MELODRAMA EMERGED ON the stage as a consequence of the development of a new theatrical genre, somewhere midway between tragedy and comedy. Among the proponents of this new genre in France was Denis Diderot, who identified one of its major components and pleasures, as follows:

If to a nation which has known only one sort of play—light and pleasing comedy—one were to propose another, serious and touching, have you any idea what it would think of it, my friend? Unless I am very much mistaken, the intelligent people, after having conceived it as a possibility, would not fail to say: 'But what use is this new form? Does not life give us enough troubles without our inventing additional, imaginary ones? Why allow sadness to creep into the world, even of our amusements?' The remark of one who knows not the pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears.¹

These remarks were made at a time when weeping had a particular significance. It was central to the cultivation of a sensitive and sentimental moral sensibility.² Nevertheless, they pinpoint a feature crucial to melodrama, a feature which, despite an ever-growing body of writing on the genre, has rarely been addressed: its ability to move its spectators and in particular to make them cry. I want in this article to discuss ‘the pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears’ as a crucial component of melodrama and, in particular, to identify some of the elements and conventions involved in producing both the tears and the pleasure. I shall start by looking at two typical characteristics of melodrama’s mode of narration.

The first of these concerns the way in which narrative events are ordered and motivated. As has often been noted, melodramas are marked by chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, *deus ex machina* endings. Melodramatic narration involves ‘continual surprises, sensational developments’, constant violations in the established direction of events, ‘breathtaking peripety’. Inasmuch as there is little causal preparation for the way events unfold, the *generic* verisimilitude of melodrama tends to be marked by the extent to which the succession and course of events is unmotivated (or undermotivated) from a realist point of view, such preparation and motivation as does exist is always ‘insuffi-
cient'. There is an excess of effect over cause, of the extraordinary over the ordinary.\(^6\) Hence the emergence of terms like Fate, Chance and Destiny. They mark a narrative logic irreducible to the conventional forms of social and psychological motivation associated with the nineteenth century novel and naturalist drama. They also mark a power over the lives of the protagonists.

This power is shared to some extent by the spectator. It stems from the degree to which narration in melodrama involves the production of discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and points of view of the characters, such that the spectator often knows more. Thus in *The Big Parade* (directed by King Vidor, 1925), for example, hero and heroine search frantically for one another amidst the crowded chaos of troops marching off to the front. Having just quarrelled, each searches, unaware that the other is searching too. The spectator is both aware that they are looking for one another and aware that they are unaware. A similar scene occurs towards the end of *Yanks* (directed by John Schlesinger, 1979). The narrative structure of a film like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (directed by Max Ophuls, 1948) is founded on a similar form of discrepancy in knowledge and point of view. Here the spectator is aware of Lisa’s love for Stefan—and aware that he is unaware.

These are particularly poignant films and scenes from films. The foundation of such poignancy in a particular structure of point of view is one of the arguments proposed by the Italian literary critic, Franco Moretti.\(^7\) Moretti is seeking to account for the ability of certain kinds of written stories to make the reader cry. His thesis is that particularly moving moments in such stories are the product of a structure in which the point of view of one of the characters comes to coincide with the point of view of the reader as established by the narrative. A character’s mistaken perception, or lack of knowledge, is rectified in accordance with the reader’s prior understanding and judgement. Moretti cites three particularly moving sentences from different stories and elaborates as follows:

\[\ldots\text{ in all three cases, the same procedure has been adopted: the ‘moving’ sentence modifies the point of view that had directed our reading, organizing its expectations and judgements, in the pages immediately preceding.}\ldots\]

The shift of perspective is sudden, but this does not make it new for the reader. The point of view that is re-established in the ‘moving’ sentence does retract the one prevailing in the section immediately before, but it does recall a point of view located even further back in the text, and which is in fact, by definition, the primary and unquestionable one, because it depends on the ‘neutral’ and ‘impersonal’ judgement of the narrator, not on the ‘limited’ and ‘subjective’ ones of the characters. Although Sir Everard is convinced of the opposite, we know right from the opening pages of *Misunderstood* that Humphrey wants his father’s affection. The moving sentence dissipates Sir Everard’s mistaken perception… by a short circuit that definitively re-establishes the original ‘truth’.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) The issue of the balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the means of motivation of the latter, is a particularly interesting—and constant—feature of the discussion of aesthetics. It is especially prevalent in neo-classical aesthetic theory and in theories of realism. The balance is often conceived in terms of an opposition between the probable and typical, on the one hand, and the particular, historically actual and contingent, on the other. See Genette, op cit., Diderot, op cit., and the section on ‘The Probable’ – ‘The Marvelous’ in Irene Simon, *Neo-Classical Criticism 1660-1800*, London, Edward Arnold, 1971. The distinction goes back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which the probable and/or the convincing are related to verisimilitude.

