definition of *sensibilité*, the *philosophe* asserts the superiority of a subject that lives by feeling to one that lives by ‘reflection’ alone. He had translated Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry Concerning Virtue* into French, and in his own writings he would extol the virtues of a subject that acts with an affective humanity and benevolence.

Indeed, France is regarded to have embraced sentimental culture prior to Britain. Anne-Vincent Buffault, in *A History of Tears*⁵⁹ argues that, in France, the event of eliciting tears in public audiences attained the status of a kind of communal ritual even by 1730. It would fulfil the sentimental ideal of a shared group emotion.

Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm argues thus:

Men are all friends when leaving a play. They have hated vice, loved virtue, cried together, developed the good and just elements of the human heart side by side. They have found themselves to be far better than they thought, they would willingly embrace each other[...]⁶⁰

In order to satisfy the requirements of this collective ritual, Buffault argues that the elicitation of tears became an essential criterion for new plays. She describes how, around 1730, a new tragic-comic genre arose, the chief aim of which, by having a moving plot that in Gustave Lanson’s words, ‘incites us to virtue in feeling for their misfortunes and in applauding their triumphs.’⁶¹ The bourgeois family home becomes the key setting for the ‘Comédie Larmoyante’ and tearful scenes become highly

⁵⁹ Cited in Anne-Vincent Buffault, *A History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France, 1700-1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

⁶⁰ Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire* (1760), cited in Buffault, *History of Tears*, p. 67.

⁶¹ Gustave Lanson, *Nivelle de la Chaussée et La Comédie Larmoyante*, cited in Buffault, *History of Tears*, p. 60.

conventionalised. The misfortune of innocent victims and the defeat of social prejudice (such as the victory of virtuous romantic love over class prejudice and financial considerations) became common narrative conditions for eliciting tears. Like the ‘sentimental comedy’ of British theatre at the time, the form would constitute an obvious precursor to the following century’s melodramas.

In 1769, in his *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (Paradox of Acting), Diderot would also praise a theatrical acting style that had the maximisation of audience emotion as its key aim, using techniques such as ‘cries, inarticulate words’ or ‘broken voices’.⁶²

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, famously advised caution about the excessive gesticulations of some actors,⁶³ yet Diderot gives the actor the task of accentuating their suffering through ‘a splendid aping’, a dramatic style that is larger than life. Thus:

A gladiator of ancient times is like a great actor, and a great actor is like an ancient gladiator; they do not die as people die in bed. They must portray before us a different death so as to please us, and the viewer feels that the bare, unadorned truth of movement would be shallow and contrary to the poetry of the whole.⁶⁴

In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1758, thought of theatrical sentiment as another of the many social conventions that he deplored. He was concerned about the theatre spectator that had ‘wept over imaginary ills’ without feeling any inclination for applying the same emotions to his own social reality. Rousseau’s portrait of such a spectator rests on his scepticism on the moral worth of the theatre:

⁶² Denis Diderot, ‘Paradox of the Actor’ (‘Paradox sur le Comédien’) in *Writings on the Theatre*, F.C. Green (ed.), London: Cambridge University Press, 1936, pp. 576-577.

⁶³ Actors are criticized for gesticulating excessively in order to please those in the audience that are too dull to appreciate the subtleties of a tragic plot. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, London: Nick Hern, p. 40-2.

⁶⁴ Diderot, *Writings on the Theatre*, p. 581.

We believe that we are drawn together at a performance, when it is there that each of us becomes isolated, it is there that we will forget our friends, our neighbours, our dear ones, and direct our interest towards fables, weep over the misfortunes of the dead or laugh at the expense of the living. But I feel that this language is no longer in season in our century.⁶⁵

In the above passage, the sentimental theatre (and its attendant ‘language’) is implicated as another social ill that brings about a state of alienated subjectivity that craves only pleasure. Emotional spectatorship at the theatre would indicate a corruption of sensibility rather than a pedagogical process, true sensibility deemed by Rousseau to reside rather in our real connections with friends and neighbours. In his second preface to *La Nouvelle Heloise*, urban and rural existence are polarized in accordance with the above rubric, with the unthinking virtue of the naïve rustic held up as the ideal of sensibility in contrast to the mannered, self-indulgent city-dweller. Those who live outside an abstracted world of corruption and beyond artificial models of sociality are applauded for a natural common sense. His preferred mode of representation of such figures is moreover diametrically opposed to Diderot’s prescriptions for acting the pathetic scene:

Do you imagine that persons of real sensibility express themselves with that vivacity, energy, and ardour, which you so much admire in our drama and romances? No; true passion, full of itself, is rather diffusive than emphatical. . . . In expressing its feelings, it speaks rather for the sake of its own ease, than to inform others.⁶⁶

The language of sensibility therefore occupies for Rousseau one extreme of a marked opposition between a decadent, emotionalist world and a virtuous form of spiritual existence, the latter removed from the former both physically and semiotically. The

⁶⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Lettre à d’Alembert’, cited in Buffault. *History of Tears*, p. 119.

⁶⁶ Rousseau, ‘Mr Rousseau’s Apology for His Eloisa’, *The London Chronicle*, 9th June 1761.

display of tears becomes suspect, a superficial substitute for a more genuine response to social or ethical problems, yet one that can nevertheless be cynically elicited by stock scenarios of suffering.

The British Man of Feeling

In Britain in the 1750s, Diderot's sentiments would be mirrored by the writings of numerous moralists. In an anonymous letter to the journal, *Man*, would be one of the first instances of the use of the term 'sentimental', in praise of 'Moral weeping':

We may properly distinguish weeping into two general kinds, genuine and counterfeit; or into physical crying and moral weeping. Physical crying, while there are no real corresponding ideas in the mind, nor any genuine sentimental feeling of the heart to produce it, depends upon the mechanism of the body: but moral weeping proceeds from, and is always attended with, such real sentiments of the mind, and feeling of the heart, as do honour to human nature; which false crying always debases.⁶⁷

Crane accompanies the above passage with another by the Scottish moralist David Fordyce from 1754, that discusses the 'Enjoyments' of a moral subject's 'Sympathy' and specifically, the emotional 'Discharge' that characterises such moments of compassion:

It is such a Sorrow as he loves to indulge; a sort of pleasing Anguish, that sweetly melts the Mind, and terminates in a Self-approving Joy. Though the good Man may want Means to execute, or be disappointed in the Success of his benevolent Purposes, yet...he is still conscious of good Affections.⁶⁸

As in Hume, compassionate sorrow is allowed to be 'agreeable' and 'pleasing' because it is never not aligned with the 'good' and is always praiseworthy. However,

⁶⁷ Anonymous, from *Man: A Paper for Ennobling the Species*, No. 43, October 22, 1755 (in a letter signed "A.B."), cited in Crane 'Suggestions'.

⁶⁸ David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (1754), pp. 263-4, cited in Crane, 'Suggestions'.

in R. S. Crane's discussion of the above passage, he points to Fordyce's 'complacent emphasis' on 'Self-Approving Joy.' The danger of sentiment, as detected by Rousseau above and others discussed below, was that it might be more of a narcissistic indulgence in self-regarding moralism than a critical engagement with the causes of a sorrowful scene. If such a critical exercise required an intellectual analysis of the scene as well as an emotional connection to its sadness, how would such analysis be possible if the subject is overwhelmed by 'Anguish' that 'melts the Mind.?'

Following Richardson's fame and the public appetite for sentiment, many imitations of his novels would proliferate. However, they would suffer from what Brissenden refers to as 'moral bankruptcy,'⁶⁹ exploiting the pleasures of experiencing tears without the 'psychological realism and moral seriousness'⁷⁰ of the earlier novels of sentiment. Plot and character conventions would be recognized and employed for their capacity to elicit emotions. These included the abduction of women or the cynical attacks on provincial families by rakish aristocratic men in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of the World* or the lament of the impossibility of real friendship in the city in Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality*. The heroes of their novels have a similar suspicion of society's conventions and long for a return to a simpler existence. A language of tears, sighs and gestures becomes generic, a recurrent convention of representing feelings too deep for verbal expression. Fainting, swooning or crying are resorted to frequently, in order to be replicated in the reactions

⁶⁹ Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, p. 125.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*,

of its own readers who have learned a bodily code that connotes compassion and virtue.

Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, published in 1771, is a frequently cited example of how the later novel of sentiment becomes self-indulgent. It would follow the various episodes of Harley, a young country gentleman, who without much money goes to London to try to get the crown lease of some land adjacent to his own. He fails in this endeavour but while in London and on his return home, he meets and is moved to tears by a variety of minor characters and their tales of woe. The novel is criticized for the artificiality of the central figure, an innocent man that exhibits so much sensibility that all his encounters result in the effusion of his own tears; for Brissenden, this sentiment becomes a 'retreat from reality.' Escape becomes facilitated by sorrowful emotion, as it becomes Harley's only response to the encountering of problems that seem ever more insoluble.

The potential for escape is indeed already inscribed in the hero's distance from each sentimental scene. They are constructed as tableaux, divorced from narrative and offering moments of aestheticized human contact, for which Harley can do nothing but sob. The scene of a man lying forlorn in a debtors' prison, attended by a sympathetic girl is described thus:

A bundle of dirty shreds served him for a pillow, but he had a better support - the arm of a female who kneeled beside him, beautiful as an angel, but with a fading languor in her countenance, the still life of melancholy, that seemed to borrow its shade from the object on which it gazed.⁷¹

⁷¹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1987, p. 90.

Mackenzie's use of the term 'still life' is telling, for it refers to the painting convention of representing fruit, dead game, flowers or vessels that had been coined at the turn of the 18th century.⁷² The display of the misfortunes of society's victims here becomes an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation. Responsibility for their plight is lifted from the outset because the style through which they are represented was reserved conventionally for the inanimate and/or the dead. As such they are contextualized as objects that cannot possibly benefit from the observer's moral intentions, even if such an observer were to stop sobbing.

In this manner, the pathetic scene is isolated from the rest of the story and seems an appeal for an emotion in its own right, without consideration of its context within the novel. Mackenzie's text abounds with such tableaux, scenes of sadness or suffering that seek emotional reactions from the reader. Narrative becomes fragmented and subordinated to this purpose rather than entering into further analysis of the antecedents of these moral outrages, or of possible solutions. The scenes are too fleeting for any further discussion of the political circumstances that may underlie them. The political thoughts of the man of feeling, Harley, are not clearly presented to the reader despite his witnessing of so many tragedies.

Indeed, where politically controversial material is permitted in the text (as in the sentimental genre generally), a firm political position is often evaded or undermined. For instance, a whole chapter covers Harley's criticisms of the British colonization of India. He asserts that the British 'conqueror' of India, exhibits none of the 'humanity'

⁷² The earliest record of the term from the OED is from R. Graham in 1695, *Short Account of the Most Eminent Painters in Dryden's Dufresnoy's Art Paint.* 277: 'His peculiar happiness in expressing all sorts of Animals, Fruit, Flowers, and the Still-life.'

or 'generosity' that might justify his endeavour such as the offering of financial support to Indian families that had lost their men in battle, nor does he refrain from the enjoyment of luxuries facilitated by colonization such as 'lace on his coat', 'slaves in his retinue,' a 'chariot at his door' or 'burgundy at his table.' However, the entire speech is undermined by the title of the chapter, 'The Man of Feeling talks of what he does not understand - An Incident.'⁷³ The implication is that Harley's discourse may exemplify sensibility but manifests at the same time an unworldly ignorance of real affairs. In this, Mackenzie reveals how his sentimental hero is a figure that lives and dies by admirable principles, sentiments indeed, that have no utility in the practical world. As a man that takes on the sensibilities normally attributed to the opposite sex, the author insists on Harley's marginalization from worldly affairs. Harley's sensibility and the underlying beliefs that are only partially revealed, for Mackenzie, necessitates his relegation to an ineffectual, aesthetic sympathy with the world's cruelties. Indeed, the end of the novel sees Harley follow the fate of many sentimental heroes and die young (from an untimely fever).

A critic in the *Monthly Review* of 1771 approved of the novel, owing to its appeal to the emotions. He would argue that 'the Reader, who weeps not over some of the scenes it describes, has no sensibility of mind.'⁷⁴ The elicitation of tears, at the time, was indeed still widely regarded as a worthy aim of fiction that traded in pathetic tropes. To exhibit 'refined feeling' was still culturally valorised as a literary motif and to sob over such tales would be evidence of one's own sensibility and moral correctness. However, growing speculation concerned how the sentimental had

⁷³ Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, p. 76.

⁷⁴ *Monthly Review* XLIV 418 (May 1771), cited in Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*.

become as much a fashionable social convention as a true indicator of a more humane culture, a code of emotional display that more likely served to mark out members of the higher echelons of society. As a contained aesthetic experience, sentiment could be all too easily commodified for the consumption of spectators wishing to indulge in the *pleasures* of sympathy. When writing for the Edinburgh periodical *The Lounger*, Mackenzie himself attacked the literary ‘species called the Sentimental’⁷⁵ that encouraged in readers a ‘sickly sort of refinement’.⁷⁶ As a trained Edinburgh lawyer, he was a far more ‘practical’ man than those he depicts in his novels and suspicious of the sentiments that could be fostered by the novel. Yet he still remained a proponent of the novel’s mid-eighteenth century sentimental discourse and was celebrated for it. Although he and others attacked the excesses of sensibility in rendering readers unable or unwilling to operate successfully in ordinary life, they still believed that such novels represented the ideals of ‘refinement’ or ‘delicacy’ that befit an ‘advanced society.’⁷⁷ As John Mullan argues in his account of 18th century sensibility, Harley’s admirable sensibility was the ‘fantasy’ rather than the ‘practice of a complex urban society’.⁷⁸

So the paradox of the protagonist or reader who must retreat from the world and its conventions in order to maintain a virtuous, pathetic sensibility did not go unquestioned even at the height of the genre’s popularity. In the *Man of Feeling* itself, Mackenzie’s narrator speculates that man’s charitable tendencies might often be

⁷⁵ Henry Mackenzie, ‘Untitled article’, *The Lounger*, 18th June, 1785.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁷ William Craig, *The Mirror*, No. 10, i. 40, cited in John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 128.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

‘more selfish than social.’ The novel’s final paragraph points to a possible misanthropy as much as sympathy for the world as the consequence of too great a meditation on virtue: ‘every noble feeling rises within me! every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!—but it will make you hate the world.’⁷⁹ Like the ‘sentimental classes’ themselves, the ‘man of feeling’ retreats from the world as a political agent and arguably perpetuates the aesthetic distance between haves and have-nots, the latter requiring a more politically active form of compassion. Unlike Harley however, the sentimental spectator was free to ‘hate the world’ without being martyred for the cause.

Sensibility on the Retreat

As a privilege of a cultured elite, enjoyment of sentimentality could be an agreeable diversion, and nothing more, among those who presumably would be capable and educated enough to control their passions. Even David Hume would eventually set limits on the ‘sympathy’ discussed in his *Treatise*. John Mullan, for instance, notes that in Hume’s later work⁸⁰, he would recognize ‘warm sentiment’ as having a particular affinity with aesthetic experience, a ‘peculiarly literary capacity, most often to be identified with ‘the great charm of poetry.’⁸¹ Sympathy as affect could not any longer be guaranteed beyond the parameters of the artwork and its immediate reception. Outside of the consumption of sentimental art, tearful sympathy is implied as being far less of a social practice.

⁷⁹ Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, p. 90.

⁸⁰ Best represented by Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751.

⁸¹ Cited in Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability* p. 43.

Hume's intellectual trajectory therefore demonstrates how belief in sympathetic virtue as a social model becomes compromised by the acknowledgement of the *pleasure* of sentiment elicited by the conventions and economies of sentimental fiction and drama. It may have been 'remarkable' to feel sympathy in tragedies with virtuous martyrs, yet questions emerge concerning when and for how long this sentimental state of mind can be appropriate without becoming self-indulgent. Sentimentality becomes invoked in the discrepancy between an idealized or aestheticized benevolence and the realities of social existence that seem inimical to it.

Hume's friend and admirer, Adam Smith, may not have shared the former's scepticism about a rationally conceived benevolence and believed virtue to be a self-evident choice which could be applicable to all areas of society. His philosophy would nevertheless also represent the marginalization of sentimental 'passion', not least once it is theorized as an affect that can and must be regulated by the cold judgement of the 'impartial spectator' of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759. Such a 'spectator,' representing 'dignity', 'honour' and 'unalterable laws'⁸² observes the subject and enforces a dispassionate behaviour. This behaviour, Smith argues, might be different from the behaviour informed by the subject's other perception of reality, one that is based on 'his natural, his untaught and undisciplined feelings', in relation to which Smith accords the 'spectator' moral authority. Theorized moreover as internal rather than external to the subject, the concept of 'impartial spectator' gives the subject the capacity and indeed the obligation to overrule his own passions if necessary. Deploying a musical metaphor for instance, Smith argues that the

⁸² Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (1759), Filiquarian, 2007, p. 184.

‘sharpness’ of a subject’s passions can and must be modified to a reasonable pitch for the benefit of the ‘harmony of society.’⁸³ Indeed, in contrast to the theorists discussed above, yet echoing once more Shaftesbury’s caution towards effeminacy, Smith would argue that, ‘the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of the character.’⁸⁴

In one sense Smith’s philosophy is reassuring if we regard the passions as potentially excessive and liable to abuse by sentimental drama and literature. However, we return immediately to the problem of how to arrive at the correct judgement of our conduct if it must be dependent on a disinterested assessment of possible behaviours. We are now in a position where we can no longer trust reason nor feelings. Smith’s answer to this would arrive with his prescient metaphor for a society of disciplined subjects – ‘an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects.’⁸⁵ The ‘division of labour’ presaged by such a model and elaborated further in Smith’s better known *The Wealth of Nations* recommends a society that functions reasonably well from a ‘sense of utility, without any mutual love or affection...’ In such a society, appropriate conduct would be best exemplified through a conservative maintenance of the status quo and with due respect paid to ‘established powers and privileges’ and an idea of ‘justice’ rather than benevolence. A sensibility posed by Smith as ‘artificial commiseration’ is ‘perfectly useless’, for:

Those who affect this character have commonly nothing but a certain affected and sentimental sadness, which without reaching

⁸³ Smith, *Theory*, p. 26.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Theory*, p. 262.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Theory*, p. 393.

the heart, serves only to render the countenance and conversation impertinently dismal and disagreeable.⁸⁶

It is here that we reach an impasse in the philosophical celebration of individual benevolence and its power to redeem society. The off-hand cautions of Shaftesbury and Hume against the ‘extremes’ of feeling take centre-stage for Smith and urge him and those who would follow to heed Hobbes’ advice and once again subjugate the passions to the necessities of social life. Indeed, according to the literary scholar Michael Bell, it is precisely with this loss of faith in the power of individual goodwill that sentimentalism attains its modern connotations:

Once the social order comes to be seen as a complex impersonal process changeable only by collective political will, then any appeal to individual feeling begins to seem necessarily, structurally, sentimental.⁸⁷

So whether through the ‘impersonal’ processes of new economic theory or the mass political movements in America and France at the end of the 18th century, hopes for the personified Enlightenment subject had become eclipsed by faith in collective will, declarations of rights and scientifically approved means of distributing wealth. Redemption through the individual subject’s sensibility would remain a sentimental fiction.

Satire and Irony

In France, the meaning of *sensibilité* would remain stable yet ‘*sensiblerie*’ would be coined, at some point in the 1780s to refer to its false or affected manifestations. The poet Mercier, in 1799, would describe it thus:

⁸⁶ Smith, *Theory*, p. 174

⁸⁷ Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, Palgrave, 2000, p.120.

Some time before the Revolution, people of fashion had adopted a certain sentimental philosophy (“une certain philosophie sentimentale”) which was the art of dispensing with being virtuous. This philosophy had its jargon, its sensibility, its accent, even its gestures.⁸⁸

In Britain, the same concept would come to be termed ‘sentimentality’. In his philological study of the word ‘sentimental’ in the 18th century,⁸⁹ Erik Erämetsä describes how a major turning point for the term can be located in the publication of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, a novel that wittily equivocates on the virtues and shortcomings of its protagonist’s self-conscious desire for sympathetic (and sexual) interactions with other characters. ‘Sentimental’ indeed became effectively a brand name for a genre, with the word itself appearing in many titles and a certain subjectivity encapsulated by that term becoming the fashion of the time. Many imitations followed Sterne’s novel with titles such as *The Delicate Distress*, *Excessive Sensibility*, and *The Curse of Sentiment*.⁹⁰ Trading on pathos that could be represented in fleetingly episodic form, sentimental narratives modified the classical conventions of tragedy for their protagonists. Raymond Williams, for instance, argues in *Modern Tragedy* that scenes of suffering are given a particular moral dimension in 18th century tragic forms, wherein the ‘tragic catastrophe[...] moves its spectators to moral recognition and resolution’ (as in *Clarissa*) or ‘can be avoided altogether, by a change of heart’⁹¹ (as in *Pamela*).

Williams is critical, however, of the often ‘static’ forms of morality represented in

⁸⁸ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Paris Pendant La Révolution (1789-1798): ou, le Nouveau Paris* (1799), cited in *Robert French Dictionary*, 1966.

⁸⁹ Erik Erämetsä, *A Study of the Word ‘Sentimental’ and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of Eighteenth Century Sentimentalism in England*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1951.

⁹⁰ Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, p. 115.

⁹¹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, p. 31.

works from the period and the ‘merely dogmatic’ representation of ‘good and evil.’ As ‘repentance and redemption’ became the driving forces of 18th century narrative, Williams is critical not of the period’s ‘moral emphasis’ *per se*, but the rigidity with which morality came to be represented and understood.

Regarded increasingly as self-indulgent, excessive and shallow to the point of inanity, sensibility and the novel of sentiment would become parodied by such writers as Jane Austen as early as 1790 with *Love and Friendship*. The novella provides a brief but incisive glimpse at the conformism and amorality of gentility and a form of subjectivity that applauds one’s own sentimentalism as a model of conduct.⁹²

Arguably the most ‘modern’ responses to sentimentality would be manifest in texts where an ironic distance is inscribed in relation to its tropes. Particularly subtle in such regards would be Sterne’s approach to the sentimental, where ‘sympathy’ and weeping are bracketed as social practices deployed for a variety of rhetorical and self-interested purposes by self-conscious characters. In *Sentimental Journey*, Yorick’s account of his encounter with Madame de L*** contain clues that this narrator is motivated by multiple impulses towards her, both sexual and sympathetic, insisting on his own ‘benevolence’ whilst simultaneously alluding humorously to his lust. The fictional narrators of *A Sentimental Journey*, and *Tristram Shandy*, exhibit ironic self-consciousness towards their own accounts, demonstrating awareness of their own contradictory desires and thereby nuancing, if not effacing, the moralistic ambitions of the novel. Sterne provides neither a model of conduct in his protagonists yet nor are they objects of simple satire. In this, the novel demonstrates what John Mullan refers

⁹² Austen’s novella parodies the epistolary sentimental style, targeting especially the self-congratulatory rhetoric of the novel’s protagonist, Laura. The latter for instance eulogizes the dead in the fashion of *Clarissa* and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the latter foregrounded as a novel one would have read in order to learn the codes of a refined, but morally vacuous, gentility.

to as a 'sociality', both on the part of the author's ironic mode of address and character's self-knowledge.⁹³

This chapter ends therefore at a point where the ambitions of the sentimental novel are not so much ridiculed wholesale but significantly reined in by the extent to which sentimental tropes had become subject to cliché and abuse. In summary, debates concerning the sentimental in the Enlightenment culture of the 18th century reveal a central tension between its conceptualization as a pedagogical and emotion-driven mode of moral improvement, and emerging discourses that begin to question the validity of 'moral sense' and the didactic rhetoric with which it was both commended and enjoyed. If it was largely manifest as a reflection of the tastes and fashions of a 'cult of sensibility' or a cultured quasi-aristocratic elite, philosophers of 'moral sense' were also arguing for its universal value as a more democratically available faculty. Yet these same intellectuals, whether Shaftesbury, David Hume or Adam Smith, came also to often less than optimistic conclusions concerning the widespread 'utility' of sentiment in what would surely follow in the era of Bentham and Mill. Moreover, the excesses of the sentimental were already becoming apparent both in terms of the increasingly hackneyed tropes with which the sentimental mode of reception could be reproduced and the ease with which tears, pity and other 'effeminate' emotions could be invoked by the literature, theatre and painting of the time. Visual culture provided certain paradigms for sentiment, the face in tears becoming almost undeniable evidence of virtue and the sentimental tableau (whether delivered by a visual medium such as painting or within literature) serving to epitomize the contagious properties of sympathy, pity and fellow-feeling. At the same time, spectacle was also that which

⁹³ See Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, Ch. 4; Bell, *Sentimentalism*, pp. 67-73.

exceeded the sentimental, delivering a more eclectic set of pleasures than could be contained within the increasingly stagnant parameters of the moral or the improving. The sentimental, or in Terry Eagleton's terms, 'The Law of the Heart',⁹⁴ became only one of many aesthetic pleasures, and an increasingly dubious one at that, while nevertheless still laying significant terrain for later aesthetic movements, notably Romanticism. The sentimental tradition would also be reproduced in the visual and non-visual melodramas of the following century, yet it would retain the status allotted to it by the end of the 18th century as a mode that not only had to be consumed 'for the sentiment', but was always in danger of seeming to offer little else.

⁹⁴ For a detailed account of sentiment's centrality to modern aesthetics, and its continuities with later concepts, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, London: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 31-69.

Chapter Two

The Dickensian meets Modernity: Sentimental Cultures in the 19th Century

My experience gave me a right to feel suspicious in regard to all so-called "unselfish" tendencies, in regard to the whole of "neighbourly love" which is ever ready and waiting with deeds or with advice. It seems to me that they are signs of weakness, examples of the inability to withstand an incitement – it is only among decadents that this pity is called a virtue. What I reproach the pitiful with is, that they are too ready to forget modesty, reverence, and the delicacy of feeling which knows how to keep at a distance; they forget that this sentimental pity stinks of the mob, and that it is but a step removed from bad manners[...]

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (1888)¹

The previous chapter shows how sentimentalism represented a set of aesthetic and ethical discourses that crystallize in the eighteenth century around notions of benevolence and moral cultivation amidst celebrations of the subject's emotional improvement by art. Yet it becomes clear from Nietzsche's writing how sentimental idealism had also retained an aura of cloying unfreedom, shallow humanism and ineffectual moral purpose as the 20th century fast approached. Sympathy had been foregrounded as an emotion-driven transmission of moral principles between subjects and between subjects and texts, while the 'cult of sensibility' testified to the great power of literature and drama in enhancing, or rather questionably 'proving' the 'sensibility' of its readers and spectators. Yet ambiguities concerning the role of pathos led to anxieties arising simultaneously as to what kind of 'sickly' enjoyments might be derived from a fiction or drama if sentiment becomes a pleasure in its own right, irrespective of its effects on ethical behaviour. 'Moral sense,' ambiguously

¹ Anthony M. Ludovici (trans.), New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2004, p. 17.

conceptualized as both innate to the human soul yet in some way dependent on disinterested processes of learning, sympathy or justice, would thus continue to present a problem to aesthetic debates still raging at the advent of the cinema.

The culture of Charles Dickens, I argue, becomes a paradigm for the development of this sentimental Victorian culture by the turn of the 20th century. Paradoxically, cinema would also represent the first true expression of this popular, sentimental culture (and one often enough debased for its sentimentality in the 20th century), and I suggest, like Eisenstein would in the 1940s, that we might consider Dickens' output, popularity and eventual critical denigration as its key cultural antecedent. The sheer popularity of Dickens' work would ensure the enormous impact of his novels on future literary, theatrical and cinematic forms while representing the prototype for a culture accessible to, and appealing largely to the tastes of a newly emergent modern public sphere. This chapter seeks to examine Dickens as a heuristic for the emergence of a mass culture that became heavily associated with the advent of cinema at the dawn of the 20th century. Emerging alongside principles of democratic society and artistic imperatives of conveying morality clearly and with emotional openness (as forged by the melodrama discussed below), Dickens' output epitomizes the sentimental tradition inherited by such figures as Chaplin, Griffith, Capra, Ford and Spielberg. This applies not only to Dickens' novels themselves (which alone rehearsed in the mid-19th century those key sentimental tropes identifiable from the previous century), but also to the 'Dickensian' models of response to literature of Victorian society. While texts and contexts are both inherited from the parlours of the 18th century, they are taken up by a new reading public and become key signifiers of Victorian culture. I argue that the common public outpourings of emotion at the reading of literature (such as Dickens') would come to epitomize the democratic spirit

and its affective registers in the modern era. Notions of empathy, morality and ‘virtue in distress’ become key ideological components of 20th century early mass culture while becoming the chief pariahs of its intelligensiae.

Literary culture’s evaluations and critiques of Dickens’ work after its own period of emergence are also crucial to comprehending the development of critical responses to this new mass culture as crucial signs of how the cinema itself would be shaped and theorized. Dickens’ alleged transition to a more critical or emotionally detached mode of writing as his career progressed and the arguments that both constructed and commended such ‘sophistication’ will be traced in this chapter as a means of identifying the factors that contributed to the now established association between sentimentality and the formulaic, gratuitous or manipulative. As expressions of a social group marginalized ideologically by Dickens work, new elites continue to find intellectual vapidness in melodrama’s sentimental rhetoric, seeking solutions that lie in the interstices between modernism and realism. Whether represented by the writings of F.R. Leavis, Aldous Huxley, Oscar Wilde or G.B. Shaw, Dickens’ work is subjected to a discriminating sensibility that identifies the vulgarity of popular taste in his work. Conceptualizing the Dickensian ‘lapse’ into sentimentality or bathos also allows such proto-modernists to construct Dickens anew, emphasising the quality of key works or techniques over others in accordance with aesthetic imperatives that may not have existed in Dickens’ own time, whether under the banner of socialist critique, an emerging literary theory and modernism or just old-fashioned snobbery. In all such cases, the dismissal of Dickensian sentimentality bespeaks an emotional austerity and critical seriousness held in opposition to popular art’s democratization of

emotion in the 20th century. The latter process arguably begins with the melodramatic theatre.

The Difference of Melodrama

Discussions of sentimentalism in the cinema most commonly revolve around the multi-layered concept of melodrama. If this term denotes a genre, it is one that is composed of various discourses that vie for centrality. For genres to be understood as such at all, they must usually be represented by certain configurations of textual, thematic or historical markers that can demarcate them in distinctive ways.

Melodrama, however, is particularly resistant to stable classification. It is little wonder, therefore, that perhaps its most stalwart ally is the equally mystifying and multivalent concept of emotion.

Anxieties about subjectivities, ideologies and escapist pleasures evoked by art have underpinned much critical discourse surrounding melodrama within contemporary moving image culture. Melodrama has struggled to be taken seriously as a critically respectable genre for a variety of reasons that pertain to issues of gender, class, race and notions of modernity, as well as to the specifics of how film itself evokes pleasures or, in more general terms, affect. Scholars have traced melodrama back to its development in the 19th century as an accessible theatrical and novelistic form, intended for a new, urban mass audience. Providing a mix of pathos, emotive storytelling and sensational turns of narrative, melodrama came to dominate the popular stories and scandals of the time. Evoking what Peter Brooks terms a new 'moral occult' in a 'post-sacred' world that had lost religious faith, the simple tropes of melodrama are argued to provide the modern world with a new mythological

system where recognizable forces of right and wrong do battle and achieve—or hope for—justice.²

Although it is clear that the 18th century had already laid the foundations for melodrama in its fictional battles of virtue between society's victims and powerful, yet corrupt quasi-aristocrats, much has been discussed in terms of how melodrama also heralds the ascendancy, at least in moral terms, of the bourgeoisie over feudalist, autocratic privilege.³ Reflected in the French and American revolutions of the late 18th century, a new class represented itself as both morally righteous and determined to effectuate change in actual society rather than hope for redemption and reward in the afterlife. Brooks' seminal account of classical stage melodrama in the 19th century, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, aligns the form historically with the advent and composition of a post-revolutionary French society. The ideals of that revolution were compromised by the bloody events that followed, events that would come to illustrate the persistence of authority and power in society. The flawed success of the French revolution rendered Rousseau's philosophy as overly-idealized in its veneration of 'nature' over 'civilization.'⁴ Given that nature, as such, could never be recovered, not even by the overthrow of an entire class, society was deemed incapable of ridding itself of hierarchical power relations. An inescapable 'civilization' was underpinned

² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 1-15.

³ See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, London: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 166-89; Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation.' in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London: BFI Publishing, 1987, pp. 1-39; Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised', in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 42-88.

⁴ See Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), where civilization is theorized as a corrupting influence that the child must be protected from until a certain age.

by structures of authority and dominance; victims and oppressors seemed inscribed in the very fabric of society.⁵

The advent of melodrama nevertheless signalled a victory for the common man in terms of how public theatrical entertainment expanded to accommodate all groups in society. In France, melodrama's roots stemmed from the arts of pantomime, acrobatics and musical theatre; these had once been unlicensed artforms in French society. Gesture, music and spectacle were just as salient as dialogue in these artforms and set a template for visually encoded tropes of morality with which cinema would find such close affinities from its inception.⁶ These forms all eschewed a neo-classical set of aesthetics emanating from the established practices of the licensed theatres. Long associated with a tradition of courtly entertainment of the 17th century by such dramatists as Corneille, Racine and Moliere along with aesthetic principles applauded by writers in England such as Dryden and Pope, neo-classical theatre concerned itself with great aristocratic heroes, most often of the ancient world. Tragedy and comic satire were its chief forms and its rhetoric was thought to accord with the 'age of reason' and enlightenment principles of order and rationality.⁷ Its audience was diffuse but famously also incorporated the royal court and the king himself in France.

⁵ For a detailed account of the changing emotional landscape of France before, during and after the revolution see Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France*, Teresa Bridgeman (trans.), New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

⁶ For general accounts of key productions and the central thematics of 19th century theatrical melodrama, see David Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800-1850*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968; Robert Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968; Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1967.

⁷ See M.H Abrams' entry on the 'Neo-Classic and Romantic' for a useful cursory distinction between the two traditions, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999. The 'Neoclassic' recognizes a 'cosmic order' that dictates a given 'natural hierarchy' in life that sets certain limits on the subject's freedom. A certain 'avoidance of extremes' characterized neo-classic aesthetics, and was extended therefore to excesses of feeling in the subject, or perhaps more significantly for the present discussion, implied certain equivalences between emotions and aesthetic excess.

The 'wit' of Moliere's comedies encapsulated the neo-classical ideal through the playwright's mockery of characters that reject the logic and reason deemed to be the foundation of enlightened society, in the name of their own egoism. In the *Bourgeois Gentleman*, for instance, Moliere satirizes a man with newly acquired wealth that wishes to pass himself off in aristocratic society. His comical failure to do so owing to continuous gaffes and embarrassments spoke of society's intolerance and rejection of the individual that attempted to break out of his social class. Likewise, *The Misanthrope* conveys the story of a man whose moral extremism leads him to reject social graces and genteel affectations despite his desire to gain the love of a woman within that society. His failure to do so, and his eventual retreat to a desert island away from society, once again signals the intractability of social convention and the need to temper one's own emotions of disgust or boredom towards that society if one wishes to survive.

As the 18th century progressed, the lives of bourgeois characters became more accepted and desired for theatrical representation, especially in England, where 'domestic' tragedies and 'sentimental comedy' allowed audiences to see unremarkable middle-class characters (as distinct from great classical tragic heroes) overcome obstacles of class or wealth to achieve domestic, familial happiness. The 'sentimental' of this genre alluded to a greater emphasis on the emotions of its characters while in the grip of their narrative predicaments. A famous example such as Sir Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1731) sees the hero thwarted from marrying his love (the orphan Indiana) owing to their social disparity, only for it to be

revealed at the play's climax that her father is alive and she has the social position after all to be suitable for marriage. The play's morally unambiguous characters, didactic address and emphasis on a tearful reunion scene between father and daughter came to exemplify the features of 'sentimental comedy,' with 'comedy' indicating more the genre's light heartedness and optimism than any intended laughter from the audience. In fact, Steele prioritized the genre's 'sentimental' elements over any comedic aspects when he commended this kind of drama as eliciting a 'joy too exquisite for laughter,'⁸ revealing a disdain (widespread by that time) for the licentious wit of an earlier generation's comic theatre and its cynicism towards 'respectable' society. A new puritan veneration of benevolence, as discussed in Chapter 1, was manifest in the theatre too, with a didacticism that sought more than anything else to excite the virtuous emotions of pathos from its audiences.

The melodrama of the 19th century had its roots therefore in the democratization of the theatre's mode of address, both in terms of the various social classes that were now represented and the extent to which social hierarchies no longer determined or constrained the freedoms of its heroes. The didacticism of the previous century's sentimental drama had prioritized 'virtue' above social position, and the established codes of conduct associated with one's social position became dissociated from—and often shown to be detrimental to—the recognition of virtue. A related element to the ascendancy of a new mode of expression in the melodrama was the division between the 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' theatres in both France and England at the turn of the 19th century. Licensing laws allowed the spoken word only in properly licensed theatres while unlicensed venues initially relied on dumb-show and musical

⁸ Sir Richard Steele, preface to *The Conscious Lovers*, 1767, Gale Ecco, 2010.

accompaniment to convey narrative. While music took on a greatly heightened role in entrances, exits and other spectacles throughout such productions, facial and bodily gesture became essential skills for actors in conveying emotions that could not be communicated through the spoken word (a style of acting which is clearly discernible in the performances of the silent cinema, which of course borrowed heavily from traditions of theatrical melodrama).

These founding properties of melodrama, at its purest a non-literary form, predisposed it to a close affinity with the expression of human emotion. This fact is often obscured by the parallel development of the genre's other key elements, which included emphases on dramatic spectacle, improbable plots and stock characters. Yet melodrama's vital link with the sentimental comes with the extent to which extremes of human emotion became codified and comprehended as chiefly visual phenomena. While the spoken word dominating the legitimate theatre allowed emotional restraint and theatrical *decorum* to be maintained, both in terms of acting and theme, melodrama traded on the raw emotions of desperate, demonstrative characters. Thus melodrama's key conflicts often revolved around the virtuous poor, oppressed and pursued by villainous aristocrats, and later, rich industrialists.⁹ Just as Richardson's heroines resorted to tears of despair as the last available response to their ordeals at the hands of rich masters, so virtue came to be associated with the victimized heroes of a cruel and oppressive Britain or France. Sensational turns of narrative, such as twins-separated-at-birth (e.g., adaptations of Dumas' *The Corsican Brothers*),

⁹ Dickens' work provides perhaps the best examples of the substitution of industrialists or capitalists for roles initially applicable to aristocrats, such as Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times* or Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.

mistaken or disguised identities, love triangles and stage-fights provided grist to the emotional mill.

As an 'illegitimate' theatre, melodrama forged a new code of moral identity based on a visual language of good and evil. Associated particularly in France with such dramatists as Guilbert de Pixérécourt, in Germany with August von Kotzebue and in America with Dion Boucicault, melodrama's simple allocation of moral greatness to one set of characters and moral baseness to another became a structure that provided moral clarity, Peter Brooks argues, to a public that had come to find such certainties scarce in their own society. Poetic justice, where the good are recognized and rewarded while villains are found out and punished, fulfilled the reader's or spectator's own wishes in relation to such Manichean polarities. However, there were also several narratives that eschewed such simple instances of poetic justice, favouring instead the tragic tropes of martyred characters that are too good for the world, exemplified by the character of Little Eva in the original novel and the many stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Whether upheld literally through the survival and victory of virtuous characters, or more symbolically, through appeals to the transcendent victories of virtuous characters in death, a modified poetic justice became a central concern of this theatre. In a similar vein to Brooks' arguments concerning melodrama's struggle for 'moral legibility', Frederic Jameson, while not naming melodrama specifically in his *Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture*, argues that popular entertainment (his example is *The Godfather's* first two parts) must convey 'our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it *now*, and as we feel in our bones it *ought*

rather to be lived' (my italics).¹⁰ Its moral purpose rests on efforts to resolve the tensions between how things *are* in society and how things *ought* to be. The film scholar Christine Gledhill agrees on the dual logic of melodrama's rhetoric, in that it contains the sad truths of contemporary life yet simultaneously attempts to represent a Utopian vision of the world that transcends those conditions. However, she shifts the tense of melodrama from the future or conditional to the nostalgia of an irrecoverable 'golden past', arguing that it depicts 'less how things ought to be than how they should have been.'¹¹ Looking back at 19th century melodrama as an essential component to what she and fellow film scholar Linda Williams recognize as a persistent 'mode' in contemporary Hollywood cinema, Gledhill sees the form as resting on tensions between a moral idealism and the representation of social realities that too often fall short of such ideals. Arguing for the latter's realism as being as constitutive of melodrama as the former, Gledhill has underlined the flaws of arguments that facilely oppose melodrama to realism, concluding that the elicitation of emotions such as pathos constitutes a variant of realism rather than its antithesis.¹² The genealogy of the realism/emotion binary is further investigated below as a chief hallmark of modern intellectual thought as it has emerged from the 19th century, with such movements as naturalism and modernism.

Melodrama, as distinct from classical tragedy, thus represented if not always the successful rescue of virtue from the dangers of modern society, then at least the

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text*, No. 1 (1979), p. 147.

¹¹ Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, p. 21.

¹² See Christine Gledhill, 'Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*', in Jane Gaines (ed.), *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992, 129-67.

possibility of the recognition of that virtue at its most vulnerable. Where tragedy represented a hero's downfall as attributable to an internal flaw, melodrama posits flaws as external, socially-derived and redeemable by human action. Its imperatives are double-edged, in that the subject must be both humble and all-too vulnerable before cosmic obstacles, yet obliged to do what he/she can to overcome them, even at the risk of failure. We can see that an 18th century novel like *Clarissa* was already a melodrama *avant la lettre*, as it too posed a tension between the cruel facts of society and the idealism of the martyred heroine for whom death is presented as a cosmic release from suffering. Despite rewards in the afterlife and the apparent intention of Richardson to prescribe religious faith, her death carries the pathos of punishment/reward from even the highest power. The heroine is both venerated at the character level for her undying faith and simultaneously punished for her goodness at the narrative level. *Clarissa*, like melodrama, both constructed and mourned the erasure of idealized benevolence from society.

On a semantic level, melodrama contends with 'sentimental' as the generic label for this form of theatre, and both words are often employed for similarly pejorative ends in relation to similar artistic devices. Just as 'sentimental' is often used to implicitly convey the sense of its own excess, melodrama has also traditionally been vilified for being 'overly melodramatic'.¹³ The fields of meaning for the sentimental and the melodramatic also often exceed associations with any particular textual genre, lending both terms a vagueness that can sometimes undermine their claims to useful meaning. However, it should be emphasised how the two words possess different genealogies and attributes, despite how they represent traditions that clearly have come to overlap

¹³ See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 10-11.

at a variety of discursive levels. For instance, Lea Jacobs, in her account of the decline of a 'sentimental' cinema in 1920s Hollywood, differentiates between sentimentality and melodrama as follows:

The two things are not the same despite the fact that many melodramas are sentimental. The literature of sentiment predates melodrama, and there are melodramatic traditions that are not sentimental.¹⁴

Arguing therefore for the historical discrepancies between the two traditions, Jacobs goes on to find 'sensationalism' as the chief distinguishing feature between them, citing research on various publications of the early 20th century film industry that largely equated melodrama as a general term applied to the action, spectacle and special effects that came to characterize so much Hollywood cinema.¹⁵ This 'sensationalist' aesthetics corresponds less with the didactic and maudlin 'sentimental' genres and more with a tradition of 'blood and thunder' melodrama as it developed in 19th century theatres, which certainly by the middle of that century had come to predominate with increased investments in elaborate stage mechanics and special effects, then to be successfully transposed to cinema at the outset of the following century.¹⁶

Melodrama in the more narrow sense of its being concerned chiefly with pathos, family, children and virtuous sacrifice (its more sentimental variants) has certainly not

¹⁴ Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008, p. 277.

¹⁵ See Steve Neale's 'Melo Talk: On the Meaning and the Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press', *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 22 (Fall 1993), p. 66-89.

¹⁶ For detailed accounts of the transposition of theatrical melodrama's conventions to the early cinema, see Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (cited in note 6); Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

been forgotten, least of all by scholars in film studies that have sought to analyse the rhetoric of such ‘melodrama’ within the rubric of a variety of political and aesthetic identity debates (see Chapter 3). Following on from the championing of melodrama as a ‘women’s genre’ by feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Steve Neale have also identified this sentimental variant of melodrama and its affective registers as having far more to do with influences as seemingly diverse as the *drame* of Diderot’s poetics and ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’ of the 19th century (discussed below) than with the dynamism and hysteria of sensational melodrama.¹⁷ The ‘commendable’ moral ideas and feelings transmitted by the sentimental comedy or melodrama remain to this day recognizable as instances of ‘sentiment’ (such as in the homely, folksy *It’s a Wonderful Life* viewed on Christmas Eve to cite an appropriately clichéd example). Conversely, the consolidation of melodrama as a mode arguably heralded the prioritization of the ‘sensational’ as much as the sentimental as it came to encompass a myriad of features aimed at exciting spectator emotion, albeit still staged around the moral opposition of good versus evil. The sensational novel or play thus connoted a wider variety of emotional involvement than the benevolent empathy prescribed initially for its truly sentimental variants. Melodrama would come to provoke emotions of hope, envy, nostalgia, laughter, sadness and anger through a heady mix of sensational thematics, fuelling what Linda Williams now regards as melodrama’s inherent oscillation between ‘action’ and pathos’.¹⁸ The sensationalism and sentiment of melodrama (and the Hollywood cinema that followed in its wake) represents an ambiguous consequence of the ‘cult of sensibility’. The experience of *being moved* becomes of course a key attraction of

¹⁷ Neale, ‘Melo Talk’, p. 75.

¹⁸ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 19.

melodrama, as it had with sensibility. However, as a code of spectatorship, the affect of melodrama was more eclectic by being less limited to the helpless, overwhelmed tears of sentimental pathos

That melodrama clearly concerned itself with ‘moral legibility’ for theatre goers should not obscure the sense therefore in which its emotional repertoire was rather more diverse than the ‘sentimental’ as such, even though the latter was commonly incorporated within it, or extrapolated from it. Reading ‘for the sentiment’, as Johnson termed it, became a particular reading strategy that, although hugely popular, was one of various moods accommodated by the melodrama. For instance, here is Thackeray commenting on a mid-19th century production of de Kotzebue’s popular 1798 melodrama *The Stranger* as its chief heroine delivers a tearful speech:

She began her business in a deep sweet voice. Those who know the play of the Stranger are aware that the remarks made by the various characters are not valuable in themselves either for their sound sense their novelty of observation or their poetic fancy. In fact if a man were to say it was a stupid play he would not be far wrong. Nobody ever talked so. If we meet idiots in life as will happen it is a great mercy that they do not use such absurdly fine words. The Stranger's talk is sham like the book he reads and the hair he wears and the bank he sits on and the diamond ring he makes play with but in the midst of the balderdash there runs that reality of love of children and forgiveness of wrong which will be listened to wherever it is preached and sets all the world sympathizing.¹⁹

The above passage illustrates the sentimental as arising at particular junctures within the drama, where ‘fine’ sentiments are expressed combining emotive gesture and pathetic verbiage. Like Johnson, Thackeray denies the value of such plays in terms of any sense of their logic or poetry, but rather commends the pathos that

¹⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy*, Houghton Mifflin, 1890, p. 36.

they elicit to the ‘world’, as a function of a select set of thematics such as the love of children and the forgiveness of wrong. The sense of a public outpouring of emotion is particularly important here also, for the novel continues with an account of the theatre-goers as they come to a ‘favourite’ passage:

With what smothered sorrow, with what gushing pathos Mrs Haller delivered her part[...] when she came to this passage little Bows buried his face in his blue cotton handkerchief after crying out “Bravo.”
All the house was affected. Foker for his part taking out a large yellow bandanna wept piteously. As for Pen he was gone too far for that.²⁰

Collective sorrow at heartfelt expressions of love and sadness was therefore still a very popular mode of public spectatorship at this time in the 19th century, although constituting only a particular mood or temporality within the larger melodramatic structure. These emotive features of melodrama appealed to a huge new swathe of society that had not partaken in the prior century’s genteel practice of novel-reading. A theatre that had freed itself of the exclusivity of the social elites now catered to the sentimental proclivities of an ever increasing theatre-going public, while also accommodating desires for the excitements of ever new sights and sounds, the arrival of cinema constituting a remarkable advance in such terms.

Dickens: Melodrama and the Genteel

Alongside huge theatrical attendance, the increasing literacy levels seen by the 19th century would account for the continued popularity of the novel and its chief melodramatist, Charles Dickens. As with the reception of Richardson’s *Pamela*, the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

outcome of Dickens' stories became public events, as illustrated by the famous story of New Yorkers greeting people newly arrived from England with enquiries as to what became of Little Nell in Dickens' latest instalment. Much has been written on how much the theatre influenced Dickens, as much as or to an even greater extent than the work of prior novelists.²¹ Such novels as *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Dombey & Son*, *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* all traded on standard sentimental tropes such as the victimized child (Little Nell, Oliver Twist, Paul Dombey), emotive rhetoric and tearful public gatherings (the death of Little Nell). Aligned with such conventions was the idealisation of the poor and the equating of poverty with virtue, which has been widely understood as a key Dickensian and Victorian sentimental vice.²² Wider melodramatic conventions included sensational plot reversals (the revelation of Oliver Twist's high birth at the end of *Oliver Twist*, for example), mistaken identities, great heroes and memorably appalling villains. Nineteenth century scholar Sally Ledger discusses Dickens' sharp oscillation between laughter and tears as another chief indicator of Dickens' appropriation of melodrama for the novel. Arguing that shifts of register from laughter to pathos 'owes some of its power to the force of contrast', Ledger defends the richness of Dickens' writing on the grounds of the myriad responses that his novels must have engendered in its reading public.

²¹ See Sally Ledger, "'Don't be so melodramatic!'" Dickens and the Affective Mode', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, no. 4 (April 2007) and Rick Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith & Film Theory Today', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (1989), reprinted in Jane Gaines (ed.), *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992, pp. 9-47.

²² See Daniel Born, *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995, p. 82, which discusses how ideologies that align poverty with virtue are argued to assuage the guilt of adherents to the liberal project and its reliance on the maintenance of class and wealth hierarchies.

Dickens' work is also widely regarded to have taken on 'darker' themes as his career developed, with greater emphases on socio-political satire and social realism. This assessment, which canonizes *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations* or *Little Dorrit* over Dickens' earlier novels, indicates the extent to which his propensity for melodrama had been thought to have given way to a more 'mature' period and suggests a presumed mutual exclusivity between melodrama and a more cerebral, emotionally detached or indifferent style of writing.²³ The advent of this theoretical binary between the naturalism of the later novels and the emotionalism of the early works has been itself historicized, particularly in terms of the literary markers of novelistic quality that had crystallized at the start of the 20th century in relation to canonical works and authors (from which Dickens himself had initially been wholly excluded). As the melodramatic was coming by that time to be increasingly deemed a hackneyed, kitschy artform, suitable only for a mass public with 'genteel' or 'Victorian' tastes in relation to art, a shift had occurred in terms of what it represented as a category of taste.

Melodrama shared a similar critical context as the sentimental by the turn of the century--with Dickens charged with indulging in both. The seeds of this cynicism in relation to the sentimentality of Dickensian melodrama were already apparent in its own century. As discussed above, sentiment had always also signified the notion of its own excesses. The quintessential sentimental crime in the 18th century was that of the tearful theatre spectators that wept at the pathetic resolution of problems of virtuous

²³ The highly influential delineation of a 'great tradition' of English literature by F.R. Leavis, for instance, consolidated a canon of novels that largely eschew melodramatic elements, excluding therefore Dickens, Hardy and Sterne. Dickens' *Hard Times*, was the sole selection from the latter's oeuvre that, in Leavis' estimation, displayed 'serious' writing (*The Great Tradition*, London: Penguin, 1993).

innocents at the theatre while remaining indifferent to the plight of poor beggars that they would have encountered in their daily lives. As with Rousseau, the theatre could be deemed a potentially corrupting cultural apparatus that could distract or inure its patrons from the realities and injustices of their own society, as discussed in Chapter 1. The problematic of sentimentality thus always surpassed the text itself and concerned itself with the ethics and actions of the spectator as a moral entity distinct from the artwork.²⁴ While melodrama came to designate a genre of emotive theatre, the sentimental occupied an increasingly indeterminate field, signifying a category of taste and a concomitant subjectivity as much as a genre. It is manifest as much by the reception of melodramatic works as by the works themselves.

Despite the sensationalism of his novels, Dickens himself was perhaps one of the best observers of how sentimental affect could be deemed a vice rather than a virtue. As early as 1840, he himself wrote of the ‘sentimental’ in terms very different to Thackeray’s depiction of a tearful theatrical audience. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* he provides this brief sketch of Nell’s friend, Kit, as he sadly inspects the now vacated shop that had once provided sustenance for Nell and her grandfather:

It must be especially observed in justice to poor Kit that he was by no means of a sentimental turn, and perhaps had never heard that adjective in all his life. He was only a soft-hearted grateful fellow, and had nothing genteel or polite about him; consequently, instead of going home again, in his grief, to kick the children and abuse his mother (for, when your finely strung people are out of sorts, they must have everybody else unhappy likewise), he turned his thoughts to the vulgar expedient of making them more comfortable if he could.²⁵

²⁴ For an extended discussion of the sentimental problem in nineteenth-century culture, see Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Wordsworth Classics, 1995, p. 105-6.

