

# The return of melodrama

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## **The Return of Melodrama**

### *After the Great Divide: The Dutch Case*

Many literary critics and cultural theorists nowadays agree with the idea that the normative and strict divide between high and low culture, firmly installed by Modernism at the end of the nineteenth century, has slowly disappeared during the second half of the twentieth century. While Andreas Huyssen (1986) in his seminal study *After the Great Divide* demonstrated how this gap has closed in the American, English and French cultural realm over the last fifty years, Ruiter and Smulders (1996) showed that a similar development has taken place in Dutch culture. Modernism, with its select canon of great writers, was firmly in place before the Second World War in The Netherlands. Nevertheless, it only produced one generation of Great Writers after the War, the so-called ‘Big Three’, i.e. Mulisch, Hermans, and Reve. They will never have worthy successors, since it has become impossible for any writer to attain such a canonical status. The time of Great Writers has irrevocably passed. Erica van Boven reminds us in this volume of how Modernism still structured the self-image and the literary taste of Du Perron and Ter Braak in the thirties. Both authors took pride in the fact that they only wrote for the happy few. They felt their own lofty literary endeavours to be miles above both the work of female authors and above the cheap commercial success that women writers often enjoyed. But Modernism has shrivelled away over the past decades and in the process, the ideology of the autonomy of art has been weakened. The rigid high/low divide has disappeared and market and media have acquired a tight grip on literature. Literature has become a marketable product like any other, whose success is increasingly measured by sales figures only.

The process of the undoing of Modernist practices and beliefs manifests itself on many different levels. In the first place, the autonomy of art has been undermined on the level of the artwork itself. Writers and other artists increasingly exploit all cultural realms, drawing inspiration from each and every medium, using all kinds of themes, forms, styles and artistic devices in their work without bothering about their status or their provenance. With a wink at Andy Warhol’s paintings of ordinary cans of Campbell soup, these same cans have penetrated into many former high art forms. The writers threw the doors open, to the storehouses of popular culture and everyday life and took up rejected styles, themes, and vocabularies for their own use. One effect of this ‘shopping around’ in popular culture has been that formerly ‘low’ genres have become intertwined with more lofty literary texts. The common features of the detective novel, for example, are found everywhere in literary novels. Each new novel by the Dutch writer, Renate Dorrestein, is also a thriller and the same goes for Thomas Roosenboom, Leon de Winter and many others. The era when television was seen as a threat to serious culture is long gone. Once seen as low culture on its arrival in the mid-fifties, television has now become a medium for the propagation of serious literature. Writers often appear on the screen but they no longer enjoy a privileged status and are on equal footing with other celebrities or experts.

Secondly, literary and cultural critics are no longer the guardians of artistic quality. They used to be severe as to who and what they reviewed, usually upholding the high/low

divide by condemning tasteless authors or works. Presently though, they are far less obsessed with the task of keeping art pure and unpolluted. To illustrate this we can think of the poetry critics who also discuss popular songs. The critic Guus Middag, for example, wrote a review on the song texts of Marco Borsato's CD 'De Waarheid' in 1997. Middag's piece was part of an entire page, which the NRC newspaper had devoted to the CD that sold 300.000 copies within 24 hours. Middag appreciated the way in which Borsato's text writers deviated from cliché's. Without denying the simplicity and predictability of end rimes and the downtrodden love theme, Middag certainly did not display any form of condescension toward the texts. He seemed to look for the secret of their attraction and pointed to their virtues within the framework of mildly Modernist poetics, which sought out originality, authenticity and innovation. Of course we can argue that Middag thereby left the modernist framework of interpretation intact by only allowing some previously discarded objects of analysis into that perspective. This is true, yet the framework is widened considerably in the process. Middag valued the immediate emotions, which these unsophisticated texts were able to evoke in the reader. He was respectful in his analysis of how these texts achieved their admittedly moving effect.<sup>1</sup> Middag also analysed the well-known song and 1982 Abba hit, 'The day before you came'. He appreciated the song, which creates an open space for the listener by effectively remaining silent about what had changed the grey life of the speaker. But he compared it to Wislawa Szymborska's poem, '16 mei 1973' which achieves the same result, only better. Although this canonized poem won the competition, the song was worthy of being compared to the poem. It is interesting that the novelist Marcel Möring had already discussed this Abba song in some depth ten months earlier and the critic Pieter Steinz had reacted to his analysis. Möring read it as a serious poem. He demonstrated how a song could be transformed into a complex, multi-layered and interesting text, thanks to an interpretative approach, which looks for these aspects. As far as he was concerned, 'The Day Before You Came' belonged to the category of poetry. Songs can be 'small labyrinths of language, refined aquarelle paintings, complex clockworks of Swiss precision' – exactly the description for a poem deserving careful reading. Möring's sophisticated modernist poetics transports the song to the realm of hermetic poetry. He also compared the Abba song to the classics by Strauss, Mahler and Ives. Pieter Steinz also declared the song to be a good one, but he questioned the necessity of Möring's complex academic hermeneutics. According to Steinz, the point is that songs speak to good listeners more directly. They do not need careful reading. In fact, the learned academic approach misses the obvious. Songs do not need to be forced into the upper levels of culture in order to be enjoyed and appreciated for what they are. In the meantime, Steinz based his own interpretation on a contextual reading of the song; it came into being, he says, when Abba was on the verge of breaking up, which explains its sadness. So, on the one hand, Steinz dismissed Möring's serious literary approach and on the other hand, he replaced it with an equally professional interpretative approach, albeit one that historically preceded close reading, by contextualizing the text and connecting it to the life of the author.<sup>2</sup> What this discussion shows, I think, is that pop music is taken seriously by consumers, reviewers and cultural critics alike. It is deemed worthy of attention because of its sheer popularity, but also because of its intrinsic value and the pleasure it brings. Its precise place in relation to the canon of poetry and the canon of Western classical music, Mahler and that ilk, can still be a

