

(Un)Frozen expressions: Melodramatic moment, affective interval, and the transformative powers of experimental cinema

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The Czech philosopher Karel Thein once said, with regard to the expressive features of Pedro Almodovar's film *Todo sobre mi madre* (All About My Mother, 1999), that in melodrama, 'a second lasts a lifetime, a minute is eternity'.^[1] While the term melodrama is used in so many different contexts and with so many different meanings that it becomes nearly impossible to bind it to a discrete genre, or even a coherent set of stylistic and narrative features, the melodramatic mode of expression remains intuitively recognisable. From soap operas to Dostoyevsky's novels, from boulevard theatres to grand opera houses, from live performances to YouTube supercuts, a distinct kind of expressive situation is clearly discernible – a scene of passionate suffering when the plot breaks down and freezes in a static and symbolic arrangement, a scene in which the figures are overwhelmed with emotion and unable to properly react, a moment that may seem relatively brief in terms of narrative content yet is pregnant with emotional meaning.

Despite the multitude of forms it can acquire, this model situation presents a configuration that is, among other things, distinctive for its art of temporal compression. Exaggerated gestures and signifiers of passionate longing are arrested in motion but also strangely prolonged, thereby drawing attention to the fundamental tension between the all-prevailing expression and its spatiotemporal constraints, between desire and its inevitable repression. Laura Mulvey spoke about melodrama's penchant for 'frozen moments',^[2]

yet if this frozen quality is indeed essential for typical melodramatic scenes, the aforementioned tensions are capable of stretching these moments, opening them towards internal bifurcations. Such ‘melodramatic moments’ pose a peculiar aesthetic problem, especially concerning the relationship between emotional expression, temporality, and film form, which demands further attention.

Melodramatic moments are generally shaped by formal and expressive elements that could be described under the umbrella term ‘melodramatic excess’. This term builds upon the tradition of the ‘melodramatic mode’ envisioned by the literary scholar Peter Brooks in the 1970s[3] and continues to be frequently applied and reinterpreted in film and media theory to this day.[4] Crucially, the melodramatic mode, which employs ‘polarisation and hyperdramatisation’ to express the underlying conflict of spiritual forces masked by the surface reality of the ‘post-sacred era’,[5] is also described as a ‘mode of excess’ that entails a ‘wide repertory of expressive features’.[6] It is debatable whether this repertory applies to all types and varieties of melodrama – there are certainly some incongruities between melodramatic form and melodramatic content, or melodramatic *mise-en-scène* and melodramatic narration – but when it comes to the melodramatic moments, such an arsenal of features (however variable) is clearly noticeable.

Stylistic features such as tortured tableaux, hyperbolic gestures, inarticulate cries, emotionally saturated *mise-en-scène*, and plaintive music are designed to concentrate the highest possible amount of emotional meaning into the shortest possible temporal unit. These moments primarily serve to produce a distinctive emotional response from the audience, enable identification with the suffering characters, and make the development and message of the story more understandable. But what if they functioned as an end in themselves? What if the melodramatic moments did not only represent a heart-wrenching pause amidst the narrative development, but also explored how their frozenness could be further developed, or even transformed?

It could be argued that the melodramatic form of expression, predominantly associated with popular art and mass culture, is too straightforward and transparent to carry such aesthetic potential. After all, the melodramatic excess is primarily aimed at expressing internal emotional states (e.g. suffering and pathos) in an unambiguous, recognisable, and therefore highly conventionalised way.[7] Nevertheless, to quote Henri Bergson: ‘things are never defined by their primitive state, but by the tendency concealed in this state’.[8] Melodramatic expression’s capacity to freeze time in a moment that is both

transitional and pregnant with meaning holds great creative potential, which has been exploited not only by such canonical masters of melodrama as Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, or Vincente Minnelli but also, arguably in a more extreme manner, by many arthouse and experimental filmmakers and video artists.

Arthouse icons such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Lars von Trier, or Wong Kar-wai, experimental filmmakers including Kenneth Anger, Carmelo Bene, or Werner Schroeter, as well as multimedia artists like Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood, or Matthias Müller employed melodramatic moments to construct complex tableauxed spaces, ritualistic narratives, and media paradoxes. Instead of merely subverting, parodying, or deconstructing melodrama, they sided with the 'enemy' and pushed the logic of melodramatic expression to its most radical conclusion, affirming Jean Genet's statement that 'to achieve harmony in bad taste is the height of elegance'.[9]