This fascinating passage reveals how a sentimental disposition could be deemed contrary to the virtue that it may once have betokened. No longer associated solely with a public (theatrical or otherwise) that is harmonized by shared feelings of benevolent sympathy, the sentimental denotes attributes of gentility and politesse that undermine its earlier association with true moral feeling. To be 'soft-hearted' and 'grateful' is contrasted with the 'sentimental turn' where once they might have been coterminous. Dickens' account instead reveals the sentimental as sharing the superficial aspects of gentility, the underside of which is characterized precisely as the cruelty of abusing even one's own family members. The familial context, hidden from the public arena, represents a place where the sentimental mask can be lifted, allowing gentility to give way to violence as its truer form. Dickens ironically opines that to attempt to help others now paradoxically becomes a 'vulgar expedient,' once more indicating a disparity between behaviour connoting simple human benevolence and contemporary modes of tasteful conduct.

As an affectation of a 'finely strung' class, Dickens clearly is in sympathy with those that, he suggests, might never have heard of the word 'sentimental' or learnt its codes. Melodrama is here employed as a means of discriminating between the virtuous poor (Kit is an illiterate odd-job boy) and a bourgeois/upper class corrupted by wealth (exemplified in this novel by Daniel Quilp) yet made seemingly respectable by genteel codes of sentimental conduct. Such conduct now also exceeds the bounds of a purely theatrical spectatorship, such as that outlined by Thackeray, for Kit is here shown to have been made genuinely sad merely by the 'cold desolation' of an empty, dusty space that had once been a place of familiarity and comfort. Dickens' denial of Kit's capacity for the 'sentimental' as a means of assuring the reader of the truth of

Kit's feeling reveals moreover sentimentality as a mode in life, not one merely confined to the reception of art. Sharing attributes with the 'moral sense' of the previous century (that commended the subject's good emotions as a function of witnessing good deeds), sentiment still operates here at the level of vision, yet with a now negative, almost threatening valence. Sentiment undermines the integrity of true pathos in almost any scenario of social injustice, sitting uneasily between self-indulgence and the social conformity of a corrupted class.

Perhaps Dickens most excoriating attack on a spurious gentility came in his analysis of the codes of high society and gentlemanly conduct in *Great Expectations*, where Pip is coerced into abandoning his working-class childhood at a provincial blacksmith's forge in order to pursue the life of a London gentleman, at the behest of a mysteriously anonymous benefactor. For all the education and refinement that Pip experiences in London, Dickens shows how honesty and the capacity for love become necessarily cast off in the urban, genteel environment, while the true determinants of Pip's identity and most of the solutions to the novel's mysteries derive from the people of Pip's childhood. The influence of both Magwitch the escaped convict, Pip's real benefactor, and Miss Havisham, Pip's mistaken benefactor, loom large in the novel for their respective economic and psychological impact. Both challenge Pip to reconcile a newly-acquired gentility with his capacity for love and kindness, while the melodramatic logic of the novel makes this all but impossible.

When Pip weeps as he leaves his town for London the first time, Dickens writes of the semiotic value of tears as follows:

Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was

better after I had cried than before,—more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.²⁶

With such a privileging of tears, the capacity to weep becomes a test of moral integrity in the novel, which in turn is gauged by the extent to which characters are close to their truly loved ones as opposed to the objects of their own narcissistic vanities. As Magwitch makes Pip wealthy through his business successes in Australia, the extent of Pip's moral descent are illustrated by his cruelly effete treatment of his old friend, Joe Gargery. When Joe comes to visit Pip in London, Dickens creates a pathetic scene of social embarrassment and snobbery on Pip's part, leading him to avoid Joe at his next visit to his home-town. When Joe causes the latter to shed tears once again at the admission of their emergent disparity in social class and appearance, Pip bemoans the obsession that turns him away from such tears, his love for the ever-elusive and heartless Estella and his attempts to adopt her snobbish perspective on all things:

But I never thought there was anything low and small in my keeping away from Joe, because I knew she would be contemptuous of him. It was but a day gone, and Joe had brought the tears into my eyes; they had soon dried, God forgive me! Soon dried.²⁷

With Miss Havisham and Estella the key proponents of upper class society in the novel, they in fact offer Pip neither wealth nor love, yet Pip is seduced by the signifier of a gentility with no signified. Havisham exemplifies a corrupted sentimentality most clearly in her compulsive prolongation of her own trauma of spurned love. Having been cruelly jilted at the altar, and living a life of gothic stagnation in the dilapidated country estate, Satis House, where the clocks have long stopped (and dressed still in her wedding dress, obsessed sentimentally with her past), she plots to have Pip

²⁶ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Wordsworth Classics, 1992, p. 132.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

experience unrequited love through her ‘heartless’ prodigy, Estella. A chilling scene of Pip’s encountering Estella once again as a grown woman at Satis House illustrates the moral ambiguity of sentimental spectatorship, as Havisham watches her two pawns coming together to symbolize an ostensibly perfect union that she knows can never be consummated emotionally. She is particularly attentive to Pip’s gaze at Estella, entreating him to notice her appearance as ‘less coarse and common’ as a means of proving Estella’s suitability for love (and marriage). When she orders Pip repeatedly to ‘love her’, Dickens demonstrates the threatening voice of a genteel high society that feeds on ‘high emotions’ as melodramatic spectacle while disregarding the meanings and consequences of activating such emotions in real individuals. Superficially, he and Estella are as good as married, yet Dickens shows how appearances of ‘genteel’ love fail to accord with emotional reality.

When Pip accedes to Havisham’s encouragement, falling for Estella, he imagines a compatibility between his emotional needs and his place in society. The novel undermines this by illustrating how society’s ‘great expectations’ for individuals fails to accord with either their happiness or their needs for real love. Estella, a desirable prize in high society, in fact represents the disinterested rationality of the marriage market; she admits to Pip that she ‘has no heart’, and no tolerance of ‘sympathy—sentiment—nonsense.’ Programmed emotionally by Havisham, she rejects his proposals of love and instead enters a mutually loveless and violent marriage with Pip’s hated rival, the well-off Bentley Drummle, as a spiteful riposte to Pip’s affection. When she reveals to him her plans to marry Drummle, Pip’s desolation provokes identification on the part of Havisham which he (as narrator) describes as ‘a ghastly stare of pity and remorse.’ As he comes to mirror her own desolation,

Havisham is shown finally to reveal the signs of her own traumatized subjectivity. The sympathetic identification that occurs between them is depicted as dependent on the destruction of two human beings - no good can come of it. As Dickens writes of the 'sentimental' subjectivity in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the only goal of the sentimentalist is to transfer his/her unhappiness to others, to 'have everybody else unhappy likewise.' Havisham exemplifies such sentimental gentility, which as such becomes somewhat of an oxymoron, for it comes to denote the aspirations of a class that is too corrupted and corrupting to exhibit real sentiment as such.

The Cult of True Womanhood

The end of *Great Expectations* remains famously ambiguous concerning the outcome of Pip and Estella as a couple. Dickens has been reported to have been undecided as to whether to conclusively unite them in happiness or to persist with the consequences of Estella's froideur towards Pip. The original ending sees her re-married to a Shropshire doctor once the abusive Drummle has died yet Dickens was aware of his public's desires for a more optimistic outcome. Having discussed the ending with his friend, the novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton, he created the happier yet still ambiguous ending where Pip meets Estella outside the ruins of Satis House, yet this time sees 'no shadow of another parting from her.' Posing the possibility of their not parting ever again, Dickens implies a change of heart in Estella that the novel had so far refused to demonstrate. The possibility of redemption indeed forms a key thematic problem for Dickens here, and it is an issue that Dickens seems to struggle with throughout his writing. Whether characters have the potential to change for the better or are consigned to invariable moral valences determined at the outset of the novel remains for Dickens a vexed question about the human condition and its moral vicissitudes.

Estella's trajectory echoed ongoing debates during the century concerning the innate virtue of womanhood and the desirability of women that lived by codes of genteel virtue. She represents clear deviance from—and a critique of--ideals of feminine sensibility. If the ideal was a devoted and subservient companion to a respectable gentleman, Estella is shown to be a product of that system made dysfunctional, for it is Havisham (a woman that was initially courted and proposed to on the grounds of her family wealth rather than genuine love as such) that inscribes a subversion of such genteel feminine codes in Estella. When she marries Drummle, Estella knows that her prospective partner, like the system through which they are to be united, is marred by imperfection and cynicism, in contrast to Pip's naive faith in the happy co-existence of love and wealth. The lack of 'sentiment' exhibited by Estella is shown to emanate from failures in prior interpersonal relations, the corrupting influence of greed and the worlds of finance and law that legitimate it. By this point in Dickens writing, as Terry Eagleton explains, the writer had shifted to a recognition that the human suffering depicted so vividly in his novels were attributable to flaws in the 'system' of 'industrial capitalist society' rather than to the evils of specific individuals within such systems.²⁸

By demonstrating the influence of material concerns on the emotional relations between people, Dickens contributes towards the subversion of the genteel codes of feminine behaviour that advanced notions of innate traits and dispositions in female identity. Barbara Welter explains in a classic article on the era's 'Cult of True Womanhood' how pamphlets, magazines and books of the early to mid-19th century

²⁸ Terry Eagleton, Introduction to *Hard Times*, London: Routledge, 1987, p. 10.

persisted in the valorisation of a sentimental ideal of femininity emanating from the 18th century; the “Cult of True Womanhood” is posited as an ideology that permeated the ‘Victorian’ gender consciousness. For Welter, its four ‘cardinal virtues’ were ‘piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.’²⁹ Emphasising the woman’s domestic and motherly role and subordinate status to her husband, the cult of ‘True Womanhood’ expounded a moral idealism with regard to women which also elicited anxieties about the corrupting influence of the world upon them, necessitating their protection and isolation. As long as women were prevented from reading the ‘wrong’ kinds of literature or engaging in overly intellectual pursuits,³⁰ the ‘cult’ ensured that women would remain a naive yet moral anchor for family, husbands and the world. Welter explains, citing a pamphleteer, Mrs Gilman, that a woman was deemed quite able to handle a man’s abrasiveness because:

...in her heart she knew she was right and so could afford to be forgiving, even a trifle condescending. "Men are not unreasonable," averred Mrs. Gilman. "Their difficulties lie in not understanding the moral and physical nature of our sex. They often wound through ignorance, and are surprised at having offended." Wives were advised to do their best to reform men, but if they couldn't, to give up gracefully. "If any habit of his annoyed me, I spoke of it once or twice, calmly, then bore it quietly."³¹

So where women were advised to remain stoical, unfazed repositories of virtue, men

²⁹ Barbara Welter, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1966), p.152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, This indeed extended to their reading habits, in which novels were to be treated with caution as opposed to works of ‘religious biography,’ and other literary forms that did not interfere ‘with serious piety.’ Constructions of a literature intended for women through an exclusive attention to sentimental tropes of domesticity or the family has continued to shape much critical discourse and has been challenged in only more recent re-assessments of the period. Like the 18th century’s ‘novel of sentiment,’ a body of scholarship has labelled this period of 19th century American literature with the generic descriptor of the ‘sentimental,’ opposing its peddling to mass/feminine tastes to the work of the great Romantic novelists such as Hawthorne, Emerson or Melville. See Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860*, New York, Pageant Books, 1959 [c1940]; Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1940; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York, Knopf, 1978.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

were expected to blunder through life in a struggle for wealth, power and sustenance for their families. Ethics were best left at home, where they could be indulged by an impractical sex, shielded from the cruelties of a utilitarian world.

Similar ideologies would come to apply to children also, as childhood became removed from the sphere of work as child labour laws were reformed as the century progressed. As children became more sheltered in the family home, their symbolic value changed from a monetary order to a sentimental one, becoming endowed with the values of innocence, virtue and unworldliness, as exemplified by the Little Nells and Tiny Tims of Victorian literature. If the Artful Dodger was the archetype of the child-adult streetwise survivor in Dickensian London, Oliver Twist was his Utopian double: uncorrupted, innocent and ultimately permitted, through a melodramatic *deus ex machina*, to rise above the cruelties of lower-class life and live the life of a child.³²

Such sentimental ideals of the 19th century provide an interesting context for a character like Dickens' Estella. Denied of her childhood innocence at Satis House, Estella as an adult becomes incapable of recovering the sentiment required of a Victorian woman and wife (unless the happy ending is to be believed). Her rejection of 'sentiment' and 'sympathy' as 'nonsense' speaks of a certain cynicism that the ideology of 'True Womanhood' would have been at pains to eliminate from female consciousness, preferring a wife's moral idealism to a jaded familiarity and contempt

³² Thorough accounts of transformations in the social valence of children and their increased idealization in the 19th century are provided in Henry Jenkins, 'Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths,' in Henry Jenkins (ed.), *The Children's Culture Reader*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, pp. 1-37; Mary Lynn Stevens Heining, 'Children, Childhood, and Change in America, 1820-1920,' in Mary Lynn Stevens Heining et al., (eds.), *A Century of Childhood, 1820-1920*, Rochester, NY: Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, 1984, pp. 1-32; Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, New York: Basic Books, 1985.

for the world. Such an ideology preferred a ‘womanly,’ naive forgetfulness of life’s injustices and inequities to the brooding, hysterical scorn of Havisham and Estella. However, while the original virtue of gentle sympathy becomes a threatened, and greatly enhanced, virtue in *Great Expectations*, it is a pragmatic, heartless world that is implicated in its demise. Its flaws and injustices cannot be defeated by naive hopefulness alone and indeed such unworldly optimism could hamper the emancipatory hopes of the age. For such reasons, sentiment becomes a particularly limited and regressive faculty for writers and philosophers towards the end of the 19th century, and a particularly feminized and infantilising one.

Cynicism and Modernism

That social critique of the late 19th century equated a blinkered bourgeois humanism with the feminine should come as no surprise given the implicitly masculinist imperatives of debunking the complacencies of Victorian society. In Europe and America, indictments of a ‘genteel’ society founded on worthy yet ineffectual liberal principles were expressed by a wide range of largely male intellectuals that bemoaned the sentimental ideology of a humanistic, enlightened progress that failed to address society’s profound problems. The American poet and philosopher George Santayana in 1911, for instance, attributed an inadequate literary and intellectual culture in America to ‘A Genteel Tradition’ that is explicitly gendered:

The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.³³

³³ George Santayana, ‘The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,’ (1911) in Douglas. L. Wilson (ed.,) *The Genteel Tradition*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 40.

While Santayana may chiefly have had in mind the New England high culture (poetry, prose and philosophy) based on the privileged, distanced sentiments of a comfortable upper-middle class, his indictment of the American intellect as a feminized sensibility extended these flaws to a wider national psychology. Ruled, to his mind, by anachronistic pieties and the optimism of the founding fathers of a bygone era, he described American poetry as ‘grandmotherly in that sedate spectacled wonder with which it gazed at this terrible world and said how beautiful and interesting it all was.’³⁴ While the male world of *laissez-faire* capitalism proceeded excluded any ethical design from its culture, its cloistered intelligentsia were thought to indulge in a culture far removed, physically and logically, from the American dynamism of free enterprise. The romantic ‘wonder’ of such a tradition was deemed ill-founded and incompatible with the realities of a modern life that exemplified, as a growing number of pre-war intellectuals were coming to believe, urban degradation and alienation as much as human progress and equality.³⁵ Governed by similar observations in Britain, the critic Lytton Strachey would set himself the task of knocking revered establishment figures of the Victorian era off their pedestals in his ‘Eminent

³⁴ George Santayana, ‘Genteel American Poetry,’ (1915) in Douglas. L. Wilson (ed.) *The Genteel Tradition*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 73.

³⁵ Later American writers such as Van Wyck Brooks (*America’s Coming of Age*, 1915) and later, Malcolm Cowley (*After the Genteel Tradition*, 1937) would similarly express disdain with regards to the ‘genteel’ tastes of turn-of-the-century American high culture and its associations with political conservatism. H.L. Mencken’s ‘Prejudices’ (1920) is another key work in this regard. In more recent literary theory, Ann Douglas’ classic study on the 19th century’s ‘feminization of American culture’ locates the many strands of a similarly genteel culture in influences as diverse as Calvinism (as does Santayana), the sermons of protestant churchmen and the ascendancy of women novelists, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (see *The Feminization of American Culture*, referenced above). The ‘sentimental power’ of such works as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and 19th century sentimental culture have since been re-evaluated and celebrated, notably by Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, New York: Oxford UP, 1985, pp. 122-46). A more recent and less evaluative account is provided by Lauren Berlant in a historicization of sentimentality and its associations with female identity, aesthetics and feminized ideas of justice (see ‘The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics’, in Jodi Dean (ed.) *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000 and *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Duke University Press, 2008).

Victorians.³⁶ His biographical account of Florence Nightingale provides evidence of the autocratic, single-minded arrogance of an upper-class pillar of Victorian society as opposed to the meek and compassionate ‘lady of the lamp’ that ceaselessly nursed the soldiers at the Crimea. Examining a representation of her that had traded on sentimental notions of the virtuous maiden’s unalloyed benevolence, Strachey presents her flaws to call attention to the ‘Victorian’ vice of idealization of women, and its distortions of reality. Associated with other Bloomsbury group stalwarts such as Virginia Woolf and Sir Leslie Stephen, Strachey’s ideas of modernization and political reform applied equally to changing the ossified literature and ideology inherited from the previous century as it did to political action.

Even within the 19th century, though, when Oscar Wilde wrote that ‘one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing,’ a sceptical self-consciousness with regard to the sentimental reception of Victorian melodrama was clearly in evidence. Recognizing the trope of the dying, innocent child as an opportunity for Victorians to feel righteous indignation at the world’s wrongs, Wilde detaches himself from ‘reading for sentiment,’ reorientating the entire practice as comically anachronistic. Nell’s death, treated now as an artifice of literature where once treated by the aforementioned New Yorkers as a virtually real event, one gets the sense in Wilde’s quote that, for a certain readership, any original experience of sentiment has worn thin and its tropes become laughably clichéd.³⁷ George Bernard

³⁶ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, Penguin Classics, 1990, first published in 1918.

³⁷ Wilde’s famous aphorisms included two quips on sentimentality:

“A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” (*Epistola, In Carcere Et Vinculis*, Ian Small (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon press, 2000.

“Sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.” (*Selected Letters*, Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 501.

Shaw expressed a similar disdain for the Manichaeism of Dickens' earlier novels, such as where a fragile Nell represented the ideals of moral perfection crushed by the machinations of heartless profiteers and sadists. In his 1912 preface to *Hard Times*, a novel noted as indicative of Dickens' turn to 'serious' social critique, Shaw commends Dickens' muting of his earlier novels' melodrama:

You must therefore resign yourself, if you are reading Dickens's books in the order in which they were written, to bid adieu now to the light-hearted and only occasionally indignant Dickens of the earlier books, and get such entertainment as you can from him now that the occasional indignation has spread and deepened into a passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world. Here you will find no more villains and heroes, but only oppressors and victims, oppressing and suffering in spite of themselves, driven by a huge machinery which grinds to pieces the people it should nourish and ennoble, and having for its directors the basest and most foolish of us instead of the noblest and most farsighted.³⁸

Shaw notes in the above that the Dickens of mild social satire, or more commonly the application of poetic justice with regards to flawed individuals or 'individual delinquencies,' has given way to a much more profound condemnation of the whole 'order' that underlies British life. Using such language as 'industrial', 'machinery' and 'directors,' Shaw highlights the institutions of the 19th century's unfettered industrial development as the root cause of systemic failure, and Dickens' chief referents. With the hindsight of the late 19th/early 20th century movements for social emancipation, Shaw sees Dickens' shift from melodrama to social realism as analogous to British society's own increasingly developed awareness of its social degradation and reliance on systemic exploitation in that same century. Applauding *Hard Times* for its scathing depiction of a fully realized industrial town and its

³⁸ George Bernard Shaw, 'Introduction to *Hard Times*,' reprinted in George Ford and Sylvere Monod (eds.), *Hard Times* New York: Norton, 1966.

endemic oppression of workers, Shaw argues that the 19th century saw a ‘Great Conversion,’ from a belief in the greatness of empire and British civilization of the century’s first half to the disillusion and calls for social reform of the latter half--a transition from the optimistic, imperial history of Macauley to the social critique of William Morris. Similar to the critiques of Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin and Carpenter, Shaw sees the advent of Socialism as the key corollary of Dickens abandonment of sentiment, comparing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Hard Times* as follows:

The Old Curiosity Shop was written to amuse you, entertain you, touch you; and it succeeded. *Hard Times* was written to make you uncomfortable; and it will make you uncomfortable (and serve you right) though it will perhaps interest you more, and certainly leave a deeper scar on you, than any two of its forerunners.³⁹

Claiming a greater difficulty for the reader of Dickens’ more biting commentaries, Shaw, as a playwright himself, equates the sentimental tragedy of *Old Curiosity Shop* with a popular, entertainment function that *Hard Times* eschews.⁴⁰ Art’s more noble purpose is now to provide social critique of a corrupt society that urgently needs reform, no longer simply a guide to virtuous conduct transmitted to the reader as moral instruction. However, he is still aware of the popularity of melodrama and the ‘simple pleasure’ it elicits in the reader. He opposes the appeals of the sentimental to those of a more critical order, likening the former to the attractions of the ‘merry-go-

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ F.R. Leavis had praise only for *Hard Times*, claiming its superiority over all of Dickens’ other novels, and considered it the only work that justified Dickens inclusion in ‘The Great Tradition’ of English literature that incorporated Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Apart from *Hard Times*, all of Dickens’ other novels underlined his ‘genius’ as a ‘great entertainer’ while the latter novel is the only work that indicates ‘a sustained seriousness.’ Dickens was also targeted in 1930 by Aldous Huxley for alleged lapses into sentimentality in the latter’s *Vulgarity in Literature: Digressions from a Theme*, Chatto and Windus; 1st edition, 1930.

round' and the latter to a 'battle', with the former always still drawing 'a bigger crowd.'⁴¹

Equating the simple pleasures of melodrama with those of mass taste, Shaw comes to employ a binary of high art/low art that has long endured in the 20th century and beyond, where the 'crowd' is thought to resist the radical messages and meanings of socially critical art in favour of the consoling optimism of sentimental melodrama.

Although he deems a novel like *Hard Times* as 'no less attractive' than popular melodrama, he is clearly conscious of its attracting a more radical and select group for its readership than for the latter, one that has already accepted the doctrines of a Carlyle or a Morris, if not perhaps a Marx. The period of critical indictment of Victorian society that began with critics of the late 19th century came to dominate elite intellectual and literary spheres, yet was structured around concerns for the emancipation of the common man or proletariat through a more accurate or 'realistic' representation of the world's ills and injustices.⁴²

If such struggles were waged in the name of the working classes, writers such as Shaw were circumspect as to how socially critical literature could actually inspire radical action, and by whom, given the limited popularity of being made to feel 'uncomfortable' as such. Likewise, if the intellectual climate was dominated by the

⁴¹ Shaw also applauded the plays of Ibsen for the same reasons, for such work also target the staid and oppressive conditions of Victorian domestic life as determinants of marital dissatisfaction and failure, such as in *A Doll's House* or *Hedda Gabler*.

⁴² Lea Jacobs charts the emergence of literary 'naturalism' in early 20th century America as a key precursor to its manifestations in the Hollywood cinema of the 1920s, which she argues demonstrates an overall 'Decline in Sentiment.' See also Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: The First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959. To give a wider sense of its manifestations in world theatre in late 19th/early 20th century and for a penetrating critique of naturalism, see Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1969.

writings of not only Marx but Nietzsche and Freud also, disillusion with modernity extended not simply to its economic determinants but to also to its underlying philosophy and the human psyche itself.⁴³ As socialist principles and ‘realist’ aesthetics may have been limited by their own reliance on a bourgeois ideology of human progress, this time in its idealization of the working class, the emergent high modernism (around 1890-1930) sought a more profound response to modernity by challenging the whole notion of ‘verisimilitude’ in naturalistic art. If naturalism, despite its rebuttal of sentimentality, still conveyed a world steeped in ideology, modernism searched for the lost, ‘natural’ coherences amidst the chaotic disorder of the present. The historical avant-gardes, from the Surrealists through to the Bloomsbury group, were united in their abstractions from the everyday and mimetic, unseating any notion in any sense of an ordered, comprehensible world. The problematics of sentimentality and notions of the perceived inadequacies of an improving literature (through regressive tropes of benevolent innocence) paled in significance compared to the more pressing debates concerning representation itself and high modernism’s more radical set of solutions.⁴⁴

⁴³ Nietzsche’s notorious atheistic nihilism and corresponding loss of faith in objective reality (such as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Clancy Martin, Continuum, 2005) paved the way for high-modernist aesthetics and has become particularly pertinent to postmodern thought. Freud’s introduction of the unconscious and psychoanalytic theory severely undermined humanistic philosophies that posited the achievability of mankind’s redemption (through class struggle or otherwise). *Civilization and its Discontents*, written in 1930, makes explicit the subject’s unconscious inimicability to civilization, the latter always constraining the psychical impulses of the former. (trans. and ed. James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1989).

⁴⁴ From Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* to Picasso’s paintings, modernist styles are characterized by fragmentation and attention to the formal properties of the medium in question, signifying a nostalgia for a lost mode of rational order, be it in mimeticism or realism. See also Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, University of California Press, 1971; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986; David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.

However, a key problematic for all aesthetic responses to the transformation in industrial modernity concerned the ‘alienation’ that had come to subsist in the Western world, whether the result of the encroachment of capitalist logic within the fabric of society or, in a simpler yet related sense, the limits to human freedom enforced by industrial society. Under all such rubrics, the efficacy of socialist or other political interventions seemed limited by the sheer scale and rapidity of the social transformations of the previous century, with such pessimism reaching its apotheosis with the outbreak of World War I. If the sentimental connoted the inevitability of harmony, closeness and benevolent feeling among humankind, ‘alienation’ was its antithesis and its coinage marked a profound disillusion with Victorian ideals of tearful communion and the recognition of virtue.⁴⁵ As such, while the work of a mature Dickens was considered by Shaw and others to commendably provide an appropriately hard-edged and evocative account of a newly fragmented and bewildering modernity, modernist ‘high’ cultures would be predicated on a more radical abandonment of sociality *tout court*, their notorious difficulty (and emotional coldness) seeming only to reflect and compound an already alienated world. However, with all such strands of modern literature and art eschewing the sentimentality of ‘respectable’ and popular entertainment, the new movements of literary naturalism and modernism would go some way in dismissing sentimental vernaculars and their ‘moral legibility’. Despite this, the cinema would prove a potent platform for the continuance of such apparent anachronisms, giving a new and ever

⁴⁵ ‘Alienation’ as a concept was first introduced by Marx (*Entfremdung* in German) in his Manuscripts of 1844, referring to the separation of things that would have been in harmony in a pre-lapsarian (or pre-capitalist) world. Social alienation as a consequence of urbanisation and industrial capitalism would become a key concept to theories of modernity, as expounded by later German sociologists such as George Simmel, such as in his *Philosophy of Money* (German: *Philosophie des Geldes*, 1900) and Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887).

more urgent cause for their denigration or exclusion from radical discourses in relation to the new medium.

Victorianism meets the Cinema

Social reformers and other intellectuals were far from united as far as attitudes to the newly emergent cinema were concerned. Even Shaw, who was excited by the potential of the new medium, refers to the cinema in 1914 in terms of both its sinister allure as well as the potential social gains for the innovations in mass communication that it heralded:

Now, the cinema tells its story to the illiterate as well as to the literate; and it keeps his victim (if you like to call him so) not only awake but fascinated as if by a serpent's eye. And that is why the cinema is going to produce effects that all the cheap books in the world could never produce.⁴⁶

Wary somewhat of the 'serpent's eye', a metaphor suggesting the screen's illicit temptations and its ability to return the look of the spectator, the writer here acknowledges the great power of the cinema to stimulate the spectator and occupy her attention like no other, while aware of the democratic accessibility of this new institution and its creation of a new public sphere. If its content had so far failed to achieve the quality of an Ibsen or a mature Dickens, its harnessing of a huge public's desires and aspirations inspired excitement in many intellectuals as to its future role in society.⁴⁷ However, scepticism was expressed elsewhere regarding the cinema and its

⁴⁶ George Bernard Shaw, 'The Cinema as a Moral Leveller: George Bernard Shaw on the Role of the Cinema', extracts taken from *New Statesman*, 27th June 1914, online version accessed on 24th February 2009 at <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2007/05/cinema-morality-shaw-boy>

⁴⁷ Tom Gunning, for instance, notes that Maxim Gorky's disdainful reaction to an early Lumière projection in 1896 was unusual in its pessimism compared to a more generalized excitement about the new technology of cinema (see 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator', in Linda Williams (ed.) *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, p. 117-8.

explosive popularity. As much recent scholarship on the reception of early cinema and pre-cinema has revealed, the great artform of the 20th century was initially regarded with disdain by various disparate sectors of society that deemed it too vulgar for respectable society, dangerous to young minds or lacking in educative qualities. As Lee Greiveson's account of early film censorship argues, the mainstream American cinema as it developed in the early 20th century was shaped by a matrix of 'legislative and reform activism' that shaped the kind of artform it should become, particularly in moral terms.⁴⁸

A key trend to isolate for the purposes of this study is the theoretical transition from an early cinema of the side-show or the nickelodeon to the mainstream classicism that crystallized as the cinematic audience came to gradually include the initially suspicious middle classes. Cinema was first associated with the cheap fairground attraction through the sheer novelty of the moving-image, trick film or gimmicky short, and the popularity of the nickelodeons produced middle-class anxieties about the immoral activities taking place onscreen and off; a substantial body of scholarship identifies and accounts for cinema's rise in social prestige via its negotiations with a matrix of moral discourses, incorporating race, class, gender and taste. With the eventual ascendancy of the censorship board, the feature film and classical editing techniques, arguably culminating in the work of the first great feature director D.W.

⁴⁸ Lee Greiveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. See also Russell Merrit's account of the rise in social prestige of early cinema in 'Nickelodeon Theaters 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies', in Tino Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, pp. 83-102. Tom Gunning surveys the rise of a morally respectable cinema in America over the course of 6 years between 1903 and 1909 in 'From the Opium Den to the Theater of Morality: Moral Discourse and the Film in Early American Cinema', in Lee Greiveson & Peter Krämer (eds.), *The Silent Cinema Reader*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 145-154. See also William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Griffith, the whole issue of making cinema suitable for the public sphere has been shown to have been shaped by key moral debates, increasingly dominated by the values of a respectable, bourgeois constituency. Thus, the incorporation of sentimental ideologies within the discursive matrix of cinema once again became a crucial element in the satisfying of commercial and social priorities. The influence of theatrical melodrama as distinct from the realism or naturalism of the Victorian novel has been widely debated in relation to the ascendancy of Griffiths and other early feature directors.⁴⁹ Whether attributable to the ‘classical realist text’⁵⁰ or the melodrama, the consolidation of Hollywood cinema principles clearly emphasised the moral and improving purposes behind its incorporation.⁵¹

The curtailment of cinema’s ‘unseemly’ or ‘vulgar’ elements, both onscreen and in its exhibition contexts, indeed constitutes one significant point of departure in identifying sentimentality as a key element in augmenting the respectability of Hollywood cinema. If storytelling in the manner of the established theatre or novel became a top priority in attracting or maintaining the patronage of such audiences, ‘moral legibility’ became a key means of catering to Victorianaesque tastes. As Ch. 4 will demonstrate, the evocation of sentimental responses in relation to the films of Chaplin or Griffiths

⁴⁹ While adaptation of the novels of Dickens, Zola, Tennyson or Shakespeare for the cinema has been perceived as indicative of early cinema’s move towards a more ‘realist’ mode and away from the narrative structure of melodrama with its coincidental turns of narrative (see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) recent scholars contest the mutual exclusivity of these two aesthetics. See Rick Altman, ‘Dickens, Griffith & Film Theory Today’, see note 22; Christine Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field’, and Linda Williams, ‘Melodrama Revised’, see note 4).

⁵⁰ A term first coined by Colin MacCabe in relation to established conventions of narrative construction dictating Hollywood cinema (Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, *Screen* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 1974), pp. 7-27. Along with Noel Burch’s concept of an ‘Institutional Mode of Representation’ (see *Life to those Shadows*, Ben Brewster (ed. & trans.), London: BFI, 1990, 6-42) the dominance of such conventions are attributed to the dominance of bourgeois ideology in the critical years of the cinema’s formation.

⁵¹ See note 46.

were highly significant factors in the success of those filmmakers over others, despite the realist or modernist elements of their work more often highlighted by discussions of early cinema's aesthetics. The valorisation of family and the virtuous man or woman, the innocence of childhood and the abandonment or reformation of vice were borrowed wholesale from the previous century's melodramatic traditions, for these tropes were recognized as the principal formulae for creating contemporary, popular, 'mainstream' entertainment at the time. If, as Lee Greiveson argues, Hollywood cinema emerged from a balancing act between the commercial priorities of entertainment and social requirements that it educate or morally instruct, melodrama and its common recourse to sentimental codes brokered such a compromise most effectively in the name of an audience increasingly composed of middle-class individuals with a still strong attachment to Victorian values. While intellectual traditions such as 'naturalism' had already gained significant ground in relation to the 'higher' cultures of the novel and theatre, their effect would not be felt so markedly in Hollywood until as late as the 1920s, as Lea Jacobs argues--a period that she terms 'The Decline of Sentiment.'⁵²

However, if the cinema was initially thought of as failing to achieve the more sophisticated aims of social critique, verisimilitude or moral improvement, returning audiences to dumb astonishment as opposed to detached, critical consciousness, 'realist' criteria became themselves signifiers of aesthetic conservatism to many modernists. Within a larger discussion triggered by the emergent modernists' optimism and radicalism towards modernity as it arose in the mid to late 19th century, cinema was promising despite its reproduction of the sentimental, or even *owing to a*

⁵² See note 15.

kind of sentimentalism theoretically evacuated of its connotations of ‘moral’ feeling and conduct as such. The cinema’s popular manifestation as the new platform for an outdated, moralistic Victorianism would be discounted as an anachronism, yet the cinema was considered exciting for its unique expressiveness of both thought *and* feeling, and for its potential to reintegrate spectator and world. By jettisoning regressive ideologies of taste that were thought to intervene in the reception of art (through unique formal properties), the sensuous (if not sentimental) properties of cinema, under this rubric, would lend themselves to a more radical mode of reception. The cinema’s affinity with the tastes of ‘the mob’ as distinct from those of respectable society was something to be celebrated and reinforced, for here was a newly emergent public sphere ready for the medium’s innovative dissection and demythologization of reality itself. For the early film theorists of the new century, the cinema could be understood indeed to be reconfiguring aesthetic and political reality. Even though early cinema’s narratives would oftentimes be considered as throwbacks to the heights of Victorian sentiment—a mode which even Dickens was understood to have surpassed or at least nuanced—the radical change in medium, from written word to moving image, promised a more formalist progressivism at the level of perception itself.

Chapter Three

The Sentimental and Cinematic Modernism

In the last two chapters, sentimentality has been examined as a central critical concept to philosophy, literature and drama in the 200 years leading up to the advent of cinema. With core concerns relating to the reason/emotion dichotomy, emotional pedagogy and the aesthetics of pathos, the sentimental represents a particularly significant body of theory and practice within which to conceptualize the new medium. Speculation on the spectatorship of cinema has been animated by similar questions to those of moral philosophy and sentimental literature on an ethics of compassion and sympathy in relation to the reception of art, not least as examined within rubrics of gender, genre and ideology. The extent to which the latter constituted an ethic at all has perhaps been the central question for critics speculating on the values of sentimental and melodramatic traditions inherited by cinema. Dismissed as Victorian (and Enlightenment) anachronism or celebrated as a central concept of aesthetic ideology, debates concerning the sentimental are not so much resolved but re-energized and reconfigured by the advent of film. If the sentimental was associated from the start with the kitschy, the cloying and the emotionally excessive, the range of critical responses and artistic solutions it continued to elicit would range from the dismissive to the genuinely inspired. With tendencies towards the melodramatic and unarticulated, its tropes challenge the very Enlightenment logic out of which it grew while nevertheless daring to denote a set of principles allied with Enlightenment obsessions for moral and didactic clarity.

Reflecting Kracauer's concerns about capitalism's inherent irrationality in modernity, sentimentality (like the Tiller Girls and the 'Mass Ornament') was and is perhaps too 'rational' in a world of moral relativism and nihilism value, and finds an ambiguous ally in the cinema. This chapter looks to cinema's early period of reception in order to see the extent to which its capacities adhered to ideas of modernity (and modernism) as they were emerging at this time. Astoundingly connotative of the 'new' in its technological modes of action and consumption, cinema nevertheless signified a status of hybrid artform rather than new art, reproducing or 're-mediating'¹ older artforms. The sentimental, within such rubrics, inevitably becomes a sign of attachments to the past both in terms of subject matter and spectatorship, yet would nevertheless retain the same appeal and significance as in earlier periods. If the modernism introduced in the last chapter becomes the chief aesthetic objection to that signified by the sentimental, I argue that it is a particular strain of 'high-modernism' that demands rupture with the past and old methodologies, a schism that is neither sustained nor desired as the century reaches a post-war era of ideological rapprochement and aesthetic integration. Melodrama indeed becomes accepted in all but name as a 'dominant' mode for Hollywood cinema, as it had for the theatre and literature of preceding centuries, and becomes a principal focus for film theory, that aimed above all to nuance and interrogate its founding divisions of formalism and realism, truth and artifice, the abstract and the concrete.

This chapter seeks to show how *theories* of cinema as a paradigm of a redemptive and explosive modern technology would come to sit in tension with strongly held

¹ A coin termed by Jay David Bolter and David Grusin in relation to digital technology's reconfiguration of television, cinema and photography in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.

considerations of its collaboration with models of regressive sentimentality (levied in particular at moralistic representations of the human subject), producing an extended and ongoing debate as to its essential attributes in modernity. By the time of ‘classical film theory’ in the early-to-mid 20th century, sentimentality as a concept had come to betoken an illegitimately produced art in the reception of cinema and other artforms, with ‘man’ and the emotional excesses attached to his representation deemed a principal aesthetic flaw (a notion that would in no small way inform some central modernist positions, such as in Eisenstein’s repudiation of Griffith’s ‘sentimental humanism’). Yet while the theory of such figures as Eisenstein, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin or the writers of *Close-Up* magazine manifest a long-established continuity with a high-modernist discourse of ‘rupture’ with a sentimental past, as introduced in the previous chapter, close analysis of even well-known texts reveals an incomplete abandonment of what might be deemed the humanist or sentimental principles underpinning such theory and their counterparts in the texts themselves. Moreover, other major film theorists, such as André Bazin or Béla Balázs seem far less oblique in their attachment to what we may rightly consider a humanist, if not sentimental aesthetics, while their theory nevertheless engages vitally with that of more resolutely modernist interlocutors.

Montage/Hollywood

An important metaphor for the sentimental/modernist dichotomy indeed becomes the US itself (and implicitly Hollywood) as a burgeoning global superpower at the turn of the 20th century, representing at once both the old and the new. Staged as an opposition between the technologically robust or functional and the superfluously humanist and politically regressive, the comments of the Soviet filmmaker Sergei

Eisenstein in relation to America capture vividly such conflicts between high-modernism and the sentimental. He captures the America represented by Griffith in his 1943 essay 'Dickens, Griffith and Film Today,' by claiming:

In order to understand Griffith, one must visualize an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, speeding trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyor belts. One is obliged to comprehend the second side of America - America the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial. And then you will be considerably less astonished by this link between Griffith and Dickens.²

Thus in the latter stages of his life and career, the filmmaker and theorist perceives a key division in American culture, two 'faces of America' that contribute equally and vitally to the national psyche. 'Super-Dynamic America' represents the nation's pioneering of new technologies as essential components of fully rationalized modern life, with 'speeding trains', Griffith's cinema and a kinetic culture serving as exemplary symbols of modernity.³ 'Small Town America' conversely represents the pastoralism, traditionalism and sentimentality of a nation that hangs back from such visions of the contemporary, one that is more content with established social structures and ensconced in a hegemony of bourgeois, Victorian, middle class values.⁴ Eisenstein poses Charles Dickens and D.W. Griffith as exponents of both the modernity *and* sentimentality of their respective cultures, yet applied to their work, the dynamic 'parallel action' of cross-cutting scenes (theorized as a precursor to

² Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, New York: Harcourt, p. 198.

³ Ben Singer identifies this alignment of cinema and other dynamic features of modern, urban experience as an important strand of 'culturalist' film theory that posits a causal or correlative relationship between such phenomena and transformations in human perception. David Bordwell has critiqued some of the central assumptions of this 'modernity thesis'. See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, Ch. 4; David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 140-149.

⁴ If this latter sensibility was for George Santayana in the previous chapter a feminized gentility, Eisenstein nevertheless perceives the 'patriarchal' in an otherwise similarly conceptualized American provincialism.

Soviet-montage) is largely valorised over the positive depictions of liberal bourgeois characters, the unredeemed victimhood of a lower class and a confused scheme of ‘virtue rewarded’. Griffith’s ‘classical’ style is deemed by Eisenstein both vital to cinema history yet necessarily inferior ideologically. A modernism in cinematic technique is compromised or undermined by a ‘way down East’ attitude of middle class morals and manners, or what he further down critiques as a ‘sentimental humanism.’

Eisenstein’s valorisation of cinema’s technological dynamism on one level accords with a Soviet and modernist project of revolutionary innovation in the service of transforming an unjust bourgeois world. In this respect, Eisenstein’s theory and practice self-consciously serve as paradigms for political change, a contemporary art-form galvanized in the service of a contemporary socio-political narrative of radical change. Yet what remains in Eisenstein’s essay is a sense of his residual fascination with Western culture as a totality, evinced by a recognition that cementing the connection between Dickens and Griffith involves considerations of both their technical innovation along with their place in a historically humanist or liberal tradition. There is thus also doubt and caution as to how the modern(ist) and the sentimental can or should ever be extricated from one another.

Scepticism towards America’s pastoralism is equally expressed in Eisenstein’s allusions to a New York apartment in the same essay, a passage that expands upon his approval of a Western culture that has adopted modern, rationalized technologies over the nostalgic objects of its past. He describes a ‘good old provincialism[...]nestling in clusters around fireplaces, furnished with soft grandfather chairs and the lace doilies

that shroud the wonders of modern technique: refrigerators, washing-machines, radios.’ Revealed here is Eisenstein’s doubt as to the clear demarcation between the two Americas, to the extent that ‘provincialism’ ominously pervades an apartment in what was regarded as the foremost urbanized city of the world.⁵ There is secondly a clear scepticism as to the function of these kitsch objects other than to ‘shroud’ the innovations of current technology. Where the refrigerator or washing-machine signifies utility and function, the fireplaces and doilies signify the outdated kitsch of people’s private dwellings. While the machines belong in a futurist everywhere, the kitsch objects are rooted in the nostalgic spaces of the past - at best decorative and at worst, ideologically regressive.

Eisenstein’s varied and fragmented responses to American filmmaking and culture manifest therefore a central tension between the (foreign) intellectual’s disdain for the cinema’s alleged subordination to commercial priorities, a cult of the star (or individual) and its concomitant aesthetic of sentimentality, and an infatuated admiration for its films and the big players that he would meet while in New York and California. While no doubt influenced by Hollywood’s ultimate rejection of his screenplay for an adaptation of Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*, his ‘Dickens’ article exemplifies in many ways a conflict between what may be regarded historically as a European, high modernist position with regards to the technologies of political modernity (including of course the cinema) and a residual respect, if not reverence, for the cultural humanism that produced such cinematic pioneers as Dickens, Griffith and Chaplin. This ambivalence as to elements of cinema deemed excessive,

⁵ Writing on the perceptual ‘trick’ of the New York skyscraper, Eisenstein finds the provincial America of private dwellings to be also inscribed in them, enough to find them ‘cosy, domestic, small-town.’ (*Film Form*, p. 197).

conservative, pathetic or humanist, is central, I would suggest, to comprehending the sentimental tradition as it persisted in the cinematic age of the early to mid-20th century. For while theories of the cinema were closely aligned, as with Eisenstein, with modernist impulses towards the rationalized or revolutionary deployment of cinema as a self-reflexive technology of perceptual and political change, the realities of a burgeoning mass culture that remained in thrall to human stories, emotions, moral values and melodramatic optimism would continue to dominate cinema aesthetics as it had with previous arts. I suggest therefore that cinema's theorization as a technologically mediated rupture with the past involved an ongoing negotiation with the medium's perceived collaboration with a sentimental aesthetics. Moreover, I argue below that some of the best-known film theorists of that era realised the implications of such a problematic despite considerable adherences to the austere radicalism of the high modernist moment.

The Modern Subject

Another key question in this debate, as in previous eras, concerned the role that cinema should play in transformations of subjectivity. The sentimental, as in previous centuries, comes to denote a model of spectatorship for a complacent subject or class that resists the radical potentials of art as a device for change, and art's sometime complicity with such a model. Pathos would be experienced in the reception of sentimental art without any concomitant change in the subject's moral treatment of the world, the latter assumed as a first priority for any substantive political change. Yet at the crux of such arguments, as we have seen, is a theory that still bestows importance to agency, or more philosophically, *free will* at the level of the subject. While sentimental art was deemed to allow, or indeed encourage, the subject to feel

the pleasures of sympathy or virtue without earning it (i.e. without altering consciousness), superior art could transform the subject politically or ethically, prompting him or her to exert a significant influence upon the social sphere within which s/he interacts. The cinema arrives at a moment, however, when this notion itself has come into question as a naively 'humanist' position. Determining whether a work of art is sentimental becomes redundant if the teleology of an ethical subject is itself inadequate. This problematic of an ethical subject extends to the moral individuals, families or social groups depicted within the novel, the play or the film themselves, the idealisation of whom comes to be deemed anachronistic and once again the indulgence of a cosseted middle-class.

An important strand of modernism would therefore posit technology as the only hope for mankind in modernity, where an alienated subject has become an insignificant element operating within larger structures of knowledge and power. Only as part of a larger critical mass does the subject recover any significance. The novelty of cinema gives cause for such euphoric exclamations as to its central role to social change – a grand new medium put to the service of a grand narrative of collectivism. A writer like Walter Benjamin in 1927 posits the importance of cinema in its deployment as a 'collectivist' technology, in what could be deemed a dry run for his famous *Artwork* essay of 1935.⁶ He deems nothing less than the technological innovation of film itself a 'violent fissure' in 'art's development', a 'new region of consciousness' that is revolutionarily autonomous from its application by man, because:

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in Harry Zorn (trans.) *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999, pp. 211-44.

[...]the important, elementary moments of progress in art are novelties neither of content nor of form; the revolution in technique precedes both.⁷

As a formalist position that equates a paradigm shift in technology with the redemption of the ‘mass’ or ‘proletariat’, Benjamin’s claim necessarily overlooks the individual, either as the creator or the crucial subject of film. The ‘individual’ only becomes significant as a test-case of the larger social and ideological structures that govern his/her behaviour. Apartments or ‘furnished rooms’ also feature significantly in this essay, as in Eisenstein’s above, except here they are not the repositories of new technologies admixed ambiguously with regressive kitsch but the ‘hopelessly sad’ reminders of individual, atomized (bourgeois) existence that need to be ‘exploded’ by the cinema’s reconfiguration of space and time. An ‘old world of incarceration’ is transformed to a technologized utopia of collectivist rationality and freedom. While Shaw in the last chapter regards the cinema as a potentially useful vehicle for socialist ideas and themes, Benjamin advances technology itself as the messianic saviour of such aims, excluding man entirely from the project of his own redemption.

And yet, film theory was formulated in a world that seemed far from ready to abandon ‘regions of consciousness’ that had been inherited from long traditions of the sentimental or realist novel, the melodrama, the ‘well-made play’ and the classical Hollywood film. The ascendancy of Hollywood clearly attested to the sentimental valences of mass culture, wherein the ‘mass’ could still be addressed as individual subjects with unique experiences, desires, thoughts and beliefs. Sympathy or empathy with characters (identification) remained a key attraction of a cinema that accentuated

⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Discussion of Russian Filmic Art and Collectivist Art in General,’ in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Martin Jay, Anton Kaes, and Edward Dimendberg (eds.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 626.

what other artforms had already delivered on a grand scale. The famous montage sequences of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, a film applauded by Benjamin, would be inconceivable without the crucial reaction shots of particular individuals, caught up in the joys and agonies of a crushed proletarian uprising. In a similar vein, much as though Benjamin celebrates the destruction of alienated bourgeois existence through the explosive force of cinema, one is moved as much by his description of those atomized, solitary lives as much as by his revolutionary desire for filmic perception to transcend it. One must recognize that at least in a pervasively philosophical sense, sentimentalism is manifest in both cinematic practice and theory. This should lead us to question what the political stakes were of such ruptures within the 'hopelessly sad' life of the subject, if the capacity for pathos would be itself exploded in Utopian efforts to efface the subject.

Early British Film Theory: *Close-Up*

Urging a radical restructuring of the worldwide film industry and the forging of a film practice for the sake of developing film for itself, the writers of *Close-Up* wrote extensively on the spectatorship inspired by a new cinematic praxis, with ideas that stand as significant precursors to the spectatorship theories of the 1970s.

Unashamedly avant-gardist in its aims, the magazine was preoccupied with form itself; it advocated for allowing the medium an idealized autonomy from commercial constraints, and for the spectator to have a far more active and skilled role in the construction of meanings supposedly purer than those permitted by the commercial cinema. The latter, deemed to be mired in the clichés and formulae of sentimentalism, indulges the spectator's sense of virtue rather than urging him to think or create. In this vein, a canon made up of *Battleship Potemkin*, *Joyless Street*, *The Student of*

Prague among others is praised by the magazine's founding editor Kenneth Macpherson as exhibiting 'pure form, every single attribute of photographic art, miracles to work in tone and tone depths, light, geometry, design, sculpture...pure abstraction all of it.'⁸

As 'pure abstraction', cinema thus promises to deliver the world in a reconfigured, cinematically essential state. Through such procedures as 'contrast, merging and dissociation', Macpherson suggests that his canon of recommended films transform the subject's perception of the world in a way that modernists would consider closer to an original or more authentic mode of consciousness. One of *Close-Up's* most frequent writers, H.D., writes of the spectator's 'inner speech', an underlying code with which the abstractions of the modernist art film correspond more effectively. She would thus similarly conceptualize the cinema as a medium that best serves itself as a paring down of reality towards essential forms. Her comparison of film with hieroglyph, as in Eisenstein's writings in reference to Japanese ideographic writing, presumes cinema's analogous affinity for the juxtaposition and montage of images in the service of a universal language of cinema. H.D. describes the figure of a woman from the Russian film *Expiation* as follows:

She has a way of standing against a sky line that makes a hieroglyph, that spells almost visibly some message of cryptic symbolism. Her gestures are magnificent. If this is Russian, then I am Russian.⁹

⁸ Kenneth Macpherson, 'As Is', *Close Up*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (October 1927), pp. 15-16, cited in Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 346.

⁹ H.D. 'Expiation', *Close-Up*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1928), reprinted in James Donald, Anne Freiberg & Laura Marcus (eds.), *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema & Modernism*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 126.

As an evocation of animal postures and closeness to nature, the image she describes conveys truth despite superficial ugliness. In a way that is ‘psychic, compelling, in a way destructive’ the realism of such imagery is considered qualitatively superior to a bourgeois aesthetics of the ‘beautiful’ or the picturesque. Where a ‘shapeless’ cinema is limited by its inclusion of ‘extraneous’ non-essential elements, H.D. sees the cinema as an ideal of artistic ‘restraint,’ filtering out all superfluities. Aligning cinema with the simplicity of ‘light,’ she argues for a ‘classic’ aesthetic that paradoxically befits modernity through its avoidance of ‘exaggeration,’ ‘elaborate material’ or ‘waste.’

Such claims regarding the specificity of cinematic art correspond with the formalist film theory of such figures as Rudolph Arnheim, who would also claim virtue for the cinema in its deviance from the subject’s normal perception of the world. Rejecting the cinema’s deliverance of the photographic world as an excessive ‘likeness’, Arnheim claims,

There is serious danger that the filmmaker will rest content with such shapeless reproduction. In order that the film artist may create a work of art it is important that he consciously stress the peculiarities of his medium. This, however, should be done in such a manner that the character of the objects represented should not thereby be destroyed but rather strengthened, concentrated, and interpreted.¹⁰

Emphasising the cinema’s proper role as enhancement or interpretation of reality, Arnheim rehearses a ‘specificity thesis’ as to the unique role that any artform must play in order to constitute itself as real art.¹¹ With editing, the cinema justifies its

¹⁰ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (1932), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957, p. 35.

¹¹ For a critique of the assumptions underlying the ‘specificity thesis’, see Noël Carroll, ‘The Specificity Thesis’, in Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,, 5th Edition, 1998, p. 322-28.

claim as art through its manipulation of a reality that arrives at the lens in ‘shapeless’ form, that is, without any as yet artistic design. Reality becomes the raw material that needs to be worked on, much as the sculptor chips away at rock to create a new artistic object.