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<sup>1</sup> Guus Middag, 'Kalme regels' in: NRC Handelsblad. Agenda. January 30th, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Guus Middag, 'Vrije regelval. 16 mei 1973' in: NRC Handelsblad. Boeken. December 29th, 2000; Marcel Möring, 'Luister naar de tekst!' In: De Volkskrant Febr 7th, 2002; Pieter Steinz, 'Lees maar, er staat wat er staat' in: NRC 15th of Feb. 2002. Other readers mixed in this discussion with letters to the editor. They proposed different interpretations of the song – thereby showing that the meaning of 'The Day Before You Came' is not obvious at all. See letters to the editor by Dirk Aalbers in De Volkskrant February 8, 2002; by Kaja de Jong in De Volkskrant Febr. 9, 2002; and by Tjark Reininga in NRC, Febr 22, 2002

matter for debate, but there are those who already think that this debate is a thing of the past. Whatever the case, such a debate would have been unthinkable forty years ago.

Another contemporary angle to the approach to pop music seems to be the acknowledgment of its value as a historically influential part of culture. At an academic conference at the University of Nijmegen, pop music was recently discussed as an increasingly important form of cultural memory. Pop music has become a continuous source of inspiration for writers, the organizers of this conference stated, a source of frequent intertextual reference, but also a reservoir of styles and themes. For the generations who grew up in the sixties and later, pop music can only be artificially separated from other forms of culture.<sup>3</sup> My own contribution to this discussion has been that pop music has sunk into our collective cultural memory even deeper than possibly any literary text has been able to do, because of its length, its repetition of the chorus, its rhythm and music and the fact that we all have been exposed to our favourites or to hit parade songs a hundred times at least.<sup>4</sup> To conclude this analysis of the second level in the process of undoing Modernism, we can safely state that the gatekeepers of high culture have clearly opened the gates in order to allow a free flow of cultural goods.

A third level on which Modernism vanishes is in the awareness of the general public. The public does not seem to be interested in the question whether one consumes high or low culture. As long as it is good stuff no one cares. People want to be entertained, and publishers cater to this need for entertainment. It has become common practice to publish the number of copies of literary books sold in advertisements (*Publieke Werken by Thomas Roosenboom: already 10.000 sold!*). This works well as an invitation to read it, since 10.000 readers cannot be wrong. This type of advertisement causes popularity to coincide with quality. This is the way in which publishers as well as the public regard the established and new authors, young and old, male and female, indiscriminately. Quality equals media attention and commercial success. As long as it sells it must be all right. Although Van Boven demonstrates in her essay in this volume how critics still resist this commercialization of culture, they are nonetheless part of this process. No cultural mediator can fully survive outside this post-Modernist arena in which the laws of market and media reign.

This opening up of serious literature to the popular realm, the attention of literary critics to popular texts and the ongoing equation of commercial and symbolic value, does not mean that every differentiation between high and low cultural zones has vanished. In each cultural sector, be it newspapers, television, literature or film, a certain hierarchy of qualitative 'levels' is established, usually by groups of well-educated consumers. When we look at television, some broadcasting companies like NPS and VPRO are considered to be more serious, more 'high culture' so to speak, than the commercial broadcasters like RTL 4 and RTL 5. But these hierarchies seem far more flexible than they used to be. In the 'high cultural' zones of television there is also intense traffic of what was formerly seen as popular culture. When one regularly watches *Het uur van de Wolf*, a documentary programme of the VPRO, you might have seen a documentary on the South African poet Ingrid Jonker, but also one on Mary

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<sup>3</sup> Colloquium 'Pop in Literatuur' of the research group 'Cultural memory', Department Algemene Cultuurwetenschappen at the University of Nijmegen, November 8, 2002. Harry Bekkering published the lecture he offered there (on popsongs as crucial and significant literary intertexts): 'Tijdgebonden achtergrondmuziek? Pop in het werk van F. Springer en A. F. Th. Van der Heijden' in: *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse letterkunde te Leiden 2002-2003*, Leiden, Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde 2004: 27-43

<sup>4</sup> Maaïke Meijer, *Machtige melodieën. Populaire teksten uit de jaren vijftig en zestig als bron voor cultuurgeschiedenis*. (Maastricht 1999) and Maaïke Meijer, 'Het populaire lied als literatuur voor alle leeftijden' in: Piet Mooren e.a. (red) *De mondige jeugdliteratuur. Over raakvlakken van jeugdliteratuur en volkscultuur*. (Leidschendam 2004): 263-276

Servaes, the 'Zangeres Zonder Naam', featuring the last years of her life, and how she lives on in the memory of her colleagues, her friends and her fans. *Het uur van de wolf* also showed the documentary on André Hazes, *Zij gelooft in mij (She believes in me)* by John Appel. This film even won the IDFA-award for the best documentary in 1999, even though its subject, the singer André Hazes, is definitely associated with low culture, with working class masculinity, with folksy Amsterdam, including all the habits of heavy drinking, big cars, being grossly overweight, and singing sentimental and melodramatic songs. The VPRO also produced a beautiful three-episode television drama on the life of the torch-song singer Johnny Jordaan. The genre of soap has become more serious. It also attracts famous actors these days and has been innovated and renewed through 'television drama', prime time television series with a soap-structure such as *Oud Geld* (Old Money) and *Pleidooi* (Plea, a lawyer's series). Writers of this genre, like Maria Goos and Hugo Heijnen, are seen as important dramatists.

