

Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11

By Elisabeth Anker

Melodrama is not merely a type of film or literary genre, but a pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America. This article examines the media coverage of September 11, 2001, and how it produced a specific American collective identity through a melodramatic plotline. The September 11 news coverage illustrates how the United States became signified as a morally powerful victim ensnared in a position that required it to transform victimization into heroic retributive action. The article concludes by probing the dangerous ramifications of a national melodramatic identity for American politics and democratic citizenship.

In the United States, the September 11 crisis unfolded through a narrative trajectory of injury, pathos, and moral retribution. The U.S.'s initial response to the terrorist attack was a nationwide empathic victimization, a collectively experienced pain in response to unjustified suffering perpetrated by an evil villain. Political leaders declared that the country was attacked *because* of its virtue; the ideals that define America, those of freedom and democracy, were precisely what the "evil-doers" aimed to destroy through their violence. It seemed that retaliatory action toward the attackers would properly defend our victimized ideals and heal our shared pain. Since the attack, debates throughout the country have disputed why America was victimized, why its ideals may have threatened terrorists, and whether its retaliatory tactics were successful. Instead of following these questions, I want to pursue another line of inquiry: Did contemporary Americans experience the crisis of 9/11 through the melodramatic narrative of victimization and retribution? How might American ideals and designations of moral virtue attach to this narrative? Can melodramatic discourse produce a certain type of American national identity through empathy with the dual role of victim and hero? In this article, I aim to explore how the media coverage of the September 11 attacks produced a specific American collective identity through a melodramatic

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plotline. For this project, it is crucial to recognize that for most American news viewers, the media coverage of September 11 was the primary experience of the terrorist act. Hence, I will suggest that comprehension of the attack was generated through the news footage that situated the United States as a morally powerful victim in a position that required it to transform victimization into heroic retributive action for crisis resolution.

Melodrama is a mode of popular culture narrative that employs emotionality to provide an unambiguous distinction between good and evil through clear designations of victimization, heroism, and villainy. Yet I contend that melodrama is not merely a type of film or literary genre, but a pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America. The media presentation of September 11 is a specific example of this identity production; it offers a morally legible national identity by positioning the U.S. as a victim engaged in a battle against evil. Although viewing national identity through the melodramatic lens gives one perspective on certain aspects of contemporary American life, notions of American collective identity are always historically and spatially contingent. Modes of identity formation that are effective during certain moments in national life may be irrelevant or impossible during other periods. Composed in this spirit, the following discussion aims to investigate one form of identity construction in contemporary America, and thus to contribute toward a broader mapping of the complex constructions that constitute American culture at the beginning of the 21st century. In this article, I first explore the layered definition of melodrama, and then investigate how it structures an American national identity. Second, I use this formulation to analyze news coverage on September 11, 2001, demonstrating how the melodramatic identity functions in a particular instance. I conclude by probing the dangerous ramifications of the melodramatic identity for American politics and democratic citizenship.

Melodrama and American Identity

Melodrama is traditionally defined as a dramatic storyline of villainy, victimization, and retribution, in which characters' emotional states are hyperbolized and externalized through grandiose facial expression, vivid bodily gestures, and stirring musical accompaniment; music is the "melos" of melodrama (Brooks, 1995; Elsaesser, 1972; Singer, 2000). In recent scholarship, melodrama has been defined more specifically as a mode of popular culture that presents images and characters through hyperbolic, binary moralistic positions and arranges them within a plotline that restages the eternal battle between good and evil (Brooks, 1995; Elsaesser, 1972; Gledhill, 1987; Singer, 2000; Williams, 1998).¹ Melodrama, then, is a discursive practice that makes truth and justice legible by demarcating a clear boundary between right and wrong. The originary moment in melodrama is often

¹ Williams (2001) specifically argued for melodrama's designation as a cultural "mode" rather than a "genre," as its overwhelming popularity superseded any single generic category.

a state of ambiguity, which calls for Manicheism to eradicate vagueness through polarization and tight resolution. Here, any state of being is an extreme state of being, with little space rendered for shadow, doubt, indistinction, or complexity. Its narrative expunges ethical ambiguity by segregating the camps of good and evil into Manicheistic absolutes, and individual actions and situations become metaphoric in their reenactment of this battle. In reshaping every encounter into a primary conflict between good and evil, melodrama moralizes all problems and relationships.