\(^7\) Franco Moretti, ‘Kindergarten’ in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, London, Verso, 1983.

\(^8\) ibid, pp 159-160.
However, the effect of poignancy and pathos, while dependent upon this articulation of point of view, also depends upon another factor, its timing:

This mechanism of retraction and re-establishment of points of view has in fact always been familiar to literary theory under the name of 'agnition'. And agnition, in and by itself, is a neutral rhetorical procedure: it can serve just as readily to make the world collapse about Othello as to bring Tom Jones to a perfectly happy ending. What makes it produce a 'moving' effect is not the play of points of view in itself but rather the moment at which it occurs. Agnition is a 'moving' device when it comes too late.

A particular mark of this is the death of one of the characters:

... to express the sense of being 'too late' the easiest course is obviously to prime the agnition for the moment when the character is on the point of dying.

Tears ultimately come from this kind of marking of temporal irreversibility across a structure of knowledge and point of view:

... time does not stop, and it does not heed anyone's bidding. Still less does it turn back and allow us to use it differently. This is what the protagonist's death is for: to show that time is irreversible. And this irreversibility is perceived that much more clearly if there are no doubts about the different direction one would like to impose on the course of events.

This is what makes one cry. Tears are always the product of powerlessness. They presuppose two mutually opposed facts: that it is clear how the present state of things should be changed—and that this change is impossible.

Examples from film melodrama corresponding to each of these points spring readily to mind. The issue of point of view has already been raised, and it is important to stress that it comprises a number of related, but distinct, meanings. It does not just refer to what one might call a moral or ideological opinion or position of judgement. It refers also to a position of knowledge in the sense simply of information, of awareness and unawareness as a function of access to narrative 'facts'. If a father is unaware of his son's true love for him, to use Moretti's example, it may be because he is insensitive, because he lacks 'understanding'. But it may also be because he has had no access to his son's true feelings, because his son has concealed them, has never told him that he loves him. There is a distinction to be made even if in practice these two forms of understanding often overlap. (The father may never have been told how his son feels, but equally, he may never have cared enough to find out.) In the instance from The Big Parade mentioned above, point of view and knowledge are of this second kind: the characters simply do not know they are each looking for each other (though the quarrel preceding this scene does establish a degree of insensitivity to the heroine's feelings on the part of the hero).
Looking for love:
top, searching the
troops in *The Big
Parade* (1925), and
below, in *Yanks*
(1979).

In addition, there is the issue of point of view in its technical cinematic
sense. In the instance both of *The Big Parade* and of *Yanks*, narrative
and character point of view, and the poignancy that stems from the
discrepancies between them, are articulated in terms of optical point of
view and the eyeline match: the characters are unaware that they are
searching for each other because they do not see each other. There is a
refusal of optical point of view, of a meeting and exchange of looks across
an eyeline match. Interestingly, although as Ben Brewster has pointed
out, Griffith tends to use point of view and the eyeline match very

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12 See Edward Branigan, 'Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot', *Screen Autumn* 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 54-64.
sparsely, preferring to establish hierarchies of character knowledge and point of view by other means, some of the most poignant moments in his melodramas do involve these devices. In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), for instance, Cheng Huan’s love for Lucy (and her unawareness of his love) is established in a sequence in which he gazes at her through his shop window while she is looking in another direction. And in *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) there is a scene in which Henriette Girard sees her long separated sister in the street from the vantage point of a high window. She shouts to attract her attention. But the sister is blind, and the distance between them so great that it is impossible to gauge where Henriette is. And Henriette cannot get to the street because she is so high up. Here the lack of reciprocal point of view shots and the eyeline match is clearly both motivated and intensified by the sister’s blindness.

