

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 26 (2011)  
  
**Artikel:** Pathetic copycats : female victimhood and visuality in melodramatic films  
**Autor:** Straub, Julia  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-283972>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Pathetic Copycats: Female Victimhood and Visuality in Melodramatic Films

Julia Straub

This essay explores the representation of copied victims in David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Two characters, *Twin Peaks*' Madeleine Ferguson and *Vertigo*'s Judy Barton, are the focus of my discussion. They are referred to as "copycats" since they temporarily adopt the identity of a dead original victim: "Laura Palmer" and "Madeleine Elster" respectively. Victimhood seems to be an attractive option for them because it gives them, in various forms, emotional gratification. However, both Judy Barton and Madeleine Ferguson copy originals that do not exist: the original victims are ultimately constructs which are reflective of other people's desires and projections. The more prominent claim this essay makes is that the copied victim represents the postmodernist radicalization of the victim stereotype that is common to traditional melodrama. Melodrama thrives on the pathos it generates with the help of visual means of expression. The copied victim doubles this effect of visualizing meaning and embodies the close link between melodramatic affect and the visual as it has shaped melodramatic cinema in the twentieth century.

Two commonly held assumptions about melodrama are the starting point for this essay. First, the genre of melodrama – films, plays and texts alike – puts the victim centre-stage by focusing on the victim's point of view (Elsaesser 185). Second, melodrama is a "mute" genre, because it is based on texts whose expressive value language by itself cannot satisfactorily deal with (see Brooks 56-57). This means that melodrama targets the eye: it operates with expressive strategies that are not verbalized and it aims to cause a strong visual effect. In this essay, I will enlarge these observations and elaborate on victimhood, more spe-

cifically *female* victimhood, as an attractive option in melodramatic films: an option attractive to the extent that it invites reduplication. The examples upon which I will draw, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), suggest that the transformation into a copy of the victim endows the female characters with a momentum otherwise unavailable to them. It becomes rather desirable to be in the victim's shoes, if just for a moment. As a matter of fact, melodrama does not require highly individual forms of characterization: identification with the victim "depends to a large extent on the aptness of the iconography ('the visualisation') and on the quality (complexity, subtlety, ambiguity) of the orchestration for what are trans-individual, popular mythological . . . experiences and plot structures" (Elsaesser 176). The copied victim thus satiates a visual hunger. This appears to be a logical response to the genre's excess of expressive content: after all the act of doubling a body also means a doubling of its immanence. In literature, the reduplication of (female) characters is obviously not a phenomenon that is exclusive to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Romantic writing and the genre of the Gothic novel abound with such Poe-esque doubling effects. In terms of cinema history, one would probably think of Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) along with *Vertigo* as classical works establishing this theme and making it available for postmodernist appropriation (Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* [1995]), for example, pays homage to *Vertigo*, and *Laura* is an important intertext for *Twin Peaks*). In several respects we can think of melodramatic films as products of modernist aesthetics that were carried over into postmodernism. My hypothesis is that the female copy-victim takes such typologizing strategies, which are inscribed into the genre, to extremes. This can be seen as the most radical version of the victim stereotype. The copy-victim exhausts the visually expressive and affective potential of melodrama and both literalizes and visualizes the prominence of the body as a site of meaning, especially in this genre. Having a copy of a possibly lost, dead or otherwise unattainable "original" return – and the same applies to doubles, twins, *revenants*, etc – duplicates both the physical presence (respectively confirms the absence) of the victim and our emotional response. Neither the effect nor the affect that such copies or doubles create emerges from a verbal discourse. Quite the contrary: clear visual signs and codes are required in order to ensure recognizability, to confirm identity or respectively detect difference, and to elicit the kind of empathy both from characters and the audience on which melodrama feeds.