Other modernists, such as the contributors of *Close-Up* are useful to consider in relation to such theory as Arnheim’s, particularly in the manner that they account for this undesired, ‘shapeless’ aspect of reality, which I suggest comes to overlap theoretically with what are deemed the sentimental excesses of American and other national cinemas. As with Eisenstein and other Soviets discussed below, some of whose writings were translated and published in *Close-Up*, the articulation of film’s role as art is a central preoccupation of these writers, with the established cinema (in America and England especially) explicitly or implicitly deemed a conservative and uninspired deployment of filmic resources. Their cynicism in relation to the hackneyed formulae of the Hollywood film corresponds to related notions of a moribund, non-essentialized cinema. The rehearsal of tired clichés inherited from old, non-cinematic traditions becomes analogous to the camera’s unfiltered registration of raw reality. The magazine’s chief financial backer and contributor Bryher would write disdainfully of Hollywood when she claims that ‘it can produce kitsch magnificently but cannot produce art.’¹² Her reimagining of how Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* would be remade in Hollywood lists a slew of sentimental devices ranging from the heroine’s survival through love for an ‘old father-mother-grandparent,’ ‘love

¹² Bryher, ‘The Hollywood Code’, *Close Up*, (September & December 1931), cited in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema & Modernism*, p.28.

at first sight' between hero and heroine, marriage as a happy ending witnessed by great crowds foregrounded by 'children with doves.'¹³

Kenneth Macpherson expresses similar sentiments in his first editorial for the magazine, 'As Is', in 1927, where he dismisses Hollywood's 'atrocious domestic and wild west dramas' for their recourse to the upbeat and formulaic. German Expressionism instead promises something different through what he describes as its 'curious details, watchfulness, harking at claustrophobia.' Macpherson commends the quality of such films' as Pabst's *Joyless Street* and Lang's *Metropolis* on the grounds of their representation of the 'REAL,' where other critics would perceive only preoccupations with the 'morbid.' This notion of the real would relate strongly to the magazine's central aim of advancing a cinema that would speak to a subject irrespective of differences in class, nationality or race. The creation of the 'real' is deeply associated with what is deemed the silent film's universal comprehensibility. With the publication of *Close-Up* spanning the transition from silent to sound, the writers would serve as first hand witnesses of cinema's transition from what was often deemed an internationalist language of moving images and united consciousness (whether commercially produced or not) to films produced almost exclusively for national audiences with the establishment of the talkie. The advent of synchronous sound and the talkie, as for Eisenstein, represented in many ways an overall regression towards an aesthetic verisimilitude that would once again threaten to occlude the 'real' as such.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴ Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandroff's famous 'Statement on Sound' was itself published in the October 1928 issue of *Close-Up*.

Such a universalist aesthetic, pared-down of sentimentalized cultural particulars, would naturally find a theoretical counterpart for the magazine's contributors in Freud's theory of dreams. As the dream-work synthesises disparate images through economies of condensation and displacement, the unconscious similarly seemed to aspire to the simple yet transformative possibilities of pure light. Anticipating later theory's concerns with film's relation to psychoanalysis and symbol, film was similarly considered to be underpinned by a symbolic language that would speak directly to the unconscious yet undeniably real fantasies of mass society.¹⁵ Cloaked in the 'waste' of superficial data (or inscribed in the ideology of Althusser's later formulations¹⁶), such fantasies remain repressed and encouraged to remain so by the analogously unfiltered noise of everyday life and its counterpart in the platitudes of conventional cinema. The 'Kitsch' and the 'sentimental', according to the psychoanalyst Hanns Sachs (who served as analyst for several of the *Close-Up* contributors and wrote for the journal) would likewise be theorized as a body of work that largely fails to engage with the unconscious in such direct ways as H.D.'s cinema of 'restraint.' Describing the predictability of the kitsch film's emotional itinerary, Sachs writes:

Owing to the skill with which the distribution of the emotions is anticipated, the public are indeed saved a good deal of worry, including that of choice, but at the same time the free development of the emotions is restricted; the possibility of lifting them by degrees out of the unconscious and letting them have free play is done away with. The process must have the minimum of psychic activity and must never be arrested.¹⁷

¹⁵ For instance, H.D. writes that 'the film is the art of dream portrayal and perhaps when we say that we have achieved the definition, the synthesis towards which we have been striving.' In the 'Borderline Pamphlet')

¹⁶ See Althusser's writings on the analogies between ideology and the dream in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Hanns Sachs, 'Kitsch', *Close-Up*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 1932), reprinted in *Close-Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, p. 266.

In the above, the sentimental is argued to not so much ignore unconscious desire and fantasy but rather inhibits their coming to consciousness. While ‘lifting’ emotions to consciousness requires the ‘development’ or ‘psychic activity’ elicited by the hieroglyphic aesthetic praised by H.D. among others, kitsch is argued to keep the spectator mired in conscious thought despite the possibilities of the film-viewing process. Kitsch comes of a failure to follow Ezra’s Pound’s modernist imperative to ‘make it new’ and instead conveys the same as that which already resides in a collective conscious. Deprived of the richness of the visual world by sentimental constraints, the spectator of kitsch maintains (and complacently enjoys) the self-perpetuating emotional schemata to which he is accustomed while remaining blissfully unexposed to transformative data.

Aligning the ‘plainly legible signposts’ of the formulaic film with a pandering to the ‘dullest intelligence,’ Sachs goes on to demonstrate the elitist underside of the notion of film as universal language. Anticipating Roland Barthes’ theory of the ‘writerly’ versus ‘readerly’ text, the unconscious is posed as a repository of emotions that require ‘development’ through the film’s activation of creative, ‘writerly’ processes. Film fulfils this function by paradoxically becoming what H.D. terms a ‘cryptic symbolism’, requiring a spectator’s ‘intelligence’ in order to decipher meaning. While such theory rests on the assumption of a universally comprehensible language of the cinema, the sentimental kitsch film is critiqued somewhat paradoxically on the grounds that it is excessively easy to understand, or too ‘readerly’ in Barthes’ terms.

Macpherson writes similarly of ‘absorption and creation’ as twin processes in the spectatorship of film, with the intellect serving a crucial role in mediating between the

active and passive elements of film spectatorship. Disturbed by the passivity of cinematic spectatorship at the time, 'dope' is employed as metaphor for the cinema's prevention of the 'real consideration of problems, artistic, or sociological,'¹⁸ Emotions are posed elsewhere as problematic in relation to the creative process of film-viewing, as indicated in Bryher's praise for Eisenstein's *October*:

Perhaps it is because its entire appeal is to the intellect - not to the emotions solely, but to the brain, which is beyond emotion- the super or over-conscious, that is habitually so starved.¹⁹

An intellectual engagement with film is valorised in the above as at least as crucial an element to spectatorship as the medium's appeals to emotion, the latter deemed particularly superficial and gratuitous when elicited by the spectatorship of kitsch Hollywood productions. Opposed to the emotions evoked by the formulaic is a more profound consciousness ('inner speech') that responds to aspects of the film that more essentially express the 'real' in the nexus between image and the spectator's consciousness.

However, if 'emotions' in the above seem stigmatized, it is owing to a conceptualization of consciousness (named 'intellect') that I would suggest is conflated with what we often understand precisely as emotion. An important paradox emerges when one considers that the above repudiation of kitsch and its sentimentality is motivated by modernist ideals of a universalist language of cinema and its implicit promotion of communication between cultures. It is paradoxical because this latter ideal is itself a central tenet of moral sentiment theory. Recalling

¹⁸ 'Dope or Stimulus', *Close Up*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 1928), p.61, cited in Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 326.

¹⁹ Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*, Territet, Switzerland: POOL, 1929, cited in Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 339.

H.D.'s assertion that 'If this is Russian, then I am Russian'²⁰, what becomes at stake in advocating a cinema of juxtaposition, economy and symbolism remains the process of identification itself. As much as such a modernist cinema is advocated as an appeal to the 'intellect', a criterion that has often been aligned with detachment or 'difficulty', the necessity of bringing together a spectatorship divided by race, class, nationality and gender clearly underpins its wider project. The original premise of such theory is after all an assumption of the failure of the 'word', and in a related vein, Enlightenment reason, to effectively bring about such ideals as radical identification between subjects across traditional divides. This ideal, related as it is to sentimental theory (that which posits the transmission of 'good' sentiments between subjects), problematizes any simple categorization of *Close-Up's* modernism as a plainly unsentimental body of theory. The magazine rehearses once again a conflict between what is deemed a sentimentalized, formulaic representation of such ideals (children with doves?) and avant-gardist (and at times elitist) attempts to start anew, motivated in no small way by those self-same ideals.

Eisenstein and Dickens

Russian films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin were highly revered above all by the *Close-Up* milieu because, compared to the commercial cinemas of America, Britain and other European countries, such films were deemed to manifest the essential properties of cinematic art, in relation to which the spectator is posed as a vital intellectual force that creates as much as consumes meaning. The BBFC's strict regulation of Russian cinema in the UK was bitterly opposed by Macpherson and Bryher and revealed, in

²⁰ H.D. 'Expiation', *Close-Up*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1928), reprinted in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema & Modernism*, p. 126

their view, the conjoined political biases and philistinism of censor and film industry. Representing for them the best filmmakers of the era for their ‘intellectual’ principles of filmmaking, such figures as Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Vertov or Pudovkin were considered to be serving purposes in many ways antithetical to the extravagant Hollywood and stagnant English cinema. In both theory and practice, the Soviets delivered the challenging and new where other national cinemas were deemed content to follow formulae, kitsch and sentiment. Nevertheless, this ‘intellectual’ cinema manifested similar ambiguities to those introduced in the theory of *Close-Up* with regards to the place of the sentimental in its corpus. Eisenstein’s theory in particular seems to encapsulate the modernism of that critical moment yet nevertheless provides a rich perspective of that era’s incomplete break from older aesthetic traditions.

Eisenstein formulated a distinctive form of cinema that differed markedly from other national cinemas, despite acknowledged influences from the American cinema, particularly the classical editing techniques of D.W. Griffith. Much of Eisenstein’s theory rested on particular irreconcilable tensions, as exemplified perhaps by the oxymoronic phrase ‘sensuous thinking,’ which demonstrated his efforts to theorize a cinematic art that was in a sense both more cerebral yet more emotionally engaging than that of his predecessors. This phrase, employed in his theoretical writings in reference to ‘pre-lingual’ cultures such as the Aztecs or the Toltecs, illustrates Eisenstein as a figure that presciently regards film as a medium that communicates in a radically different order from that of the written or spoken word.²¹ Both pre-linguistic yet radically infused with meaning, the cinematic image had the potential to revolutionize art and the world. Rejecting linear narratives, traditional acting styles,

²¹ See Eisenstein’s *Immoral Memories*, Herbert Marshall (trans.), Boston: Houghton, 1983, p. 211.

realistic central characters of themes of collectivity of Soviet life, Eisenstein's work was highly innovative in its search for an 'intellectual' cinema that strove to stimulate the spectator with revolutionary ideas.²²

Yet seen within the milieu of the now infamous Soviet Proletcult, however, there are reasons to see Eisenstein as less condemnatory of 'humanist' cinematic practices in his theorization of a new cinematic spectator compared to contemporaries such as Dziga Vertov. Eisenstein may have coined the term 'Cine-Fist' as metaphor for the forceful impact of his filmic rhetoric upon a spectator that needed to have regressive ideological illusions destroyed, yet he would remain acutely aware of the pertinence of 'bourgeois' American cinema to 'montage' theory and practice throughout his career, as borne out by his qualified valorisation of Griffith, discussed further below. Vertov's practice demonstrated similar commitment to shot juxtaposition and poetics in aid of producing a similarly Marxist interpretation of the represented world, yet his theory explicitly proclaimed the primacy of a realist aesthetic diametrically opposed to bourgeois forms. As a newsreel and documentary filmmaker, Vertov coined the term 'Cine-Eye' as the chief metaphor for a body of work that would aim to depict the 'life caught unawares', an aesthetic he would consider opposed to the 'film-drama' and the 'bourgeois fairy-tale scripts'²³ of capitalist society.

²² Of course, Eisenstein's greatest filmic achievements such as *The Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin* necessarily thematized Marxist ideology through the highlighting of the victories of the Russian proletariat in accordance with Soviet Socialist principles, yet such thematic parameters would inevitably become constraints to a filmmaker that wished to experiment with form and avoid the conventions of Stalinist dictates on state art.

²³ See Vertov's polemics in 'Kino-Eye' (1926), reprinted in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Annette Michelson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 60-79.

While both filmmakers were thus similarly committed to ‘montage’ as a forceful transformation of spectator consciousness, Vertov would explicitly critique human psychology in favour of a logic dictated by electricity and machines, aligning his project with the transformation of a ‘bumbling citizen through the poetry of the machine to the perfect electric man.’²⁴ With the movie camera serving as a ‘mechanical eye,’ a superior reality was posed as having been made available to the modern cinematic spectator, who no longer required the alleged ‘fiction’ or ‘psychologism’ practiced by the bourgeois literature and theatre of the time. In the polemical manifesto of 1922, for instance, Vertov invites the reader to ‘flee,’

[...]the sweet embraces of the romance
the poison of the psychological novel
the clutches of the theatre of adultery
to turn your back on music²⁵

Insisting that ‘man’ as such falls short of the ‘precision’ of machines (a ‘stopwatch’ is given as example), Vertov advocates man’s temporary exclusion ‘as a subject fit for film.’²⁶ This logic fuels Vertov’s criticism of Eisenstein’s *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*, which for Vertov represented the continuance of the ‘acted film’ and so remained antithetical to Kino-Eye aesthetics.²⁷

Despite beginnings in the theatre and his adoption of a notionally narrative cinema, Eisenstein’s deployment of montage aesthetics would nevertheless conform to imperatives very much akin to Vertov’s theory, similarly seeking to differentiate the Soviet cinema from its predecessors through the forceful constructions of filmic

²⁴ Vertov, ‘We: Variant of a Manifesto’ (1922), reprinted in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, p. 8

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7

²⁶ *Ibid.*,

²⁷ Vertov, ‘The Factory of Facts’, 1926, reprinted in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, p. 58.

meaning.²⁸ His critique of the ideology of the individual, for instance, would extend to problematizing the valorisation of the ‘star’, not only as hero of the bourgeois drama but also in terms of artistic contributions to the filmmaking process. In reference to the bourgeois West, Eisenstein would remark that ‘someone has to be the ‘star.’ *One* person. Yesterday it was the actor. This time let’s say it’s the cameraman. Tomorrow it will be the lighting technician.’²⁹ Opposing such systems to Soviet collectivity and equality, Eisenstein would emphasise ‘unity’ as the aesthetic horizon of Soviet montage, whereby the individual heroic character would be effaced by the proletarian mass. Applied more formally, the film shot was analogously only endowed with complete meaning through its juxtaposition with other shots and cinematic effects. At least in his initial films, therefore, it is rare for central protagonists to emerge with which to identify emotionally, as a spectator might have done in relation to linear narratives and focalized protagonists in Hollywood cinema. Eisenstein’s ‘montage’ technique would be justified theoretically through appeals to cinema’s abstract qualities of rhythm, tempo and synaesthesia as distinct from notions that highlighted its affinity for representing the human, such as in the theory of Balázs or Bazin, discussed below.

However, Eisenstein’s examination of D.W. Griffith as a key influence on his aesthetics in ‘Griffith, Dickens and Film Today’ reveals theoretical tensions between formalist and what Dudley Andrew terms ‘organicist’ impulses in Eisenstein’s

²⁸ While Eisenstein engaged in ongoing debates with Vertov as to the function and aesthetics of the new cinema, much of this conflict has been attributed to the fierce competition for funding and prestige in the Soviet Union of that era. See Annette Michelson’s introduction to *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, p. xlvii-l.

²⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Béla Forgets the Scissors’, 1926, reprinted in Richard Taylor (ed.) *The Eisenstein Reader*, London: BFI, 1998, p.68.

thought. Written in 1944, Eisenstein had already by this point made *The General Line*, *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, all works that saw him compromise with the Socialist Realist School's demands for character, plot, focalized heroes and moral legibility, in an effort to assuage charges of formalism from his contemporaries. Nevertheless the article reiterates key tenets of Eisenstein's original conception of montage as manifest in the films and theory of his early career. He argues that Griffith inherits a tradition of narrative construction from Dickens that was to be admired both for the evocative characters he creates and for the parallel editing and cross-cutting between scenes. Discussing the scene that sees Oliver Twist leave his well-to-do grandfather's house on an errand only to be abducted by Nancy, Fagin and Bill Sykes - Eisenstein analyses the sequence as the narrative switches between the abductors (now with Oliver) and Brownlow as he waits in vain for Oliver's return. For Eisenstein, the oscillation between 'storylines' enhances the emotional impact of the narrative overall, whereby 'one (the waiting gentlemen) emotionally heightens the tension and drama of the other (the capture of Oliver).' This leads Eisenstein to construct Dickens as cinematic *avant la lettre*, alluding to the latter's mastery of melodrama in the novel as a key factor to Griffith's success in the cinema. Eisenstein accounts for Dickens' and cinema's successes as follows:

What were the novels of Dickens for his contemporaries, for his readers? There is one answer: they bore the same relation to them that the film bears to the same strata in our time. They compelled the reader to live with the same passions. They appealed to the same good and sentimental elements as does the film (at least on the surface); they alike shudder before vice, they alike mill the extraordinary, the unusual, the fantastic, from boring, prosaic and everyday existence.³⁰

³⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today' (1944), reprinted in Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 206.

In this passage, Dickens' employment of 'parallel action' inspires the same technique in Griffith's films and thereby achieves the same levels of success with their respective publics. We see here Eisenstein's clear recognition of cinema's melodramatic roots and its evident popularity as mass culture. Yet his qualification 'at least on the surface' provides an insight as to how the Dickens/Griffith style is deemed to differ from Soviet montage at least theoretically. For while Eisenstein recognizes the popularity of the liberal-humanist aims of representing virtue triumphing over vice, there is a sense in which such aims have become anachronistic or at least limited in relation to a modernist-socialist project. Eisenstein indeed expresses his surprise, in a footnote, that 'as late as 1944' Griffith maintained the above aims as the 'chief social function of filmmaking.' While this may have defined the Dickens/Griffith axis of story construction, Eisenstein affirms his own innovations in film technique as serving more explicitly political objectives. While he regards both figures as precursors to the 'montage' that would inspire he and his Soviet colleagues, Griffith is argued to have reached a 'standstill' with 'parallel action.' Eisenstein furthermore applies this status of standstill to Griffith's thematics and politics also:

In social attitudes Griffith was always a liberal, never departing far from the sweet sentimental humanism of the good old gentlemen and sweet old ladies of Victorian England, just as Dickens loved to picture them. His tender hearted film morals go no higher than a level of Christian accusation of human injustice and nowhere in his film is there sounded a protest against social injustice.³¹

Asserting Griffith's status as an artist of the 'bourgeois world,' Eisenstein is ambivalent about such sentimental technique for while Griffith achieves 'magnificent pathos' in *Way Down East* or *Broken Blossoms*, Eisenstein also attributes Griffith's

³¹ Ibid., p.233-4.

moral failures to the same sentimental politics, demonstrated for him in the racism of *Birth of a Nation* or the Manichean metaphysics of *Intolerance*. What then follows in the article is a complex discussion of the differences between American and Soviet technique where political ideology is centralized as the determining factor in shaping cinematic style. He argues that Soviet ideology facilitates ‘qualitative’ innovations in technique that most expressly problematize American pretences at ‘objectivity’. In order to achieve full political expressivity as a means of achieving social transformation, ‘montage’ is argued to have required a more ‘full, conscious, completed’ use, entailing above all the shaping of filmic reality with meaning as opposed to the passive registration of bourgeois truths through anachronistic storytelling. While ‘parallel action’ displays the seeds of a dynamic film logic in American film culture, it remains mired in a social and aesthetic conservatism, not permitting art to be ‘freed from narrow commercial tasks’ and inhibiting the metaphorical and truly political freedoms that come with the deployment of a true ‘montage image.’ Thus:

Griffith’s cinema does not know this type of montage construction. His close-ups create atmosphere, outline traits of the characters, alternate in dialogues of the leading characters, and close-ups of the chaser and the chased speed up the tempo of the chase. But Griffith at all times remains on the level of *representation* and *objectivity* and nowhere does he try through the *juxtaposition* of shots to shape *import* and *image*.³²

In the name of ‘import,’ Eisenstein advances Soviet montage as a technique that breaks down the bourgeois values sustained by Griffith’s films. A chief binary in this argument is that of ‘rich and ‘poor,’ a hierarchy that for Eisenstein also dictates the formal parameters of Griffith’s film culture. While he recognizes the centrality of the binary to melodramatic aesthetics, he rejects what he argues to be Griffith’s analogous

³² Ibid., p.240.

‘dualistic picture of the world’ which, for both he and Dickens, prevent their ‘moving beyond these divisions.’ The ‘parallel’ structure is argued to work differently in Soviet cinema, where via the application of Hegelian/Marxist dialectics in shot composition and editing, the meaning of film shots are modified by the context within which they are represented.³³ With shots representing the ‘thesis’ or ‘antithesis’ elements of the dialectic, Soviet montage seeks to generate meanings through combination, juxtaposition and ‘synthesis’ of images that lacked sufficient meaning as discrete units.

Eisenstein’s main criticism of Griffith thus emerges as the complacency with which his films represent a world replete with meaning and truth, having evaded the obligation of modifying such meanings through cinematic form. This for him defied Marx’s central maxim that people should change history rather than merely understand it. Where Soviet cinema generates meaning in accordance with revolutionarily metaphorical principles, American cinema is deemed to reproduce the complacent fixed meanings of bourgeois society. If we return once more therefore to a dichotomy introduced at the start of this chapter, Eisenstein’s discussion of Griffith’s representation of two ‘faces of America’, both ‘Small Town America’ and ‘Super-Dynamic America,’ Eisenstein’s attitude is ultimately one of cautious inspiration. The dynamism of the crowds, stock-market, traffic and skyscrapers of New York are analogized with the ‘dizzying action’ of Griffith’s set pieces and the montage of his own epics. An aesthetic of urban chaos, movement and porosity, its ‘montage’ is posed as antithesis to the sedate charms of American provincial life, which Eisenstein

³³ This has been aligned with structuralist notions of the single shot attaining full meaning only through its insertion in the chain of shots that it becomes part of in a film’s narrative, see Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 38.

nevertheless notes sceptically as an ineradicable crux of the culture. While the former technique lends itself to the working through of 'injustice' through cinema, its embeddedness in American life limits it to addressing individual destinies ('human injustice') as opposed to deeper political change ('social injustice'), for the latter would supposedly require a wholesale forfeiting of a sentimental culture founded on hierarchy.

However, if montage aesthetics are opposed to all that is less than technologically innovative and functionally worthwhile to rhetorical imperatives, Eisenstein is nevertheless highly ambivalent about a related element of American sentimentality, which he discusses in relation to the 'intimate' aspects of Dickens and Griffith's work. The 'intimate', employed above in the article in reference to their attention to life-like characters, provokes Eisenstein's admiration for art that can reveal the truths of real people, a dangerously 'realist' notion for one of the most notorious formalists in film culture. As he notes evocative memories of the 'inimitable bit-characters' in these films and novels 'who seem to have run straight from life on to the screen,' he notes with admiration the 'particular method' these artists employ for representing the human condition. While he notes the skill with which such characters are rendered by these artists, he betrays a sense of wonder at the realism of both central and peripheral characters, and how evocatively they conjure up the 'atmosphere' of the novel or film they are part of. It is here that perhaps Eisenstein's montage theory is most under strain, for here he seems to confess the joys of engaging with characters drawn from

life and praises the intimacy required of the author or filmmaker that seeks only to represent humanity truthfully.³⁴

Praising the evocativeness of characters drawn from life undermines formalist imperatives of constructing meaning out of raw material that struggles for significance. While the ‘cine-fist’ necessarily ruptures existent reality with its own ideological stamp, Eisenstein’s meditation on character reveals an attention to human qualities extrinsic to the constructivist act. By discussing various examples of realistic characters both in terms of the ‘fascinating and finished images’ of Griffith’s cinema or the one-dimensionality of Dickens’ incidental characters, the intimacy of character depiction (and implicitly the whole notion of spectatorial engagement with characters) comes to sit in tension with an aesthetics of ‘attraction’ and ‘montage’ that locates meaning only in the film artists’ synthesis of disparate and otherwise meaningless elements. While Eisenstein swiftly moves on to dealing with the ‘second side of Griffith’s creative craftsmanship’, namely parallel action and the montage that it inaugurates, he leaves a sense of unresolved admiration for the ‘intimate’ aspects of Dickens’ and Griffith’s art (despite denunciations of their ‘humanism’).

Because these same ‘good old gentlemen’ and ‘sweet old ladies’ of a ‘provincial’ Anglo-American world represent for Eisenstein the complacent bourgeois world, he would struggle with character engagement and its indispensability to his own work. There is recognition, in other words, that the human body constitutes a vital component to Eisenstein’s own desired goals with regards to cinematic spectatorship.

³⁴ In James Chandler’s account of Eisenstein’s essay, the notion of ‘small-town’ America is directly associated with the close-up. See James Chandler, ‘The Historical Novel Goes to Hollywood: Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today’, in Robert Lang (ed.), *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, director*, Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994, p. 226.

Despite America and the USSR's montage cultures and their respective decentring of the individual, the subject nevertheless constitutes an emotionally evocative component of cinema, even if cinema must necessarily for Eisenstein focus on elements of larger socio-political import. His own compromises with the dictates of the Socialist Realist school (the need for a standard hero in narrative film) and abandonment of the epics of his early career reveal a filmmaker and theorist that genuinely struggled with the formalist principles he pioneered so effectively. While his machine-like, constructivist technique revolutionized what was in his estimation an often dull, uncinematic application of the movie camera in other cinemas, Eisenstein and his contemporaries came to need more convincing as to why the 'human' needed to be so radically decentred and defamiliarized by the new art.

One must be cautious however in implicitly claiming Eisenstein within a tradition that in many ways seems antithetical to his own montage theory. The enormous scholarship that has been undertaken on his work testifies to a highly complex attitude with respect to emotional responses to film, with a scholar such as Peter Wollen expressing criticism at his own premature perceptions of a disjuncture between the constructivist, semiotic montage theory of an early Eisenstein and the Wagnerian 'synaesthesia' of his later writings. While the later aesthetic's introduction of 'sound and colour' seemed, in the context of a 1970s theoretical radicalism, to be merely Eisenstein's compromise with Stalinist demands (or his own desires) for conventionalism, Wollen highlights continuities of Eisenstein's theory throughout his later writings, wherein the polyphonic or synaesthetic attributes of film are recognized from an earlier point than is assumed. While Wollen notes the contrast between Eisenstein's early principles of formalist abstraction with his later interest and work

with dance, the human figure and music, he argues how these latter developments confirm Eisenstein's lifelong concerns with an aesthetic of the 'sensuous thinking' described above. So while Wollen notes how at one point Eisenstein even loses interest in an overly 'ideological' cinema in favour of the 'real bodies and real movement' of the theatre, he continues that such doubts nevertheless reinforce the sense of Eisenstein's obsession with an aesthetic (whether cinema or theatre) that would engage the spectator both emotionally and intellectually. Such affect is described by Eisenstein in terms of both 'ecstasy', 'pathos' and even the 'pathetic' in his later writings³⁵, yet he would nevertheless maintain a distinction between emotions of identification and those inspired by 'action'. 'If we wish the spectator to experience a maximum emotional upsurge, to send him into ecstasy', he argues,

we must offer him a suitable "formula" which will eventually excite the desirable emotions in him.

The simple method is to present on the screen a human being in the state of ecstasy, that is, a character who is gripped by some emotion, who is "beside himself."

A more complicated and effective method is the realization of the main condition of a work of pathos – constant qualitative changes in the action – not through the medium of one character, but through the entire environment. In other words, when everything around him is also "beside itself". A classical example of this method is the storm raging in the breast of King Lear and everywhere around him in nature.³⁶

If this passage rehearses Eisenstein's preferred site of cinematic affect as the 'super-dynamic' and the 'environment', it should also alert us to the distance between Eisenstein's modernism and the 'simple method' of the sentimental. While the latter method of course works with partial success, there is more than a suggestion here that

³⁵ See the last collection of Eisenstein's writings compiled in *Nonindifferent Nature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

³⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Organic Unity and Pathos in the Composition of Potemkin' (1939), reprinted in *Problems of Film Direction*, Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004, p. 7.

character ‘ecstasy’ must necessarily be accompanied, and is largely justified, by the larger movements captured by film. While a contemporary director such as Steven Spielberg would no doubt agree with such a claim when one considers his investment in the great spectacles of his films, key ideological differences remain between the two filmmakers that may account for the sentimental charges made against the latter’s work (discussed in detail in Ch. 5.) If the modernist politicism of Eisenstein’s epic work has traditionally removed him from such criticisms, this is precisely what is considered lacking in Spielbergian ‘ecstasy’, despite key aesthetic parallels between the two.

Frankfurt School Aesthetics

If, with hindsight, Eisenstein’s innovations have been fully incorporated into a sophisticated set of editing techniques that are now commonplace to contemporary cinema, Hollywood and beyond, the above discussion highlights how his place in film studies is attributable to the crucial links between the political and aesthetic concerns that underpin his theory. It is within this rubric that sentiment functions as the pariah of a rationally conceived constructivist model, a complacent allegiance to regressive political models that resist the progressive impulses of the Soviet age. Nevertheless, we see in the above also how such theory and practice cannot, and up to a point, has not been considered in isolation from deeper considerations of cinematic affect evoked by a cinema, theorized as progressive or not. Similar tensions are manifest in the theory of ‘Frankfurt School’ intellectuals, for whom the repudiation of a sentimental American culture may have constituted an even greater imperative given the different political climate of their own societies, where socialist revolution had

crucially not taken place. While theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer or Theodor Adorno would advance some of the most sophisticated accounts of cinema as a mass-cultural phenomenon with widely varying degrees of optimism, Adorno and Horkheimer's 1944 post-war theory of the 'Cultural Industry' stands as the clearest indictment of mass culture's complicity with the repressive mechanisms of capitalism and the commodity form. Within this rubric, cinema is judged negatively as a 'dependent art,' dependent that is on the capitalist system of banks, electric companies and film companies that collude in producing 'entertainment' that reifies the existing conditions of production in favour of an upper class cushioned by wealth and capital. While for other theorists such as Balázs (and to an extent Benjamin and Kracauer), cinema had the capacity to function artistically or progressively through various appropriations or negotiations with the sentimental, both cinema and the sentimental become major institutions of a regressive mass culture within the rubric of the 'Culture Industry'.

Furthermore, positing a subject dominated by Fordist and Taylorist standards of identity, Adorno and Horkheimer transfer the surface attributes of the commodity to human identity itself. Just as Marx writes of the commodity as a sign that represents yet effaces the alienated labour that produces it³⁷, so the subject himself takes on the same attributes of self-alienation and misrecognition, while allegedly held in thrall to the commodity culture that perpetuates such (mis)cognitions as consumer products.³⁸

³⁷ See Marx's opening chapter of *Capital* for his account of 'commodity fetishism.'

³⁸ Echoed in Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', that in turn draws on the concept of misrecognition in Lacan's mirror stage theory. See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in trans. Ben Brewster, *Lenin and Philosophy & other essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 127-86.

The subject of capitalist ideology under this rubric emerges not as a zombified, passive recipient of a dictatorial mass culture but rather one whose expectations and desires are determined by capitalist commodification. Structuring desire and identity in accordance with the commodity, an authentic, self-conscious subject becomes antithetical to templates determined by the mass culture. ‘Personality’, Adorno and Horkheimer conclude at the end of the ‘Cultural Industry’, ‘scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions.’³⁹ Emotions in this rubric are thus also subject to manipulation, remaining within the control of the capitalist culture that channels which form they will take through displacement onto commodity forms. Adorno and Horkheimer focus their scepticism particularly on the sadistic laughter and appetites for violence of the cinema audience, as opposed to the more pathos-driven emotions, yet this only serves to compound their condemnation of the cinema’s nefarious pleasures, with sentimentality implied in its wider sense of regressive, immoral emotions *tout court*.

Nevertheless, a critique of ‘virtue in distress’ is manifest in their criticism of cartoons, owing to the regressive emotions they inspire in the spectator, with cartoon violence argued in particular to habituate the spectator to his own victimized existence in modern, industrial society. Accustoming the subject to the ‘new tempo’ of modern life and its attendant ‘breaking down of all individual resistance’, Adorno and Horkheimer account for the ‘thrashing’ of Donald Duck in reference to the sado-masochistic

³⁹ The homogenous character of mass identity under Fordist standardization is problematized by theories of postmodernist culture, where difference is fueled by capitalism’s ability to cater to diverse, niche markets, suggesting ostensible heterogeneities of (consumer) identity. See ‘Interview with Stuart Hall’, in Fredric Jameson, Ian Buchanan, *Jameson on Jameson*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 113-134.

desires of an audience that must 'learn to take their own punishment.'⁴⁰ Virtue in distress here becomes a means of conditioning the subject to the unjust violence inherent to capitalist, industrial society as distinct from an aesthetic that could found moral subjectivity through a spectatorship of sympathetic identification. Identification instead functions as the sado-masochistic pleasure of, (a). violence perpetrated on a commodified, aestheticized other, distanced from the spectator as an image-commodity and, (b). confirming the subject's place in that same system of oppression.

Adorno's partial solution to this politically regressive mechanisation of society would lie with the 'autonomous' artwork that displays an attention to modernist fragmentation, disunity and a negation of its own mode of address. Kafka's prose and Schoenberg's music, in their deviations from traditional art's alleged pretensions to 'harmony' or 'totality,' represent for Adorno the only hopes for art, through their negation of its original, allegedly naïve purposes. In giving the lie to what Adorno elsewhere terms 'the totality of a rounded temporal experience'⁴¹, autonomous art would differ radically from dependent art through its modernist rejection of 'mimesis', which would be most commonly implied in Adorno's thought as the mere imitation of existing forms inscribed by a capitalist logic. It is here that Adorno's thought rehearses ideas already apparent in the theory of Walter Benjamin, yet about which the two forcefully debated in correspondence, often coming to divergent conclusions. In Benjamin's thought it is the complex concept of 'aura' that contains both the promise and the futility of sentimentality in mass culture.

⁴⁰ Adorno & Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in trans. Edmund Jephcott, Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (ed.), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002, p. 110.

⁴¹ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983, p. 265.

While both theorists were deeply concerned with the consequences of ‘mechanical reproduction’ (with cinema posed by Benjamin as a prime instance), it is Adorno’s theory that most forcefully maintains the wholesale inadequacy of mass culture for revolutionary purposes. Benjamin’s Artwork essay far more optimistically poses the destruction of the traditional, bourgeois artwork’s ‘aura’ as a progressive consequence of film’s ‘mechanical reproduction’. A new mode of vision is inaugurated that yields a ‘sentimentality’ that is both critical and liberatory. In his *One-Way Street* of 1928, Benjamin applauds a new ‘sentimentality . . . restored to health and liberated in American style’ when referring to that new subjectivity engendered by the wall advertisements and cinema of an Americanized culture.⁴² It would be the disintegration of auratic distance promised by mass cultural media that for Benjamin could result in such affect precisely owing to technology’s collapsing of subject and object. Writing of a transformation such that ‘people whom nothing moves or touches any longer learn to cry again’, Benjamin theorizes a progressively sentimental engagement with an inevitably self-reflexive technology. While, as expanded on by Susan Buck-Morss, the commodified world or image ‘anaesthetizes’ the subject to the world’s oppressive realities (the factory, war, commodity culture) cinema offers to reintegrate subject with object, resensitizing the subject to a world ruptured by technology.⁴³ In contrast to the sado-masochism of Adorno’s spectator, sentimental emotions in Benjamin’s rubric are deemed the humane response to the realisation of

⁴² Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street’ (1928), Edmund Jephcott (trans.), in (eds.), Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 476.

⁴³ Buck-Morss poses Benjamin’s essay as a response to the ‘anaesthetizing’ effects of commodity culture on an industrialized society that threatens the modern subject with the bodily dangers of the factory, war and their attendant technologies. See Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, *New Formations*, No.20 (1993), pp. 123-143.

the pathetic human subjectivity that must live in the bourgeois world, or at the very least, a crucial catalyst to revolutionary action.

Even Mickey Mouse, a quintessential product of modernity, is inscribed for Benjamin by an uncanny, dream-like fusion of the technological and the human. Miriam Hansen discusses how Benjamin poses the possibility of a ‘therapeutic’ function to the emotions that the mouse would elicit in the spectator, as an evocation of the subject’s response to ‘military and industrial technology.’⁴⁴ Adorno’s response to Benjamin’s essay is to question the assumption of film’s absence of aura. In a letter responding to his reading of a draft of Benjamin’s Artwork essay, a Disney character becomes chief evidence of the ‘highly suspect degree’ to which film displays an ‘aural character’:

Your dig against Werfel gave me pure pleasure. But if you take Mickey Mouse instead, things are far more complicated, and the serious question arises as to whether the reproduction of every person really constitutes that *a priori* of the film which you claim it to be, or whether instead this reproduction precisely belongs to that ‘naïve realism’ whose bourgeois nature we so thoroughly agreed upon in Paris.⁴⁵

Posing Mickey Mouse as paradigm of the ‘naïve realism’ that sustains a ritualistic, ‘auratic’ reception of film (that Benjamin wishes to eliminate from the experience of art), Adorno could not accept film’s capacity for transforming subjectivity. In some ways guilty of the same cultural conservatism as the more right-wing intellectual figures of the day in his seemingly outright dismissal of the medium, his scepticism oscillates in this letter between a repudiation of film in general and a more focused

⁴⁴ Hansen nevertheless notes the fearful caution that possibly motivates such Utopian visions of the Disney character, ambivalence on the part of Benjamin as to whether laughter at Mickey Mouse connotes ‘therapeutic discharge or prelude to a pogrom.’ See Miriam Hansen, ‘Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 92 (January 1993), pp. 27-61.

⁴⁵ Letter from Adorno to Benjamin (II), London, 18th March 1936, accessed online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/11510904/Adorno-Letters-to-Walter-Benjamin>, visited June 4th 2009.

attention on what are posed as its more sentimental variants. While Mickey Mouse may have served as the epitome for Adorno of film's affinity for naïve realism, for reasons analogous to those in reference to Donald Duck, it is an ostensible indictment of film's mimetic anthropomorphism that motivates his critique here. Such an aesthetic cannot remain confined to Disney or the cartoon, for Adorno's wider critique implicates such realism as a more pervasive force of political regression in film generally. Elsewhere in his letter, it is the semblance of 'technicality' that must be proved by film in order to escape the charge of ideological reification, echoing the formalist positions of Eisenstein or Balázs. For instance, commenting on his visit to the film studios at Neubabelsberg, he bemoans the lack of 'technicality' in the feature film (formal devices of close-up, montage) in favour of a 'reality' that is 'everywhere *constructed* with an infantile mimeticism and then 'photographed'.⁴⁶ As long as film maintained its imitative relation to the world as a cover for its ideological operations, it could never for Adorno engage in the aesthetic negation deemed necessary for revolutionary change.

Despite this dismissal of 'dependent art', Adorno would elsewhere express far from Utopian optimism with regards to an 'autonomous' high-culture, specifically owing to its necessary mechanism of negation with regards to mimetic art. Elsewhere in his letter to Benjamin, he refers to the (dependent) 'cinema' and the (autonomous) 'great work of art' as 'torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.'⁴⁷ Autonomous art is limited by its being defined by its formal negation of mechanical reproducibility, an exclusivity forged by its relation to capitalism and thus

⁴⁶ Ibid.,

⁴⁷ Ibid.,

compromised and constrained by the necessity of its own structural autonomy. While both 'bear the stigmata of capitalism' and 'contain elements of change', the impossibility of their aesthetic reintegration becomes a problem for both forms. While mass culture provides the legibility and reproducibility of mimetic representation, the latter's exclusion by modern art dooms it to another kind of non-meaning, particularly in terms of its exclusivity from the wider public sphere of mass consumption.⁴⁸

Benjamin would echo such sentiments in his own writings as precisely those problems that pertain to the aura of the 'unique' work of art that 'autonomous' art only served to reproduce. As the 'hidden' holy object of ancient religious practice represents for Benjamin a foundational logic of auratic experience, Adorno's 'autonomous' art is similarly argued to assert 'cult value' as opposed to dismantling the sustained aura that remains in its reception. In both instances, the ritualistic elements of their reception inhibit the revolutionary destruction of bourgeois aesthetic value that technologies of mechanical reproduction threaten promisingly to subvert. As a 'theology of art,' Benjamin critiques the reception of 'unique' art, as manifest for him in the 'cult of beauty' and 'l'art pour l'art'. Characterised by a 'distance' that traditionally separates bourgeois spectator and aesthetic object, an auratic experience serves to sustain the aesthetic object as sentimental 'myth', with the analogous ideological force of the commodity.

Conversely, film's penetration of this aesthetic 'distance' would for Benjamin allow a materialist dissection of previously obscured realities, and the politics that underpins

⁴⁸ Adorno has been critiqued often enough for his negativistic indictment of mass culture, yet his theory has undergone significant re-readings that question what seems an initial dismissal of any kind of alternative artistic practice. See Miriam Hansen, Introduction to Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film', *New German Critique*, No. 24/25, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema (Autumn, 1981 - Winter, 1982), pp. 186-198.

them. He advocates a radical aesthetic experience of the moving-image as something far more akin to a scientific analysis of ‘hidden’ realities in a manner very similar, and some argue indebted, to Balázs’ theory of the ‘face of things.’⁴⁹ However, Benjamin makes explicit that film’s capacity to unlock such secrets constitutes a radical bid for freedom under conditions that he and Adorno would agree were governed by the perceptual dominance of the commodity and its complicity with the oppression of the labour class. The freedom to ‘calmly and adventurously go travelling’ at the cinema would be aligned with its promise to ‘burst this prison world asunder’, referring unmistakably to the conditions of bourgeois capitalism and the structures of perception and memory dictated by it. Asserting that ‘the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses’⁵⁰, Benjamin would influentially suggest an analogy between the subject’s attainment of self-knowingness in psychoanalysis and the demystification of material reality through film’s unique scientific dissection. Like other theorists discussed above, Benjamin was enthralled by the close-up and slow-motion in their capacity to yield hidden truths from ‘familiar objects,’ while montage promised to reconstitute the world’s image as never before. The revolutionary potential of film would come with the ‘shock’ with which such ‘technicality’ altered the spectator’s consciousness as distinct from the contemplation required by bourgeois art, such as painting. Contrasting the two artforms, Benjamin argues that the ‘painting invites the spectator to contemplation’ because,

⁴⁹ Laura Marcus notes corresponding theories of an ‘optical unconscious’ between Balázs and Benjamin in *Close-Up: Cinema and Modernism*, p. 242.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in (trans. Harry Zorn) *Illuminations*, p. 238.

before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.⁵¹

With contemplation of the object connoting too much of the auratic experience, the ‘shock’ of the moving-image would for Benjamin entail disrupted cognition, with the spectator confronted with an ongoing stream of new images. Through the techniques of image juxtaposition, enlargement, etc, ‘shock’ would alter perception by forcing the spectator to experience reality in a qualitatively different way. While bourgeois contemplation poses man’s capacity to arrive at a rational, ethical subjectivity through perception of the beautiful or the good (or even nothing at all), Benjamin obliges a confrontation between man and the material world that is unprecedentedly aestheticized by technology, and made superior in the following terms:

For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.

The distracted person, too, can form habits[...].

Benjamin in the above suggests a radical potential in film’s ‘tactile’ address through its enforcement of ‘habit’ as opposed to the cognitive activity of contemplation. In place of cognition, film forces a necessarily ‘distracted’ subject to engage in filmic reality in order that critical consciousness becomes a second-nature response rather than that arrived at through contemplation by the bourgeois subject. If the latter is deemed to be mired still in the data of the ideologically self-evident and cannot arrive at truly revolutionary consciousness, the ‘distracted’ masses could yet be capable of such consciousness precisely by being open to the effects of mass technology as ‘tactile appropriation’. Free of the bourgeois subject’s sentimental reverence for

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 230.

cognition as contemplation, the subject of mass culture is thus considered more porous to film's revelation of political realities.

Benjamin nevertheless still deems capitalist ideology to have permeated existing film culture of the era in irredeemable ways. He rehearses similar objections to the sentimentality of a naively realist commercial cinema as other writers discussed above, including Adorno. Cinematic conventions that reinsert 'aura' into a potentially revolutionary medium would need to be eliminated in order to facilitate film's higher purpose. The 'cult of the movie star' is thus seen as a conservative response to the 'shrivelling of the aura' in successfully reintroducing the 'phony spell of a commodity' to film spectatorship. Commodity and the film 'personality' conspire in Benjamin's view to render cinema into an object of contemplation, reasserting the dominance of bourgeois aesthetics in a mass medium. Benjamin equally perceives 'cult value' in the 'human countenance' as manifest in the portraiture of early photography. By employing photography (and implicitly film) as a means of retaining the 'aura' of 'loved ones, absent or dead', Benjamin suggests the undermining of the true purposes of these technologies in favour of their employment in the maintenance of 'myth' or 'magic', all of which served to sustain the dominance of the commodity. Commending the evidentiary quality of Atget's photos of empty Parisian streets, Benjamin clearly favours the use of the new technologies for their evocation of 'hidden political significance' as opposed to their affinity for the anthropomorphic and its sentimental valences.

In these respects, Benjamin's Artwork essay reveals the influence of Bertolt Brecht, whose own writings and theatrical technique would similarly assert the primacy of

political materialism over the emotional manipulation of the era's bourgeois theatre. With 'defamiliarisation' or making strange [*verfremden*] posited as the principal aesthetic imperative of this radicalized, didactic art, 'empathy' with characters is considered a regressive mode of reception that impedes the critical activation of the spectator. In 'What is Epic Theatre?' Benjamin commends Brecht's use of 'interruption' and 'gesture' as a means of breaking up the illusion of naturalistic drama. Corresponding with his idea of the deployment of 'shocks', Benjamin compares the gestures of the 'epic drama' specifically with the 'images on a film strip' such that:

The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions differentiate the scenes. As a result, intervals occur which tend to destroy illusion. These intervals paralyse the audience's readiness for empathy. Their purpose is to enable the spectator to adopt a critical attitude (towards the represented behaviour of the play's characters and towards the way in which behaviour is represented).⁵²

So Brecht and Benjamin discourage the play's capacity for illusion and absorption in the name of activating the spectator's critical consciousness. While an auratic, illusionistic theatre reproduced the conditions of oppression through its seamless attention to narrative, identification and Aristotelian catharsis, 'epic theatre' would call attention to the artifice of such conventions. 'Empathy with the hero' here is discouraged in favour of 'astonishment' with regards to the 'circumstances within which he has his being.'⁵³ To 'uncover those conditions' through which characters are represented attains more importance than the narrative conditions within which they are depicted. In such respects the actor in Brechtian theatre was encouraged to emerge out of character at certain moments in order to break the illusion of reality, just as an

⁵² Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans Anna Bostock, London: NLB, 1973, p. 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

aesthetics of ‘shock’ would aim via the cinema to reveal the constructed nature of ‘familiar’ experience.

Benjamin and Brecht’s overall aim of making ‘what is shown on the stage unsensational’ corresponds with minimising the sentimental aspects of ‘dramatic’ theatre through strategies of estrangement. The application of ‘making strange’ would focus on the necessities of changing aesthetic reception. Unlike Eisenstein’s cinema, where thought becomes an attribute of ‘intellectual montage’ itself, Brecht’s work would allow the spectator to think owing to the play’s incompleteness and emotional distancing. Benjamin thereby opposes ‘the use of theatre to dominate the masses by manipulating their reflexes and sensations’ with a theatre where audiences are constituted by ‘collectives freely choosing their positions.’⁵⁴ By calling on the otherwise ‘complacent’ spectator to process deliberately interrupted, elliptical and incomplete information, Benjamin advocates once again the critical training of a subject whose perceptions of socio-political realities outside of the theatre are qualitatively transformed by an ongoing exposure to non-auratic art.

A tension in Benjamin’s work is manifest therefore between his messianic valorisation of film technology *per se* and his responses to an auratic cinema that surrounded him. If film destroys ‘aura’ as the very condition of its mechanical reproducibility, Benjamin faces the problem of the sentimental-as-auratic elements that continue to be inscribed in cinema. While Adorno saw this as reason to condemn the entire medium in the ‘Culture Industry’, Benjamin’s emphasis on film’s potential for progressive perceptual transformation suggests a shift towards questions of

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

critical-reading that has been echoed by many more recent theories of mass culture and alternative film praxis. The Artwork essay overlooks to some extent the appropriation of film by capitalism and a bourgeois aesthetics of sentiment, yet also considers the alternative possibilities of film praxis in relation to the forging of a new kind of critical spectatorship. His approval for the Brechtian style both undermines his optimism for the technology of film *per se* and serves to better articulate the sentimental elements that for him hamper film's critical reception.

Moreover, the underlying rubric of Benjamin's writing on the 'Utopian' aspects of mass technology is a rehearsal of notions of film's capacity for the formal reconfiguration of reality articulated by other formalist theorists. Revealing aspects of an otherwise moribund, commodified world that are as elusive as the subject's own unconscious desires and fantasies, film's vital role is 'illumination' via a mode of critical integration. A pejorative sentimentality (both for him and Adorno) applies to the dangers of film's conveyance of 'myth' despite this capacity for ideological demystification and as a direct consequence of its deployment without 'technicality'. Whether by evoking the 'uncanny' of Mickey Mouse's negotiations with modernity or the defamiliarisation of Brechtian disruptions of narrative and character identification, a politically regressive sentimentality is subverted and undermined through the intervention of the film apparatus in producing a critical spectatorial mass. In these respects, such Weimar thinkers still adhere to a formalist theory of film wherein the medium must still justify itself on the grounds of its 'artistic' treatment of reality. Even if for Benjamin the medium serves above all to allegorize the impact of modern technologies on the human psyche, critical or artistic consciousness would not be possible without its intermediary function. It is on this very premise that Realist

film theory would reconfigure film's essential assets in favour of those pertaining to its ontology as opposed to its capacity for reshaping reality, wherein sentimentality shifts towards a field of meaning connoted by the dangers of conveying realities distorted by film technique.

André Bazin

For André Bazin, the importance of cinema was to be gauged by the extent to which the medium could capture reality *without* modification, and the human struggles for freedom captured by the post-war Italian Neorealist cinema exemplified the spirit with which such reality should be conveyed. Much of the revered contemporary cinema of his day had reached an aesthetic impasse for Bazin, owing to what he deemed a disrespectful distortion of pro-filmic reality in favour of fabricated, ideologically-inflected myth, divorced from a more authentic historical reality.⁵⁵ One kind of cinematic sentimentality for Bazin, as for others, would be implicated in such dissociation between image and reality, the production of the 'imaginary' as opposed to the 'real'. While modernists would generally advocate greater interventions on the part of the medium between these two elements, Bazin notoriously seeks to collapse them. In this respect, Italian Neorealism was deemed to deliver the gritty realities of post-war Italian life through an aesthetic that necessarily eliminated the stylistic excesses of Soviet modernism or the overly stylized classicism of Hollywood and French cinemas. However, the virtues of Neorealism for Bazin were also bound up with the 'love' of the auteur for characters oppressed by harsh social conditions. In as much as a sympathetic engagement with such characters becomes a vital key to the

⁵⁵ As Dudley Andrew argues, while prior film theory held film up as a painterly 'frame' that invites the artist to create, film for Bazin now served as a 'window' onto the world, offering thus a much needed re-engagement with social and political reality (see *The Major Film Theories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

political relevance of these films, a cultural humanism emerges in Bazin's theory that conflicts with certain high modernist assumptions concerning cinematic spectatorship.

An example of how montage and the sentimental are implicated with one another in Bazin's theory is manifest in his critique of Jean Tourane's *Une Fée pas comme les autres* where live footage of animals is subjected to editing, voiceover and narrative in the service of anthropomorphized spectacle. While Bazin is careful not to denounce what he considers a human predisposition for the anthropomorphic, he claims Tourane operates at its 'lowest level' owing to his reliance on 'trick' and 'illusion'. A key problem of creating such stories comes down to a question of ontology:

The apparent action and the meaning we attribute to it do not exist, to all intents and purposes, prior to the assembling of the film, not even in the form of fragmented scenes out of which the setups are generally composed. I will go further and say that, in the circumstances, the use of montage was not just one way of making this film, it was the *only* way.⁵⁶

In accordance with his theory of the ontological essence of cinema, if a film evidences the distortion of pro-filmic reality to the extent that it cannot exist without such distortion, such a film constitutes a fatal deviation from reality. Bazin disdainfully affirms that Tourane's 'naïve ambition' is to achieve little more than 'to make Disney pictures with live animals', suggesting that, as with Disney's animal characters, a spectator is tricked into anthropomorphic identification by an illusory cinema divorced from reality.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ André Bazin, 'The Virtues and Limitations of Montage' in Hugh Gray (trans.), *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 43.

It is worth emphasising that Bazin's critique aims not to attack the sentimental spectator but the filmmaker that seeks to exploit the former's capacity for anthropomorphic perception. With the article concerning itself with children's literature and film generally, Bazin outlines a theory of best practice that necessitates respect for the authenticity of the image while not entirely abandoning basic cinematic devices – the 'imaginary' is a cinematic constant, but for Bazin, it must also 'include what is real.' Authenticity becomes the guarantee that the spectator is engaged with a reality that lends itself to the spectator's imaginary even prior to its capture by the camera, with cinema enhancing that process as opposed to creating it through excessive trickery. Unlike the 'zoomorphism' of Tourane's animals, Bazin praises Lamorrissette's 'red balloon' tale, as the story allows itself to remain a 'pure creation of the mind.' In other words, Bazin claims that the spectator has a predisposition for a sentimental engagement with the image while nevertheless maintaining that its abuse all too often results from cheap simulations of that otherwise imaginative process.