All of this implies that in cultural production nowadays 'anything goes'. It is no longer a problem when themes, genres or artistic devices have a smell and a taste of low culture to them. Boundaries between genres, between art disciplines, between different media, between youth culture and classical culture are easily crossed. The dividing line between high and low culture has become a thing of the past. Jan Wolkers was not really admitted into the Dutch literary canon in the seventies, because of his colloquial style, his popularity among youngsters, his frequent and open descriptions of sex and his prolific and easy story telling. Later writers who worked along similar lines, such as A. F. Th. van der Heijden, were welcomed and well received. Gerard Reve seems to me to have been a key figure in this process of erosion of the boundaries between high and low culture, but I will not elaborate on the history of this now. What I would like to know is how this process affects cultural production at large on the level of its devices and its content.

### *Anything Goes?*

Does this complex process of the erosion of traditional divisions between high and low culture also have repercussions on the level of content, and on the type of style and form of cultural production? If it is true that 'anything goes' nowadays, can we say that some styles, forms or techniques nevertheless work better than others? Can we discern trends in the types of cultural production in the present media and market-driven cultural dynamic? I have the impression that there is a tendency towards a more expressive and emotional aesthetics generally. I would like to put forward the hypothesis that in literature as well as in film the aesthetics of the intimate, of subtle psychological characterization, of indirectness, minimalism and hermetism – all historically related to canonized literature and to Modernist aesthetics - is on the decrease. Explicit feelings that are represented in that they are acted out. A certain exhibitionism, the figure of the hyperbole, unabashed emotionality, the big story, starkly opposed characters, all of these things have become fashionable again. There is a trend away from psychologizing, away from an aesthetics of silence and subtlety, and a trend towards more directness. I would like to explore the hypothesis that the erosion of the high/low division implies that the vast reservoir of popular culture has opened up. As a result, the formerly 'low' cultural forms with a different, a-Modernist or pre-Modernist, aesthetic are marching into culture at large.

It has been noted that popular culture is, and often has been, the storing place for cultural forms that have been cast off by the elite. Old forms live on within popular culture, only to be rediscovered and restored to life at a later point in history. The rediscovery of the medieval folk songs and the ballad form in romanticism may serve as examples of these revivals. In our own time we can think of the gothic novel, which seems to be going through an impressive revival. One need only think of the work of the successful English novelist

Sarah Waters and the work of Dutch writers such as Helga Ruebsamen and Renate Dorrestein. 'Gothic' is also the term for a branch of youth culture which cherishes the old paraphernalia of witchcraft, black clothes, cobwebs and a particular kind of ghastly music, which seems to conjure up a dark medieval past. Whole genres can move upwards and downwards. The novel started as a low genre, but has moved upward to into the position of being the dominant genre of modern literature. Melodrama definitely sank during Modernism, but may be reawakening. In the depths of cultural memory such repressed cultural forms seem to lie in waiting to be resuscitated, to be rediscovered and reintegrated. This makes 'low' culture into an enormous reservoir of potential renewal.

I would like to make my hypothesis that Modernist restraint is over and done with slightly more focused. I think that in particular melodrama, or a melodramatic mode, is making a return in cultural production, i.e. in mass culture such as television, film and popular literary genres, as well as in poetry, which is still generally reserved for a public of highly educated readers with a highly specialist taste. I would firstly like to illustrate this with an art house movie by Julio Medem. Secondly, once we have taken a look at the genre of melodrama in its own right, I shall use the very long epic poem by Pieter Boskma as another illustration. The return of melodrama seems to me to be the key issue in the understanding of what happens in both these texts. But what kind of melodrama is this? Which long-forgotten reservoir does it come from? And why does it return at this particular point in time?

### *Lucia y el sexo*

My first example is a recent movie, *Lucia y el sexo* by Julio Medem (Spain 2001). The story is about the waitress Lucia and her beloved, the writer Lorenzo. Once on a trip to an idyllic island in the Mediterranean Lorenzo had a brief love affair with a woman whom he is unable to forget. The movie begins with a magical sex scene in the waters of the sea, at night, under a mysterious moon. Back home Lorenzo tries to write a novel based around that event. He also starts a relationship with Lucia, or rather Lucia with him, since the women are all very liberated and autonomous in this movie. They are very happy together. Lorenzo, however, develops a writer's block. He fights with the limitations of his imagination, his inability to grasp the magic encounter on the island. At that time he meets a young girl whom he finds fascinating, since she and her mother seem to have a connection with his former lover on the island. The girl lives with her stepfather Carlos, who has a vicious dog, while her mother also takes care of a little baby girl. When Lorenzo visits her at home they are drawn into some lovemaking on her urgent plea. At that point the vicious dog attacks the baby girl, and kills her. Lorenzo flees, seized by panic. At the same time he discovers that the baby girl was in fact his own daughter, given in custody to that family. So Lorenzo had just found his daughter, born from that magical union on the island, but lost her at the same time. At this point in the story it starts to become unclear for the spectator where the limits between fact and fiction lie. Where do Lorenzo's feverish fantasies stop? In any case Lorenzo is unable to talk to his beloved Lucia about what happened at the house with the dog, and he becomes depressed and ill. He is so desperate that he commits suicide, or tries to. Lucia finds him, thinks he is dead, and runs away, stricken with grief. She travels to a faraway island, and yes, in the Mediterranean, rents a room in a pension with a landlady who is called Elena. Guess who this is? She happens to be the former lover of her Lorenzo. There is also a man living there, guess who, yes indeed, Carlos, the owner of the vicious dog, who by some miraculous chance also landed there to escape persecution. Elena, not knowing who he is, has a sexual affair with him, but generously hands him over to Lucia, who in the meantime has become her friend. It is interesting that the women exchange men in this movie, as much as men pursue women. Elena is surfs on the Internet, and chats with (imagine our surprise) Lorenzo, her

former lover, without knowing that it is him because they both use pseudonyms. Slowly the truth is unearthed. Lucia discovers that Elena knew Lorenzo, that she was his magical lover on the island. She discovers the source of Lorenzo's depression, the fact that he has unwittingly killed his own daughter. Elena learns that Carlos is the boyfriend of the woman she gave her child to and that he owned the dog that killed her child. So Carlos is the villain that is chased out. Then Lorenzo is brought to the island, and a happy reunion of Lucia and him follows. Lorenzo overcomes his writer's block, as he will now have enough to write about for the rest of his career.