The two film examples I will discuss are not purely melodramatic works. In fact, *Vertigo* would count for most as a psychological thriller or a film noir, while *Twin Peaks*, the series, is a complex, multi-layered

and highly intertextual take on various TV and film formats, a “carnival of genres” (Chion 108), “combining the situations of a film noir and a melodramatic television series” (Chion 107), and refracting these genres through the lens of postmodernist parody (see Richardson 79). In *Twin Peaks*, Lynch even parodies the genre of the soap opera specifically by including a series within the series, entitled “Invitation to Love.” This shows how difficult it is in the context of postmodernism to account for the uses of melodrama, but this is a point to which I will return below. All in all, it seems advisable to think of melodrama as a mode as well as a genre. Viewed as a mode, one can acknowledge significant melodramatic elements on the level of plot and character development as well as that of expressivity, especially when genre boundaries are blurred and genre conventions challenged.

*Twin Peaks*, not all the episodes of which were directed by Lynch himself, was first shown on US television in the early 1990s and reached immediate cult status. It was followed up by a film, conceived as a prequel, entitled *Twin Peaks – Fire Walk with Me* in 1992. The plot of the series unfolded from the death of a pretty young woman called Laura Palmer. Laura Palmer became an iconic victim, “dead, wrapped in plastic” (a reference to her beautiful water corpse which is discovered in the pilot film) circulated as a standard quotation, and Angelo Badalamenti’s film music, most notably “Laura’s Theme,” an unmistakable marker of the victim, evoked the presence of the dead Laura at moments of heightened emotional suspense (see Richardson 85-87).

The discovery of Laura’s dead body by the lakeshore leads to an FBI investigation conducted by the charismatic special agent Dale Cooper (Kyle McLachlan), who travels to the small Northwestern town of Twin Peaks. What begins as a shocking, yet still routine, murder investigation turns into a journey into the heart of small town American darkness, suggesting that behind the Lynchian picket fence one finds a world of corruption, drug abuse, domestic violence, incest and prostitution, with no prospect of moral redemption. Laura’s death leaves her family and friends devastated. Her cousin Madeleine Ferguson arrives in Twin Peaks to offer comfort to her aunt and uncle. There is a strong physical resemblance between Laura and her cousin, even though Laura is the shining blonde and Madeleine Ferguson the bespectacled brunette; in fact, both were played by the same actor, Sheryl Lee. Madeleine is eventually killed by Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), Laura’s father, because she looks too much like Laura. Leland, it will become clear at the end of Season Two, was possessed by an evil demon called “BOB.” In Season One, though, Madeleine appears as the sober and sweet version of Laura’s twisted character. In episode six, Madeleine meets two of Laura’s friends, Donna (Moira Kelly) and James (James Marshall), to

listen to secret audiotapes that Laura sent to her psychiatrist Dr Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn), who is at this point a potential suspect. It is a notable scene because her friends listen in on her secret thoughts, completely unsettled by the disturbing revelations that destroy their fond idea of their friend. Laura talks freely about her irresistible impact on men, which only reinforces the contrast between her and the more modest Madeleine. This scene then paves the way for a trick the three play on Jacoby, who is lured out of his house so they can search for possible clues, and for two noteworthy scenes of recognition. The shy and rather lustreless Madeleine is the bait: she dresses up as Laura and puts on a blonde wig. Due to her transformation, she is able to live for a moment the magnetic radiance of her beautiful cousin. Her identification with the victim turns her into the center of attention, allowing her to receive the kind of male admiration she is not used to, and which her cousin Laura monopolized. Her effect on James and Dr Jacoby, who both had been in love with Laura, is one of entire bewilderment.

Both their encounters with Laura's double are brief, but orchestrated by Lynch in interesting ways. When James meets her in episode six, Madeleine walks towards him slowly, gradually emerging into visibility, accompanied by Laura's theme music. Soft-hearted James' first reaction is to dispense with his disbelief, his facial expression betrays that he is being duped for a fraction of time, but then he reminds himself of the masquerade of which he is an initiate. Dr Jacoby's spotting of Laura is arranged differently: this scene, which takes place in episode seven, includes different levels of observation and is a veritable cat-and-mouse game, with Jacoby watching Laura while he himself is being watched by – supposedly – the possessed Leland Palmer. Jacoby's secret observation of Laura is driven by mistrust: he sneaks up on her because he believes that he is being set up. The encircling, unsteady movement of the camera adds to this stalking effect. When Laura turns around to meet his eye, Jacoby's response to the copy-victim is the inverse of James': his initial incredulity gives way to complete rapture on his beholding and recognizing Laura. In both cases the gaze of the beholder feasts on the spectacle that the copy provides. The director indulges the affective quality of these moments by prolonging the sequences of seeing, understanding and emotional response that follow.