In addition to the refusal of an exchange of looks across point of view structures and the eyeline match, poignancy can also come from a narrative strategy in which optical point of view and character knowledge are differentiated from one another. In *Only Yesterday* (directed by John M Stahl, 1933), Mary Lane searches the columns of parading soldiers home from the war for the father of her child. Initially, she cannot see him. Then she catches sight of him across the street. She rushes over and touches his arm. He turns round: there is a matching of eyelines, an exchange of looks. But although he sees her, he does not recognise her. He has forgotten her and their night of love. There is a coincidence of optical point of view, but a marked non-coincidence of character point of view. The film is structured around such moments of coincidence and non-coincidence, as is *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. When Stefan and Lisa meet again at the opera, they exchange looks and Stefan pursues Lisa to the opera foyer, but he does not realise who she is. Lisa knows who he is, but is unaware that he does not recognise her until later, when she goes to his apartment. Every time they meet, in fact, there are discrepancies of knowledge and awareness of various kinds across an insistence of exchanged looks, point of view shots and eyeline matches.

Moretti’s thesis about the timing of the coincidence of knowledge and point of view is also well illustrated by *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Stefan indeed comes to realise who Lisa is and to know of her love too late—her letter has been written on her deathbed. Shots of Lisa from Stefan’s point of view recur as Stefan’s memories at the moment of his realisation. Points of view in the optical and narrative senses at last coincide—but Lisa is dead. *Imitation of Life* (directed by Douglas Sirk, 1958) and *Some Came Running* (directed by Vincente Minnelli, 1958) provide other examples of films in which pathos is the product of a realisation that comes too late, and in which this is underlined by the death of one of the characters—the one unrecognised or misunderstood by those left to grieve: Annie in the former instance and Ginny in the latter. As Lisa's letter puts it: ‘if only you could have recognised what was always yours’ (my emphasis).

In addition to films like these, though, there do exist poignant and tearful films in which characters do not die, and in which the coin-
cidence of points of view is not too late. To return to The Big Parade and Yanks, the scenes which I have been discussing end with a coincidence of each of the kinds of point of view I have tried to identify. The characters become aware that they are searching for one another, that they love one another, and this moment of awareness is marked by an exchange of points of view and a meeting of looks across an eyeline match.

Generally, melodramas like All That Heaven Allows and Magnificent Obsession (directed by Sirk in 1955 and 1954, respectively) end with a coincidence of point of view in the narrative sense. And this coincidence is not (quite) too late. It is true that there is often a degree of qualification in these endings (a mark of loss or potential loss, a cost), and in the case of Sirk’s films in particular a degree of irony. And there is a particularly interesting pattern to melodramas which end ‘happily’ and tearfully—like All That Heaven Allows, The Big Parade and Seventh Heaven (directed by Frank Borzage, 1927), in which the cost of the achievement of the coincidence of points of view and the couple’s union seems marked in terms of an impairment of masculinity, male castration. At the end of Seventh Heaven, Chico has seemingly returned from the dead—but he is blind. Ron Kirby lies paralysed in bed at the end of All That Heaven Allows, and at the end of The Big Parade, James Apperson eventually finds his lover in France, but by then he has lost a leg in battle. Nevertheless, the coincidence does come in time. It is not too late—the couple are still alive.

This means, I think, not that Moretti’s thesis is simply wrong, but that it needs qualification. Time in general and the timing of the coincidence of points of view in particular are indeed crucial—not that the coincidence is always too late (though it may be, of course), but rather that it is always delayed. Tears can come whether the coincidence comes too late or just in time, provided there is a delay, and the possibility, therefore, that it may come too late. Tears in either case are still ‘the product of powerlessness’, though not necessarily always because ‘it is clear how the present state of affairs should be changed—and that this change is impossible.’ What is impossible is not change as such, but the spectator’s ability to intervene and make the change. The spectator is powerless not so much before each situation, the state of affairs at any one point in a film, but rather in relation to the course the narrative will take, whether the state of things changes or not. The spectator is in a position of knowledge and power vis-à-vis the characters. The spectator knows the facts of the situation, the characters’ true feelings, how and why they act, think and feel as they do, a position accorded them by the narrative’s hierarchical point of view structure. But the spectator cannot determine the course events will take, a course which, as we have seen, is often markedly ‘arbitrary’ (full of ‘continual surprises, sensational developments’). The lack of spectatorial power is all the greater because a degree of knowledge is available through the structure of points of view: the lack is all the more acute because the characters are even more powerless, even more unaware, and because we, as spectators, are aware of that. Will the characters become aware of one another’s feelings, thoughts and
intentions, things of which we, in our position of relative knowledge, are only too well aware. Or if they are mutually aware, will things turn out all right—or will events intervene to separate them in one way or another? We have to wait and see. We are dependent, not on time in the abstract, but on the time of the narrative and its narration. And the longer there is delay, the more we are likely to cry, because the powerlessness of our position will be intensified, whatever the outcome of events, 'happy' or 'sad', too late or just in time.

