

In Defense of Melodramatic Rhetoric

Marc Bousquet

David Downing likes getting things done. See an evil? Change it, and be quick about it. Brought up in the high theory moment, his own commitment was to theory with traction, observably leading to “real change.” That personal ethos of theory in action informs *Works and Days*, as several of our contributions establish. Downing and a whole lot of his fellow travelers see ourselves as spending our lives and careers as “good guys” battling social evils. There are certain social relations we would like to see extinguished, and other social relations we would like to take their place. Like some of Naomi Klein’s writing, Downing’s editorial approach has often been melodramatic. That is: he sees an actually existing evil, and immediately begins crafting a special issue addressing it, generally favoring works addressing praxis that would extinguish the evil in question.

You, the reader, may think “melodramatic” is not a complimentary term for a scholar. But for “scholactivists” like ourselves, melodrama is an ontology, in the sense that the logic of our lives is, relative to those of observers and bystanders, simple, clear, and straightforward: we live to name an evil and fight it. Indeed, melodrama is the preferred mode of contemporary politics. Certainly, there’s plenty to criticize about melodrama, but there’s no escaping it. It’s the discursive, political, cultural, and aesthetic atmosphere in which we think and act—our social epistemology.¹

Melodrama is a modern emergent from an old, old mode of binarism, originating in religion and rhetoric naming insiders (believers or patriots) as the agent of an overwhelming good (God’s will, manifest destiny) and outsiders (nonbelievers, others) as an evil—an evil that must be extinguished for the good to prevail. In revolutionary France, the rhetorics of religion and politics infiltrated the “music drama,” creating a new form of drama borrowing cathartic king-killing from tragedy and lifting from comedy such essentials as the

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happy reunion plus fortunate overcoming of insurmountable obstacles.

The French melodramatic stage delighted its audiences with straightforward binarism, presenting heroes in homespun white and aristocratic villains in opera clothes such as black hats and capes. The characters clash and the good guys win. Good and evil are personified clearly, hero vs. villain. By the early 19th century, melodrama dominated stages in Europe and America, perhaps not incidentally in the era of democratic revolution across Europe. As Peter Brooks insists, this drama was characterized by an Enlightenment epistemology and was in fact an epistemological drama: The story ends when all is revealed. Lost documents and errant witnesses reappear; heroes have a talky confrontation with the villain in which the villain explains all, and so on. Nothing is left unclear, ambiguous, complex, or ironic.²

By the middle of that century, there were countless versions of liberal reform melodrama as well, targeting specific social evils (slavery, alcohol, unbelief, disease, poverty, sexual exploitation, corruption). These also typically personified the evil following a logic similar to white hat/black hat melodrama, albeit more focused on the suffering of the victim and the villainy of perpetrators, rather than the crusade of the hero. This influenced the emergence of social realism in other forms, such as the novel and magazine story. As print culture exploded into a mass culture, whole-book jeremiads and weekly journals devoted to a melodramatic exposition of social life became the glue through which reform groups worked out solidarity and strategy. Groups often translated their rhetoric into creative, strategic and tactical form, including wildly popular dramas and the invented traditions of reform groups. Early film preserves the melodramatic rhetoric and melodramatic ambition in its stagiest form, but our contemporary films, especially blockbusters, retain melodramatic plots little changed in two centuries.

So, too, is our political speech. It's hard to deny the overwhelmingly melodramatic character of contemporary U.S. politics with our "Wars" on drugs, sexual violence, and illiteracy, not to mention our actual wars "on Evil," against an "Evil Empire," an "Axis of Evil," against "Terror," and so on. This kind of political speech is a big fat target for liberal critics, who condemn politicians using this grammar on the shaky ground that melodrama is a bad rhetoric.³

That is to say: It's shaky ground for liberals because they are just as likely to approve melodramatic rhetoric against social evils, such as breast cancer, mass incarceration, or—climate change.

