

## Melodrama as an essential pulse: From the perspective fictional television series

*El melodrama como pulso esencial: Una  
mirada desde la narrativa serial*

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This article reviews modern melodrama as a narrative form that modulates the dramatic development of contemporary series, signaling its role as the determining esthetic-creative impulse when explaining and assessing the emotional effectiveness of the audience. Structurally, this impression could be expressed based on three specific differentiations: ethical readability (enhanced by serial mechanisms); audiovisual mannerism; and a particular approach that serves as gender binary tension such as feminine and masculine, good and evil, and flaws and virtues.

**KEYWORDS:** Melodrama, TV series, narrative genres, mannerism, affections, emotions.

*Este artículo revisa la actualidad del melodrama como forma narrativa que modula el desarrollo dramático de muchos seriales contemporáneos, señalándolo como un impulso estético-creativo determinante al momento de explicar y evaluar la efectividad emocional que logra en el público. Estructuralmente, esta impronta se expresaría a partir de tres modulaciones particulares: la legibilidad moral potenciada por los mecanismos de la serialidad, el manierismo audiovisual y el abordaje particular que hace de las tensiones binarias propias del género, tales como lo masculino y lo femenino, el bien y el mal, el defecto y la virtud.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Melodrama, seriales televisivos, géneros narrativos, manierismo, afectos, emociones.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace that the success of TV fiction is the result of the progress powered by technology, business, and arts. Increased competence, need to maintain a corporate image through quality productions, and sophistication in content filmmaking and distribution have been strong contributing factors in shaping contemporary drama (Cascajosa, 2009). However, according to the audience, the success of contemporary drama lies in the storylines.

Although we note that the constant changes in current productions evade formalization, there is consensus about the distinctive feature of these fictional stories revolving around dramatic tension (Mittell, 2015), i.e., the emotional surge the audience is subjected to as a result of suspense and development of astonishing unforeseen events. Little research has been conducted on the nature of the said tension and the sensitive and usual trace behind its mechanism, which, far from being a professional inspiration, appears to respond to melodramatic resources through an esthetic-creative layout beyond the emotional and stylistic excess traditionally linked to it.

Suggesting that melodrama impacts the poetics of television series may contravene many critical categories, but several authors have addressed this subject (Herlinghaus, 2002; Sepinwall, 2013; Mittell, 2015) and argued that melodrama has become the foundation of many forms of popular entertainment. The general assumption is that melodrama is only expressed in soap operas; however, genres are not simply narrative conventions but cultural categories grouping texts within contexts and specific cultural circulations (Williams, 2012). Thus, it is pointless to continue defining melodrama as an “excess,” given that exaggeration is neither its essence nor a requirement to meet the unbundling of feelings and essential emotions. “Melodrama is considered a mode, rather than a genre; a focus on emotion, narration and morals that goes through numerous genres and expressed through a wide range of media forms” (Mittell, 2015, p. 233).

Genres are currently facing a conceptual crisis on television. Their regular division into watertight compartments, as pure categories, has crumbled to clear the way for what García de Castro (2007) defines

as permanent hybridization, boosted by the need to expand markets (Fiske, 2006; Nelson, 2008; Shimpach, 2010) and to achieve support from a secondary audience of different age groups and from various geographical areas. In the same vein, the regular combination of genres, formats, and subjects became flexible, giving rise to a series of loans and mixtures resulting in *mestizo* and highly adaptable fictions to develop serial narratives with “complex mythologies” (Thompson, 2007, p. 19).

The most recent form of fiction takes the shape of a meeting point for a set of practices involving production and reception from different genres for them to be merged, intertwined, and remodeled. In this context, this article traces the melodramatic influences following the tension mechanisms of high-quality television fictions (Cascajosa, 2009; Tous, 2010), assessing its relevance in registers as diverse as comedy, science fiction, crime, as well as stories whose genre hybridization combines more than one emotional and intellectual tone.