Bazin applies a similar logic to his analysis of Neorealism itself, where the sentimental once more pertains to sympathetic and imaginative engagement with 'realist' narrative yet remains a danger of cinema's excessive emotional engagement as a consequence of excessive editing styles. In this context, Bazin discusses narrative construction in De Sica's *Umberto D*. In as much as the film could be argued to use melodramatic conventions, Bazin's paraphrases the criticisms of other critics who see the film as a 'populist drama with social pretensions' However, unlike such critics, Bazin notes the reductiveness of accusations of the film's sentimentality. He argues that a central concern of their critiques rests on how the film's evocation of 'pity' in the spectator arises out of the manipulation of plot developments in relation

to an ostensibly pathetic central protagonist (i.e., the hero's unmistakable suffering is shown to be causally related to mistreatment by cruel antagonists). In as much as the film concerns itself with the protagonist's loneliness and poverty (a retired, penniless pensioner and his faithful dog), Bazin agrees that the film belongs to a tradition of melodrama. He claims however that the film does not accentuate 'pathos' for its own sake, preferring instead to convey events in the protagonist's life, some of which are pitiable (being thrown out of his flat owing to rent arrears) and others that are not (his comic stay in hospital owing to a harmless angina). Thus, for Bazin, the film conveys man's downfall due to the 'the lack of fellow-feeling that characterizes ... the 'middle-class' and succeeds in producing a variety of emotions in the spectator, not just an exclusive 'pity.' Bazin counters the critics by applauding the film's emotional eclecticism--an important attribute of Neorealism, and, as we have seen, of melodrama generally.

Bazin goes on to bracket the above discussion (and his own contributions to it) as a 'lapsing back into traditional critical concepts', that is, dramatic construction. With narrative and character constituting the two main factors of such analysis, Bazin claims an exclusive attention to the 'dramatic' as superfluous to the true aims of *Umberto D* (and film generally). Thus he writes:

If one assumes some distance from the story and can still see in it a dramatic patterning, some general development in character, a single general trend in its component events, this is only after the fact. The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than the other, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ 'Umberto D: A Great Work' in *What is Cinema? Vol.2*, p.81.

Bazin in the above applauds the film not for its plot or its characters but for the fidelity with which it captures the reality of the depicted events. If the dramatic elements of *Umberto D* are still manifest to the spectator (or to the critic that is ready to claim sentimentality), Bazin concludes that such attributes, shared with theatrical and novelistic forms, come secondary to the film's more unique achievement of 'ontological equality'. This latter attribute has little to do with the construction of story in dramatic terms, and refers more to the success with which the film conveys 'concrete instants of life.' Whether pity is still evoked by the film becomes a secondary concern also, trumped by the necessity of maintaining a style that is unencumbered by the 'dramatic' concerns of more conventional narratives.

Describing a scene that dwells on the young maid waking up and going about her chores, Bazin asserts that such mundane moments are free of an 'art of ellipsis' that 'organizes the facts in accord with the general dramatic direction to which it forces them to submit.'⁵⁹ Drama becomes implicated as a simplistic rendering of reality, a 'construction' that must be minimized in order that 'life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which film finally changes it.'⁶⁰

For Bazin then, it is not so much the emotions generated by 'drama' that are attacked but, as with the Tourane's animated films, the means by which they would be elicited by styles of cinematic rhetoric that deform reality to an excessive level. As Dudley Andrew notes, Bazin's notorious claim that cinema 'is *also* a language' rests on the notion of what Bazin considers its more significant attribute of indexicality, an attribute deemed distinct from its function as language, both in its modernist and

⁵⁹ Ibid.,

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

Hollywood dialects. While cinema's linguistic function risks its manipulation by oppressive, repressive or sentimental ideologies, respect for the indexical reality of the image serves for Bazin as a stylistic priority that defends the medium from the dangers of abstraction. In these respects, Bazin's realism remains as austere towards dramatic categories as the modernists', still favouring the conveyance of a politically vital reality to the 'lapsing back' towards anachronistic forms. Whether the sentimental signifies emotion shown by characters within narrative, or those evoked in spectators becomes a question belonging to another aesthetic debate in relation to media that still rely existentially on abstraction, unlike the cinema. Whereas modernists such as Benjamin or Brecht criticize techniques of conventional drama and identification in favour of a non-audacious cinema that should transform our usual perceptions of reality, it is precisely this reality that Bazin wishes to retain in an unmodified state. So while the 'dramatic' seems repudiated by both camps, Bazin's emphasis on the cinema's ontology implicitly leads him to a greater acceptance of sentiment than the formalists. Whereas the latter seek to eliminate aura through a medium-specific film-language, Bazin's preference for pro-filmic reality crucially leaves affect inherent in such phenomena available to the spectator as long as it stems from a faithful, unimpeded process of cinematography.

One may also presume from the above that Bazin had little interest in the emotions elicited by, or depicted within films, so long as they remained respectful of ontological reality. However, more than any of the theorists so far discussed, Bazin's rhetoric in praise of neorealist films is suffused with references to the sentimental values of their directors. In another article in praise of De Sica,⁶¹ Bazin applauds the

⁶¹ 'De Sica: Metteur en Scène', in *What is Cinema? Vol.2*, pp. 61-78.

‘love’ and sense of ‘poetry’ evoked by such films as *Bicycle Thieves* or *Miracle in Milan*, virtues that he deems constitutive of a proper auteur. Posing a humanism of ‘courtly and discreet gentleness’ or ‘liberal generosity’ as key to the Neorealism of De Sica and other Italian directors, Bazin positions them within a long line of humanist directors that includes Vigo, Flaherty, Renoir and most especially, Chaplin. All the above for Bazin exercised the ‘tenderness’ or ‘sentimental affection’ required of a cinematic auteur. Noting for instance that if Chaplin’s work were transposed into cinema, ‘it would tend to lapse into sentimentality’, he nevertheless poses just such aspects of the director’s work as testament to the latter’s artistry and a chief attribute of the cinema itself. Writing of a ‘quality of presence’, the ‘radiation of tenderness’ or ‘an intense sense of the human presence’ in the work of such auteurs, Bazin affirms a distinctly humanist set of elements as crucial to cinematic representation. He confirms most explicitly Chaplin’s place in this cinematic sentimental tradition in the following description of the latter’s oeuvre, for instance:

[...]cruelty is not excluded from his world; on the contrary, it has a necessary and dialectic relationship to love, as is evident from *Monsieur Verdoux*. Charlie is goodness itself, projected onto the world. He is ready to love everything, but the world does not always respond.⁶²

While the above clearly confirms Bazin’s approval of a sentimental aesthetic, what remains problematic is how such humanism is posed in relation to Bazin’s more hard-edged notion of Neorealism as an abandonment of the contrived, melodramatic tendencies suggested by an ‘art of ellipsis’. A qualified answer can be offered by observing that while such a sentimental aesthetic as ‘virtue in distress’ is made central here, and historicized as an important cinematic tradition, Bazin retains a certain

⁶² Ibid., p. 72-3.

catholicity as to the kinds of emotion that should inspire such work and to those such work should evoke. As with *Umberto D*, sympathy remains a complex of thoughts and emotions available to auteur and spectator, in contrast to a singular pity for its protagonist. Instead, Bazin advocates a spectatorship characterized by a ‘dialectic’ between subjectivity (feeling ‘love’ for realistic characters) and objectivity (the witnessing ‘cruelty’ as well as its causes and consequences). In a discussion of Antonioni’s *Cronaca di un amore*, he notes the film’s ‘expensive sets’ and ‘melodramatic narrative’ but praises the realism of the film’s characters, such that the Italian director:

builds all his effects on their way of life, their way of crying, of walking, of laughing. They are caught in the maze of the plot like laboratory rats being sent through a labyrinth.⁶³

Bazin’s praise here underlines the importance of human emotion to this film, yet it also implies an engagement with human behaviour aligned with the realism of scientific observation. While Benjamin claimed the scientific attributes of the cinema as a means of theorizing mass visibility as modified by technology, Bazin employs the metaphor of the observed maze to characterise the activity of the liberal, neorealist auteur. Given that ‘crying’ or ‘laughing’ are inevitable manifestations of human emotion captured by the camera, they must not be excluded from the realist film, for such emotions guarantee the authenticity of the human activities represented. In advocating a quasi-scientific model of sympathy, however, Bazin’s Neorealism remains a generous and courtly practice that cannot be too emotionally involved with its subjects. For De Sica too, Bazin commends in the auteur-director a detached kind of sympathy rather than empathy in relation to character:

⁶³ Ibid, p. 67.

[...] but the affection De Sica feels for his creatures is no threat to them, there is nothing threatening or abusive about it. It is courtly and discreet gentleness, a liberal generosity, and it demands nothing in return. There is no admixture of pity in it even for the poorest or the most wretched, because pity does violence to the dignity of the man who is its object. It is a burden on his conscience.⁶⁴

Bazin's praise of De Sica's approach here rehearses a key problem of the sentimental, for while his language evokes the key virtues of sentiment, his message enforces an identificatory process of sympathetic detachment over one of empathy, the necessity of understanding over and above emotional contagion between spectator and character. The cinema permits a 'gentle' examination of the world motivated by 'affection', 'love' or 'poetry', yet its best practice for Bazin would stop short of permitting the 'violence' of pity. Bazin's outline of De Sica's 'love' is suggestive of the sensibility an auteur must feel in relation to the humanity depicted in his films, yet it must also be a virtue that restrains the impulse to manipulate the spectator's perspective towards excessively empathic reactions, which all too often arise for Bazin from styles of narrative that overly abstract from the reality of depicted events.

However, as much as Bazin deems the representation of real, hostile conditions and an uncaring society a vital task of Neorealism, his praise for central characters repeatedly, as we have already seen, emphasises the necessity of their well-meaning benevolence, even to the point of excess. Although the spectator is entreated not to 'pity' such put-upon heroes as Chaplin's tramp, *Umberto D* or Ricci from *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin's praise for the underdog as a necessary rhetorical weapon for change seems implicit in his essay on De Sica. Even here, though, Bazin is cautious about an overly idealized perception of the hero. The sympathy one should have for virtuous

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

characters becomes nuanced by comments such as those that follow his discussion of Chaplin's 'goodness,' where he compares the latter to De Sica.

Chaplin also chooses his cast carefully but always with an eye to himself and to putting his character in a better light. We find in De Sica the humanity of Chaplin, but shared with the world at large.⁶⁵

As opposed to Chaplin's having 'an eye to himself', Bazin suggests his preference for a virtue that is shared by humanity at large, albeit one that might be exemplified by pathetic protagonists like the tramp. Because, Bazin implies the underdog continues to at risk for excessive identification when singled out as an idealized symbol of benevolence, Bazin prefers De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* with its depiction of an entire group of homeless people divested of their homes and living a poor but honest life in a shanty town of their own making. Emphasising the mass as opposed to the individual, this film resembles Eisenstein's own epics of mass struggle, their shift away from the virtuous hero. Bazin's argument places value on such a shift and reveals his caution with regard to a hero that is overly idealized above other characters. Nevertheless, as discussed above, respect for the indexical properties of the image and the thematization of benevolence in the virtuous poor, whether represented as an individual or as the group, become key corollaries in Bazin's appreciation of Neorealism.

Béla Balázs

If Bazin expresses caution as to the idealisation of a moral hero, the stakes are raised by the theory of Béla Balázs, for whom truth was revealed above all by the cinema's attention to the human face alongside an affinity for conveying the narrative trajectory

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

of a hero. In many ways, Balázs' theory complements Bazin's in its emphasis on cinema's affinity for revealing and explaining the complexities of human nature, yet for Balázs, a shift of focus away from the individual threatens to destabilize that capacity. Balázs' emphasis remains on the expressivity of man as distinct from the abstract, anti-imitative models of the modernist avant-gardes or the human behaviour captured by the 'objective' documentary. Nevertheless, his discussion of cinema's representation of the human is communicated once more in scientific terms, qualifying the extent to which the spectator's engagement with the individual should be idealized or sentimental.

Balázs has often been considered a modernist or formalist owing largely to the period and location within which he wrote (1920's Weimar Germany) and a recurrent emphasis on cinema's necessary transformations of pro-filmic reality. Recent scholarship however has problematized easy categorization of the theorist in either the formalist or realist camps, along with other theorists such as Epstein, Vertov and Kracauer.⁶⁶ While his admiration of the close-up suggests a modernist's attention to editing, his cinematic humanism requires a realist's focus on the referent. The revelation of life's hidden details, particularly the nuances of human emotion and gesture, become cinema's special vocation for Balázs, producing a modern human subject more attuned to visual signs of emotion. Balázs' humanist metaphor for the aesthetic he perceives as central to cinema is encapsulated by the title of *Theory of the Film's* most well-known sections on the close-up, 'The Face of Things.' Asserting that normal human perception leads us to 'skim over the teeming substance of life', Balázs argues that the camera 'has uncovered that cell-life of the vital issues in which

⁶⁶ See Malcolm Turvey's critique of Dudley Andrew's categorization of Balázs as a formalist in 'Balázs: Realist or Modernist', *October*, Winter 2006, No. 115: 77-87.

all great events are ultimately conceived.’⁶⁷ The face here serves as metaphor for the anthropomorphized significance of film, a benchmark for the richness that the close-up is able to convey.

Balázs’ discussion of children and animals as cinema’s newly found objects extends this deep concern with cinema’s ability to reveal particularly authentic aspects of the world. While arguing that their representation forged a new style rather than a language of cinema, he writes of both with an almost mystical attachment to the authenticity of their gesture. While adults could be ‘stage-managed’ to act in pre-determined ways, Balázs writes of the autonomy of children and animals from what he describes elsewhere as ‘severe rules that govern grammar’ that he considered to potentially govern gesture or expression. When children act in films, Balázs argues:

This is not acting- it is a natural manifestation of youthful consciousness and it can be observed not only in the human young but in the young of other species as well. It is a transposition such as occurs in dreams, or in a trance.⁶⁸

While facial expression and gestures were already rich in ‘polyphony’ for Balázs, children or animals were guarantors of an emotional realism in their freedom from convention. While Balázs avoids praise for the realism of non-actors over actors (he prefers the close-ups of such film actors as Asta Nielson or Falconetti to the supposedly objective expressions of non-actors), his descriptions of the fairy-tale like otherness of children, animals and native savages suggest a latent fascination with an ‘inaccessible nature and inaccessible fairyland’ connoted by them. If such passages undermine his own distinction between a filmic style and a filmic language, his thesis

⁶⁷ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, trans. Edith Bone, London: Dennis Dobson, 1952, p. 55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

gains strength in its overall veneration of a curious spectator enthralled by cinema's delivery of a 'microphysiognomy' that is beyond linguistic constraints.

What emerges in Balázs' thought therefore is the saliency of physiognomy and gesture, created by the tensions of dramatic action (narrative) and, relatedly, freedom from a kind of emotional barrenness, as applied either to dispassionate filmmakers, insensitive spectators and indeed, untrained actors. With such sub-titles as 'Education in Physiognomics' or 'Sound Explaining Pictures', Balázs' aims very much accord with a humanistic goal of better understanding between people via film's unprecedented ability to convey the nuances of subjectivity. Responding to Soviet methods of creating images of mismatched emotional reactions (his example is the use of a mother's reaction to her child's pram overturned inserted by Eisenstein as the reaction shot of a woman facing the barrel of a gun), Balázs writes:

This method is always a deception; it is rendered possible only by the fact that our physiognomic culture is not as yet sufficiently sensitive to be able to differentiate between terrors induced by different causes[...]The close-up which has made us so sensitive to the naturalness of a facial expression will sooner or later develop our sensitivity further, so that we shall be able to discern in a facial expression its cause as well as its nature.⁶⁹

Balázs here goes some way in expressing not only his disdain for the 'fanatics of "naturalness"', but also makes salient his central aim of educating the spectator in a new cinematic lingua franca of human emotion. The stakes of this endeavour are couched in the necessity of averting the kinds of cruelty that emanate, for Balázs, in the Soviet directors' narrow-minded inattention to emotional nuance. Such disregard for the integrity of human emotion in favour of its role in a supposedly superior synthesis of meaning grated Balázs in terms that vary between the ontological

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 79.

(mismatched actual and represented emotions), humanitarian (the directors' emotional callousness) and educational (the spectators' exploited ignorance of the sham owing to a lamentable insensitivity to emotion). If emotional meanings could be correctly depicted and then adduced by newly sensitized subjects, Balázs implies that the cinema constitutes man's best hope for mutual understanding. As a universalized language of human emotion and gesture, cinema promises to emancipate man from the 'severe rules' of abstracted meaning that prevented the emergence of a truly popular art. Thus he would argue that:

...it will probably be the art of the film after all which may bring together the peoples and nations, make them accustomed to each other, and lead them to mutual understanding. The silent film is free of the isolating walls of language differences. If we look at and understand each other's faces and gestures, we not only understand, we also learn to feel each other's emotions. The gesture is not only the outward projection of emotion, it is also its initiator.⁷⁰

With language differences posing for Balázs, as for many other theorists, a great challenge to 'mutual understanding', cinema (especially silent cinema) directly addresses the spectator's conscious and unconscious. By revealing 'hidden' emotions, film would make visible to the spectator truths that had as yet remained occluded by surface appearances. With such descriptions as the 'the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well',⁷¹ Balázs insists that cinema constitutes more than just a quantitative increase in perceptual information; it creates a qualitative change. Anticipating counter-arguments that the close-up still only shows new details of pro-filmic objects as opposed to necessarily providing new

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 55.

meanings, Balázs goes on to justify the semiotic value of the cinema's detailed scrutiny:

The close-up may sometimes give the impression of a mere naturalist preoccupation with detail. But good close-ups radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things, a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-the-miniature, a warm sensibility. Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eye, that has perceived them.⁷²

Balázs' sentimental language in the above passage reveals the underlying impulse in his theory to emphasize the role of human consciousness in the deployment of the close-up. While inadequate close-ups reveal little of extra significance, the good close-up is motivated by 'intimacies', whether on the part of the spectator or the filmmaker. Anticipating Bazin's theory of the benevolent auteur, Balázs' theory of the close-up requires a concern for meaning founded in a 'tender human attitude' towards the world, as opposed to an appetite for increased detail for its own sake. Emotional investment suggests the filmmaker's benevolent impulse to show the world in new ways; the 'mere naturalist' is posed as a non-artistic cataloguer of visual facts in the name of a kind of dispassionate taxonomy.

One can see how Balázs' aesthetic dismay over both documentary and avant-garde practices derive from this above notion of detached filmmaking. He argues that the avant-garde seeks to represent nothing but 'absolute visuality'⁷³ or the 'poetry of things'⁷⁴ while the documentary seeks an objective and impartial registration of reality. Narrative remains for him therefore the key intermediary between excesses of the subjective and objective, particularly when bound by the necessity of representing

⁷² Ibid., p. 56.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 159.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

a 'hero'. The mass epics of Eisenstein, the Vertovian documentary or the 'abstract' avant-garde film all abandon, for Balázs, this necessary 'individualization' in favour of an aesthetic of the 'the natural or the logical', with the following consequences:

The trouble was that if an artist renounces individualization, what he achieves is not something of universal validity; it is on the contrary, complete disintegration.⁷⁵

Balázs condemns the subordination of narrative and the presentation of 'human destinies' to what he deems elitist styles because it comes at the cost of comprehensibility and coherence. Only by treating the 'fable' or 'story' as 'a closed entity' (i.e. an adherent to narrative form) could the filmmaker hope to give best expression to filmed material. The 'hero' provided for Balázs the ideal emotional anchor for the registration of ongoing changes in narrative, without which the film would risk disintegration. If these prejudices reveal Balázs' somewhat conservative conception of film's ideal practice as based on a logically flawed valorisation of narrative over other devices of representation, they nevertheless emphasise his humanist concerns. Problematically overlooking the constructed nature of narrative itself, 'dramatic action' retained the 'face of things' for Balázs compared to the avant-garde's exclusive attention to form itself or the documentary's fetishization of objectivity or naturalism. As distinct from the latter practice for instance, Balázs commends the use of trained, experienced actors over the non-actors of documentary precisely because the former were for him better able to convey the nuances of facial and gestural emotion. While using non-actors would bring an apparent 'objectivity' to the film, the richness of human expression and its 'polyphony' would be lost without the actor's ability to create physiognomic or bodily meanings.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

However, despite his emphasis on the ‘intimacies’ of good film-making, Balázs’ model of spectatorship, as with Bazin’s metaphor of a ‘maze’ and Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious’, is likened to the accuracy of scientific observation. Thus in cinema’s depiction of family drama:

The micro-tragedies in the peace and quiet of ordinary families were shown as deadly battles, just as the microscope shows the fierce struggles of micro-organisms in a drop of water.⁷⁶

If the above suggests, as with Bazin, the possibility of the scientist’s vantage point and an implicit emotional impartiality, the two writers both share an enthusiasm for human conflict as the preferred object of analysis. While Balázs is far less concerned with the ontological realism with which such human conflict is staged, there is a shared consensus as to the need for cinema’s scrutiny of human behaviour. The implication for both theorists however is the possibility of representing ‘fierce struggles’ and the darker side of human nature as much as morally exemplary behaviour. Despite the ‘warm sensibility’ with which Balázs encourages our encounter with life up close, he writes of what we may find in terms of moral realism, such as in his description of film’s rooting out of a ‘capable liar’:

In vain does his mouth smile ever so sweetly the lobe of his ear,
the side of a nostril shown in isolated magnification reveal the
hidden coarseness and cruelty.⁷⁷

If cinema’s truthfulness must necessarily convey the moral baseness of the human condition, such as in the lies, cruelty and coarseness of superficially moral characters, Balázs nevertheless endows cinema with the moral imperative of revealing it and enabling the spectator to exercise superior discrimination, in relation to onscreen and offscreen characters. With this level of realism guaranteed by the cinema, Balázs is

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

more than content to permit such a model as ‘virtue in distress’ as a legitimate characteristic of the narrative hero. A scorned sentimental trope in other artforms often owing to the one-dimensionality with which the object of sympathy is drawn, pathos lends itself to cinema’s vivid analysis and thereby facilitates moral legibility. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, becomes a paradigm for Balázs of the heroic individual thwarted by an ‘inhuman society’, his ‘golden-hearted’ nature in no way diminished by the clarity with which the cinema delivers the tramp as ‘shiftless, blundering’ and even ‘cunning.’ With such characters serving as moral anchors for narrative action, melodrama becomes, as Linda Williams has suggested, a deeply embedded ‘mode’ of Hollywood storytelling, with ‘action’ and ‘pathos’ contributing in equal measure to the resolution of conflict between good and evil and the recognition of moral virtue. Cinema, with its affinity for the close-up, the human face, and an incomparable capacity to invoke an omniscient spectator through editing, becomes the medium of choice for melodrama’s articulation of ‘moral legibility.’ Invoking the moral realism discussed by Bazin, Balázs and others above, the subject represented by such figures as Chaplin’s Tramp remains a potent signifier of humanity victimized by ‘mechanization and capitalism’, the plucky hero that asserts his right to life despite the status of perpetual misfit, played for Balázs with a ‘melancholy optimism’ that ‘expresses the opposition of all of us to an inhuman order of society.’⁷⁸

In short, therefore, the sentimental remains a latent presence in much of the discourses surrounding film as it emerged as a dominant medium in the early-to-mid 20th century. Despite, or in many ways owing to, the repudiations of kitsch, mass or bourgeois tastes or simplistic character engagements that informed the critiques

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 285.

analysed above, the sentimental comes to represent much of what a certain hard-edged set of modernisms, formalisms and realisms sought to problematize and transform. At the same time, the philosophical ideals that motivate such critiques are time and again shown to be rather less than inimical to sentimental values of universal communication, sympathy for those oppressed by economic disparities and the significance of art's humanist function. If as a practice, the sentimental and its reproduction in the cinema were, or indeed are, all too often considered to devalue such ideals for the sake of cheap, unearned emotion and/or bourgeois entertainment, it is vital to bear in mind the extent to which it retained critical importance in the cinematic era.

Such indeed can also be seen in evidence in much of the cinema that is analysed in the chapters that follow. As many of the theorists examined above knew so well, cinema was exceptional in its capacity for emotion and rhetorical power, and so it is to some of the major sentimentalists of the cinematic era that the discussion now turns.

Charting the early, classical and post-classical eras respectively, a key question that informs the analysis below concerns the extent to which sentimental ideology informs these auteurs' rhetorical purposes and how it is deployed in relation to the priorities of gaining, maintaining and emotionally inspiring a mass audience.

Chapter Four

Chaplin, Sentimental Tastes and the Biopic

In a scene from Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin*, a 1992 biopic of the early filmmaker and star, an elderly Chaplin (Robert Downey Jr.) recounts to his biographer (Anthony Hopkins) how he 'invented' the Tramp character that would bring him so much success in the early days of Hollywood. The sequence begins with the younger Chaplin's entrance into the wardrobe at Hollywood's Sennet studios, his gaze immediately drawn by the hat that would become essential to the Tramp costume. In a parodic style that supports the biographer's later judgement of the scene as 'bullshit', the hat glows with a purple tint superimposed as a special effect and an entranced Chaplin advances balletically towards it, having been 'possessed' by the synecdochal 'him' (the Tramp). With gentle music and soft-focus camerawork, the scene is infused with conventions connoting the dream-sequence, explicitly acknowledging its artificial status and comically parodying the form. The hat advances magically up Chaplin's arm to his head, followed by the famous cane, that rattles in its holder for Chaplin's attention, and having done so, flies out to his hand. As a recounting of the formation of the Tramp, the scene becomes a complex fusion of self-conscious mythmaking, echoing the biopic's ideology in relation to Chaplin's genius while remaining aware of its own stylistic fallacies or excesses for the contemporary cine-literate spectator. With the film oscillating between the young Chaplin and the latter-day Chaplin (both played by Downey Jr.), the film underscores the extent to which the sequence's truth is possibly threatened by the subjective bias of its teller and the conventions of the biopic genre itself, both sharing sentimental attributes. The heavy stylization described above at one level humorously draws attention to the artificiality

of the elder Chaplin's account, yet also represents a self-consciousness on the film's part as to the extent to which it wishes to remain within a genre known for sentimentality. The sequence ends when Chaplin's biographer thus accuses the elder Chaplin of situating the whole process in 'purple' prose (with an off-screen 'bullshit, and you know it'). With the biographer refusing to go along with the artificial excesses of the modern biopic's revision of historical facts, the elder Chaplin argues back, 'but the truth was so boring, George,' after which follows the apparently real history of the Tramp's formation, where Chaplin bumbles through the wardrobe trying on many different items bearing little relation to the Tramp costume, before finally finding the costume after all. The music changes from strings to that of the archetypal silent film's chase-sequence, suggesting the rushed and provisional realities of the creative process, the predominance of work and effort as opposed to a magical interpellation of character.

Both modes, the sentimental and the comic, therefore contend for dominance in the construction of the Chaplin legend and serve in many ways antithetical purposes in this scene. Both modes are stylistic glosses in relation to the story at hand, yet they do so in rhetorically disparate ways, both serving also to repress key socio-historical factors that would necessarily have contributed to the Tramp's formation. The comic mode accentuates the extent to which the Tramp was created through chance, where items are combined in slap-dash fashion with little concern outside of the need to look comedic. Now speeded-up in comic fashion, the sequence corroborates how 'boring' the elder Chaplin finds it, the Tramp's destiny and iconicity shown to have been of very little consideration to his younger self. The sentimental slow-motion mode emphasises precisely that iconicity, invoking a nostalgia that also privileges and

flatters the spectator's cultural memory and grounds the Tramp in more meaning than the notion of a randomly selected set of clothing and props. Moreover, by privileging Chaplin's being called upon to assume the 'him', the sentimental sequence allows the Tramp to belong to the spectator and the Hollywood myth factory as much as to Chaplin or the particular historical conditions out of which he arose. The film, as a biopic, shows us his actual life in the slums, pubs and music halls of early century London, yet this later scene serves to remove us from such conditions in favour of an altogether more auratic experience. Chaplin as a historical entity competes with the Tramp as a media icon belonging to a global image culture.

So potent is this need for myth that the comic sequence ends with a return to the sentimental mode with which it began, except with irony now dispensed with entirely. As a now fully costumed Chaplin-as-Tramp selects his oversized shoes from the basket, the leitmotif of gentle strings returns as Chaplin gingerly picks the shoes up and ponders their excessive significance in relation to the Tramp's iconicity, once again privileging the spectator's knowledge of their import and re-introducing the theme of their magically ordained rightness. Looking into his reflection as a near finished-product in an off-screen mirror, Chaplin slowly smiles, his recognition of himself-as-icon that invokes destiny once again. Selecting then a small moustache and, having stumbled on the shoes, adopting the Tramp's walk (like at the climax of *The Tramp* [1915], away from camera), Chaplin is now 'Chaplin.' Like the sequence in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) that sees Judy return to Scotty's (and the spectator's) exact vision of Madeleine on the day of her death, the Tramp is constructed as a fetishized object, yet one belonging to the image culture of Hollywood itself. While *Vertigo* is far more emphatic as to the darkly perverse forces that underscore the

spectator's (and Scotty's) desire for the rightness of Madeleine's image, *Chaplin* allows the spectator to become immersed in the myth-making process as part of a biopic's linear narrative of individual success. Where *Vertigo*'s spiral of fetishistic desire underlines the dangers of fantasy and re-constructed memory, *Chaplin*'s mode of address invites the spectator to share a sense of communal recognition with everyone that has ever seen and loved the Tramp, and implicitly, the Hollywood movie.

With the film having thus stumbled into a 'boring' comic sequence, owing to a self-conscious acknowledgement and disparagement of its own myth-making, a return to the sentimental style underscores the complex renunciation that takes place with the re-construction of the fetish object. As in the famous psychoanalytic dictum of fetishistic disavowal, 'I know very well, but nevertheless,'¹ Chaplin's creative act must correspond with the cultural memory of a contemporary Hollywood audience, despite being acknowledged as an impossibility that only cinema's magic tricks can overcome. Chaplin senses the rightness of the Tramp just as the spectator of *Chaplin* feels as much as understands the genesis of such an icon. *Chaplin* aims to thereby appease the 'hip' irony of a contemporary cinematic spectatorship while ultimately retaining the affect of a reverential biopic with its concomitant recourse to a sentimental aesthetic. Despite evidence to the contrary, such an aesthetic wants us to believe that the Tramp was intended, reflected upon, 'meant to be.'

In this chapter, I seek to analyse how such tensions between the Tramp's comic realism and moral stylisation have pertained to the Tramp from his inception, as

¹ Translated from Octave Mannoni's oft-cited 'Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .', in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969, 9–33.

demonstrated by the scene discussed above. Just as this scene oscillates between two different orders of representation, I show how significant modifications to the figure of the Tramp itself in Chaplin's early period demonstrate a similar dynamics concerning Tramp's reception as a figure of sentiment. With the Tramp re-crafted by Chaplin himself into a figure of sentiment and pathos to complement the slapstick and violence of his early shorts, such a transition is animated by key questions emerging from the 'sentimental' period itself, where sentiment emerged as the moral feeling of a 'gentleman' that can no longer secure a place in a newly middle-class dominated society. Brought in line with the theme of the virtuous soul, whose sentiments are too rarefied and whose capital insubstantial, the Tramp instantiated a unique reconciliation of sentimental and modernist values, fuelling intense critical speculation in relation to his own import and that of the cinema at the time of his reception. I argue moreover that Chaplin's iconicity and renewal in such films as *Chaplin* testify to enduring alignments between Hollywood and a sentimental tradition that continues to thematize the individual's struggle in society and the moral lessons therein.

As such, Chaplin's own story comes to represent the moral concerns of his own films, and persists as an object of fascination to a film culture invested in emotional pedagogy. I contend that the same sentimental processes that were at work in his own self-fashioning in the 1910s persist in his continued critical relevance and the creative appropriations of his legacy today. With the sentimental remaining a key property of *Chaplin*, Chaplin's critical significance endures not in spite of, but precisely due to his promulgation of a sentimental tradition, allowing the past to be re-articulated in a present now characterised by high media literacy and postmodern irony. With the

biopic representing for many critics a ‘deeply conservative genre’, often as a function of its recourse to sentimentality in the portrayal of great historical figures,² Chaplin’s life and work both ‘fit’ the general requirements of the genre as suitable material, a rags-to-riches narrative and the entire tradition of the ‘troubled’ artist. Yet through further analysis of *Chaplin*, I show that the biopic itself, particularly in terms of its deployment of pathos, also struggles to address the particular socio-historical conditions that produce Chaplin and Hollywood, not least as co-products of such cultural phenomena as Fordism, Taylorism and the Great Depression. The biopic as such demands both a reverential focus on the individual and his achievements and engagement with political or historical concerns, communicating through multiple discourses rather than the more unilateral mode assumed of the naively sentimental film. Thus, our understanding of sentimentality can be fine-tuned and made more media-specific than most deployments of the term in relation to Chaplin suggest.

The Gentleman Tramp

Any discussion of Chaplin’s sentiment must consider the extent to which Chaplin’s films have been considered to have developed in line with the tastes of a desirable (lucrative), ‘genteel’ audience between the 1910s-1920s. Chaplin began his cinematic career under the direction of Mack Sennet at Keystone studios in 1914 and appeared continually as the Tramp, an ideal character for the slapstick talents he had honed in the London music halls. Amidst growing fame, he gradually gained increased control over the direction of his films and in the following years signed new contracts with

² See Carolyn Anderson & John Lupo, ‘Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century’, in Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, London: BFI, 2002, pp. 96-7.

Essenay and then Mutual as both central performer and director for the many shorts produced during the rest of the 1910s. Such a high level of control over productions has been considered a chief factor in how the Tramp figure became subject to ‘refinement’, particularly once at Mutual. It has been well established by Chaplin biographers and critics in relation to Chaplin’s Keystone/Essenay/Mutual period (the many shorts that preceded his first feature, *The Kid* in 1921 for First National) that a key development occurs in Chaplin’s Tramp persona from the thieving, lecherous and rather violent tramp of the Keystone and early-Essenay period to the well-meaning yet romantically vulnerable loner of his later shorts and features.³ If the slapstick antics, chase-scenes and kickabout humour are never eliminated from Chaplin’s oeuvre, films from as early on as *The Vagabond* (1916, Mutual) *The Bank* (1915, Mutual) and *The Immigrant* (1917, Mutual) incorporate parallel narratives of romance and unrequited love with Chaplin’s leading lady (played by Edna Purviance) that allow him to share pathos as much as humour with the audience.

A brief consideration of a Keystone film illustrates the extent to which Chaplin’s archetypal character began as a notably unsentimental protagonist. In *Twenty Minutes of Love* (1914, Keystone) for instance, the Tramp (wearing an uncharacteristically sneering facial expression and puffing on a cigarette) enters a park and observes a romantic couple embracing on a park bench. Finding their behaviour laughably ridiculous, Chaplin mimics their facial expressions and embraces and kisses the tree he’s standing next to as a parody of their courtship. When the couple seem not to notice and carry on what they’re doing, the Tramp’s face turns back to one of envious

³ See Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 14-24; Michael Woal and Linda Kowall Woal, ‘Chaplin and the Comedy of Melodrama,’ *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 3-15.

menace before approaching them to disrupt their behaviour more effectively. While this last facial expression certainly confirms Chaplin's displeasure at their coupling (a vital element of the 'sad loner' persona that would remain integral to the character), it is his recourse to parody and then to direct confrontation that overshadows, or indeed effaces, the pathos of his character. Moreover, the remainder of the film charts a rather Hobbesian matrix of relationships between its characters, where romantic attachment is shown to be predicated on material gain. Another couple in the park pause their embraces at the woman's request that the man produce a token of his love, which leads the latter to steal a pocket-watch from a man sleeping on a bench. The Tramp's intervenes in turn by stealing the pocket-watch off the thief in order to woo the latter's girlfriend by presenting her with a twice-stolen watch as though to give as a gift. Successfully won over by a gift from an entirely new suitor (the Tramp), the woman's response further confirms the fickle conditions upon which a very cynically conceived 'love' is often founded. The film ends with all the characters fighting in the sea except the woman and the Tramp, leading to both his victory over the other suitors and justifying the attitude of cynical envy with which he entered the film from the outset. While in later films the Tramp's childish attempts and failures at romance would be deeply related to the Tramp's perpetual alienation from social relationships (and a clear source of pathos), this early film delivers a scheme of romance and a code of practice that differs markedly from the genteel, sentimental tradition.

Where *Twenty Minutes of Love* allows everyone to behave irresponsibly and rewards the Tramp as the most cunning of them all, such competitive and ruthless instincts are suppressed in favour of moral protocol in later films. The Tramp now emerges as a far more complex subject that *knows* how to behave socially yet whose instincts, and

seemingly ineradicable identity of outsider, tragically disrupts any easy insertion into bourgeois subjectivity. In *The Tramp*, much as though the Tramp is attracted to working on a farm as a means of wooing the farmer's daughter with whom he initially finds favour (by rescuing her from thieves), his incompetence and ineptitude for the work prefigure his ultimate rejection by her. As a social outcast, the Tramp is unemployable, struggling with his desires for continued freedom that sit in tension with desires for social belonging. When the girl's fiancé emerges in the last section of the film, quashing all chances of romance between her and the Tramp, it is with knowing resignation that the Tramp famously walks away from the camera, disappointed with how the world has rejected him once again yet determined nevertheless to keep trying. From the ruthless individual among other ruthless individuals in *Twenty Minutes of Love* to the confused victim of a middle-class society that he both desires and rejects, the Tramp now becomes the plucky loner that aspires to middle-class respectability but is rarely able to achieve it, or even truly want it. Rather than simply lower-class, the Tramp becomes a figure existing outside the class system entirely, a status that has always gone hand in hand with a unique moral sensibility that now distinguishes him from other characters.

In such respects, Chaplin's appeals to bourgeois standards of respectability become highly ambiguous, for the sensibility valorised in the Tramp figure fails to correlate with bourgeois subjectivity any more than with that of the working-class. Indeed, Chaplin's films rarely confirm middle-class values of hard work or a place of one's own, the latter rather more often represented as impediments to the Tramp's symbolization of freedom, the latter invested more than any perhaps in the joys of

flânerie, spatial interstitiality and plain luck.⁴ Such an ‘outsider’ subjectivity enhances the critical insights of such films, as a function of the spectator’s engagement with a figure that only partially ascribes to the codes of all established class categories. If working class labour conflicts with the Tramp’s aspirations to gentlemanly comfort and freedom, middle-class status remains elusive and dependent on one’s capital or that of one’s family, neither of which the ‘outsider’ possesses nor strives too hard to attain. The pathos of failure is thus always offset by the Tramp’s invocation of freedom and moral independence.

In order to appeal to as many sectors of his potential audience as possible, Chaplin nevertheless succeeds in diversifying the Tramp’s identity, with increased attention to character realism and pathos. If slapstick (in the films of Chaplin and others) invoked the anarchistic spirit that many audiences, trapped in regimented itineraries of work and urban life, found comically liberating, it did so at the risk of remaining fundamentally separate from the spectator’s world, with little attempt to hide its artifice. The early Chaplin’s petty criminality, violence and insubordination to authority figures could not be met by the same harsh consequences as they would have been in the real world, or else comedy would have quickly turned to tragic realism. Such comic fantasies of lawlessness were, of course, hugely appealing to audiences, including the middle class. It would, however, also be precisely this discrepancy between cinematic and actual world that Chaplin’s ‘sentimental turn’ would redress. If realism served as an index of ‘seriousness’ for genteel audiences,

⁴ While the flâneur has traditionally been discussed in terms of the urban space he/she surveys and takes enjoyment in, it is the Tramp figure, epitomized by Chaplin but also invoked by such novels as Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, that nuances the concept to incorporate both urban and rural locations while maintaining its emphasis on indeterminate observation and social alterity. See Benjamin’s celebrated account of Baudelaire’s original concept in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Harry Zohn (trans.), London: Verso, 1983.

what we would now best describe as the ‘cartoon-like’ elements of Chaplin’s early cinema consigned him to the low rank of vaudevillian, trading above all in an aesthetic of comic spectacle. Chaplin’s augmentation of pathos and romance in his films widened the terms of identification, or in Murray Smith’s terms, character ‘engagement’.⁵ Such a transition arguably forged correspondences between his films and the requirements of a more ‘genteel’ middle-class audience that was similarly won over to the cinema through the latter’s appropriation of the ‘legitimate’ theatre’s classical narrative. Charles Maland similarly finds in his detailed study of Chaplin’s career and varied reception that the ‘refining’ of ‘The Tramp’ from the amoral slapstick outlaw to the pathos-driven romantic lead was a matter of maximising audiences. This was achieved by accommodating the tastes of middle-class constituencies that were feared to be excluded by the Keystone films. Maland shows therefore that it is the pathetic romance that becomes central to most of these later shorts and subsequent feature films. Acknowledging Chaplin’s awareness and appeasement of the ‘Genteel Tradition’ outlined by Santayana, Maland argues that such themes of unrequited love and the virtuous do-gooder spurned by the world come to invoke morally ‘serious’ connotations:

Although in later films Chaplin handles his romantic relationships and pathos more effectively, it is important to reiterate here that Chaplin’s romances increased his appeal to men who had been rejected in love because of inadequate wealth, prestige or power; to women who admired his tender and nurturing spirit; and to viewers with genteel sensibilities for whom the romance helped to ‘negate’ the vulgarity that worried them.⁶

⁵ Smith’s formulation nuances the much used concept of identification by both focusing on that which Christian Metz would refer to as ‘secondary identification’ (in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 89-98), and underlining the importance of distinctions between a spectator’s ‘alignment’ with onscreen characters and a more moral ‘allegiance’ with them. See Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters, Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 73-109.

⁶ Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, p. 23. Maland reveals that Chaplin, earning ever more directorial control of his films, nervously asked the writer Charles McGuirk what he thought of *The*

It would appear, in fact, that Chaplin's shift in emphasis echoes, rather than abandons, the vaudeville tradition, which was far more eclectic in its repertoire than knockabout comedy alone, both within and between acts. Associations with an exclusively lower-class audience were constantly rectified by vaudeville managers through the employment of stars and adaptation of shows from the 'legitimate' theatre of classical drama. Henry Jenkins, for instance, provides a valuable account of how the sentimental operated alongside, rather than antithetically to, slapstick comedy in his discussion of early 20th century vaudeville theatre.⁷ While vaudeville is celebrated for the great comedians of cinema that learned their craft in the chaotic atmosphere of the variety circuit (including of course Chaplin, not to mention Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Stan Laurel), Jenkins charts the period (between roughly 1907-1912) that saw the inclusion of 'dramatic sketches' or 'playlets' within the already highly varied billings. With employment of actors that had been working on the 'legitimate stage' to perform the non-comic scenes to which they were accustomed, Jenkins discusses how such inclusions on the vaudeville roster constituted both deliberate attempts at courting higher-class credentials while nevertheless remaining entertaining to the lower-class audiences of variety, melodrama or music-hall.

Equally pertinent to the binary of the 'well-made play' versus popular affect (or high versus low tastes) however was the extent to which such sketches were subject to 'compression and intensification' in order to fit the time-slots allocated to them.

Tramp, admitting to having taken 'an awful chance' by incorporating a romantic plot for the first time, (Chaplin and American Culture, p. 23).

⁷ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 81-5.

While such dramas may largely have been drawn from the ‘realist’ theatre, Jenkins shows how modifications would serve to create a ‘series of emotionally intensified “moments” of drama’ as opposed to the subtle, well-timed narrative sequencing of more naturalistic versions. With the criteria for well-developed or ‘rounded’ characters a lesser priority, Jenkins continues that ‘emphasis was placed’ instead ‘upon the performer’s ability to move an audience toward an outward display of emotion, not toward the more thoughtful or contemplative reaction promoted by the legitimate theatre.’ His analysis shows, therefore, that despite the intermittent suspension of realism or naturalism in such vaudeville playlets, their underlying pathos and drama continued to be as ‘popular’ in the 20th century music hall as it was at the time of sentimental comedy or 19th century melodrama. Indeed, studies such as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s monumental work, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, discuss the ‘playlet’ as a direct influence on precursors to the first full-length narrative cinematic features, many of which had to similarly compress long novels or plays to fit the duration of standard features (perhaps most famously, Porter’s 1903 version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*).⁸ Despite modifications between low and high theatres, easy distinctions between vaudeville as ‘low affect’ and the legitimate theatre as detached thought become flawed, for at root, sentimentality was common to both aesthetic spheres. The tastes of a hypothetical middle-class, ‘genteel’ audience could not have been as monolithic as presumed, for even the ‘legit’ theatre itself was largely a sphere of sentimental affect, save for the more radically modernist plays of such innovators as Shaw, Chekhov or Ibsen, for whom naively sentimental schemes

⁸David Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 159-61.

such as the romance narrative were actively excluded.⁹ By the standards of the legitimate theatre, the possible persistence of vulgarity in vaudeville was thus signified not by affect *per se*, but by the latter's 'intensification' and presumed divorce from naturalist standards of verisimilitude, as applicable to comedy as much as to pathos.

However, such aesthetic distinctions did not always coincide with moral ones. Maland provides evidence for certain moral constituencies *within* a broadly middle class milieu, centred especially around church and other civic institutions, for whom the pre-classical cinema displayed vulgarity and immorality, yet such objections had more to do with content and conditions of consumption than with form.¹⁰ Intense affect was fine, indeed desirable, as long as the moral message (or sentiment) was appropriate. This is borne out by more recent studies that account for clear developments in the moral tenor of cinematic productions from the earliest cinematic era, 1906-7 to a pre-classical or classical period starting in the early 1910s. Tom Gunning shows, for instance, how the film industry took such protests seriously and itself set up a censorship board charged with validating the morality of new productions, as a means of accommodating such charges.¹¹ Motivated, of course, by business interests and the fear of offending middle-class audiences, the film industry's efforts to refine its product were both PR exercise and textual reality, and as Gunning

⁹ See for instance Shaw's introduction to *Pygmalion*, which comments on the play's reception by some audiences as a sentimental romance when he intended it to be nothing of the kind.

¹⁰ See Lee Greiveson's account of the censorship of early American cinema in terms of both text and context in *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth Century America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

¹¹ Tom Gunning, 'From the Opium Den to the Theatre of Morality: Moral discourse and the Film Process in Early American Cinema,' in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 145-54.

shows, can be verified by key contrasts in films produced within as little as six years of each other. His main example illustrates the contrast between a 1906 film that unashamedly showed the enjoyments of an 'Opium Den' to a later film about the reform of an alcoholic father for the sake of his family, demonstrating a discernible change in moral attitude with regards to the issue of adult drug-use. Others have written on how similar social pressures contributed to the demise of the original nickelodeons and the rise of the movie theatre and the eventual 'Picture Palace'. The latter's emulation of the more highly regarded theatre is commonly explained as the forging of a more cultivated image for 'cinema' than that represented by the nickelodeon and its predominantly working class, immigrant audiences; the curtailment of what was deemed sleaziness, rowdy behaviour and sexual license could be both onscreen and off-screen endeavour.¹² If the period spanning 1908-9 constituted therefore for American cinema, as Gunning claims, a 'conscious movement into a realm of moral discourse'¹³, the moral tensions signified by such a shift would have been well established by 1913-14, when Chaplin had just taken on directorial control of his films for the first time. The courting of 'high' critical tastes becomes, then, a means of increasing audience attendance and maximising an already lucrative business in a fast-changing industry. Moreover, as Chaplin suspected early on, sentimental pathos (related to, but not an exclusive attribute of, the 'legit' theatre) could enhance one's own artistic credentials, as it was approved by bourgeois tastes in a way that slapstick, circus acts and mime were less so.¹⁴

¹² See Russell Merritt, 'Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies,' in *The American Film Industry*, Tino Balio (ed.), Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 83-102.

¹³ Gunning, 'From the Opium Den', p. 146.

¹⁴ Chaplin's gamble with pathos can also be understood as a shift in the direction of what has been termed the 'classical Hollywood cinema' as it crystallized in the mid 1910s. In place of the trick films, chase-films, curiosities and other shorts that made up the 'cinema of attractions' (and its theatrical

However, it is crucial to reiterate the difficulties of equating Chaplin's deployment of sentiment exclusively with middle-class standards of detached observation. His films became highly melodramatic and comical where once they were more predominantly comic, diversifying the already 'intensified' affect of its vaudeville underpinnings. If a sense of 'moral legibility' becomes more explicit, such elements may well have appealed more to 'genteel' sectors of society but cannot be discounted as any less popular with the 'non-genteel,' for whom the moral tone of melodrama was far from unfamiliar. The point was to maximise audiences. The Tramp's failures or difficulties in winning the girl or succeeding at work speak of far more than the tragic misfortune of the hobo as a pitiable low-class figure, for the Tramp becomes a paradigm for all contemporary subjectivities, irrespective of class, race or gender. The vulnerability of the Tramp spoke to widespread anxieties and insecurities concerning physical deficiency, insufficient capital or underemployment precisely to the extent that all such problems had an impact on 'getting the girl' or merely surviving in modernity.¹⁵ As opposed to the manly defiance of the Keystone slapstick, the newer shorts are far more emphatic as to the emotional and personal stakes of 'losing' in modern society. Even when the Tramp succeeds romantically at the film's climax (such as in *The Vagabond*), his potential abandonment defines the stakes of the film's overall narrative.

cousin, vaudeville), longer films are produced (resulting in the standard feature length) and a set of editing techniques becomes established for a film practice that relies above all on continuities of narrative and character(see Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, note 10).

¹⁵ While *The Immigrant* would convey the recent hardships and injustices of life for immigrants entering America, and *The Bank* alludes to class divisions between the 'urban poor' and the 'idle rich', Maland emphasises the difficulty with which one would discern a sustained politically progressive viewpoint or moral message from such films taken as a whole, (despite the 'Progressivism' of some of their themes). See *Chaplin and American Culture*, p. 29-30.

Connoting such loss amidst fantasies of freedom, subversion and escape from social convention, the Tramp thus articulates both the desirable and problematic elements of American petty bourgeois identity, not least in terms of the emotional and bodily constraints that such an ideology imposes on the subject. When the Tramp meets Edna Purviance on board the sea-swept ship bound for New York in *The Immigrant*, taking her hand and offering her his seat with a courteous gesture of love-at-first-sight goodwill, he can't help but look at his hand to see if her dirty hand has left a residue on his, deflating the romance of the moment with comic effect. Likewise as he leaves the ship's galley, smiling back at his new love interest, a barely concealed belch once again undermines his ability to remain within the ideal scheme of bourgeois romance. Tom Gunning writes on this aspect of Chaplin's persona in such films as *The Pawnshop* (1916, Mutual), where a poor old man's story of woe provokes such sympathetic tears on the Tramp's part that he begins to spit out the crackers he was eating. Archetypal scenes of sympathy or bourgeois romance embodying established sentimental ideals of pity or love are thereby expressly undermined by the other consequences attendant on the Tramp's inability to control his body.¹⁶ Other subversions of sentiment of this kind abound in Chaplin's corpus, such as the scene in *The Idle Class* (1921, First National) that sees a rich drunkard of a husband learning that his wife abandoned him owing to his continued drinking and neglect of her. With his back facing camera and shaking from apparent sobs, he turns back to camera to reveal his movements to have been the effort to merely shake a cocktail, his face comically unmoved by the news. Gunning concludes thus that Chaplin's subversion of sentiment is closely bound up with what he terms a 'body of modernity' that is explicitly fuelled by the puncturing of the sentimental as a monolithically 'genteel'

¹⁶ See Tom Gunning, 'Chaplin and the Body of Modernity', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (2010), pp. 239-40.

ideology. Lest the romance or the scene of sentiment be taken at face-value, Chaplin self-consciously stages a challenge to these set-pieces through the foibles, neuroses and indelicacies revealed by the body.

Cool Chaplin

Although never dispensing with his trademark physical comedy, Chaplin's 'sentimental' turn did prove questionable for certain modernist or radical voices of that era, for whom Chaplin's alignment with the dynamism of slapstick still proved his most radical and progressive of attributes. Nevertheless, as examined in the previous chapter, the extent to which such modernist values were necessarily dismissive of a humanistic or sentimental tradition is highly debatable given the wide variance in critical response to such a figure as Chaplin throughout the 'high-modernist' period, both between radical writers and within the body of work of certain critics. For instance, Siegfried Kracauer's responses to Chaplin and slapstick ranges from an early modernism informed by a left-fordist opposition to American capitalism and mass culture and later hermeneutic analyses of the 'mass ornament' embodied by the Tiller Girls, urban movie-going and indeed Chaplin.¹⁷ In a 1926 review, Kracauer regards slapstick as a redemptive subversion of an American-led industrial, capitalist order, commenting:

One has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick films they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality: if in that reality they subject the world to an often unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Siegfried Kracauer, Thomas Y. Levin (trans.), *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

¹⁸ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 29th Jan, 1926, cited in Miriam Hansen, '“With Skin and Hair”: Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), pp. 437-469.

If the above already isolates particular aspects of American culture that signify an emancipatory spirit that undermines an overwhelming system of oppression, Kracauer is here unspecific as to the chief affect associated with this process of ‘dismantling’, the latter term perhaps still most suggestive of slapstick’s violent disruption of order (that Henry Jenkins aligns with a sensibility of the ‘anarchistic’¹⁹). In a 1931 piece on Chaplin, however, Kracauer expands upon the full import of Chaplin’s affective power as one that depends on more than his ‘gags’ alone. In a review of *City Lights* (1931, United Artists), he writes that:

Chaplin, a storyteller of the Dickens school, knows very well how gags and harmless clowning have to be used to reduce narrative tension, and uses them willingly. But then he always plunges again into that abyss where the Comic originates, and lays it bare.²⁰

Chaplin’s work is celebrated as an exemplar of the modern subject’s encounter with the ‘abyss’, with the sentimental climax of *City Lights* providing the ‘most resonant’ of moments. Situated as the chief source of ‘narrative tension’, the melodrama of this sequence is privileged aesthetically over comic relief, and its sentiment becomes equated with the full disclosure of the film’s socio-political meaning; Chaplin’s ‘display of facial expressions’ in this sequence is now situated as ‘among the most shattering achievements of his art.’ If the ‘clowning’ of slapstick has now become a ‘harmless’ formal device, it may no longer serve such radical purposes unless

¹⁹ Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 6-25. A key theoretical text in such regards is Mikhail Bakhtin’s delineation of grotesque comedy as a violent, carnivalesque inversion of bourgeois values in *Rabelais and His World*, (1941)Hélène Iswolsky (trans.), Reprinted Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

²⁰ Siegfried Kracauer; John MacKay (trans.), ‘Two Chaplin Sketches,’ *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (1997), p. 117.

complemented by the more legible signifiers of oppression and struggle exemplified in the pathos of Chaplin's face at the climax of *City Lights*. In such respects, Dickensian sentimentality, now deployed by Chaplin, once again seems far from antithetical to the transformative ideals of modernist theory.