Although melodrama is fluid and expansive enough to encompass international cultural products from Balzac's *Lost Illusions* to *telenovelas* to *Titanic*, I want to propose that the cultural mode of melodrama can be defined by five primary qualities²: (a) a locus of moral virtue that is signified throughout the narrative by pathos and suffering and can be increased through heroic action; (b) the three characters of a ruthless villain, a suffering victim, and a heroic savior who can redeem the victim's virtue through an act of retribution (though the latter two characters can be inhabited in the same person: the virtuous victim/hero); (c) dramatic polarizations of good and evil, which echo in the depictions of individuals and events; (d) a cyclical interaction of emotion and action meant to create suspense and resolve conflict; and (e) the use of images, sounds, gestures, and nonverbal communication to illuminate moral legibility as well as to encourage empathy for the victim and anger toward the villain. The polarities emblematic of melodrama inspire its tools and presentation, as gestures and characterizations embody and reenact the central dilemma: the struggle between good and evil. In order to create and enhance the moral legibility so crucial to its discursive aim, the melodramatic narrative employs the plot devices of grandiose events, unprovoked actions, hyperbolic language, and spectacles of suffering. These practices of melodramatic composition demonstrate good and evil through nonspoken forms, and thus use dramatic gestures, ambient music, thematic repetition, and associative montage to convey moral truth through affect rather than speech. The transparency and spectacle of these imagistic, aural, and narrative practices serve to enhance melodrama's fundamental Manicheistic underpinnings.

There are several additional characteristics that contribute to the melodramatic narrative. Primarily, melodrama promises to its spectators "a dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (Williams, 1998, p. 42). The underlying aim of melodrama is to create a space of "moral legibility" in which Manicheistic designations are clear and recognizable.³ These designations manifest through the dialectic of pathos and action in which pathos, or deep empathy for the suffering character, drives action, and action drives further pathos; this dialectic serves to create cyclical situations of anticipation and

² All of these are associated with melodrama to varying degrees; whereas Williams and Singer depicted similar categories, I differ from both in my deeper emphasis on moralizing and binaristic structures that infuse the narrative in composite ways, and my deemphasis on nonclassic narrative (Singer, 2000) or "in the nick of time" action (Williams, 1998).

³ Brooks (1995) claimed that melodrama exists in order to establish "moral legibility," describing melodrama as a space in which "we find there an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the Manicheistic struggle of good and evil. . . . Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order" (pp. 12–13).

anxiety that propel the narrative forward. Pain is usually inscribed within the body of the suffering victim, one whose initial innocence has been shattered but can be restored through redemptive heroic action, for at the heart of melodrama is the principle that by virtue of suffering, one becomes good. It grounds this notion in a condition of moral purity that existed prior to victimization and is held out like a carrot throughout the plotline, promised back to the sufferer if her/his virtue can be reestablished through an act of heroic restitution that demonstrates moral might. The heroic deed often signifies less a material than symbolic reparation: a shift of affect from the vulnerability of victimization to the powerful confidence of valiant accomplishment. Redemption, restitution, reparation, and revenge are all codified within the hero's achievement and serve to deepen the significance of her or his deed. By the end of the narrative, through unwarranted suffering and heroic redemption, the victim signifies a more robust state of virtue than at the outset of the story.

I want to suggest that the scope of melodrama is not limited to popular culture but rather extends into political discourse and political action, providing the structuring framework for a specific contemporary American national identity that establishes its own moral virtue through victimization and heroic restitution.⁴ In this particular identity, America is fashioned as an imagined community unadulterated by immorality or evil. The country is designated as both unified and virtuous, and any state action taken at this time is predicated by the justification of moral righteousness. Clear demarcations and culturally identifiable patriotic significations denote America's resounding goodness. Through the melodramatic narrative, "the American people" become a united entity whose shared values and social solidarity create a homogeneous body. The American people's virtue extends naturally from their practice of democratic freedom; decency and righteousness are intertwined with the designation "freedom loving people." American ideals of freedom, free markets, and democracy serve to reinforce the ideal of an honorable and politically unified nation of virtuous common folk.

Melodrama constructs characters and a plotline out of this identity. America is characterized as an abstract yet cohesive collective body, signified by the qualities of virtue and goodness implied in the ideals of freedom and democracy; the collective body is under attack from an evil "other," a villain, and this condition necessitates a retaliatory act of heroism. This melodramatic identity becomes a contemporary national self-definition. Essentially, the melodramatic character of the virtuous victim/hero signifies America. Cultural, ethnic, gender, and economic differences are irrelevant within this national identity; the collective body is an abstract, homogenous unit defined solely by adherence to American ideals and the virtues they connote, either victimized or engaged in heroic action. Through melodrama, the substance of national identity contains only the most general

⁴ In *Playing the Race Card*, Williams (2001) asserted that melodrama shapes American identity as always presented in relation to the racial "other"; yet I would like to push her point much further and argue that melodrama shapes a type of amorphous but *unified* American national identity undivided by internal identity politics, in which "the other" becomes the enemy of America as such. Melodrama structures American national identity as a unified community fighting against incessant threats to its very existence. In this sense, I combine Williams's melodramatic form with Michael Rogin's (1988) work on American identity as produced through constant demonization of an other.

