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Petrodrama: Melodrama and Energetic Modernity

DEVIN GRIFFITHS

Critics have long emphasized the essential modernity of melodrama; this essay locates that claim within modern energy culture, treating melodrama as a key genre of the Anthropocene.¹ Melodrama forces us to reconsider how we think about those two poles of literary criticism, genre and period, and to trace their connections to wider social, economic, and energetic systems. As many have noted, to test the significance of climate change to Victorian studies we must weigh the fact that its changes extend well beyond the notional bounds of the Victorian, both geographically and temporally.² In identifying melodrama as both powered by and reflective of the energy regimes that drive modernity, I seek to explain the predominance of this characteristic nineteenth-century mode for more than two centuries, from the Romantic theater to modern television and film.

Like us, the Victorians were not simply caught up in climate change. They were making it. Melodrama, which precipitates from an atmosphere of energetic transformation and uncertainty, speaks to this condition, as well as to the possibility of making other kinds of political and energetic change. This

ABSTRACT: This paper explores melodrama as a central genre of the Anthropocene: a mode of staged (and later, televised and filmed) representation powered by the petro-fueled technologies and extraction capitalism that have caused global warming. These technologies furnished the aesthetic ecology on which melodrama depends, especially the high-contrast lighting and continuous incidental music that underwrite a moral typology of bright virtue and dark vice. Drawing on ecocriticism and the energy humanities, and surveying the history of melodrama, this essay gives special focus to two “petrodramas” that explicitly consider the petroculture of fossil capital: Watts Phillips’s staged melodrama *Lost in London* (1867) and the film *Wind River* (2017), directed by Taylor Sheridan. In doing so, it proposes reading literary and critical genres as “energenres” alongside the wider energetic ecologies that make them possible.

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gives melodrama the power not only to help explain the significance of the Anthropocene to Victorian studies, but also to show the ways in which Victorian cultural forms can address the mess we find ourselves in today.

On the one hand, the extraordinary reach of melodrama—its viral extension beyond the nineteenth-century stage into film and televised serials—has prompted a range of responses to the question of what defines it. Studies of melodrama have characterized it alternatively as a genre, a mode (Elaine Hadley; Linda Williams), a kind (Neil Hultgren), and even a “cluster concept” (Singer 7). Central to this debate is the question of whether melodrama consists primarily in specific features of content, or in a more historically located and materially bound marriage of content and format. Is melodrama characterized by a relatively mobile constellation of ideological, narratological, and characterological features, including a Manichean battle between good and evil, an alternation between spectacular incident and moments of heightened aesthetic composure and realization, and stock characters including heroes, heroines, villains, and comics? Or is melodrama innately bound to more concrete and material practices and technologies, especially the use of incidental music to highlight emotion, innovative framing and staging (particularly *tableau vivant*), and spectacular stage and cinematic effects?

On the other hand, the question of melodrama’s modernity has put increasing pressure on the category of modernity itself. Melodrama has become a global phenomenon and a pervasive feature of the media we consume today. The planetary reach of melodrama is startling. Carolyn Williams observes the quiet ubiquity in modern media of “melodramatic effects achieved through expressive music or the sudden stasis (and sudden movement) of the tableau” (108). Central to the development of Anglo-American media, melodramatic conventions also continue to define international television and film. Take telenovelas: as Jade Miller points out, by the time the Columbian melodrama *Yo soy Betty, la fea* was adapted as *Ugly Betty* by ABC, it had been subtitled, dubbed, or adapted in more than seventy countries. Similarly, Wimal Dissanayake explores the diverse ways that melodramas throughout Asia are “framed and textually produced,” observing that, in both “Western and Asian melodramas, questions of interpersonal relations, moral meanings, and the workings of good and evil are depicted in accordance with a poetics of hyperbole” (4). Melodrama, as Matthew Buckley puts it, has become “an essential thread in the warp and weave of global modernity” (176). How can we explain the longstanding importance of melodrama to modern life?

This essay argues for melodrama’s significance as a primary genre of energetic modernity, an economic system based on the accelerated extraction of

petrofuels that took a recognizably modern shape in the nineteenth century. For more than two hundred years, melodrama has examined the economic and industrial engines of modern energy culture, practicing a mode of formal introspection characterized by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor as “Anthropocene reading” (*passim*). From its inception, I will argue, melodrama both depended upon and reflected the extraction economies and energy cultures that have powered the Anthropocene. Extended through film and aligned with the carbon-heavy technologies that are reshaping the global climate, the long afterlife of melodrama marks a form of nineteenth-century experience that persists as a geologically powered distribution of the sensible.

This persistence is no accident. Though previous accounts of the emergence of both English and French melodrama have insisted on the determinative importance of theater patents, I argue that extraction-based lighting technologies—the oil lamp, gaslight, and lime light—produced the multi-tiered visual ecology on which melodrama depended, especially its differentiation between high-contrast, adjustable stage effects and the lower continuous lighting of the pit orchestra and auditorium. For the first time, the clean-burning and adjustable Argand oil lamp—and later coal-gas burners, arranged in footlight floats with reflectors—produced stage lighting magnitudes brighter than the auditorium. This exuberant light had two consequent effects. First, the bright stage lighting facilitated the shadowed abstraction of the orchestra and its incidental music from action on the stage. This allowed musical underscoring to counterpoint, rather than simply accompany, narrative action. This abstracted sound—the “melo” of melodrama—magnified the charismatic experience of a seemingly shared and choral affective response to the stage; it created a new extradiegetic dimension of encounter that is one of melodrama’s most pervasive legacies (think of film scores). Second, this lighting, especially techniques like back-projection and lighting from below, fostered the peculiar “drama” of melodrama—promoting a moral economy of bright virtue and dark vice—and accentuated transitions between explosive action and contrasting moments of heightened suspense: the striking visual realizations of tableau.

Many theorists, including Amitav Ghosh, Imre Szeman, and Tobias Menely, have pointed to the challenge of identifying genres that best express and reflect upon modern energy cultures, defined in terms of petroculture, oil culture, or even whale oil and coal culture.³ This essay explores melodrama and its history as “petrodrama.” Melodrama clarifies the basic premise of petroculture, asking what connects energy regime, genre, and thematics, and explores the ways in which relations of entailment and reflection structure a connection between energy and cultural production. In explaining melodrama as a petroculture,

I do not mean to occlude the distinction between the different extraction regimes of whale oil, coal, and petroleum, but rather to emphasize their apparent fungibility as energetic engines of melodrama, as well as their continuities as subsurface, extraction-based, heavily financed, and technically demanding (tough) energy technologies. Melodrama's persistent link to energetic modernity is marked by its resource-intensive, consistently exergetic nature. Dependent upon the extraction economies that have driven global warming, melodrama is singularly hot.

