Conclusion: Of Gravity and Tears

Why insist on melodrama as a lens through which to approach global, contemporary film? What do we gain by retaining the melodramatic as a category of analysis? Sometimes the question is just plainly: why melodrama? For those of us who are invested in melodrama as a field of analysis, my experience is not uncommon; it seems that we often find ourselves backed into having to explain, sometimes with some defensiveness, why we believe it remains important, or even why it is important at all, to continue to think through the pervasiveness of the melodramatic mode and its shape-shifting capacities. As the field of film studies continues to move toward embracing the study of global cinema, either as an antidote to studies of national cinemas or as a response to the need for theorizing the pervasiveness of global media, we run into the danger of reifying similarity at the expense of historical and local specificity. This conundrum has always been at the heart of any kind of comparative analysis. I offer that melodrama provides a method through which to approach global cinema such that we can retain a kind of elastic tension to locality that does not permit our lens of analysis to wholly extricate texts that circulate globally from the national and historical contexts that inform their stylistic and narrative choices. As I have discussed, melodrama helps retain a stratified relationship to history, one that continues to be both marked on the body and narrated through it. And, most importantly, because melodrama shares an intimate relationship to the abstract ideals that made the rise of modern sovereignty possible, it continues to be particularly well equipped for visualizing its crises.

Elizabeth R. Anker has proposed that we think of melodrama not only as a film, literary, or cultural genre but also as a genre of national political discourse. She posits that American melodramatic discourse is nation-building and state-legitimating and, further, that it has been instrumental in justifying the growth of the national security state.1 As I have argued, this is true of melodrama not just in the United States but also as a global phenomenon given that the mode develops hand in hand with

C. Marcantonio, Global Melodrama
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the nation-state’s historical rise. Yet, given the ways in which globalization paradoxically erases certain borders while it also leads to their proliferation, it can only be true that melodrama is deployed in innovative ways such that it can still help narrate and represent how we now conceptualize time, space, and bodies. It is a telling feature of melodrama, one belatedly due for recognition, that as much as Anker has had to employ melodramatic theory in order to elaborate and make certain mechanisms of current American political discourse plainly visible, I have had to avail myself of political theory in order to make useful sense of the aesthetic and narrative parameters of melodrama in the context of a global cinema that stages anxieties around how power has been redistributed in the wake of weakening national sovereignty. Therefore, far from championing the borderless landscape that the term “global” might index, global melodramas map new temporal and spatial territories informed by the necessity to address the atomized forms of control that biopower exerts; the new arrangements and displacements of bodies that neoliberal economic policies generate; and the production of borders that works to mitigate a sense of vulnerability in an increasingly volatile world environment. Furthermore, I have argued that rather than merely providing a means through which to stage the events of the past, melodrama proves to be an adept tool with which directors rewrite, revive, and redeploy history.

As we have seen, the imagined borderlessness of globalization and the image’s digitization supply melodrama with new challenges for representation. Alfonso Cuarón’s Gravità (2013) hyperbolizes this juncture. Gravità distills the plight of the subject in a borderless world to the extreme of imagining her as floating in a gravity-free environment. This is an almost literal rendition of the notion that a waning sovereignty brings with it “a subject made vulnerable by the loss of horizons.” On the one hand, the film proposes that we are left dangerously untethered in the absence of others, be it fellow astronauts or alien creatures (notably absent antagonists). On the other hand, it also reminds us that while we may be untethered from location (planet Earth), as humans we remain attached to the structures that sustain us, even when these belong to defunct nation-building, presented as space-building, projects. This is reflected in the choice of structures, all of which are ultimately destroyed: the Hubble telescope, the International Space Station, the abandoned Russian satellite, and the Chinese Tiangong station (the one in the film is actually modeled after the module that is set to launch in 2016). Gravità presents us solely with images of Earth from space: the ultimate image of a borderless world indeed. Only in the final scene, when Dr. Stone (Sandra Bullock) lands in an uninhabited place on Earth, does the film bring us back to the real possibility of starting anew by forging new frontiers. The image of Dr. Stone