American ideals of “freedom” and “democracy,” the victimizations they incur, and the heroic acts of redemption they necessitate.

The villain is a shifting category populated most often by a foreign invader or a domestic subversive seemingly intent on destroying either American ideals or American territory, who becomes personified, demonized, and codified as the embodiment of pure evil.⁵ Conferring the location of moral power on the victim, this narrative imbues the idea of country with moral valor by portraying America as a unified body able to overcome a situation of victimhood with a successful assault on evil. Through the figure of the villain that aims to destroy America, melodrama frames a narrative that requires reparation for suffering endured; it demands heroic action in order to challenge any villainous attack on the country. The villain thus becomes the catalyst for state action, and hence for what it means to be American, for, without a villain, there is no victim and thus no hero or heroic feat. Only by counteracting the vulnerability of victimization through powerful reparation, an act that transforms debility into strength, is the victim transformed into the hero who brings about justice by triumphantly attacking the forces of darkness. American melodrama is about heroism, about power, about the capacity to respond and overcome. Thus, I would further argue that within melodramatic discourse, the designation America cannot itself be understood outside the purview of state action. In order for this to be the case, the notion of “America” as a national identity must be so blurred, so abstract, that state heroic action in the service of basic ideals, predicated on a felt victimization, becomes its only designator. Hence, within the melodramatic narrative, state action is inseparable from America.

Therefore, melodrama expands when it relocates from popular culture into national identity. American melodrama reaches beyond the five key points of conventional melodrama with a fundamental political twist: It sanctions state power by presenting its deployment as a necessary as well as righteous measure toward fighting evil. American action against its villain is justified through the moral imperative to attack evil. The hero’s escalating responsibilities serve to grant political and moral legitimacy to state action by defining it as a responsive moral heroic crusade that extends goodness in the world. In sum, by first identifying America with the victim, and subsequently with the hero who elicits reparation in order to institute righteousness in a place of prior wrongdoing, the melodramatic narrative offers the state justification to exercise military and economic power. American melodrama creates a moral obligation for state action.

Through the Melodramatic Lens: September 11

The media images of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attacks demonstrated melodrama’s discursive production of national identity. The coverage can

⁵ Countless essays have described the unflinching presence of “the other” in American sociopolitical discourse; notably, Rogin (1998) examined America’s 200-year infatuation with its self-definition as the insistent victim incessantly thwarting invasions by the other. Rogin aimed “[T]o call attention to the creation of monsters as a continuing feature of American politics by the inflation, stigmatization and dehumanization of political foes” (p. xiii).

be seen to have followed a melodramatic narrative that highlighted the United States's unequivocal moral positioning and signifies the images of attack and collapse through melodramatic practices. This analysis will examine the hour between 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm EST of Fox News coverage on September 11. This precise portion will be investigated for several reasons: First, this analysis aims to be content-specific and textually grounded, therefore one hour on one station will provide detailed commentary. Second, the time between 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm is close enough to the attacks for the shock to be new (approximately 8 hours from the first attack) yet far enough from the original time that the images are already discursively signified through narrative voice-over and editing processes. Third, Fox News was chosen because it is the most popular news program in the United States. Fox News can also paint with bright colors the melodramatic narrative I am trying to locate in American culture. Although I am hesitant to argue that Fox producers intentionally framed the attack through a calculated application of melodramatic tactics, I do find that melodrama, as a cultural mode of understanding and narration, deeply infuses Fox's rhetorical style throughout this news coverage. Although I would contend that most news programming in America at this time can be interpreted as melodramatic, it seems that for present purposes Fox News can present the most useful and intelligible case for analysis.

The following news analysis emphasizes the intersection of rhetoric with sensory (both aural and visual) perception. When sounds and images are produced at the same time on screen, they become reflective of each other and are fused into a new whole.⁴ In this manner, the importance of the voices and sounds overlapping the moving pictures provides new meaning to the image, especially as one of melodrama's primary designations is its emphasis on music and nonverbal communication. The fusion of voice and shots is part of the discursive process, as meaning becomes encoded and reinforced throughout the viewing experience.

September 11, 2001, 5:04 pm

Fox News began an interview with former Secretary of State James Baker, his voice projecting over a full-screen collage of images from the World Trade Center attacks earlier that day. Baker, an authoritative presence in the political arena, discussed the possibilities for attacking the perpetrators of terrorism. We do not see his face, but hear his words:

It's a terribly tragic event in my view and it moves us into probably another era, one that we have feared for some time would get us here, as far as our vulnerability to terrorism is concerned. Some of the things that we are going to have to do is to beef up particularly our human intelligence capability so that we're able to penetrate these groups. We've let those slide ever since the mid-seventies. Somehow it has always been a little offensive to us to do the kind of things you have to do to be a clandestine spy and penetrate those groups. We're going to have to get back into that messy business, we're going to have to beef up our security measures.