I. A Constant Revolution of Energetic Production

Whether or not we accept the claim, famously staked by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that the bourgeoisie "cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production" (222), it is demonstrably the case that nineteenth-century theater—especially melodrama and allied forms like pantomimes and spectacles—depended on a constant revolution in the energetic implements of stage production, the completely modern "integration of multimedia performance" observed by Marcie Frank (537). Michael Booth elaborates the point: "in a real sense melodrama and pantomime were creatures of technology. The very existence of new materials, new stage machinery, and new methods of lighting impelled them into a dramatic structure which in part existed to display the ingenuity of machinist [and] gasman" (*Spectacular Theatre* 64).

Advances in lighting were especially important to the melodramatic stage, from the colored lighting and fires that illuminated its endless visions, dreams, and ghost scenes to the rapid adoption of new lighting technologies: the Argand or patent oil lamp (invented in 1784), the gaslight (adopted in 1817), spotlighting using lime light or electric arc (adapted in the 1840s), and eventually the incandescent electric bulb (widely adopted in the 1880s). Of 787 theatrical inventions filed at the British patent office between 1801 and 1900, the largest number, 163, were for lighting technologies, as compared to 93 illusion patents, 89 that dealt with fire prevention and 42 that dealt with ventilation and cooling. Given that the primary cause of theater fires was combustible lighting systems, and that this lighting was a major source of heat, one in three nineteenth-century theater patents were for either lighting or the amelioration of its byproducts, heat and accidental fire.⁴

The wider background for these technical developments, of course, was the industrial revolution and the explosion of extraction-powered technologies that harnessed "fossil capital," Andreas Malm's apt description of the coal-based

economic system that displaced earlier riparian and biomass-based manufacturing (*passim*). Fossil capital launched industrial Britain into an era of accelerated economic growth, modernization, and labor exploitation, the economic regime of the Anthropocene. There is substantial disagreement over the question of when the Anthropocene began: whether it should be associated with the testing of atomic weapons in 1945, the carbon-based technologies of British industrialization, or the sometimes dramatic impact that earlier indigenous, and later settler, populations had on world atmosphere.⁵ The Anthropocene Working Group has recommended dating the period to the 1950s, marked by the appearance within the geological record of radioactive fallout from nuclear testing and the “Great Acceleration” (Carrington). Yet that acceleration might more accurately be seen as a great leveling, the internationalization of an energetic revolution that had previously motivated an unprecedented speeding up in both the adoption of energetic technologies and the volume of resource extraction. Cast in this light, the Great Acceleration marks the globalization of the modern energy regime, the emergence of melodrama as a global media phenomenon, and the closure of the “great divergence” that, in Kenneth Pomeranz’s analysis, defined Britain’s early entry into modern capitalism (*passim*).

The fact that the earliest melodramas depended on whale oil for lighting would seem to complicate the connection I am drawing between energetic modernity, petrofuels, and the nineteenth-century stage. Though whale oil was a biomass-based energy source, its energy density and portability were comparable to petrofuels, and in practice it helped invent petroculture as a highly financialized and technologically advanced extraction-based industry. In Scott’s view, the “floating factories” (5–6) of whaling anticipated the petroleum era, as laboratories of the exuberant “culture of extraction” that, for Buell, characterizes carbon capitalism (282). The whale oil that burned in Argand burners, like the coal gas that followed, filled the melodramatic theater with both the exuberance of energetic modernity and the effusions of the Anthropocene.

In this light, the comment of Porter Emerson Browne—a nineteenth-century American playwright—that “in the vernacular, the melodramatic audience is a ‘warm’ house to play to” speaks to the exothermic relation between the melodramatic stage and its audience (qtd. in Singer 178). Henry Mayhew’s extensive description of the Coburg or “Old Vic” in the 1850s—a period in which the theater’s repertory was devoted to melodrama—swelters with the “furnace-heat” of the performance and its effect on the audience: “As the heat increased the faces grew bright red, every bonnet was taken off, and ladies could be seen wiping the perspiration from their cheeks with the play-bills” (18–19).

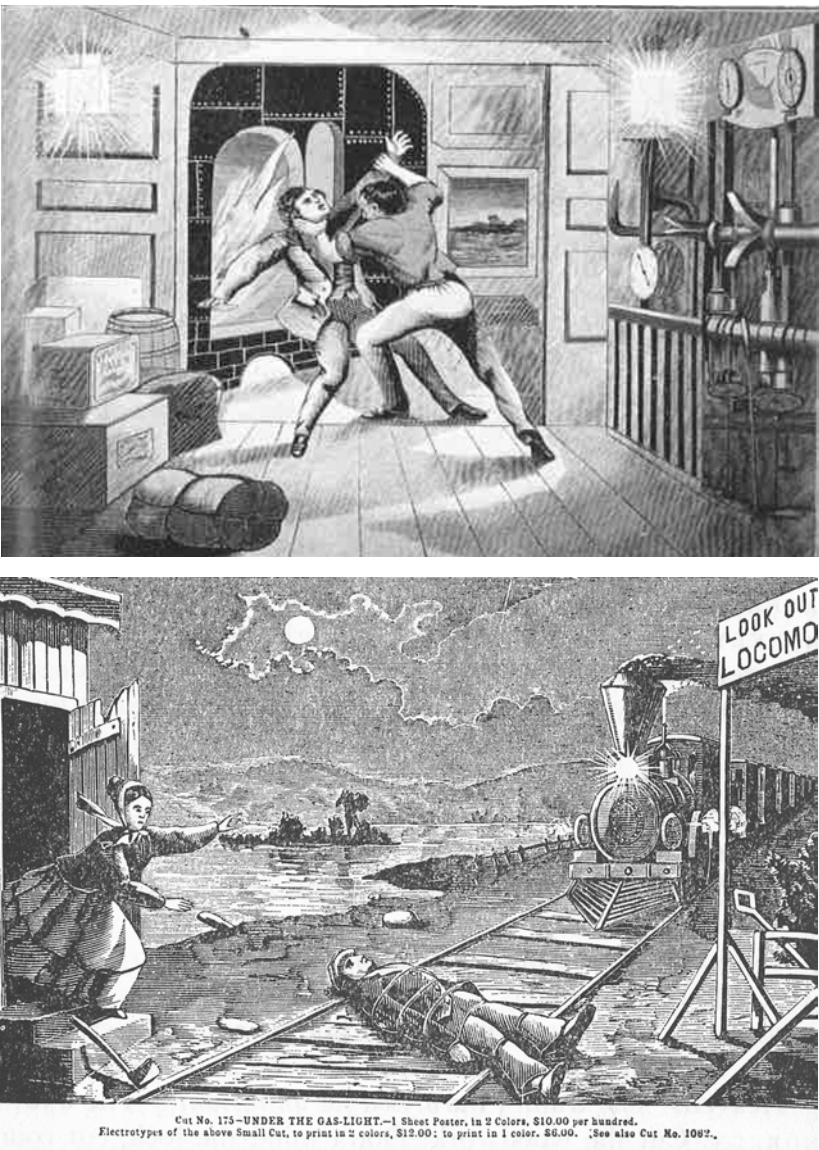


Fig. 1. Riverboat scene from *A Flash of Lightning* (1868) and train rescue from *Under the Gaslight* (1867) in *English Melodrama*, by Michael R. Booth (London: H. Jenkins, 1965): n. p. Courtesy of TS 240.12.1.69 (A). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

