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Ghost World as Dialectic

Much has been made of the reminiscence of Todd Haynes' recent film *Far from Heaven* to the kinds of melodramas that flourished in the Hollywood of the 1950s. It self-consciously imitates the work of genre heavyweight Douglas Sirk. As Roger Ebert says, *Far from Heaven* "is like the best and bravest film of 1957" (Ebert:2002). But this sort of imitation, as self-aware as it may be, of the technique is certainly not the only place one can find echoes of melodrama in the cinema of today. While we have seen few of the classical Hollywood melodramas in recent years, there are touches of the melodramatic all through contemporary cinema. But this permeation is not simply a phenomenon of melodrama being dressed up in the clothing and conventions of another genre. Rather, it is a process of genuine hybridization, incorporating the melodramatic but altering it and recontextualizing it in terms of the expectations of the new genre. I intend to examine *Ghost World* (Zwigoff, 2001) as a new iteration of melodrama tempered by late-20th century cynicism and reacting against the problems of life in a mass marketed world. In technique, style, and approach, it follows many of the established conventions. In theme, it is opposed to much of the body of work in the melodramatic genre. Thus, we see here two-thirds of a Hegelian dialectic—thesis and antithesis. And by combining them together into one body, we are provided with the remaining piece, synthesis.

It has been said that a film belongs to a genre only insofar as it meets an audience's expectations of that genre (Knee 1986). The question must be asked, then, what are the expectations associated with the melodrama? While it is my intention to

define the genre contextually in dialogue with my analysis of *Ghost World*, it behooves me to devote a few lines here to a definition of melodrama before beginning.

In a strictly denotative sense, melodrama refers to “a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects” (Elsaesser 1972:74). But a denotative definition is rarely the last word. Melodrama carries a great deal of baggage with it. The connotations associated with the genre are legion and quite varied. One may think of anything from stereotypical silent era melodramas' moustache-twirling villains to the caricatured trapped-housewife weepies of the 1950s. Peter Brooks (1985) provides a partial list of some of the connotative meanings associated with melodrama:

the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety (p. 58)

However, Brooks sees a “desire to express all” as the “fundamental characteristic” of the “breathless pitch of melodrama” (p. 52). He characterizes the so-called melodramatic imagination, which is a transhistorical and transmedia configuration, as a “narrative voice, with its grandiose questions and hypotheses, [which] leads us in a movement through and beyond the surface of things to what lies behind...which is the true scene of the highly colored drama” (p.51). The melodramatic imagination is a way of seeing and understanding the world, and particularly the social relations therein, that focuses on, to borrow Woodward's phrase, “the primacy of emotion” (1984:587).

Another fundamental characteristic of melodrama is that “its height of popularity seems to coincide...with periods of intense social and ideological crisis” (Elsaesser 1972:70). It would be difficult to argue that neither the 1950s or the end of the 20th century were not such crisis periods. Thomas Elsaesser suggests that

melodrama is a genre particularly linked to the bourgeoisie. He indicates that they have an ideological subtext that “record[s] the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism” (p. 70). This statement is made, in particular, about the melodramatic tendencies of literature and drama during the French Revolution. However, if one substitutes traditionalism for feudalism, the connections to a more contemporary situation are inescapable. Consider a film like Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), a nearly paradigmatic example of the genre which has lent its title to more puns than any of its peers. The plot revolves around the plight of older woman Jane Wyman, a respectably middle class character, who chafes under the disapproval that traditional society metes out upon her relationship with younger man Rock Hudson.

It is upon these two fundamental attributes, the emphasis on the internal life and the conflict between emergent bourgeois and traditional ideologies, that the rest of the genre's characteristics hang. They are foundational to the other techniques and approaches that will be examined as part of the analysis of *Ghost World*.

Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World* was one of the most idiosyncratically wonderful films of 2001. The film, loosely based on Daniel Clowes' comic book of the same title, is the story of teenaged girls Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) in the summer following their graduation from high school. Rebecca gets a job at a Starbuck's-esque coffee shop and is beginning to cement herself in a sort of working-middle-class position. Enid, on the other hand, is taking a remedial art class to complete her high school requirements and makes some abysmal attempts to secure a living wage. Meanwhile, she meets Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a somewhat eccentric collector of old blues and ragtime 78s. Their friendship grows, even as Enid becomes distanced from

childhood friend Rebecca. However, Enid's inability to commit to anything ends up threatening both relationships and any plans for her own future. There are numerous opportunities for the melodramatic within the plot structure of this film.

One such opportunity is what Noël Carroll (1980) calls the family plot of melodrama. He says that the way that melodramas conceive of the moral order of the universe posits the reunification of the nuclear family as both “natural” and “restorative” in nature (1980:189). This is the “moral ecology” mentioned in the title of his article. This family plot is present in *Ghost World*, but it takes a back seat to many of the other elements of the film. Enid's father (Bob Balaban) is attempting to reconcile with an old girlfriend—Maxine (Terry Garr). In the original comic book, this plot is slightly different. Enid's dad is reconciling with an ex-wife named Carol, which heightens the identification with Carroll's family plot (Clowes 1993:69). However, unlike the 1950s family melodramas, the reunification and restoration of a nuclear family is not a good thing in *Ghost World*. In both the film and the graphic novel, Enid dreads the reunification of her father with Maxine/Carol. Indeed, it is one of the events that precipitates her abrupt departure at the film's conclusion. It seems that the moral ecology and natural order that marked the courses of older melodramas do not survive in their contemporary counterparts.

This may seem like a small point to make, but it is central to the way that events happen in melodrama. The assumption that there is a natural order leads to a conclusion that everything happens for a reason. There is meaning apparent in everything. This leads to the “intensified symbolization of everyday actions” and every day objects that are often witnessed as distinctive of melodrama (Elsaesser 1972: 79, 77). This does not happen in *Ghost World*. Instead, the film provides numerous “empty

signifiers”, object which invite reading by the audience but defy interpretation. Enid and Rebecca become convinced that a couple they see in a restaurant are Satanists for no particular reason. Attention is drawn to a pair of pants lying on the sidewalk. Enid makes a drawing of Don Knotts in her art class simply because she “likes Don Knotts”. Indeed, in the art class, even those objects that are meant to have meaning have no logical relationship to the concepts behind them; they are presented in a satirical fashion by the film. The idea that something can carry a meaning that objectively signifies some idea that makes sense within a larger cosmology is denied. Given some of the cultural developments that have taken place since the 1950s that shattered many of the myths about what constitutes the “natural”—race and gender, for example—it is not surprising that this element has faded away from the reformed melodrama of contemporary cinema.

Much of *Ghost World* is spent railing against phoniness. Enid's story is one of a search for authenticity in a mass-culture world. This is constructed in terms of hypocrisy and conformity. These things are symptomatic of Elsaesser's linkage of the melodramatic form to the middle class consciousness, once the idea is filtered through a contemporary perspective. Consider classic Hollywood melodramas such as Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953) or Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959). Both of these films involve the rise of show business heavyweights from obscurity. The climax of the trajectory of this aspect of their plots is success—fame, a beautiful home, servants, and financial security. While one may argue that this confirmation of middle American values of wealth and material comfort are complicated by the films, any such complication is done implicitly. *Ghost World* does so quite explicitly, attacking this materialist, bourgeois resolution and the contradictions that lie therein.