⁶ Chion (1994) stated that sound/image fusion is "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced by a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time. This join results independently of any rational logic" (p. 63).

Baker's words fuse with a sequence of visual images that evoked profound empathy. The sequence lasted for less than a minute and was repeated seven more times throughout the hour. The first shot of the sequence followed a man running frantically yet helplessly up the escalator of a bombed-out building, and the camera trailed him, as if just on his heels, into the shadows where he then disappeared. Baker concurrently decried in a voice-over that we Americans are unwillingly placed in "another era" by this attack, an era implicitly less desirable and more painful, that adds to "our vulnerability." Baker's speech facilitated the interpretation of the visual images, as the destroyed building began to represent "another era" and the frantic man "our vulnerability." Viewing the scene through the melodramatic lens, it seemed that Baker had invoked two key melodramatic plot points—the lost innocence of victimization and the rectificatory power of retribution—that together serve to encode the visual images. The drama in the pictures merges with the empowering action of Baker's voice to fulfill the appeal to retribution summoned by the melodramatic narrative, with "our vulnerability" providing justification to "beef up" human intelligence, "penetrate" these groups, and "get back into that messy business." Baker has authority to interpret the attack and place it in a comprehensible narrative of victimization and heroism, by virtue of his political expertise and name recognition.

The next shot in this sequence invoked deeper pathos; it cut directly to an invasive close-up of a survivor on a stretcher, her face covered in white ash as she struggled for breath through an oxygen mask. A wider shot of her body surrounded by paramedics quickly followed. The close-up of the victim, coded by Baker's designation of this situation as a "terribly tragic event," situated her as a victim of undeserved injury. This designation implied her virtue as a sufferer while alluding to the dichotomy of "the other"—the attacker who caused her pain and thus is evil. Through the voyeuristic close-up, viewers were invited to identify with the attack victim's connoted experience of unwarranted anguish and vulnerability. The close-up shot allowed the viewer to get in close to see the victim, and may also have helped facilitate her identification. The news viewers can be, if they choose to empathize with her visible pain, "victimized" themselves. As in any melodramatic narrative, viewers are promised, if they desire to identify with the victim on screen, the designation of virtue via the experience of unwarranted suffering and the guarantee of future heroic reparation to eradicate their undeserved pain.

The following shot in this sequence was a skyline picture of New York City from which the twin towers were conspicuously absent, the sky blemished by yellowish smoke. This shot faded into the walking body of an ash-covered disoriented businessman. Directly following was a close-up of a photograph half-buried beneath the debris of ground zero depicting a young and happy heterosexual couple smiling at a party; this shot then quickly zoomed outward to expose the destruction surrounding the photograph, a wider and more dramatic picture of ground zero. The empty skyline, the feeble businessman, and the crumpled photograph all seemed to reference a past happiness that has been destroyed by the attack. When the photograph shot dramatically zoomed outward toward ground zero, the image exhibited the widespread allocation of lost happiness; structures, both of the building and the social relations pictured in the photo, had been

destroyed by terrorism. This image was synchronized with Baker's explanation of how clandestine activity, though "offensive," is necessary. We observed the need for this activity in the visual images of pain and loss, and his authoritative words implied that "beefing up our security" can compensate for suffering. Reparation can restore the just balance of power and transform the role of the victim into the victim/hero through the expectation of future power.⁷

At the bottom of the screen, present throughout this sequence and throughout the entire hour of coverage, was the tagline, "Terrorism Hits America." The word "terrorism" was in red, with uneven and disjointed letters, while the word "America" was white, orderly, and bold. Indeed, from the outset of this hour, we were presented with the bipolarity that would literally frame the representation of all moving images on Fox News: America as pure and innocent, attached unwillingly to a destabilizing and threatening force, the color red symbolizing fear, villainy, and loss of control (a color that has represented this feeling in American culture at least since the Red Scare in the beginning of the 20th century). With this tagline, the interpretation of each sequence became more uniform, as America was constantly framed as an innocent entity attacked by the disjointed forces of evil.

5:13 pm

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon spoke English at a press conference in Israel, sharing a split screen with images of the World Trade Center attacks. Sharon stated, "Tomorrow will be a day of mourning in Israel, as we bow our heads and share in the sorrow of the American people." These words were spoken as the picture to his left on the split screen showed a shot of the attack plane flying into the south tower of the World Trade Center. Following at 5:14:39, an American ambassador stated over a shot of a woman hugging a fireman tightly, "This is a day that will live in infamy" and later continued, "Whoever did this is going to regret this dearly."