Among other things, these experimental artists often aim to unfold the peculiar temporality for which melodramatic moments are known. For example, the opening sequence of Werner Schroeter's *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (The Death of Maria Malibran, 1971) presents stylised and excruciatingly slowly animated *tableaux vivants* in which (mostly female) figures keep moving incrementally closer to each other as if they were about to embrace and kiss, although their bodies never touch.[10] These moments of unfulfillable, yet strangely fascinating pathos evoke many emblematic melodramatic scenes, familiar from early sentimental theatre through Romantic opera to silent film melodrama, but as the hyperbolic gestures are never explained or fully realised, the emotional expression becomes more ambiguous and nuanced. Here emerges something that I call the 'affective interval', a temporal gap in which the emotional expression emerges or disappears, multiplies or dissolves, exceeds or loses its meaning to generate affective surplus.

The notion of the affective interval obviously communicates with the findings of contemporary affect theory, particularly those that are informed by Deleuzian and/or phenomenological perspectives.[11] Nevertheless, to capture the various subtleties of affective manifestations in the film form, the concept will be defined in terms of what it entails rather than what it resists, disrupts, or enchants.[12] In the context of experimental film and video variations on melodrama, the term affective interval will allow us to examine the different processes and transformations that can emerge when the frozen moment is extended or dilated and which formal operations give rise to these changes. The term 'affect' is thus understood as something that precedes or

exceeds the emotional sign, but also as something that is clearly anchored in a distinctive (in this case melodramatic) aesthetic, which, despite the ongoing estranging processes, remains recognisable.

Thinking in these terms, a certain ‘two-way movement’ between melodrama and experimental cinema, or more specifically between the melodramatic moment and the affective interval, becomes discernible. On the one hand, various experimental films unveil the affective interval within the melodramatic moments, making way for all the paradoxical micro-movements and micro-operations that emerge in between recognisable expressions. On the other, through this interplay between the estranging and the familiar, the cinematic affect, often defined as something that eludes form,[13] achieves a specific melodramatic variation. This paper aims to show how this two-way movement works and the new insights it can bring for affect studies and their application in film theory, as well as for studies of the melodramatic mode.

The double temporality of desire

In his renowned study ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’ (1972), Thomas Elsaesser briefly mentions a sequence from Minnelli’s melodrama *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962) in which ‘Glenn Ford and Ingrid Thulin go for a ride to Versailles, but which in fact tells and foretells the whole trajectory of their relationship’.[14] This sequence presents a typical instance of the melodramatic compression of lived time: the most important feelings, actions, conflicts, and events are condensed into a short but expressive situation, and everything that aims to move the plot forward is suddenly foreclosed. The championing of such situations is consistently cited as one of the characteristic features of melodrama. Ben Singer, following Lea Jacobs,[15] refers to the capacity of the melodramatic situation to ‘momentarily arrest narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance’ which results in ‘a dramatic impasse, a momentary paralysis’ that ‘constrains the protagonist’s ability to respond immediately’.[16]

These standard situations can be distinguished from other types of narratives by the privileging of emotions, primarily suffering and pathos, which represent an end in themselves. According to Julian Hanich and Winfried Menninghaus, a stereotypical ‘scene of pathos’ that ‘focuses on the protagonist’s suffering’ is ‘primarily tailored to produce emotional effects in the viewer’, but ‘could well be dispensed with in terms of narrative economy’.[17]

Of course, this focus on emotional excess is not exclusive to melodramatic sensibility, as it appears in other emotion-oriented genres (e.g. horror) or modes (e.g. tragedy); however, melodramatic situations are distinctive for the tension they establish between desire and its repression.[18] Characters find themselves in situations that do not allow them to act the way they wish, due to social, psychological, or discursive obstacles, and the direct or indirect expression of pathos presents the only way out. This paradoxical logic nevertheless entails a utopian dimension: in its 'too late-ness'[19] it enables the viewer to imagine a scenario in which absolute self-expression would have been realisable, given the right circumstances.

What most of these accounts fail to mention are the temporal characteristics of the melodramatic situation – we learn how it necessitates a halt in the narrative progress, but not how the situation functions when such a halt actually happens. Regardless of whether we are speaking about Sjöström's silent melodramas or modern blockbusters such as *The Great Gatsby* (Joe Wright, 2012), fast-paced action melodramas of the 1910s or the nearly static family melodramas of Vincente Minnelli (e.g. *Some Came Running*, 1958), classical Hollywood melodramas or melodramas shaped by different national traditions (German, Italian, Russian, etc.), or indeed whether we talk about genre melodramas per se or about all films which contain melodramatic situations – the melodramatic moment always entails a discrete duration. When Laura Mulvey states that melodrama privileges 'frozen moments',[20] she does not merely speak about its ability to stop the narrative flow, she also emphasises how such moments make visible key meanings that 'could not have been perceived when hidden under the narrative flow and the movement of film',[21] and, crucially, how they demand to be delayed and stretched out in order to reveal these meanings.[22]