In high school Enid and Rebecca were outsiders, giving them a vantage point from which to see the inauthentic nature of most things in modern life. An early scene at a post-graduation party cements this understanding of the two characters. They stand apart, mocking and parodying the scene and the people before them. Many characters and ideas are presented in the film for the express purpose of being torn apart by Enid and Rebecca on the basis of its hypocrisy. A young white man who vocally expresses his enthusiasm for reggae music is labeled as “the biggest idiot of all time”. A stand-up comedian named Joey McCobb is billed on the television as “the weirdest man in comedy”. This immediately prompts the question: “If he's so weird, why is he wearing Nikes?” After a performance by an old ragtime guitarist at a bar is generally ignored by the patrons, the headlining act comes to the stage. This band called Blueshammer is made up of young, white, apparently middle class men who proceed to sing a song called the “Pickin' Cotton Blues”. A chain of '50s mini-mall diners called Wowsville play gangster rap music inside. These hypocritical characters and situations are made to appear as ludicrous as possible. They are straw men of a sort, created to be ripped to pieces, but they stand in for a larger phenomenon. The ghost world to which the title refers is this bland environment of mass marketed personalities, places, and ideas. It is this loss of self and authenticity to which the girls are forced to respond.

Enid and Rebecca's initial solution is nonconformity. Their critical stance towards society is part of this. They self-identify as outsiders. Enid says at one point that the “creeps, weirdos, [and] losers” of life are quote-unquote their people. However, their nonconformist stance does not actually solve anything for them. Rebecca, for example, is still somewhat bourgeois at heart. She works in a coffee shop that could be any

number of franchised locations and quickly grows tired of the social pariahs that once made up “their people”. When looking for an apartment, she advocates getting “semi-expensive outfits” in order to pass for affluent middle class renters. Shopping for brightly coloured, pseudo-designer plastic cups for their apartment, the consumerist in her seems to come out. Rebecca's solution to her distaste for the values of mainstream bourgeois society has been to identify herself with the working class, though she never seems to give up her ambitions to a more or less middle class lifestyle. Enid does not come up with any better solution. In one scene of the film, Enid dyes her hair green and puts on a leather jacket. As she explains, she is not a faddish devotee to the wallet-chain pop that is identified as punk by mass culture today, but is wearing an “original 1977 punk rock look”. She is wearing a look. Identifying with a look. This is superficial rebellion at best, and no more genuine than anything created by the mass society that she detests.

The alternative to these hypocritical, inauthentic options offered by the film is embodied in the character Seymour who, as Enid puts it, is “the exact opposite of everything [she] hates”. Seymour is her link to certain possibilities for authenticity. One could see their relationship as somewhat analogous to that of Hal and Madge in *Picnic* (Logan 1955). Hal offers Madge a possibility of a different kind of life, one which does not have the comforts and trappings of her life as the Neewollah Queen or her romantic relationship with the town's bourgeois dauphin Alan Benson, but provides the possibility of real fulfillment. The record with Skip James' “Devil Got My Woman” which so entralls Enid is sold to her by Seymour. He is a collector of relics from a time that most people ignore. But his record room is Enid's “dream room”. She is fascinated by the antiques he has amassed. They are a genuine connection to the past. As Seymour so faithfully

points out, his original 78 of “Devil Got My Woman” is one of only five known copies. Seymour stands out from the rest of the crowd. As he says, he “can't relate to 99% of humanity”. Fulfillment is easy for most people in today's world, “give them a Big Mac and a pair of Nikes and they're happy”. There is a scene in which Seymour explains to Enid the racist origins of fast food franchise Cook's Chicken, which was originally known as the “Coon Chicken Inn”. She asks him if he thinks things were better in the time period for which he has so much affection, given the prevalence of racism. Seymour says that people “still hate each other” today, “they just know how to hide it better”; at least people were honest about it then. Seymour represents an antithetical position towards hypocrisy and mass consumerism, one which Enid finds appealing. However, she does not choose to live as Seymour does in the end of the film. It is true that he does not conform to the expectations of consumer society, but he is still shaped by it—after all, Seymour works for that self-same Cook's Chicken. Because Seymour lives his life retreating into the past, not dealing with the present, he is rendered passive, still defined by the inauthenticity of the modern world.