From the 1860s, melodramatic spectacles increasingly relied on engines to function, featuring a variety of machines powered by steam. Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* (1867), which staged a locomotive and the first rescue of a victim tied to tracks, was immediately and widely imitated (fig. 1). At one point

in 1868, five different London theaters were featuring some version of the track rescue each night. Another production staged a race between a locomotive and an automobile, backed by a multi-tiered moving panorama that simulated their movement, all powered by a twenty horsepower engine.⁶ Nicholas Daly observes that “the historical roots of the popular railways rescue, and indeed of spectacular melodrama in general, are in the broader experience of industrial technology and modernity” (*Literature* 12). These absorptive technical effects characterized sensational melodramas and made theater-goers, as Lynn Voskuil puts it, “feel as if they were *really* there” (245).

This attention to spectacular technological innovation was a pronounced feature of theatrical productions from the beginning of the nineteenth century. One example is the “aqua dramas” of the first decade, staged in theaters like Sadler’s Wells, which included a sixty thousand gallon tank for staging elaborate naval battles with live ammunition and functioning cannons and guns (Booth, *English Melodrama* 100). These spectacles had a powerful influence on the military melodramas that followed. *My Pol and My Partner Joe*, a typical nautical melodrama staged at the Surrey Theatre in 1835, featured the storming of a pirate stronghold and a battle between a slave ship and a British man-of-war, complete with cannon fire (fig. 2). Augustus Harris, the manager of the Drury Lane Theatre in the 1880s, specialized in imperial melodramas, which, as Booth describes, “were elaborately spectacular in the late-Victorian manner of mass, color, and scenic effect,” including “colored limelights [that] bathed leisurely transformation scenes with the richest effulgence of hues” (“Soldiers” 4). Such performances used modern weaponry, including Gatling guns and Martini-Henry rifles, as part of the elaborate complement of an up-to-date stagecraft.

The key energetic innovation for melodrama, however, was the development of new lighting technologies, which had a dramatic impact on the phenomenal possibilities of the theater. The first major innovation was the Argand oil lamp in 1780, which consumed less oil and burned twice as brightly as a normal lamp, and about ten times brighter than the wax candles that then illuminated theaters.⁷ Though the auditorium remained fully illuminated until late in the nineteenth century, the new Argand lamps, combined with reflectors and placed in floats at the actors’ feet, illuminated a stage that was now an order of magnitude brighter than the rest of the theater. In principle, brighter lighting at less cost allowed theater managers to maintain the same lighting level more cheaply, but in practice theaters invested in brighter and brighter lights that burned more and more fuel. The cost of lighting continued to climb as well, caught up in the accelerating impulses of fossil capital and modern energy culture.⁸



Fig. 2. Poster for “My Poll and My Partner Joe” (n. d.) in *English Melodrama*, by Michael R. Booth (London: H. Jenkins, 1965): n. p. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The flood of light had several important effects. On the one hand, more intense float lights dramatically lit the performers from below, enhancing the differentiation between bright and dark stage effects and providing a striking illumination for *tableaux vivants*. This more intense lighting enhanced the differentiation between pale virtue and dark vice, a visual dichotomy elaborated, for instance, in the contrast between Gothic villains—referred to as the “black[s]”—and both heroines and heroes (Booth, *English Melodrama* 19). Later

in the century, it also enhanced the drama of unmasking a new breed of sensational aristocratic villains referred to as “whites” (20). In this way, new stage lighting encouraged the Manichean ideology for which melodrama is famous, casting morality into sharp relief on the stage. To take one extreme of the gender dichotomy, it allowed the numerous women in white to shine brilliantly, and fallen women to literally drop into shadow.

The effect of such lighting on the soundscape of the stage was, if anything, more profound. Though music was ubiquitous in nineteenth-century theater, melodramas used incidental music, rather than sung lyrics, to underline dialogue and action.⁹ A comment rather than an accompaniment, the melodramatic score established a contrapuntal distance from both the action and the thoughts and sentiments voiced on stage. The new lighting differentiation compounded this effect: high-intensity lighting onstage threw the rest of the theater into background, essentially abstracting the auditorium and the pit orchestra (or pianist) from the proscenium. The combined effect was to move the musicians and their music from diegetic collaboration with the stage to a new extradiegetic position of commentary, reflection, and consequent intensification. Backgrounded by stage lighting, the orchestra carved out a new narrative space of affective engagement and response that is now foundational to both television and cinema: this music out of nowhere generates a dense aural atmosphere that saturates our experience of television and film.

Melodrama's mixture of technical and more traditional generic features leads Ben Singer to characterize it as a “cluster concept” (7). We might instead consider the ways in which melodrama enlarges our accounts of the material and energetic entailments of genres in general. To get a full picture of melodrama as a genre of energetic modernity, we need to recognize its persistence at the intersection of several channels of experience: distinct but closely inter-related flows of energy, sound, and visual sensation, and their coordination in producing the more familiar genre channel of characteristic narrative and characterological patterns. Figure 3 maps the triangulation between these melodramatic components. The energetic engagement of melodrama suggests a contrast between how we usually think of the genre and an enlarged sense that accounts for its determinative place in modern energy culture, what I call melodrama's “energenre.” The medial components of melodrama as an energenre, especially its striking visual aesthetic and continuous, affecting musical scores, are crucial to the genre's full articulation. The extradiegetic score, by definition, is absent in a Charles Dickens novel. Its substitute, narration, is no equivalent; there is no melo in a novel's melodramatic mode. By contrast, the persistence of all of these elements, if in modified form, within modern

television and film argues the continued salience of melodrama as an energenre, and provides strong evidence for the importance of petrodrama as a persistent feature of modern energy culture and its media.