Interestingly, the debate on Klein zeroes in on the melodramatic aspects of her rhetoric. Some think melodramatic rhetoric can be good; others find it almost irredeemably bad. (See what I did there? Liberal critics of melodrama's "bad rhetoric" are using melodrama's own binarism themselves.) Herndl claims Klein's book "embraces an absolutist political and moral logic marked by self-certainty, ideological and political purity, and a willingness to condemn those who embrace less radical practice." Ouch. This critique sounds exactly like the DNC's assault on first Sanders and then Stein voters. Herndl's terms are richly referential to contemporary political discourse, referencing the Clinton camp's philosophy ("The Best is the Enemy of the Good"). His language is intentionally provocative, at least to the actual left, and judgmental, while complaining the same of Klein. Perhaps unintentionally, Herndl's arguments embody liberal contempt for the global majority to the left. To liberals, the left is "absolutist," self-righteous, "divisive" and contemptuous of "less radical practice." Rhetoric like this is everyday straw-man, delivering the mass-mediated and highly political message that *anybody to the left of me personally unreasonably demands purity, so my position is reasonable, therefore correct*. When Herndl and others claim left-melodramatic language "reduces wicked problems to clear moral choices," their base concern is that this language might fail to persuade and "alienate all but the faithful." These worries, however sincere, are refuted by the vast majority of actual human discourse.

Admitting that this epideictic rhetoric works fine for solidarity among activists, Herndl finds it inadequate to any practical purpose because, as he sees it, left rhetoric is cruel and disparaging: Klein's "rhetoric of immoderation," he says, "ridicules moderate or 'reasonable' policies." What is most frustrating about this argument is that it tries to meet Klein in the era that inspires her book, the U.S. mid-19th century moment of impending civil war, of reform melodrama, intemperate rhetoric against intemperance, and a vast network of social-change oriented voluntary associations. Sure, these activists used rhetorics of "reasonability" and "compromise," but not to the exclusion of more provocative acts and claims. Acting up in public is how those associations made change. There were indeed plenty of bourgeois opinionators, what Herndl dubs a stable full of "inside critics," pitching woo to "average citizens" skeptical of immoderate rhetorics. But these clerics and essayists are generally understood to have tried to co-opt movements in the interest of social control. By contrast,

actual change makers went out after citizens, sold them on social change with immoderate rhetoric, and made public spectacles of themselves, going outside in parades, mass meetings, sing-alongs, radical theater, and arguing with the era's Naomi Kleins standing on soapboxes. Like Karl Marx, the typical utterance of the age was a manifesto, and nearly all the manifestos of the era were woven throughout with references to the contemporary melodramatic stage.

Cintron addresses the manifesto character of Klein's book, criticizing its hyperbole and spontaneism regarding people power, all in terms that call up the melodramatic tableau, the moment where actors freeze in frame to signify an over-welling cup of meaning, ie, ta-da, a realization: "This changes everything!" *You have nothing to lose but your chains!* In response, he offers a compelling discussion of contemporary modes of accumulation (similar to the autonomists' "social factory") justifying a more radical demand than Klein. Cintron demands not just a socialist "resource commons" but instead a social arrangement flowing from the understanding that all wealth emerges from an "unlimited commons" comprised of countless forms of emotional, intellectual, creative, reproductive, and indeed all forms of human effort. His embrace of the contemporary Marxist "social factory" concept, however, puts his arguments a bit closer than he might prefer to the melodramatic imaginary of the Communist manifesto. Indeed, some might say the radicalism of Cintron's proposal flows from the line of theory emerging from 1970s "power" movements, particularly the revolutionary feminism of Federici, James, and Dalla Costa and the "Wages for Housework" campaign, later elaborated by Angela Davis and others.

Condit has an interesting argument. She pits intersectionality against melodrama, claiming that "purity" is not an inclusive "virtue," actually driving people away from making common cause. She casts melodramatic rhetoric as a seductive, "emotionally attractive" register because it represents an evil "them" against a virtuous "us," but in accepting that appeal, she argues, we are duped. She is concerned in particular when Klein issues the provocative claim that certain large environmental organizations are "the enemy." To be fair, however, Condit doesn't consider all the ways many such organizations fail their mission—despite offering the reason and moderation that Condit and Herndl find persuasive. What's particularly useful in Condit's contribution is her clear-eyed comprehension of all the ways melodrama can work to seduce us into false binaries.

But isn't this binarism tactically useful? Isn't it a strategic achievement for the voiceless to "name an enemy"? It worked for Marx—in part because he understood a fundamental real-world binary between capital and labor. Those of us who deny this real binary belong to that special, mediating (not middle) class, anywhere from 10–20% of the population. We are those who feel we are neither capital nor labor, generally as salaried or modestly entrepreneurial professionals and managers, i.e., the Ehrenreichs' "professional managerial class." As Gramsci intuited, most persons of the PMC are equally able to work for one side or the other, and can enter the intellectual workforce by rising from labor or stooping from capital, choosing an enjoyable occupation without needing to get much pay for the privilege. The third way into the PMC is by the earnest, often panicked PMC class reproducing itself, which for the Ehrenreichs explains the PMC fanaticism regarding education, since the PMC rarely accumulates enough capital quickly enough to render their children first-generation capitalists. To have a chance to join the class of their parents, the children must strive, early and well. The PMC's signature structure of feeling therefore, observe the Ehrenreichs, is a continuous fear of their children "falling" out of the class. (More recently, with the rise of managed professionalism, professionals such as academics risk falling out of the PMC themselves.)