The ending of *Ghost World* is one of the most curious aspects of the film. There has been something of a meltdown. Enid has ended up failing her class and losing an offered scholarship to the Academy of Art and Design. She and Rebecca seem to be a few straws beyond the last one. Seymour's been fired from work, broken up with his girlfriend, and been beat up by a local tough in a convenience store. However, prospects are good for recovery. Things seem to be on the mend. But then Enid boards a bus and leaves for parts unknown without a word. This denies the audience the conclusion it seeks. Why? This may be best understood through Woodward's (1984) discussion of anti-melodrama.

Woodward says that anti-melodrama is a particular kind of modernist film that “centers on the assumption that today's society is suffused with a false melodramatic outlook and that a film should lead viewers to scrutinize their own melodramatic inclinations” (1984:586). The anti-melodrama works to create “an aesthetic distance between the film text and the viewer” and uses this to attack the “primacy of emotion” that is so integral to the melodramatic perspective (p. 586, 587). Woodward uses films by Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and RW Fassbinder as examples of anti-melodramatic cinema, especially focussing on the way the endings of these films attempt to avoid the kind of neat, emotionally-fulfilling resolution that melodramas and their viewers demand. *Ghost World* does the same thing. Its conclusion is designed to circumvent the audience's expectations for a happy ending—or anything resembling an ending at all. This undermines the melodramatic perspective and the primacy of emotion.

One of the distinctive aspects of anti-melodrama that sets it apart from other kinds of experimental cinema that are opposed to the melodramatic, is that it plays the game a little. Anti-melodramas “attempt to make viewers explicitly aware of the melodramatic perspective” by slipping “potentially melodramatic incidents and structures” into the film (Woodward 1984:586). This statement is not only helpful to understanding the anti-melodramatic ending, but also provides a way of interpreting the film as a whole. In an anti-melodrama, these melodramatic structures and configurations are set up only as a reminder of how false they are. This kind of practice has gone on throughout Zwigoff's film. Avatars of mass culture, mass hypocrisy, mass inauthenticity are paraded before the viewer in order to be torn down by the viewer. However, as has been discussed before, the characters do little to free themselves from

the same trap. Until the ending. The anti-melodramatic conclusion allows Enid to escape in a way her previous attempts had been unable to. She escapes the not only the problems inherent in her situation, but, from the perspective of the viewer and critic, escapes the entire system (the melodramatic mode) that creates those problems. This is the ultimate in nonconformity because it is not simply reactionary. Rather, Enid has taken steps at the end of the film to move beyond that kind of thinking. It may not provide the sort of ending the audience wants, but, again, that is precisely the point.

Is *Ghost World* a melodrama? Is it an anti-melodrama? I would argue that it is both and neither. It includes and exploits many melodramatic elements in the course of the film, but it undermines these. It has an anti-melodramatic ending, but works within the melodramatic perspective so perfectly for the rest of the film that it is difficult to claim that it entirely resists the melodramatic perspective. And the way in which the ending serves a purpose for both the character and the viewer to escape the melodramatic perspective imposed by the genre suggests that *Ghost World* is exploiting this anti-melodramatic mode for its own purposes. It does not simply tell the viewer that the melodramatic outlook is bad, but provides allows a way out, suggests that an alternative more substantive than token nonconformity or rebellion is possible.

This suggests to me that the film is operating in a different mode, one we can perhaps label as synthetic melodrama. In this mode, melodramatic and anti-melodramatic structures are used to undermine both the melodramatic perspective and the kind of binary thinking propagated by anti-melodramatic positions. In the search for authenticity that *Ghost World* embodies, one can neither rely on the bourgeois sentimentality of melodrama or the cold, abstract intellectualism of anti-melodrama. Rather, an approach is required that transcends both sides of this binary. I believe that

Zwigoff's *Ghost World* is an attempt at a dialectically-developed formulation that aims to do just that. The film uses melodrama and anti-melodrama to make the viewer aware of these perspectives and plays them against each other so as to display the contradictions and complications that are associated with them; then, to the haunting strains its theme, *Ghost World* leaves both perspectives behind.

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