I enjoyed this movie. I appreciated its good dialogues, the wonderfully filmed land- and seascapes, the great performance of beautiful actors, and in my view, the rather innovative love-scenes. But when I left the theatre, I thought WAIT A MINUTE, this is really too much! I have just witnessed an avalanche of *coups de theatre* - miraculous rediscoveries, improbable encounters, happy coincidences that have a definite smell of the nineteenth century to them. Divine intervention seems to arrange the plot all the time. While the children's book *Kruimeltje*, as the Dutch might remember, only needs *one* such *coup de theatre* (the miraculous rediscovery of the orphaned boy Kruimeltje by his lost and now-famous mother, through a car-accident) *Lucia y el sexo* uses no less than four of such tricks to tell its story. Nothing less than magical coincidence seems to be its main device. But everything is so artistically done that you do not immediately notice it. This is because this unconvincing plot is totally intertwined with elements that one would not associate with old melodrama. First the rather innovative representation of sex, which is not exactly a feature of melodrama. Secondly, there is an obviously post-modern play with fact and fiction through which spectators are led to doubt whether all of this is real or just the figment of Lorenzo's imagination as a writer. The movie is constructed as a puzzle full of miraculous change, desire and mystery, in which these distinctions become deliberately blurred. Apart from post-modern aesthetics the conventions of Latin culture might also complicate the picture. *Lucia y el sexo* is a Spanish film, and it could be argued that Latin culture in general allows for more magic than northern spectators are used to. But the fact that this film is shown in art houses, thereby labelling it as having quality, and that it is favourably received, might support my thesis that melodrama is becoming *bon ton* again.

### *The Melodramatic Imagination*

In order to substantiate this claim I will have to revisit the origins and features of the melodramatic genre. It was Peter Brooks who, with his book *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976/1995), rediscovered melodrama as an important historical cultural mode that almost fell into oblivion after its great successes in the nineteenth century. Brooks uses the term 'melodrama' as a descriptive one, not as a pejorative one. He describes melodrama as a mode alongside comedy and tragedy, and takes us back to the precise historical roots of the genre, i.e. the early nineteenth century, the decades after the French Revolution. Melodrama in its purest form is found in the theatre pieces of Guilbert de Pixérécourt, who was nicknamed the 'Corneille of the Boulevards'. He wrote some hundred and twenty plays that enjoyed tremendous popularity between 1800-1830. These are the decades, during which the plays of his principal 'rivals and emulators' Caigniez en Ducange were also widely appreciated by all social classes (Brooks 1976/1995: 29).

A representative specimen of the original melodrama is Pixérécourt's historical play from 1819, *La Fille de l'exilé*, which tells about the sixteen-year-old girl Elizabeth who travels for months through the vast wildernesses of Russia to seek the czar's pardon for her unjustly persecuted father. By chance she encounters the evil Ivan who is the author of her family's disgrace. When Ivan is attacked by the Tartars, she saves him by waving a cross

above his head while uttering the words: 'Wretches! Bow down before this revered sign'. This magically stops the Tartars. Now Ivan unveils his identity, saying to her: 'Angel from heaven. It is you, my victim, who protect my life'. Ivan continues to explain to Elizabeth as well as to the Tartars that Elizabeth is Virtue in person:

He goes on to reiterate and underline the unique, remarkable, and impressive situation: that she who most should despise him, and who is worn down by months of journey through the wilderness, should come to his rescue and possess the force to save him. "Ah! Such generosity overwhelms me! I lack the words to express... Elizabeth, all I can do is admire you and bow my head before you!" (Brooks 1976/1995: 25)

At that point the Tartars also fall on their knees in reverence. A similar spectacle occurs when Elizabeth finally reaches the czar, who again in a dramatic scene publicly recognizes and admires the superhuman virtue of this 'fille étonnante'.

A feature of melodrama is 'the spectacular excitement, the hyperbolic situation and the grandiose phraseology', says Brooks (25). The theme of the genre is invariably the dramatic uncovering and the spectacular restoration of virtue. Pixierécourt 'presents, and his plays work toward, the éclat of virtue, its dramatic representation and enunciation as a real and invincible force in a universe beset with forces working toward its undoing' (26). All *coups de theatre*, the heavy symbolism, the miraculous parities, the whole dramaturgy work toward the recognition and reward of (usually female) virtue and the glorification of the innocence that goes with it. Virtue finally overcomes all evil, although evil threatens to win for a long time in the course of the melodrama, which only adds to the spectacular and astonishing effect in the end. Melodrama always depicts extreme, even unbearable situations. Familial relations often are the source of torture. Brooks compares the experience of the spectator of melodrama to the experience of a nightmare:

Like the characters, the audience experiences basic emotions in their primal, integral, unrepressed condition. From their full acting out, the "cure" can be effected. Virtue can finally break through its helplessness, find its name, liberate itself from primal horror, fulfil its desire. We awake from the nightmare. (35)