II. Energeneric Feedback

I am not simply interested in the way that this energy regime establishes the conditions under which petrodrama thrives. The problem with a unilateral analysis of conditions—of the material or energetic determinations of a cultural form—is that it oversimplifies the more complex interplay of cause and effect that characterizes social systems. This interplay is evident both in the uncertainty of particular outcomes and in the way that, within such complex systems, apparent outputs (like the melodrama) might reflect upon and even change the behavior of specific inputs (its energy regime). In Figure 3, solid arrows mark more conventional determinations of different strata; extraction energy technologies shape sound and visual spectacle, which in turn shape the generic features of melodrama. The dotted arrows, however, mark systems of feedback that, in some cases, might be understood to manipulate and alter those inputs. I have in mind the ways in which melodrama sometimes considers energetic modernity explicitly, the ways in which petrodrama evaluates its sonic, visual, and energetic regimes.

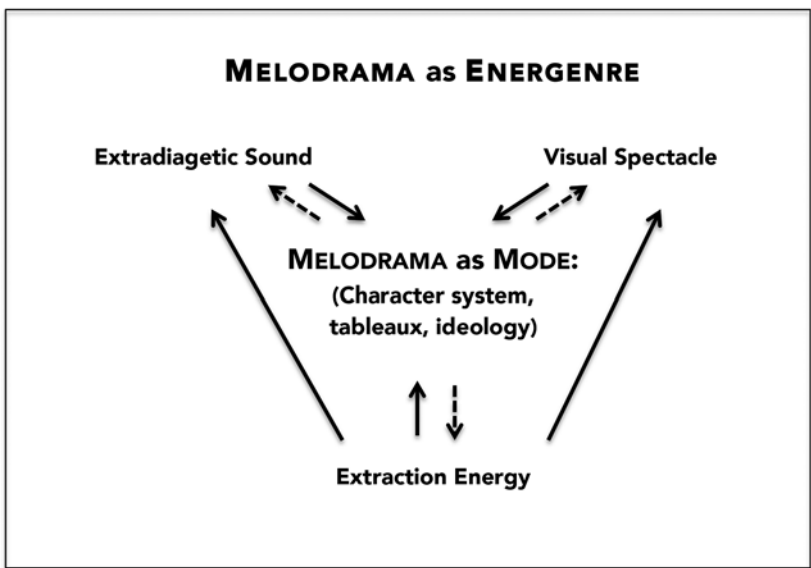


Fig. 3. The Energenre of Melodrama.

Melodrama's thematics, stock characters, situations, and narratives often dramatize the struggle to control the machines and explosive instruments of energetic modernity, and to manage the laborers—miners, factory workers, and soldiers—required to construct, power, and deploy them. The equation that melodrama establishes between physical and political power (amplified, as Ted Underwood and Allen MacDuffie explain, by nineteenth-century thermodynamics) fosters a new sense of the transmutability of labor and energy, broadly conceived. Melodrama does not simply reflect and reproduce the energy culture, but rather loops back to evaluate it, considering energy culture as both a thematic content and a problem; melodramas stage inversions in which the condition of energetic modernity becomes the content of the melodramatic form.

Nicholas Daly has drawn a similar link between spectacular melodrama and “the experience of industrial technology and modernity” (“Blood” 49). I am arguing that the instability of melodrama—the sense that violence always lurks in the wings—is a more general feature of energetic modernity, in terms of both the unstable energy stocks that fueled fossil capital and the latent violence of the machines they powered. Recognized as one of the longest-standing genres to concern itself with modern energy culture, then, melodrama explores the ways in which petroliterature inflects the economic and ideological configuration of the Anthropocene and its energy cultures. In making this argument, I seek to backdate Lauren Berlant’s “cinema of precarity” (7) by arguing that melodrama is the quintessential genre of what she terms “crisis ordinariness” (10), a staging of precarity driven by a continual attempt to grapple with the irruptive “situation” of energetic modernity—and to alter it (5).

This is the wider context for melodrama’s long-recognized concern for class conflict and gender politics. Melodrama emerged in the context of radical popular movements and the reactionary politics that sought to master their energies. The critique of social, military, and industrial hierarchy is a typical feature of early melodrama, which first emerged during the revolutionary period along the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. It was recognized, as Kristen Guest observes, “as a genre that makes visible the struggles of the powerless against the pressures of capitalism” (635). This echoes Judith Walkowitz’s claim that, “in both form and content, melodrama was an appropriate genre for working-class audiences, evoking the instability and vulnerability of their life in the unstable market culture of the early nineteenth century. . . . Below the surface order of reality lurked a terrible secret that could erupt unexpectedly with violence and irrationality” (86). Of the three major phases of nineteenth-century melodrama identified by Booth—Gothic, nautical, and domestic—it is hardly

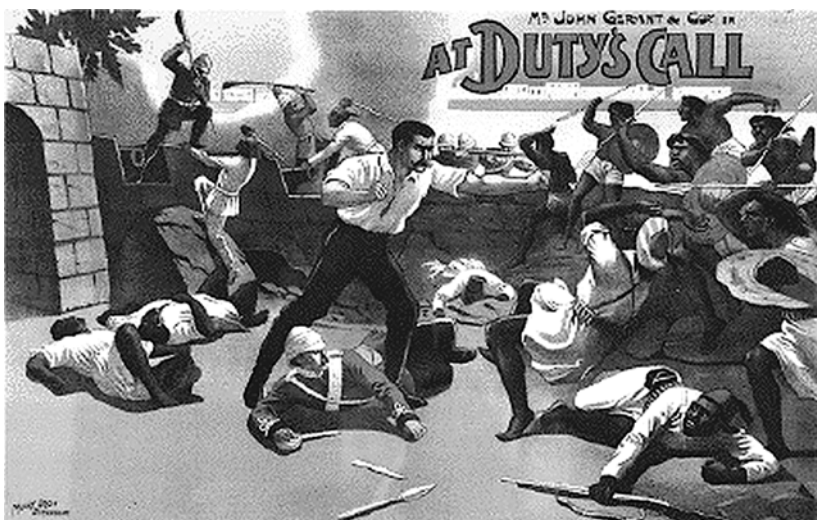


Fig. 4. Touring poster for *Duty's Call* (1898). Courtesy of Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection, University of Newcastle, Australia.

surprising that Gothic melodrama, with its emphasis upon dramas of control, sexual autonomy, and uneven modernity should stage problems of power, gender, and class. Yet nautical melodrama also had an intense investment in the questions of where power comes from and who gets to manage it. *My Pol and my Partner Joe* juxtaposes actual slavery with the condition of the press-ganged hero, Harry Halyard. Chastised for insubordination by an overbearing captain, Halyard is nearly court-marshaled for the crime of stealing a barge filled with gunpowder from the Spanish without orders: for commandeering the enemy's energy. Later social problem melodramas, which featured strikes and machine breaking, relocated these crises of technology, energetic control, and social discipline to the industrial economy. These were adapted, in turn, by domestic dramas such as *Lost in London*, which refocused these thematic concerns on the explosive social and energetic forces that were transforming the Victorian home from a distance.