I read Condit as making the truly essential point that the "elites" include the 10–20% of global elite consumers of goods, culture and education, meaning professionals, scientists and managers. She is right to point out our culpability and the sense, in Bruce Robbins' term, that we global elites are the "beneficiary" of an unjust global system. By the same token, Condit and Robbins both observe that the wealth and privilege of at least some beneficiaries enable them to act against injustice, perhaps even the very injustice that elevated them to comfort and privilege. This would make them PMC or capitalist "class traitors," in Gramsci's sense. Nonetheless class treason by individuals in the working class is far more common. Either by entrepreneurship or education, by striving to enter at least the professional-managerial or petit bourgeois class, these workers become contained and confused, and become agents of containment and confusion themselves.

My concern with some moments of "de-binarizing" and substituting instead a proliferative rhetoric of inclusion and intersection is that sometimes *it's the binary that's being hidden*. Proliferations of readings, but within narrowly circumscribed borders of what's

“reasonable,” is precisely the form of discursive control that Chomsky warned us about: Have an opinion, any opinion, but don’t color outside the clearly marked lines (watch American newscasters choke on the word “socialism,” much less use it properly in a sentence). Condit is trying to have her Zizek along with Laclau and Mouffe. Hoping for One Big Tactical Intersection would be hoping for a totalitarian moment, except that Condit echoes Herndl in leaving a lot of people behind, hoping as she says to highlight “intersections that are good for most of us, even if they don’t offer us the emotional zing of perfection”: “though they are emotionally attractive for her readership because they effectively deploy a familiar account of an evil “them” (elites of various sorts, but especially “big” corporations, big environmental groups, and big technologies) against “us” (represented as small, cooperative groups, even specifically “tribal” communes). The story feels virtuous because our rhetorical predispositions tell us that such purity is a maximal virtue, but these stories lack virtue because they drive us away from the intersections at which any inclusive version of virtue can be found.

Actually, the melodrama works inclusively because, like Napoleon, the “new man” of action and personal worth, melodrama’s hero and/or victim capaciously invite identification with the broadest human experiences: the shared experience of victimization, exploitation, contempt from our rulers, lies from our judges, and disappointment in actual existing social relations.

Walsh explores the tension surrounding the “god trick” of synoptic global climate science and its sudden (jeremiadic) discovery of climate change, acknowledging both the utility and the failings of taking a “global” view (not least because what counts as global depends on power, privilege and perspective, a la Foucault and others). Like Zizek, she recognizes that any claim to totality is contingent on the excluded remainder—those the Inside has left unconsidered, rejected, forgotten or unwilling to see. Zizek argues that any total view is in a way constituted by that remainder (because the Outside can be said to give shape to the Inside), and therefore that the most persuasive totalizing justice claims emerge from Outside. Walsh’s argument is similar, directly confronting the “cosmic incommensurabilities” between the global In and global Out, presenting evidence for the utility of tactical bridging moments, even in their instability and fragility, “folding” the perspectives of In and Out into a new dimension.

From my perspective, Walsh’s critique of Western rhetorics of science captures the delicate problem of melodramatic rhetoric. The

Enlightenment-era ambition of both science and melodrama is the projection of clarity and truth-telling. It is simply factual to observe that the feeling of “knowledge revealed!” appeals to the most broadly shared human experience, of lies, betrayal and obfuscation—the fibs and fantasies emerging from our most trusted priests, professors, politicians, and other executive storytellers. Our professionals and managers are paid to elevate the lawyerly New Critical values of irony, complexity and ambiguity. But when everyone in authority is gaslighting you with their clever ambiguities, ironic detachment and insurmountable complexity, you just might prefer the directness of Zola to Henry James’ reverential ambling about in bourgeois drawing rooms.

What theory tried to tell us was that the New Criticism and the public rhetoric it produces hasn’t been liberatory; it has been and remains, instead, a velvet trap, the unfelt swaddling of deep ideology, the manufacturing of values that Can’t Be Questioned, like civility. Ultimately, the New Criticism is training in the complicit approach to language of the PMC, an approach designed to befuddle the majority, entrapping most of us in word-cages crafted to benefit the PMC’s employers.