#### MELODRAMA OVER TIME

Melodrama can be defined by three historical events: 1) *The Renaissance*, which dramatized the Greek tragic spirit, although incorporating verse and music, which would then inspire the opera and the rhythmic melody of Elizabethan theater; 2) *Pre-Romanticism*, from the second half of the eighteenth century, when the term was used to describe the *comédie larmoyante*, a genre that became highly popular as a result of its combination of recitation, social pedagogy, drama, and music; and 3) *Victorianism*, which took place in the last third of the nineteenth century when mystery, horror, and fantasy thrillers were considered melodramas and brought tears to the audience’s eyes through a paraphernalia of tricks ranging from phantasmagorias to shadow play.

From then on, the promise of a positivist and pragmatic twentieth century relegated the interest in genre. In fact, its hybrid nature played against the culture’s institutionalized spaces: musical ambiance, which eliminated dramatic recitation; spoken text, which led to it being discontinued in opera houses; and theatrical dimension, which led to it being driven away from concert halls. As proposed by Faretta (2009), this only came to an end when cinema resolved its statelessness by means

of a synthesis that combined tragic feelings, the *comédie larmoyante*'s social didacticism with emotional emphasis, and the spectacular nature of thrillers.

At the same time, the journalistic *doxa* took responsibility for giving a pejorative sense to the term by describing overvalued, pathetic, and popular emotional-spiritual demonstrations as melodramas. This devaluated view was soon tied to a specific format of a *soap opera*, given its wide audience and the rhetorical excesses incurred. Unlike other formats, a soap opera is not a classification derived from its basic constitutive elements, i.e., of the combination of production and directing characteristics that define and shape an idea by combining specific elements such as stage design, rules, and functioning dynamics. Instead, it responds to the derogatory humor used by presenters in the 1930's to mock the juxtaposition of highly melodramatic and non-commercial aspects directed toward fairly unsophisticated housewives (Mittel, 2004).

Nonetheless, when the socio-political changes of the new century and transformations promoted by the digital paradigm forced the audiovisual industry to outline its replication and formulation strategies, the melodrama successfully became a consolidating source, neither through a genre hegemony nor by the effects of its hybridization with other conventions but under a narrative pulse capable of bringing about empathy in a diverse and complex society pulled by different stimuli (Cappello, 2015). In other words, when homogenizing practices stopped working in an increasingly scattered and unfathomable audience, the old resources of melodrama were deployed as an effective means of communion as for the sensitive treatment of the fundamental impulses.

Consequently, television fiction becomes a socio-cultural product of special interest, as its storylines are not only highly profitable due to the productive and corporate dynamics they are connected to but they are also established as categorical spaces for intervention and cultural fields for the introduction of habits and values. As Williams (2011) pointed out, the television, in its cultural form, is the expression of the social process producing it: discussing a television model –as well as strategies for content reception or development– involves a debate regarding a society model.

The transformation of the audiovisual setting and digital technological development cannot be detached from the social aspect. Martín-Barbero and Rey (1999) analyzed how soap operas and melodramas have considerable potential to tune in to tell stories, connect feelings, and understand the dimensions of everyday life (p. 115). This condition, which can be extrapolated to other spheres of fiction, is noted in the narration strategies of the most remarkable television productions of this era. We are not experiencing telenovelization or melodramatization of stories but the audience's empathy and emotional commitment beyond the genre or specific format chosen to tell the stories.

### MORAL READABILITY

Understanding the reasons for this connection with the audience's imaginary and everyday life involves remembering that stories are expressions inherent to the transformation of societies. When Aristotle noted that the flute and dancing rhythms could explain men's characters, he understood that "the reason for our enjoyment lies in learning, grasping the meaning of things, i.e., that men are like this or otherwise" (1963, p. 17) and that, as a consequence, their growth would also entail the development of arts. This analysis of sensitive content capable of becoming the bearer of spiritual-universal significance leads Cassirer to claim that art is not the sum of particular sensations experienced through the eyes, ears, or touch but implies access to an objective view of everything and human life. "It is not an imitation but the discovery of reality" as Cassirer (1964, p. 36) specifies and somehow, Burke strengthens the premise by asserting that stories are life metaphors, as they show a symbolic development of reality as a dramatic construction.

