



Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility (Theory Q)

By Jonathan Goldberg

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Offering a new queer theorization of melodrama, Jonathan Goldberg explores the ways melodramatic film and literature provide an aesthetics of impossibility. Focused on the notion of what Douglas Sirk termed the "impossible situation" in melodrama, such as impasses in sexual relations that are not simply reflections of social taboo and prohibitions, Goldberg pursues films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes that respond to Sirk's prompt. His analysis hones in on melodrama's original definition--a form combining music and drama--as he explores the use of melodrama in Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, films by Alfred Hitchcock, and fiction by Willa Cather and Patricia Highsmith, including her Ripley novels. Goldberg illuminates how music and sound provide queer ways to promote identifications that exceed the bounds of the identity categories meant to regulate social life. The interaction of musical, dramatic, and visual elements gives melodrama its indeterminacy, making it resistant to normative forms of value and a powerful tool for creating new potentials.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Melodrama* is a major work that offers a superbly original way of thinking queerness, impossibility, and melodrama together. Exploring the insistence of nonidentity in the melodramatic mode, Jonathan Goldberg reads texts by Beethoven, Sirk, Fassbinder, Haynes, Hitchcock, Highsmith, Cather, and Davies to show how melodrama, by confronting limitation, reveals that nothing is only what it seems: other readings are always available; other potentialities always inhere. Beautifully elaborated, theoretically pointed, and intellectually provocative, *Melodrama* gives thought in constant motion a chance to take center stage."

(Lee Edelman, author of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*)

"Jonathan Goldberg is always interesting and always incisive. In this wide-ranging and powerfully revisionist study he tracks the melodramatic form across music, film, fiction, and television, from *Fidelio* to *The Wire*. His suggestive readings show how melodrama's rhetoric of moral peril generates queer energy and brings about 'an aesthetics of the impossible situation.'"

(Michael Warner, author of *Publics and Counterpublics*)

"Apropos of his homo-topics, Goldberg writes beautifully, in prose vulnerable and oppositional that elevates academic vernacular to a higher aesthetic plane.... Lucky for us, Goldberg's decided we can't have our Hitchcock without our Highsmith, and aren't they a lovely pair. He writes about music in Hitchcock (something rarely considered) and explores how Highsmith thematizes music in her novels.... [Y]ou will trust Goldberg's fast-paced, suspenseful ekphrasis and delight in reliving these extraordinary reversals on the page."

(Maxe Crandall *Lambda Literary Review* 2017-04-08)

About the Author

Jonathan Goldberg is Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of English at Emory University and the author of several books, most recently *Strangers on a Train: A Queer Film Classic*. He is also the author of *Willa Cather and Others* and editor of *Queering the Renaissance*, both also published by Duke University Press.

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