This frozen quality of melodramatic moments manifests itself even in the most 'low-brow' or 'primitive' forms of melodrama such as soap operas. For example, Michael Robinson's found footage experiment *The Dark, Krystle* (2013) presents a montage of key gestures and situations from the television show *Dynasty* (1981-1989). Emotionally and semantically pregnant moments, such as Krystle's crying or Alexis' drinking, are subjected to endless repetition and decontextualisation, which does not merely deconstruct the illusory power of the images[23] but reveals their double nature, or double temporality. On the one hand, the isolated images lose their capacity to make the audience identify with the characters and become immersed into their fictional world, on the other, the process of slowing-down, freezing, and repeating the

images makes these moments stand out as fleeting signifiers of passion that still resonate within the collective memory attached to the show. This double-edged process of extraction and fetishisation expands the gap between the historical context from which the images emerged and the utopian promise of all-prevailing expression – the stuff which melodramatic situations are made of.



Fig. 1: The Dark, Krystle (Michael Robinson, 2013), courtesy of Video Data Bank.

Furthermore, melodramatic moments do not have to be associated only with stillness. As we watch the expressive moment emerge, we begin to discern how different components of the image interact with each other to produce the desired emotional effect in the viewer. What Hermann Kappelhoff, following anthropologist Helmuth Plessner, terms the ‘expressive movement’ accentuates how the coding and decoding of meanings is dependent on the temporal unfolding of the scene, on the way emotions are gradually distributed by means of stylistic features.[24] The spatiotemporal configuration that encloses these operations while also allowing their centripetal and centrifugal movements to shine through usually includes the close-up, the montage sequence, or most typically the tableau. *Tableaux vivants*, which are functionally related to the melodramatic situations from the days of popular musical and theatrical melodramas of the late eighteenth century[25] and prevailed into the era of early silent cinema,[26] not only present an effective ‘visual sum-

mary of an emotional situation'[27] but also expose how this emotional situation comes into being and conserves itself in time. Paul Coates spoke about the 'apocalyptic desire to halt time in its stride', which 'reveals the [melodramatic] form's essential stasis', forever enclosed in the space of innocence.[28]



Fig. 2: *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), courtesy of Universal Pictures.

Nevertheless, this struggle to preserve the idealised moment of fulfilled desire is often ambiguous: either the tableau is framed in a way that emphasises the inevitable limits of this endeavour, or it is shown as riddled with contradictory processes and movements that bring forth the transient nature of this moment. Consider the final scene of Douglas Sirk's film *Written on the Wind* (1956) in which Marylee, the self-destructive nymphomaniac daughter of a Texas oil baron, mourns the death of her brother and her unrequited love for Mitch in her father's former office. The camera depicts her as she slowly caresses a phallic oil-rig sculpture, while her father metaphorically watches over her from a giant portrait. Nowadays, the symbolic meaning of the tableau looks quite straightforward, but the scene also presents a poignant example of the double temporality of melodrama. The repetitive movement of Marylee's fingers, clinging to the only thing that remains from the family's ideal image, expresses the desire to freeze the strangely tender moment and preserve its fetishistic quality, while the static portrait of her father – a frame-within-a-frame – reminds us that the figure who embodied this moment of plenitude now maintains only a spectral presence. Consequently, this *tableau vivant* sums up not only the whole film but also the very logic of melodramatic 'endless time'. [29]

Melodrama's double temporality therefore poses a distinctive aesthetic paradox – how to reconcile the frozen quality of melodramatic moments with the utopian hope of transcendent expression, or alternatively, how to relate the desire to preserve moments of plenitude to the knowledge that even such moments eventually become ruins. The demand of this double logic to be further developed, submitted to even more extensive slowing-down, freezing, and repetition, has been answered by certain experimental artists, who approached the problem less metaphorically, with regards to specific bodies and movements, and more phenomenologically, with regards to the affective possibilities of the temporal gap itself. However, to analyse their creative contribution to the melodramatic paradox, it is first necessary to develop a theoretical concept that would encapsulate the many ways in which the melodramatic moment could be transformed.