Stories can express what Germans call *zeitgeist*: the intellectual and cultural spirit of an era. If we accept this, as Bauman (2011) describes, the erosion of irreplaceable fundamental postulates has led human beings to not only stop focusing on themselves but also focus on other aspects, and the rise of the melodramatic resource as an effective way to perceive the world will be justified, given its ability to provide sensitive responses when fundamental tension is narrated: life and death, good and evil, virtues and flaws, among others.

No other genre replicates the social sphere and delves into it as effectively as melodrama. It is with good reason that Hermann Herlinghay prefers to understand it “as a matrix of dramatic and narrative imagination that helps produce meaning amid the daily activities of diverse individuals and social groups” (2002, p. 23). Thus, melodrama, as a narrative strategy to tell (ourselves) a story, deploys a set of experiences “made of a material nature in particular: scenes of everyday life, a place inhabited by the common sense of a society” (Salinas & Stange, 2017, p. 166).

Martín-Barbero (1987) highlighted this quality while studying melodrama in relation to the migration of workers during the Industrial Revolution. According to his review, in a world alien to old community ties, where ethical and physical incidents are threatening, melodrama proved effective against loss by developing the practice of virtue as a mode of survival.

This statement concerning honorable relevance in a demystified universe is the same as that proposed by Williams (2012). She points out that a large part of production triggers affection throughout the common chart of values that create a sense of involvement. Speaking about *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), Williams notes that the story presents a “good feeling” that is shared regarding the ideal of Baltimore as a fair and functional city and puts forth an emotional appeal for the audience to be concerned about everything lost due to successive injustice caused by drugs, global capitalism, and political corruption (Williams, 2012, pp. 538-539). In *The Wire*, melodrama flows discreetly, but the emotional responses after all the stories of personal redemption and institutional defeat are as powerful as any of the most recognizable melodramatic twists, such as a family tragedy or an individual betrayed in a relationship.

The greatest productions of this era are characterized by the fact that they conceive dramatic tension from attachment and ethical dramatization of characters and events that allow for an emotional response. In all cases, values revolve around basic precepts such as family, community, interpersonal relationships, power, love, and justice.

This tendency is noted in different kinds of productions. Let us consider *Empire* (Fox, 2015-2019), a family saga set in the world of hip-hop music that narrates the fight among Lucious Lyon's sons, ex-wife, and various lovers to take over Empire Records, a company founded by Lyon, after he is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Another example is *The End of the Fucking World* (Netflix, 2017-2019), a dark comedy wherein a boy who believes himself to be a psychopath wants to commit his first murder, but his whim fades as he meets a girl and unknown feelings surface. It is the story of two hurt individuals, an orphan and a daughter of absent parents, but beyond the bizarre and unexpected events and the road movie style that define its genre, what upholds the characters and audience is the curiosity in getting to know whether another reality, perhaps a more pestilent and lonelier one, awaits. James and Alyssa's silence; glances; and their mutual feelings of expectancy, interest, and attention express the basic instincts of the story: death and love.

#### INTERRUPTED PLEASURE

This emphasis on morality intensifies and results in a highly engaged audience by taking advantage of the postponement and pauses between episodes, turning series into an active mechanism. Therefore, the screen time distribution, based on episodes with significant time gaps between them, becomes crucial in establishing the specific ways employed by series to narrate stories.

Existent since the creation of serial novels, which date back to the nineteenth century, the regular and systematic interruption of stories have built what Buonanno (2002) interprets as the first institutional relationship between the reader and the text based on the expectation and promise that result from said postponement, i.e., a relationship based on the interruption of reading pleasure at the most intense moments, in addition to the stress generated, which lasts until the start of the following episode. The serial novel's great skill—which is existent in today's televisual times— took advantage of the idea suggesting that intervals, rather than representing a pause or standstill, leave room for the audience's imagination.

Imagination, pushed to the limit between what has been learned from a story and the promise of what will be known in the future, is overburdened as the time the audience waits passes, and it is also enhanced, in anticipation of new findings to be unveiled as the narrative flow resumes (Buonanno, 2002, p. 22).