Melodrama contains only 'flat' characters since conflict and psychic structure are all exteriorized. 'What we have is a drama of pure psychic signs – called Father, Daughter, Protector, Persecutor, Judge, Duty, Obedience, Justice – that interest us through their clash' (35). Conflicts between good and evil are always presented in an extremely polarized way: there is nothing in between, which leads Brooks to characterize melodrama as manicheistic. Moral judgment is explicit, unambiguous and immediate. People are always types, and usually it is clear from their very appearance what they are: 'inhuman monster', 'honest' or 'wicked'. They often characterize their own type by announcements of their own predictable behaviour, such as "Yes! I will always pursue you! Everywhere! You will see me ceaselessly, a shadow following your footsteps! You will no longer have a day of rest", or: "Ungrateful Rosemonde! You will soon know the consequences of outraged love! For eight years my heart, wrung by your cruel disdain, has known only one feeling: revenge!" Thus the evil character reveals, even celebrates, itself. Later in the play another soliloquy usually follows, in which the villain recognizes his damnation, gives voice to pangs of remorse and acknowledges how his wickedness is conquered by the greater force of innocence and virtue. (37). Dramatic unveilings of true identities, which in turn lead to a decisive peripeteia, often take place during thunderstorms or amidst a crowd of onlookers, which enhance the dramatic

effect. Brooks demonstrates and sums up the typical figures of melodramatic rhetoric: hyperbole, antithesis and oxymoron:

those figures, precisely, that evidence a refusal of nuance and the insistence on dealing in pure, integral concepts. [...] The search for a dramaturgy of admiration and astonishment needs a rhetoric that can infuse the banal and the ordinary with the excitement of grandiose conflict. [...] [Melodramatic] rhetoric must maintain a state of exaltation, a state where “hyperbole” is the natural form of expression because anything less would convey only the apparent (naturalistic, banal) drama, not the true (moral, cosmic) drama. (Brooks 1976/1995: 40)

Brooks contextualizes the origin of melodrama in the ‘post-sacred’ universe after the French Revolution. Religion as the moral centre of society is dethroned at that time. This loss of the transcendent dimension implies that moral problems have to be understood and solved amongst human beings, without any guidance from above. The cosmic struggle between good and evil, which is always at the centre of melodrama, explains the pressure of the sublime, the hyperbolic tone of the genre. Melodrama does nothing less than ‘making the world morally legible, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large and bold characters’ (42). In order to be able to do that the forces of good and evil must be readily accessible within the human soul. That is why Brooks advances the hypothesis that melodrama represents a victory over repression, which also forms the attraction of the genre for the spectator. Nothing psychic is forbidden or unreachable. All feelings are immediately accessible and ready to be uttered and experienced to the full. Finally melodrama is a democratic art, not only because the people enjoyed it, but also because it replaced religion as a collective point of orientation: ‘a moral universe made available’ (43). Villains are often powerful tyrants or mighty and rich oppressors, whereas innocence very often is an ordinary girl. The egalitarian message might be that everybody can rise to the nobility of the good, regardless of social power or class background. Strangely enough Brooks does not go into the gender implications of the genre, in which virtue is almost always female. It seems therefore clear that the genre did not only work for equality between the classes, but also for equality between the sexes.

Melodrama in its purest form was a French invention. It was quickly exported to other European countries and came via England, where it was considered entertainment for the lower classes, to America. The genre underwent complex transformations and re-appropriations. Peter Brooks devotes the main part of his book to the way in which this ‘mode of excess’ shaped the novels of Henry James and Balzac, who continuously seem to point to the larger conflict that goes on under the surface of their narratives. He also acknowledges that the film historian Thomas Elsaesser rediscovered the melodramatic mode at the same time as he did, in 1972. Elsaesser did this in an influential essay about the way in which the silent film integrally continues the hyperbolic and expressionist rhetoric of stage-melodrama. Since then the melodramatic imagination has become an indispensable concept in film theory, where many have studied the melodramatic dimensions of, for example, the oeuvre of filmmaker Douglas Sirk (Klinger 1994), and of soap operas such as *Peyton Place* and *Dynasty*. It is true that the work of literary historians and drama theorists such as Hays and Nikolopoulou (1996), who want to go back to the sources and different national manifestations of nineteenth century melodrama, seems indispensable for a thorough understanding of the genre. At the same time I agree with Brooks, that melodrama can be seen as a peculiar modern form, as a *contemporary* mode of excess, as a representation of an intense inner drama of consciousness, which continues to function until the present day. Peter Brooks has ‘liberated’ the melodramatic mode from the scorn and contempt of some contemporaries and many of its later critics. He thinks that the revival of the concept of

melodrama was necessary 'because it pointed to – as no other term quite could – a certain complex of obsessions and aesthetic choices central to our modernity.' (Brooks 1976/1995, viii). With the renewal of critical interest in the forms of popular literature and culture, we might also be able to see how well-worn artistic forms try to renew themselves by going back to their rejected and almost forgotten popular forms. Melodrama might be a case in point.

From this perspective we get a better understanding, I think, of *Lucia y el sexo*, Medem's film. Its hyperbolic sequence of miraculous coincidences, which reunite lost family members with each other, is evidently derived from the melodramatic tradition. The fact that Lorenzo in one and the same evening discovers that he has a baby daughter and witnesses her extraordinary cruel death between the teeth of a dog is a particular instance of heightening the melodramatic effect. This coincidence of finding and loosing might be seen as an intertextual play with the conventions of melodrama in which loosing and rediscovering are usually reversed and also separated. Lucia qualifies as the innocent and virtuous heroine, thanks to whose great love Lorenzo is saved. He is freed from his obsession with Elena, who becomes a dear friend, and finds his true mate, Lucia. Carlos is exposed and chased out as the villain; – the stark contrast between good and evil is definitely present. It is also important that psychology seems to be exteriorized in this film, as the events themselves are astonishing. Meaning is on the very surface and needs no further explanation or interpretation. But at the same time this melodrama also functions in a new context, our own time. That is why it is also hybridized and modernized. I have already pointed at the post-modern thematics (the blurring of fact and fiction) and aesthetics of this movie, and at the fairly feminist, and therefore late twentieth-century, representation of gender and of sexuality. Virtue is also modernized, as well as the concept of 'family'. Virtuousness certainly does not mean chastity and the family is the modern family, which is created outside wedlock. In a way Lorenzo finds Lucia twice and loses her in the middle. He finds her first when they begin their affair, loses her in his obsession with his former lover and the ensuing depression and then finds her back at the happy end and recognizes in her his true beloved. Lucia also finds Lorenzo twice in this way. Her loss of him is even more dramatic, because she thinks she sees him lying dead. It is not so much romance, which dominates this plot but 'the melodramatic mode'.