This sequence of shots and voices exemplified the fusion of rhetoric and imagery in melodrama. Shown while Sharon spoke, the shot of the plane hitting the tower grounded the reason for mourning referenced in his speech. Sharon's sentence classified all Americans together, as equally deserving of Israeli people's sorrow. By recognizing the perspective of an other, in this case a different nationality, American viewers could begin to recognize themselves at this moment in time as unified and defined by national borders. Sharon implied that every American, as part of "the American people," had been victimized by the plane. In conjoining Sharon's words with the shot of the plane, the split screen eased the way for this signification and as such became a method of melodramatic codification. The image was interpreted through Sharon's speech, and viewers together become catalogued as Americans, the ones for whom "sorrow" was felt.

The sound-image fusion in these shots also facilitated pathos. When the ambassador decried the "infamy" of this day, he was speaking in hindsight about past

⁷ Berlant (2001) similarly argued that in the contemporary era of American life, the state's purpose becomes a drive to eradicate the social pain of its citizens. Politics becomes both the site and the alleviation of pain (pp. 47–48).

events that now must be made meaningful. Infamy is a designation that can only be applied to an event retrospectively. It is possible to envision various alternative interpretations of these scenes that need not involve infamy; for instance, with other signification the shot of the woman hugging the fireman could signal a concluded lover's quarrel. Seen and heard alongside the ambassador's words, the sorrow of the embracing female and fireman seemed emblematic of the suffering victim and diminished hero, especially when we were told of the infamy of this day. Only in hindsight can the shot become embedded with the pathos of loss, and pathos was combined with action—"the America people" gained power by suffering through a day of infamy. The authoritative voice of the ambassador informed the viewer that justice would be served, as punishment would ensue for those who caused the suffering. The synthesis of an image of pathos with a voice of action provided the dual impression of suffering and power. The polarity of good and evil had been assigned through the branding of guilt (attacker) and innocence (victim/spectator) in the jurisdiction of justice. The crying woman and crestfallen fireman together were the good; in their embrace, they represented the mutually dependent positions of victim and hero that identified the American people in this moment.

5:18 pm

Another authoritative voice spoke over the same sequence of images shown at 5:04. This time, the former ambassador to NATO explained why the American population should support intelligence agents' ability to assassinate a perpetrator of terrorism, a practice that is currently banned.

The sequential images of pathos, first seen at 5:04, were repetitively shown on-screen and thus became the primary illustration for fortification of the country and offensive action on its behalf. The persistent repetition served the moral clarity so vital to melodrama, especially when combined with the insistence on retributive action permeating the narrative voice-overs. The pain displayed throughout the sequence became hard and fast justification for the rhetoric of revenge.

The sound-image fusion additionally promoted the melodramatic American narrative by erasing all real sounds from the shots. During this hour, news viewers had little access to the actual audio that accompanied these images. All sounds were either voice-overs from interviews with officials or news anchors recapping the day's events. The lack of real audio further imprinted the images with melodramatic codification, as the narrative of morality and victimization reified the visual landscape. Additionally, almost all of the voices providing commentary over visual footage from the attack were White male figures of political leadership. These male voices, rarely shown with a face attached, seemed to represent moral truth and righteous power.⁸ The spectator was rarely shown an individual with whom to observe on-screen, but was merely told of each man's credentials and thus was expected to assume his words had legitimate power to signify the pictures.

⁸ Feminist film theorists emphasize that male voices are often positioned to confer meaning upon a text; Silverman (1988) in particular called to attention the narrative model "aligning the male voice with discursive authority" (p. 84).

5:26 pm

A narrative voice-over is provided by Senator Chuck Hagel as he was interviewed over a full-screen shot montage of the towers' attack and collapse. He began:

People came together in a very precise project and effort [*full screen fade-in to the moving image of the plane nearing the south tower*] to do this terrible, terrible terrorist act [*the impact of the plane into the tower is synch pointed exactly on the word "act"*]. That is what we do know. . . . Now we will unfold this, and we will pull it apart and we will get those facts, and there will be punishment [*continuous footage of the building exploding from the plane's impact*]. But right now what we must do, what we are doing in fact, is securing our country [*closeup of the fire on the tower*] and all our national security interests, helping those who need help [*fade in to collapse of the south tower*], pray for the families and the loved ones who have been lost, and then we've got a lot of work we need to do ahead of us.