Laura Palmer was the American "*über*-victim," mainly because she was so readily readable as such. "Moral legibility" has been identified by Peter Brooks (5) and Linda Williams (52) as essential to the genre. It refers to the interpretability of victimhood, which is ensured by the use of certain moral codes. These codes need to be easily decipherable and, importantly, reflected by certain visual means: Laura is the dutiful daughter, the Meals-on-Wheels volunteer, the exemplary student and



friend, and she is also the soft-featured, angelic blonde whose looks symbolize innocence. Melodramatic victimhood depends on theatricality, which in this case is, according to Linda Williams, “a public testimony to an elusive virtue” (81). However, unsurprisingly for anybody familiar with his work, Lynch undermines this equation between victimhood and innocence, villainy and guilt, throughout *Twin Peaks*, as well as in many of his other works. The grand narrative of virtue and innocence rewarded is deconstructed in Lynch’s world, where the detective work that we witness does not set right and wrong apart, but brings about a gradual ambiguation. The viewer does not receive the gratification of seeing vice punished and virtue, if not compensated, then at least glorified. “Lynchtown” is the “base camp for an adventure of the imagination,” “a façade with nothing to hide” (Chion 78).

There is a clear line of descent that runs from *Twin Peaks* to my second example, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. In *Vertigo*, Madeleine Elster becomes the love interest of policeman Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart). Ferguson is hired for private investigations by a friend, who wants him to keep an eye on his wife: Madeleine being allegedly suicidal. On one occasion, Scottie saves her from drowning and eventually falls in love with Madeleine, given her beautiful looks, her somewhat enigmatic background and her apparent need of protection. However, Madeleine’s death wish, supposedly inspired by her obsession with her great-grandmother’s suicide, is stronger and, at her second attempt, Scottie fails to come to her rescue. He suffers a mental breakdown following her death. He then encounters and befriends a woman called Judy Barton, who strongly resembles Madeleine. What he is unaware of at this point is that all along Judy Barton has been the Madeleine Elster he loved. His friend Gavin Elster killed his real wife, and Judy Barton stood in as a fake Madeleine Elster who was designed to catch Scottie’s attention and was meant to “die” in a way credible enough to cover up her husband’s killing of the real Madeleine Elster. Only when he sees Judy Barton wearing Madeleine’s necklace does it dawn upon Scottie that he himself is a victim: the victim of a scam and his own emotions. This is Scottie’s moment of melodramatic recognition. Judy’s moment of revelation happens when Scottie takes her out, early on in their courtship, to the restaurant where he had first seen her in the role of Madeleine. Scottie ogles a blonde woman who walks past their table and who resembles his Madeleine, wearing the kind of grey two-piece suit that he admired on the latter. It is a fascinating, melodramatic scene. Judy now understands what lies at the heart of Scottie’s detachment from her, of which she had a painful premonition: his desire for somebody else, who is paradoxically herself.

She immediately gauges her loss. Melodrama thrives on exactly this moment of epistemic transferral and the way it seizes the body and the face. The whole drama of love denied is readable in Judy's facial expressions. The look on Judy's face presages an internal conflict between love and self-renunciation whose expressiveness requires no single spoken word. Subsequently, and ever so reluctantly, Judy yields to Scottie's desire and adopts Madeleine's looks, from tip to toe, thereby reverting to a role she had excelled in before. After her makeover is completed, each detail of her looks adapted, each strand of her bleached hair put into its right place, she appears as a fuzzy half-light epiphany to the bedazzled Scottie in a way that leaves no doubt as to which model Lynch had in mind when resurrecting Laura for her admirers. For Scottie, who at this point does not know that Judy Barton is an actress who has been leading him on, she becomes the double of the "original" Madeleine Elster, and thereby confirms the existence of the lost original. Yet, for the actress Judy Barton, this reversion to the role of Madeleine is not so much an act of copying, but one of repetition: she repeats her own previous enactment of this figure to the point that over-precision is being produced, which culminates when Judy dies the same death as the real Madeleine (see Bronfen 12-13).