One might argue that films are more likely to take up the melodramatic mode since many branches of film belong to the popular domain, which makes the medium less firmly rooted in Modernist traditions. We can indeed point to other filmic neo-melodramas, such as Baz Luhrman's *Moulin Rouge*, which is a dazzling play with a great many elements out of the big storehouse of cultural tradition, and of which the agenda seems to be to deliberately mix historical high and low repertoires. In particular, melodrama is restored to cultural memory in this movie. But rather than abducting you to another movie I would like to turn to a contemporary poetic text now, because poetry might be considered to be the last stronghold of high culture. If that reintegrates melodrama as well, it really becomes urgent to reflect upon the meaning of this modern rediscovery of the melodramatic mode.

### *De aardse komedie*

My second example of the comeback of melodrama is *De aardse komedie* (2002) by the well-respected Dutch poet Pieter Boskma. The title is a reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the work is, like its famous ancestor, an epic in verse, presented as a 'novel in verse' but displaying some characteristics of a classical epic. It pretends to describe human life in its primordial essence, which is why it assumes mythical allure every now and then, but in a half-serious, 'camp' way. When the story begins, it presents a Dutch promoter of the visual arts, a

woman in her forties, called Hera, who is staying in New York. The second protagonist is the photographer Sarah, twenty-six, also residing in New York with her new lover, the poet Tosk, a man of thirty-eight. Tosk and Sarah had already met once in Amsterdam, when Sarah was seventeen. Both had never been able to forget that first encounter. They seem a happy new couple, and they have a lot of loving sex. Everybody has a lot of sex in this book: solo-sex, hetero-sex, lesbian sex, and there is also massive drinking going on especially in Hera's case. Sarah receives a letter from Hera, who grants her a project in the name of an art commission. Sarah would have to deliver seven photographs of holy places, seven places associated with water. She accepts the assignment and chooses the Amstel, Het IJ, the North Sea, the Hudson, Cape Cod, Big Sur and the Garda Lake in Italy as her holy waters to be photographed. Tosk decides to accompany her. These travels are described. The story is organized in such a way that it jumps from Hera, in New York, to Sarah and Tosk at the different places of her 'holy waters project'. Their lives become closely intertwined, closer than they already were when the story began. We should know that Hera once had a one-night stand with the poet Tosk, and also, in her further past, with Sarah. I am quoting a stanza, to give you an idea of the tone and texture of this lyrical narrative:

Die nacht droomde zij hoe zij hem had ontmoet  
 In een afgeladen kroegje bij het Amsterdamse  
 Rembrandtplein, en hij haar met dubbele tong  
 had verteld van zijn werk aan een vers van wel  
 vijfduizend regels waarin hij alles zou zingen  
 van ons gescharrel over de aardbol en onze  
 lieflijke sterfelijkheid, een grap om te huilen,  
 een traan van het lachen, het hele wankele  
 staketsel, dat wij, als Zijn evenbeeld, voort  
 hadden gebracht, *o spiegeling der schepping*.

*That night she dreamt of how she had met him  
 in a crowded bar near the Amsterdam  
 Rembrandtplein and how he, drunk as a skunk,  
 had told her of his work on a poem of  
 five thousand lines in which he would sing  
 of everything, our wandering over the face  
 of the earth and our sweet mortality,  
 a joke to cry about, tears from laughter,  
 the whole rickety railing, which we, created in His image,  
 had brought forth, o mirror of creation.*<sup>5</sup>

This stanza pictures the poet Tosk, focalized by Hera, in his effort to write the ultimate poem in five thousand lines on the whole creation and Life on Earth. Tosk will remain true to character, trying to create and perform his 'singing' (the classical term for writing lyrics): He will go on writing endlessly until the end of this saga, striving to capture nothing less than the essence of life. Tosk aspires to be The Poet of Everything and More (p 66). Homeric, Petrarchan or Dante-esk pretensions, indeed. As a classical poet he always needs a muse to do this, and his life will become a concatenation of passionate love affairs with the Muse, at this point Sarah.

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<sup>5</sup> Boskma, *De aardse komedie*, p. 51. Translated by Maaïke Meijer

You can also see how easily narrative and verse are combined in *De aardse komedie*. There are almost always these stanzas of ten lines each, without rime. The language is very colloquial except when Tosk cites his lofty, opaque and baroque lyrics, which often do rime.

Hera visits Sarah, working on her photography project in Vermont. A surprise awaits her. Sarah turns out to live with the man Hera once picked up in Amsterdam, the man with whom she passionately made love to and with whom she is still in love, Tosk. The situation is embarrassing, since Hera also had a one-night stand with Sarah in Amsterdam. Hera stays with them and solves her embarrassment with excessive drinking and solo sex. Sarah decides she wants to go back to The Netherlands alone, to photograph the North Sea. Tosk is disappointed, angry and desperate but comforts himself by deciding to go back to a former lover, Sylvia, close to Lake Garda, where Sarah will eventually arrive to photograph the water. Later the three protagonists, Hera, Tosk and Sarah live together in Italy till they are all old.

I will not tell you the whole story. I only want to point out the number of improbable events and the level of over-the-top drama that fills this text. Here we go: Hera is the only survivor of an airplane crash. As if that is not enough she tries to commit suicide and miraculously survives. Paralysed in a wheelchair she is suddenly able to walk again. The in the meantime pregnant Sarah witnesses a grotesque accident in the train to Italy. The severed head of a young woman and in her mouth (sorry) the genitals of a man come out from under a halted train.