The affective interval

When Anne Rutherford, one of the chief exponents of the 'affective turn' in film theory,[30] looked for precursors to her 'energetic understanding of *mise en scène*', she inevitably turned to Elsaesser's aforementioned classic text on family melodrama.[31] She understands Elsaesser's notion of the 'dynamic use of spatial and musical categories as opposed to intellectual and literary ones'[32] perhaps too simplistically, 'as a material, affective counterpoint to the linear, meaning-producing structures of language'.[33] Nevertheless, this link between melodramatic excess, energetic *mise-en-scène*, and affect offers many research opportunities: not only for the analysis and interpretation of film style but also for the investigation of melodramatic moments. As Rutherford emphasises, energetic *mise-en-scène* is 'clearly a temporal, performative notion',[34] which enables us to perceive filmic space not merely as a sum of its parts, but as an expressive event emerging through the interaction of various elements and operations.

The famous sequence from *Written on the Wind*, in which Marylee dances furiously in her room while her father approaches his death on a staircase, demonstrates how the energetic *mise-en-scène* works in practice. An impressive analysis of this 'dance of death' scene by Elena del Rio, another film theorist associated with the affective turn, demonstrates how the combination of accelerated montage, a fierce jazz score, the colour symbolism of Marylee's red dress, and her performative, dancing body makes the heroine's

revolt against patriarchal power dissolve into a Dionysian spectacle which blurs the boundaries between bodies, *mise-en-scène*, and objects.[35] However, this stylistic spectacle is also a function of two distinctive temporal modes – the frenetic, gradually escalating movement of Marylee, resulting in her body becoming a flux of red stains, and her father’s discontinuous shambling, ending in his fall from the stairs and agonising death – and although these two modes are interrelated via montage, it is precisely the distance between them that constitutes a gap from which the affects of the sequence emerge. This gap represents one of the many possible instances of what I will call the affective interval.



Fig. 3: *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), courtesy of Universal Pictures.

The association of affect with some sort of gap, with something that ‘arises in the midst of inbetween-ness’,[36] is of course nothing new. When Gilles Deleuze, one of the most influential figures for contemporary affect theory, followed up on Baruch Spinoza’s theory of affects in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1970), he distinguished ‘affection’ (*affectio*), which ‘refers to the state of the affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body’, from ‘affect’ (*affectus*), which ‘refers to a passage from one state to another, taking into account the correlative variation of the affecting bodies’.[37] Crucially, he defines this ‘passage’ in terms of the temporal duration that attaches affections, images, or ideas to the preceding state and makes them tend towards the next state: affects are ‘these continual durations or variations of perfection’.[38]



Fig. 4: *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), courtesy of Universal Pictures.

Philosophers of affect such as Brian Massumi, Mark B.N. Hansen, Steven Shaviro, or Marie-Luise Angerer highlighted (each in their own way) this processual and transitive quality of affects.[39] Notably, Massumi states that affect is something which ‘happens too quickly to have happened’,[40] and therefore it is not possible to conceive of according to traditional spatiotemporal categories. For this reason, he develops the notion of the ‘in-between’, or the ‘missing half-second’. Inspired by Benjamin Libet’s cognitive-psychological experiment from the 1960s,[41] Massumi claims that between the beginning of a bodily event and its completion in an outwardly directed, active expression, there is a ‘half-second lapse’.[42] Conclusively, he states that the ‘half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action and of its ascribed meaning’.[43]

While Massumi’s ideas are (often rightfully) criticised for their insufficient scientific merit or for the way he divorces affects from any form of signification,[44] the notion of the in-between can be particularly fruitful when applied ‘subversively’ to the way art dilates or extends emotionally pregnant moments. Whereas ‘natural’ perception does not allow us to capture the affective process in all of its complexity, precisely because it ‘happens too quickly to have happened’, certain art forms (not restricted to the ‘occurent arts’)[45] offer mechanisms to stretch the missing half-second and make it reveal its nuances. For the purpose of unveiling the potential of melodramatic moments, we must look beyond the tendencies to identify affective experience with spontaneous or immediate bodily reactions or with some

magical, elusive force flowing between bodies and objects. Instead, it is necessary to uncover what it is that these in-between moments actually entail and how can they be related to the melodramatic form of expression and its variations.