This combination of narrative and image generated melodramatic meaning into the spectacular montage of the World Trade Center's attack and subsequent collapse. The montage was a narrative unto itself, and its fusion with Hagel's voice-over ensconced the binary opposition of right and wrong into its plotline. The tower is good, and the plane, the "terrorist act," is "terrible." The combination simplified a complex issue at the outset of its representation and mandated "punishment" for the wrongdoers. The image of the plane crashing into the tower gained significance as the grounds for punishment that will be served in just dessert by the side of good: Those who lost "loved ones." Hagel's authoritative voice simultaneously coded help, compassion, pain, and loss into the image of collapse and destruction, further emphasizing unprovoked suffering and undeserved victimization, as well as the righteousness of retribution.

When looking at material objects through the lens of melodrama, literary theorist Peter Brooks (1995) suggested that "things cease to be merely themselves . . . they become the vehicles of metaphors whose tenor suggests another kind of reality" (p. 9). In this vein, it seems that the image of the towers was used metaphorically within this 1-hour segment of news. The towers—perhaps previously symbolizing capitalist, phallic, imperialist power on a global scale—have been instantaneously transmogrified into a referent of freedom, virtue, and "the American people." The sequential images of the towers' attack and collapse became a rallying symbol for unity and for justice best served by avenging unwarranted injury.

5:36 pm

A disembodied newscaster's voice relayed an official's remark that "there is a strong indication [that Osama] bin Laden is involved" and further conveyed bin Laden's military capabilities and recent activity. While the newscaster spoke, the viewer was presented with a full-screen, slow-motion shot of the north tower collapsing. This image, which in real time took approximately 15 seconds to complete, was dramatically stretched here to 55 seconds. This image faded into a video of bin Laden shooting a gun at various times in front of a group of spectators, followed by a close-up shot of his face during the shooting. The video of bin Laden was then cut back to a repeat image of the tower collapsing in slow motion.

This fade back and forth between two disparate images was an associative montage: When conjoining two disparate shots, one can create a new product; in merging two visual objects, one creates the metaphoric representation of something that was visually undepictable.⁹ In this case, what is visually undepictable was Osama bin Laden attacking the World Trade Center himself; therefore, the use of associative montage accomplished this vision for the viewer. This 2-minute montage reflected the insistence on easy answers for ascribing good and evil, as the evil of the attack paralleled the violent shooting action of bin Laden. Through the montage sequence, bin Laden's face became effectively associated with the towers' painfully slow collapse and fall. Even before there was any confirmation of bin Laden's involvement in this terrorist act, the media found rapid solutions for this crisis; the villain had been named.

5:39 pm

President Bush began his first official public address to the nation regarding the day's terrorist attacks. He donned a red tie and was framed by two American flags stationed imposingly behind him. This image shared a split screen repeating the shots of attack and collapse that had been looping throughout the day. Bush began:

Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended. [*A first shot of the north tower, hit by the first plane, fades into a shot of the towers with the second plane approaching.*] I want to reassure the American People [*at this exact moment, the plane hits the south tower*] that the full resources of the federal government are working to assist local authorities to save lives [*close up of the fire*] and to help the victims of the attacks. [*At this point, the screen is almost consumed by the image of fire.*] Make no mistake: [*long shot of the south tower collapse*] the U.S. will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts. [*long shot of the north tower collapse*]. I've been in regular contact with the vice president, the secretary of defense, the national security team and my Cabinet. [*medium shot of the north tower collapsing and spreading ash all over the city streets.*] We have all taken appropriate security precautions to protect the American people. Our military at home and around the world is on high alert status, and we have taken the necessary security precautions to continue the functions of your government. [*Fade to sequence that begins with person running up the stairs, as seen at 5:04.*]

The victim in Bush's speech was "freedom," the very ideal that signifies the amorphous, homogeneous, unified nation within the melodramatic American collective identity. In Bush's speech, it was an ideal that was attacked, and it is an ideal that must be defended; through Americans' devotion to and identification with that ideal, Bush wanted all to feel victimized. The attack on "freedom" could be recognized as an attack on all Americans, who became an undifferentiated collectivity that deeply cherished the elusive value of freedom. Bush aimed to

⁹ Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1995) pioneered the use of associative montage in the 1920s and observed: "the copulation . . . of two images is to be regarded not as their sum but as their product. . . each separately corresponds to an object, to a fact, but their combination corresponds to a concept" (pp. 29–30).

conjoin the concepts of freedom and the American people, as he used these designations interchangeably in his speech to reference that which must be protected. Inscribing the images of attack and collapse with the suffering of the virtuous, it seemed Bush not only wanted to elicit pathos from the viewer, but to encourage the viewer to also fuse another term, “victimization,” to “the American people.” During the speech, Bush uttered the phrase “American people” at the exact moment the plane attacked the tower. Although probably unintentional, this powerful synch point indicated the confluence of both concepts. The American body was here defined by an ideal, by the moral goodness attached to that ideal as something that has been victimized, and by the action needed to protect it. Indeed, Bush’s merging of “the American people” with “freedom,” with “victimization,” and with the action verbs “to hunt down and punish,” made clear that his vision of American identity contained only state action required to buttress abstract ideals.