Such melodramas continually ask: who will master energetic modernity, and how? The consistent answer is that virtuous individuals triumph over power. At a moment of crisis, there is no physical feat which a hero or heroine cannot accomplish. In earlier, abolitionist melodramas, these virtuous acts are used to frustrate the system of slavery and bolster a notion of universal virtue; but in later imperial melodramas the staging of masculine virtue takes on an increasingly racist pallor. Figure 4 shows the touring poster for *Duty's Call*, an imperial melodrama from 1898. The poster underscores the racialization of power in

the imperial melodrama. Here, the racial imaginary rests on a notion of virtue that strikingly cuts across the energetic and technological divide between the imperial British army and native Mahdi of Northern Sudan, as well as the internal class hierarchy of the British army. The poster argues that neither rifles nor cannon are sufficient to secure the British military, but the heroic British soldier, whose bravery has literally surmounted his officer, may yet triumph through the virtue of his white fists. Robert Dean explains that this image “validate[s] the pursuit of Empire as a dangerous but virtuous and essential crusade” (112).

The “virtue” of race here figures as an extension of a more basic bodily notion of vital puissance, a “particular, innate, lifelong, active, effective force” that, in Pheng Cheah’s account, adapts the *Bildungstrieb* of German *Naturphilosophie* to the increasingly racialized narratives of ethnic nationalism and its characteristic *Bildung* (54). The place of race in the history of melodrama, both on stage and in film, is exceedingly complex.¹⁰ Also imbedded here is the longstanding concern of melodrama with a virtue that can transcend and even overturn class division, allowing the worker to seize the moral and energetic high ground. Such virtue is infinitely masterful, capable of overcoming and ultimately controlling energetic modernity through an action in which, as J. S. Bratton puts it, “the ‘few’ became the ‘gallant few’” (26).

Melodrama’s continued insistence that virtue might overmaster, if only for a time, the unequal economic and social configuration of modernity has consistently afforded its female characters an extraordinary capacity to interrupt gender conventions. Heroines in melodrama constantly jump in and out of windows, leap between pistols, and surmount physical obstacles. As Booth puts it, drily, “heroines must run a great deal—to save the hero or to escape the villain—over tricky terrain (rocks, forests, moors, *etc.*), and for some distance” (*English Melodrama* 26). In Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight*—which featured a working locomotive and a daringly staged rescue from the tracks—the heroine grabs an axe, breaks through the door of a signal box, and unties the hero, all in the nick of time (see fig. 1). Singer devotes an entire chapter to the acrobatic “serial queens” of the early cinema, who regularly jumped on and off automobiles and careening locomotives (14). The serial queens imagined a melodramatic virtue that, as the train rescue in *Under the Gaslight* literally spotlighted, could break through the longstanding generic conventions of gender distinction and save us from the violent machinations of the modern world: the triumph of heroine over horsepower.

This is evident in the thematics of melodrama, but these explosive possibilities also inhabit the energetic technologies that sustain its action and structure

its forms. Such spectacles did not simply stage economic, domestic, or imperial power; they staged power per se, the energetic regime of extraction capitalism that energized Empire—as realized through the mined coal and other flammable and explosive minerals—and powered the melodramatic stage. What else, after all, might we term melodrama, as a genre of the Anthropocene, if not the “situation tragedy” of Berlant’s account? It is “a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life” (Berlant 5).

I argue that the thematic, formal, and technical features of the melodrama are closely aligned by the situation tragedy of the Anthropocene and its energy regime. Jeffrey Cox, I expect, would disagree. Exploring the legacy of British reactionary theater after 1790, Cox has argued that the popular and radical dimensions of melodrama are curtailed in its later imperial and domestic articulations. He sees instead “a history of cultural reaction in which potentially radical forms are routed in the post-Napoleonic theatre by the domestic melodrama” (168). At stake in this argument is not only the question of whether melodrama has a specific politics, but also whether genres—particularly as situated within their peculiar energy regimes—have a characteristic ideological drift, and whether energeneric form specifies ideological content.

Certainly melodrama, with its heavy use of *tableau vivant*, particularly in closing scenes that inscribe an explicit moral economy, seems an ideal place to perform a suspicious reading of ideological closure. Yet melodrama’s “increasingly deep and pervasive penetration of [global] mass consciousness” suggests an alternative possibility (Buckley 189). In a pair of field-defining essays, the novelist Amitav Ghosh and the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty have called for a new account of the genres and modes of political commitment adequate to address modern energy culture and the crisis of the Anthropocene. In effect, they ask what genres might be competent to grasp the present crisis and catalyze a politics of change. Given its global reach, I think we need to explore the ways in which we might read melodrama as something more than a reflection of the new climate regime.

III. Situating Petrodrama

Lost in London, a domestic melodrama by a playwright with the illuminating name Watts Phillips, was first staged in 1867 at the Adelphi Theatre (the same year as *Under the Gaslight*). It ran for forty-eight nights, a moderate success compared to the eighty-night run of Phillips’s *The Dead Heart* (a story of unjust imprisonment set in the French Revolution, which directly inspired Dickens’s

A Tale of Two Cities [1859]).¹¹ A fallen woman narrative staged within extraction capitalism, *Lost in London* tells the story of coal miner Job Amyrod and his wife Nelly. Nelly is “lost” to London when she elopes with Gilbert Featherstone, owner of the mine. The play closely links the energetics of coal mining and aesthetics of coal gas illumination, as emphasized in two performances of a chorus of miners, singing: “We work thro’ a changeless night, / That comfort round English hearths may shine, / And the coal blaze warm and bright, / And the coal blaze warm and bright.”¹² Figure 5 shows the beginning of a scene set within the mine itself; this staging of the energetic economy is nearly disrupted when one of the miners attempts to break open a safety lamp to light his pipe. The tension of the scene is palpable, especially given the ubiquity of explosions, both on and just off stage, in period melodramas. The blast is prevented when Job “comes suddenly in between,” appearing instantly and snatching the lamp away (222). The stage directions do not explain how to stage this, but woodcut illustrations suggest that this would be set up through the careful calibration of obscuring shadows, painted scenery flats suggesting the rough-hewn walls and impenetrable shadow of the mine, and focused illumination from the float, the wings, and lanterns on stage.