De Italiaan, inmiddels nuchter, verklaarde  
Toen zij bijkwam hoe het waarschijnlijk  
Had gezeten. [...]  
Ja signorina, de liefde die wist wat.  
Lagen ze daar naast de tunnel.  
Veel te dicht op de rails, in het gras  
Te vrijen, soixante-neuf, je kent  
Dat wel, en toen *rats!*, geraakt  
Door een stang of hendel,

Haarlok gegrepen door een wiel,  
Wie zal het zeggen, *si Dio*, enfin:  
In elk geval onder de trein gesleurd  
En totaal vermalen, behalve haar hoofd,  
Zijn geslacht nog in haar mond, dat door  
De klap omhoog was gesprongen, boven  
Een as beklemd geraakt en het ongeluk  
Vrijwel ongeschonden had doorstaan.

*When she regained consciousness  
the Italian man, meanwhile sober, told her  
how this might have occurred [...]  
Yes signorina, love is a strange thing,  
There they must have lain, next to the tunnel,  
Too close to the rails, making love in the field,  
Soixante-neuf you know, and then, hey-day!  
Touched by a bar or a handle*

*Lock of hair seized by a wheel*

*Who can tell, si Dio, to cut a long story short,  
Dragged under the train in any case  
And completely crushed, apart from her head  
- his penis still in her mouth – which had leapt up  
by the blow, had become stuck under an axle-tree  
and had come out of the accident almost unmutilated.*<sup>6</sup>

On top of this the six-month-old unborn baby of this unhappy woman can be liberated from her womb and survives. This grotesque event seems to me to belong to the genre of gothic pornography, a clear revival of the gothic in a new form. But there is more to come. Tosk, who is living with his former Italian lover Sylvia again, and Sarah run into each other by coincidence at the borders of Lake Garda and reunite. Sarah has her baby when she is only six months pregnant, but the baby, Laura, miraculously survives. The friend with whom they live, almost a sister, has a baby too, a boy called Dante. Dante has incestuous sex with Laura while she sleeps and then commits suicide. His mother, in the meantime Hera's lesbian lover, goes mad with grief. Tosk is secretly in love with his daughter Laura, who has in fact taken Sarah's place as the Muse for him; Sarah and Hera become lovers; Laura turns out to be pregnant by the dead Dante. And in the end, the old Tosk finds a new Beatrice again, a girl Viviane, a Muse as old as his daughter, and the endless circle of life, which Tosk is still singing about in his never ending Magnum Opus, begins anew.

Perhaps you expect me to declare *De aardse komedie* as utterly vulgar and worthless, but strangely enough it is not, in my opinion. It is an experiment in the re-admission of overstatement and of melodrama, both of which had become suspect and unspeakable since the onset of Modernism. This especially had been shunned in Dutch poetry from the seventies onwards, where the dominant aesthetics stressed sobriety, understatement, the small, the subtle, and the silent. It is this aesthetics, petrified into an artistic dogma, which Boskma is intertextually trying to attack.<sup>7</sup> And his text somehow works. Although the character of Tosk at first seems a parody of the classical poet, incarnated by the intertextually omnipresent Dante, he is a convincing, even moving character. His male egotism is shown very openly, just like Hera's alcoholism is. At the same time the charm of his passion for writing 'Everything in Everything and More' gets under your skin. Strangely enough the melodrama is kept within bounds by the sometimes-beautiful poetry in which *De aardse komedie* is written. It is full of great images and 'Revian' effects (changes of register between the lofty and the comic or trivial). There are many references to Gorter's work, and the mythical setting of the whole narrative cannot be but inspired by Gorter's 'Mei' (May) the long Homeric similes included. But it is not my intention to evaluate this text from an aesthetic perspective. I mainly want to show how it enacts the undoing of the division between high and low culture. That makes it interesting to identify the strange mix of high cultural devices (the epic mode, frequent intertextual references to the classical tradition) and low cultural phenomena (the colloquial, the vulgar, the excessive) in this text. Because of this very mix, *De aardse komedie* is part of a trend in current cultural production: the massive reintegration of low cultural elements into the high cultural genre of poetry. The revival of the melodramatic mode in this text is notably striking. We recognize a degree of hyperbole, of spectacular excitement,

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<sup>6</sup> Boskma, *De aardse komedie*, p.162. Translated by Maaïke Meijer

<sup>7</sup> Boskma is not the only one who does so. Elly de Waard had already reinstated The Archetypal Poet in all his /her glory since the early eighties. Beginning with her fourth volume *Furie* she has written ten volumes of poetry now in which lofty feeling, daring and high-strung metaphors, big words and animated rhetoric are the rule. Although De Waard tries to undermine the barrenness of Modernist aesthetics as well, her tactics are unlike those applied by Boskma. Her work cannot be characterised as being touched by the melodramatic mode.

of grandiose phraseology, which echoes nineteenth century melodrama. The spectacular events take the place of psychological development, and the characters remain types. Chance plays a big role in miraculous and improbable reunions of former lovers. In its modern form, the family is a source of torture as well as a source of bliss. The meaning of the dramatic turns in the plot is immediately visible. The events do not need further explanation as they speak for themselves. At the same time the old form of melodrama is modernized in many ways. The theme that is deemed so central for the classical melodrama by Peter Brooks, of Innocence rewarded, the theme of Virtue that is beset, then liberated and acknowledged, is absent. Nobody is particularly virtuous. The protagonist Tosk remains remarkably true to character, writing his Dante-esk Great Work while chasing the different manifestations of The Muse incessantly with sexuality taking the post-modern form of its frequent descriptions in many different forms. Certainly the narrative is not focused upon any struggle between good and evil. There is rather a particularly late twentieth-century struggle of all characters for human, sexual and artistic fulfilment and for happy relationships. This struggle takes place in a world full of absurdity and chance, with strokes of absurd luck or monumental disaster, which hit in the most unexpected ways. This means that *De aardse komedie* only displays the figures and forms of melodrama. It uses many of its common features but it does so in service of a different theme and a different content. I think this is a very modern content, which takes me back to my initial question. Why does the melodramatic mode return at this particular point in time?

