Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling. Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*

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5 In *Orgies of Feeling*, Elisabeth Anker addresses an arduous topic with a controversial hypothesis: she proposes that political discourses about freedom understand the international political sphere after 9/11 as a dualism of victim and aggressor built in emotional and moral terms. This reading capitalizes on the ideological presence of melodramatic sensibilities in contemporary American culture, proving how U.S. citizens interpret the concept of ‘freedom’ in an emotional sense. If in the late-eighteenth century the term ‘freedom’ allowed for the conceptualization of individual rights, melodramatic interpretations of the term have transformed it into a lost value of American culture, something to be repaired by the state through violence. By studying U.S. presidential discourses, American media coverage of 9/11, and reading them from a multidisciplinary discussion on melodrama, Anker dissects the uses of emotional excess in American politics.

6 In reading 9/11 as a melodrama, Anker identifies how the simultaneous operation of *pathos*, an emotional approach to experience, moral polarization, sensational narrative construction, and the simplification of historical processes into essential terms, defines a manner of processing experience after emotions. Anker finds that 9/11 has been understood in the U.S. through three formulations: a moral antagonism of good and evil, an essentialization of U.S. citizenship as a victim of terrorism, and a definition of national identity as a synonym for freedom. An identification with the roles of victim and agent of moral good become explanation for the use of military violence as a response to the evil forces, which threaten individual and national identities. Anker explains how intellectual and public activities spread a melodramatic reading of global politics, proposing moral
polarizations as if they were objective depictions of geopolitics. As happened in Samuel Huntington’s and Francis Fukuyama’s works on the end of the Cold War, even intellectuals understand political and cultural antagonisms in a reductionist moral binary, in which essentialized cultural groups embody good and evil.

The first chapter offers five conventions for melodramatic political discourses in the U.S.: a moral polarization of experience; an identification of political actors as victim, villain, or hero; an understanding of experience in emotional terms; a formulation of new experiences under a freedom / unfreedom binary; and an understanding of experience as a teleology of freedom. By studying one hour of media coverage on the events of 9/11, Anker exposes how melodramatic emplotments of violence are understood as ideologically neutral. While the five previous formulas are ubiquitous in the objects studied by Anker, their presence constitutes another version of what Peter Brooks and Ben Singer define as ‘sensationalism,’ in which the exposition of suffering becomes the core of melodramatic artifacts. The media’s emphasis on the “terrible” nature of violence leads to moral polarization, which in turn leads to a demand for revenge. The transformation of the victim-aggressor dichotomy into a conflict of good and evil hosts two metonymic operations: first, the conversion of the victim into an embodiment of the morally good; second, the interpretation of an attack on two specific locations in the U.S. as an attack on the entire nation and its values.

Chapter Two studies U.S. melodramatic political discourses in relation to historical events of international relevance. In this section, Anker connects the narrative of the innocent victim with a conceptualization of U.S. subjectivity as a heroic embodiment of freedom. While agreeing with most of Brooks’ insights on how the emergence of the melodramatic mode responds to the epochal change originated with the French Revolution, Anker considers contradictory the idea that melodramatic understandings of experience rely on conservative images of the social. Brooks considers melodrama a form that democratizes culture because it allows for the dramatization of non-elite backgrounds presented in the sacred era with types, such as the rogue, that were never protagonists in serious genres. In that sense, Brooks emphasized how melodrama helped imagine the transition from a sacred conception of the world to a secular one, which also meant the passage from monarchy to democracy, and from feudalism to capitalism. Melodrama is a mode of dealing with the new in old, incommensurable terms, because *logos* is postponed to attend *pathos*, making it a source of knowledge in itself. This is proven not only by the formulation of freedom as a timeless value of U.S. citizenship, but also in the last chapter of the book, where Anker finds left-melodramatic formulations in the moral polarization of capitalism. Both cases show, as Brooks argues, that melodrama responds to the reinvention of decorum, a concept that takes identity values as fixed, in spite of being culturally constructed.

If decorum expressed the coincidence of the highest moral, economical, political and religious values as continuity in the individual’s appearance, Anker shows how American nineteenth-century realist fiction reinvented modern decorum, turning freedom into an inherent value in the narrative of the self-made man. The trope of the innocent victim structures the analysis of the post-World War II context as the end of the division between public and private spaces. This process normalized melodramatic polarization in American minds, as the imagination of the Cold War as a battle between tyranny and freedom. With neoliberalism, a vague resemblance between consumer’s agency,
individual freedom, and the U.S. role in the global context turns U.S. citizens into birthright heroes.

Chapter Three proposes a non-traditional approach to the concept of legitimacy. Building on Foucault’s contributions, Anker shows that felt legitimacy is important in melodramatic political discourse, because its strategies validate the processes of emotional and moral simplification and ongoing conflict through normalized perception. Additionally, felt legitimacy helps externalize the perception of evil as a concrete agent, which must be defeated through a display of power. After explaining the difference between historical and affective facts, Anker shows that melodramatic perceptions embodied evil in Hussein and Bin Laden, despite of the fact that neither of them controlled weapons of mass destruction.

The following sections of Orgies of Feeling build on previous arguments and return to them. Chapter Four proposes the category ‘orgies of feeling,’ an intense emotional display of victimization that consolidates the moral polarization of identity and otherness. Anker studies how a melodramatic appropriation of the enlightenment narrative of man as master of nature reappears in the understanding of freedom guaranteed by the state. On the basis of Freud’s ideas, Anker evinces in chapter five how melodramatic subjectivities normalize violent state power by means of identification. By doing so, U.S. citizens repeat a bland melodramatic moral sense, in which they are victims of international violence, but supporters of state violence at the same time. In the final section of the book, Anker traces a tradition of false consciousness in left thinking. Moral polarization of society into proletarian and bourgeoisie agents in Marx’ and Engels’ Communist Manifesto has established an intellectual tradition in which, on one hand, left theory is considered an expression of moral virtue, and, on the other, oversimplifies the analysis of capitalist forces by considering them evil. With the sole objection that Anker’s reading of melodrama as a genre seems contradictory to its presence as a mode in different artifacts and formats, Orgies of Feeling stands as a significant contribution to the study of melodramatic understandings of experience in the U.S. and Western traditions.

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