Judy's willingness to become the copy of the Madeleine that Scottie craves may appear pathetic to us. "Pathetic," as used in the title of this essay, can obviously have two meanings in contemporary usage. We can refer to somebody as pathetic, when we think of him or her as acting in a way that is emotionally or morally feeble. Judy's decision to forsake her individuality, to become a mere copycat for the love of a man, certainly appears pathetic in this sense. Yet there is also a "pathetic" quality about Judy that inspires a feeling of empathy or fellow-feeling, brought about by the spectacle of somebody else's suffering. Here "pathos" needs to be seen as an expressive mode used to depict feelings. As Franco Moretti states in his "Kindergarten" article, the moments that make us cry when we read a book or watch a film are those when awareness of the irreversibility of time kicks in. Finally we understand that somebody's desire is futile, finally we understand that people's misfortune may be the merely contingent result of bad timing (Moretti speaks of a "rhetoric of too late," 159). Add to this the feeling that somebody is being wronged and an injustice is being done, and you can account for the emotional impact of melodramatic pathos. Judy's unconditional love for Scottie (which is tainted by her involvement in acts of deceit carried out behind his back) versus his Pygmalionesque desire to sculpt her (the cold-heartedness of which is mitigated by the sincerity of his feelings for Madeleine Elster) can be seen as ironic and pathetic at the same time. Both irony and pathos hover in this precarious gap be-

tween reality on the one hand and, on the other, the emotional investments that a character is making: melodramatic pathos is derived from the incompatibility of past and present, the asynchronicity or varying intensity of desires.<sup>1</sup>

Based on what has been argued so far, I would like to discuss two observations. I thereby hope to forge a connection with melodrama's visual quality, taking into consideration that its popularity during the twentieth century in different medial forms is owed exactly to this: its capacity to stimulate the (mind's) eye. The first point I would like to make is that there are no originals in these processes of reduplication. Neither in Madeleine's nor in Laura's case is there an "objective difference" between the copy and the copied. Or, as Jean Baudrillard would put it, the "signs do not lean to one side or another" (20). This effect is explicable in terms of the cast: both Laura/Madeleine and Madeleine/Judy are played by the same actress. But there is an interesting divergence as regards the copying pattern and the uses to which the copy is put. In *Vertigo*, the identity of the "original" and fake is made known to the viewer early on, when Madeleine puts her past down in writing; Scottie comes to an understanding of this only later in the film. Yet the film steers towards the climactic moment of Judy's utter metamorphosis and revels in the exactness of the copy. In contrast to this, *Twin Peaks*' Madeleine Ferguson, as she gets out of the car to meet James, is evidently a fake Laura, at least in the eyes of the viewers: her clothes do not fit and it is apparent that she is wearing a wig. Interestingly, despite the obvious resemblance, she does not strike the viewer as a copy at all or, if so, as a bad one. However, on the intradiegetic level, she is a powerful copy and the effect she has on her beholders is one of authenticity.

The question of who is the copy, and who the original, is of even greater complexity. As Elisabeth Bronfen has pointed out in her discussion of *Vertigo*, there is no original lover called "Madeleine" whose identity Judy seeks to adopt (6). Madeleine is a product of Scottie's imagination, a fictional construct whose sole point of reference is not a real human being but the portrait of a woman long dead, that of Madeleine Elster's mysterious great-grandmother Carlotta Valdes. Very similarly, Madeleine Ferguson copies Laura Palmer. But who is Laura Palmer? She is not a source victim, but a simulacrum in that she "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 6). Throughout the *Twin Peaks* series, Laura exists as a framed portrait, as a woman captured on video