#### *Melodrama in a new jacket*

Peter Brooks convincingly located the origin of melodrama within the historical context of the period immediately following the French Revolution. This Revolution disrupted everything that had provided security and guidance. It was ...

the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society (...) melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths. (...) We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era. (Brooks 1976/1995: 15)

Because the French Revolution meant such an extreme break with religion and social tradition, far more radical than in other European countries, it was in France where melodrama originated. But as we know, such 'post-sacred' conditions spread, providing a fruitful breeding ground for the genre elsewhere.

Why has the melodramatic mode returned in our time? I think this is because of a further secularisation of society at the end of the twentieth century. While Brooks pointed at the concerted effort to create a new 'posts-sacred' system of values in France after the French Revolution, such efforts seem to have been largely given up. We no longer believe in a collective 'post religious' set of values in which good and evil, virtue, justice, innocence and social equality are unequivocally defined. We may experience a general sense of a loss of collective values. We feel the unsettling effects of an ongoing individualisation and loosening of social coherence. That might create the need for an imaginative mode that could capture the sense of absurdity that accompanies the loss of coherence. Many do not believe in the superiority of virtue anymore, in the possibility to even clearly know what is good or evil,

despite the manicheistic assertions in present-day American politics. That might be the reason why the overarching ethical programme of melodrama has weakened, or vanished in the case of Boskma. Yet melodrama remains and is rediscovered as an interesting vehicle for conveying the sense of the fruitless and tragic battle for human fulfilment in an indifferent universe. The sheer out datedness of the genre, its aura of being over the top, its funny improbabilities, its oxymorons, hyperboles and antitheses, its theatricality, all make it attractive for the articulation of a post-modern sense of loss of coherence. Humour, completely lacking in old melodrama, is an element in the new version of the genre. It reflects the modern reception of melodrama as 'camp'; it fits in with the hilarity of melodrama, with its aura of being over the top. Life itself is experienced by many as an impossible undertaking, which we have to make the best of, against all odds. This sensibility is captured in the new forms of melodrama. This might explain why melodrama has once again become fashionable. Many more contemporary texts have to be studied to strengthen my hypothesis. Let me simply suggest that contemporary films by Greenaway and Tarantino, novels by Dave Eggers, by Arnon Grunberg, Pam Emmerik and Jonathan Safran Foer, offer the same mixture of absurdity, improbabilities, humour, coups de theatre and incredible stories that are highly dramatic. The meaning of these stories is presented as self-evident. There is also no time to explain things as the next bizarre concatenation of events is already waiting in the wings. These authors all move away from psychologizing or even mock it with them all breaking with the restraints of Modernism. A new style is developing which is anti-classical, grotesque, colloquial, streetwise, hilarious, and which quotes from each and every source (high and low), understanding tradition yet playing around with it. It is funny, tragic, dramatic, improbable and absurd, lost in this world, yet making the best of it. This is melodrama in a new jacket.

### *Gender*

Finally, we may briefly look at the gender aspects of the current revival of melodrama. In my analyses of *Lucia y el sexo* and of *De aardse komedie*, I have not felt the need to be critical about the representation of men and women. In both texts the male protagonist is an artist, a novelist and a poet respectively, with classical pretensions. In both, women are his muses: they unchain his imaginative powers. Without the mediation of women, men do not seem to be able to create. At first sight this seems a repetition of a very old gendered scheme, yet that scheme is substantially revised in both texts. Women themselves are also creators. Sarah is a successful photographer; Hera has a great deal of power as a cultural broker. Women also are actively desire subjects, in social and in sexual matters. The sex scenes in *Lucia y el sexo* are incredibly beautiful. They seem to be created according to a whole new grammar for the representation of sexuality, a grammar in which the positions between man and woman are far more equal than they used to be. The *male* body is also shown as a spectacle and as an object of desire for the women here, as well as for the spectators. Female subjectivity in the representation of sexuality is innovative, I think. Feminist views on sexuality, as they were translated into the sexually explicit feminist fiction of the seventies and eighties, seem to be incorporated by these texts. That may also be the reason that lesbian sexuality is no longer a taboo: it is freely represented by Boskma, whereas the friendship between Lucia and Elena in the film verges on the erotic. On the level of gendered representation the neo-melodrama does not seem conservative at all.

What about gender on the level of the 'genderedness' of melodrama itself, however? Melodrama used to be perceived as cheap, commercial and 'feminine'. It was relegated to the cultural margins by the end of the nineteenth century. The current return and readily acceptance of this cultural mode can be read as a 'return of the repressed'. As Andreas Huyssen demonstrated in his study *After the Great Divide*, Modernism increasingly

disengaged with the exuberant qualities of nineteenth century fiction, melodrama included, in order to become more sober, restrained, bare, 'masculine'. This process seems to be reversed now. Exuberance, pathos, and melodrama can freely walk in and out of fiction and film again, while all of the gendered connotations of these modes seem to have vanished. While melodrama was repressed back then as being 'too feminine', it seems to have become gender neutral at the point of its return. Male artists such as Medem, Boskma, Grunberg and Eggers use this mode freely without any anxiety of being contaminated by its symbolic 'femininity'. It might simply be too long ago, that male aesthetics was set up as a defence against the overwhelming fictional power of women writers. That cultural struggle may have been forgotten by now. Or: such defences may have become anachronistic. Literary culture may really have opened up for female writers, in such a way that nobody any longer feels the need to label certain types of writing as gendered. Anything goes, for everyone. I see this as a promising, liberating development.

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**The Return of Melodrama**

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