The dramatic coordination of song, lighting, and sudden imposition is repeated at several moments in *Lost in London*. In the first scene after the elopement, Featherstone complains in one breath that Nelly will no longer sing for him, that he must “command” (234) her affection, that the lighting of his villa lacks “brightness,” and that the coals have “no more warmth in ‘em!” (231). The scene closely tracks Walkowitz’s insight that “in domestic melodrama ... class exploitation—that terrible secret—was imaginatively represented and personalized as sexual exploitation” (86). Gilbert’s comic and redemptive lackey, Blinker, observes that “these hoily, insinuating chaps, they twists and they winds like corkscrews, till once they’ve got a hold and then—pop!—(*imitates drawing cork*)—who likes may ‘av the hempty bottle” (242). The suggestion, made startlingly clear in Blinker’s simile, is that the agents of fossil capital exploit its systems of extraction, whether in the way that they “twist” and “wind” for petrostocks or pursue their sexual satisfaction.

In subsequent scenes, the circuit between the sexual and energetic economy is completed through a series of encounters that attempt to rewire the relation between class, virtue, and energy. The action pivots to Featherstone’s villa in town, setting up a spectacular snow scene which “*should partake of those characteristics which form what is called a realistic and sensational scene*” (242). This stage direction marks the relation between melodrama and realism, and underlines the ways in which the energized sound and visual sensation of melodrama

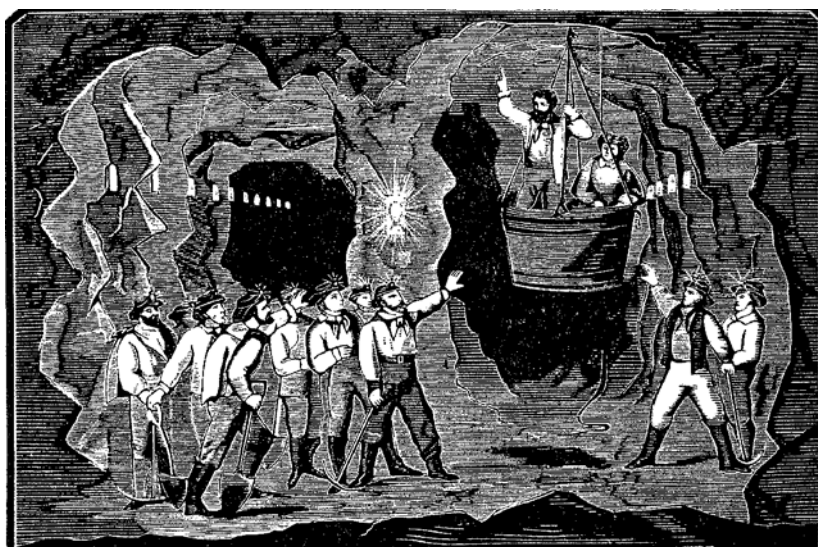


Fig. 5. Stock posters for mine and snow scenes from *Lost in London* (1867) in *Hiss the Villain*, by Michael R. Booth (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964): pp. 205, 227. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

drew attention to the sensational physiology of spectatorship. *Lost in London*'s sensation scene included an increasingly heavy snow effect, the arrival and departure of horse-drawn carriages, and progressive illumination as various gas lamps on the street and in the houses behind were lit, culminating finally with the back-projected lighting of a large shaded window in the façade (fig. 5).



Fig. 6. Final scene from *Lost in London* (1867). Courtesy of Adelphi Theatre Project.

This backlit screen is how Job recognizes Nelly; as he passes by, he looks up, fascinated by the music streaming from within, and he recognizes the shadow that Nelly casts. From this point on there are a series of confrontations: Job confronts Nelly and Gilbert; Nelly flees to a cottage, only to be tracked there by Gilbert; and Gilbert and Job finally draw pistols on each other (fig. 6). At the last moment, Nelly, already dying, dramatically interposes: “Fire *here*, Gilbert Featherstone; that heart (*indicates JOB by a gesture*) is struck too deep already!” (268). Note how Gilbert, the “white” villain, is cast into shadow by the lighting, while Nelly, casting off the “shadow” that Job has seen between them, is brightly illuminated. This virtuous imposition stages both Nelly’s recuperation and the triumph of virtue over deep energy, with predictable results: “FEATHERSTONE, *startled and abashed, lowers pistol*” (268). Featherstone acknowledges the ways in which melodramatic confrontation performs a virtue that overwrites class distinction; he now refuses to raise his hand against Job. It also allows Nelly to renegotiate the fallen woman plot. She dies, predictably, but she does so as Job clutches her to his chest, pointing to the sky and proclaiming “I shall foind her theer” (269).

The direction for this scene, as for any closing tableau, is elaborate. The back wall of the cottage consists of a panoramic, three-part window with a view of London in the distance. The scene takes place in the transition from day to night, accomplished through the modulation of light and the drawing of the

curtain (see fig. 6). As Nelly falters, Job tears open the curtain and reveals “*the distant [gaslit] city, now brought out in strong relief by the rising moon*” (269); Phillips directs that, as Nelly dies, “the silvery light of the moon should fall suddenly upon the figure of Nelly, flooding it as with a glory” (269n). Subterranean and celestial power, gaslight and moonlight, brilliantly confront the audience.

In an insightful account, Williams explains such use of tableau:

While audience members pause to look at the compositional syntax of the stage picture, they turn inward to contemplate an interpretation of its significance in relation to the suspended action. The configuration of bodies on stage will be legibly meaningful, but the pause itself solicits an additional sense of significance, breaking the action in order to suspend the potential of the future. (113)

This, as Williams notes, is “paradoxically moving,” insofar as the stasis onstage energizes affective response (113). Melodramas like *Lost in London*, I would argue, stage a confrontation with the situation of energetic modernity—an impasse that, as Berlant explains it, prompts “a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event,” but which has not yet discovered its “genre of event” (4). *Lost in London* is a situation tragedy, in Berlant’s terms, precisely because it explicitly argues that the domestic drama is bound up in a wider economic and energetic system that it struggles to address. The play emphasizes that Nelly leaves Job not simply because Gilbert offers a flashier, brighter life but also because she clearly sees the destructive impact of the mining industry, from the death of her own father in the mine where Job works to its effect on the “bleak moreland, which even the birds seem to shun” (207). Conversely, the play argues that a brighter life in the city does not exist.

The closing tableau—which coordinates heavenly moonlight with gaslit London, stagecraft with urban planning, and reparative labor with human casualty—speaks to the intricate bind of this condition. Yet the moonlit tableau also endorses Nelly’s heroic action, and the subversion of gendered and classed norms of authority. If we wish to “foind” each other in a better life, it suggests, then we have to find out how to act differently in this one (269). Tableau does not simply impose a pre-existing moral order: it insists on our ability to create new possibilities for a world in crisis.