---

<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Elsaesser has pointed out, pathos "results from non-communication or silence made eloquent" and originates from "highly emotional situations," where "an ironic discontinuity of feeling or a qualitative difference in intensity" prevails (186-187).



and audio tapes and in photographs; she even returns as a name echoed by a bird. Laura “serves as a structuring absence that organizes the desire of the other characters and the spectator (who wants both to understand Laura and to find the solution to her murder)” (McGowan 130). But these mediated signs of her presence only mark her absence. She is a victim who is hollowed out from the inside, endowed with the beautiful looks of a Hollywood star, appearing as the heiress in a tradition of victimized and/or women and icons. “Laura” itself is a significant name, recalling a long poetic tradition of woman’s veneration. Lynch’s creation of Laura Palmer shows that victimhood in melodrama does not require particularity or psychological depth, but rather a generic appearance, an iconographical resemblance and recognizability, coupled with a moral legibility that allows us to see victimhood without it having to be articulated verbally.<sup>2</sup>

Both Laura Palmer and Madeleine Elster – dead, absent and ultimately insubstantial creatures – possess astounding radiance and vitality. Like Aristotle’s unmoved mover, they cause bustling action while remaining invariably inactive. This paradox of activity in passivity tends to obscure the tragedy of their own victimhood: the victim’s ordeal is of less importance than the narrative provided by the investigative work it entails. The victim’s actual life is gradually transformed into an afterlife with its own dynamic. This also explains, at least partly, why victimhood seems so attractive to others. The copy-cats aim to fill the void caused by the absence of the original victim and want to be drawn into this afterlife but, the further they move, the more likely they are to become victims themselves. Both Judy Barton and Madeleine Ferguson lose their lives eventually and pay the full price for becoming agents in the victim’s narrative. *Vertigo* and *Twin Peaks* represent victimhood not as static and stigmatic. Instead, it is a shifting state, allied to power and its loss in complex ways. Neither in *Vertigo* nor in *Twin Peaks* is it rigidly gendered. Without a doubt, Madeleine Elster and Laura Palmer are conspicuous, iconic female victims towards whom the copy-cats, the other characters and the audience gravitate. But upon closer inspection it becomes obvious that men can be victims, too.<sup>3</sup> Scottie Ferguson and Dale Cooper’s emotional investments and their quests for knowledge

---

<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to compare the melodramatic dimension of *Twin Peaks* the TV series with *Twin Peaks – Fire Walk with Me*. Whereas the series revolves around Laura, the ever absent and still present objectified victim, the film has been considered one of Lynch’s boldest artistic moves, given its subjectivization of his cult victim, showing her acting in the various roles she played, none of which manage to define or substantiate her (see McGowan 131).

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Jörg Metelmann for his observations on male victimhood in *Vertigo*.

make them vulnerable and manipulable. Positions can shift easily once victimhood exceeds the stereotypical “villainy versus heroism” dichotomy, and comes to be defined more fluidly as a loss of power and (self-)control.

It is worth dwelling on the appeal of victimhood, which makes it a state to be aspired to or copied, which brings me to my second observation.<sup>4</sup> Judy Barton and Madeleine Ferguson approximate an experience that would remain unattainable to them if it were not for their transformation into somebody else: the sexual allure of Laura Palmer and Scottie’s love, respectively. In the absence of the “real thing,” the appeal of victimhood seems to lie at least partly in its making available second-degree emotions. This kind of experience by proxy emblemizes the mimetic principles of drama in general, but very specifically those of melodrama. Just like these copycats, recipients are keen to be moved by emotions destined for or felt by somebody else, on screen and on stage. This may well happen for cathartic reasons, but it may also happen because this second-degree feeling is a rare emotional stimulus. If melodrama is, as Linda Williams has argued, the central mode of American cinema in the twentieth century (42-43), thriving within and catering to the needs of a consumerist society, then its popularity stems perhaps from its capacity to offer us, more so than other genres, goods that money cannot buy. Melodrama has many such appealing goods in store because it functions under the assumption that, behind the surface of reality, we can discern some moral value and integrity. Melodrama retains an atavistic promise of emotional wholeness: its moral legibility allows justice to be done and virtue to be rewarded and, in the absence of such consolation or happy endings, at least restores dignity to defeat and loss.