First, the affective interval involves (not necessarily human) bodies that are entangled in a distinctive expressive event which overwhelms them to the point of passivity but at the same time provokes certain bodily responses that are continually forming or deforming themselves without fully taking shape. As we already know from Massumi, this situation constitutes a temporal lag, disruption, or excess; nevertheless, in his language of never-ending flux and becoming it is not entirely clear what exactly is being lagged, disrupted, or exceeded or what kind of experience is taking place in this process. Here, the notion of 'diastasis', taken from a perspective of Bernhard Waldenfels' 'responsive phenomenology',^[46] serves as a useful supplement. Diastasis represents a 'temporal shift' that 'emerges from the antecedence of pathos and deferment of response', a 'jetlag of sorts' that binds these dimensions of experience to one another.^[47] In other words, the affective interval, and the bodily changes it brings forth, is constituted by the heterochrony of pathos, which always comes too early, and response, which always comes too late. Waldenfels' shift towards pathos and suffering also underscores the possible alignment of the affective interval with melodramatic moments, enabling them to incorporate not only the exteriorisation of isolated feelings but also diverse micro-variations which occur in between and testify to the transformative power of passion.

Second, the affective interval is not uniform or static, but involves a plurality of different durations. Again, although the temporal lag subverts linear continuity, it does not merely halt the course of events – on the contrary, it unleashes the differential qualities of the expressive event. There is a well-known example of such a phenomenon in Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907): when he waits impatiently until sugar dissolves in water, he lives the difference between his own rhythm and that of the sugar.^[48] As Deleuze highlights in his interpretation of this scene, it is not only a question of psychological vs. physical time: we discover that sugar, as well as other entities involved, has its own being in time, its own rhythm, which 'differs not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself'.^[49] In the affective experience, this kind of temporal multiplicity can manifest itself through the way bodies are inscribed with 'traces of past actions and their contexts',^[50] or, with a partic-

ular resonance to melodramatic moments, through the juxtaposition of different rhythms and speeds. Instead of associating the affective interval with either the deceleration or acceleration of a single, 'natural' time, it would be more appropriate to emphasise the simultaneity of differential durations that pertains to bodies, their fragments, and the spaces in between. In this manner, even a standardised theatrical gesture of suffering can disclose a subliminal interplay of speed and slowness.

Third, the affective interval does not suddenly emerge only to fade away a half-second later – it continues to recur. As Massumi puts it, with an obvious reference to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968), 'the logic of affect is entirely bound up with the logic of serial repetition and difference': like all event-factors, it can be 'repeated, reactivated, it can rearise, but always anew'.^[51] Even though the processual quality of affects prevents them from being fully actualised in social reality, there always remains an excess with the capacity to resonate further, to undergo further repetition and variation without gaining a distinctive identity. Still, there should be a way for this excess to be defined positively, to describe what exactly is being repeated and differentiated. One term that could be applied is 'liminality', a concept championed by anthropologist Victor Turner. This term describes a transitory phase in which the subjects partaking in the ritual enter into an extraordinary state and 'new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted'.^[52] Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman portray this notion in a way that is notably similar to the definition of the affective interval. For them, liminality designates a phase 'marked off by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday'.^[53] Furthermore, they emphasise that liminality offers a 'means of describing the shape of affective experience', thereby enabling us to see how affective experiences are 'plastic' – 'not only taking form, but giving it as well'.^[54] Thinking in terms of melodramatic expression – repetitive to the point of becoming conventional, yet saying 'too much to be born' and saying 'too much in being born'^[55] – liminal excess is that little difference that arises in the process of bringing these repetitions into play.

These three distinct features of the affective interval often manifest themselves in artistic practice, particularly in installations and performances that accentuate duration and bodily relationality. Like-minded experiments with a melodramatic tinge are also not as rare as they might seem – see, for example, Bill Viola's video installation *Quintet of the Astonished* (2000). This

work employs extreme slow-motion to reveal affective transitions between five major ‘negative’ emotions and their circulation between five figures, to capture the ‘steps in between’ which ‘the Old Masters did not paint’.[56] Nevertheless, the marriage between the affective interval and the melodramatic moment is perhaps most visible in certain strands of experimental cinema from the 1960s and 1970s, notably in films that privileged stylistic excess and bodily pathos. The aforementioned film *The Death of Maria Malibran* by Werner Schroeter will serve as a case study.



Fig. 5: Quintet of the Astonished (Bill Viola, 2000), courtesy of Bill Viola & The Getty Center.