This way, postponement provides us the opportunity to enjoy the story in advance, which represents a source of pleasure that is highly exploited by television fiction. Even the formerly favorite primetime product, the series (characterized by an auto-conclusive narrative wherein episodes have their own endings and cyclic structures and new stories are constantly developed), began featuring different formats, described by Innocenti and Pescatore (2011) as “the serialization of the series,” which comprises the emergence of stories that submit their narrative structures to a hybridization process wherein every episode can be self-sufficient to a certain degree, always supported by a central story concluding by the end of the episode [known as the anthology plot], but incorporating “an element of temporal progression and partial narrative openness that extends throughout several episodes [the running plot]” (p. 34).

This is clearly not the case of a contribution or resource unique to melodrama, but it is possible to assert, similar to Pérez (2011), the persistence, reach, and popularity of formats such as the soap opera as well as television series that subsequently led to so-called sagas such as *The Godfather*, *Star Wars*, *Rocky* and *The Avengers*, which were key entertainers in familiarizing the audience with times of uncertainty that, by the end of each episode, became suspense content and led to further tension.

*The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008) is one of the most refined examples of the combination of the anthology and running plot. In addition to the new-case-every-episode structure, stories are developed over three or four episodes, even including conflicts that the characters struggle with for seven seasons. We can also consider the tempestuous relationship between Lilly Rush and her mother in the *Cold Case* (CBS, 2003-2010) series or the family disputes, parricidal struggles, ethnic problems, and mining conflicts encountered by the characters in *Justified* (FX, 2010-2014).

Thus, as can be seen, a wider definition of melodrama may lead us to consider its practice as a narrative mode, a “narrative technology of gender,” as proposed by Warhol’s (2003) model, which uses serial progression and suspense to represent a “moral readability” (Williams, p. 526) providing affective responses to different conflicting impositions.

This way, we understand that, in the case of observing an “evolution” between the most renowned television fictions and soap operas –as is sometimes proclaimed, guided by common sense– this would be associated with deploying information and narration dosing strategies rather than breakdowns related to the thematic refinement or their excess control.

### MELODRAMATIC MANNERISM

Notably, melodrama, as a genre, describes a set of conventions. Apart from Manichean characters acting as victims and villains –to allow for the association between experience and archetypes, as per Eco (1981)– tragic romances, lax causalities and their desirable coincidences, comforting and often forced endings, explanatory rhetoric, and its jumbled esthetic condition (Bordwell, 1996; Brooks, 1995; Faretta, 2009), what comprises its nerve center is the tellurian condition of emotions, “the relentless organic nature which prevents men and women from accessing the logic tabulation of their passions” (Faretta, 2009, p. 36).

In its more recurrent structure, the narrative cycle of melodrama starts with an absence, a flaw, or an error (the Greek *hamartia*) that befalls the hero or is willed by fate so that, from then on, he is subjected to suffering, subsequently leading to a revelation (anagnorisis) affecting his behavior. This way, he obtains a more accurate idea of himself to bring about a reinvigorating *denouement* or future, which may be happy, based on traditional values (Pérez Rubio, 2004; Thomasseau, 1984). With regard to the form, music, acting performance, use of the Chiaroscuro scenic technique, locations (hospitals, barracks, highly modest houses in contrast to the countryside’s vibrancy and freedom), objects (reliquaries, letters, photographic images), as well as any kind of inventiveness portraying pain, hope and faith.

Therefore, all these signs and conventions are revealed and work as examples for contemporary serials. In other words, to develop the interest of the audience and an affective bond with them, television fictions adjust their narration to easily identifiable forms in the melodramatic *manner*.

Thus, melodrama, which was limited to the household and family spheres for a long time, making matters worse with paramount loyalties and the suffering arising from betrayal in the closest relationships, now extends to all spheres. Television serials appeal to the social corpus as an extended family depiction, specifically represented by colleagues, codes of friendship, and political beliefs, among others, such that the modern world and its different spheres become a metaphor symbolizing the society.