So, tears in melodrama come in part from some of the fundamental characteristics of its narratives and modes of narration. A particular place is constructed for the spectator, a place from which, like Lisa (and Stefan), we are led to wish 'if only': if only this character realised the other's worth, if only she or he were aware of the other's existence, if only they had met in different circumstances in a different time, in a different place, 'if only you could have recognised what was always yours' (my emphasis). However, these narratives themselves do not fully account for the existence or nature of the wish. They construct a position from which to wish, but not the wish itself. In order to account for the wish we have to turn to the issue of fantasy and seek to identify the kinds of fantasy that melodrama tends to involve.

Melodramas tend to deal in terms of subject matter with desire and its vicissitudes. As a genre marked by emotional hyperbole, by what Peter Brooks has called 'grandiose emotional states', melodrama involves extremes of polarised emotion: love and hate, joy and despair, and so on. These extremes mark and are marked by the vicissitudes of desire: its coming into existence, its realisation (brief or lasting) or its failure, and in particular the blockages to its fulfilment. The constantly changing and apparently arbitrary course of events articulates and intensifies these vicissitudes, and, in turn, is motivated by them. Blockages, barriers and bars to the fulfilment of desire are constantly introduced as events change course.

These blockages are characterised and motivated in different ways. They may be specified, for instance, in social terms, as the product of family circumstances or the strictures of class and social propriety. As an older and 'respectable' widow, Cary Scott feels barred from marrying Ron Kirby in All That Heaven Allows, caught between her desire and her social circumstances. As a courtesan, the heroine of Camille (directed by George Cukor, 1937) has to renounce her love for the hero. Such blockages may be specified in terms of physical or psychical impairment (as happens to both Cary and Ron at different points in All That Heaven Allows). Or they may be specified as the product of Chance, Fate or Destiny. Outside events simply and unexpectedly intervene. War breaks out, or, against all the odds (and the rules of realist motivation), Battling Burrows' crony in Broken Blossoms just happens to be in Cheng Huan's shop at the moment when Lucy, unaware of his presence, just happens to knock over an item of crockery, causing him to investigate and discover her whereabouts. In practice, of course, these forms of blockage can, and usually do, overlap. War breaks out in Seventh Heaven, but

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14 Peter Brooks, op cit, p 35.
Chico goes to the front out of a sense of national duty (he wishes to defend Paris from the Germans). The strictures of social propriety and in particular the obligations and responsibilities of marriage and children that weigh so heavily upon Laura in *Brief Encounter* are intensified by the fact that one of the children just happens to have an accident, and that she and her lover just happen to be seen together by Laura's acquaintances. And so on.

Inasmuch as desire is central to melodrama, so, too, is fantasy. For fantasy, as Elizabeth Cowie has argued, is the site and, in many senses the mode of existence, of desire.\(^{15}\) Fantasy is the setting of desire, is its 'veritable *mise-en-scène*'.\(^{16}\) But all genres, indeed all fictions, involve fantasy and, therefore, desire. Is there any specificity to the forms of desire and fantasy involved in melodrama?

One answer perhaps would argue that the characteristic form of desire in melodrama is adult, heterosexual desire, and that the aim of its fantasy is the union of an adult, heterosexual couple. This may be prevented, delayed or blocked for the kinds of reasons and in the kinds of ways outlined above. Such an answer would be problematic in that it does not differentiate between *sexuality* and *love*, either as forms of desire (or aims of desire) or as the mode of union of the fantasy. Sexual desire (and its fulfilment) can after all be represented in forms from which love is often absent—in pornography, for instance. In a film like *Broken Blossoms*, it becomes evident that the key to the melodramatic fantasy is not the union of a couple through sexuality, but rather the union of a couple through love. For *Broken Blossoms* involves the representation of a love and the union of a couple to whom sexuality, as such, is a threat. The film constructs sexuality as exclusively male. Female sexuality simply does not exist: Lucy is young, innocent and childlike, her married friend