Between the ‘not yet’ and the ‘no longer’

‘When people accuse me of being melodramatic, I always say that to me, melodrama is first and foremost a form of opera.’[57] The German film, theatre, and opera director Werner Schroeter often emphasised that his inclination towards melodramatic moments in his works derives primarily from his love of opera as a medium. Such an affection for opera was also significant for many of his artistic contemporaries, be it for fellow filmmakers of the New German Cinema (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Daniel Schmid, or Hans-Jürgen Syberberg) or for like-minded experimental queer directors (Kenneth Anger, Carmelo Bene, or Derek Jarman), but Schroeter was particularly interested in opera’s quality of being ‘the craziest and most exaggerated form of expression’.[58] Crucially, Schroeter relates this uncontrolled expression of insufferable passion verging on death to the question of temporality. Ecstatic arias

sung by the famous diva Maria Callas, his muse and life-long obsession, ‘demonstrate nothing other than the need to halt the march of time’, and ‘could make time still so long that all fear vanished, even that of death’.[59] In the case of films such as *Eika Katappa* (1969) and especially *The Death of Maria Malibran*, Schroeter employs these pregnant moments in a manner that accentuates not only their ability to make time stand still but also their inevitable transience, as their transcendent beauty is always ‘laden with a sense of loss and mortality’ when ‘the performance of singing is over’.[60] At the same time, the way he combines excessive stylistic features of film, opera, and performance art further complicates this paradox, thereby making it all the more fascinating.



Fig. 6: *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (Werner Schroeter, 1971), courtesy of Edition Film-museum / Film und Kunst GmbH.

Consider the opening sequence of *tableaux vivants* from *The Death of Maria Malibran*. We see expressively lit and heavily made up (usually female) bodies in shiny costumes emerging from dark, flat backgrounds, accompanied by the sounds of Brahms’ *Alto Rhapsody* with verses from Goethe’s *Harzreise im Winter* (Winter Journey in the Harz): ‘Ach wer heilet die Schmerzen / O, who will heal the pain ...’. Each of the shots portray these unspecified characters in search of intimate contact that is never fully realised: bodies are condemned to a perpetual process of approaching and withdrawing from each other, with expressions lacking origin or resolution, gestures and looks without reciprocation. The melodramatic frozen moment is extended, distilled, and slowed

down even further in order to let the normally imperceptible micro-operations between bodies, or more precisely between bodily fragments (lips, eyes, hands), stand out. Thus, we can perceive how even recognisable gestures of passion are becoming estranged and uncanny while waiting to be actualised, and how these movements involve not only mutual desire but also manifold dissonances – for example, when Magdalena Montezuma slowly raises her eyes and moves her lips towards a grotesque-looking diva as if trying to kiss her, although all the diva does is open her mouth without issuing a sound. As with Waldenfels's diastasis, pathos always arrives too early to be fixed with immediate meaning, while response is principally delayed, imperfect, and discordant with its perceived object.[61] Both pathos and response therefore constitute the same event, the same interval between the 'not yet' and the 'no longer' that brings forth a differentiation of elements and relations.



Fig. 7: *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (Werner Schroeter, 1971), courtesy of Edition Film-museum / Film und Kunst GmbH.

Even if slow-motion is essential to the way the affective interval operates in these tableaux, the emergent frozen moments involve much more than a mere slowing down. When Jeff Jackson states that 'everything in these tableaux progresses so slowly that they become dreamlike',[62] he is only half right. According to Vivian Sobchack, slow-motion 'does not erase or eradicate movement' but paradoxically hyperbolises it, 'forestalling' and 'distilling' it to what seems its 'essence'.[63] Slow and fast can thus be regarded not as qualitatively opposed categories, but as relative powers of the single category of speed. In the case of *The Death of Maria Malibran*, slow motion enables the director to highlight how each component of the image – from mise-en-

scène and performing bodies to those lips, eyes, and hands – pulsates according to its own specific rhythm. The numerous ‘failed’ attempts to express affection demonstrate how even highly codified operatic gestures function only in a ‘particular relation between speed and slowness’ – when slowed down, other exchanges begin taking place.[64]

Moreover, what distinguishes Schroeter’s film from many related art-house or experimental melodramas is that the slow motion effect is not induced solely by formal and technological features but by the performing bodies as well. Whereas, for example, Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane* (1976) also uses slow motion to highlight otherwise barely discernible movements and operations of passionate bodies, *The Death of Maria Malibran* points out how bodies in states of excess can be determined not only by the slowness that is engendered by a fixed analogue camera and tableauxed space but also by a slowness immanent to the bodies themselves. The ‘dream-like’ effect of the images is all the more powerful because those barely discernible movements are performed by the actors themselves, and not slowed-down during shooting or post-production, in a manner resembling contemporary avant-garde theatre and performance art (e.g. the works of Robert Wilson such as *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* [1969]).[65] In this way, Schroeter’s cinematic *tableaux vivants* stage a dialectical tension between the media uncertainty of the frozen moment, ‘torn between the stillness of the celluloid strip and the illusion of its movement’,[66] and the instability of filmic bodies, whose auto-poietic quality is entangled with its technological determinants.