Popular characters in television series such as honest men, doctors, and private detectives, all of whom, although blurred, are depicted as heroes, are still part of the contemporary motion picture industry. *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) is not only a gangster series but also a family drama exploring the relationships among its characters: the procedures of investigation are secondary to prioritize the description of Bobby Simone's spiritual quest and redemption for instance. *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) is not the traditional patriotic western from the 1950's; it is rather different from *Bonanza* (NBC, 1959-1973) and *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955-1975), as sheriffs are not portrayed as life savers anymore. In *Deadwood*, the positive characters are, in fact, not as bad as villains, whereas the lead characters of *Nip/Tuck* (FOX, 2003-2010) are surgeons and their stories revolve around the medical world wherein self-destruction prevails over salvation. Doctors do not save lives; on the contrary, their lives fall apart owing to stress, jealousy, lust, and crime.

As genres emphasize the development of characters and relationships, the melodramatic model emerges above the waterline. This is particularly evident in the case of romantic comedies. Woody Allen redefined the genre, leaving the "love story with gags and jokes" behind to bring it closer to sociologic and psychoanalytic study, with characters highly different from the predominant stereotypes, being less than perfect and subject to their motivation. Furthermore, indie films from the end of the 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century

revitalized the genre by discarding the concepts of Prince Charming, the ideal women, and the quirk of fate that unites and separates souls as quickly and intensely as Cupid's arrow. Without the foregoing, all that remains is a reality so frank and painful that characters can do nothing but attempt to resist. *Love* (Netflix, 2016-2018) perfectly illustrates this when Gus throws all his movies out of the window to the cry of "Bullshit!" when talking about *Pretty Woman*, and he asserts that prostitutes do not fall in love with you but steal everything they can from you to buy more cocaine.

*Love* tells the story of Gus and Mickey, who are young, unstable, and incompatible but have a sparkle that appears to bring them together. Not having to deal with falling in love, *Love* opts for the individual search that gives meaning to that relationship. Therefore, Prince Charming in this case is the unknown utopia; the burning flame here is not romantic love in despair but hopelessness, absurdity, and loss. Its main characters live precariously, their jobs make them unhappy, and they feel that there is no room for future projection. *Hamartia*, the tragic error they seem to give away, lies in the fact that they were born in a drifting post-modern world that prevents them from overcoming teenage sentimentalism, and as a consequence, their relationships are ruined based on a passive – aggressive combination of neglect and tears.

With productions as diverse as *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017), *After life* (Netflix, 2019) and *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-2020), stories cease to respond to the need to bring alive characters to focus on them amid the chaos surrounding them and center on the exploration of essential bonds, the aforementioned basic motivations. In doing so, the key elements of the *continuous serial* play a pivotal role as they turn to the informality of good manners and maturity of an audience familiarized with audiovisual inventiveness.

As Allen (1985) pointed out that soap operas adopted redundant poetics, as a result of having to continuously update the audience on the events, turning it into an art form; the current *mannerism* depends on the progressive updating of the effects of said events to give rise to new events. The fifth season of *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016) is an apt example of this. After the law firm splits, with Lockhart and Gardner and Florrick and Agos going their separate ways, the story is enhanced

by multiplying the combination in each course of action: Chicago's governor, the district attorney's office, Chumhum (a search engine) and its conflicts with China, etc. The plot appears to lose balance, but the story never backtracks, problematizing romantic relationships and tension among the different characters. When Alice's associate, Will Gardner, a firm candidate who became the main character's partner, unexpectedly dies, it could have been used as a blunt, radical blow that could serve as a cliffhanger from one season to another. However, *The Good Wife* and its mannerism had other plans. Will's murder is established as the season's *middle point*, deploying a disruptive impact: its tone gets increasingly complex, pain and emptiness become the focus of the series, and the season finale shows ineludible drifts.

#### FORMS OF PASSION

One of the most commonly mentioned excesses of melodrama has to do with the slow and exaggerated development of happy and sad moments that end up establishing tones bordering on bearable limits. This is, however, a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic construct that relates to various forms of representation over time. Distress, the spiritual affliction undermining characters on the inside, impacts the space for dramatic representation and vice versa. This way, affliction and tragedy are correlated, physically (pulling eyes out, being unable to conceive, committing suicide), naturally, and socially (plagues, animals, wars), working as an extension and enhancement of the most aggravated moods and feelings.