\[^{15}\text{Elizabeth Cowie,}\]
\[^{16}\text{ibid, p 79.}\]
The childlike Lucy of *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is solely a suffering bearer of children, and the prostitutes who advise her against their trade do so as adjuncts to— and sufferers from— a sexuality which is male. Furthermore, male sexuality is specified exclusively as a form of violent aggression. This is most evident in the characterisation of Battling Burrows, Lucy's father, who is a boxer, and who beats her violently with a whip whose tip can, in a number of shots, be seen dangling between his legs. Lucy finds momentary comfort—and love—from Cheng Huan. The threat to that love comes primarily from outside. But it comes also from the possibility that Cheng Huan's love may be *sexual*. In the bedroom scene, as he lavishes her with clothes, flowers and affection, there occurs a moment at which, in a point of view shot from
Lucy's position, he leans in close-up towards the camera, as if to kiss her. At that moment, and at that moment only, he takes on the connotations of aggression and menace that had hitherto characterised her father and Evil Eye, another Chinese. Prior to this moment, Cheng Huan had been characterised as very feminine. In an extraordinary sequence earlier in the film, in which Lucy is caught unawares between two looks, that of Cheng Huan and that of Evil Eye, the former had been explicitly differentiated from the latter on the grounds of the nature of their looks. Cheng Huan is loving, tender and protective. Evil Eye's is leering, menacing and sexual. Here, though, the threatened kiss produces a marking of look and facial expression almost identical to that of Evil Eye. Racial difference is stressed here, too. Cheng Huan is not only male, he is Oriental. Race and gender both emerge here to mark and re-mark an impossible and menacing otherness that threatens both Lucy and the union of the couple. Sexuality involves an irreducible otherness—an other body—and this must be repressed in order for the union through love to sustain itself. For the fantasy of the union through love to be sustained, sexuality must either be repressed or sublimated: Cheng Huan then kisses not Lucy's lips, but her hand.17

It may well be argued that the fantasy articulated in Griffith's film is a particular—and particularly perverse—one. While it may in some senses be extreme, though, it does illustrate the extent to which, in a classic melodrama, a fantasy of love can be differentiated from a fantasy of sex (at least as conventionally understood, i.e. a fantasy involving or understood as involving sexual activity; the supreme mark of this in classical Hollywood melodrama is, of course, the kiss). This is all the more important inasmuch as there are a number of melodramas which centre

17 For a discussion of the theme of the 'tragic Mulatto', see Thomas Cripps, From Sarnbo to Superspade.
not on an adult, heterosexual couple, but on other relations, notably that between a mother and child (as in *Stella Dallas* and the second half, certainly, of *Imitation of Life*). And in tear-jerking films beyond the province of melodrama proper, like *E.T.* and *The Yearling*, in part, perhaps, because of a particular ideological conception of childhood, sexuality is never an explicit issue. What is at issue is a relationship of caring and love between two characters (in these instances a boy and an extra-terrestrial and a boy and a young deer).

To Lacan, love is ‘fundamentally narcissistic’\(^{18}\). The ‘field of love, that is to say... the framework of narcissism... is made up of the insertion of the *aut erotisch* in the organized interests of the ego.’\(^{19}\) The object of desire is the desire of the other; one loves an other in order to be loved, desires an other in order to be desired. Nowhere is this clearer than in Chaplin’s films, which although comedies are of course renowned for their pathos. This pathos stems not only from the articulation of a wish to be loved across the relations between the Chaplin character and his heroines, it stems in addition from a marking of this wish in the relationship established between the Chaplin figure and the spectator. For the spectator, the figure is *lovable*, but for many characters in the films he is a disturbance, a nuisance, worthy only of ridicule, rejection or contempt. They have no access to our knowledge and position as spectators. We know he is worthy of love and affection; they, often, do not. Hence the pathos and tears marking the endings of those films in which he is rejected. Perhaps the most tearful of Chaplin’s endings occurs in *City Lights* (1931) which involves very ‘melodramatic’ hierarchies of relative knowledge, perception and awareness, and constantly arbitrary turns in the course of events (most markedly in the sudden reversals of behaviour of the rich man who befriends and welcomes the Little Tramp when drunk and rejects him when sober).