This ‘media paradox’, as Dieter Mersch would call it,[67] between bodily phenomenality, theatrical tableaux, and technological reproduction is what the affective interval brings to the melodramatic moment – and yet the film creates an impression that the potential for such paradoxes was intrinsic to it all along. The more the model situations of Romantic opera are repeated and varied, the more it appears as if those moments were never fulfilled. While many cinematic experiments with difference and repetition of pregnant moments (e.g. Andy Warhol’s *Kiss* [1963]) serve primarily to de-semanticise these images, *The Death of Maria Malibran* shows events which may never have happened in the first place. To quote Adrian Martin, in Schroeter’s films the question is ‘not whether things are happening more than once but whether they truly happened even once’.[68] With this in mind, it is obvious that when the contradictions of melodrama’s double temporality are extremised, melodramatic expression can no longer be actualised, but only revealed in its fleetingness.



Fig. 8: *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (Werner Schroeter, 1971), courtesy of Edition Film-museum / Film und Kunst GmbH.

Conclusion: Two-way movement and its benefits

The revelation of the intrinsic affinity between melodramatic moments and the affective interval, uniquely actualised in Schroeter's *The Death of Maria Malibran*, sheds new light on at least three contested theoretical problems: a) the role of affect in film studies, b) the affective potentialities of the melodramatic mode, c) the interplay between melodrama and affect in certain strands of experimental cinema.

First, affect is understood as the differential excess of emotional expression that emerges in time and involves a plurality of divergent processes, and therefore cannot be limited to its immediate effects nor to its disembodied relationality. If this concept is applied to the theory of art, specifically to film theory, it should be taken into account that the ephemeral 'real-life' experience of affect can be distilled by various stylistic modulations (e.g. slow motion). In this way, we can discover not only forms of affect in film, as Eugenie Brinkema calls for,[69] but also how specific stylistic modifications of space, bodies, and, chiefly, time make these forms emerge or disappear in the first place.

Second, the way the melodramatic mode privileges seemingly static yet pregnant situations of passionate suffering bears consequences for more than just narrative concerns. These moments are based on melodrama's fundamental paradox of unfulfillable yet fetishistically worshipped desire, and

conclusively reveal how this contradiction manifests itself in the mode's double temporality. Typical features such as tableau, slow motion, and repetition hold many aesthetic potentialities to unmask the instable and fluctuating character of melodramatic emotional expression, and thereby disclose the interval in which these variations are made visible, without denying their melodramatic heritage.

Third, this curious marriage between melodrama and affect can be exploited in many spheres of art, notably in the experimental 'cinema of the body'. Werner Schroeter, for example, staged this dialectic in terms of media paradoxes, and thereby radicalised the melodramatic logic of double temporality to the point at which melodramatic moments endlessly vary themselves yet never actually happen. Such creative methods offer numerous analytic and interpretative possibilities, not only in terms of temporality in experimental cinema but also for the way they can be infused with aesthetic influences that are often deemed low-brow or pop cultural, and conversely, how they can transform these influences into something uncanny yet still recognisable.

To further apply this 'two-way movement' between melodrama and experimental cinema, or melodramatic moment and affective interval respectively, its features would have to be adjusted to the specific research material. The examination of distinctive film and media experiments with regards to the manifestations of melodramatic excess from different historical periods would yield beneficial refinements to this model. For example, certain more recent works that straddle the border between film, video art, and performance such as Lech Majewski's *Pokój saren* (The Roe's Room, 1997), Bill Viola's *Emergence* (2002), or Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* (2014) would necessitate further rethinking of the relationship between affective interval and media paradoxes, as well as between melodramatic excess and technological mediation in general. There are also various found footage experiments with melodramatic moments, such as Matthias Müller's *Home Stories* (1990), Peter Delpout's *Diva Dolorosa* (1999), or Sami van Ingen's *Polte* (Flame, 2017), which would demand that the specific aesthetic role of film material itself and the affective potentialities of its degradation be taken into account. The possibilities are wide, and the case study of *The Death of Maria Malibran* presented here together with the whole range of 1960s and 1970s experiments with tableaux vivants, bodily performance, and melodramatic pathos certainly present unique possibilities for how the affective experience could be shaped, and also how film form itself could become affective.