This is not to deny that other critics such as Gilbert Seldes still inhabited a certain perspective in film criticism of that era that understood comedy (slapstick in particular) as the most critically innovative of genres for the cinema's particular capacities, rather than 'drama'. Before aligning this thinking immediately with a European, particularly French, praise for the anarchic 'Charlot', it is also important to consider the popularity of what Henry Jenkins describes as the 'New Humor' taking place in America itself. While Santayana and other literary naturalists had condemned the overly feminized aesthetic of the earlier century's 'genteel' literature, a related vein of thinking deemed comedy as potent a force of aesthetic disruption of the 'Genteel Tradition' as the more formally modernist works of Conrad, Dreiser or Joyce. Both more accessible to mass audiences than the anti-realist novel or symbolist poetry, the comic promised to re-orient the subject once again in terms of the enhanced 'affective immediacy' outlined above. For Jenkins, a fundamental conflict could be traced between the 'New Humor' of gags, intense laughter and bodily shock (vaudeville, slapstick cinema) and a 'thoughtful' comedy of kindly humour and moral sentiments (theatrical comedy), which he accounts for in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory:

The working class of the country's expanding cities, for whom entertainment dollars were scarce and leisure time limited, placed a greater emphasis upon the "use-value" of cultural experience, upon the amount of pleasure received per expenditure. The aesthetic choices of the working class, Bourdieu argues, often reflect a desire for "maximum 'effect' ... at minimum cost, a formula which

for bourgeois taste is the very definition of vulgarity.” Hunger for immediate gratification and intense stimulation grows from an insistence on the ultimate return on one’s investment and a need for an immediate, though short-lived, release from the rigors of one’s environment.²¹

If slapstick was structurally aligned therefore with the tastes of a ‘working class’ audience that hadn’t the income nor the emotional aptitude for sentimental comedy owing to oppressive environmental and monetary conditions, what emerges is a mass audience whose tastes in comedy and much else would be divided along class lines. This division alone would no doubt contribute to how writers such as Seldes might have felt with regards to the ‘lower’ entertainments when he writes of the ‘remorseless hostility of the genteel’ that was threatening to ‘corrupt the purity of slap-stick.’ While no doubt enamoured by its ‘driving energy’ and the fact that it was ‘funny,’ there is also the undoubted disdain of the ‘elite’ intellectual for the hypocrisies of his own class and the latter’s policing of the ‘vulgar.’ If such a taste hierarchy undermined the ‘drama’ and its ‘good sentiments’ by aligning the latter aesthetic with middle-class hypocrisy and ideological self-validation, the only choice for this bourgeois intellectual becomes the polemical siding with the oppressed classes in terms of cultural taste.

Going back to some of the definitions for sentiment discussed in prior chapters, what might seem at issue here are questions concerning how beliefs concerning the heroes of sentimental narrative influence their emotional claims on the spectator. A chief question that Chaplin always seems to invoke in this regard concerns the extent to which his tramp is willing to countenance the troubles he or she encounters. If, as

²¹ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, p. 45.

Richard Steele argued in the 18th century, it is ‘through no fault of his own’ that misfortune must befall the sentimental hero, with pathos invoked most forcefully with the perception of an unwilling victim of circumstance, then the Tramp becomes a highly ambiguous instance of ‘virtue in distress’. In as much as Chaplin’s films give us grounds for seeing the Tramp as partially complicit with his lot, as desiring his social annexation as much as having it foisted upon him, a specifically sentimental reception of him becomes an issue of critical belief. When the Tramp is abandoned at the end of *The Tramp*, could his plucky gesture of resolve not instead be interpreted as the *jouissance* of renewed freedom for one that was perhaps better off anyway? The bodily gesture as he walks away from camera could be deemed a renewal of energy that visibly courses through the Tramp’s entire body as much as a stoical ‘picking oneself up after a knock’. Where the latter concerns a pitiable subject re-enlivened by brave thoughts (‘things aren’t too bad’, ‘maybe its for the best,’ I’ll live to fight another day’), the former gives greater prominence to the body itself, relieved of fetters and stress, re-energized without the intervention of bourgeois ideology.²² Despite the ambiguity concerning the Tramp’s victimization, slapstick must have seemed to certain critics more explicitly irreverent and radical through its more comprehensive expunging of ‘feminizing’ pathos. In order to be radical, the Tramp had to be the irreverent and virile anarchist of the slapstick film, not the pathetic underdog that may or may not have been more accepting of his lot in the later films.

Not for all modernist critics however; for it was those films of Chaplin’s oeuvre that were perhaps the most sentimental and reluctantly resigned in their acceptance of oppressive ideology that proved for other critics to be the most inspirational. If we

²² Charles Musser also discusses this aspect of Chaplin’s persona, discussed below.

recall the comments of Béla Balázs, it is the extent to which the ‘melancholy optimism’ of the Tramp ‘expresses the opposition of all of us to an inhuman order of society’ that Chaplin’s rhetoric was deemed to succeed. The issue becomes not how Chaplin could be read as embodying a heroic, virile defiance of the repressive status quo but how the pathetic, vulnerable and ‘sentimental’ Tramp inspired a spectatorship that deemed him ‘revolutionary’ specifically for such attributes, not least in the eyes of that era’s modernists and even Marxists. In such respects a ‘genteel’ middle-class spectatorship was far from mutually exclusive with politically radical voices of the era, for Chaplin’s sentimental turn could be deemed both ‘artistic’ by classical standards and ‘radical’ in more modernist terms.

When we turn to the reception of Chaplin in the Germany of the 1920s, we find a Chaplin that was celebrated by left-liberal intellectuals from a middle-class that Chaplin had as yet failed to successfully attract through slapstick or sentiment. Joseph Garnarcz, for instance, has shown how Chaplin’s films did not poll so highly during this decade in Germany, and concludes that while popular with working-class audiences, ‘the middle class did not like him.’²³ Intellectuals that celebrated Chaplin therefore had less reason to isolate aesthetic superiority in a specific corpus of Chaplin films, unlike Seldes, for whom slapstick was applauded above all for embodying a working-class or popular voice. Thus much of the writing of such figures as Benjamin and Balázs (and Kracauer) is more immediately attuned to the pathetic elements of Chaplin’s persona without condemnation of them as regressively sentimental. Balázs writes that Chaplin’s creation:

is not the revolutionary image of the exploited factory worker or

²³ Joseph Garnarcz, ‘Films that are applauded all over the world: Questioning Chaplin’s Popularity in Weimar Germany’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (2010), pp. 291-92.

agricultural labourer, but that of a 'Lumpen-proletarian who defends himself with charming cunning against the heartlessness of the rich and revenges himself by petty means.'²⁴

As such, Chaplin is understood and applauded far more as a sympathetic figure that can only counter his oppression by 'petty means', rather than as the rogue that takes down the bourgeoisie in a more effective, revolutionary fashion. What might be lost by accepting Chaplin as a figure of pathos (in terms of his not embodying the soldier-like role model for revolutionary action) is recuperated in the cultural work of such a figure, specifically as a figure of moral sympathy. Walter Benjamin was enthused by the 'laughter' that such a figure as the Tramp could evoke in an international audience, commenting in 1929 that 'Chaplin has directed himself toward both the most international and most revolutionary affect of the masses—laughter'.²⁵ However, if Benjamin perceived the humour of Chaplin's work as its redemptive force, such humour is indistinguishable from Benjamin's recognition of its function in relation to the sad and disturbing facts of capitalist oppression. Thus when he writes of the 'American farce' as an exemplar of an internationalist 'collective' cinema, laughter takes on a portentous rather than escapist function.

Such a film is comical, after all, only in that the laughter it inspires hovers over the abyss of horror. The reverse of a ridiculously unrestrained technique is the mortal precision of a fleet of naval vessels on manoeuvre, relentlessly captured in *Potemkin*.²⁶

²⁴ Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film*, trans. Edith Bone, London: Dennis Dobson, 1952, p. 55.

²⁵ Rudolph Arnheim, Walter Benjamin, and John Mackay (trans), 'Walter Benjamin and Rudolph Arnheim on Charlie Chaplin,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 9, no. 2 (1996), p. 311.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'A Discussion of Russian Filmic Art and Collectivist Art in General,' in *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Martin Jay, Anton Kaes, & Edward Dimendberg (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 626-7.

Where the ‘New Humor’ seems in Seldes’ view to promise a different form of sociality that supersedes genteel decorum and ossified Victorian values altogether, Benjamin leaves one with the sense of laughter as ironic counterpoint to the ‘abyss of horror.’ As a therapeutic desensitization to the traumas of modernity signified on the body of the Tramp, Chaplin’s cinema becomes necessarily driven by the imperative of representing the possibility of subjectivity in an unjust society. Echoing Kracauer above, it is the ‘abyss’ that must be acknowledged as the chief emotional catalyst of humour, slapstick or otherwise, wherein the spectacle of human suffering remains the vital currency. Even for a Benjamin exhilarated by technology and a Brechtian form of critical spectatorship, Chaplin’s sympathetic figure still serves radical purposes, or indeed, effectively embodies them. In a review of Chaplin’s *The Circus* (1928, United Artists), Benjamin saves his skepticism for Chaplin’s plans of making films on ‘Napoleon’ and ‘Christ’, deeming them ‘giant screens behind which the great artist is hiding his weariness.’²⁷ While the Chaplin of 1929, suffering from creative blockage or excessive compromise with the film industry, is criticized by Benjamin for turning his hands to the epic rendering of grand, historical or religious figures (a genre identified and condemned here for its implicit recourse to reverential biography, further discussed in relation to *Chaplin* below), Benjamin privileges Chaplin’s earlier corpus (slapstick and sentiment combined) as Chaplin at his most unrestrained and radical.

Perceptions of the Tramp as a ‘radical’ persona rested on more therefore than his inhabiting a working-class subjectivity or posing a virile challenge to bourgeois respectability. If the ‘refining’ of Chaplin introduced the Tramp’s desires for upward

²⁷ Benjamin, ‘on Charlie Chaplin,’ p. 311.

mobility, romantic love and social belonging, it also revealed their emotional stakes, and intensified the critical stakes of his outcast status by ‘humanizing’ him. Before class, gender or political persuasion, the Tramp was human, fallible and vulnerable. Seldes’ implicit binary of masculine/working-class/popular/aggressive/subversive versus the genteel/feminine/middle-class/disingenuous comes radically unstuck in the light of these other critiques and no doubt explains his preferences for the Keystone slapstick that for him more forthrightly pitted the former against the latter. Yet if the binaristic logic of such a rubric may be considered a somewhat vulgarized appropriation of a modernism that is rather less dismissive of Dickensian or Chaplineque humanism, it still informs subsequent perceptions of Chaplin’s persona as regressively ‘sentimental’, especially when compared to Buster Keaton.

A Re-Victorianized Chaplin

Since such praise from left-wing intellectuals of the Weimar period, one might argue that Chaplin’s reputation soured in the aftermath of the high-modernist moment documented in the last section. If Chaplin seemed a ‘cool’ exponent of the Jazz age, urban modernity and even the ‘New Objectivity’²⁸, such a reputation itself has been tempered by reappraisal and reconfigurations of Chaplin’s classicism and melodrama, and often once again reconceived as anachronisms of a Victorian past, not just that of a bygone silent era. The same modernist calls for formal innovation and medium

²⁸ The New Objectivity was a movement across the arts in Weimar Germany (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) that worked against what were deemed sentimental, expressionistic or romanticized approaches to music, architecture and painting etc, praising instead such attributes as functionality, simplicity and mathematical precision. See Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, London: University of California Press, 2001.

reflexivity found *auteur* heroes from Brecht to Godard to Sirk, and in the case of silent film comedy itself, in Buster Keaton. Chaplin's sympathetic protagonist of classical cinema gives way to Keaton's 'deadpan' modernist. While certainly not championing the latter's work over the former's, Tom Gunning compares Chaplin's and Keaton's comedy by commenting that whereas 'Chaplin used film to create a startling intimacy with his audience, allowing them insight into his most private moments of romantic longing and disappointment (as in the final sequence of *City Lights*), Keaton's relation to the audience remained distanced.' Keaton's physiognomy becomes in Gunning's view bound up with a numbed acquiescence to, and accommodation of, modernity's traumas ('mechanical reproduction') as opposed to Chaplin's indignant or panicked opposition. Thus:

If Chaplin's reaction to industrial production was one of Luddite destruction or anarchic hysteria, Keaton tried constantly to adjust his body to the new demands of systematic environments. These adjustments unmasked the absurdity of the system itself, its anxiety-causing, infantilizing power.²⁹

If Gunning accounts for Keaton's impassivity as a radically different, though by no means superior, affect experienced in relation to modernity, he nevertheless adds how such an attitude appealed to certain 'avant-garde' sensibilities in a way that Chaplin did not. Reflecting the 'nonconsciousness of the machine,' Keaton's response to technology, as 'one of victimization and mastery of this inhumanely ordered environment', paradoxically promised a better solution to man's conflict with modern industry than Chaplin's defiant hysteria. Keaton has also often won out as the modernist player with cinematic form compared to Chaplin, whose apparent ease with the conventions of melodrama are foregrounded as grounds for dismissal within a

²⁹ Tom Gunning, 'Buster Keaton or the Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Cineaste*, Vol.21, No. 3 (Summer 1995), p.14.

strictly formalist aesthetics. While such Keaton films as *Sherlock Jr.* (1924, Metro Pictures) may be deemed to subvert the 'classical realism' of Hollywood cinema, Chaplin is considered innovative only at the level of individual performance: his cinematic value is constrained by the allegedly uncritical reproduction of melodramatic conventions.

However, such evaluative comparisons tend to overlook the ideological work of the films themselves (as a function of their socio-historic conditions) in favour of a facile categorization of the two comedians within separate aesthetic agendas, playing the modernist off against Victorian sentiment as a means of defining the terms of a new canon of cinematic modernism (that supersedes realism or melodrama). In such respects, as Henry Jenkins humorously notes, the classical canon of Chaplin, Griffith and Ford taught in the film class of the 'liberal-humanist...Professor Oldman' are superseded by the Keaton, Godard and Sirk films taught by the modernist 'Professor Youngman'.³⁰ Both rubrics, however, renew a binary of low art/high art, where the classical Chaplin becomes the sentimental storyteller, enforcing spectator sympathy at the expense of formal progressivism achieved through a more experimental, self-reflexive or ironic aesthetics. Consigned now to the status of 'eternal clown' or apolitical 'humanist', Chaplin becomes either the Victorian anachronism or even worse, the universal sign that foreshadows an omnipresent, sentimental Hollywood culture that dominates the globe and inhibits alternative practices and subjectivities. Charles Musser indeed argues that the cultural work of Chaplin's films needs to be recuperated as a socio-historical and political phenomenon, and critiques the Tramp's

³⁰ See Henry Jenkins, "'This Fellow Keaton Seems to be the Whole Show": The Interrupted Performance in Buster Keaton's Films,' in Andrew Horton (ed.) *Buster Keaton's Sherlock Junior*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 30-33.

mutation in a contemporary global image-culture to an icon of ‘vague humanism’ or ‘philosophical’ everyman, his image having been subjected to an ‘ideological cleansing’ (his example is the use of Chaplin’s image in IBM commercials of the 1980s). Musser claims that such iconography fails to acknowledge or find interest in Chaplin’s contributions to debates concerning issues of class, poverty and the work ethic that beset early 20th century America and that, for Musser, resonate to this day. Like many critics during Chaplin’s own time, Musser redeems Chaplin’s Tramp as a historical figure of both pathos and alternative subjectivity amidst Fordist and Taylorist standardization and the concomitant undermining of working-class rights. While rarely specifically political, Chaplin’s films return as ‘social comedies’ that reflect the issues of class, gender and privilege in their own historical moment, not least in terms of the Great Depression that exacerbated the inequities of American society.³¹

Musser’s argument concerning Chaplin’s ‘sentimentalized’ status in contemporary culture identifies once again some rather old alignments between the Tramp and a reductive symbolic humanism. A correct critical response rests for Musser not on wholesale dismissal (as intimated by preferences for Keaton) of Chaplin as an intrinsically apolitical icon of modern commodity culture but on a historical resituating of the Tramp as a figure of urban modernity, industrialization, poverty and inequality. I would add furthermore that the Tramp’s reappearance in modern consumer culture then takes on an expanded valence, beyond ‘ideological cleansing’, pointing to important cultural continuities between then and now in terms of global

³¹ Musser, underlining the extent to which Chaplin’s films functioned as significant engagements with social reality, situates the Tramp in terms of his accurate resemblance to real-life counterparts in early 20th century society, despite the latter becoming more casual in dress as the century progressed.

image culture. For while a cultural memory of Chaplin may be invoked as a merely comic and congenial persona that gives a 'human' face to an impersonal corporation (much like Mickey Mouse or Ronald Macdonald), such deployments might also accord with the original imperatives of the sentimental tradition. The IBM ads foreground once again the bumbling, incompetent yet human individual's struggle with the world, shown now to be dominated not by cinema or even television but by corporate culture's indeterminate array of screens, moving images and cross-marketed, synergized commodities.

In most of these commercials, we see the Tramp (still dressed as such) struggling with the heavy workload of a modern office worker, overwhelmed by an absurdly high volume of paper documents in the inbox that requires processing. To all such problems, the PC is posed as an ideal solution that transforms the Tramp, as always stressed out by a modern work culture, into a productive, happy worker that is able to achieve his goals. If sentimentality has always functioned ideologically, it does so here once again not only as 'false consciousness' but as a moral language of continued struggle and subjective atomization--a legacy of modernity ostensibly now brought to an end by the personal computer. Chaplin finally masters the work environment with a computer that now allows him to avert the nervous breakdown he incurs in the first 15 minutes of *Modern Times* (1936, United Artists, which was explicitly referenced in these ads³²), yet the PC is not *the* solution but the *latest* solution to a rather more intractable set of problems invoked by the Tramp and his continued struggles with labour, capital and his own 'body of modernity.' As if to

³² Available for viewing online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LR1Xvvch18&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtE-pnwVbOo&feature=related>, accessed on 5th July 2010.

bear this out, Youtube.com now also brings us one of the IBM ads that was not permitted to be aired on national television, owing to its depiction of a corporate CEO (the Tramp's boss) as one of the hulking, large-moustached men that Chaplin would have hilariously hoodwinked and defeated in his Keystone shorts, a framing of corporate authority that was clearly found to be problematic for corporate culture.³³ We might complain here that this ad's exclusion from the airwaves derives exactly from the power of capital to 'sanitize' sentimental rhetoric of a subversive edge, ensuring that the modern corporation is depicted within a more productive and cooperative frame and less in terms of the weakly dominated and the aggressively dominant. Such a claim indeed is highly valid in terms of 'ideological cleansing', yet I would argue that it need not therefore dampen the sense to which the presence of the Tramp himself serves also as a sign for a continued historical conflict between labour and capital. Moreover, while the ads neutralize the discontent and madness with which the protagonist of *Modern Times* is left after his encounter with modern industrial machinery, there remains a sense to which the image of the Tramp sitting contentedly at a computer alongside fellow office workers rings hollow, or even invokes the uncanny in such a deployment of the silent era star.

I would argue therefore that such appropriations of Chaplin's legacy do rather more than dampen the Tramp's significance, for they reveal precisely the extent to which capitalist modernity constitutes a still active historical problem. Moreover, it takes only one more interpretative step to see cinema itself signified in such ads, represented by Chaplin and now struggling like him to come to terms with these new screens that threaten the worker with obsolescence as technology creates more

³³ Available for viewing online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJrpYZGjd4g>, accessed on 5th July 2010.

versatile forms of capital. In such respects, it is Hollywood that finds itself on the back heel as it were, competing with many more moving-image technologies than at the time of Chaplin's rise to fame, becoming as vulnerable to the vicissitudes of market capitalism as its original hero and subject also to similar identity confusions. It should not be surprising therefore that Chaplin, and many Chaplin clones, are returned to time and again in the contemporary moment by a Hollywood that has had to continually promote itself through continuous reinvention and repurposing of a melodramatic legacy. With Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin* (1992), it was able to do so through an effective deployment of synecdoche, re-introducing the Tramp as a figure almost as old and certainly as iconic as itself. Embodying and re-validating cinema's own historical and sentimental contributions, both the genre of biopic and Chaplin are canonized as experiences brought to us only by cinema. Where IBM delivers a series of comicbook slapstick set-pieces that ironically reveal the Tramp's encounter with technology, cinema responds with a full, sentimental exposition of the man, the character, the career and the life.

Chaplin: Tears of the Clown

Chaplin effectively demonstrates a set of ideologies that coalesce to situate Chaplin as one of cinema's first 'men of feeling' as it follows the conventions of the modern biopic. It is a sentimental treatment that nevertheless situates Chaplin's life within the period of social and cinematic history discussed above for both pedagogical and reflexive purposes. Indeed, as if conscious of how such a 'golden age' of cinema has passed into an era of streamlined, corporatized image culture, the narrative nostalgically invokes a bygone cinema, for which Chaplin serve admirably as

synecdoche. As discussed above, the film both acknowledges its own act of sentimental memorializing of this possibly misremembered cinema while still indulging in such nostalgia, using Chaplin's own acts of self-fashioning as a legitimating mirror for its own displays of self-appropriation. At both levels, the question of how to get remembered is foregrounded, facilitated of course by the biopic genre in its own right, and becomes a driving concern in relation to Chaplin and the cinemas of past and present that he stands in for. In such respects, a certain version of Chaplin's work and life become the paradigm for Hollywood's own self-image of virtuous enterprise and humanistic endeavour.

Within what Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo consider to remain in many respects the 'deeply conservative' genre of biopic,³⁴ Chaplin's life and work is worked through a melodramatic lens that ultimately affirms a status of cinematic legend, artistic genius and emotionally vulnerable clown. The film serves in the context of 1990s cinema to articulate a place and time in which cinema and America shared the same innocence and adventurism as those pioneers, in accordance with an aesthetic that has been described by Jim Collins as a 'new sincerity'. In this aesthetic that avoids irony in favour of nostalgic reverentiality for the past, biopic emerges as a particularly suitable vehicle for sentiment. Films displaying 'new sincerity' are for Collins 'hyperconscious' of the postmodern 'array' of images circulating in contemporary image culture, yet respond not through hybridization, allusion or irony but through a mode of address that nostalgically re-asserts a lost 'authenticity,' a place anterior to the world's and cinema's own commodification into images. Thus:

³⁴ Anderson & Lupo, 'Hollywood Lives', p. 96.

Rather than trying to master the array through ironic manipulation, these films attempt to reject it altogether, purposely evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism.³⁵

Citing such films as *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Hook* (1991), in each the recovery of a ‘never-never land of wish fulfilment’ symbolically redresses the problems of the present through the willed return to an imaginary and impossible past. Contemporary imperatives of cathartic redemption and ‘self-actualization’ impose themselves on the re-writing of past ‘folk culture’, as represented by the idealisation of Native Americans, early baseball players or childhood itself. Through the ‘fetishizing of “belief” rather than irony as the only way to resolve conflict,’³⁶ such texts posit ‘escape’ and ‘fantasy’ as parallel responses to the postmodern array of images and the ‘ironic mastery’ of them. I contend that this ‘new sincerity’, as Collins coins it, might similarly be employed as a means of comprehending the treatment of Chaplin’s image as it circulates in the array addressed by Attenborough’s *Chaplin*. As a biopic, sincerity is connoted by a ‘conservative’ story structure that, for scholars like Lupo and Anderson, remains in the service of the ‘subject’ and the latter’s ‘personal struggle’ for success. Highlighting such struggle as central to sentimentality, they continue their survey of the 1990s biopic by commenting that:

Biopics continued to depend heavily on sentimentality. An ironic approach to the biographical enterprise or the biographical subject was rare and, even then, incomplete; however, more attention (proportionally) was directed towards conflicted, eccentric or irascible subjects. Overall, 1990s

³⁵ Jim Collins, ‘Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,’ in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 257.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

biopics continued a psychological approach to storytelling, with personal struggle as the nodal dramatic action which incorporated a presumption of the US (and often the world) as a meritocracy.³⁷

In *Chaplin*, the protagonist's story seems admirably to fit such a schema, starting from a childhood in the London slums and the emotionally volatile audiences of the music hall, to the status of mogul in a grandiose Hollywood that has come of age amidst huge financial successes. Yet with the film concerning itself with Hollywood cinema as much as with Chaplin's role in it, the film's at times cloying reverence needs to be examined precisely in terms of its self-reflexivity and awareness of the ideological conditions of its own reception. The sequence showing Chaplin's creation of the Tramp discussed in this chapter's introduction demonstrates the competing modes of address with which the contemporary biopic now accommodates a hip irony despite enduring conventions of character engagement that continues to attract contemporary spectators. If the sentimental ultimately wins out in that sequence, this and other scenes nevertheless reveal the contradictions with which the film itself struggles in order to enforce the biopic's rhetoric of reverence in relation to Chaplin.

A scene showing Chaplin's triumphant arrival to his Los Angeles set, driven in a chauffeured Rolls Royce and wearing the clothes of a wealthy gentleman, is a case in point in terms of its excessive invocation of communal recognition of Chaplin's achievement. With a cast and crew for the next production assembled dutifully and ceremoniously as the car arrives, their applause for Chaplin signifies the culmination of the film's narrative to a highpoint of his success. With the attention of cameras (the press), a largely male crew (his employees) and a group of adoring women directed

³⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

solely at him, the scene's excessive adulation of course seems to undermine such grievances as might have been as evident in the working force of film production as of any other industry. Partially acknowledging such artifice, a dapperly dressed Chaplin reverts to the now well-known gestures of the Tramp as if to legitimate such applause by directing it at an image of a virtuous man of feeling as opposed to a newly ascendant film mogul. His Asian chauffeur, customarily bowing after Chaplin tips his hat at him, momentarily represents an identity of otherness that threatens to upstage Chaplin's moment of uniqueness, prompting Chaplin to re-do his greeting, this time once again reverting to the Tramp but *not* reciprocating the chauffeur's bow. While his initial greeting inserts Chaplin into an identity of the wealthy patriarch with colonialist connotations, performing the Tramp diffuses the evocation of any such hierarchy, and sustains an implicit ideology of unalloyed virtue rewarded. As Chaplin's second gesture is met with laughter by the crowd, the now also laughing chauffeur recedes into the background, an 'immigrant' now educated as to the Tramp's symbolic import and brought into line with everyone else.

As an image of virtue transcending oppression and difference, even one's own, one might say the Tramp not only therefore courts, but demands, universal legibility. Despite the chauffeur's grounds for dissent in terms of both race and class, one might argue that Chaplin as universal icon of virtue ideologically neutralizes any claims to victimhood on the part of worker and immigrant. I would argue that the sentimentality of this scene is precisely dependent on such conflicts yet nevertheless indulges in its larger project of communal celebration of Chaplin and cinema as a means not of effacing them but of representing them, albeit in displaced form, through Chaplin himself. *Chaplin's* negotiation with Hollywood history thus reveals the inherent

perversities of reconstruction and memory, whereby the Tramp is revealed as an instance of potent visual ideology that both symbolizes and effaces. If the sentimental focus on this man of feeling serves like the fetish to repress other claims to virtue rewarded, it is nevertheless excessively frank in its disclosure as to where such historical or political repressions have taken place at the textual level. In *Chaplin*, both Chaplin and cinema unite to address such conflicts in the spirit of humanistic virtue and liberalism that they stand for.

Such juxtapositions reinforce the aims of the biopic of foregrounding a historical figure whose contributions reflected the needs of his or her time. In *Chaplin*, as with Attenborough's other biopic of *Gandhi* (1982), the life of a great man is followed to the point not only of socio-political or cultural significance but most importantly to the point of his concordance with an identity as universal icon of 'humanism' recognized by many. To many critics, not least post-colonialist scholars, such a treatment undermined the necessity of retaining Gandhi as a historical figure of political struggle that responded to actual historical oppression.³⁸ In both *Ghandi* and *Chaplin*, the veneration of these figures becomes legitimated by a sense of the moral contribution of these men to world affairs, be it in political or cultural terms. As icons of moral victory, however, their idealization necessarily shifts virtue, victimhood or struggle from historically locatable groups to their own mediatised images. In *Ghandi*, according to Shailja Sharma, the 'saintly figure of Ghandi[...] becomes a signifier for the liberalism of Britain's colonial policies, rather than for the strengths of India's

³⁸ The film for instance was deemed to achieve objectives related to a 'liberal, neocolonialist historiographic project' in Shailja Sharma, 'Citizens of the Empire: Revisionist History and the Social Imaginary in "Gandhi"', *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 35 (Spring 1995), p.61. See also Salman Rushdie, 'Attenborough's Gandhi' in *Imaginary Homelands: essays and criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991.

freedom movement'; Chaplin's virtue and humanism likewise reflect the pioneering spirit, freedom and liberalism of Hollywood itself, effacing the film industry's mutations and synergies with other media and reinforcing values of spirited virtue as a continuous attribute of Hollywood enterprise.

With Chaplin's successes shown to both correlate with and facilitate the fortunes of the film industry, the final scene showing Chaplin's return to Hollywood for his tearful 1972 Oscar tribute thus invokes a pathos that resonates with contemporary perceptions of Hollywood's fall from a 'golden age'. Now an old man that has long lived in exile in Switzerland after being denied re-entry after McCarthy's communist witch-hunts, a wheelchair-bound Chaplin becomes a clear identificatory symbol for a film industry that now competes with television and other communication technologies for what was once its sole audience to address. Thomas Elsaesser argues that

In the biopics the code that ensures unity is ultimately congruent with one of the most naturalized paradigms of all: that of a Life. [...]The biopic is a genre of special interest if it can be understood as trying to inscribe the spectator as an individual (the classical subject-position of American cinema) and as a member of a collectivity, a civic audience (a more specific, historical mode of inscription) held together by the force of personality (in this case the authenticated historical individual represented by the performer as specialist of metamorphosis rather than the star who is always identical with himself.³⁹

Through the ideology of a 'Life' *Chaplin* tells the story not only of one of cinema's great pioneers but also of itself, expressing sympathy and recognition of virtue in response to its own arguable decline as much as to that of Chaplin. Moreover, the film's persistent mode of address is one that encompasses the audiences that Chaplin

³⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Film History as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers *Bio-pic*', *Wide Angle*, Vol.8, No. 2 (1986), pp. 30-31.

and cinema address, a fickle collective bound by differences of class, nationality and political persuasion yet one that is addressed most effectively in terms of a common 'humanity'. As the Oscars crowd cheer for Chaplin's famous scenes during the tribute's sequence of clips, *Chaplin's* spectator is addressed most importantly as part of a cinema spectatorship for whom Chaplin (and more importantly, Hollywood) has provided a universal vernacular. By unifying individual and collective subjectivities within a rubric of sentimental nostalgia for a 'golden age' of Chaplin and Hollywood, the biopic here implores the spectator to recognize 'virtue in distress,' to right a wrong perpetrated by external malign forces. While the sequence begins with Chaplin's best-known comic episodes (including *The Circus* and *The Gold Rush* [1925]), it follows through to two scenes from *The Great Dictator* (1940), implicitly underscoring Chaplin's political allegiance with Western democracy and condemnation of the genocide of European Jews.

However, the final clips are reserved for Chaplin at his most pathetic, the rescue scene from *The Kid* followed by the Tramp's abandonment and famous walk away from camera at the end of *The Tramp*. As Chaplin now watches these scenes, tears fill his eyes as sympathy for his character and his own story finally coalesce through the cathartic process of cinematic spectatorship. While the Oscars seemed another demand on his time and energy on the part of a country and industry that had done little since his exile to deserve his return, it is the phenomenon of Hollywood cinema and its capacity to invoke self-integration that justifies itself amidst the still-present signifiers of hype, glitz and excess. The Tramp's adjustment of gait and walk away from camera, severed from the preceding material of *The Tramp* that is not shown, may become the clichéd message of what Charles Musser translates as 'c'est la vie' or

‘easy come, easy go’,⁴⁰ a take-home message of optimistic self-control when seen outside its narrative context. Yet Chaplin’s tearful reaction proves an investment of meaning in the sequence after all, as a direct reflection of his personal ‘life’ that *Chaplin* has also now delivered to the spectator. Only cinema itself is thus capable of such emotional orchestration, intensifying pathos with this final alignment of perspectives between the onscreen Chaplin, the elder Chaplin, the Oscar’s audience and, of course, the spectator of *Chaplin*. If this is ‘ideological cleansing’, it has arguably done its job, a nostalgic cinematic montage foregrounded as the only means of educating Chaplin himself, and us, as to his import. It is ultimately shown to be the collective cultural memory of Hollywood itself that redeems Chaplin’s dispirited elder self by serving in many ways as the most reliable biographer of all.

Accentuating the ‘troubled artist’ through the hackneyed ‘tears of the clown’, *Chaplin* may well be filtered of the ‘laughter’ that Benjamin and others once claimed as Chaplin’s most ‘revolutionary affect’, yet the revelation of the man (mirroring the Tramp) as a ‘man of feeling’ becomes itself invested with historical and moral significance concerning the sentimental subject’s self-realization. Cinema is advanced as a key medium in such respects, deploying character pathos as a means of intensifying rather than merely undermining the failure of certain critical ideals. In a scene showing a tuxedoed Chaplin leaving a gala and asked for an autograph by a pair of fans during the Great Depression, Chaplin acquiesces, while the elder Chaplin says morosely in voiceover ‘I wished they’d wanted my money.’ A reversal of the sentimental fallacy of the beggar on the street being ignored by the gentleman, here Chaplin’s sad guilt disavows an important alignment between the interests of the poor

⁴⁰ Charles Musser, ‘Work, Ideology and Chaplin’s Tramp,’ *Radical History Review*, Vol. 41 (1988), p. 48.

and needy and Chaplin's radical persona. Similarly, near the film's denouement, the elder Chaplin says self-dismissively to his biographer that 'I didn't change things...I...he just cheered people up'. With such statements, Chaplin echoes the assessments discussed above that consigned the Tramp persona to the melodramatic and theatrical as opposed to the radical or the transformative. Yet it is arguably the purpose of *Chaplin* (in accordance with the biopic's mode of address) to bracket and refute such disillusioned claims and dismissals, re-validating cinema's and Chaplin's success as owing precisely to their sentimental inspiration. What Chaplin's cinema failed to deliver in material or concretely political terms (making it comparable with most cinema surely) is addressed in sentimental terms, providing hope and moral 'feeling' precisely amidst the pathos of being unable to ensure all round prosperity, offer a clear course of political action, or end suffering definitively.

If the values invoked by such affect have become synonymous with a certain kind of naïve or regressive sentiment assumed of Hollywood and biopic in particular, the above discussion of Chaplin's historical reception and such films as *Chaplin* reveal the extent to which Hollywood has been consistently aligned with the pedagogical and morally idealist ideology of the sentimental. Indeed, such a figure as the Tramp becomes a crucial precursor to a wide array of contemporary cinematic icons that renew the same sentimental tropes. If Jerry Lewis in America, Totò in Italy and Norman Wisdom in Britain explicitly renewed the slapstick and pathos of the original tramp, Chaplin's aesthetic is also invoked by films further removed from slapstick as such. Examples such as the acrobatic down-and-out drug addict of Leos Carax's *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (1991),⁴¹ Roberto Benigni's clownish father in *La Vita è Bella*

⁴¹ USA - *The Lovers on the Bridge*.

(1997)⁴² and even Woody Allen's clumsy neurotic persona in many of his films (*Bananas*, 1971; *Sleeper*, 1973) testify to the enduring versatility of the Tramp's original formula of comic pathos in relation to a host of morally dramatic aims. Some, but not all, such films avoid accusations of naive sentimentality through recourse to an aesthetics of European arthouse or 'indie' cinema or a more pronounced use of formal irony or a cautious avoidance of melodramatic cliché. More explicitly historical or political referentiality might also mitigate such charges, invoking a wider scope of enquiry than that invoked by the 'narrow' focus on the melodramatic hero, offered and epitomized by the biopic.

In such respects, the extent to which Hollywood conventions become subject to nuance, irony and stylization becomes a key consideration in relation to whether films are deemed regressively sentimental in contemporary cinema. Intertextuality and reflexivity run alongside melodramatic narratives and sentimental tropes in post-classical blockbuster culture, as we have seen in *Chaplin*. We have seen how its hero very much embodied the problematics of the sentimental, his films animating its core concerns with the alienation of the individual in a hostile industrial, capitalist society while nevertheless invoking redemption through a bourgeois scheme of romance and pathos. Chaplin's gamble with the sentimental paid off, of course, the filmmaker realizing and depicting that which many before already knew to be a successful and truthful formula, concerning the interdependence between the comedic and the tragic. Moreover, and contrary to frequent assumptions, the socio-political significance of Chaplin's art was not lost on many of the modernist theorists discussed above, exhilarated as they were precisely by the sentimental impact of these 'social

⁴² USA – *Life is Beautiful*, dir. Roberto Benigni.

comedies' and their inspiration (critical or otherwise) of a global spectatorship. 'Feeling' was clearly considered vital to any lasting project of social change, and Chaplin's work was applauded as a paradigm of a certain classical Hollywood cinema that Miriam Hansen has recently persuasively described in terms of a 'vernacular modernism', in its fusion of classical and modernist elements.⁴³ I now turn to Steven Spielberg, who arguably is and continues to be a major exponent of the sentimental tradition in today's post-classical cinema, albeit subject to a host of critical detractors.

⁴³ Hansen nuances the classical v modernist binary inherited from literature and philosophy as an opposition with limited applicability to the cinema, examining in particular the cross-influences between early American film technique and Soviet modernist technique. See Miriam Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,' *Modernism/modernity* Vol. 6, no. 2 (1999), pp. 59–77.

Chapter Five

Redemption amidst Trauma: Spielberg's Sentimental Pedagogy

In Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the 'action' juxtaposed with the loss of life during the Normandy landings is an old man's visit to the graves of his WWII comrades and captain. This visit bookends the film and is the only part that takes place in the present. In the final battle scene of the film, Ryan's captain (played by Tom Hanks) has been fatally wounded by an exploding shell and addresses Ryan (Matt Damon) with his departing words. Having rescued the private for return back to the United States and his surviving family, Captain Miller and many squad members sacrificed themselves so that the Ryan family did not lose all their sons that went to war. Miller's final words to Ryan are 'Earn this,' an imperative that these losses, including his own life, be redeemed through Ryan's own actions. As an order from a dying man who recognizes that his time is up, Miller's demand is that his death be not in vain, that 'pathos' be productive. When he dies, the camera tracks back slightly but remains on his body and face, signifying an immediate response to this event through an adjustment in the camera's framing. As the spectator may be moved, the camera is analogically reframed. The film then cuts to another soldier who responds tearfully followed by a similar reaction shot of Ryan himself, who is also clearly moved by Miller's death.

Paradoxically, such scenes of 'pathos', comprised of facial close-ups and respondent reaction-shots of emotional characters, are remarkable for how little action occurs in the diegesis and how near such close-ups come to the stasis of the photographic still. Passive suffering is registered in the minute facial movements of mourners that almost

mimic death itself. When the film dissolves to Ryan's face in the present, now much older, yet holding precisely the same countenance as when he stood before the body of his captain, the emotional stakes of the sacrifice have changed as little as Ryan's physiognomy. A temporal shift therefore is demonstrated to have no effect on the immutable truth of human sentiment. The stasis of this response negates Miller's call to action ("Earn this."), a passive helplessness before such a potentially monumental order. It is the film itself that provides a possible answer in the following shot. As Ryan's family enter the frame where Ryan initially stands alone, the film asserts its principal rhetorical response to Miller's demand - family. The film becomes so pared down throughout this sequence to passive shots of Ryan's and others' faces, that it renders any additions to the *mise-en-scène* as especially enunciatory and loaded with meaning. The film here operates on the symbolic level, with Ryan's family standing in for all families, which in turn repeats the film's original moral imperative - the preservation of family against the agonies and inevitable sacrifices of war.

There is little question that sentimentality applies to these interlocking scenes of Ryan at war in the past and Ryan with his family in the present. But sentimental about what, and who exactly is being sentimental? Is it Ryan, Spielberg or the spectator/audience? Or is the scene, problematically for some, an evocation of all three projected as a community of shared emotions and beliefs? Discourses of sentimentality are invoked in many critiques of Spielberg's work, both explicitly and, as is the case with much scholarly analysis of his work, when the term is not deployed specifically. In contemporary cinema at least, there is probably no more visible nor successful filmmaker to whom sentimentality, as a pejoratively evaluative accusation, is more commonly levied or implied. To use the imperative laid down in *Ryan* by Miller,

(“Earn this”), Spielberg is all too often accused of *not* earning his endings, allowing implausible characterization and plot outcome or awe-inspiring scenes of spectacle to yield superficial and insufficient resolutions to the social, historical and psychological problems set out by his films. The endings to his films are by no means the only objects of scorn, but are often the most obvious, as instances of an emotional veering from realism and narrative cohesion to the Utopian pathos of melodrama.

Where many critics employ the term ‘sentimentality’ as a means of accusing Spielberg of manipulatively eliciting ‘unearned’ emotions from the spectator, others see sentiment as one of a great number of ‘affects’ that his oeuvre can and should evoke. In terms of critical film theory, and in relation to film spectatorship, the distinction between realism and melodrama suggests a concomitant distinction in emotional response between the two modes: critical detachment and the clear apprehension of truth for the former, emotional absorption and optimistic idealism in the latter. However, film theory has more or less dispensed with the notion of any unified and coherent ‘subject position’ in relation to a film-text, preferring a subjectivity that occupies a plurality of identities and belief-systems and performs a heterogeneous variety of reading strategies.¹ Accusations of manipulation and ‘pressing the buttons’ of the spectator have long given way to an acceptance of the repetitions and continuities of generic conventions across films, now fully accepting rather than dismissive of those implicated in the elicitation of strong, sentimental emotions.² Moreover, binaries such as realism versus melodrama or modernism

¹ For an incisive introductory discussion of the transformations in ‘subject position’ theory, see Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Studying TV Audiences Today: Voodoo, Shamans and Prospectors?’, in Jostein Gripsrud & Kathrine Skretting (eds.), *History of Moving Images*, Oslo: Levende Bilder, 1994, pp. 171-79.

² See the discussions about ‘sentimentality’ and genre in Ed S. H. Tan, and Nico, H. Frijda, ‘Sentiment in Film Viewing’, in Carl Plantinga & Greg M. Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and*

versus sentiment are often considered far from mutually exclusive sets of aesthetic criteria, as illustrated above as a key feature of the sentimental tradition itself. Indeed, as we have seen in other chapters, finding the ‘poetics’ of sentiment distasteful or unearned can be looked upon as a mean-spirited rejection of popular entertainment, one that is grounded in an elitist and anachronistic stoicism that seeks to sustain hierarchies of high and low art (in the previous chapter, this is most manifest in the ‘vulgar’ modernism that privileged Keaton over Chaplin or slapstick over sentiment). This process in turn becomes implicated in the reproduction of an agenda of class, race or gender divisions as determined and policed by categories of ‘taste.’³

It is perhaps this kind of critical taste that Lester Friedman has in mind when he writes of a continued dismissive attitude towards Spielberg’s oeuvre on the part of a scholarly majority, that for him still considers this popular filmmaker’s work unworthy of critical examination. Thus:

The standard scholarly view resolutely positions Spielberg as little more than a modern P.T. Barnum, a technically gifted and intellectually shallow showman who substitutes spectacle for substance and emotion for depth. Read any extended account of his work, and you will quickly recognize the party line echoed by most academic writers: Spielberg (along with his pal George Lucas) is responsible for two of the greatest sins in modern cinema history- the Blockbuster mentality that permeates the commercial film industry and the infantilization of contemporary movies.⁴

Emotion, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 48-64, 261-2; Carl Plantinga, ‘Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism’ in Richard Allen & Murray Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 372-93.

³ For a detailed discussion of taste hierarchies, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice (trans.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. As applied to cinema, see Jeffrey Sconce, ‘Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style’, *Screen* Vol. 36, No. 4 (1995), pp. 371-93 and Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

⁴ Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006, p. 2.

Such widespread and ubiquitous dismissal of Spielberg implies a scholarly community stuck in an ivory tower mentality that has little truck with mainstream film culture. The underlying rubric of a critical attitude of this kind is that the critic or scholar sees greater complexity or reality beyond that which is depicted by the straightforward characterization or plot of a Spielberg film. The critic's reading strategy is attuned to the intertextuality of a film, whereby one's knowledge of the texts or devices that Spielberg has drawn upon allows one to be distanced from the effects of the film's mode of action. Secondly, a "naïve" spectator is assumed who is wholly "taken in" by a Spielberg film's rhetoric, one who weeps at the onset of sentimental cues, feels aggressive at the onset of action and violence, or is immersively awestruck by scenes of special-effects. Nigel Morris, in his book on Spielberg's films, *Empire of Light*,⁵ likens this binary of spectatorial positions to the Symbolic and the Imaginary of Christian Metz's *Imaginary Signifier*.⁶ The dualism of critic and naïve spectator, he argues, works on a facile assumption that the naïve spectator enjoys a wholly Imaginary relation to the text, immersed passively in narrative and emotional cueing processes, whereas the critic occupies a superior, Symbolic position, comprehending the text as a set of signs and asserting a critical distance between himself and the text. Morris is very sceptical that either position can ever apply to an actual spectator or actual type of spectator, and wonders why 'sentimental', with its potentially dismissive connotations, cannot instead be substituted by 'emotional' as an appropriate adjective for Spielberg's work.⁷

⁵ Nigel Morris, *Empire of Light: The Cinema of Steven Spielberg*, London: Wallflower Press, 2007, pp. 17-8.

⁶ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (trans.), London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 301-304.

⁷ Morris, *Empire of Light*, p. 381.

Indeed, despite Friedman's serious engagement with such critical voices in his detailed analysis of Spielberg's oeuvre, I would suggest that scholarly and critical approaches to Hollywood cinema, including Spielberg's films, have for some time constituted its objects of analysis in more nuanced and complex terms than suggested by the kind of Frankfurt-school negativism implied by Friedman above. Whether it be analysis of the 'Woman's film'⁸, melodrama as a pervasive Hollywood 'mode',⁹ Hollywood violence and masculinity,¹⁰ the 'guy-cry' genre¹¹ or studies of filmmakers ranging from James Cameron¹² to Bryan Singer¹³, popular culture and contemporary film have certainly been considered a serious and significant object of study for some time.

When considering sentimentality in relation to popular cinema, Spielberg's in particular, it may be tempting to begin by assuming a solid constituency of theoretical opposition to sentiment as a means of mounting a straightforward defence. As

⁸ See Mary-Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

⁹ See Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised', in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 42-88.

¹⁰ See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

¹¹ A phrase in common coinage within popular film criticism, corresponding with the Hollywood tradition of the 'male weepie' discussed by Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres, Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981, pp. 239-242. See also John Mercer & Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*, Wallflower Press, 2004, pp. 98-104.

¹² See James Kendrick, 'Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1999), pp. 36-44.

¹³ See Jonathan Eig, 'A Beautiful Mind(Fuck): Hollywood Structures of Identity', *Jump Cut*, Vol. 46 (2003).

previous chapters have established, to conceive of the sentimental as a ubiquitously dismissed aesthetic both fails to grasp the concept's full import and implies a spectatorship that approaches art from a strident anti-humanism, a case that is not borne out by many scholarly studies of Spielberg and melodrama. Unambiguous dismissals of naïve sentimentality in cinema can nevertheless be located in more middlebrow film journalism that remains committed to film evaluation and a more conservative upholding of taste categories. Moreover, given the extent to which film journalism contributes very significantly to the cultural reputation of actors and filmmakers, these latter channels of discourse are of crucial interest to a study such as this that seeks to examine the overall reception of such figures as Chaplin and Spielberg, rather than their treatment within exclusively scholarly circles. Indeed, given the extent to which the sentimental is intimately bound up with notions of bourgeois pedagogy and the social functions of art in relation to ordinary spectators, Spielberg's reputation becomes important precisely in relation to film culture writ large, as represented most visibly by film critics.

Friedman's claims may seem simplistic concerning Spielberg's academic dismissal yet the extent to which his scholarly reception is influenced by popular opinion should not be discounted. Spielberg, as discussed below, continues to elicit a sometimes vitriolic criticism from more theoretically-inclined voices that rehearse objections to his films more commonplace in film criticism. What remains of interest to this study is therefore the extent to which, despite intensive scholarship on melodrama, affect and emotion in film, sentimentality as a specific and identifiable aspect of Spielberg's cinema may continue to be subject to qualification and bracketing compared to other

attributes that are more easily recognized as markers of aesthetic significance. I argue in such a vein that such attributes as irony, reflexivity, ideological contradiction, and the stylistic continuities of an auteur's corpus impact significantly on how we conceive of Spielberg as a director of note. I further contend that each has a specific bearing on how we might also conceive of this director's sentimental attributes, not least if the latter are sometimes considered as such at the expense of or despite the presence of the former attributes.

Spielberg the Ironist?

In many respects, Spielberg's brand of storytelling and technique has earned him a reputation as anything but an ironic filmmaker. Irony has been historically perceived as a marker of self-reflexivity and 'excess' in relation to the 'conventional' Hollywood narrative, endowing the overall work with critical significance through 'defamiliarisation' or the presence of a detached voice in relation to a 'dominant mode of address', Spielberg is often lambasted for his alleged overenthusiasm for reproducing generic conventions without modification. Peter Biskind argues disparagingly that Spielberg and George Lucas returned audiences to the 'simplicities of the pre-'60s Golden Age of movies' by a combination of processes summed up as:

infantilizing the audience, reconstituting the spectator as child, then overwhelming him and her with sound and spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and critical reflection.¹⁴

¹⁴ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1998, p. 344.

In these comments, Biskind concisely rehearses what has become a standard criticism of Spielberg and his sometime co-producer George Lucas, specifically that neither trades in the irony that has become *de rigueur* for a (post)modernist sensibility. Sentimentality within such a rubric serves as a signifier once more of both kitsch and cheaply elicited emotion, and particularly with Spielberg, of a glossy, melodramatic, optimistic mode of address in relation to potentially dark themes. It is crucially also marked by an absence of self-reflexivity in favour of more direct, unmediated modes of address.

However, one of the key interventions on the part of a widespread critical assessment of Spielberg's work concerns precisely the extent to which such work may be considered to possess the marks of self-awareness and self-quotation, such as in the analysis of *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001) below. Through such work, I argue that Spielberg has more recently been analysed precisely within such terms (including their Brechtian senses), such that some of his work becomes realigned with modernist ideas of defamiliarisation and alienated subjectivity. *AI*'s final scene, at once sentimental (and widely panned for bathos), is 'redeemed' for its ironic foregrounding of its status as 'fantasy.'

Such accounts now negotiate with shifts in critical theory itself where such attributes as irony, intertextuality and aesthetic self-consciousness are not quite the attributes of unmistakable 'critique' that they once were. Theories of melodrama and Hollywood narrative have clearly moved on from the 'Sirkian' moment where the identification of Brechtian irony in the text, through interventions in sound, music and colour, proved sure indicators of progressive defamiliarisation from the conventional

Hollywood narrative.¹⁵ The key shift in such respects concerns the extent to which self-reflexivity could no longer be considered proof of a text's adherence to a 'political-modernist' agenda, and can just as easily denote the indulgent self-referentiality of an apoliticised postmodern culture.¹⁶ This is indeed precisely where Spielberg enters the field, for he is commonly recognized far more as a film buff and playful quoter of retrograde genres than as any kind of proponent of modernist irony. He is seen as the 'eternal kid'¹⁷ who unthinkingly reproduces the genres of his and the 'baby-boomer' generation's coming of age. Acts of reference and self-consciousness are more often deemed complicit with the propagation of nostalgic escape and regression rather than a means to aesthetic critique. Much criticism levelled at Spielberg indeed concerns the extent to which this filmmaker's deep knowledge of American cinema is considered to yield little more than self-indulgent allusions to the retrograde genres reproduced for a mass audience. Updating B-movie genres and offering knowing nods or in-jokes in relation to his own exercises of revision lead many critics to consider Spielberg a figure so immersed in the 'movies' that he can only reproduce the regressive ideology of earlier genres. From *Close Encounters*' direct references to De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, to The Indiana Jones trilogy's repackaging of the 1930s Republic serials, Spielberg has always openly

¹⁵ See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London: BFI Publishing, 1987, pp. 43-70; Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home is Where the Heart is*, pp. 1-39; Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, pp. 75-83; David N. Rodowick, 'Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s', in *Home is Where the Heart is*, pp. 268-80.

¹⁶ See Frederic Jameson's arguments concerning 'blank parody' in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 16-25, and a less pessimistic appraisal of postmodern parody in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*, Illinois: University of Illinois, 2000. For a defence of Spielbergian pastiche in particular, see Nigel Morris, *Empire of Light: The Cinema of Steven Spielberg*, London: Wallflower Press, 2007, pp. 160-4.