The Little Tramp falls in love with a blind flower seller (her restricted knowledge as to his true identity marked precisely by her blindness). He accumulates enough money to have her sent away for surgery to restore her sight, pretending all the while that he is rich and can easily afford it. We know, of course, that he isn’t, that the accumulation of money is difficult and that he is motivated by pity and love. While she is away having her operation, the Little Tramp is jailed. When released, he wanders through the streets looking tired, disconsolate and shabbier than ever. We know that this is unjust and of course feel sorry for him (feel love for him). Suddenly, he sees the flower seller, her eyes now restored, through the window of the florist’s shop in which she is now working. He gazes at her through the window, the camera placed behind his shoulder (thus a kind of displaced or indirect point of view shot of the kind very familiar in Hollywood narrative films). Cut to inside the shop, the camera now behind *her* shoulder. She sees him and starts to laugh at this absurdly shabby figure looking longingly at her. (‘I think I’ve made a conquest’, she laughs.) At this point, the discrepancies between character knowledge and point of view are almost unbearably marked. Potential mutual recognition is delayed. The flower seller comes out of
the shop to give the Little Tramp a flower. Their hands touch. At last she recognises him, recognises his touch, and realises who he is. At which point the spectator, already deeply moved, is liable simply to burst into tears. This is due in part to the almost paradigmatically melodramatic point of view structure involved here. But it also happens because the spectator wishes the Chaplin character to be recognised and loved, because the fulfilment of the wish is delayed and because, nevertheless, it eventually comes.

Melodrama is full of characters who wish to be loved, who are worthy of love, and whom the spectator therefore wishes to be loved: Lisa in Letter from an Unknown Woman, Donnelly in The Reckless Moment (Max Ophuls, 1949), Charlotte Vale in Now, Voyager (directed by Irving Rapper, 1942), Mary Lane in Only Yesterday, Lucy in Broken Blossoms, Ginny in Some Came Running (directed by Vincente Minnelli, 1958). But the spectator wishes for more than that. He or she wishes these characters to be loved in order to satisfy his or her own wish for the union of the couple. The root of this wish lies in a nostalgic fantasy of childhood characterised by union with the mother: a state of total love, satisfaction, and dyadic fusion.

One can clearly locate particular versions of a wish for union with the mother in the work of directors specialising in melodrama. For Griffith, the sexuality involved in the wish is disavowed, by characterising sexuality as the property of the father (and/or of the racial other). The figure of the mother is central in a film like Intolerance (1916), but it is often displaced onto feminised males or childlike and innocent females (the mother's sexuality thus further disavowed), both of whom may be marked as motherly, being capable of love, care, tenderness and, in
These remarks on Griffith are based on viewing only a few of his films (most of them features). They should therefore be treated as provisional and to some extent speculative.

As Thomas Elsaesser has argued, the films of Vincente Minnelli are marked by the wish on the part of their protagonists to order the world according to their dreams, desires and visions, to construct the world in their own image. In his musicals, this wish can be achieved, but in the melodramas, rarely so. In Minnelli's films, the wish for fusion with the mother is thus figured as the wish for a fusion of self and world, a wish which finds its articulation quite explicitly as aesthetic fantasy: the characters who wish are singers and dancers, film producers, film directors, novelists, painters, each seeking obsessively both to merge with and separate themselves from the world through the practice of representation. Interestingly, both the failure and the achievement of the wish and its fantasy are marked in terms of symptoms of insanity and mental disturbance. In The Cobweb (1955), Lust for Life (1956) and Two Weeks in Another Town (1962) this marking is explicit. It is certainly implicit in The Bad and the Beautiful (1952) and Some Came Running (1959), whose protagonists are nothing if not obsessively neurotic. The achievement of the wish courts psychosis and death (as in Lust for Life). Its failure produces in Minnelli's melodramas an intense, agonised and often uncontrollable anguish: the characters are permanently and neurotically scarred by a fundamental loss of and separation from the mother, by the dissolution of a union they wish desperately to restore.

A number of Frank Borzage's films, most notably, perhaps, Seventh Heaven and Street Angel (1928) are marked by a classic male fantasy of union with the mother. The heroine is a 'fallen' woman. She is degraded or tainted in some way, is rescued by the male and comes to attain the status of a madonna in a union of 'spiritual' love: the mother is shorn of her sexuality (the mark of her degradation, the sign of her desire for a rival—the father) and thus restored as the exclusive source and object of love for her son.