This urgency, that may prove highly costly for the genre, as it expresses the angriest feelings, either persisted through positivism at its sides or was explicitly stated through pathologies doing justice and providing science to passion, skipping and avoiding the pathetic side. Nonetheless, well into the twenty-first century, mannerism would retrieve and translate passion into a sophisticated visual rhetoric.

In other words, every excessive atmospheric representation that in melodrama turned passion into chapters of natural phenomena and provided the set and its objects an excessive and more significant nature, and all the clichéd storms, avalanches, fires, and ominous sounds (thunderclaps, lightning flashes, and knocks on the door) that used to

represent “the representative forms and numens of classic melodrama” (Faretta, 2009, p. 34) now become audiovisual waste, a technical and artistic staging that breaks down whimsical frames, extremely difficult shots, bold transitions, evocative photography, and baroque motifs configured by each production based on the story told.

This way, television fictions radicalize everyday life to illustrate a striking passion. This is evident not only in the topics and spaces represented but also in how ordinary life is expressed. In this connection, *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) emerged as a forefather by proving that television could be way more complex based on the intensity and production of its images. How esthetically and carefully Lynch introduces Laura Palmer’s corpse, the contour of the motorcyclist reflected in the victim’s pupil, and the corridors of the Grand Hotel or the Martell residence filmed as places awaiting a revelation that never comes out are examples of the evolution committed to everything related to the visual sphere, where a single scene may contain paradoxical and contradictory ways of saying the same thing and where the emotional power of a moving picture is capable of breaking the audience and turning the serial into a deep form of expression that can be equally developed with heroic, poetic, intimate, sensitive, and ordinary tones.

An example of this complexity can be found in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), a production wherein life basically goes on indoors: work, family life, and even leisure time. Windows are a crucial element: what their blinds show or shield is the result of meticulous work. Manhattan in the 1960’s is depicted as a promising time with rapid changes. Nevertheless, the line drawn through the windows is that of a constantly distorted horizon, which appears blurred and sometimes excessively bright, with a suggestive depth of field that often forms a metaphor of the situations experienced by the characters, as the fourth season’s episode, wherein Don Draper starts questioning himself and has a breakdown. As he looks out of the window to feel the breeze and get his head together, he can only see the wall of a neighboring building.

*Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011) delves into the competitive world of American football in a high school setting. Although the plot revolves around sports, it focuses on football as a promise, a lifesaver, and gear lever to escape from bitterness. The production alternates sweating bodies and other anxiety-related situations, such as Tyra’s

efforts to achieve academic success and flee poverty and her sexual reputation. The most exaggerated moments take place during the game scenes when, in view of the way they progress, their results are not final until the final seconds, making use of sound and visual elements emphasizing despair, filmed in slow motion, and musicalized in a remarkably evocative manner.

However, although this mannerism is especially clear in the story's external modulation—the artistic adornments, as Aristotle would suggest, working on the immediate area of the stage—the internal dimension is never disregarded. Every episode of *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), for instance, shows the kitchen in excess, turning food, cookware, and eating into a sublime act, making use of a rhythm and distinction that makes us forget about the fact that this gourmet experience is related to human flesh. In addition to blood, the story exudes a strange beauty that turns gore into an esthetic experience wherein violence is not minimized but brought together in accordance with Dr. Lecter's standards and personality (García, 2019). In "Mizumono," the second season's final episode, the excess of hemoglobin, saturated close-ups, high key lighting, and tiresome music are not grandiloquence-makers. Its strength lies in the core of the characters and their relationships, where truth, love, friendship, disappointment, and perversion are combined through the metaphor of the intensifying storm outside Lecter's house as he exacerbates his own. It is not the master flash of the knife, the powerful force of the final scene per se, but the way Hannibal decides to seek revenge for the betrayals.

In any case, modern serials incorporate excess elements in their stories through audiovisual stylization which, not without a reason, communes with the *zeitgeist*, with the frantic overflowing of a world that can be observed, narrated, and strengthened through the screens, such as the ones allowing us to follow these captivating stories.