As president, Bush symbolized the ultimate authoritative voice in the space of American politics, and in this speech he additionally referenced other authority figures to further ground his power. His position as president established his capacity to both acknowledge and redress the suffering of the victimized populace. Manichean distinctions of right and wrong, good and evil were summoned and affirmed in Bush’s version of the day’s events. His words evoked the pain of loss (the victims of cowardly acts), the virtue of freedom (“freedom will be defended”), and American people as situated squarely within these two ideals. In this speech, Bush shrewdly invoked the melodramatic premise that action, when responding to pathos, reinforces America’s moral goodness. The perpetrators of the attack were twice referenced as “cowards.” Cowardice is a specific type of evil, as it immediately implies the weakness of the evildoer and the strength of the victim. Indeed, using the term cowardice to designate the villain demonstrates in and of itself the porous boundary between victim and hero. By referencing the impetus to “hunt down and punish those responsible” for the tower collapsing (shown simultaneously on the split screen), the viewer observed the duality of victimization and invigoration; the sound-image fusion utilized the tension between these emotions to produce the melodramatic narrative. The empathically imagined community of a unified, suffering American populace, conjoined by love of freedom, bolsters the invitation to identify with the images of anguish, and expands the rationalization for restorative retribution.

5:44 pm

New York Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Charles Schumer stood together in a full-screen shot as Schumer began addressing reporters, “We are here today to express our solidarity with the people in New York and America. First, we are completely appalled, shaken but resolute as a result of this awful action.” At this moment, the shot was halved and the two senators shared a split screen with the images of attack and collapse beginning again. Schumer continued:

This is Pearl Harbor, twenty-first century, and it’s an unknown enemy, although they will be known. [*Plane hits the south tower.*] First, to the families,

those who may have losses, we feel your pain. So our first feeling is for the families and the suffering and pain in New York and throughout the country [*south tower collapse shot*]. Those who did this must be brought to justice. We now know that none of us, as Americans, can avoid that terrorism unless we take strong action against it. . . . We will be united in this fight [*north tower collapse shot*]. America can never turn its back from this point. We are in a new era, where we realize the world is an interconnected, but sometimes very nasty place.

Schumer didn't just acknowledge the victims, he "feels their pain," thus embodying the pathos necessary to become an empathic victim himself. Schumer's ability to be appalled and shaken was grounded on the basis that these emotions would engender punishment of the perpetrators, that vulnerability would be transmuted into strength. He, as an "American" and as an embodiment of suffering, called for a "united" act of retribution. In reemphasizing punishment throughout his speech, Schumer emblazoned the images of attack and collapse with an insistence on active retaliation. Viewing his speech through the melodramatic lens, it seemed that America's virtue would be increased by the resolution to undertake retributive action. Once again, only action toward full retribution would vindicate and restore the moral dominion of the United States.

Whereas most of the previous commentary had been spoken through disembodied voice-overs, the visual image of Schumer speaking had different discursive connotations. In melodrama, virtue and integrity were most easily identifiable with individual characters (Williams, 2001, p. 35). Through his rhetoric, Schumer positioned himself explicitly as a victim, as an American, and as a future hero; thus, by seeing him, the viewer could more easily empathize with him personally as an individual inhabited by these traits. Melodrama is highly personalized; good and evil refer to persons who, in a clear and unambiguous way, characterize these qualities. The fact that Schumer was not faceless, and even occupied the full screen for much of the speech, allowed the viewer to distinguish him visibly as a sufferer, a future hero of action, and thus as a man of virtue.

6:00 pm

At exactly 6:00:00 pm, dramatic music began, packed with thundering beats and resonant jolts. A sequence of images materialized: a shot of the plane flying into the tower, the tower collapsing in smoke, a shot of the second tower collapsing, an image of the collapsed wall of the Pentagon. This sequence was rapidly followed by a full-screen image of the digitalized title seen throughout the news hour at the bottom of the screen and now rapidly growing larger: "Terrorism Hits America." Though still red, the font of the word "Terrorism" was even more broken and dramatic, with fissures disrupting the formation of the letters and the font of "America" was white, clean, and impeccably straight.

No melodramatic narrative would be complete without music. Although the written words mark indelibly the clarity of moral positioning, music fixes the melodramatic insistence on the importance of this day. This is high action melos. Melodrama calls on music to create emotional pitch and convey emotive meaning nonverbally; here, the rhythm furtively conjured up a racing, pounding heart,

simulating the adrenaline rush of excitement, nervousness, fear, and shock. Yet it also evoked anticipation of the desire to see what was next, what would be resolved. This musical patterning shaped the narrative and signaled a heightening of the mood already rooted within the news coverage from the past hour. The sequential images of attack and collapse were repeated during the music; embedding this music into the narrative of the day's events increased the appeal to action, justice, and punishment for the attack on America. The moral truth contained in the title became even more insistent when implanted within high-action rhythm. At this moment in the news coverage, it seemed that moral legibility was best attained through the intersection of melos with spectacle and repetition.