A scene in Imitation of Life articulates one of the major components of the fantasy of union, linking it to the issue and importance of knowledge, point of view, understanding and awareness in melodrama. Annie, a black maid, goes for the second time to see her fair-skinned daughter backstage. This time, though, she will not force her daughter to leave, to give up her job as a showgirl and return home. She will let Sarah Jane do as she wishes. Sarah Jane's room-mate arrives. In order to avoid embarrassment (and possibly jealousy to Sarah Jane's career), Annie pretends to be her daughter's former nanny. Sarah Jane's anger has dissipated once she realises she will not be exposed and forced to leave. Annie has to go. She and Sarah Jane embrace, Annie to the right of frame, her face obscured, Sarah Jane to the left, her face visible to the spectator. Sarah Jane says 'goodbye' then mouths inaudibly but visibly the word 'Mama', precisely the word Annie would like to but cannot hear. This instance of failed communication, here focused directly on the figure of the mother,
is only one of many such instances in melodrama. Peter Brooks, in his discussion of melodrama in literature and on the stage, discusses the issue of failed or inadequate communication in terms of the importance of gestures (as opposed to words) and in terms of what he calls 'the text of muteness', in which cries and gestures become the only adequate vehicles for the articulation of feelings. The cry and the gesture indicate 'a kind of fault or gap in the code, the space that marks its inadequacies to convey a full freight of emotional meaning'. Tears very often come in this gap. It is a gap marked not only in the significance of gesture and the inarticulate cry, but also in the non-coincidence of points of view and knowledge discussed earlier, and in addition in the figures of blindness and muteness that occur so often in melodrama, from Orphans of the Storm to Magnificent Obsession, from Moonrise (directed by Frank Borzage, 1949) to Letter from an Unknown Woman (where Jean, the servant, the one who knows, precisely cannot speak). One of the reasons instances of this gap can be so moving is that they mark a form of failure of the fantasy of union—a fantasy of oneness, therefore total and effortless communication and mutual understanding. When in Seventh Heaven Diane and Chico commune with one another regularly at eleven o'clock, despite and across the barriers of distance and circumstance that separate them physically, their relationship is marked as being of this kind. One of the most moving scenes in the film occurs towards the end. Diane (and the spectator) has for the third time been told that Chico is dead. She cannot believe it. If he is dead, then, as she says, their eleven o'clock meetings never happened: they, their union, 'heaven' were all an illusion, a fantasy in the conventional sense of the term.

The fulfilment of the fantasy of union is rare, precarious and often momentary, but tears in melodrama can come from this fulfilment. When in Seventh Heaven Chico returns, against all the odds (and all the rules of probability of a realist system of verisimilitude), the film indeed moves its spectator to tears. The union, the eleven o'clock meetings, 'heaven' are affirmed as 'real' after all. However, tears come more often from the destruction of the union or the failure of the fantasy and its wish. One of the most moving and tearful of all scenes in melodrama is the last scene in Imitation of Life, the scene of Annie's funeral. It becomes especially poignant (and almost unbearably moving) when Sarah Jane rushes into the street where the funeral procession is taking place and up to Annie's coffin, screaming for her mother. She clings to the coffin, sobbing that she loved her mother, and accusing herself of having killed her, of being responsible for her death. But her mother will never hear the declaration of love that we, as spectators, can hear. It is too late. Sarah Jane is in tears. The spectator is in tears. Whoever is responsible, the mother and her love are gone. As in infancy, crying here emerges precisely at the point of realisation of the loss of union of mother and child. It serves to mark and articulate the absence of the mother and the wish for her return, for a state of being prior to this fundamental separation and loss. But separation and loss have always already occurred. Tears are thus the sign of Moretti's powerlessness twice over.

23 Peter Brooks, op cit, pp 56-80.
24 ibid, p 67.
It is in reality *always* too late.

If this is simply the case, though, there are few grounds for an *enjoyment* of melodrama, for the *pleasure* of being touched and giving way to tears. Melodramas would just be unbearably painful. Where, then, does the enjoyment and the pleasure come from, and how do they figure? I'd like to propose a number of avenues of approach to this question. First, if melodrama is, as a genre, especially concerned with love and desire and is therefore especially marked by certain characteristics of fantasy, pleasure will come from the pleasure of fantasy itself, a pleasure which resides in the process of articulation of a wish rather than in any representation of the attainment of its object: "The pleasure of fantasy lies in the setting out, not in the having of the object." In any story, pleasure comes primarily from the process of its telling, rather than from the nature of its ending. Moreover, if that ending articulates the fulfilment of a wish, the attainment of the object of desire, any satisfaction that may come will always be accompanied by a sense of loss. For
the attainment and the ending mark the loss of the pleasures of fantasy and wishing themselves, while the provision of an object for the wish can never ultimately satisfy, since the founding object of any wish is always already elsewhere:

... the demands of narrative may obscure this, for the typical ending will be a resolution of the problems, the wars, feuds, etc, the achievement of union in marriage of the hero and heroine, etc. Yet inevitably the story will fall prey to diverse diversions, delays, obstacles and other means to postponing the ending. For although we all want the couple to be united, and the obstacles overcome, we don’t want the story to end. And marriage is one of the most definitive endings. The pleasure is in the happening and continuing to happen; in how it will come about, and not in the moment of having happened, when it will fall back into loss, in the past.²⁶