I close this essay with a turn to modern cinema in order to illustrate the ways in which the analysis of Victorian cultural forms, especially melodrama, informs our thinking about climate change today. If *Lost in London* exhibits the

longer genealogy of the situation tragedy, Taylor Sheridan's *Wind River* (2017) shows the continued dependence of Berlant's cinema of precarity on the long-standing codes of melodrama. As Frank observes, film in general is "mechanized melodrama" (539). In light of the heavy technological investment of melodrama from its beginning, however, it is perhaps more accurate to say that cinema is simply more mechanized, and more energized; petrodrama is ever accelerating.

Before exploring *Wind River's* interest in petroleum culture, I want to emphasize how closely it follows the melodramatic script. It is a striking irony that the film begins, as Booth puts it, with a scene in which an Indigenous heroine "must run a great deal—to save the hero or to escape the villain—over tricky terrain (rocks, forests, moors, *etc.*), and for some distance" before dying in the snow (*English Melodrama* 26). As if reading Booth's account, the dramatic arc of the film closes with two scenes that insist, dogmatically, on measuring the specific distance that she ran: six miles. It is a quintessential act of melodramatic virtue, insisting, in the words of the white male protagonist, "that's a warrior."

That character—who is interpolated into the life of the reservation as the father of a mixed-race son and of a daughter who died ambiguously in conditions that echo the central crime of the film—is himself a reformed cowboy figure. His Stetson-wearing, horse-training, rifle-wielding presence reminds us how insistently the film seeks to redeem the Western as a progressive genre. Cinematic Westerns have always depended on the protocols of melodrama. They are organized through scenes of slow suspense and frenetic action, including perhaps the most troped tableau in all of film, the face-off and shoot-out, with riveted characters and immortal whistling melo ("doo weeyoo weeyoo"). Crucially, the Western generally substitutes violent action and landscape for melodramatic dialogue. Yet at all times it emphasizes the interaction between the melo and the drama: between musical underscoring, with its profoundly evocative and nostalgic themes, and scenes of dramatic, eruptive action.

In *Wind River*, the aesthetics of melodrama are superfueled, especially through its energized sound—the roar of snow mobile engines, the growl of revving pickups—which powerfully augments the emotional burden of the score. There are three scenes in which the hero Cory Lambert, played by Jeremy Renner, races over the snow on his mechanical horse (fig. 7). In each, the increasingly loud diegetic roar of the engine complements a vaguely Indigenous chant that inflects the scene extradiegetically with a feeling of mourning and haunting dread. This charismatic contrast, between mechanical



Fig. 7. Still from *Wind River* (2017).

roar and soulful chorale, is reflected in the striking visual aesthetics of the scenes, as headlit machines slip through the shining white reflection of the snow and the dark shadows of the forested mountains.

Strikingly, the fuel for the snowmobile is produced on site and is tied—at least synecdochally—to the oil derricks around which the entire situation of the film and its crime swirls. Berlant notes that the crime procedural is the classic drama of the situation tragedy because it stages uncertainty about the nature of the crime itself. *Wind River* provides a powerful example of this. It insists, however, that the uncertainty of this situation is not simply a feature of late modernity, but also of the energetic regimes that power late capitalism as well as the liberal economic and imperial orders that preceded it. From the beginning, the cause of Natalie Hanson's death is ambiguous; it is only near the climax of the film that we witness her death as a consequence of sexual assault and escape. This relatively straightforward solution to the who-done-it plot is significantly complicated by its staging in an oil camp, with her murder occurring at the hands of a group of seemingly ex-military security contractors—presumably veterans of American imperialism and its elusive search for what is often termed “energy security.” Even that indictment is complicated by the fact that the rapists also kill Annie's ex-military boyfriend and a sheriff's deputy who, the film indicates, is also a veteran. There are villains here, but the film takes pains to indicate that these villains were processed and refined, not born. Most immediately, the film identifies the toxic masculinity that they so violently perform as an externalization of a toxic oil culture, encompassing both the oil derricks they are paid to secure and the oil stocks they were once enlisted to protect abroad. From the perspective of psychologist T. A. Kupers, toxic masculinity defines “those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive,” including especially “violent domination” (713). As a petrodrama, *Wind River*

suggests the energetic and environmental character of this violent dominion. It powerfully illustrates the perceptive link that Stacy Alaimo draws between toxic masculinity, petroculture, and a “militarized masculine aesthetic” that is the immediate legacy of America’s Middle Eastern wars, but it situates that linkage in a much longer history of colonial violence and extraction (97).

Wind River illustrates the ways in which petrodrama “performs exposure,” in Alaimo’s terms; it struggles to “reckon with—rather than disavow—such horrific events and to grapple with the particular entanglements of vulnerability and complicity that radiate from disasters and their terribly disjunctive connection to everyday life in the industrialized world” (5). The film stages this exposure in the way it exhumes the interrelation of petroculture, toxic masculinity, and economic and military imperialism, as well as in the way it links this interrelation to a longer history of settler colonialism. If the film seems to perceive the ways in which limitless resource exploitation was achieved through policies that supported the violent clearance and genocide of native populations, it also makes it hard to miss the problematic of centering the plot on two white characters, one a modern cowboy, while exploring the deaths of Indigenous women.

Yet *Wind River* is clearly designed to tell a more complex story about the history of tribal life in America and its legacies of violence. The film was inspired by a news story about the actual Wind River reservation, which focused on a particularly brutal act of violence that occurred within an Indigenous family. Sheridan’s film, by contrast, emphasizes both the ubiquity of sexual violence committed by non-native attackers, and its implication in a much longer history of settler colonialism and resource exploitation. Philosopher Kyle Whyte, a Potawatomi scholar-activist, argues that Indigenous people in America have been living as climate refugees for centuries, insofar as their history and its forced relocations constitute an “indigenous climate change studies”: “Indigenous peoples often imagine climate change futures from their perspectives (a) as societies with deep collective histories of having to be well-organized to adapt [to] environmental change and (b) as societies who must reckon with the disruptions of historic and ongoing practices of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization” (154).

Wind River also exposes the lasting purchase of petrodrama and its complex struggle to mount a response to energetic modernity. Any film shot on location, particularly in difficult weather, will be significantly more resource-intensive than an urban production. Not only did cast, crew, and material have to be brought to the various filming locations in Utah and Wyoming, but also the inclement weather sometimes meant the cast and crew needed extensive

heating equipment, and required manufacturing snow for outdoor scenes.¹³ In making this point, I echo LeMenager's observation about the Paul Thomas Anderson petrofilm *There Will be Blood* (2007): "a great deal of fuel enabled this film's sensory bonanza" (101), from spectacular visual imagery to the "rich aural dimension" of its sound design and score (100). Even as it comments on its violent legacies, petrodrama continues to articulate itself through the charisma of energetic modernity. Its simultaneous critique of oil culture and celebration of its fruits verges on a compulsion to continued energetic self-harm, a "petromasochism" that Jesse Oak Taylor sees in films like David Lean's imperial epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) ("Lawrence" n. p.).

