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Virtuous Victims, Visceral Violence

War and Melodrama in American Culture

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The argument at the center of this essay is in some respects a simple one: that melodramatic conventions have provided a significant and persistent foundation—perhaps the most significant and persistent foundation—of cultural representations of American warfare; and that this conjunction has been largely overlooked in discussions of both melodrama and war. Across the last two centuries and across a range of media, the staging of national conflict in melodramatic terms has provided a way to assert the moral underpinnings of violence and to consolidate identification with an imagined national community whose virtue is constituted through the image of assaulted innocence. An interlinking of victimization, virtue, and violence has defined dominant war narratives in the United States, as sensational spectacles of nationalist aggression have been morally authorized and qualified by pathetic appeals to identify with the position of the victim. To substantiate this assertion, in the discussion which follows I will consider the emergence of melodrama in relation to the political imagination of the American nation, and trace the significance of melodramatic forms to the representation of war in particular, with a focus on popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

To make this argument is to deviate from popular conceptions of melodrama, which tend to associate the form with female protagonists (as well as audiences), domestic conflicts, and exaggerated forms of emotional display. It is also to deviate from ideas about war representation, which is likewise understood in heavily gendered terms as aligned with the masculine virtues of "realness" and authenticity (in contrast to a hyperbolic form like melodrama). Action and violence have long provided a staple of melodramatic entertainments, however, and ideas of realness and authenticity have been central to their appeal–a conjunction nowhere more evident than in the history of war representation.

To assert the conflation of melodrama and war in American culture it is necessary first to establish what I mean here by the term "melodrama." Within

film and media studies, melodrama has sometimes been used to denote specific genres or cycles—the "women's weepies" of the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, or the domestic or family melodramas of the 1950s. Recent scholarship, however, has explored the prolific if protean workings of melodrama, emphasizing the significance of melodramatic modes of representation to the articulation of American popular and political discourse from the birth of the nation to the present.[1]

Drawing upon the influential work of literary scholar Peter Brooks, these accounts have argued that melodrama is best understood not as a specific genre or even a discretely designated style but more as a general mode of representation. Brooks traces the emergence of melodrama to the Age of Enlightenment. Relying on the sensational appeals of both action and pathos, the melodramatic mode (or "melodramatic imagination," in Brooks's term) circulates around the revelation of moral virtue in a world in which its traditional tethers have become unmoored. With the ascendance of democratic philosophies in the eighteenth century and the demise of notions of the sacred secured through and represented by ecclesiastical and monarchic authority, new conventions for representing moral truth emerge. Melodrama, according to Brooks, is the imaginative mode which gives expression to this new moral order and its attendant insecurities, relying upon heightened means of expression to give form to that which is obscured in a post-sacred era.[2] As David Mayer has explained, in place of an overarching religious authority, melodrama substitutes "a secular explanatory narrative of causality which attributes public disaster and private calamity, peril, or tribulation to the malign operation of evil seeking to overcome goodness."[3] Central to this melodramatic tradition is an emphasis on the individual protagonist as an innocent victim whose virtue is established through the public display of his or her suffering; in melodrama, indeed, victimization itself functions as the privileged signifier of virtue, that which makes moral virtue recognizable as such. Although the form this process takes may vary across genres (melodrama "looks" different in a war film than in a women's weepie, for instance), the representation of innocence through a focus on victimization remains central to the melodramatic project.

Approached as a broad set of conventions organizing representations of conflict in the modern era, the significance of melodrama to war representation in American culture is historically unsurprising. While Brooks locates the emergence of melodrama in revolutionary France, the project of melodrama is uniquely well-suited to the political context of the United States. As Daniel C. Gerould has noted, melodrama and the United States both emerge from the same radical historical moment, as the political and philosophical reorientations of the eighteenth century give birth both to melodrama and to the American Revolution. For Gerould, focused as he is on the Americanization of what was originally a continental form, in its narrative emphasis on spirited underdogs who prevail over adversity, its democratic address to a mass audience, and its increasing reliance on a technically-driven stagecraft for its sensational effects, "melodrama became a direct expression of American society and national character."[4] Though the interaction between cultural forms and the social and political contexts they both represent and help to shape is more complicated than this phrase suggests, Gerould makes an important argument in regards to the resonance between melodrama and the political, ideological, and economic currents of the new nation. Linda Williams takes this argument even further, suggesting melodrama's status as, "the best example of American culture's (often hypocritical) notion of itself as the locus of innocence and virtue," and considering melodrama's paradoxical power of identifying with victimhood as "one of the great unexamined moral forces of American culture."[5]