¹⁷ Derek Malcolm, 'Empire of the Eternal Kid,' *The Guardian (London)*, June 17, 1989.

acknowledged and celebrated his influences and precursors. He even references his own past work, such his spoof of *Jaws* (1975) in an early sequence of his wartime comedy *1941* (1979), using the same actress that was killed by the shark in the earlier film and substituting the submarine for a shark, which for some invokes smug self-congratulation rather than any kind of reflexive critique in such respects. Such intertextuality and revisionism (or lack thereof) becomes equated with the kind of ‘blank parody’ that Frederic Jameson deems a key feature of a fatally apoliticised postmodernity.¹⁸ Such referentiality looms large indeed in Lester Friedman’s concise list of the standard faults levied at Spielberg’s films, which he lists as:

- 1). Their highly ritualized and formulaic character,
- 2). Their interminable solipsism (self-celebrating and self-referential;
- 3) their flattering of the spectator with his or her familiarity with conventional forms;
- 4) their escapist sensibility;
- 5) their refusal to challenge the viewer;
- 6) their overt signalling of how audiences ought to feel;
- 7) their simplistic resolution of tensions and anxieties
- 8) their pleasurable obviousness; and
- 9) their insistence on their unreality, playfulness and detachment from real issues.

Such objections are confined not merely to those of 1980s critics that proclaimed Spielberg (and his sometime co-producer George Lucas) as a purveyor of ‘Reaganite entertainment’ nor are they directed solely at films of that decade.¹⁹ Writers such as Wheeler Winston Dixon have rather more recently listed ‘the malign influence of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas’ in 2001 as one of ‘Twenty-Five reasons Why

¹⁸ Jameson argues, in reference to the genre revisionism of *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) for instance, that ‘Faced with these ultimate objects – our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as ‘referent’ – the incompatibility of a postmodernist ‘nostalgia’ art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent.’ (*Postmodernism*, p. 19).

¹⁹ See Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam To Reagan*, New York: Columbia University Press and Andrew Britton, ‘Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment’, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 97-154.

It's All Over,' referring to the demise of contemporary American cinema in a critical anthology focusing on precisely such a decline.²⁰

However, as discussed above, I would suggest that a more fine-tuned discussion is made necessary by Spielberg's frequent invocations of self-reflexivity and sentimentality. As with *Chaplin* and as discussed below in relation to *AI*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Schindler's List* (1993), sentimental and ironic modes of address often function simultaneously in Spielberg's work, challenging the spectator to occupy multiple levels of reception at once. In such respects, a sentimental mode of address becomes bracketed by a host of historical, generic, and stylistic intertexts, as well as contexts of reception that make the spectatorship of Spielberg's films a far more complex affair. Through frequent appeals to moral instruction, Utopian idealism, alongside a keen fidelity to historical actuality, a Spielberg film's naïve sentimentality from a late 20th century/21st century perspective should be considered within the rather more longstanding and inclusive parameters of the term offered by this thesis's early chapters. If sentimentality's purpose was at one time to instruct the spectator or reader, to put the latter in a position of moral, social and political 'knowledge', it is a Spielberg film's clear adherence to such priorities that problematizes the supposed naïveté that is fostered by their recourse to sentimentality. If the key opposition of naïve sentiment and ironic reflexivity have at times seemed mutually exclusive attributes of the text or spectator reception, such an aesthetic provides what we might consider "a third way" between such models, fostering neither the regressive naïveté of the former nor the cool detachment of the latter. As a true inheritor, like Chaplin, of a sentimental tradition analysed above, Spielberg's

²⁰ Wheeler Winston-Dixon, 'Twenty-five Reasons Why It's All Over', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema As We Know It*, London: Pluto Press, p. 361.

films adhere to an aesthetic that negotiates between sentiment and irony or melodrama and modernism in order to maintain cinema as an above all communicative, pedagogical and affective art.

The film *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, particularly its ending, exemplifies the extent to which sentiment and irony become interwoven textually in Spielberg's work, and is fascinating in terms of how critics have attempted to recuperate Spielberg for his fostering of precisely the kind of critical spectatorship associated with a quasi-Brechtian model of disengagement and realism. The following analysis of *AI*'s finale therefore unpacks how a typical Spielberg move is recuperated in such terms.

Although many critics have come to regard *Artificial Intelligence: AI* as a film that marks Spielberg's transition to more thoughtful territory, the film's ending split the critics between those that regarded it as Spielberg's inevitable descent into bathos, and those that accepted and applauded the director's rhetorical style as one that engages mimetic emotion *and* displays a sophisticated intertextuality. Scenes of love and reconciliation are a chief attraction of Spielberg's work, whether between mothers and sons, boys and aliens (*E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* [1982]) or benevolent patriarchs and the victimized groups that they come to rescue (*Schindler's List*, *Amistad* [1997]). The end of *AI* represents a sequence that encodes the 'perfect day' between a mother and her son, David, a day comprised exclusively of the child experiencing his mother's uninterrupted attention and love. It is only in consideration of the narrative that precedes this scene and its sad facts that this scene's pathos can be actualized, for David is not a real boy but an artificial life-form, designed and purchased in order to love his human mother unconditionally and without her necessary reciprocation.

The “perfect-day” sequence takes place 2000 years after David is abandoned by his human mother/owner in favour of her own son, who after David is bought and activated, recovers from a coma and returns to his family. The sequence is a simulation created for David by other far more sophisticated artificial life-forms of the future, after he has endured 2000 years of abandonment and solitude and is finally rediscovered under a massive sheet of ice that covers what was New York City. It is his birthday, a day that allows this robot-child to be particularly indulged by his immediate family, except there are strangely no other people around, no siblings and no father. Mother and child go about happily playing games, painting pictures and eating birthday cake as if no one else exists. At the end of the day, his mother, tired from the day’s fun and games, needs to take to bed. She falls asleep with David next to her. The narrator tells us that for the first time David fell asleep and went to that place where ‘dreams are born.’ The film ends with softly played piano music, a child-like, restful happy ending with which to fade to black. Pathos is intensified with the knowledge that David’s mother, reincarnated by these super robots from a lock of her hair, cannot live longer than one day; she does not simply sleep at the day’s end but also dies.

The film scholar James Naremore has likened this final scene to a ‘Freudian wet dream’ considering the clear Oedipal trajectory of David’s desires.²¹ He admits nevertheless to being moved to tears by it. This is certainly a sentimental scene, although it is one, according to Naremore, that never lets the spectator forget its status as artifice, and indeed thematizes that artificiality at the levels of both form and story. Indeed, the whole scene can be seen as a self-conscious masterclass in the

²¹ James Naremore, ‘Love and Death in AI Artificial Intelligence,’ *Michigan Quarterly Review* Vol. 44, No. 2 (2005), p. 258.

sentimental: softly-played music that runs through the sequence; the use of soft-focus camera lenses, bathing characters in sunlight thereby accenting their idealized status in the story; extreme close-ups of characters gazing at one another with love; and the face of a character moved to a single tear that falls slowly down his cheek. The latter trope in particular has of course become a staple of Hollywood melodrama, a moment of sentimental catharsis where inner pain is expressed alongside the sense of a character's enlightenment, or resignation to a sad state of affairs. From such classic final scenes as *Casablanca's* (1942) farewell between lovers, and a socially abandoned Stella's witnessing of her own daughter's wedding from afar in *Stella Dallas* (1937), to those of *E.T.* (1982) and *Ghost* (1990), the single tear expresses a pathos that almost dare not be felt by the subject in distress. A sign of the intellect's struggle to hold back emotion and its evident, righteous defeat, the falling tear epitomizes the sentimental tradition in its visual articulation of the latter's principle oppositions. In *AI's* final scene too, such a trope, among other conventions, are present and correct, and can be recognized by any spectator with a reasonable familiarity with the movies.

Viewing sentimentality pejoratively is often, however, about the recognition of devices such as those above and dismissing them as kitschy manipulations of the text that produce desired responses in a vulnerable spectator. David Denby, in the *New Yorker*, for instance, accusing Spielberg of excess in *AI*, writes:

Spielberg likes warmth and sentiment in his pictures. In the past, children have been the perfect vehicle for his emotion, but in "AI," with a brilliant child actor on hand, he loses his common sense and milks the kid to death.[...] David is not only the ultimate goody-goody; he's the spirit of pure, yearning adoration[...]The movie

weirdly pours treacle over a foundation of despair, and any genuine emotion drops out of it.²²

Here, Denby identifies the key tropes of Spielbergian ‘treacle’, as it were - a child actor playing a character that encapsulates what the literary scholar R.F. Brissenden first termed ‘Virtue in Distress,’²³ a key ingredient of sentimental fiction and drama. The face of the child, as Denby recognizes it, has the capacity to display hyperbolic levels of pathos and innocence, is over-played by Spielberg. Denby evokes an age-old scepticism in relation to the idealized figure of the benevolent protagonist - here, the ‘goody-goody’ child who can do no wrong yet who is persecuted by a cruel society. Rehearsing Oscar Wilde’s comments in relation to Little Nell, as discussed in Chapter Two, Denby continues a longstanding suspicion of the idealized child and the latter’s invocation of a cloying Victorianism.

The critic that dismisses the idealized representation of children as sentimental thus calls for something that David Denby earlier on terms ‘common sense’; an attribute that either filmmaker or spectator is implored to possess as immunization to ‘feeling’ in relation to morally one-dimensional characters. Another critical term for this ‘common sense’ might be ‘realism,’ which although ambiguously employed in various critical discourses, is often opposed to the extreme moral polarities and simplicities of melodrama. However, the theorization of such spectatorship fails to acknowledge the spectator’s ability to read a film intertextually, especially with films

²² David Denby, ‘FACE; OFF; Steven Spielberg meets Stanley Kubrick,’ *The New Yorker*, July 2, 2001, p. 86.

²³ R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*, Macmillan: London, 1974.

such as Spielberg's, whose oeuvre is suffused with references to other films. Indeed, a Spielberg film may seem a strange target for such charges, given the frequency with which this director foregrounds the status of his films as works of great artifice, from the astounding special effects of many of his films to the frequent games he plays by misdirecting spectator expectations, in such movies as *Jaws*, *Duel* (1971) and *Schindler's List*. The final scene of *AI* is certainly no exception, and indeed has been identified as a key instance of bracketed sentiment. Evoking the influence of the fairy-tale genre in its employment of a storybook narrator, the sequence is tacked onto the narrative of *AI* itself as an artificially engineered performance of David's Oedipal desires for his mother. All the clichés mentioned earlier are there, drawn from long-established literary and movie traditions, of which Spielberg is himself a contemporary proponent. The Blue-Fairy that David hopes will grant him his wish of return to his mother, is directly referenced from *Pinocchio* but also invokes such fairies as Peter Pan's Tinkerbell or Cinderella's Fairy Godmother. The narrator that relates the events of David's 'happiest day' possesses the even-toned, calming timbre of a parent's voice during a bedtime story. The awakening of David's artificially engineered mother recalls the famous awakenings of such heroines as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, for whom David represents a bizarre incarnation of a junior Prince Charming. David's best friend Teddy, an artificial teddy bear that stays loyal to him to the end, also of course invokes childhood and belongs to the world of fairy-tale.

In such respects, the end sequence serves as a mechanically-reproduced prosthetic that fits on the end of *AI* with its joins and seams intentionally showing, in terms of its obvious allusions to fairy-tale and cinematic tropes. Indeed, if some see *AI* as the

glossing over of Kubrick's modernist ending with a gratuitous Spielberg veneer that provides the obligatory feelgood ending, others defend the latter's treatment in postmodern terms. For it is precisely in the extent to which genericity is foregrounded by the scene, that other critics and theorists have deemed the scene as approaching parody or, more accurately, pastiche. In a short essay on Spielberg's sentimentality, Dag Sødtholt argues that with this scene, 'Spielberg here at last rids himself of his most troublesome artistic Achilles' heel, by a brave and paradoxical act: actually magnifying his patented 'happy ending' to its extreme.'²⁴ Michael Koresky similarly problematizes whether this 'wish-fulfilment finale was to be taken literally', and questions most forcefully those 'cynical viewers' that considered it merely another Spielbergian 'happy ending.' Koresky instead deems the scene's vital asset as its envisioning of a 'domestic warmth so chilly that the line between reality and fantasy never becomes fully delineated.'²⁵ What becomes at issue therefore is the extent to which spectators would be attuned to such hyperbole and could appreciate such blurring, as distinct from those that might have preferred the more 'modernist' ending: what Koresky terms 'existential angst' invoked by David's remaining trapped in a frozen 'amphibicopter' looking up at the Blue Fairy for eternity. For both critics, irony and disjuncture are incontrovertibly present in the scene - whether the scene 'works' becomes a question of the spectator's recognition of such complexity.

²⁴ Dag Sødtholt, 'Warning: Sentimentality!', in 'The Question Spielberg: A Symposium' at http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/spielberg_symposium_films_and_moments.html#sodtholt, accessed 1st March 2009.

²⁵ Michael Koresky, 'Twilight of the Idyll', in 'The Question Spielberg: A Symposium' at http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/spielberg_symposium_films_and_moments.html#koresky, accessed 1st March 2009.

In such respects, Spielberg's work is redeemed owing to how he shows himself able not only to quote his own style but to deliver a cathartic moment, while at the same time undermining its reality. It is possible to take the scene both at face-value and as a philosophical meditation on the constructedness of a child's seemingly natural desires. Whether the spectator is a connoisseur of films and film technique or a more 'naïve' viewer who responds more to story than to formal concerns, Spielberg makes it clear that he is aware that both kinds of spectator can respond to this scene and, indeed, that neither position is mutually exclusive nor preferred. It can be considered both the epitome of Spielberg's sentimental oeuvre as well as a cleverly self-conscious riposte to those who condemn his sentimentality on the grounds of the latter's alleged distortions and artificiality.

AI's 'change of gear' can thus very well be considered evidence of Spielberg's self-consciousness as an auteur and as an ironic commentary on the sometimes jarring leaps of logic that characterizes his brand of rhetoric. The conflation of modes fosters an ambiguous mode of reception that is both sentimental and ironic, consoling and alienating. Feelings of 'warmth and sentiment' conveyed by the scene compete with the 'chilly' uncertainties of its truth claims, unanswered questions and foregrounding of parodic intent. The film thereby remains within the parameters of a 'melodramatic mode' outlined by Linda Williams while deflecting accusations of sentimental naiveté with respect to its ending. A brief comparison between the endings of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *AI* illustrates a key difference in tone in such respects, despite the films' thematic and philosophical similarities. When Dave Bowman shuts down HAL 9000 near the end of *2001*, his actions are clearly those of a man who seeks to survive in an environment controlled by an amoral and evidently

hostile artificial lifeform. Yet as he persists in his deactivation of HAL, disabling one memory bank after another, with his face largely unmoved and resolved, he engages compassionately with a HAL who knows precisely what's going on and tries to persuade Dave to stop. While HAL, nearing his complete deactivation, sings 'Daisy-Daisy' as an evocation of his own nursery days, showing the spectator how HAL too had a virtual childhood and an actual 'father-creator' in 'Dr. Chandra', there is little question that Kubrick has nuanced the spectator's perception of HAL from evil monster to a complex lifeform with an acute sense of mortality. Like David in *AI*, HAL is constructed by humans and therefore is shown to be at least partially human and more than capable of eliciting sympathy. Whether HAL does this manipulatively or unintentionally is less important than the question of how human sympathy responds so powerfully to coded data and pre-existent schemata. Similar questions are applicable of course to cinema too, in relation to its own genericity, or in 'new-media' terms, programmability.

It is no big analogical leap to see *AI*'s final scene as a re-enactment of the cinematic scenario itself, with David standing in as the paradigm of the spectator who knows what he sees to be a transient illusion, but nevertheless performs his part in this fantasy scenario unhesitatingly. Informed at the outset by a beneficent life-form of the future that his artificially engineered mother will be with him for only one day, David knows that what he experiences that day is an illusion, yet holds on to the belief that she will remain. Programmed with a child's mentality that finds death and impermanence to be particularly incomprehensible, *AI*'s hero foregrounds the latent disavowals of cinematic spectatorship itself, not least in relation to the sequence within which he participates. Epitomizing the credulity of childhood, this surrogate

spectator is unable to fully accept the image's unreality despite clear evidence to the contrary, buoyed rather by the cathartic stakes of the sentimental moment and the melodramatic justice that it embodies. The sequence invites us to act on a similar disavowal of our own disbelief, while acknowledging the problematics of doing so in its own mode of action.

In such respects, *2001* and *AI* both foreground cinema's own role in meditating on the blurred meanings of "human" as opposed to "artificial". However, despite the pathos of the final scenes described above, the films ultimately proceed in discursively distinct and arguably opposite directions. To the extent that *2001* remains focused on 'man' and the latter's struggle with mortality, Dave Bowman emerges as a man who has severed ties with humanity and his last pseudo-human companion in order to survive, a fate that leads him to a strange, alienated transcendence in the final sequence of the film. Entrusted with the secrets of the monolith, Bowman must now live a solitary existence in a strange set of rooms decorated in classical style, the grey hair of one of his incarnations signifying the experience of trauma, the extreme aging of his other incarnation invoking a long duration or even an inhuman immortality. *AI* does the inverse, by suggesting that existence begins and ends with acts of love and familial bonds and where it is better to 'love' for a single day than live an alienated eternity in a parallel cosmic dimension, as Bowman does. David may or may not know he is experiencing a temporary and unmistakably artificial reconstruction of a blissful scenario, despite a crushing rejection by his mother earlier on in the film, but he is still able to desire her fictional reincarnation.

This of course has deeply philosophical implications. If ‘love’ can be so clearly encoded as a series of operations that would satisfy a long-persecuted robot, Spielberg asks us what it means for us to be so emotionally invested in the happy resolution of this pseudo-human’s longings. At the same time, however, such reflexivity in relation to cinema and its relation to artificial intelligence serves only to intensify the scene’s pathos rather than diminish it. The film asserts that if artificial intelligence is all that remains in the long-distant future, or if its vision serves as an analogy for our own contemporary media-saturated world, it is better that cultural values of kindness and ‘humane’ modes of address be upheld than the alienated solitude of *2001*’s future. In such respects, *AI* adheres to a sentimental tradition of emotional pedagogy that affirms the importance of moral civility despite the death of humanity, the latter becoming the ultimate condition of constructed and self-reflexive truth or reason. If *2001* affirms in HAL that a perfect simulation of reasoned humanity acts as little guarantee of moral stability, HAL’s conduct and deactivation contrasts markedly with *AI*’s staging of the ‘perfect day’ for David, the latter serving as a moral rather than a necessarily pragmatic response to the existence of machines that have developed vulnerabilities that are all too ‘human’.

History Lessons

AI exemplifies Spielberg's frequent deployment of the family as both a site of great devotion and great pain, in its fragmentation (a central thematic also of *E.T.*, *Close Encounters* and *Hook* [1991], and perhaps most overtly of *Poltergeist* [1982]²⁶). This hardly, however, exhausts the possibility for discussing sentimentality in Spielberg's cinema, nor its reflexive aspects, for another significant strand of his work concerns the sentimentalization of male heroism, exhibited at times of war or racial persecution. Often epitomizing the 'action blockbuster' genre, such films as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Amistad* or *Schindler's List* provide a different generic context within which the melodramatic 'mode' continues to be drawn upon by Spielberg, bringing with them a different set of critical questions. Indeed, Spielberg's recourse to sentimentality has been dismissed as kitschy distortion most forcefully in those of his films concerned with recounting real historical events. This has led film scholars such as Bill Nichols to argue, for instance, that Spielberg's historical films of the 1990s have 'replaced ethics with spectacle and history with fantasy,'²⁷ targeting aspects of these films such as the stereotypicality of supporting characters, the idealization of 'white male heroes of gentle character' and the Manichean divide between good and bad characters (of which Nazis are the most frequently and unambiguously vilified). Despite 'documentary trappings', such films as *Ryan* are deemed disingenuous by Nichols in their maintenance of Hollywood-style 'psychological realism', 'suspense' and 'spectacle'. As such, the cultural values articulated by Spielberg's historical war films provoke Nichols to argue the following with palpable irony:

²⁶ Directed by Tobe Hooper, but produced by Spielberg and very much bearing the latter's signature in terms of theme and style.

²⁷ Bill Nichols, 'The 10 Stations of Spielberg's Passion: "Saving Private Ryan." "Amistad." "Schindler's List."', *Jump Cut* 43, July 2000, p. 11.

Great wars serve great principles. Individual soldiers, though, don't trust the noble rhetoric of their leaders. Still, Schindler's List they know real values when they see them. They willingly sacrifice for others. They give their lives to a greater cause. And those who survive combat, slavery or the Holocaust dare not forget the price others paid so that they might live. Pvt. Ryan, for example, in the bookend scenes of flashback plaintively asks his wife, "Am I a good man?" There is nothing like war to produce a sense of honourable conduct and noble purpose in citizens, if they survive.²⁸

Nichols' comments exemplify the extent to which Spielberg's melodramatic treatment of history has been met with ironic cynicism in some critical quarters. Where Spielberg attempts to make the moral stakes of war legible in terms of a melodramatic Hollywood tradition, such an approach is deemed an instance of gross manipulation, with invocations of patriotism serving merely to 'inoculate itself from criticism', to coin Nigel Morris' words,²⁹ while maximising popularity and profit. In a similar vein, in Wheeler Winston Dixon's listing of the 'the malign influence of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas',³⁰ it is the melodrama of *Saving Private Ryan* that most offends, for it demonstrates how:

One can cobble together a stunning opening sequence by duplicating (or replicating) actual battle footage, and then graft it onto a thoroughly sentimental and ordinary combat narrative, with Tom Hanks standing in for Jimmy Stewart.³¹

For Dixon, Spielberg's early films (citing also *Duel* and the Indiana Jones trilogy) at least proved him to be a 'superb action filmmaker' while it is the sentimental narrative

²⁸ Ibid.,

²⁹ Morris, *Empire of Light*, p. 296.

³⁰ Dixon, 'Twenty-Five Reasons Why It's All Over', p. 361.

³¹ Ibid., p. 361.

of *Saving Private Ryan* that best evidences Spielberg's 'distressing lack of depth.' While 'action' and the 'sentimental' are both presumed as genres with their own cinematic traditions, it is the latter that epitomizes *Ryan's* genericity and ordinariness in excess of the former.

Yet as a director who has often operated in the action 'genre', Spielberg has always ensured that spectator engagement with characters is as important as astonishment at spectacle and special effects. To this end, and in accordance with an established Hollywood tradition, focalisation on key characters remains a vital means of conveying the emotional stakes of all events that take place in his films. *Saving Private Ryan* arguably exemplifies Spielberg's mastery of showing how grand events, the Normandy landings no less, impact on individuals, through his focus on a small band of soldiers that are re-deployed from the grand offensive to a rescue mission. In such respects, the film's pedagogy is motivated by the will to convey the experience of war on individuals in as complete a manner as possible, with an above all *polysemic* mode of address encompassing an aesthetics of simulation (the landings themselves), more theatrical models (honourable speeches, death scenes and soliloquy) and a plurality of political stances in relation to war, patriotism and bravery.

The chief flaw of the film for critics is the alleged grafting of redemptive meaning onto war, despite the opening scene's nods to the senselessness of slaughter via graphic realism. Indeed, given the realism of the latter sequence, it is the perception of a jarring shift towards the melodrama and redemption of the rescue party narrative that provokes such critique even further, for it is deemed a sentimental falsification of

the earlier sequence's horrors. Through melodrama's emphasis on story, character and empathy, the film instead identifies war as an opportunity for individual development and moral lessons or redemption. It therefore effaces the rhetoric of nihilistic meaninglessness that conventionally characterises the 'anti-war' film's rhetoric.

Indeed for Gabbard:

Spielberg departs from the more recent paradigm of war films in the 1970s and 1980s by suggesting, sentimentally and without irony, that war is about building character and not about brutality and stupidity. Most disturbingly, he joins those who have promoted conservative retrenchment through nostalgia for the war years.³²

Once more favouring the more explicit anti-war films of 1970s and 1980s auteur cinema (*M*A*S*H** [1974], *Apocalypse Now* [1979], *Born on the Fourth of July* [1989], *Full Metal Jacket* [1987], and possibly *The Deer Hunter* [1978]) over Spielberg's exercise of 'revisionism', such criticism of *Ryan* condemns a mode of address that is deemed to approach WWII with no apparent irony or ambiguity (thus reading the movie indeed as a particularly untimely mythical legitimating of American military might in light of its continued deployments in Bosnia and the Middle East during the 1990s). Through what Gabbard terms a 'fascination and reverence for war', *Ryan* is considered nothing less than propaganda for an overly self-righteous nation that continues to enforce an ideology of war as both 'necessary and life-defining.'³³ While the 'anti-war' film promoted a nihilistic, post-Vietnam, post-Watergate cynicism in relation to state power and the egotistical individual

³² Ibid. p. 132.

³³ Krin Gabbard, 'Saving Private Ryan Too Late', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. New York: New York University Press, 2001, p. 138.

carried along and necessarily corrupted by its momentum, *Ryan* is situated as a conservative backlash fuelled by nostalgia, patriarchal values and moral vapidities.

The death of Captain Miller, for instance, is critiqued as a 'bloodless movie death', that omits screaming and gore, contributing to an illusion of sentimental dignity in the face of death. Lacking the realism of other deaths in the film, not least those of the graphic opening sequence, recourse to the sentimental is here deemed by Gabbard to permit an evocation of Miller's moral authority as he dispenses 'life-changing advice' to Ryan.³⁴ Aligned with the benevolent authority of General Marshall (depicted at the film's outset), Gabbard argues that the film nostalgically valorises the entire military structure that fought the 'good war' as being endowed with a similarly unambiguous moral authority, thereby invoking a time when 'the system worked and morality was unambiguous.'³⁵ In a similar vein, Miller becomes for Frank P. Tomasulo 'another in a series of sacrificial "Spielbergian Christ surrogate(s)"',³⁶ citing Robert Kolker's original coinage,³⁷ examples of which might include Roy Neary of *Close Encounters*, the eponymous alien hero of *E.T.*, Indiana Jones in *The Temple of Doom* (1984) and Schindler in *Schindler's List*.

A problem arrives, therefore, when defenders of *Ryan* and other Spielberg films detect precisely such moral ambiguity in the same scenes that some critics find to be complacently simplistic and triumphalist. For Lester Friedman, the death of Miller

³⁴ Krin Gabbard, 'Saving Private Ryan Too Late', p. 136.

³⁵ Ibid.,

³⁶ Frank P. Tomasulo, 'Empire of the Gun: Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and American Chauvinism', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. New York: New York University Press, 2001, p. 126.

³⁷ See Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 3rd ed, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 306.

serves to *question* war as much as to valorise it patriotically, insisting that *Ryan* problematizes the brutality of war and its sacrifices precisely from the disillusioned, post-Vietnam perspective that informed war films of the ‘New Hollywood’. As proof of a jaded ‘cynicism’ worthy of such auteurs as Kubrick or Scorsese, *Ryan* is distinguished from the rather more straightforwardly patriotic or triumphalist war films of earlier generations such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *The Longest Day* (1962) or *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970). Friedman responds to Tomasulo’s criticisms of Miller’s death, for instance, by aligning such critique with a modernist distaste for mimetic engagement or empathy that dismisses the act of mourning for the sentimental death scene. Rejecting the implicit appeals to a disinterested rationality necessary for the disavowal of such a scene, Friedman claims:

The important point remains that Spielberg will not allow viewers to retreat into abstract logic, alternately weighing one carefully reasoned set of options against another. Instead, he puts human faces on universal ethical dilemmas and forces us to acknowledge the individual consequences intrinsic with every moral decision.³⁸

Under this rubric, Spielberg’s infamous manipulation of affect is now appraised as an ethical act of humanism, where emotional impartiality becomes a suspect model of spectatorship and critique in its insistence that we must ignore ‘individual consequences.’ Indeed, the above has been a key assumption of sentimental philosophy from its earliest manifestations, from Diderot and Hume onwards to Balázs and Bazin, whereby the abstractions of intellectual literature or cinema jeopardize the moral imperative of art to reveal human nature. Such a defence of *Ryan*’s dramaturgy is echoed by the ‘special affect’ that Michael Hammond considers

³⁸ Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*, p. 241.

the result of *Ryan*'s conflation of the sentimental and action movie. Belonging to the genre of 'epic war movie', Hammond distinguishes *Ryan* from the mere entertainment of the action-adventure genre, citing the former genre's appeals to pathos (an 'obligato of melancholy') through music, and 'anguished voices' and the highlighting of 'poignant fear, suffering and loss.'³⁹

Given such arguments that prefer to perceive the film as epic melodrama rather than as identifiably distinct modes of sentiment and action, *Ryan*'s mode of address now appears rather more ambiguous than many critics such as Nichols, Wheeler-Dixon, Gabbard or Tomasulo consider. Both formally and rhetorically, *Ryan* serves as an admirably slippery text, visualizing the human costs of war yet constantly problematizing its own act of representation and the ethical questions it claims to address. If the film's melodrama serves only as optimistic relief to its otherwise oppressively realistic depictions of war and death, it is notably only once the rescue mission is well underway that the platoon members discuss their situation as 'FUBAR' (military slang for 'fucked-up-beyond-all-recognition'). While their original remit of invading Northern France at least makes sense as part of the grand Allied incursion (as it does also for the spectator with a moderate familiarity with WWII history), it is the new mission that clouds as much as clarifies moral legibility, defamiliarising the soldiers from their accustomed roles and demanding renewed commitments of loyalty and compassion despite fear and disorientation. Likewise, *Ryan*'s own confused and desperate call to his wife that she confirm that he has 'led a good life' similarly constitutes a critical stance in relation to war that is far from

³⁹ Michael Hammond, 'Saving Private Ryan's "Special Affect"', in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 153.

unambiguous. Ryan's insecurity indeed becomes a cause not just for ethical, but also epistemological, justification. Faced with the gravestones of his comrades, the memories invoked (and the film's narrative) contribute to an overall confusion of identity, where Ryan is identified neither as hero, villain nor any of the other ethnic or generic stereotypes that comprise the platoon. As if to inhibit the spectator's familiarity with the elder Ryan, he is played by an unknown actor who offers little opportunity for engagement that a Hollywood star might have brought to the role. With his rescue serving as a 'McGuffin' within a rather more conventional war movie, and his identity deliberately presented as indeterminate or 'in development' compared to his comrades' ethnic and generic security, Ryan's rescue and identity take on a profound meaninglessness compared to the more linear progress and straight-forward moral imperatives of D-Day. It is in such instances as the rescue mission's near mutiny or Ryan's moral confusion that the nihilistic self-preservation of such films as *M*A*S*H** or the self-introspection of *Apocalypse Now* are both very much in evidence, but bracketed nevertheless in favour of sentimental principles of sacrifice, duty and honour, these principles communicated through 'feeling' as much as through reason.

Indeed, with much of the film following a platoon differentiated in purpose from the grand offensive of the Normandy landings, *Ryan* invokes such films as *Apocalypse Now* or *Kelly's Heroes* (1970), precisely in its focalization on a mission distinguished from the wider events of a high-profile war. Whether in relation to *Apocalypse Now*'s assassination mission, the heist operation of *Kelly's Heroes* or *Ryan*'s own rescue mission, FUBAR logic and mutinous intent seem to predominate as key affects of such missions, a profound defamiliarisation between dominant historical narrative and

these lesser known anomalous, special case modes of combat. Nevertheless, it is clear that *Ryan* also demands to be contrasted with such films through its own significant re-framing of the 'mission' sub-genre, redressing the now rather established association between the small combat mission and a lack of moral legitimacy or credible leadership. If *Kelly's Heroes* used the Second World War merely as the backdrop for a conventional heist caper, deploying the Allied war machine's manpower for an ultimately self-serving, freelance bank robbery, *Apocalypse Now* invokes an even greater sense of moral futility in relation to war. Nowhere is this more apparent than when Willard's voiceover claims that 'charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets in the Indy 500' alongside his clear expressions of skepticism concerning his own generals' motivations for dispensing with Kurtz.⁴⁰ Not only is criminal killing commonplace in the Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now*, but it goes right to the very top of the American military. *Ryan* directly contrasts with the above film not only in terms of the fact that its mission involves the rescue rather than the assassination of a man (significant though that is), but also in the sense to which the rescue mission is represented as a legitimate moral endeavour within its own diegetic world, both for the individual 'grunts' that come to realize its moral stakes, and for General Marshall himself, who indeed gives his blessing to the mission with a morally stirring speech that draws on the authority of Abraham Lincoln himself. While morality and moral purpose is rendered more or less bogus in *Apocalypse Now*, or surplus to requirements in *Kelly's Heroes*, it is very much recuperated as a driving legitimization of the Allied struggle, in all its manifestations, in *Ryan*.

⁴⁰ For instance Willard says in voiceover, 'I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz. It wasn't just insanity and murder; there was enough of that to go around for everyone', and later, 'No wonder Kurtz put a weed up Command's ass. The war was being run by a bunch of four star clowns who were gonna end up giving the whole circus away.'

If critics consider *Ryan*'s most grievous flaw to be its avoidance of anti-war nihilism and irreverence, it is the film's insistence on the individual and the moral priorities that surround his or her survival that dares nevertheless to bring moral clarity back to the war genre, and in particular to the special mission sub-genre discussed above. If Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now* represented the 'Heart of Darkness' that instigates a mission bent on the latter's elimination, the nihilistic meaningless he inspires serves to underscore the futility of the war that brought him there. War corrupts the individual, which in turn inspires the horrors of more killing. Such a cycle of 'the horror' is overturned in *Ryan*, in favour of locating redemption in the individual despite the film's epic sweep. *Ryan* urges us to desire Ryan's survival despite our knowledge and experience of mass death as an inevitability in war, indeed, one in which such sacrifices were known to result in Allied victory and our survival. Nihilism is conjured by the film's going against the grain of history, as reflected in the cynicism and fear of the platoon members and the spectator's experience of generic hybridity (combat clashed with melodrama, the epic clashed with the personal). Yet it is precisely such polysemy that intensifies the pathos of the film's overall moral pedagogy, where the spectator understands sacrifice even if characters therein fail to. Commentators such as Nigel Morris thus describe the film's self-reflexive polysemy as its most critical function:

Yet, as the film aspires to canonical status within its genre, it dialogises movie warfare to challenge assumptions. Gung-ho masculinity of John Wayne movies, 'anti-bourgeois and anti-authoritarian dropout values' of the Vietnam generation. And 'patriotism, nationalism and militarism' of the 1980s all constitute the discursive formation mediating warfare, and veterans' experiences in the 1990s.⁴¹

⁴¹ Morris, *Empire of Light*, p. 296.

If such hybridity brings about an ambiguous mode of address that relativizes its ideological discourses, Morris notes how such an attribute remains of principal value for '20th century critical theory' and arguably provides a chief means by which the film 'inoculates itself against criticism' in the eyes of its critics. Moreover, rather than implying the necessity for scenes of sentiment to underscore their genericity or regressivity through 'excess', such scenes and their specific emotional effects are permitted without stylistic intervention as such, understood now as part of a larger 'mode' comprised of various genres and attendant discourses. Sentimental pedagogy remains a key function of such a film, its aims intensified rather than undermined by its accommodation of variegated discourses. Where the affirmation of 'You are' by Ryan's wife to Ryan's plea for moral clarity conforms to a sentimental brand of 'moral legibility', its appeals run alongside other 'discursive formations' conveyed with equal weight by the film, such that taking such an affirmation at face-value is both encouraged and problematic. Sentimentality is no longer the aesthetic 'lapse' that critics may dismiss in favour of formal defamiliarisation, emotional detachment or common-sense realism but an overriding ideological imperative laid down in the face of a culture still at war and once more ostensibly governed by FUBAR logic.

Teaching Compassion

If *Saving Private Ryan* was deemed problematic for its depiction of redemption in Normandy, *Schindler's List* would similarly court controversy in its allegedly sentimental approach to the Holocaust. Spielberg is accused in its final scenes of imposing a morally unequivocal conclusion concerning its central protagonist who, up to that point, had seemed too self-concerned and calculating to be a purely virtuous hero. A common denominator of many of Spielberg's films is that of a protagonist

(often male) that, in typical matinee-film style, saves the day and learns new values. Be it in a fictionalized third-world country where a local cult has stolen children to use as slaves (*Temple of Doom*) or in the faithfully recreated environs of the Krakow ghetto and concentration camps (*Schindler's List*), Spielberg enhances the emotional stakes of his stories through focalisation on a protagonist who learns to both act and react morally. Yet the trope of male redemption that predominates in Spielberg's films has been fraught with ideological contradiction for many commentators, despite the ostensibly 'liberal' connotations of such transformations in male subjectivity. Such critique is exemplified once more by Bill Nichols' criticisms concerning the Spielbergian hero who sees the light:

In each film, the saviours of those less fortunate and farsighted than themselves are white male heroes of gentle character, empathetic nature and altruistic impulse, in short: Christ figures. Liam Nelson's conscience-stricken Nazi, Anthony Hopkin's compassionate ex-President, and Tom Hank's wise platoon leader are pointedly *not* Jews, or blacks. They do not speak for the plight of their own people; instead, they act on behalf of others whom they do not fully know or understand. They give of themselves so that others might live. They act sacrificially and nobly in the manner of the classic Christian narrative.⁴²

As Christ figures, the Spielbergian hero is deemed by Bill Nichols to be the catalyst of excessive manipulation of historical fact and evidence in favour of a more sentimental scheme of moral intervention. By saving his Jewish employees from the genocide of the Holocaust, Schindler (Liam Neeson) of *Schindler's List* is also arguably shown to save himself, and thereby becomes emblematic of how humanity (represented by a self-centred Nazi at the film's outset) could transcend the moral quagmire of Nazi involvement in the Holocaust. Such a narrative (following a very similar

⁴² Bill Nichols, 'The 10 Stations of Spielberg's Passion: "Saving Private Ryan." "Amistad." "Schindler's List."', *Jump Cut* Vol. 43 (July 2000), p. 11.

representation of male 'lack' as *Citizen Kane*, both stylistically and thematically⁴³), depicts a businessman and member of the Nazi party who finds moral purpose through the discovery of his altruism towards Jews in wartime Poland; prior to this is a vacuity and emptiness that it is the narrative's purpose to fill. Yet the film's tearful ending famously divided the critics, owing once more to its alleged descent into bathos.⁴⁴ Once the Jews have been saved from Auschwitz and the Allies have finally won the war, Schindler must take his leave from the now relatively safe Jews. Before doing so, however, Spielberg provides a scene of Schindler tearfully berating himself for not saving more Jews by using the remainder of his wealth. This self-immolation takes place in front of the Jews he has saved, who are there to present him with a collective symbol of their gratitude (a gold ring) and to say goodbye to their benefactor. This scene confirms Schindler as a 'good' man who realises the moral stakes of what he has successfully or, in his estimation, unsuccessfully achieved. The film as a whole takes Schindler through a narrative of redemption, from the charming, egocentric and self-serving entrepreneur at the film's outset to a heroic, self-sacrificing man of compassion at the end. For the critic David Thomson, this scene is excessive. He argues,

In the end, this Schindler sacrifices his all to be good, even to the point of a breakdown scene that is beyond Neeson and which is the most pointed failure in the picture.

How much truer it might have been if this Schindler had stayed matter-of-fact and jovial to the end, laughing off the chance of

⁴³ Miriam Hansen comments for instance that Spielberg's 'relative restraint and withholding of interiority' in his treatment of Schindler rehearses Orson Welles' in the latter's depiction of Kane. See Miriam Hansen 'Schindler's List is not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996), p. 307.

⁴⁴ For criticisms of Spielberg's treatment of the Holocaust in *Schindler's List*, see Claude Lanzmann, 'Why Spielberg Has Distorted the Truth', *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, April 14th 1994; Bill Nichols, 'The 10 Stations of Spielberg's Passion' (see note 50); Leon Wieseltier, 'Close Encounters of the Nazi Kind', *The New Republic*, Vol. 210, No. 4 (1994).

friendship with Stern (for, really, Stern isn't his type) and recollecting-- as a rough joke--that the getaway car might have meant another handful of lives. But Spielberg won't permit that brusqueness with his big finish in sight. So Schindler becomes, simply, a ruined but saved man, a character such as Capra might have liked.⁴⁵

Thomson's mention of Capra immediately evokes a tradition of sentimental narrative and characterization in Hollywood. Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), it should also be noted, has become a paradigm of Hollywood sentimentality (pejoratively implied or otherwise) to which all other films within such a 'mode' are compared. Both *Schindler's List* and *It's a Wonderful Life* tell stories of men who come to realise the 'important things in life' such as family, community or charity, over the materialistic concerns of finance, business and entrepreneurial expansion. Thomson asks how fitting it is, however, for Spielberg to overlay a narrative about the Holocaust onto a generic, namely sentimental, narrative arc of redemption for its central character. Considering this redemptive climax inappropriate, Thomson argues his case largely on the grounds of what would have been, as he says, 'truer'. He wants continuity from the cynical, business-like Schindler of earlier on in the film through his farewell scene and no doubt beyond. He does not believe in the central character's sudden overwhelming sadness at the gift upon his departure. He hints that Spielberg is pulling the strings, manipulating the narrative in order to produce his 'big finish.'

This 'big finish' presents us with the culmination of the film's own narrative, emphasising above all the survival of *these* particular Jews. Despite the wide sweep of the prior narrative through key historical traumas of the Holocaust (the deportation from the Krakow Ghetto, children separated from their parents, Jews entering the

⁴⁵ David Thomson, 'Presenting Enamelware', *Film Comment*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 44-6.

Auschwitz gas chambers) *Schindler's List* controversially looks to those that survive. The tracking shot of their faces reflected in the car's windows as it moves along gives the impression of their abundance. Their number exceeds that which can be taken on in the frame, motivating the tracking shot and delivering a cathartic sense of virtue finally rewarded. In its dramatization of the Holocaust and its emphasis on a story of rescue and survival, *Schindler's List* therefore contrasts markedly with other films about the Holocaust. For example, *Shoah* (dir. Claude Lanzmann, 1985, France), in which the representation of actual Holocaust events is deemed taboo, largely favours a modernist aesthetic of emptiness, faded memories, and distorted testimonies, all of which signify the stark absence of those that have died rather than those that survive. Spielberg's finale does the inverse. Where six million have died, Spielberg represents more than 1200 that survived; where many Nazis were unambiguously obedient to the Führer, Spielberg presents just one that acted against such ghastly conformism.

The conflict of responses to the film exemplify the extent to which the Holocaust in particular divides the hopes of sentimental philosophy (with its roots in Enlightenment thought) and a modern post-Holocaust disillusionment with such ideals. Indeed, as this thesis argues, it is precisely a contemporary cynicism with regards to sentimental tropes and their underlying philosophy that fuels a modernist approval of conveying trauma and alienation as an epistemologically superior mode of representation. The Holocaust serves as a paradigm in such regards, yet its factual representation (although crucial) is constituted in *Schindler's List* as just one of various priorities of the film's overall project. Adhering to the sentimental tradition, the film had to inform not only intellectually but through 'feeling', allowing Hollywood's appropriation of melodrama to represent the Holocaust accurately but

also in terms of emotional pedagogy. Yet as film scholar Miriam Hansen notes, *Schindler's List* was guilty both of being too realistic and not realistic enough, as coming as close to a comprehensive, representational survey of the Holocaust as any other film in history, while at the same time allowing generic conventions such as an upbeat ending, a last-minute rescue, or a hopeful narrative arc and climax to detract from its claims to post-Enlightenment realism.⁴⁶ Such attributes, however, are precisely those that allow us to see such films as instances of postmodern 'heteroglossia' that draw on a plurality of stylistic and thematic intertexts. By doing so, cinema certainly modifies the reality of such events as the Holocaust but does so less in terms of distortion (which suggests deception and emotional naiveté) and far more in terms of emotional pedagogy.

Spielberg's deployment of the reformed male hero becomes therefore an instance of his larger project of finding exceptional stories that have gone against the grain of history. As a story of unlikely Jewish survival and of a German that experienced uncommon remorse and regret while his country was in the grip of Nazism, the rhetoric of Spielberg's film uses such exceptions as a means of inspiring hope in the face of what Benjamin termed the 'abyss'.⁴⁷ Noting how Spielberg's film invokes the 'synecdoche' of an original Talmudic saying (where the part stands in for the whole), Thomas Elsaesser contrasts Spielberg's 'theodicy' with the European modernism of *Shoah* as follows:

By affirming that whoever saves one life, saves mankind,
Spielberg accepts the principle that the one can represent the
many, that the part can stand for the whole. *Shoah* is based,

⁴⁶ Miriam Hansen, 'Schindler's List is Not Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,' *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996), pp. 292–312.

⁴⁷ As discussed in Chapter Three.

explicitly and emphatically, on the exact opposite premise: that no one can stand in for anyone else, no one can speak for anyone else.⁴⁸

In accordance with other defenders of Spielberg's vision, therefore, focalisation and engagement with a moral 'hero' is comprehended as part of an aesthetic that runs counter to the austere anti-mimeticism of modernist film aesthetics. This is also to recall the theory of Béla Balázs on film narrative, for whom the Hollywood protagonist enables the fiction film to resonate emotionally while avoiding the abstractions of avant-garde practice on one hand, and the arrogant claims to objective truth made by documentary on the other. If genocide seems to demand the non-mimetic, either by avoiding the graphic representation of atrocities or by underlining its impact on a collective of people above all else, *Balázs'* theory here corresponds with synecdoche in its insistence that such events be filtered through the consciousness of a diegetic individual.

Such defences of Spielberg very much echo those qualified defences of Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, and other Hollywood entertainment figures discussed in previous chapters by such writers as Benjamin and Kracauer, where a sentimental mode of address ironically underscores the sad facts of modern oppression and hegemony. In Spielberg's films, the articulation and foregrounding of hopeful, idealized outcomes, such as the reform and remorse of the central male protagonist, provide poignant and instructive counterpoint to instances of historical trauma against which they occur, where moral subjectivity continues to be fraught with contradiction and violence, yet remains an ideal nevertheless. The film concords with Steve Neale's arguments

⁴⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From Holocaust, Our Hitler, and Heimat to Shoah and Schindler's List', in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Public Event*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 178.

concerning melodrama's invocation of the 'too late', where displays of humanity and sentiment (often maternal sacrifice in the 'Woman's Film') partially resolve a local or familial problem but fail to remedy the larger conditions that produced them and necessitate such acts.⁴⁹

In such respects, the film's central relationship between Schindler and the concentration camp commandante Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), underscored as a kind of alter-ego to Schindler, mitigates charges concerning the film's unalloyed optimism. Demonstrating not only that for every Schindler that took the risk of disobeying Nazism, there were many others that did not, Goeth's crimes in particular testify to the pedagogical problems of Schindler's exemplary actions. One of the film's most interesting scenes shows Schindler's attempts at inspiring compassion in Goeth's treatment of the Jews in his camp. By suggesting to Goeth that the latter's feelings of power could be enhanced rather than diminished by 'pardoning' the life of camp victims rather than by murdering them, Schindler tests a key premise of 'moral sentiment' theory that foregrounds the potential of compassion for moral change. By doing so, the test not only foregrounds the film's moral pedagogy as an overriding philosophical concern, but also crucially serves as a rebuttal to those who condemn the film on the grounds of distorted optimism, for it is a test that resolutely fails. Once Goeth attempts to pardon a Jewish boy who has failed to clean grime off his bath ('Go ahead, go on, leave. I pardon you'), he kills the boy anyway as he leaves the commandante's house, finding the rewards of empathy inferior to those of murder. Owing in no small way to the terms upon which it is formulated, whereby power is still invested in the one who 'pardons', which is in turn commended by Schindler as a

⁴⁹ See Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and Tears,' *Screen*, Vol. 27, No. 66 (1986), pp. 6-22.

pleasure of virtuous power rather than any kind of categorical imperative, Goeth returns to murder within minutes. Remorse and compassion are shown as such to be far from 'innate' to the human soul, which is just as likely to be invested in sadism during times of war and racial persecution.

The film's foregrounding of Schindler as a man who ultimately refused to follow orders becomes radically more condemnatory of those that didn't (and a culture that succumbed to totalitarianism) than the most graphic or factually accurate representation of Nazism. If the final farewell scene seems a cloyingly sentimental falsification of a pragmatic and self-interested Nazi up to that point, its point is as much to underline the tragedy of Schindler's exceptionalism as to present him as a hope for mankind. Just as Chaplin's tramp ultimately represented the same kind of idealized figure that worked against the grain of history, history and its failures nevertheless remain signified as much as effaced by them. In both instances, such excessively desired presences serve to signify mankind's 'too late's.

Emotional Pedagogy

The scene analysed above between Goeth and Schindler also provides a powerful rejoinder to arguments concerning the function of reflexivity both in *Schindler's List* and Spielberg's films generally. In portraying the literal attempt on the part of a would-be moral teacher (Schindler) to inspire empathy and moral sentiment in a figure so far removed from its core principles (Goeth), the film comments on its own

sentimental project as one that is necessarily idealistic while often unsuccessful.⁵⁰ Yet as much as the film's historical realism prevents any sustained moral reform on Goeth's part, the scene nevertheless foregrounds the extent to which such pedagogy should constitute a vital process towards improving humanity. Its inclusion serves as far more than a merely 'clever' exercise of mirroring between the sequence and the film's overall rhetoric as an instance of technical self-reflexivity, least of all in terms of an attempt to dampen or undermine the film's sentimental rhetoric. The sequence's full implications are that such appeals to our better selves might succeed where they have not in the past, where this time contrary to synecdoche, the part indeed may not always represent the whole. Schindler's action here is an exercise of representation with unpredictable results, his role aligned with the film director (or screenwriter) who tries to feed a different set of lines to his chief protagonist, not knowing quite how it will turn out. The sequence's power stems from the extent to which reality fails to follow such a script so easily, underlining with renewed force the significance of scripting and instruction as the only means of effectuating moral order. In other words, as opposed to considering the sequence's rhetoric as ironic commentary on the film's sentimental idealism (as a means of disrupting any clear ideology of feelgood optimism on the film's part), such doubling between sequence and film serves more to bolster reflexivity in the name of intensifying the film's overall power to teach and inspire. Critical detachment and a cynical response to ideology *tout court* gives way to

⁵⁰ Indeed, the well-documented incident in Oakland's Castlemont high school, where students laughed at a scene of the a murder of a Jewish woman during the screening of the film, creating public and media uproar, reinforced and publicised further the particular aims of the film as much through its failures as its successes in moving its genuinely 'moved' spectators. See Omer Bartov, 'Spielberg's Oskar', in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 49-51.

the invocation of increased critical engagement when that ideology conforms to moral principles, as made salient by a longstanding sentimental tradition.

In such respects, Spielberg's film once again exhibits a self-reflexivity that serves purposes more noble than mere 'blank parody' of allusion and quotation on one hand or quasi-Brechtian modes of emotional detachment invoked by more coolly modernist cinematic practice on the other. If instances of the latter could range from *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Shoah* to American structuralist film or modern avant-garde practice, it is in Spielberg's commitment to inspiring moral sensibility through 'feeling,' as much as through intellectual conceit, that proves such work as the true inheritor of a sentimental tradition writ large. Displaying a polysemy that invokes Utopian idealism alongside moral instruction while remaining committed to history and socio-political emancipation, such films may indeed 'inoculate themselves against criticism', but do so in the name of a sentimental pedagogy that remains largely respected as a key civil right and duty. In such a vein, they serve an important pedagogical function that is distinct from the mere conveyance of factual information, that has been widely considered the remit of such sober forms as documentary or naturalistic drama, providing emotional, rather than merely informational, instruction. If a critic such as David Denby complains that the ending of *AI* lacked a degree of 'common sense' in the way that it exploits the use of a child actor to drive home its rhetoric, such a film might rightfully be considered aligned therefore with critical theory's rather longstanding distrust of that which is signified by such a term. For if a central project of critical theory concerns the necessity of unpacking the ostensible normativities of our own 'common sense' and reveal its basis as a matrix of arbitrary

constructs and assumptions about the world,⁵¹ its attendant aesthetic necessarily approves of such art that aims to facilitate such a process. As such, and in as much as sentimentality in Spielberg's art alerts the spectator to its own deviance from a 'common sense' model, it should be less surprising than it is to consider such films as profoundly engaged with critical endeavours.

⁵¹ A key theoretical presumption of many critical theorists including Gramsci, Benjamin and Adorno.

Chapter Six

‘Sympathy for a Kitsch Devil’: Postmodern Sentiment

In the above chapters, the sentimental has been examined as a concept key to modern aesthetic theory, one that has undergone radical shifts in meaning and value in its history of deployment, while remaining in common usage to the present. The key development concerns its shift from a denotative to a connotative status, from a term that maps out a new philosophy of ethics driven by an optimum balance between ‘reason’ and the ‘passions’, to one that cannot escape connotations of ‘gross sentimentality’: the excessive affect of the subject and a set of textual effects implicated in that same affective process. However, reassessments and revisions of melodrama (and genres that heavily reproduce its tropes such as the ‘action blockbuster’) in film studies and renewed emphasis on emotions, the body and technology in a wide field of philosophical enquiry bring us to a contemporary moment in which the sentimental enjoys a renewed, postmodern acceptability. Yet the terms upon which this legitimacy is attained require careful analysis so that we are clear as to which specific elements of the sentimental are being favoured at this particular cultural moment. The postmodern has been itself widely associated with the über cool ‘affect’ of a post-classical, post-Freudian spectatorship, a trend that is aligned not so much with a return to the sentimental as with a conceptual foregrounding of the body and its receptivity to everyday phenomena. Theories of ‘affect’ in particular, often dependent conceptually on a radical anti-humanism, posit a subjectivity reducible neither to the emotions nor to the individual that experiences them. It rather betokens a philosophical movement and critical hermeneutic (arguably with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze as its founding fathers) that, like the sentimental, concerns itself with the body and the embodied image, while arguably

carrying far less baggage. To be sure, such a term's intellectual genealogy charts a non-identical terrain from the sentimental, yet I suggest below the productivity of considering theories of affect and the sentimental as being in possession of similar philosophical roots. Furthermore, I would suggest that such comparisons in turn help us to better comprehend the emotional appeals of a set of distinctly post-classical films, discussed below. In each, sentimental tropes are deployed within an eclectic array of stylistic and generic signifiers that significantly alters the extent to which such films can be comprehended as sentimental in any modern sense of the term. As examples of what I argue below has come to be understood within a rubric of a postmodern 'smart' aesthetic, as coined by Jeffrey Sconce,¹ such films illustrate how sentimental tropes are still reproduced in some of the most challenging of contemporary films, while their sentimental idealism is reined back ideologically.