Like Jonathan Alexander, I would single out the contributions of Welch, Scott, Eberly and Ackerman as more sympathetic with Klein’s rhetorical choices. Welch and Scott are blistering in their response to compulsory centrism, carceral civility and appeals to “moderation,” all of which they argue weaken democracy. (And, I would add, empower authoritarian liberals of the sort who approve of “free speech” enclosures surrounded by water cannon, rather than direct public rhetoric leading to direct public action). Eberly catches the melodramatic heritage of our press nicely, celebrating the power to shine the limelight on our sneering, well-fed and officially-garbed villains. And as Ackerman argues, we get to tell stories the way we need, in our circumstances. For most of humanity, the odd people who feel that there is no villain in the story aren’t paying attention. For most of us there is indeed a villain and its name is Capital.

The best of melodrama insists on the reality of victimization, and the threat represented by a common enemy. That can be an explosive, easily abused set of powers, as in propaganda and hate speech, as several contributors have hastened to point out.

Nonetheless melodramatic rhetoric is popular, not for its potential defects, but for its actual virtues. Especially this one: Against all the institutional powers of school, police, politics, churches, profes-

sional and managers—the power to render reality, law, and principle unclear, ironic and ambiguous—melodrama makes intersectionality work with its most fundamental act of clarification, the naming of a common enemy. Kelly tasks Klein with Hannah Arendt and Krista Ratcliffe, insisting that human relations are, basically, unclear and ambiguous, and that rhetoric should proceed from listening (Ratcliffe and Lyon) and the fundamental need to find ways to live together (Arendt). All of this, echoing several others, Kelly correctly observes, is a larger, richer view of rhetoric than that performed by Klein.

But Klein isn't the movement, or its only voice. She performs a rhetoric needed by many, one that creates solidarity, firms purpose, opens eyes, provokes debate, inspires imitation and invention, and teaches direct action—"Blockadia"—in clear, straightforward prose. She clarifies the situation and its stakes, pushing through the complicit, self-serving rhetorical subtlety of, say, Clinton Democrats, to announce instead: *The Revolution Wants You*.

In my view, likely shared by many others in this issue: Klein plays one instrument in the movement's orchestra. But she plays it like Sarah Chang plays the violin.

When David Downing took up *Works and Days* in 1984, it was in a spirit of commonality with those who "got" theory but didn't make their reputations "doing" it, whatever that means, and who above all cared about the world outside their words, how their words might empower them to slay actual dragons. The journal was simultaneously in the orbit of critical pedagogy, British cultural studies, and the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE). All places, not incidentally, among the few where the study of literature and culture as a historical, material artifact met up with leading scholars of rhetoric and communication. This is abundantly true of this issue and has generated a lively discussion of Klein's provocation. Provocation, I imagine, is her aim, after all: If you argue with her, she has already won. Emerging from a scholar-activist event in which both strategy and tactics are up for debate, in the hope of making common cause where the stakes for humanity are highest, Cathy Chaput has put together a volume that is both typical of the journal and a tribute to it.

What Downing calls the "Black Series," the second period of the journal, is organized like Zola's oeuvre or, if you like, the five seasons of *The Wire*, with every issue a special issue devoted to one social evil. And the final period, focusing on the failings of the academy through a richly critical university studies, was like being immersed

in all the seasons of *House of Cards*, with neoliberal administration playing Frank Underwood, the aristocratic rapist and killer behind sugary charm.

Everyone who knows Downing sees him as a calm, reasonable fellow—until he sees injustice. He gets a bit red in the face then, and a touch loud. He gestures more and his eyes widen. The camera pulls in. It likes him almost as much as Jimmy Stewart. He rolls up his sleeves and starts putting together a team to trounce the evil in question. They are often big teams, leading to big issues, because the naming of a common enemy brings so many of us together.

I will always be grateful to David Downing for calling on me. It has been an emotional and intellectual comradeship that has sustained me for a good fifteen years, and will, I suspect, last the rest of my career. Think of all the big teams he's fielded for those outsized issues, and you have the kind of impresario that comes just a few times in a generation. Salut, David Downing, and solidarity, fellow traveler.

Notes

¹ Bousquet, Marc. "Harry Potter, the 'War Against Evil,' and the Melodrama of Public Culture." In Elizabeth Heilman, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*. 2nd edition: Routledge, 2008: 177-195.

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Elisabeth Robin Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*. Raleigh-Durham: Duke UP, 2014.

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