#### AFFECTIVE DEPolarIZATION

The story's development is penetrated by ideological impositions, economic and cultural practices, as well as those related to advertising and consumption, which, in the end, define the concept of quality

with regard to television productions. Thus, this sub-heading can be interpreted as evidence of said effects through the way genre is portrayed by different productions and the strategies used to develop stories.

One of the most common debates concerning melodrama deals with the feminine dimension and characterization, as women are portrayed as a subordinate impulse, downplaying their esthetic and dramatic importance, below masculinity (Warhol, 2003). Nevertheless, the mannerism detailed above favors the use of genre discourse as a resource, even more at the time of defining the strategy that best describes emotions; it deals with passion economy and affection management.

According to Warhol (2003), the emotional responses to fiction can be regarded feminine or masculine based on certain behaviors culturally codified for both the genders, but it requires them to be neither determined nor limited by feminine or masculine bodies, “emphasizing the performative aspect of the gender-linked practice rather than the connection with sexed bodies” (p. 53). In this regard, crying, losing one’s temper, and being carried away by emotions would be considered feminine codifications associated with unmanly enjoyment, whereas those related to adventures, detectives, or mystery such as analytical resolutions, physical endurance, inventiveness, or technological skills would correspond to a masculine codification, far from feminine sensitivity. In line with Mittell (2015), the most reductive form of these distinctions reflects the long-term stereotypical mapping of men as rational and women as emotional or the gender-based dichotomy between thoughts and feelings.

Nonetheless, although mannerism reproduces these codes through repetition, it also explores other dimensions as we observe that the pathos of its stories can be either feminine or masculine, regardless of characters, plot, and the audience’s enjoyment and sensitivity. A science-fiction production such as *Star Trek: Discovery* (CBS, 2017-2019) generates feminine emotion and deeply felt pathos, as in the most suitable prime-time soap opera: it is impossible not to be touched by Hugh Culber’s death and the grief of his partner (Dr. Paul Stamets). After overcoming his loss, he is overcome with joy as Culber is suddenly resurrected through the mycelia network but is disappointed

again on finding that, although Culber is back, he does not love him anymore, as the body of the loved one can be recomposed but not the person they used to be.

Emotional responses coexist in a story starring a woman, Michael Burnham, who leads us to enjoy the analytical solution, spatial audacity, steadiness, and capacity to sacrifice, resulting in a vibrant combination of genre-based responses that may appeal to a range of spectators and a wide spectrum of emotions. As Amanda Ann Klein (2009) suggests, a feminine layer appears to have been added to different genres. *Grace & Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-2019) perfectly demonstrates this: two women who start living together and supporting each other after finding out that their husbands fell in love with each other. In the story, men are like women, trying to live the lives and passion they were unable to experience until declaring their homosexuality, and Grace and Frankie represent the men who try to reposition themselves in the social and working worlds as they struggle with new relationships and survival issues.

Therefore, if focusing on a type of story by turning masculine figures into feminine figures complicates the traditional generic standards, incorporating melodrama in masculine narrative worlds gives rise to breakdowns. Lotz (2014) argues that, when this happens, the emotional narrative style comes to the forefront to narrate the masculinity in crisis. But this is not the only change: they also show every feminine characteristic of said masculine codification, the mutual sentimentality, and the pathos that may be inherent to any gender. Isn't it pathetic to see a man like Tony Soprano, broken and crying in therapy, feeling paranoid, insecure, and distressed as the ducks that used to swim happily in his swimming pool left without any apparent reason?

Tony is a prisoner of his dreams, hallucinations, and distress, suffering from many anxiety and panic attacks, which often lead to his unconsciousness. At that time, as is seen in the second episode of the last season, he sees himself as an ordinary man, a solar panel salesman who lost his suitcase and attempts to recover it, who stands for his own pursuit for the issues overwhelming him: the sense of belonging, anonymity, estrangement, death, sex, and dishonor. Tony Soprano feels uneasy and insecure just like the migrant girl in a big city frequently portrayed in any soap opera, although he is the boss and carries a gun.

Thus, nobody can question him for going to therapy, a feminine aspect according to Warhol.