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Notes

- [1] Thein 2002, p. 31.
- [2] Mulvey 2006, pp. 144-160.
- [3] Brooks 1995.
- [4] For more contemporary adaptations or revisions of the melodramatic mode, see, for example, Zarzosa 2013 or Bayman 2015.
- [5] Brooks 1995, pp. vii-xii, 11-23.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- [7] This line of criticism is most visibly pronounced in the works of Hermann Kappelhoff, who conceives melodrama as a machine to produce formalised and prefabricated emotions (but nevertheless comes up with many important notions regarding melodrama's unique relationship to temporality). See Kappelhoff 2014, pp. 243-288.
- [8] Quoted in Deleuze 1986, p. 25.
- [9] Genet 2004, p. 53.
- [10] For a poignant description of these scenes, see Jackson 2015, pp. 129-132.
- [11] The ever-growing field of contemporary affect studies involves a multitude of different approaches from various disciplines (philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, neuroscience, etc.). This paper draws mainly from the Spinozist-Deleuzian vector of affect study in the humanities (see Gregg & Seigworth 2010, pp. 5-6; Anger 2018, pp. 21-25) and also from the context of German affect and emotion studies, especially the approaches which are informed by phenomenology (see, for example Campe & Weber 2014). Regarding the specific issue of affective temporality, see Angerer & Bösel & Ott 2014.
- [12] I have formulated a critique of the negativist, vitalist, and sensualist tendencies of cinematic affect theory in Anger 2018, pp. 32-44.

- [13] The tendency to align affect with what resists form and signification was most profoundly criticised by Eugenie Brinkema. See Brinkema 2014, pp. Xii-xv.
- [14] Elsaesser 1991, p. 77.
- [15] Jacobs 1993, pp. 121-147.
- [16] Singer 2001, pp. 41-44.
- [17] Hanich & Menninghaus 2017, p. 80.
- [18] The relationship between desire and restriction is substantially covered by Bayman 2015, pp. 40-43.
- [19] 'Melodrama offers the hope that it may not be too late.' See Williams 1998, p. 74.
- [20] Mulvey 2006, p. 155. In other contexts, the frozen moments are connected to a deeper (but not unrelated) issue: the relationship between film and photography, respectively between movement and stillness.
- [21] Ibid., p. 146.
- [22] Ibid., pp. 147-148.
- [23] Bachmann 2016, pp. 74-78.
- [24] Kappelhoff & Müller 2011, pp. 133-134.
- [25] See, for example Brooks 1995, pp. 56-67 or Lockhart 2018, pp. 25-42.
- [26] For the issue of continuity between theatrical and cinematic tableaux, see Brewster & Jacobs 1998 or Jacobs 2011, pp. 88-120.
- [27] Brooks 1995, p. 48.
- [28] Coates 1994, p. 60.
- [29] 'The time of melodrama is endless.' Ibid.
- [30] For a critical overview of affect theory in film studies, see Brinkema 2014, pp. 26-46.
- [31] Rutherford 2011, p. 62.
- [32] Elsaesser 1991, p. 75.
- [33] Rutherford 2011, p. 62.
- [34] Ibid., p. 65.
- [35] del Rio 2008, pp. 52-55.
- [36] Gregg & Seigworth 2010, p. 1.
- [37] Deleuze 1988, p. 49.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] See, for example: Massumi 2002, Hansen 2004, Shaviri 2010, Angerer 2014. The latter study is particularly helpful for understanding the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of the affective interval.
- [46] See, for example Waldenfels 2011.
- [47] Ibid., p. 31; Waldenfels 2014, p. 251.
- [48] Bergson 1911, p. 10.
- [49] Deleuze 1988, p. 32.
- [50] Massumi 2002, pp. 217-239.

- [51] Massumi 2015, p. 63.
- [52] Turner 1977, p. 40.
- [53] Skjoldager-Nielsen & Edelman 2014, p. 33.
- [54] Ibid., p. 38. For a more general account of the relationship between liminality and affective experience, see Stenner 2017.
- [55] Artaud 1999, p. 88.
- [56] Bill Viola quoted in Walsh 2003, p. 36. See also Ravetto-Biagioli 2018, pp. 91-96.
- [57] Schroeter 2017, p. 131.
- [58] Schroeter 1987, p. 11.
- [59] Werner Schroeter quoted from Kuzniar 2000, p. 133.
- [60] Grover-Friedlander 2005, p. 60.
- [61] Waldenfels 2014, p. 251.
- [62] Jackson 2015, p. 129.
- [63] Sobchack 2006, p. 338.
- [64] See, for example Cull 2012, p. 165.
- [65] See, for example Fischer-Lichte 2004, pp. 140-142 or Cull 2012, pp. 195-208.
- [66] Mulvey 2006, p. 28.
- [67] See, for example Mersch 2008, pp. 304-321 or, more specifically, Mersch 2012, pp. 447-478.
- [68] Martin 2017, p. 57.
- [69] Brinkema 2014.