It is necessary here to briefly review the main points concerning the theoretical genealogy of the sentimental covered above. In a pre-Kantian field of thought, thinkers as diverse as Shaftesbury, Hume, Diderot and Adam Smith advance the idea that 'sympathy', tender emotions and the power of communicated feelings between subjects (and between the subject and art) might promise the best hope for the achievement of civilized society. As invoked by the sentimental novel and early forms of theatrical melodrama, a cultivated response to art was one that by the mid-eighteenth century was dominated by the customs of the 'cult of sensibility'. Tears and the emotions of admiration, gratitude and moral elation were deemed not only enjoyable but crucial ingredients of an enlightened culture and a key signifier of art's power to improve society. The fostering of a moral, compassionate citizenry becomes

¹ Jeffrey Sconce, 'Irony, Nihilism and the New American "Smart" Film', *Screen*, Vol. 43, No. 4, (December 2002).

for many a key priority for art, wherein an aesthetic of reading ‘for the sentiment’ is aligned with a pedagogical project that goes beyond church and school and out to the less regulated but obviously powerful interactions between citizens, media and feeling. If classical tragedy aimed to invoke ‘pity and terror’ in its audiences, the new dramas sought, as Peter Brooks argues, to make morality legible through pathos. While church and school aimed to instil values through the ‘precept’ of Judeo-Christian scripture and the belief in God, sentimental art could inspire a more humane subject through an ‘interactive’ process of moral spectatorship. In this, an Enlightenment faith in man and society’s progress could continue on through the subject’s attainment of moral knowledge through ‘feeling.’

Yet if the sentimental begins as a term that represents the ambitions of Enlightenment thinkers to found ethics in a renewed formulation of emotion or ‘moral sense’, critical undercurrents running alongside them and certainly following them have continually sought to expose the underlying assumptions of sentimental theory as naïvely wrong-headed, not least in relation to actual moral agency and political action. If Kant’s emphasis on the subject’s ‘disinterest’ as a crucial principle of judgment evacuated moral action of the subject’s motivations and ‘interests’, then an emotion-driven apprehension of truth or beauty became once more problematic.² As critics of the cheaply sentimental literature that proliferated through the course of the 18th century claimed, the experiencing of ‘noble’ feelings before art might fail spectacularly in engendering allegiance to (moral) Reason on the part of an actual person. With the

² For instance, Kant’s position on compassion is one that demands ‘disinterest’ over pity as the only ethical response to another’s suffering. Pity for another’s misfortune negates a Stoical devaluing of external goods. Thus ‘such benevolence is called softheartedness and should not occur at all among human beings.’ (Doctrine of Virtue, 34). See also Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’ for further discussion of ‘disinterest.’

subject wedded firmly to the abstracted moral action of the ‘categorical imperative’, the sentimental becomes aligned more exclusively with the subjective and the irrational, and not in a particularly cool or radical way. If Romanticism’s veneration of the irrational sublime recuperated subjectivity as a vital corrective to the ultimately impossible objectivities of scientific enquiry and knowability, its sentimental cousin would come to signify the distinctly unsublime and down-home spaces of the feminine, the infantile, the local and the domestic, sites of both idealization and ubiquity alongside unprecedented sexual repression, boredom, and as Freud would later discern, hysteria.³ The Victorian bourgeois home indeed becomes the model and the pervasive reality of a newly-industrialized and increasingly middle-class populace, with theatrical melodrama and the sentimental idealism of works ranging from the ‘penny dreadful’ to the classics of Dickens and Hugo providing a constellation of bourgeois models to revere, and later to call into question. Both form (the realist novel and melodrama) and content (virtue in distress, belated recognitions of virtue, the domestic sphere, infant martyrdom, reunited long-lost family members) coalesce to form the ever more clichéd sentimentalism that both modernity and modernism had to eclipse in order to be *modern* at all.

Given that recognizing the grief over Little Nell’s death was the test and the badge of Victorian moral subjectivity, Oscar Wilde’s ironic suggestion of ‘laughter’ in its place serves indeed as a frustrated appeal for a playful species of reception that should be anything but sentimental, pointing the way to the subversive humour (discussed in

³ See Freud’s most famous analysis of female hysteria (Dora) in *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905 [1901], Standard Edition Vol.7, pp. 1–122).

Chapter Four) that might take down an insipidly genteel melancholia.⁴ Moreover, with readers here implicitly asked to consider and react to a Dickens' novel from the more distanced perspective required for the full apprehension of its kitsch elements, one of modernism's key roles become clear. At least as far as high modernism is concerned, art had to become less obvious, less intuitive and more self-reflexive if it was to have any real purchase on modern subjectivity, the latter now subsisting in a world of exploded fragments and incongruities offering apparently nothing of the wholesome coherence of the bourgeois subject in his or her ever dependable hearth and home. As Susan Buck-Morss argues in relation to the theory of Walter Benjamin, and pointing the way to postmodern theory, the modern subject had become a jaded figure of 'anaesthesia', shocked into emotional numbness and urban servitude, no longer able to respond to, or feel, real emotion realistically rendered, except perhaps through the larger-than-life technology of cinema.⁵ In its own simulations of shock, whether construed as a formal property of Soviet montage, the emphasis on an atomized urban experience from Lang's *Metropolis* to Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, or of the mere scale of the cinematic image brought before the spectator's eyes in the dark movie theatre, cinema might serve modernism's project of bringing dispersed fragments together again into a new synthetic whole. Bearing more resemblance to a Picasso painting than to a Victorian street scene or a still life, modernism's last ditch efforts to find coherence would thus also by definition avert

⁴ Oscar Wilde is famously said to have remarked, 'One would need a heart of stone to read of the death of Little Nell without laughing.'

⁵ See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and *Anaesthetics*: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *New Formations*, No. 20, (Summer 1993), pp. 123-143. For a discussion particularly focused on the concept's application to film theory, see Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,' *Art & Text*, No. 34, (Spring 1989), pp. 31-32.

our eyes from nostalgic evocations of prelapsarian wholeness, as deemed most clearly epitomized in the Victorian model of sentimental idealism and moral virtue.

Sentimentality or sentimentalism as such became a term that now contended with a burgeoning set of other 'isms' (Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Neorealism, Postmodernism etc.), each having the advantage of their novelty as both attribute and driving ideology, as most clearly exemplified by the manifesto form that accompanied so many of these projects.⁶ Where the politicized aesthetics of most of the historical avant-gardes advanced that same modernist call for an alternative space of radically constructed coherence through 'difficult' but more truthful engagements with the world's fragmentation, the sentimental is accentuated as a rigidly old-fashioned insistence on the virtues of common-sense realism alongside an optimistic and idealist faith in humanist (or latently Christian) values of protestant struggle, redemption and sacrifice. Contrary to both modernist imperatives of undermining the integrity of realist representational culture or to a relatedly postmodern attachment to free-floating signifiers without reliable referent, the sentimental continues to fuel its often didactic project with a reliance on knowability, legibility and a kind of intuitive common-sense (which itself becomes a mere byword for the acceptance and approval of moral truism and conservative ideology). Where the 20th century saw an epistemological reorientation towards an attention to pure form, 'Weimar' surfaces and anti-illusionist objectivity, the sentimental represents an oft derided but still potent nostalgia for the possibility of an intimate relation between appearance and reality. If the postmodern period, as Frederic Jameson claims, represents the death-

⁶ Marinetti's Futurist manifesto, Breton's *The Surrealist Manifesto* and *Nadja* or indeed Zavattini's arguments on Italian Neorealism (see 'Some Ideas on the Cinema', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 23, (October-December 1953), pp. 64-9) all conform in such respects with a modernist underwriting of a set of political and aesthetic aims attached to an art movement.

knell of hermeneutic ‘depth models’ in relation to contemporary subjectivity, the sentimental becomes doubly anachronistic in its insistence on a vital integrity pertaining to both subject and image.

Yet cinema has of course faithfully and indeed ruthlessly reproduced such a tradition despite the great promise it held for many as an exemplar of high modernist dynamism, depicting time and again the pathetically vulnerable subject and his/her vain struggles with oppression and cruelty. Auteurs such as Chaplin and Spielberg (not to mention all those in between such as Griffith, De Mille, Murnau, Capra, Disney, Lean, and Ford) clearly invoke this tradition in their work and are rightly deemed sentimental in the extent to which the narrative tropes deployed in their films so frequently adhere to the melodramatic ‘if only’, returning time and again to a pedagogical relaying of cultural values. We have clearly moved on from a high-modernist denigration of such emotion in favour of analyses that have both recuperated the appeals of pathos and melodrama to politically humanist purposes and underscored a more emotionally and ideologically eclectic dynamic at play in such films. In place of an insistence on an austere modernist attachment to apparatus, institution, experimentation and non-realist forms, ‘classical’ Hollywood cinema is considered in some cases postmodern *avant la lettre* in its inevitable fusions of sentiment and irony, affect and intertextuality. Where modernist parody might have interrogated and dismembered a potentially sentimental scene to the point of its no longer resembling the sentimental at all, postmodern *pastiche* more likely brackets the sentimental trope within a larger polysemic stream, allowing the sentimental its own internal integrity while juxtaposing it alongside a multitude of other generic tropes. Chaplin’s slapstick persona coexists and is emotionally intensified by the pathetic

moments of weakness, frailty and plucky resolve that resonated with the social conditions of his era. Equally, *Saving Private Ryan*'s Captain Miller's embodies the ethos of Spielberg himself, serving mutually-inclusive roles of teacher, pro-active leader, family man, 'unknown' soldier and anti-war nihilist. While only the latter film can be understood as a 'post-classical' film, owing to considerations of its period of production and its enhanced intertextuality, the register of sentiment shared by these films reveals the throughline of melodrama that has in many ways dominated Hollywood from early to post-classical eras.

Indeed, as an 'action-blockbuster', *Saving Private Ryan* overwhelms the spectator with high-octane special effects and kinetics, yet recourse to the sentimental has been noted as an equally key ingredient to this particularly post-classical of genres. As Barry Langford notes, a genre that incorporates output ranging from Spielberg to Simpson and Bruckheimer has become a 'New Hollywood' dominant not only through 'high-concept' genre hybridity, cross-media cooptability and rampant generic self-consciousness, but also through an adherence and indeed a revitalization of Hollywood's melodramatic tradition. Langford argues that as:

ultra-modern – even postmodern – as in so many ways the action blockbuster obviously is, it also manifests abiding continuities with and through the history of Hollywood genre. In its combination of visual spectacle, sensational episodic storylines, performative and presentational excess, and starkly simplified, personalized narratives, the action blockbuster is umbilically linked to the foundational melodramatic tradition of Hollywood film.⁷

Post-classical film is marked indeed both by a startling contemporaneity and reflexivity that seductively foregrounds the cinematic apparatus as capitalist

⁷ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 236.

commodity and marketing vehicle, while nevertheless time and again revealing its continuities with its 'domestic/pathetic melodramatic traditions.'⁸ If a certain modernism's streamlined rupture with the past is negated by such continuities, the sentimental becomes once again a legitimate player within a thoroughly inclusive postmodern aesthetic.

Or does it? Indeed, what is postmodernism and its underlying philosophy of emotion? Moreover, what place (if any) does sentimentality have in a postmodern cultural landscape now apparently characterized by the collapse of high/low categories of taste and an appreciation for sentimentalism that can only be enjoyed ironically as kitsch? While the sentimental once represented the core of moral aesthetics, its status within postmodern culture now becomes far more ambiguous, for while the latter may herald 'affect' and the body as newly politicized regimes, sentimentality itself continues to signify subjectivist triviality, moralistic manipulation and a conservative impermeability to new experience. Modernism's 'cool' detachment continues, albeit under a revised set of parameters.

Camp, or the 'Waning of Affect'

As many commentators have noted, postmodernism does not chronologically (and for some even theoretically) supersede its supposed predecessor (as modernism was wished to do, in relation to its own forbears), but represents precisely the impossibilities of such a 'paradigm shift', despite its 'post'-ness. Whether put in terms

⁸ Ibid., p. 236.

of Lyotard's relegation of 'grand narratives'⁹, Baudrillard's 'simulacra'¹⁰, the slow and agonized falling out of favour with Western Marxist discourse, or Foucault's related insistence on 'Power' as the pervasive play of ideology and dominance without a metaphysical centre¹¹, the postmodern questions the possibilities of a radically achieved purity of the political-modernist project in favour of an at once disillusioned but celebratory carnival of omnipresent representation and 'différance'.¹² Where the progressive, 'writerly' text promised to jolt the reader or spectator into a new, rather sobering recognition of the political Real, the postmodern text is one above all of 'shallowness', demystifying the ideology of an ultimate totality or referent (or the 'meta-subject' in Hegelian terms¹³) in favour of the perpetual deferral of meaning and a deliriously playful calculus of images, tropes and 'readymades'.¹⁴

This arguably sits at odds therefore with how the sentimental has for a long time been firmly aligned with a 'depth' model of perception, assuming an alliance between

⁹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massumi (trans.), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

¹⁰ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Sheila Faria Glaser (trans.), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

¹¹ For instance, Foucault dismisses a Hegelian 'transcendental subject' in favour of attending to the 'various enunciative modalities' that 'manifest his dispersion.' Methodologically, therefore, an 'archeology of knowledge' is foregrounded over and above a more teleological 'history of ideas.' (See *Archeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 55-61).

¹² Jacques Derrida's term for the post-structuralist emphasis on textuality and the infinite permutations of identity inherent to a world structured by language. See 'Différance' in Alan Bass (trans.), *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1982.

¹³ As discussed by Martin Jay in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 54.

¹⁴ Although Duchamp's 'readymade' of course epitomizes the self-critical collapsing of high and low art as a chief aspect of modernism itself, such a figure has proven particularly resilient in postmodern discourse in terms of the already-existent status of tropes in contemporary media culture.

cognition and emotion that seems fundamentally challenged by a postmodern foregrounding of context, intertextuality and moral relativization.¹⁵ The subjective experience of emotion is considered so fluid, fickle and manipulable that its importance to critical theory often pales in comparison to renewed efforts to grasp at more productive differentials at play in a plurality of image economies, fleeting articulations of actual conditions of sexual, racial, ethnic and national identity. This ‘piecemeal’ and arguably more rigorous approach characterises how the media are approached in much of cultural studies and how film spectatorship is analysed by much cognitive film theory, a shift that has itself inspired continued enquiry and debate.¹⁶ Up to an extent, the postmodern announces the death of emotion altogether amidst the omnipresence of simulacra and the collapse of subjectivity implied in such theory. For Frederic Jameson, there is a profound ‘waning of affect’ in the images of postmodern culture, aligned with a fundamental undermining of humanist and metaphysical models of truth and progress. Emotion aligned with heartfelt belief is no longer tenable within such rubrics, where the only life for sentimentality is one where it can be recognized in inverted commas. Like postmodern images, emotions for Jameson are ‘free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a ‘peculiar kind of euphoria.’¹⁷ Such pronouncements are echoed in the title of Steven Shaviro’s article, ‘The Life, After Death, of Postmodern Emotions.’¹⁸ Meanwhile Jeffery Sconce identifies an entire genre of the 1990s, the ‘smart film’, which invokes a

¹⁵ See Frederic Jameson’s key comparison between Van Gogh’s peasant shoes and Andy Warhol’s ‘Diamond Dust Shoes’ as archetypes of modern and postmodern art respectively in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 6-10.

¹⁶ Noël Carroll for instance calls for an above all ‘piecemeal’ approach to theoretical film study in his and David Bordwell’s *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 37-68.

¹⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Steven Shaviro, ‘The Life, After Death, of Postmodern Emotions’, *Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 1, (2004).

contemporary nihilism and ‘blankness’. Through a static mise-en-scène and longer shot lengths (that contrast with classical Hollywood editing), such films ‘are highly stylized, their sense of authorial effacement and blank presentation achieved not through a feigned verité but through a series of stylistic choices mobilized to signify dispassion, disengagement and disinterest.’¹⁹

Meanwhile the ‘euphoria’ to which Jameson alludes shares connotations with ‘camp’, a key mode of the postmodern. The moment of camp (arguably subsuming the modernist one) represents the relativization of an artistic ‘common-sense’ or ‘quality’ that has implicitly underpinned a set of formal conventions deemed acceptable in terms of its emotional appeals. A certain ‘classical’ mode of address (whether implicitly patriarchal, heteronormative or repressive of female, queer or racial identity is still open to debate) that has itself borrowed aspects from avant-garde, documentary and mainstream cinema, is now used within a more pluralistic array of popular forms. Its own possible policing and editing of ‘excess’, whether of the sentimental, the effeminate, the violent, the amateurish, the cheaply-made or the plain ‘bad’, is likewise called into question as a set of culturally constructed and latently political criteria.²⁰ In relation to the cinema, camp rejects a tasteful classicism that rests above all on what Warren Buckland names a film’s ‘organic unity’, where all elements function harmoniously and invisibly in the service of linear narrative.²¹ The

¹⁹ Sconce, ‘“Smart” Film’, p. 359. Sconce’s examples of the genre include *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997) and *Your Friends and Neighbours* (Neil LaBute, 1998).

²⁰ Sconce discusses the continuing impulse for media scholars and fans of ‘trash’ to discover ‘counter-cinemas’ that may be distinguished from classical Hollywood cinema in terms of the style and the pleasures offered by alternative forms, in ‘Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,’ *Screen*, Vol. 36, No. 4, (1995), pp. 371-93.

²¹ A term Buckland deploys in relation to the overall coherence of form and style valorised by V.F. Perkins in *Film as Film*, and further elaborated by Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger as the stylistic

paradigmatic camp spectator is also characterized by a healthy postmodern distrust of classical pathos, seeing all appeals to ‘conventional’ emotions as precisely that – appeals, and moreover, ones that the spectator always sees coming. The laying of inverted commas over any such appeal, resulting in what Jeffrey Sconce calls the ‘dampened affect’ invoked by the contemporary ‘smart’ film, characterizes a spectatorship that has seen it all before and cannot be impressed upon in the same way that a more classical audience might.²² Only through parody (or what Jameson calls ‘blank parody’) can the postmodern spectator be reminded of that appeal, albeit one that is now distorted and rendered disingenuous by its own acknowledgement of that spectator effect.

Of course, if one were to offer an example of the aforementioned aesthetic against which camp rails, one might be tempted to suggest *Schindler’s List* or one of many of Spielberg’s ‘serious’ films as key paradigms. The film has the technical virtuosity, sophisticated mode of address and emotional seriousness that exemplifies the common-sense quality against which so many other films are deemed inferior. The latter are consumed with glee however by a camp sensibility that relishes such stylistic shortcomings and reclaims them as ‘paracinema’²³, and it is with a punkish sneer at the mainstream canon that such films are applauded as unintentional masterpieces. Although *Schindler’s List* was itself widely deemed to embody a regressive sentimentalism, and was both recognized and repudiated by various critics

parameters of the ‘classical Hollywood film’ in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. See Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*, Continuum, 2006, pp. 29-52.

²² See ‘New American “Smart” Film’, pp. 359.

²³ For discussions of paracinema, see Sconce’s ‘Trashing the Academy’ and Joan Hawkins, *Cutting edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

as such, such an attribute could not possibly qualify it for recuperation as camp. Displaying mainstream Hollywood's high production values, its emotional appeals are considered *calculatedly* excessive rather than accidentally or ironically so. While postmodern in terms of its intertextuality and self-conscious referentiality, the film necessarily contrasts in tone with the 'smart' cinema of such filmmakers as Tarantino or Solondz discussed below. Where the latter stand as paradigms of an ironic and über-stylized approach to the melodramatic mode, Spielberg remains committed in such films as *Schindler's List* to more traditional invocations of pathos. Whether motivated by artistic aims, a very 'smart' business strategy, or most likely both, it certainly caters to a variety of what Thomas Elsaesser terms 'speaking positions',²⁴ invoking the sentimental alongside more critical concerns with form. However, although indicative of a 'flashy rhetorician', as James Naremore argues,²⁵ Spielberg's work is still largely deemed to exemplify 'organic unity' according to Warren Buckland, significantly *balanced* in terms of both pedagogical, legible signifieds and excessive signifiers.

It is often however in accordance with a marked disdain for such tasteful economy in relation to a film's emotional registers that a 'smart' sensibility processes excess in a particular way, favouring the unintended, unconscious or ironic attributes of camp over the deliberate, didactic and sometimes manipulative features of sentimentality. If the films of Sirk exemplified melodrama's potential for camp as a function of excesses in mise-en-scène, colour and music, 'paracinema' is celebrated by a camp

²⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From *Holocaust, Our Hitler* and *Heimat* to *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*,' in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 149-72.

²⁵ James Naremore, 'Love and Death in A.I. Artificial Intelligence,' *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (2005), p. 258.

sensibility informed above all by what Sconce terms a ‘particular reading protocol’, marking out members of a subculture that aesthetically ‘valorize all forms of cinematic ‘trash.’²⁶ While the many tropes of sentimental virtue, the martyred moral soul and the belated recognitions of goodness became hackneyed formulae before even the latter half of the 18th century, their denigration, through such terms as kitsch, the formulaic and the emotionally gratuitous, now return as instances of postmodern camp. In sympathy with the feminine and ‘queer’ identities implicitly repressed by what is considered an ideologically patriarchal, heteronormative system of aesthetic value, camp becomes an ironic championing of unjustly derided discursive forms. A postmodern sentimentality in turn serves as a politically refreshing but ambivalent ‘excess’ that both reproduces and punctures the aesthetic conservatism of a now institutionalized set of tropes, character types and narrative patterns. As Shaviro notes of camp, its

affectations and exaggerations [...] ridiculed the straight world's values and norms. But at the same time, they also secretly allowed gay men to affirm those values, an affirmation that was otherwise forbidden to them. The camp value of bad performance lies in the way that it both expresses forbidden desires and simultaneously protectively disavows those very desires through parody and excess. In this way, camp is deeply ambivalent: it has both a subversive, desiring edge and a conservative, conformist edge.²⁷

If camp’s recuperation of the ‘bad performance’ rests on the pervasive relativism fostered by modernism’s (deliberate?) collapsing of aesthetic criteria, sentimental tropes (precisely in their ‘gross’ manifestations) have afforded a means by which

²⁶ Sconce, ‘Trashing the Academy,’ p. 372.

²⁷ Shaviro, ‘Postmodern Emotions’, p. 131.

minority identity groups express the contradictions of their social belonging.²⁸ However, cultural studies' foregrounding of the reader or spectator's *agency* in relation to an expanded host of popular texts has problematized alignments between camp and the minority cultures it once seemed to define in terms of taste. As Barbara Klinger has observed, 'mass camp' becomes available to a far wider audience, no longer defining the tastes of an actual gay or female community and arguably becoming so 'mainstream' as to no longer serve as a 'subculture' discourse at all.²⁹ The artistry and craft of performers and directors loses significance compared to their contributions to a new carnival of exaggerated form, pastiche and radical incompetence.³⁰ In such respects, much 'reality television' indeed might be deemed camp's *coup de theatre* in its wilful foregrounding of the amateur and his/her knowing performances of contemporary social identity.

The political materiality once revealed through austere modernist difficulty, defamiliarisation and reflexivity may now thus be equally, if not more, discernible in the omnipresent excesses of the generic, the cringingly trite or the cloyingly sentimental images of popular culture. Indeed, the 'pathetic' has been appropriated in some sectors as a new aesthetic unto itself, one that revels in the camp appropriation

²⁸ Richard Dyer for instance notes the parodic excesses of camp as a key feature of both underground gay and lesbian cinema, while remaining a key attribute to certain other underground films that aren't specifically gay in content, such as the films of John Waters. See *Now You See It: Studies in Gay and Lesbian Film*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 109-200.

²⁹ See Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 132-156.

³⁰ See also Susan Sontag's original highlighting of camp sensibility in 'Notes on Camp' (in *Against Interpretation*, London: Penguin Classics, 1964), and further discussions of camp in Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 82-95. Tania Modleski has also addressed questions of gender and popular culture in many works, see 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas,' in Marcia Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life*, pp. 446-465. For a good overview, see See Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

of sentimental kitsch, for which even an online manifesto of ‘patheticism’ exists.³¹ One of its aims is worth looking at carefully, where patheticism is defined ‘as a desire to move beyond the bounds of irony via an unapologetic occupancy of a position which is from the outset acknowledged to be untenable in any heroic sense yet very human.’ While at the same time asserting that ‘pathetic art hates the ethical and the moralistic’ such a manifesto approaches kitsch through the lens of ‘camp’ humanism or in its own terms, ‘sympathy for a kitsch devil.’ As with the Surrealists and their lost objects, it is in the pure triteness of the pathetic that a camp sensibility finds aesthetic value, connoting freedom in the collapsing of aesthetic criteria invoked by such acts of contemplation in relation to kitsch. The more such objects fail to connote value in capitalist, aesthetic terms, the more value they attain as aesthetic excesses.

Embodying a sentimental narrative of its own, the useless media object (itself lost in an omnipresent image culture and signifying mass culture in a way that a Spielberg film cannot) attains aesthetic value in its own epitomization of failure, rejection and depersonalized helplessness.

Indeed, if the camp sensibility recuperates all forms of ‘trash’, it is still a certain category of ‘melodrama’ that wins out here over the sentimental as such. ‘Camp’ functions in postmodern culture as a hermeneutic attuned to the excessive signifiers of desire, denial and hysterical repetition that an abstract high culture has failed ultimately to register. Yet in a curious turnaround of what one might be tempted to call camp’s ‘inverted snobbery’, the sentimental becomes a certain regressive, above all conservative, ‘quality’ of melodrama that still wrong-headedly aspires to such ‘high’ aims, despite its own historical alignments with kitsch. Where camp revels in

³¹ See <http://www.kurtbrereton.com/pathman.html>, accessed online 3rd July 2010.

the provisional realities of the shallow and the raw, the sentimental seems still to represent a repugnant stylistic 'gloss' that strains for feeling and deeper, more static, meaning. If camp valorises John Wayne, the Queen Mother, the films of John Waters and Todd Haynes, daytime soap operas and a whole host of rediscovered paracinematic classics, it is because their 'schlock' is either unintentionally gratuitous or intentionally, ironically parodic.³² Yet camp, even 'mass camp,' is rather less concerned with melodrama that remains within a sentimental category of taste, the latter delivering pathos without the apparent irony and parodic intent that so defines a 'trash' aesthetic of its own. Chaplin's patheticism and Spielberg's redemptive models do not connote camp as the above examples have, for they still embody a certain classicism represented by a repertoire of affects that are neither archly 'smart' nor casually 'incompetent.' Indeed, regressive sentimentalism is more often associated with full intentionality, and indeed seriousness, the chief grounds upon which charges of emotional manipulation are levied. Amidst the increasingly complex image economies within which sentimental tropes circulate, as outlined above, it is still in terms of the sentimental's connotations of earnest pedagogy (or 'new sincerity'), in accordance with its genealogical roots, that its own effects continue to court dismissal.

So the sentimental seems not to have lost all conceptual significance within a culture of emotion characterised for Jameson, quoting Lyotard, as the fleeting 'intensities' of an image culture perpetually in flux.³³ One can indeed say with some certainty that the sentimental clearly has survived conceptually for a very long time and most likely

³² See Richard Dyer's brief list of camp icons in 'It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going,' (1976), in Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 110-16.

³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 16.

will continue to do so, albeit in forms guided by a contemporary postmodern sensibility. The aesthetic ‘bracketing’ of emotions need not in such a context imply a loss of potency but a rather more complex interaction between subject, technology and memory. In such respects, Steven Shaviro’s deployment of ‘sentimentalism’, in his article on ‘postmodern emotions’, rests on the concept’s continuing invocation of a vital bridging of the conceptual divide between reason and emotion. He argues as follows:

There are good reasons why we can no longer take emotions seriously. We are far too jaded, cynical, and ironic ever to trust the heart rather than the head. And a good thing too. But this condition of terminal irony is also what allows us to reinvent the much-maligned state of aesthetic disinterest. And in that cool, impersonal, and disaffected state we encounter the life (after death) of postmodern emotions. I am calling, therefore—and I think that Warhol would have approved—for a new sort of emotionalism or even sentimentalism, that is to say, for feelings that are playful, perverse, whimsical, wasteful, futile, dysfunctional, extravagant, and ridiculous.³⁴

By underscoring what I have above referred to as a historical denigration of emotion, Shaviro redeems sentimentality for its invocation of a kind of sensual eclecticism, that depends above all, I would agree, on the continuing tendency of the media to engage the spectator both intellectually and emotionally. Because our emotional lives have changed from the enthralled immersion of cinema to Warhol’s distracted spectatorship of a television that’s always switched on, the postmodern allows for a far wider spectrum of aesthetic experience, of an omnipresent image culture that perpetually feeds on ‘feeling.’

With disaffected irony now thus the virtual precondition of a postmodern sensibility, the sentimental project of guaranteeing moral civility through art’s transmission of

³⁴ Steven Shaviro, ‘Postmodern Emotions’, p. 131.

particular moral values remains a largely bankrupt idea, yet pathos and the pathetic remain vital to aesthetic theory. Getting ‘beyond the bounds of irony’ (as the ‘patheticism manifesto’ calls for) requires a sympathy that must still not be equated with a conservative moralism, necessitating a shift towards the abstract, for which Shaviro is quite right to invoke Kant. From tears as tangible evidence of moral character to tears as a momentary bodily reaction cued by a particular constellation of stimuli, the latter is nevertheless accorded importance as the ‘affect’ generated by aesthetic experience. If it is not subversive, affect can no longer be dismissed as apolitical either. Neither progressive nor regressive, the political promiscuousness of sentiment becomes its most promising attribute, as experienced by a subject unmoored from both rigid ideology, and, if the most radical postmodern voices are to be believed, from herself. If irony and media-literacy deflate the newness of experience and any notion of a naively moral spectator, po-mo sentimentality must necessarily be considered within a more expansive rubric than that defined within reductive moral parameters. This begs the question of how contemporary moral philosophy has itself responded to the changes prompted by post-modernity.

Postmodern Moral Philosophy

Academic philosophers would be the first to announce the problems lying at the heart of moral philosophy and ethics in the post-modern era; yet the set of problems they articulate look very different from those addressed by media aesthetics. A moral philosopher such as Alisdair MacIntyre echoes the revisionist impulses of the postmodern moment with his 1981 book *After Virtue*,³⁵ a work that announced the failure both of Enlightenment notions of the moral individual and its nihilistic

³⁵ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

aftermath, in favour of a return to an Aristotelian understanding of morality founded in man's interaction with society. Identifying the same late 19th century moment of the Enlightenment's collapse in Nietzsche's attacks on a universalist morality, McIntyre nevertheless attacks the latter's own emphasis on the individual as an *Übermensch*. While a faith in Enlightenment's universalism was bound, he argues, to fail, solutions resting on the political philosophy of Nietzsche to John Rawls fail owing to their reliance on 'emotivism', a philosophical movement that McIntyre implicitly aligns with the modernist age and its rejection of 19th century Victorian culture. Thus he asks:

What was it about the culture of the late nineteenth century which made it a burden to be escaped from? [...] But we ought to notice how dominant the theme of that rejection is in the lives and writings of the Woolfs, of Lytton Strachey, of Roger Fry. Keynes emphasised the rejection not only of the Benthamite version of utilitarianism and of Christianity, but of all claims on behalf of social action conceived as a worthwhile end. What was left? The answer is: a highly impoverished view of how 'good' may be used.³⁶

Without unpacking all of McIntyre's arguments, which remain outside the scope of this chapter, I would emphasise that the period identified in the above largely coincides with the period of proto- or high-modernism discussed at length in the chapters above. Philosophically, it becomes aligned with a vitriolic, Nietzschean retreat from moral discourse altogether: by rejecting the baby of Enlightenment reason, it throws out the bathwater of the possibility of a social theory of the 'good.' Ironically, McIntyre refers to this movement with the term 'emotivism', yet this is not meant as a repudiation of emotion *per se* but rather a critique of what he argues

³⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

constituted a downsizing of moral discourse to the mere ‘feelings and attitudes’ of writers that nevertheless purported to make philosophically objective claims.

The sentimental as such comes to represent an Enlightenment doctrine that is rejected in the twentieth century by a movement that paradoxically is not so much too rational as too subjectivist. If all prior models of the ‘good’ had to be rejected for their false claims to universal truth, MacIntyre argues that emotivism leaves us with little but our own untestable preferences and feelings. His solution nevertheless returns to Aristotelian notions of the ‘moral’ as grounded in shared standards of social life, or ‘*telos*’, a criterion with which the sentimental has always itself been associated, despite its own reputation with vulgar subjective irrationalism.³⁷ It remains however continuously problematized by its conflation of the objective and subjective, the rational and the irrational. This becomes most evident in MacIntyre’s critique of Hume’s concept of ‘sympathy’ as a ‘philosophical fiction’ that cannot bridge these binaries. While Hume subjected ‘rationality’ to qualification and Kant discounted the ‘passions’, MacIntyre argues that both major Enlightenment philosophers failed to found morality in rational discourse and precipitated emotivism. Thus:

The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture – and subsequently of our own – lacked any public, shared rationale or justification. In a world of secular rationality religion could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and action; and the failure of philosophy to provide what religion could no longer furnish was an important cause of philosophy losing its central cultural role and becoming a marginal, narrowly academic subject.³⁸

³⁷ Conceptualisation of a communitarian ethics that opposes the individualism of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, is central also to the thought of such philosophers as Charles Taylor, see *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

³⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 50.

The above passage echoes claims made by such scholars as Peter Brooks that use such a philosophical context to explain the advent of melodrama, an aesthetic that could be considered to make ‘ethical forces’ legible³⁹ in the absence both of religion and, as McIntyre claims, an adequate moral theory. Yet just as Hume and Kant both fail to fully account for morality, so the sentimental has always courted accusations of its attempting to provide evidence for an ungrounded and unfindable ‘sympathy’, an issue that has always made the theorisation of the sentimental a difficult one, and arguably also prefigures the modern problematics of sentimental art.

For McIntyre then, emotivism has been both an inevitable and inadequate response to ethics writ large, and requires renewed efforts to found moral discourse as something more than the relativistic conflict of individual preferences. This however has not stopped many other contemporary philosophers from engaging in the codification, explanation and recuperation of emotions. No longer the blind spot of rationalist enquiry, the question of emotion’s interdependence with reason has now come centre stage, producing a wealth of work concerning the validity of emotional experience. A key intervention concerns the debunking of emotion’s subjectivist connotations.⁴⁰ Particularly pertinent to this discussion is Martha Nussbaum’s recent accounts of compassion and a tradition of detractors that have assumed, since Plato and the Stoics, compassion’s fatal association with particularism and individual preference.⁴¹ If the Stoics original validation of disinterested judgment has enjoyed a rich legacy in

³⁹ Peter Brooks, ‘The Melodramatic Imagination’, in Marcia Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life*, p. 64.

⁴⁰ For an overview of contemporary philosophical approaches to emotion, see Robert C. Solomon (ed.), *Thinking About Feeling*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴¹ See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavels of Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 297-456.

philosophy, Nussbaum provides evidence of a strong counter-tradition ('pro-compassion') that for her has largely succeeded in opposing such ancient objections. Of particular interest to discussions of melodrama is Nussbaum's dismantling of what she terms the Stoic's 'egalitarian cosmopolitanism.'⁴² The family, for example, within this rubric, represents a unit that wrongfully courts a 'disproportionate measure of our concern and energy' in its members, who attend to a particular sub-group of community at the expense of society's wider, cosmopolitan circle. Echoing communist ideology of course, it is compassion that is blamed here for prompting the subject to attend morally only to those perceptually close to him. When individuals outside of such close circles (whether family, national territory, imagined community) are out of sight, they are also out of mind, and receive undeserved neglect on the part of a subject overly focused on the nearest and dearest.

Of course, such has been a key rationale in relation to the promotion and distribution of films and other art projects that bring the experience of marginal or under-represented groups to the attention of filmgoers deemed overly accustomed to sentimental Hollywood entertainment and its allegedly narrow repertoire of characters and heroes. While the American family and its white, heterosexual patriarch may be deemed the paradigmatic commonplace in the actual lives of many Western filmgoers and in the cinema that reflects it, the need to broaden the field of experience has rightfully constituted a core ethos of arts funding, the festival circuit and quality film criticism for a long time. Such policy of course rests on the notion that a broad-minded subject must be persistently apprised of marginal figures and minority experiences in order to act morally in the interest of the wider social and global

⁴² Ibid., p. 359.

community. While compassion is certainly invoked in such a process, representation and the being made aware come first and foremost, or else compassion (as one, and perhaps not the most necessary, of various appropriate responses) will be immorally constricted to a limited set of objects.

Yet it is precisely the common assumptions often underpinning such thinking that Nussbaum has sought to problematize in her defence of compassion itself. Rather than attack such a policy in its own right, her pro-compassion position seeks to defend the emotions of compassion in all its evocations, irrespective of interest group. While sentimentality is often associated with compassion felt in relation to an over-represented figure of sympathy, Nussbaum is careful to point out that it can't be the emotions of compassion itself that are to blame here, but rather the nexus of values and politics that bring about such interactions, due to either the Hollywood movie factory or the spectator that wants a cheap cry for its own sake. In itself however, compassion is defended as having an intimate connection to a 'core theory' of value that she expounds upon as follows:

The standard occasions for compassion, throughout the literary and philosophical tradition - and presumably in the popular thought on which the tradition draws - involve losses of truly basic goods, such as life, loved ones, freedom, nourishment, mobility, bodily integrity, citizenship, shelter. Compassion seems to be, as standardly experienced, a reasonably reliable guide to the presence of real value.⁴³

In itself therefore, and as Hume wrote long ago, moral sentiment is a rather dependable human activity which, if at times problematic, is too important to be dispensed with on the grounds of its closeness to sentimental abuse. Compassion and its regular evocations ground the subject as a properly social being that, only through

⁴³ Ibid., p. 374.

such pedagogically inflected experience, can become a truly moral agent. Evaluation and discrimination are necessary checks to unencumbered compassion, but they do not necessarily for Nussbaum undermine the emotions associated with the compassionate process itself. Indeed, such rational checks on compassion are ultimately also reliant on compassionate impulses focused elsewhere, as part of an overall economy of 'real value.' She thus asserts a vital link between 'compassion' and such 'agency', because it is 'only when we see to what extent need for external goods is involved in the development of agency itself that we have the deepest possible basis for respecting and promoting human freedom.'⁴⁴

The dangers of sentimental abuse are not ignored though, wherein the enjoyment of neediness or victimhood for its own sake through cheap signification is acknowledged as an ancient objection on the grounds of unwarranted or self-indulgent compassion. In response to such objections, Nussbaum is once again careful to qualify their traditional implications in relation to condemning compassion *tout court*. This she does first through the denial that compassion's cognitive component need necessarily be the desire to maintain misfortune and disaster as a means of ensuring a perpetual flow of pitiable objects. As proof, she allows compassion a cognitive component that understands 'need' and 'victimhood' to be normal phenomena of everyday life while at the same time able to allot value to their elimination or reduction. Once more asserted as the 'reliable guide to the presence of real value', compassion is here given the benefit of the doubt through Nussbaum's assertions concerning the mutual interdependence of emotional and systemic thought. She argues that 'compassion needs to be combined with an adequate theory of the basic human goods: but there is

⁴⁴ Ibid.,p. 385.

no reason to assume that it must have a bad such theory.’⁴⁵ Put simply, compassion in Nussbaum’s reasoning need not undermine or impair the subject’s ability to discriminate between the various claims to ‘need’ that he encounters, but instead constitutes the core motivation to such acts of discrimination. Compassion requires us to ‘get it right’⁴⁶, in order to avoid a regressive sentimentality (among other unfavourable consequences such as anger and violence, see below), but there is nothing according to Nussbaum in its own mode of action that should prevent this from happening. Informed by an ‘adequate theory of the basic human goods’, sentiment can and must operate despite the possibility of various manifestations of sentimental distortion, either as textual or subjective phenomena.

It is here that we discern most clearly a set of shared concerns between moral philosophy and postmodern visual culture, for here is expressed the possibility that real and imagined experiences of pathos can coexist with the subject’s ethical discriminations. If postmodern culture immerses the spectator in an array of images and texts that have apparently lost their relation to the ‘referent’, we might follow Nussbaum’s theory by saying that this need not necessarily imply that ‘dampened affect’ operates independently of compassion. Being hyper-aware of the array suggests not that compassion itself is eliminated as a cinematic affect but rather that the postmodern spectator has merely become *more* discerning and discriminating as to how ‘need’ should be recognized and verifiable. Images of ‘need’ and pathos do not become irrevocably lost or meaningless in this array, which sometimes seems to be suggested by such terms as ‘blank style’ or ‘dampened affect’. It would under this

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 376.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 387.

rubric be truer to suggest that our compassion and sentiment represent important components in generating an overall ‘theory of basic human goods,’ parts of a cognitive system that can process kitsch or the gratuitous without needing to dispense with compassion wholesale.

However, as discussed before our turn to moral philosophy, compassion and empathy continue to carry connotations that are not so easily defended when read against issues debated in the context of the ‘new humanities.’ In a post-Freudian, post-Marxist intellectual landscape, compassion remains the property of the ‘subject,’ a concept that invokes a philosophical humanism that has been forcefully challenged by Michel Foucault and the ‘deterritorializing’ theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Owing to various institutional and discursive differences (as implicitly questioned by MacIntyre above), such theoretical work is rarely considered directly alongside academic moral philosophy. If this is still attributable to an ongoing demarcation between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy (related no doubt also to distinctions between the ‘leftist’ humanities and the more ‘conservative’ Empiricist or Analytical philosophy traditions), the last 30 years has seen qualified efforts to bridge this divide.⁴⁷ For despite methodological, and certainly ideological, differences that make comparison a thorny affair, shared genealogies can be found between such theorists. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari’s critiques of Oedipal identity in some ways rehearse the Stoical condemnation of the family in favour of larger communal formations. Frequent appropriation of philosophical ‘immanence’ by

⁴⁷ A preponderance of journals and conferences have thus emerged, seeking to instigate dialogue between these two traditional camps. Within Film Studies in particular, significant inroads have been made into analytic philosophy (See *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Richard Allen & Murray Smith (eds.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) and cognitive philosophy and psychology (See Bordwell and Carroll’s *Post-Theory*, cited above), the discipline having been traditionally associated most firmly with continental theory and cultural studies models.

Deleuze and Guattari implicates such alternative spheres as being in a more perpetual state of ‘becoming’, arguably radicalizing the Stoics’ sense of a tangible communal formation. If the Stoics might have been happier to validate society over family, a similar concept of disinterest and nullification of subjective preference is nevertheless still implicit here, where compassion continues to constitute an inadequately moral discourse.

For Deleuze and Guattari, codes of morality inherited from Christianity and other institutional clusters are thus rejected in favour of a Nietzschean anti-rationalism, wherein static codifications of the moral give way to the perpetual flux of the ethical. If the moral is an inherently conservative set of standards that centralizes the subject, the ethical comes to signify a more abstracted and fluid set of interactions between bodies.⁴⁸ Appropriating Bergsonian psychology, Deleuze and Guattari undermine the integrity of the subject, positing subjective experience as a series of neuronal firings between sensory and motor activity, inputs and outputs with little scope for mediation. A philosophical anti-humanism displaces any sense of common-sense morality (with which compassion has so often been aligned) in favour of a ‘deterritorialized’ set of aesthetics. Bergson’s concept of ‘affect’, as distinct from the more humanist emotion, is central here, for while ‘emotion’ is felt by a subject, ‘affect’ suggests above all an irreducible interaction between that which moves (exemplified for Deleuze in cinema) and the body that is moved by it. Taking the psychoanalytic premise that locates desire or libido as abstracted drives, Deleuze and Guattari reconfigure the Enlightenment subject as a ‘desiring machine’, a cluster of impressions and impulses

⁴⁸ For Deleuze and Guattari’s appropriation of ‘Immanence’, see ‘What is Philosophy?’, Columbia University Press, 1996. For good overviews of Deleuzian concepts see Patricia Pister (ed.), *Micropolitics of Media Culture: Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari*, Amsterdam University Press, 2001.

that share vital attributes with cinema, which itself approximates the body as an analogous 'sensorium.' While image and body are still qualitatively different objects, their modes of action both resemble each other and serve as channels for an ongoing flow of impressions.

Nussbaum's formulation of compassion, then, sits in tension with Deleuzian theory above all in terms of agency. Where Nussbaum depends on a conception of the subject as active, self-determining and compassionate, Deleuze and Guattari follow the Nietzschean premise of dehumanizing the body for more expressly radical purposes. Capitalism still looms very large here as a commodifying logic that serves to concretize and identify bodies in the name of material consumption, a process which also includes such aspects as the continued demarcation between private and public or family and wider notions of community. Destabilization of bodily integrity constitutes a vital counter-logic here, whereby the collapsing of constructed boundaries (in Foucaultian terms, of gender, criminality, sanity etc) can serve to reconfigure perceptual experience.⁴⁹ Where compassion between subjects still necessitates a boundary between subjective and objective, these anti-humanist formulations seem to call for a more radical collapse of such boundaries, reinforcing rather the role of a 'materialist' post-Freudian unconscious.

Paradoxically, it is precisely in the extent to which Deleuze and Guattari engage with affect over emotion that leads a literary historian specializing in 18th century sentimental 'languages', James Chandler, to claim Deleuze and Guattari as the true

⁴⁹ A key figure of such bodily fragmentation is termed the 'Body without Organs', which is related to the 'desiring machine', both concepts discussed in particular in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Robert Hurley, Mark Seem & Helen R. Lane (trans.), London: Continuum, 2004 and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Brian Massumi (trans.), London: Continuum, 2004.

heirs of its critical project.⁵⁰ The crux of the sentimental in such regards pertains not to moral discourse or discourses of compassion as such, but rather to the philosophical problems foregrounded by the sentimental with regards to defining emotion and affect. Cinema, as for Deleuze, stands as an ideal paradigm for such indeterminacies, for as a sign of ‘vehicularity’ in Chandler’s terms, it serves to materially embody emotion as motion. The cinematic close-up, or ‘affection-image’, for instance becomes a metaphor for movement despite its dependence on stillness. Thus:

The fact that the affection-image is associated with an absence of locomotion becomes less significant when we understand that the movements in each case are meta-movements to begin with. The resonance of this language with the discourse of the vehicle – the discourse from which *A Sentimental Journey* initially emerged as a form – seems to me too strong to ignore, especially in light of Deleuze’s self-proclaimed, Bergson-derived materialist account of affectivity.⁵¹

Situating sentimental theory within a theoretical tradition of ‘materialist affectivity’,⁵² Chandler thus claims Deleuze’s discussion of the ‘movement image’ as a continuance of the sentimental’s preoccupation with moving and being moved, thematized notably for him by both ‘moral sentiment’ theory and Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*. The famous Maria of Moulines episode in Sterne’s novel, for instance, invokes for Chandler the Deleuzian ‘affection-image’ in its thematization of Yorick’s response to the face of a distraught woman he meets and its foregrounding of a handkerchief that becomes a repository for their comingled tears, moments that Chandler aligns with the cinematic close-up and insert. What matters for this analysis revolves, as with Deleuze and Guatarri, less on the how Sterne or the cinema belong to a sentimental or

⁵⁰ See James Chandler, ‘The Languages of Sentiment,’ *Textual Practice*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 21-41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

melodramatic tradition of pedagogy and communication and rather more on how the sentimental tableau problematizes distinctions between the static and the moving, and how a language of emotion that begins with Shaftesbury and Sterne remains as a philosophical problem regarding the representation of 'matter and motion'.

In this, we are once more on the terrain of an understanding of the sentimental as a term of ambiguous reflexivity that problematizes an essential dichotomy between the subjectivity and objectivity of emotion. Moving-image culture simulates and embodies emotion so effectively that its movements become analogues of emotion itself, feeling *for* the spectator and thus undermining the extent to which the latter constitutes a subject at all. Just as with the conditions that produce Jameson's 'waning of affect', the emotions associated with postmodern visual culture become indissociable from the material conditions of image production: desubjectivized, free-floating and unmoored from the referent. Related to the 'disinterest' that Shaviro outlines above in relation to the postmodern spectator responding to an image culture of heterogeneity and ecelecticism, such affect undermines any sense of a subject's authentic emotions, allowing only for a subjective experience that is necessarily 'promiscuous' (or heterogeneous) in taste, desire and morality. That which is moved and that which moves become equivalents, neither privileged ontologically over the other, with such 'depth' rubrics as sympathy, compassion or morality becoming necessarily evacuated of specific content or value as such.

Derived from a significant and complex plurality of aesthetic discourses, the sentimental has thus undergone great 'adventures' as a concept (to coin Martin Jay's

phrase in relation to ‘totality’⁵³), and as such provides some key insights for better comprehending interactions between various moral and philosophical discourses. If it is bound up with theories of ‘moral sentiment’, it is also that which represents the more expansive field of ‘affect’ and the ‘sensorium’. Where it is represented by such figures as Richardson, Fielding or Sterne, it also has come to include Mackenzie, Brooke and every other novel deemed to constitute a ‘sickly species’ of literature. If it is commonly aligned with trite, bourgeois Hollywood entertainment, the high modernist assumptions that underpin such alignments have been shown to be less inimical to the sentimental than might be assumed. Furthermore, postmodern theory once more nuances our terms of reference, calling for the centralization of emotion as a rubric without being altogether clear on how this can be squared with theory and ‘Theory.’

In such a vain, and being mindful of the expansive field of affect within which the sentimental is still significantly implicated, a distinctly postmodern set of films from the last 15 years can be identified that clearly reflect such multivocalities in the sentimental project. While traditional elements of the melodramatic mode are appropriated by such films, they also illustrate the ways that the sentimental has been, and continues to be, subject to ironic qualification. Camp arguably plays a key role in each of the films discussed below, yet it operates rather less in terms of a specifically queer aesthetics and rather more in terms of a ‘mass camp’ of parody and pastiche. I purposefully select a set of films that reach beyond American cinema, for while a ‘smart’ aesthetic has become an increasingly salient attribute of American ‘indie’

⁵³ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept*, see note 12.

cinema, a very similar set of concerns pertains to the 'arthouse' cinema further afield. It hardly needs to be recalled that European cinema, from Bunuel and Godard to Sirk and Fassbinder serve as undeniable historical precursors to an aesthetics of formal, if not 'smart', irony. At the same time, a key concern of the analysis below concerns the extent to which American cinema might be deemed to have reconfigured that tradition of European cinematic modernism in accordance with its own postmodern version. Not least in terms of the particularly camp self-reflexivity that underscores all the films discussed below, the sentimental traces of melodrama are subject to a postmodern hollowing-out of 'depth' in favour of 'shallow' eclecticization.

Arthouse Melodrama: *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000)

Sentimental tropes are to be found in some of cinema's most distinctly non-mainstream channels, yet the pathos invoked by the postmodern narrative is subject to significant modifications compared to more classical forms of the melodramatic mode. One such film is Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000, Zentropa), a film that in true arthouse tradition maintains a sense of perceptual, emotional and generic instability, despite an ostensibly clear melodramatic trajectory. Its jarring shifts between musical and realist drama also mark it out as an instance of camp, while von Trier's use of the Icelandic pop star Bjork as the central protagonist serves an ambiguous function of foregrounding her non-actorly star persona while maintaining a focus on the tragedy of the character she portrays. Such stylistics earned the film much praise (and the Cannes festival's top prize) yet there was also much criticism of its camp pretentiousness, such as in the following:

For its sheer effrontery, for its browbeating melodrama and pseudo-tragedy, Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* has to be the most

sensationally silly film of the year - as well as the most shallow and crudely manipulative. Everything about it is silly, from the faux naivety and implausibility of its plot to the secret little idiot savant smile on the face of its Victim Heroine played by Björk - a squeaking, chirruping diva turn sufficient to curdle every carton of milk within a 10-kilometre radius.⁵⁴

Rehearsed in the above of course are standard critical objections to sentimentality, and once again the energy of such condemnation stems from the sense to which a filmmaker contrived to provoke compassion as a function of the blatant recourse to clichéd melodramatic tropes. If von Trier was living up to his reputation of self-stylized prankster, as evidenced most notably by his playful publication in 1995 of the Dogme manifesto along with fellow director Thomas Vinterberg, the film's ability to 'curdle every carton of milk within a 10-kilometre radius' was taken by some, such as Bradshaw, as both serious flaw and a mark of auteurist complacency.⁵⁵ Both 'silly' and 'manipulative', the film could be neither written off as Hollywood dross nor did it conform to a more stable, if not by now conservative, critical conception of an experimental thematics and stylistics.