To ensure empathy, television fictions deploy various moral models surrounding certain fundamental ideas to facilitate a connection from various perspectives. To cite an example, a story such as *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015-2017) places identity and gender issues together, has the courage to delve into social questions, and completely embraces pop culture while keeping the audience dangling. The relationship between Dev and Arnold lets them talk about women without sexualizing them or thinking like predators. In the absence of toxic masculinity, they are able to fall in love and dream of sharing a life with someone in a different way, without the pressure of being forced to be what the world demands they be. It is not a politically correct story but an inquiry regarding an ordinary man from the viewpoint of the lights and edges that used to be left out.

The melodramatic mannerism of this era opts to recreate the grayscale rather than the Manichean extremes but treats it just as the traditional poles, being aware of the fact that doing so fosters higher commitment and new opportunities to develop emotional shades and dramatic profiles.

Along this line, we can see that positive characters also show their dark sides, unfinished business, or flaws of any kind, while villains reveal more than one side that turns them into hurt souls. The lead character in *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), for instance, witnessed his mother's murder with a chainsaw and later spent two days in a container in shock, next to other victims' corpses. As a consequence, he became a serial killer, although his code only allows him to murder those who deserve to die and will never be condemned for various reasons. *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014) shows a similar case, wherein its protagonist, Nucky Thompson, is openly portrayed as a liquor trafficker, a casino game manipulator, and an unscrupulous politician, although the audience may see him as an individual unable to cope with the loss of his wife and son or his father's lack of affection, which pushes him to seek refuge in local prostitutes. In other words, the audience is emphatic to the characters as the story succeeds in convincing us that they are suffering or in need of protection. Therefore, each diegesis shapes its

own moral code to justify, despite the violent nature and despicable methods that these characters are the best part of the story, as the series will always feature a much more unlikable character.

The constant flow and subsequent public acceptance of these stories suggest a group consistency with morally questionable characters or villains, who will, by extension, be called antiheroes. As Echart and García Martínez (2013) explain, TV series have a vast capacity to organize the comprehensive knowledge of characters over time, which produces mental and affective empathy in the audience.

*Breaking Bad's* (AMC, 2008-2013) strong focus on Walter White allows for the audience's immediate involvement in his illness and concerns. From the third episode, wherein he concludes that he must kill the dealer Krazy Eight (since, if the latter manages to get out of the basement alive, White's family will undoubtedly get murdered), Walter is considered the weakest individual within a corrupt ecosystem in the criminal and professional worlds –he is part of a declining education system that values neither achievement nor intellectual figures– as well as the social sphere, due to the exorbitant costs of his cancer treatment and uncertainty regarding the family's future. In this context, Walter is not only a victim but also the character embodying values socially regarded as positive, as he defends the most precious asset a man can have: his family. Walter enters the world of drugs to help his loved ones, but, at the same time, he sets off on a seemingly justified criminal adventure: his revenge, his retaliation against the world that condemned him to be an anonymous and dull professional. The audience follows his story until the last episode, according to a moral pact conveniently renewed, and accepts his end without convicting him, as spectators understand the final confession to his wife, when he explains that he resorted to turning into Heisenberg due to “the terrible, honest, and selfish satisfaction of knowing, for the first time, that he was good, or even the best, at what he did” (Cappello, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

It is possible to identify a melodramatic tone beneath the American series that are most famous among the critics and the public. This esthetic-creative arrangement flows as a mannerism that makes use

of melodramatic resources and tradition and accounts for the moral tension governing the subplots in the stories.

An integration of expressive elements and the audiovisual plane is also observed, and this justifies the most exacerbated moods and sentiments. Having reached its maturity as a medium, the audiovisual element reproduces the verbal rhetoric of classic melodrama through sophisticated and significant treatment of imagery, making a show out of passion contained in the highly expressive quality of lights, sounds, and shots.

Moreover, this narrative impulse uses different ways to approach the polarizing dichotomies, seeking to generate the dramatic tension that is most convenient for its stories and market requirements. It is modulated not by its extremes, but between them, leaving behind common dyads such as good and evil, flaws and virtues, and masculine or feminine actions and affections, which received simplistic treatment earlier and are now an opportunity to explore the complexity of its characters and plots.

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