Melodrama, American Politics, and Power

Media coverage of the September 11 terrorist attack illustrated the role of melodrama in generating a compelling national identity. Melodrama defined America as a heroic redeemer with a mandate to act because of an injury committed by a hostile villain. Through the melodramatic narrative, Americans were depicted as a unified and moral nation. America's virtue was validated by the resolution to undertake retributive action in response to its victimization. During this hour, numerous politicians incorporated melodramatic narratives in their speeches and discussions in an attempt to make sense of the attack. Cameramen, editors, and news producers also employed melodramatic practices to structure what was being shown on television. As a cultural mode of understanding, many pieces of this news-hour puzzle produced and were produced by the melodramatic narrative.

Already in news coverage just a few hours after the events on 9/11, political concerns were sealed by moral deliberations over good and evil. There was a blockage of discussion over the complicated and vague causes, effects, and understandings of the attack, and how it should be connected to national life. The attack was immediately subsumed under the Manicheism of the melodramatic narrative. My concern is that in the ensuing national discussion, designations of right and wrong became depoliticized because they were codified as universal moral truths. Hence, they became unaccountable to public debate. By describing the attack at the mythic level of a reenactment of the forces of good and evil, melodrama reoriented political power toward reconciling transcendent dilemmas. Framing America's response to the September 11 attacks as a compulsory rejoinder to evil brushed the political questions and concerns that the attack evoked under the rug of transcendent morality and hence made state action seem absolutely moral and unquestionable. An ambiguous situation was made to appear clear, and an uncertain response, obligatory.

Throughout the media coverage of 9/11, American national identity was created out of victimization; it was both America that was victimized and America that then had to become heroic and rescue itself. Through its initial status as victim, and the empathy this engendered, America became defined by the broad ideals that necessitate state action for protection. Therefore, the state gained moral

justification in exercising and increasing power, and in fact its exercise of power seemed an innate facet of national identity.¹⁰ Equating state action with national identity further depoliticized state power by assuming its deployment to be natural and hence incontestable. Thus, the pronouncements to “protect the American people,” “get back into this messy business,” and “hunt down and punish those responsible” became necessary and moral acts, not specific political choices by specific political actors in response to a specific situation. America was defined explicitly by “freedom,” and implicitly by the state power necessary to protect it, so that state action seemed an inescapable part of American identity.

In sum, framing American identity through melodrama obfuscated state power. Though nebulously configured, state action was characterized as both necessary and good; therefore political debate over state action became simultaneously unnecessary and immoral. In essence, state power became politically unaccountable to citizens. The most dangerous implication of the melodramatic national identity during September 11 was that it took power away from citizens by encouraging them to assume that state power was an unquestionable moral imperative in fighting the eternal battle between good and evil. Although this article delved into only 1 hour of news coverage, the ubiquity of the melodramatic narrative throughout the coverage should demonstrate both its force as a cultural method of meaning-making as well as its ability to quickly and convincingly define this event. Although some of melodrama’s ramifications were mitigated over time, others that were present from the outset still govern national understandings of September 11. In its insistence on Manicheistic designations and the redemptive power of fighting evil, melodrama immediately foreclosed the asking of questions about responsibility, morality, and long-term implications of government action. Melodrama eliminated the space for complexity and ambiguity in which these questions could be posed. Thoughtfulness was replaced by the imperative toward retributive action. As citizens, we must begin to question the seductions of this national self-understanding that feeds on an attachment to victimization and generates vengeful heroism. Through a critical examination of the perceptions of victimhood and retribution within specific cultural forms and national events, perhaps we can begin to generate more complex and nuanced ways of understanding contemporary national life. Perhaps we can open up a wider space of deliberation over America’s collective identity, and the state action committed in its name.

¹⁰ Wendy Brown’s (1995) critique of identity politics can help illuminate the hazardous links between melodrama and American national identity. Brown explored the way that contemporary identity in America is formulated around victimization, and how the subsequent turn to the state to redress victimization concurrently increases state power and conceals its expansion, while reinforcing the depoliticization of identity. I want to extend Brown’s argument by maintaining that victimization is not only a category for identity politics within a broader America identity, but became a national identity during 9/11. In adapting her critique, I argue that, as with identity politics grounded in victimization, the national identity generated by melodrama clouds the exercise of state power through renaturalizing it as a moral imperative.

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