Thus, if there is fulfilment, a ‘happy’ ending, it is at the cost of the loss of the story and the fantasy and their pleasures. There is a pleasure, clearly, in the representation of a fulfilment, but noticeably, in melodrama at least, insofar as there is something impossible, incredible or fantastic about it. When Diane and Chico are re-united at the end of Seventh Heaven, Chico not only seems to have risen from the dead (against all the rules of probability and verisimilitude); in doing so he defies the authority of three major social institutions which have each certified his death: the Army, the Government and the Church. The fantasy is fulfilled, but the fulfilment is precisely implausible, incredible, extraordinary. It can indeed last only as long as the fiction lasts. Crying is both a mark of the fulfilment—at last it has come, at the very end of the story—and its loss—the story and the fulfilment are soon both over. However, if they are over this time, in this particular film, the wish and its fantasy are not themselves lost, destroyed forever; they are shown as capable of fulfilment; they can hence be re-engaged, re-articulated, perhaps finally fulfilled in the next film, the next melodrama (or the next episode of a soap opera).

This last point is applicable too to melodramas with ‘unhappy’ endings, melodramas which involve the representation of the failure or unattainability of the wish. For an ‘unhappy’ ending can function as a means of postponing rather than destroying the possibility of fulfilment of a wish. An ‘unhappy’ ending may function as a means of satisfying a wish to have the wish unfulfilled—in order that it can be preserved and re-stated rather than abandoned altogether.

In different ways, then, the melodrama with the ‘happy’ ending and the melodrama with the ‘unhappy’ ending can engage both the pleasures of fantasy and wishing and provide satisfaction by preserving them. But why the pleasure, specifically, in tears? As indicated above, tears in childhood arise as a consequence of loss, the loss, particularly, of a sense of union with the mother. However, crying isn’t simply an articulation of this loss, it is also a demand for its reparation—a demand addressed most commonly to the mother, who thus is situated in fantasy as a figure

²⁶ ibid, pp 79-80.
capable of fulfilling that demand. Crying, therefore, is not just an expression of pain or displeasure or non-satisfaction. As a demand for satisfaction, it is the vehicle of a wish—a fantasy—that satisfaction is possible, that the object can be restored, the loss eradicated. There would be no tears were there no belief that there might be an Other capable of responding to them. Crying is thus fully compatible with—indeed perhaps the fundamental mark of—the kind of paradoxical structure of fantasy, satisfaction and pleasure that melodrama fundamentally involves. Just as a wish (the wish that there be somewhere an attainable object of desire) can be retained through the apparent non-fulfilment of a wish, so tears can mark both the failure of a wish (the loss or non-attainment of the object in this insistence, in this particular film) while articulating a demand for its reparation in terms which imply that such a demand can be answered, that such reparation be possible. Tears, in this sense can be comforting in a very fundamental way.

It is worth returning, finally, to Moretti. Although the points he makes about the temporal structure of melodramatic narratives and about crying as a sign of powerlessness have considerable purchase, they must, I think, be modified in the light of the arguments made above. There is indeed an insistence in the narrative structure of many melodramas that mutual recognition, union through love, the attainment of the object of desire are impossible—because it is always too late. Tears come in part as a consequence. They mark a powerlessness of the reader or spectator vis-à-vis the temporal articulation of this impossibility in the process of the narrative. However, the fantasy structure of melodrama can inscribe simultaneously the ultimate possibility of all these things, can allow a retention of the wish, through the very same narrative characteristics. The tears, in their function as demand, inscribe a position of narcissistic power in implying an Other who will respond. Point of view and hierarchical structures of relative knowledge are crucial here. They allow a degree of separation-in-identification with the characters and scenario which binds the spectator into the fantasy and generates empathy with the protagonists, while permitting a retention of the fantasy whether or not it is fulfilled by these characters in this film. It is always too late, yet it might have been possible. This balance, this paradox, is articulated precisely in the last words of Lisa’s letter to Stefan. The words ‘if only’ mark both the fact of loss, that it is too late, yet simultaneously the possibility that things might have been different, that the fantasy could have been fulfilled, the object of desire indeed attained:

If only you could have recognised what was always yours, could have found what was never lost. If only....

I would like to thank Andrew Higson and Elizabeth Cowie for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.
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