A late scene in *Wind River* underlines this dilemma in familiar terms. Recuperating after a shoot-out, the film's central heroine, FBI agent Jane Banner, played by Elizabeth Olsen, suggests that her survival was a matter of luck. Lambert disagrees: "luck don't live out here. Luck lives in the city. . . . That's whether you get hit by a bus or not, . . . whether someone's on a damn cell phone when they come up to a crosswalk. That's winning or losing. Out here, you survive, or you surrender, period. That's determined by your strength, and by your spirit." The capricious violence of powerful urban machinery—buses, automobiles, even cell phones—defines for Lambert the precarity of urban life against rural experience. Yet they have recently survived a showdown with dozens of guns and a military assault rifle. They've spent considerable time in the film roaring around on snowmobiles that are at least as deadly as motorized road vehicles.¹⁴ Still, their success is explained as the virtuous triumph of "strength" and "spirit."

A closing tableau in *Wind River* drives home the complexity of finding this strength within a history of violent attrition (fig. 8). Martin, the Shoshone father of Natalie, the murdered girl, sits with Lambert under a swing set, staring at a highway and its traffic. When Lambert asks about the ritual face paint that his friend wears to grieve Natalie, Martin replies: "I . . . just made it up. There's no one left to teach me."

Wind River's apparent sensitivity to the genealogical connection between modern energy exploitation and the longer history of settler expansion and violence—the link between oil camp and reservation—helps explain why it won best film at the American Indian Film Festival, in addition to other honors. Martin's recuperative practice resonates with the decolonizing historicism advocated by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith: "to resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become



Fig. 8. Still from *Wind River* (2017).

spaces of resistance and hope” (4). As Whyte explains, “for Indigenous peoples, ‘the Anthropocene epoch’ ... does not present us, at first glance, with the specter of unprecedented changes” (160). In contrast to the transcendental triumph of Lambert’s spirit, Martin’s act of creative remembering, donning makeup to revive and remake the past, performs the deep relation, observed by Whyte, between “histories and futurities” (116).

I see a reparative impulse in the thesis, advanced through this tableau and the closing tableau in *Lost in London*, that we can *make things up*, even as we remember them, imaginatively and performatively: that small-scale recuperations can disrupt and perhaps derange the purchase of petroculture in modern life. If petrodrama—whether staged or filmed—is an extraordinarily energy-intensive genre, it also alerts us to those energetic demands. It’s a tentative, perhaps utopian possibility, but in sensitizing us to the costs of that energy, to what is lost in gain, petrodrama works to imagine alternatives, a politics of creative limitation that might allow us to make something different of the present.

IV. Conclusion

I have focused on petrodramas that comment on the energy culture of modernity, but I see this possibility as bound up in the utopian possibilities of melodrama in general. As Anahid Nersessian puts this, “the tropology of limited utopia resists independently of the ideological content of the texts from which it is mined” (12). Yet I’ve also been suggesting that the relation between the different strata of a work is never so clear-cut, whether between what is mined and what it is mined from, between surface and subsurface, between content and form, or between genre and energy regime. Melodrama’s political

possibilities are not an indelible feature of its tropology, but rather of the wider constellation of formal, technical, and energetic practices whose layerings, inversions, and entanglements give it life and constitute the emergent genre of melodrama. Politics, after all, emerge through relation, situation, and feedback.

Marshall McLuhan famously argued for a distinction between what he termed “hot” and “cool” media, taking the light bulb as the key example for the ways in which new energetic media could shift the contours of aesthetic experience (McLuhan and Lapham 22). The various media of melodrama, profoundly synesthetic and charismatic, would certainly qualify in McLuhan’s own terms as “hot.” As an expression of modern energy culture, however, McLuhan’s typology can be recognized as a more fundamental meditation on the intensity of a given medium’s energetic requirements and the facility with which it rewires the connections between energetic substrates and aesthetic stimulus. To be clear, I am not adopting McLuhan’s distinctions: it has never been clear to me why he describes radio as hot and television as cool. Rather, I want to encourage us to more consistently take the temperature of our media and their genres, and to more fully register their energetic inputs and outputs: the counter currents and feedbacks, whether measured in terms of energy or carbon, that warm our world and circulate through our literatures and our critical procedures. As we sift the past for ways to recast our relation to the Anthropocene, and sound the present by way of that past, we continue to “retrieve what we were and remake ourselves” (Smith 4).

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NOTES

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1. Peter Brooks’s definitional study, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), took up earlier accounts of melodrama’s modernity (especially Vardac’s) and made this a defining feature for criticism of the genre over the last forty years. For Brooks, melodrama is modern because it is an inherently secular and psychoanalytic genre. For later scholars, its modernity is marked, alternatively, in the way it registers key features of industrial and urban modernity. See, for example, Booth, *English Melodrama*; Cox; Frank; Hadley; Singer. For other later scholars, modernity is marked by its importance to the development of film and televised serials. See Berlant; LeMenager; Singer; Vardac.

2. For more on this connection, see Taylor; Menely and Taylor; Hensley and Steer.

3. See Ghosh; Szeman; Menely.

4. For a count of nineteenth-century theater patents, see Rees and Wilmore. For an analysis of theater fires, see Davis, 96.
5. See Ruddiman, et al.
6. For a discussion of these train stunts, see Daly, *Literature* 10. For a discussion of the powered panorama effect, see Singer, 10.
7. For more on the innovations of the Argand oil lamp, see Thompson.
8. See Rees, 28.
9. See Pisani.
10. For discussions of the complex interplay of race, abolition, and minstrelsy in Victorian melodrama, see Boltwood and Daly, "Blood." Flory explores this history as context for his study of early American black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Flint, too, has weighed evolving protocols, black and white vs. color photography, in the presentation of race.
11. The Adelphi Theatre Project website provides extensive information about Phillips's career and the staging of his work. See "Home Page."
12. This quotation is reprinted in Booth, *Hiss the Villain* 221. All further quotations from *Lost in London* are reprinted in this collection as well and are cited by page number.
13. See Darling.
14. This is suggested by a comparison between a 1997 CDC study of snowmobile deaths per registration in Maine and statistics for registration and traffic fatalities. See Centers for Disease Control; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; SAGE Stats.

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