Dancer in the Dark was the third film in von Trier's 'Golden Heart' trilogy, which also included *The Idiots* (Danish: *Idiotern*, 1998) and *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Inspired by a book von Trier read as a child telling the sentimental tale of a girl that goes into the woods and gives away all her possessions to animals, each of the 'Golden Heart' trilogy's films featured a 'Victim Heroine' that sacrifices her own

⁵⁴ Peter Bradshaw, Review of *Dancer in the Dark* in *The Guardian*, Friday 15 September 2000.

⁵⁵ His and Vinterberg's intervention appeared to *perform* the established codes of a European film movement, with calls for a greater, or an at least modified, realism and a variety of technical parameters advocated to that purpose (compulsory hand-held camera, no props transported to location, use of colour film only), Dogme 95 proved less a manifesto for all future filmmaking but a kind of self-reflexive experiment that both called attention to itself and its founders while deconstructing the very notion of a modernist movement and its aims. See Jan Simon's argument for comprehending von Trier's self-stylization and formal experimentation as following game logic in *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

interests to save or help others, only to be severely punished by a society that fails to recognize such virtue.⁵⁶ *Dancer*'s central character Selma, an immigrant to the US from Czechoslovakia, works in a factory in the US state of Washington in order to save up money for an eye operation for her son, Gene, so that he will not go blind. Selma suffers from the same condition, and the film follows the deterioration of Selma's sight to blindness and her initially friendly relationship with her landlord Bill to an eventually exploitative one, as he steals her savings in order to fund his wife's overspending. When Selma demands the stolen money back, he ashamedly exhorts Selma to kill him, and because she eventually does so under extreme duress, she is subsequently caught, put on trial, and finally executed for murder at the film's end. Although she commits murder, her act becomes one of both compassion (Bill begs her to do it) and justified retribution, with an aura of martyr established around her from the film's outset.

As with other von Trier films about rural to semi-urban life in America in particular, the narrative of *Dancer* begins with the possibility that members of a capitalist society can help and support one another, even where poverty seems entrenched (a similar premise of von Trier's subsequent film *Dogville* [2003] for instance). When Selma is not able to buy a present for Gene's birthday, Bill and Linda buy him a bicycle, a gift that Selma warily accepts despite its ostensible foregrounding of her failings as a mother. Similar goodwill is apparent in her factory work, a place where Selma becomes increasingly unable to perform her duties owing to failing eyesight. While her supervisor Norman excuses her mistakes that could possibly lead to a machine

⁵⁶ Von Trier comments on the DVD audio commentary of *Dancer* (New Line Platinum Series) that his father (a man he later found out not be his true father) would repudiate the sentimentality of the end of the children's book that inspired the trilogy, thus motivating von Trier to ask 'was it so stupid after all?' as a driving question of the 'Golden Heart' trilogy.

breakage, Selma's friend and colleague Kathy (Catherine Deneuve) turns up to help Selma perform her night-shift without being paid. However, as the film progresses, such acts of benevolence prove either insufficient to preventing catastrophe (Selma still loses her job) or indeed prove more directly instrumental to her downfall. Despite the bicycle gift, we learn only two scenes later from Bill's conversation with Selma that it is precisely such expenditure on the part of Linda that has brought him (as breadwinner) to financial ruin. A society of goodwill functions fine in von Trier's films as long as conditions remain unrealistically stable, with poor individuals shown to benefit from the kindness of more wealthy neighbours and friends. Yet it is precisely owing to the untenability of such stability, where poverty comes to dominate without any welfare on the part of state or employers that crime and murder start to encroach on such pastoral idylls. Bill's theft of Selma's money and his death follow as direct consequences of such changes in circumstances. That Bill is too ashamed to admit to Linda that they're broke and that this financial situation has arisen from Bill's failure to curb her consumption serves to underline failings on the part of the married couple and its traditional propagation of imbalanced gender roles. The film shows that if such an anachronistic scheme of marriage is permitted to subsist, the wider society, represented by friends, neighbours and colleagues, suffer equally if not more. While statuses of American, landlord, paid employee and husband afford a certain respectability, it becomes nothing short of parasitical on those that fall short of such criteria. Such figures as the stranger, the immigrant or the destitute (exemplified by Selma) become subjects at risk of abuse in such conditions. In the film's courtroom scene for instance, where Selma is put on trial for Bill's murder, the prosecuting lawyer brands Selma a 'communist' invoking the knee-jerk, mindless accusation of mid-20th century American society.

In such respects, as with the tradition of Sirk films and the classic melodrama, the film serves as a critique of American society while appropriating and arguably celebrating two of its principle genres, the melodrama and musical. As a European artfilm, the film might be construed as another instance of anti-American rhetoric emanating from countries and filmmakers that perceive themselves as more closely aligned with socially democratic principles.⁵⁷ However, it is precisely in *Dancer's* evocation of Hollywood melodrama and the musical that situates its project as one more of negotiation with American movie culture and its sentimentality. The musical in particular is subject to postmodern re-appropriation in *Dancer*, in which it maintains a shallowness of affect in its incomplete validation of the genre's ideology. Selma's rehearsals for an amateur production of *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) are shown, like the films' musical numbers, to break up the monotony of alienated, factory labour or, later on, the miseries of social isolation and rejection. While factory work imposes a crushing solitude on its workers, the rehearsal scenes show drama and music as episodes of social cohesion, support and love. Moreover, it is the musical numbers themselves that provide marked ironic counterpoint, as often with the traditional musical, to the grim conditions that surround them. In musicals such as *West Side Story*, *Oliver!* and *The Sound of Music*, to name but a few, musical numbers provide relief from the tense events of their plots, invoking moral legibility and Utopian idealism despite the profusion of tragic events that take place around them. Moreover, the classic musical number often clearly serves a pedagogical purpose, bringing characters together romantically or socially despite their initial

⁵⁷ As winner of the Palmes d'Or at the Cannes' film festival, such a film becomes aligned with other recent winners that similarly have mounted powerful ideological critiques of American capitalist society such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911* (2004).

disagreements and conflicts.⁵⁸ In *Dancer* however, music serves to unite characters as a more direct counterpoint to how they interact in the film's non-musical segments. Characters in the latter sequences are either as indifferent to one another as atomized factory workers, or are more likely actively working against each other's interests, such as Linda in relation to Selma after Bill's death or the death-row officers that transport Selma to the execution room. During musical numbers, such differences become effaced in the spirit of larger ideals, where characters act with far greater compassion and express sympathy with each other's motives—emotions which are later exposed as expressions of idealistic unreality in non-musical segments.

The moral legibility of the Hollywood musical thus becomes blurred, as musical escapism fails to effectuate cohesion in the non-musical numbers that follow. In the same scene in which Bill confesses his bankruptcy to Selma while she reveals her saving plans for Gene's operation, they discuss Hollywood musicals and their capacity to transport the spectator. A discourse is here foregrounded that poses music as a transcendent force over oppressive conditions (poverty for both Selma and Bill) so that they might survive psychologically. Yet when such escapism fails to prevent the theft, deceit and murder between these characters, such a discourse is at least partially shown to fail. Likewise, despite the extent to which Selma and Katherine are shown to enjoy their amateur rehearsals of *The Sound of Music*, their rehearsal space becomes a place of distrust and danger later on in the film. Informed by the police of Selma's crime, Selma's director deceptively stalls her at rehearsal so that the police have time to arrive and arrest her, underlining in a particularly overt way how the enjoyment of music can only be justified for its own sake rather than in more moral

⁵⁸ See Richard Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia' in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: Vol. 2*, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 220-32.

terms. Betrayal and deceit more often than not persist in non-musical numbers and we are confronted with a more overt failure of moral legibility to translate beyond the formal confines of the musical number. Unlike *West Side Story* for instance, where tragedy and music eventually precipitate recognitions of thwarted love and virtue between the two warring New York gangs, music remains interior, even delusionarily psychotic in *Dancer*, ensuring nothing but its own abstracted logic.

Closer to *Dancer* therefore are the revisionist musicals of Dennis Potter's TV series for the BBC such as *Pennies From Heaven*⁵⁹ and *The Singing Detective*⁶⁰, that explicitly clashed grim reality with a man's delusional flights into musical numbers that take place all around him.⁶¹ Like *Dancer*, such series' revelled in camp parody, informed nevertheless by a more serious subtext suggesting that such musical forms could no longer be trusted as sites of genuine emotional reality. Once more interiorized as the imaginings of a sick man (immobilized in a hospital bed by severe psoriasis), the musical number here becomes a key symptom of a profound identity confusion and mental disorder. As with Potter, grim reality is similarly subjected to the camp artifices of cinema in *Dancer*, such as when Bill's corpse (his head having been graphically bludgeoned by Selma) comes back to the life with the onset of the song 'Smith and Wesson' in order to reassure Selma about the killing. The film immediately becomes saturated with colour compared to the washed-out resolution of

⁵⁹ 1978, UK, aired on BBC television.

⁶⁰ 1986, UK, aired on BBC television.

⁶¹ Derived from Marlowe's imagination rather than the more literal bursts into song of the traditional musical, performances by the doctors, nurses and other patients that surround him are underlined as a similar kind of psychosis as Selma's reimaginings of her work environment as percussive music. Using standards from the 1930s, *Detective*'s excursions into song thus both alluded to the long-established escapism of Hollywood and jazz while underlining the extent to which such songs (and the imaginer's psyche) signify both an irrecoverable past and Utopian idyll.

the film's non-musical sequences and Selma's appearance becomes magically cleared of blemishes from her struggle with Bill. With the music still playing, Linda appears outside of the house and helps Selma escape from the police she's just called in the film's non-musical narrative, now seemingly aware that Selma needs to get the money to a doctor for Gene's operation. With Gene himself then circling on his bicycle singing the refrain 'You Just Did What you had to Do', the entire sequence here becomes dominated by the musical number's attempts to align the perceptions of characters with that of the omniscient spectator, despite its impossibility in the actual story.

In such respects, *Dancer* appropriates and defamiliarises the conventions of a sentimental Hollywood genre, calling attention to how the musical number in particular functions ideologically and nuancing a simpler kind of melodramatic pathos. While Selma is certainly misunderstood and unjustly punished (as an instance of virtue in distress), it is her unhinged remove from reality (her blindness serving as a good metaphor) that motivates the musical number's entertainment function, putting the spectator in a difficult position emotionally. The film seems to assert that while the number may be diverting for Selma and entertaining for the spectator, there is a price to be paid for its artificial consolations, in the form of Selma's ultimate execution. Furthermore, rather than allowing for such punishment to be perceived as the sad conditions of a melodramatic universe of destiny, sacrifice and martyrdom, *Dancer* implicates the spectator him- or herself as an integral element of that unjust economy. Unless our enjoyment of the musical number is one of camp detachment, it just might be possible that we ourselves are as much part of the problem as the state apparatus that ostensibly destroys Selma. By recognizing the genre and being

‘entertained’, we are implicated in such a process at the same time as being permitted an ironic subject position. As with Sirkian melodrama, sentimental tragedy is counterposed with formal excesses in music and colour, yet the latter are now foregrounded as more overt symptoms of delusion and escapism than a subtle stylistic gloss on narrative. Embodying a rather grosser kind of postmodern parody, *Dancer* invokes sympathy for Selma while complicating the extent to which identification is truly possible. Is this Bjork or a fictional character? To what extent are we supposed to sympathize with her off-kilter character? In such respects, *Dancer* certainly succeeded in distancing a fair number of critics and spectators, yet as the Cannes jury seemed to acknowledge, such a fostering of camp detachment seemed to be part of von Trier’s game all along.

American ‘Indie’ Cinema - *Palindromes* (Todd Solondz, 2004)

If von Trier’s project suggests that such experimental approaches to narrative cinema require the seasoned familiarity with modernist technique that comes with a European background, America’s own thriving ‘independent’ cinema has for some time also subjected the melodramatic tradition to irony. One such film in recent American cinema is Todd Solondz’s *Palindromes* (2004, USA), a film that addresses underage sex both between children and between children and adults. In its foregrounding of children as objects of the adult gaze, the film addresses a core theme of the sentimental in terms of its unstable relationship with sexuality. Invoking a mode of address with frequent recourse to the parodic and camp, *Palindromes* also epitomises the ‘dampened affect’ of Sconce’s American ‘smart’ cinema. It tells the story of a 13-year old girl, Aviva, that runs away from her middle-class suburban home once she is

forced to have an abortion by her parents. The character is played by seven different actors varying in age, race and even gender, who play Aviva through different stages of her journey. Such a formal device problematizes the extent to which Aviva constitutes a subject at all, for while the diverse casting at one level widens the spectrum of identification, such a device also serves to ‘defamiliarise’ the spectator from a more continuous experience of character, once again undermining a ‘depth’ model of spectatorship in favour of more episodic engagements and an enhanced consciousness of film form.

As a middle-class teenage girl desperate for a baby from a young age, Aviva deliberately gets pregnant with the teenage son of family friends. Once Aviva very reluctantly goes through with an abortion, and is unknowingly given a hysterectomy due to medical complications, she runs away from home and hitchhikes to the American Midwest where she ends up at a rural foster home run by evangelical Christians. This extended middle section of the film, a camp and dark parody of ‘bible-belt’ values, serves ultimately less as validation of ‘East-Coast’ or more notionally (sub)urban values than as further invocation of the latter’s already ‘shallow’ values, irrespective of location and religiosity. Both spaces (the suburban and the rural) are essentially debunked as places of ostensible security and nurture. The Midwest part of the film sees Aviva initially happily accepted into a troupe of disabled orphans that have apparently found sanctuary from a cruel world, loved and cared for by their surrogate evangelical mother, Mama Sunshine. Happily going about household chores, children’s games and rehearsing performances of pop musical numbers for the ‘Gospel circuit’, the Sunshiner’s home invokes so excessively saccharine a vision of Utopian innocence and moral values that an ironic perspective

becomes inescapable. While typical of an evangelical Christian dance group that appropriate the performances of modern popstars and 'boybands' like Madonna, NSync and Britney Spears and redirects such rhetoric in relation to Jesus, such reappropriations retain the traces of their earlier signification in terms of sexualized lyrics ('Nobody else could ever love me this way, Nobody, Jesus, but you') amidst emulation of such performers' sexualized dance movements. Jarring though it is when such numbers are performed by children, such performances are shown to be enjoyed in a particularly unironic way by their foster mother Mama Sunshine, a seemingly responsible, morally upstanding adult. Where the spectator is permitted a knowing irony in relation to the film's recourse to parody, it becomes also apparent how their diegetic counterparts do not share this distance (aside from Aviva herself who is rather more mutedly enthused). A discomfiting kitschy upbeatness and innocence remains in such a scene, challenging the 'smart' spectator to examine the extent to which her own 'sophisticated' distaste might itself require qualification. If the kids are happy, the film slyly intimates, who are we to object to such an idyll with our own irony-inflected standards of taste. How is it also that spectators such as we are more sensitive to the jarring sexuality of such performances than their onscreen mother, the embodiment of Madonna-like (the biblical one) Christian virtue?

The film thus clearly provokes the spectator to take on subject-positions that it only ambiguously itself endorses, and invokes an above all postmodern loss of critical viewpoint. One of the world's most popular 'grand-narratives', Christianity, is subjected to the simulacrum, its value system still expressed in terms of charity for the weak, poor and vulnerable, but now made legible through sensationalism as much as mere sentiment, with recourse to pop music and modern celebrity culture. Such

kitschy performance epitomizes a postmodern pastiche aesthetics, infusing the pop culture of the MTV video with Christian rhetoric, clashing the 'shallow' culture of image, fame and 'bling' with a 'depth' model of moral value. Yet while both modes are subject to critique emanating from different aesthetic agendas, their fusion in some way inoculates them from criticism altogether, one apparently redressing the excesses of the other. As discussed above, if camp allows us to laugh at the tacky and the grossly clichéd, it also has the 'double-edged' attribute of taking pop culture at more than face value i.e. seriously.

Innocent virtue therefore also shares this double-valence in the film. While it represents a condition that produces a potentially dangerously blinkered view of the world that fails to register its cruelties and perversions, it is also that which (might) prevent agents from descending into darker crime and malice. For while Solondz's depiction of the suburban family and the devoutly Christian home are constituted by children and adults participating in a carnival of sentimentalisms and benevolent artifices, they are offset by the ubiquity of the extreme, the graphically explicit and the criminal. As in David Lynch's films, Solondz has a fascination with detritus and trash as places of intensified social reality, with aborted foetuses dumped *en masse* or a baby doll found in a dumpster with its anal orifice violated with a beer bottle. As Lynch counterposed the idealized American suburban garden (complete with an absurdly artificial chirruping Robin) with the image of a human ear being broken down by hordes of insects just below the lawn's surface in *Blue Velvet* (1986, USA), Solondz's similarly juxtaposes the campy-sentimental with the rotten and dead. Likewise, despite the sunny appeal of Mama Sunshine's home and its seeming epitomization of naively sentimental goodwill among its residents, Aviva's stay is

punctuated by reminders of moral uncertainty, such as in her visit to a dumpsite for aborted fetuses and her discovery of plots to assassinate abortion doctors organized by Mama Sunshine's husband, Bo. With murder plotted downstairs alongside cruel proclamations of Aviva as a 'child-whore' and 'slut' in the basement of the house, the Sunshiners' homestead becomes a place of danger to be escaped, the first floor's self-consciously saccharine tableaux of happiness serving as unconscious over-compensations for the evil acts plotted one level below. The excessive tableaux in such regards become ultimately suggestive of displaced cruelty and repressed sexual desire as much as spaces of pure innocence.

Aviva's story thus suggests not so much innocent virtue preserved but a rather more pervasive questioning of how innocence (especially that of children) can be reliably represented at all. Child sexuality becomes the critical subject here, in relation to which Aviva's sexuality becomes paradigmatic. Subject to sentimentalization as spectacle and repression as morally inappropriate, child sexuality is omnipresent but still problematic for American society. Aviva's overt sexuality makes her not the 'child-whore' of radical evangelist discourse but neither does it allow her to represent a sentimental ideal of 'virtue rewarded.' Indeed, it is ultimately made clear that Aviva cannot herself remain a purely virtuous subject amidst the morally ambivalent conditions through which she progresses. Surviving a variety of dangerous contexts, her life is one of self-preservation, offering few opportunities for her own benevolence and altruism. In her insurances that the appointed hitman, Earl, goes through with the killing of the doctor that aborted her own foetus, Aviva's own moral compass is clearly here shown to have shifted from passive victim to retributive agent. Rather than forgive, Aviva here takes on the self-righteousness of Bo's evangelical

libertarianism, resorting to murder for justice. The revenger's role might elsewhere serve to deliver moral legibility, yet here it is taken on by an underage victim of trauma that has been keeping bad company. Her actions are shown not to have the moral validity usually expected of the melodrama, whether justice is enacted or remains in the register of the 'if only'. We are left instead with a postmodern sense of existential uncertainty concerning a moral outcome, a state of mind symbolized indeed by the palindrome that cannot but end as it begins.

That the violent events of *Palindromes*' closing scenes turn out to constitute an unexpected tragedy (the accidental killing of the abortion doctor's daughter) serves to confirm the film's evocation of chaos and chance at the expense of any sense of successfully executed moral vengeance. Where violence and moral retribution are revealed as blunt, destructive instruments of justice, often instead leading to further injustices, the film offers few indications as to where to gain a more 'morally legible' viewpoint. The film's foregrounding of the abortion debate and its intractable moral complexities sets the tone for the entire film, wherein divisions in contemporary American society between liberal and libertarian, urban and pastoral, are represented as ongoing conflicts. Aviva, in such respects, serves as the chief metaphor for 'dampened affect' in this universe, her formal fragmentation into several actors foregrounding her artificiality as a coherent subjectivity, at the same time that her story remains the central focus of the film. A 'depth' model of character continuity is thus both undermined formally while still reproduced at the narrative level.

An Exterminating Angel: The Jewish Orphan in *Inglourious Basterds*
(Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

Questioning the morality of violent retribution contrasts with a long Hollywood tradition, not least in such genres as the Western, that have explored the extent to which violence can be legitimate when enacted by moral agents. This idea is both continued and problematized by Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, which mobilizes key sentimental tropes while remaining wedded to a 'smart' and ironic representation of violence. With the film's central character Shoshanna, Tarantino delivers an almost uncharacteristically 'straight' mode of melodramatic narration that recounts the killing of her Jewish family at the hands of a Nazi death squad, and her efforts a few years later to exact revenge on the Nazi top-brass (including Hitler). *Basterds* therefore constitutes an interesting instance of an über-violent 'smart' film (replete with Tarantino's trademark gore) whose central character nevertheless rehearses a key sentimental trope of the orphaned Jewish girl. Such allegiance to dramatizing Holocaust events within required standards of taste carries with it a set of constraints that Tarantino is almost uncharacteristically careful to observe, reserving his trademark pulp violence for episodes that depicts the 'Basterds' on a violent mission through Northern France, a platoon of American Jews ordered simply to find Nazis to torture, maim and kill with gleeful, sadistic intent.

Indeed the film's first scene faithfully depicts the disturbing discovery and execution of Shoshanna's family hiding under the floorboards of a French farmer's house in occupied France. It is here that historical realism is largely adhered to, both in terms of how the farmer must give up the location of the family under duress of saving his

own family and the genuine emotions of guilt and betrayal he displays when he eventually does so. The process through which the German SS Colonel Landa (Christoph Waltz) expertly leverages the farmer's confession is shown through a barely-interrupted 20-minute long conversation/interrogation, allowing the spectator to register the subtle shifts of emotion in the farmer's face as he gradually is made to realise he has no option but to betray the location of the family. Despite its serious subject matter, the scene is not without either instances of allusion, irony or even dark comedy. The introductory intertitle reads, 'Chapter 1: Once Upon a Time...' suggesting both the classical European fairy tale but also a number of films that begin with that phrase, not least Sergio Leone's 'Once Upon a time in the West', a work frequently drawn upon by Tarantino both stylistically and thematically. As 'in Nazi Occupied France' appears, completing the chapter title, the film is already signalled as occupying a space of sharp contrast between grim, historical period and fairy tale, serious themes and something more fanciful. Such disjuncture continues in the opening images of pastoral life (a farmer chopping wood, a young girl hanging clothes to dry) offset by the arrival of a Nazi motorcade, with music that fuses Beethoven's Für Elise and the Spaghetti Western guitar flourishes of Ennio Morricone. Moreover, with Landa invoking a well-worn trope of the genius, clinically precise Nazi, Waltz's camp performance serves to ironically underscore the extent to which we are not on particularly original territory.

Yet despite such indications of what is to come, in terms of generic hybridity, intensified intertextuality or comedic performance, the scene remains faithful to the task of conveying the execution of the Jewish family once their location is revealed by

LaPadite. Climactic music accompanies the act of Nazi soldiers machine gunning through the floorboards of the farmer's house, yet no gore or dead bodies are presented in its aftermath, allowing this scene to remain within a certain category of taste where later scenes, mostly involving the 'Basterds', cross over into 'exploitation' gore. LaPadite moreover remains a moral anchor for the scene, visibly agonized by his necessary disclosure and the shooting, and further disgusted by the 'masquerade' Landa implicitly demands he go along with in order to keep the hiding family ignorant of their fate (so that they attempt no escape). Finally, the sentimental trope of female virtue in distress is established as the only surviving daughter, Shoshanna, escapes the house and runs for her life across the fields, while Landa (as the classical 'rake'), chooses not to shoot her and then mocks her escape with 'Au revoir, Shoshanna,' upon which the chapter ends.

As a self-contained section that conveys a tragic outcome and establishes the key Manichean opposition between Landa and Shoshanna, a narrative arc is clearly established where victim and oppressor (notwithstanding the latter's pro-Allies actions later on in the film) are identified and motivated. Sympathy, or in Murray Smith's terminology, 'allegiance' remains with Shoshanna throughout the film. As owner of a Parisian cinema in occupied Paris showing the great classics of the day, her encounters with Nazis put her in continual danger of being found out as Jewish, despite the great suffering she has already been put through. When Landa meets Shoshanna in a Parisian café, his clear suspicion, recognition and implicit interrogation of her rehearse the grossly uneven power relations of their equivalent characters in *Schindler's List*. Although more sexually charged, the scenes between Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) and Helen Hirsch (Embeth Davitz) also reproduce the

sentimental trope of Jewish female virtue in distress, the latter surviving in terror at the mercy of a powerful, amoral Nazi. In both instances, female virtue seems foregrounded as that which prevents Nazis from fully executing their orders, the trope's potent connotation of the 'human' overriding a Jewish identity that makes such women apparently sub-human. However, although women are subjected to extreme violence at the hands of the same male characters in both *SL* and *IB*, the films ultimately differ in their understanding of the emotional motivations for violence. While Helen is severely beaten by Goeth for resisting his sexual advances, Landa's violence is tempered by his pragmatic concerns in relation to his survival. Shoshanna escapes Landa's violence ultimately not owing to his recognition of her female virtue in distress but because of her (masculinized) efforts to blow up the Nazi party, a mission that might ultimately serve his own interests. While Goeth feels a perverse 'love' for Helen, Landa's ostensible compassion for Shoshanna's vulnerability turns out to be highly self-motivated. When his most savage violence does come, it is directed not at Shoshanna, but at the treacherous German actress Bridget von Hammersmark, revealing a savage hatred of deceptive women (Shoshanna no exception) that must nevertheless be tempered by a 'smart' strategy. Violence is here legitimated not as Goeth's expression of thwarted love and desire but as an equally, if not more, aggressive man's displaced hatred, Bridget serving as the unfortunate channel for a deeply repressed savagery. While all other channels have required Landa's 'dampened affect' of strategy and calculation, here Landa reveals his true thuggery, aligning him with Goeth after all albeit now nuanced by a more postmodern set of camp faces that he must wear at all other times.

In such respects, Shoshanna's victimhood establishes the film's moral centre in both thematic and stylistic ways, yet the film pushes against the Manichaeism that such a figure might commonly engender, maintaining a core opposition of good versus evil while nuancing the usual signifiers through which such a binary is normally invoked. The heavily stylized and excessive exploits of the 'Basterds' themselves and their part-Apache leader Colonel Raine (Brad Pitt) indeed represent the film's most overt upending of the moral semiotics usually reserved for the genre with which *IG* negotiates. The former Nazi soldier turned 'basterd', Stiglitz, who sadistically tortures and maims his Nazi victims is introduced in typical Tarantino style by a blast of 70s exploitation soundtrack music and a period comic-book graphic bearing his name. Another 'basterd', Sgt. Donny Donowitz (Eli Roth), known as 'The Bear Jew', is introduced WWE-style by the striking sounds of a baseball bat emanating from a cavernous lair-like railway arch. His summoning for the execution of a Nazi officer sees his emergence from the tunnel, bat in hand, followed by the graphically explicit killing of the officer by repeatedly smashing the latter's head. Such violence is governed not by rational calculation and strategy but by sheer bloodlust amidst the moral imperative to punish. Their graphic scalping of victims proves paradigmatic in such regards, serving no other function than as a symbolic memento of a successful killing and as posthumous humiliation of each Nazi killed.⁶² Similarly, Raine defaults on Landa's pragmatic bargaining for US real estate with the Allies HQ in exchange for his betrayal of the Nazi top-command, by carving a swastika into Landa's forehead with a large Apache knife at the film's end.

⁶² Scalpings also of course invoke the practice of Native-Americans as depicted in the Western genre, once again aligning the 'Basterds' with minority resistance to hegemony and unwarranted occupation.

In such respects, with such acts committed for aesthetic enjoyment (Raine says to one of his German officer victims “Frankly, watchin’ Donny beat Nazis, to death, is the closest we ever get to goin’ to the movies.”), violence here becomes subjected to a radical de-sentimentalization. While the soldiers of a more traditional war genre go into battle and kill reluctantly in service of a greater, honourable cause (*Saving Private Ryan* and Captain Miller paradigmatically), the ‘Basterds’ here indulge in violence as nothing short of self-conscious, aestheticized spectacle. While diminishing Nazi morale is stated as an objective of such ‘guerrilla’ operations, their mode of action serves more as viscerally experienced retribution, a radical challenge to the technocratic pragmatism of Nazi ideology and its über-rationalized ‘war-machine’. While Landa goes about his deadly job with disinterested impartiality and leaves it up to his henchmen to shoot Jewish families, violence takes on for the Basterds what can only be described as a cathartic *jouissance*. With Nazis subjected to the same disregard for humanity as the Jews historically were, the film celebrates ‘exploitation’ violence as a fitting response to historical trauma. Unlike Shoshanna, the ‘Basterds’ are not designated as models of humanity but ‘shallow’ cartoon-like icons, singlemindedly intent on immediate, bodily violence without exhibiting the more human attributes of compassion, forgiveness or even rationalization. If Shoshanna’s story largely resonates with melodrama’s traditional ‘if only’,⁶³ we might say the Basterds encode justice more in alignment with the present tense temporality of the ‘on time’, that which Linda Williams claims for the genre of pornography.⁶⁴

⁶³ Steve Neale, ‘Melodrama and Tears’, *Screen*, Vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), p. 12.

⁶⁴ See William’s ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, And Excess’, in Braudy & Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 1999, p. 711.

Yet if the film revolves around two stark extremes within its Allied ranks, from a 'straight' depiction of Shoshanna's passive endangerment to the ironic fanfare of the Basterds' belligerent scalpings, it is nevertheless in its final sequence that the sentimental and its radical other coincide. The raw material of cinema itself, a pile of film stock, is ignited in a locked cinema auditorium full of Nazis watching Goebbels' latest propaganda 'masterpeice', and it becomes evident to what extent cinema itself becomes entrusted with returning the world to a state of order and peace. In a Deleuzian vein, cinema achieves that which is beyond the subject, foisting disorder and chaos on some of the most historically static images of cinema, not least of which include the sentimentalized Jew and Hitler himself. In order to do so, it must also reconcile the distinct modes of representation that occupy the preceding narrative, allowing Shoshanna a highly aestheticized vengeance while upstaging the exploits of the Basterds. As Colonel Raine and his sergeant are detained by Landa as the suspected conspirators that they are, the Basterds' plot is put on hold, allowing Shoshanna to occupy central stage. As Goebbels' tampered film cuts to her face at extreme-close, she states to the Nazi audience her true identity and their imminent fate, whereupon the film stock located behind the screen ignites and two uncaptured Basterds begin machine-gunning the already fleeing Nazis. As Shoshanna laughs maniacally onscreen at the Nazis as the screen burns, her transition to the subject-position of a Basterd's vengeance is confirmed, invoking a radically different identity to that of sentimentalized Jewish victim. Cinema emerges as that which provides this denouement, in sad contrast moreover with Shoshanna's actual plight that sees her finally suffer at the hands of her Nazi admirer and would-be suitor Private Zoller. As he shoots her in response to her shooting him (having threatened to rape her),

Shoshanna ironically suffers not because she is Jewish, but because she is female, making her cinematic incarnation therefore all the more necessary. Likewise, Hitler does not escape retribution through the ‘dignified’ suicide of historical fact; he is subjected to a graphic pepper-spray of machine-gun rounds to his face, once again aligning humiliation with moral legibility. Cinema, and a larger aesthetic project, arguably provide this enhanced melodramatic legibility that goes beyond the constraints of the subject’s bodily suffering and death, promising to deliver as much action and pathos as are necessary to effectuate justice and closure. While the sentimental may have settled for unjust martyrdom and melancholic sacrifice, cinema is foregrounded as the ‘exterminating angel’ that can finish the job, albeit through a transcendent, necessarily aestheticized mode of action.

All three films examined above indicate the extent to which independent or ‘smart’ cinema is distinguished from the ‘blockbuster’ aesthetic arguably engendered by Spielberg and his forebears, at the same time that such a mode still reproduces various sentimental tropes. *Inglourious Basterds* revels in the conventions of the melodrama in order to achieve justice for one of the worst crimes in history, yet as a ‘Holocaust movie’ comparable to *Schindler’s List*, reveals significant distinctions between the sentimental and the melodrama. *Dancer in the Dark* and *Palindromes* offer visions of an American pastoral society in crisis, while offering a qualified and uncertain hope in those that suffer from its ills (Selma) or in those that manage to survive (Aviva). Both films thus set the conventions of the sentimental novel (female virtue-in-distress) in dialogue with newer versions of the sentimental: kitsch in the case of *Palindromes*, the musical genre in the case of *Dancer*. What emerges from all such films is a sense of irony and referentiality that intensifies the critical stakes of each films’ thematics.

What might be lost in terms of a 'depth model' of sentimental idealism is gained by the foregrounding of sentimental tropes as 'shallow' signifiers that must now necessarily be reproduced within the conditions of postmodern intertextuality. The sense of irony or the 'waning of affect' heralded by such films signifies in turn not simply a cynical postmodern nihilism but precisely that which Steven Shaviro above refers to as 'aesthetic disinterest'. The sympathetic melancholia of the sentimental gives way to excess, the 'playful' and the 'perverse', while sentimental tropes remain as components of a now more eclectic aesthetic heterogeneity.

Conclusion

In a recent article for the *New York Times*, literary theorist Stanley Fish commented on recent manifestations of the ‘Crisis in the Humanities’ in the form of language department closures at US universities such as at SUNY Albany. Defending a ‘liberal arts’ education in the face of cynical economic decisions that now seem to dominate higher education funding, Fish is nevertheless highly critical of a fellow respondent’s claims concerning the value of the humanities. This respondent asks in his letter, ‘What happened to public investment in the humanities and the belief that the humanities enhanced our culture, our society, our humanity?’ Fish however advises caution concerning this line of defence, arguing:

Well, it won’t do to invoke the pieties informing [the above respondent’s] question – the humanities enhance our culture; the humanities make our society better – because those pieties have a 19th century air about them and are not even believed in by some who rehearse them.¹

In the above we have what Fish acknowledges as another articulation of a far older debate, intimately related to the sentimental problematics covered in the above chapters, that has predominated in such disciplines as philosophy, literary criticism, film studies and other disciplines for some time. On one side comes what may be considered a ‘humanist’ discourse that situates art and aesthetics as cultural activities that are both improving to individuals and central to a sense of universalized progress and purpose in society. This is countered by a more modern voice that has nevertheless been long emergent ever since culture was thought of less in terms of teleology and utility and more as what Adorno once termed an ‘autonomous’ entity.

¹ Stanley Fish, ‘The Crisis in the Humanities Officially Arrives,’ *The New York Times*, 11th October, 2010.

The humanities become reconsidered far less in terms of social or moral function and more in terms of an unashamedly self-justifying study of literature, discourse and cultural codes. Just as the lay person now apparently enjoys the cultures of film, television and the Internet for reasons owing more to do with entertainment and epistemology than self-improvement or moral instruction, so the academy adopts a methodology that subjects texts of many kinds to discursive analysis of 'cultural function' before any pronouncements on morality, canonicity, or even political progressivity. Furthermore, critique itself becomes that which is important rather than improving, insightful or informative rather than a key to the society's moral or political betterment.

It is not my intention here, nor has it been in the above chapters, to mount a strident defence for the civilizing, improving influences of the humanities or indeed of the arts in the face of Fish's comments, for as I hope to have shown in the above chapters, such 'sentiments' do indeed derive from the problematic hopes and aspirations of an era very different to our own. As I have shown, the sentimental remains with us as a critical category but it almost always now signifies the invocation of a past informed by a more moralistic intellectual code, whether manifest in the theories of 'moral sentiment', tropes revolving around virtue-in-distress, the Manichean opposition or the behavioural codes of the 'cult of sensibility'. The Victorian era indeed was all too comfortable with still rigid divisions in class and imperial colonial ambitions, where the study of the humanities (or rather classics, theology and philosophy) was very much a privilege of an upper

bourgeois class (or an Arnoldian clerisy²) that could make pronouncements on the betterment of society as a function of their own tastes, values, and ultimately, interests too. Discourses of the sentimental emerged and were popularised within such a society, one that was still in thrall to the Enlightenment ideas that had forged such concrete and tangible developments as the French and American Revolutions and arguably the British reform acts and poor laws. If the Romantics and Nietzsche were beginning to assert the experience of subjectivity itself as the only form of truth attainable to the subject, they were living in a world where such cultural relativisms and nihilisms had yet to go ‘mainstream.’ Bolstered by an expanding bourgeois class, the humanities and such aesthetic doctrines as ‘realism’ and ‘didacticism’ came about as a function of still widespread sentimental assumptions concerning the subject and the society she lived and worked in. If the history of cinema has illustrated how resilient such a model continues to be, it has nevertheless been equally subject to significant challenges, whether in terms of avant-garde practice, feminist theory and practice, increased media and cine-literacy, Hollywood’s own intertextual eclecticism, arthouse cinema or the contemporary ‘smart’ film.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is a valid sense in which the ‘law of the heart’ and its attendant ‘pieties’ continue to hold cultural currency in contemporary media culture, albeit alongside a host of critical qualifications. From the quasi-highbrow discourses of cultural humanism above to the everyday displays of pathos, popular psychology and self-help that characterise daytime television, the attractions of sentimental discourse are still obviously, evidently omnipresent in

² See Raymond Williams’ illuminating account of Arnold’s outline for the values of an enlightened elite class in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, pp. 120-137.

visual culture while nevertheless hounded by the spectre of a ‘disaffected’ (post)modernist subjectivity. If Peter Brooks’ formulations still hold, there remains a sense to which the ‘melodramatic imagination’ continues to stand in for and provide succour for the loss of belief and value that characterises a ‘post-sacred era’. ‘Pieties’ indeed seems a pertinent word here, for it invokes precisely the matrix of religious values and certainties that sentimental art has striven to make legible since the apparent ‘death of god’. Yet it is also with obvious acknowledgements of the profound epistemological consequences of Nietzsche’s original coinage that the sentimental has come to connote its own gross excesses in the modern period. The ‘crisis in the humanities’ continues arguably as a function of such losses of certainty in what can be meant by ‘Culture’ therefore, humanities departments hoisted by their own petard as it were, undermined by reconfigured beliefs in relation to the pedagogical project, while rightly unwilling to appropriate a sentimental language that would articulate the humanities within such an apparently uncritical rubric as ‘virtue-in-distress.’

In the above chapters I have examined how sentimentality, as a term central to film criticism, has been mobilized, denigrated, quarantined or ignored for over 300 years of aesthetic debate. In such respects, I have demonstrated the extent to which disenchantment with the ‘heart’ is hardly a recent development, despite its particular resonances with a variety of post- (feminist, Marxist, Freudian) positions. Indeed, the sentimental very much coincides with the melodramatic in its acknowledgement and dramatization of this long-established ‘post-sacred’ era, essentially one of ‘enlightened’ disbelief. Charting the chronology of multiple strands of sentimental

aesthetics in the 18th century: ‘moral sentiment’ theory, the ‘sentimental novel’ and theatrical melodrama, we start with a state of affairs that sees sentiment enjoying an almost cultish popularity as a mode of tearful reception prescribed as both fitting and satisfying in relation to tales of ‘virtue in distress.’ Not merely a popular fad however, such theoretical luminaries as Shaftesbury, Diderot, Rousseau, Hume and Smith, in albeit distinct ways, claim aesthetic value in the revelation and propagation of noble virtue and centralize the experience of sympathy or compassion in relation to its fictional paradigms. If reflection and the exercise of Enlightenment reason was still of principle importance in the formation of an ethical subject, emotions or the ‘passions’ become at the very least vital allies to such ideals, valid channels for empirical ‘sense’ without which the subject cannot achieve full actualization. In such respects, the sentimental begins (and persists) as a concept concerned with the problematics of relaying ethics between ‘feeling’ subjects and has constituted a vital underpinning for considering art as a pedagogical and/or progressive practice.

At the same time, the sentimental also began, and retains traces as a sign of genteel fashion; it was ‘en vogue’ for Lady Bradshaigh in her question to Samuel Richardson concerning the definition of the ‘sentimental’.³ Aligned from the start with the tastes of a bourgeois class that culminates in the great 19th century Victorian societies depicted by Dickens and Hugo, sentimentality took on connotations of an excessive idealism or affective optimism in its increasingly kitschy textual instances. As a ‘Characteristic’ that might once have denoted a core set of politically human attributes that might usurp the intellectual libertinism of aristocratic feudalism, it came to suggest as early as the mid-18th century a rather more ‘sickly’ kind of indulgent,

³ See Chapter One, Note 7.

feminizing affect in the reception of art, and indeed in relation to a society now often inescapably perceived within sentimental, and apparently uncritical, parameters. A mark of critical self-delusion at best and hypocritical disingenuity at worst, the sentimental became very much aligned with the emotional excesses and political complacencies of bourgeois Victorian society, hegemonic in its impact, apolitical and uncritical in its appeals to the universality and timelessness of innocence and virtue, exemplified best of course by such fictional children as Little Nell and her many imitations. Moreover, its alignment with the ‘sensibility’ of effeminacy, troubling even to the earliest proponents of ‘moral sentiment’ theory, persisted as a negative attribute of an art that needed to be more muscular, clear-headed and less emotionally inclined.

The sentimental, make no mistake, was thus a theory and practice subjected to critical scorn and suspicion from its very earliest uses and manifestations, both during the ‘cult of sensibility’ and beyond, while remaining a key attribute of popular culture ever since. The history of cinema and its theorization has nevertheless been considered in the above chapters as a particularly dramatic period in the genealogy of the sentimental, not least in terms of its evident persistence as a critical term in modernity. Sentimental idealism was that which animated the melodramatic ‘mode’ inherited by cinema, fuelled by a rhetoric of ‘moral legibility’ that demanded the articulation of justice and virtue *despite* evidences to the contrary in the form of disenchantments with religion, precept and indeed Enlightenment progress itself. Such figures as Chaplin indeed seemed to embody the concerns of the first world war period and after, not by offering an insipidly rose-tinted view of the world (as is sometimes invoked by criticisms of his sentimentality) but by precisely offering a

bittersweet vision of a society that was ceaselessly and mercilessly inimical to the paradigm of society's losers. If the Tramp invoked melancholic hope and inspiration, such affect was less a sentimentality of false optimism or mollifying conservatism and rather more one of disenchanted fellow-feeling between global subjects, acknowledging the often futile struggles, oppressions and frustrations that characterised life in industrial modernity.

Yet in as much as Chaplin's Tramp is still understood as a hero of melodrama, whose pathos and indignation stemmed from a disillusion in urban modernity, he can and indeed is still framed as trademark of a tradition that has hoped in vain for a better society. Embodying the 'if only' of melodrama, I have suggested that his rhetorical appeal still thereby conflicts with a certain strand of modernism that has shifted focus away from the 'humanist' subject (be it in terms of art or aesthetics) in favour of an attention to form, experimentation and the linguistic building blocks of such a 'myth' as the inspiring sentimental hero. Justified in terms of autonomy and linked to the academic independence and impartiality demanded by such figures as Fish discussed above, such practices and their attendant discourses have continued to find something troubling about the sentimental. Whether manifest as a particularly 'humanist' cultural memory of Chaplin or of the Hollywood that he would so strongly influence, their sentimentalism is often equated with the anachronistic, conservative or ideological in comparison to modernist imperatives of demythologisation, critical analysis and fresh perspectives.

My discussion above has thus also followed such debates to their most recent manifestations, in terms of the reception of such a figure as Steven Spielberg and his own distinctive brand of post-classical blockbuster melodrama. Rather less invested in the elliptical anomie of his auteur contemporaries in the 1970s, Spielberg and his frequent homage and appropriation of ‘classic’ Hollywood cinema (such as that of Ford, Lean and Capra) could hardly but court the critique of more auteur-focused critics, ever sceptical of the Hollywood ‘hack’ artists that reproduced the tropes and sentimental clichés of the melodramatic ‘mode’. At the same time, I have shown how such assumed dismissal and repudiation of Spielberg’s oeuvre has itself been subject to hyperbole and misrepresentation, not least in terms of his academic reception. Alongside a very significant turn towards popular culture and such directors as Spielberg as possible sites of more ‘serious’ discursive activity, I have examined the extent to which the theorization of melodrama has changed too, most significantly perhaps in terms of its sentimental appeals to pathos. Analysing the reflexivity of such Spielberg films as *AI* and *Schindler’s List* in particular, we see such tropes as virtue-in-distress within a representational frame that is highly ‘knowing’ about its own acts of appropriation. In one sense, as in *AI*, sentimental idealism is laid very much in quotation marks, with Spielberg more or less outdoing himself in terms of sentiment. While some may still see this as ‘blank parody’, I argue that there are significant grounds for regarding such pastiche as a highly sophisticated frame within which to articulate the ethical problematics of artificial intelligence. Reflexivity become a significant aspect too of Spielberg’s war films, continually undermining the extent to which such films as *Saving Private Ryan* can be dismissed as mere nostalgia or patriotism. *Schindler’s List* meanwhile serves less as a

‘feelgood’ Holocaust movie by tackling the problematics of Nazi culpability and guilt in as direct a way possible i.e. in its depiction of a Nazi that chose to be good.

In such respects therefore, and in accordance with the arguments of theorists whose modernism might never have been so inimical to sentiment as might be assumed, melodrama (and implicitly the sentimental) has been widely re-imagined by a critical community less hostile to its direct emotional appeals. Indeed, I have demonstrated how some of even the most formalist positions of ‘classical film theory’ could accommodate sentiment too, whether manifest in Eisenstein’s qualified approval of Dickens, Bazin’s ontological realism or Balazs’ insistence on a diegetic hero for that which he considered film’s best deployment, the narrative film. While not wishing to discount or invalidate such positions as Brecht’s or Adorno’s in relation to the emotional conditions of Hollywood entertainment and the necessity for critical detachment, I have nevertheless striven to underscore the extent to which such positions were themselves less rigidly stoical than is often assumed. Adorno would realise for instance, despite his cultural elitism, that ‘autonomous’ art and the ‘cultural industry’ were ‘torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.’⁴ In this is surely an acknowledgement that sentimental art, for all its fallacies and contrivances, could not merely be dismissed, and indeed might contain what Frederic Jameson has since coined ‘Utopian’ elements. More recently, the ‘bodily turn’ in film theory, shifting attention away from the eye and cognition to the sensory, embodied experience of cinema, further raised the stakes of discounting emotion and ‘affect’ and indeed re-centralized the body as a key paradigm for modernist art in particular.

⁴ Letter from Adorno to Benjamin (II), London, 18th March 1936, accessed online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/11510904/Adorno-Letters-to-Walter-Benjamin>, visited June 4th 2009.

If all this brings us to a moment of great ambivalence concerning the sentimental stakes of cinema, I would suggest along with other scholars of melodrama that such a situation is of course preferable to the great dismissals of kitsch that characterized an earlier era's more rigid divisions between high and low culture. Assumed alignments of the sentimental with femininity on one hand, or with a relatedly middle-class taste on the other, have been fundamentally nuanced by an established revisionism in relation to our notion of popular culture and melodrama's role within it. Yet if academic 'cultural studies' has for some time sought to recuperate such instances of popular culture in critical, historical and sociological terms, this has not dampened the extent to which sentimentality in particular is still held in contempt by a more broadly perceived critical film community. Furthermore, as discussed in relation to Spielberg, an inevitable and obvious permeability between critical spheres allows for significant influence and shared discourse between academic and more middlebrow voices, neither mutually exclusive of the other. Where some consider the distaste for sentimentality as a latent snobbish stoicism endemic to film critics securing cultural capital, I have shown how time and again the critic's subject position corresponds with ongoing intellectual positions in relation to emotion, art and the film spectator.

Indeed, the final chapter of this thesis demonstrates the extent to which the 'heart' continues to present conceptual difficulties for postmodern approaches to film. While 'affect theory' represents a significant shift in discourse towards the body and emotion as a necessary concession to decentralizing the text and the 'gaze' as sole determinants of meaning, significant qualifications remain in relation to the subjective experience of film. While the 'heart' invokes the wrong-headed gut

reactions of a real spectator, the ‘head’ remains a vital corrective in terms of its alleged compatibility with polysemy, ambiguity and irony, key communicative attributes of a dialectical postmodern culture. If compassion must necessarily be understood in terms of a vital cognitive component of ‘sense’, or as Nussbaum argues a ‘system of values’, the postmodern film constitutes *economies* in terms of gender, race, class and sexuality that require a distinct set of critical, cognitive (and emotional) capacities in the spectator. While the body and emotion (or ‘haptics in Laura Marks’ terms⁵) have constituted extremely fruitful paradigms within which to explore film spectatorship, they nevertheless continue to imply what I agree is an often ‘healthy’ distrust of the sentimental. As much as though such theorists as Jeffrey Sconce apply a term such as ‘cool melodramas’ to much postmodern cinema, it is the coolness of his corpora that is rendered salient, without which their recourse to melodrama alone might become excessively safe or uncritical once more. Films such as *Dancer in the Dark* and *Palindromes* continue to dramatize a sense of good and evil in melodramatic fashion, yet they do so with a palpable sense of irony and qualified sympathy, undermining a straight-forward ‘allegiance’ towards conventional heroes and heroines in favour of a more uncertain perceptual ‘alignment’ with their fates (Murray Smith’s terminology proving useful again⁶). The sentimental model of sympathy likewise becomes nuanced by its now frequent juxtaposition with various other genres and senses, a means of diminishing its invocation of kitsch and formula in favour of accentuating its core critical concerns with injustice, redemption and ethics.

⁵ Who in turn draws on the phenomenology and sensory theory of such figures as Merleau-Ponty, Reigl and Deleuze and Guatarri. See also Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

⁶ Concepts discussed in Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

If Fish's claims were to be countered therefore, it might have to be in consideration not of the disillusionments of the post post-structuralist humanities but of mainstream popular culture itself that one might most effectively make the case concerning the extent to which '19th century pieties' still justifiably live and breathe. For despite the extent to which we do indeed live in a world of free-markets, moral cynicism and the inauthenticity of the simulacrum, the desire to articulate moral clarity and to narrativize justice still clearly motivates much of what counts as entertainment in the 21st century. From James Cameron's latest 3D blockbuster *Avatar* (2009), (widely lambasted for its simplistic melodrama yet still a global box-office smash), and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-3), to the 'Rom-Com', the newly emerging 'Bromance'⁷, and such successful US TV series as *The Pacific* (2010), *The Wire* (2002-2008) or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the Manichean opposition and the rhetorical idealization of virtue is hardly going out of fashion even if it is continuously subjected to intertextual nuance and ambiguation. Owing to a separate history and arguably a different mode of address and reception, I have not discussed television in any significant detail, yet any brief survey of daytime soap operas, prime-time miniseries and heart-warming CNN news features would reveal the extent to which the sentimental looms large here and warrants investigation. The model of 'distracted' spectatorship applicable to various theories of television spectatorship may seem to make the medium inimical to sentimentality compared to the 'immersive' experience of cinema, were it not for the extent to which 'apparatus' theory and the notion of a fully 'passive', immersed spectator

⁷ See for instance Justin Wyatt, 'Identity, Queerness and Homosocial Bonding: The Case of Swingers', in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, London Routledge, 2001, pp. 51-66.

subject has been itself significantly revised in the last 30 years of film theory. Seen differently indeed, television's aesthetic of 'distraction' lends itself rather well to the various problematics of ingenuous, fleeting emotion covered above in relation to the sentimental,⁸ one for which Andy Warhol and his ever switched-on television indeed remains salient as a conceptual touchstone. If one recalls the initial objections to Henry Mackenzie's 'The Man of Feeling' in 1771 for instance, one finds indeed that it was in terms of Harley's distracted pursuit for ever new tableaux of the sufferings of the London poor that the novel was first deemed 'sickly' in its straining for pathos.

Furthermore, in awareness of the increased emphasis on 'global' media, wherein Western discourses are decentralized in favour of a wider nexus of cultures, another avenue for research concerns precisely the extent to which discourses surrounding neglected media cultures conform to sentimental models. Whether in terms of a post-colonialist theory that continues to shed insights on the rhetorical status of global Others (in terms of 'Orientalism'⁹ or otherwise) or the related conceptualizations of 3rd world cinema as alternative public spheres, the sentimental seems applicable as a very significant model for comprehending fast-changing media cultures around the world. Relatedly, a key future direction for related projects to my own, and one that I'm sure is already underway, concerns the extent to which new media might be deemed to reproduce the 'melodramatic mode', or whether this is even possible given the new parameters within which information is made available in cyberspace. Of particular interest in such regards, although it has been beyond the scope of this

⁸ See Ben Calvert et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 109-115.

⁹ Edward Said's concept for a post-colonialist Other-ing of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures in Western hegemonic discourse. See *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978.

study, are precisely those performances of online subjectivity that conform to models of virtue in distress, whether that be deemed as such of online conspiracy theorists, campaigners against their own totalitarian regimes or one's own self-delimited Facebook community, all of whom invoke sentimental tropes as part of their rhetorical appeals.

Lastly, however, and shifting towards a more historical methodology, I would like to stress the importance that further studies continue to examine the critical apparatus applied to cinema as a function of its many cultural antecedents, to see how the discursive patterns in relation to our current media culture share vital attributes to predecessor texts and forms. Research continues to be undertaken in relation to a host of ever newly emergent texts, genres and media with recourse to a critical language that often fails to be as self-evident as might be assumed. If I have focused on the conceptual difficulties and indeterminacies surrounding the 'sentimental', similar if not even greater ambiguities surround such terms as the 'romantic', 'classical' or 'humanist', for which updates and refreshers to our knowledge are urgent before we can begin to satisfactorily refer to such films or practices as 'post-romantic' or 'post-classical.' In such a vein, I hope to have shed some light on a term that has for some time wallowed in semantic and conceptual limbo, and by doing so, made a small contribution to our collective critical vocabulary. To coin the terms Fish dismisses above, it might not make our 'society better', but it might add to the conversation concerning the cultural values that make such an endeavour possible.

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