Melodrama reintroduces into modern society narratives of innocence, justice, and moral heroism, which may no longer steer us towards a higher power of transcendent good, but offer the prospect of salvation within the humble sphere of domesticity: “Melodrama represents both the urge towards resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms” (Brooks 16). Melodramatic films catapult us back into an experience of the world where people are still who they are, where names mean something, where values still apply, and where there is a clear line between good and evil. But underlying

---

<sup>4</sup> Melodramatic victimhood obviously needs to be set in a wider frame of injustice: the wrong that is done to people does not have to be romantic. In fact, concern with social injustice is often condensed so as to make it fit into narrower domestic spheres, as Thomas Elsaesser has argued in his work on melodrama and the family. “Primarily ideological conflicts” tend to be interiorized and personalized and microcosmically enacted in family settings (168).

this impulse there has been, ever since its early days in eighteenth-century Europe, mistrust in verbal communication, a linguistic scepticism *avant la lettre*.<sup>5</sup> Melodrama's visual strategies and the figurability of its subjects have always contributed to what Peter Brooks refers to as an "aesthetic of embodiment" (17). Peter Brooks' study obviously deals with melodrama as a stage form flourishing in nineteenth-century France. Amendments and concessions need to be made when applying his concepts to US cinema. Classical stage melodrama traditionally uses "frozen" moments, such as tableaux and pantomime, especially at moments when language fails: "... melodrama so often, particularly in climactic moments and in extreme situations, has recourse to non-verbal means of expressing its meanings" (Brooks 56).<sup>6</sup> It repositions the graphic sign at eye-level with the verbal.<sup>7</sup> Language is de-prioritized and becomes exchangeable or entwined with other forms of expression, such as music, gesture or facial movements. Language can be required to clarify a gesture, but gestures can also be used to clarify linguistic communication.

The genre of film has the advantage that its means of production allow more subtle arrangements than those of stage drama, where visual signs ought to be obvious and eye-catching. Still, the visual presence of objects, gestures and actions can have a significant impact of reinforcement or clarification where the orchestration of the plot or characters is concerned. In *Vertigo*, for example, Scottie and Judy are placed in front of a mirror in the clothes shop to which Scottie has taken Judy in order to dress her up as Madeleine. It is a moment of heightened tension for the two: Scottie's impatient demand that Judy finish her radical metamorphosis into Madeleine within a single day reveals to her the pathology of his desire, while she herself is too desperate to resist. Their painful encounter in front of the mirror as he urges her to keep to his plan is enacted by a strained pose, which confirms what the audience already knows: that their relationship is deeply flawed, since it is based on wrong assumptions. However, the mirror also becomes a doubling device, which literally reflects the phoniness of the copied emotions hold-

---

<sup>5</sup> Melodrama seems to blithely perpetuate the kind of nostalgia that Baudrillard condemns as a sorry placeholder for "when the real is no longer what it was" (6), and could be – on a more critical note – said to share with political order or ideology the desire to "reinject the real and the referential everywhere" (22).

<sup>6</sup> One reason for this overt visual component of melodrama is historical: melodrama emerged in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and, being thought of as a democratic response to the predominantly aristocratic conflicts carried out on the classicist stage, was destined for an audience that was not necessarily literate (see Singer 132).

<sup>7</sup> As Caroline Dunant has put it, in melodrama visuality carries the full weight of meaning, to the point that spectacle is more important than speech (83).

ing these two characters together. More than just a prop, the mirror clarifies their body language and makes their conflict visible: they are just a reflection of a couple that itself was never real.

Melodrama is a sensationalist mode, which makes use of easily readable, audience-friendly visual codes and tries to grip the reader through different channels of perception. In fact, its proneness to sensationalism explains its prominence early in the twentieth century, leaving its imprint on modernist and postmodernist culture. The consciousness of people's vulnerability in the modern city that melodramatic films reflect (Singer 74) feeds into this together with a fascination with the contiguity of (modern and urban) life as an inexhaustible source of pathos (Singer 90). But the overarching reason for its popularity in US popular culture from the late nineteenth century onwards may well be its capacity to team up language with non-verbal expressive means. Lighting, montage, decor, acting style and music are more than accompaniments in melodrama, both on stage and in film, but important compositional devices, adding the "melos" to "drama." Victimhood in melodrama is thus less a matter of complex verbalized discourse, but rather something that needs to be rendered visible on people's faces or their bodies. This explains, too, why in melodramatic film scenes the victim's body parts are frequently shown synecdochically, often coupled with subjective use of the camera, and close-ups of the victim's face.

The copy-victim, as I have shown, is the epitome of this play with bodily, and thus visual, immanence: it doubles the impact of the victim's body, reconfirming its presence as a site of meaning. In melodrama, meaning tends to be literalized and visualized, and the act of copying the victim's body means doubling exactly these processes. In a way, these copycats mirror the dilemma that postmodern melodrama incurs. It had been suggested above that an obvious way to interpret figures such as Madeleine Ferguson and Judy Barton would be to see them as simulacra, as copies without an original. However, melodrama stands in a vexed relationship both with modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Given its emphasis on the material and the unambiguous, its anti-intellectual quality, it has been viewed as resistant or even averse to postmodernist theory (see Williams 169). There is perhaps more willed unruliness in this genre than is commonly assumed. As Susan Gledhill points out, the melodramatic subject refuses to accept the gap between the self and representation opened up by modernism and widened by postmodernism, and forces its reality on to the audience: "Taking its stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and repre-

sensation, [melodrama] proceeds to force into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning" (33).<sup>8</sup> This could well be considered an attitude of "So what!" as Gledhill goes on to argue (33), a demonstrative gesture which is even doubled in the films I have discussed.

In this sense, the copycats I have discussed in this essay are far less "pathetic" than one would expect. In fact, it seems that they ask us to reconceptualize the merits of victimhood and thereby to go beyond the usual patterns of rehabilitation, such as highlighting the moral victory that is sometimes said to belong to the defeated. The impact of the victim's visual presence and the different ways in which it can be instrumentalized – copying being just one of them – then seem to be less a mere straining after effects, than a means of empowerment. This opens up further avenues of investigation. What is certain is that the complexity of melodramatic victimhood emerges fully when the genre's intense engagement with visual matters as one of its defining features is understood.

---

<sup>8</sup> Lynch in particular seems to celebrate the gravity and meaningfulness of the everyday object in *Twin Peaks*: the ceiling fan and the traffic lights become semanticized markers of particular moods; the ceramic figurines standing on mantelpieces and Cooper's craving for coffee and cherry pie seem to fixate meaning within contexts that in any other regard defy definite interpretation.



## References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Die Liebe zu einer Toten: Hitchcock's *Vertigo*." *Enzyklopädie des Kriminalfilms*. Meitingen: Corian Verlag, 1997. 1-15.
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Chion, Michel. *David Lynch*. Trans. Robert Julian. London: BFI, 2006.
- Dunant, Caroline. "Olympian Dreamscapes: The Photographic Canvas: The Wide-screen Paintings of Leighton, Poynter and Alma-Tadema." *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*. Ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 1994. 82-93.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Drama." *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Vol. 2. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 165-189.
- Gledhill, Christine. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 2002. 5-39.
- McGowan, Todd. *The Impossible David Lynch*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Moretti, Franco. "Kindergarten." *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*. 1983. Radical Thinkers 7. London: Verso, 2005. 157-181.
- Richardson, John. "Laura and *Twin Peaks*: Postmodern Parody and the Musical Reconstruction of the Absent Femme Fatale." *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*. Ed. Erica Sheen and Annette Davidson. London: Wallflower Press, 2004. 77-92.
- Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revised." *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 42-88.