The moral force of American melodrama has never been separate from an equally powerful emphasis on melodrama as "thrilling" popular entertainment. Theatrical melodramas of the nineteenth century, for instance, relied for their impact on the dramatic staging of "sensation scenes"—thrilling large-scale spectacles oriented around chaotic action and rendered with an eye toward realistic detail. The production of sensation was integral both to the affective force of these melodramas and to their claims to authenticity and realness, as sensationalism and realism were understood as complementary rather than oppositional terms in this context. As Tom Gunning has discussed, the sensation scenes lobbied a "powerful assault on the senses of the audience," and while these spectacular displays could be tethered to the moral expressivity of a performance, their success depended more upon their immediate visceral impact than on their revelation of any underlying moral order.[6]

The contemporary insistence on the "realism" of the sensation scenes located their emphasis on the spectacular and the sensational within the ongoing quest for ever more lifelike and "authentic" re-creations. The production of such scenes—which commonly included natural and technological disasters such as earthquakes, avalanches, volcanoes, fires, explosions, train and ship wrecks—required an increasingly sophisticated stagecraft dedicated to the values of verisimilitude. An emphasis on the sensational appeals of realistic representation has been a hallmark of melodramatic forms ever since, though one which has paradoxically functioned to shift the consideration of more recent action-packed, thrilling entertainments away from a discussion of melodrama. Rather than approach melodrama and realism as opposing representational modes, however, the history of popular culture in the United States urges us toward a closer attention to the melodramatic marriage of sensational action and the appeals of authenticity.

While war-themed melodramas were not an uncommon feature of the

nineteenth-century stage (with Civil War melodramas constituting a particularly fertile subgenre), to fully appreciate the merger of war and melodrama in American culture, we must turn to the most popular and commercially successful entertainment of the turn of the twentieth century—Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Here the melodramatic conventions of the stage were distilled down to their essentials—the conventional moral authority of the victim wedded to the kinesthetic thrills of fast-paced, frenetic action and large-scale violence. Advertising campaigns boasted of the show's "popular, sensational, melodramatic" appeal, and press coverage breathlessly described the "rescue party of dashing, dare-devil cowboys" that always arrives "just in the nick of time."

The visceral impact of the Wild West show was legendary and provided a significant aspect of its appeal—the smells and sounds of the gunpowder and the horses, the "terrific whoops of the painted warriors," the blur of fantastically colorful costumes in motion. All of these contributed to a multifaceted assault that "bombilated" the Wild West audience on a variety of sensory fronts. Structuring these sensory thrills was a thematic emphasis on white victimization, rescue, and retribution, as in the largely interchangeable scenarios of the "Attack on the Wagon Train," the "Attack on the Settler's Cabin," and the "Attack on the Deadwood Stage," in which satellites of Anglo-American domesticity were imperiled by savage assaults.

Although the particulars could vary, the general contours of these scenes remained quite consistent. First, the white protagonists would be viciously attacked by an adversary constituted as racially other. They would fight valiantly but be outnumbered by the "marauding" savage hordes. Then, just when all hope seemed lost, they would be rescued in a spectacular show of action and violence by the cavalry's advance. These reenactments were not limited to an imagination of conflict on the frontier, as scenes from contemporary wars in Cuba and the Philippines could, and did, provide ready substitutes. In 1899, for example, show organizers replaced the "Attack upon a Settler's Cabin" with the timely spectacle of the "Battle of San Juan Hill" as the show's grand finale, and featured the "Rescue of Pekin" alongside the "Attack on the Deadwood Stage." In representing such scenarios as interchangeable, the Wild West underscored the ideological resonance between manifest destiny at home and expansionist efforts abroad, representing both within the moralizing framework of melodrama.[7]

A variation on the pattern could work to emphasize the pathetic intensity of the scene, as in the case of the popular and long-standing attraction of "Custer's Last Fight." Though the spectacle of rescue more typically emphasized the sensational thrills of action, "Custer's Last Fight" highlighted the affective importance of pathos, as here the reenactment of the battle of the Little Bighorn concluded with the arrival of Buffalo Bill upon the scene of

massacre, while projected upon a screen behind him appeared the conventional melodramatic lament—"Too late." It was through the interwoven appeals of action and pathos then that the audience was invited to take pleasure in the show's reenactments, to be moved by the image of suffering alongside the thrilling display of action and violence. The moral legibility of these performances emerged through the interaction of these appeals, as the white settlers and soldiers were constituted as victims even as the show held forth the promise of their ultimate triumph. The remarkable consistency with which the Wild West represented the story of white conquest through an insistence on the status of white settlers and soldiers as victims underscores the significance of melodrama to such attractions.[8] While the show invited identification with US soldiers as both victims and agents of violence, however, they were never cast as aggressors, a point which Williams underscores in her discussion of melodrama as the "alchemy whereby we turn our deepest sense of guilt into a testament of our virtue."[9]

In staging conflict as a thrilling scene of virtuous victimization and righteous retribution, the Wild West helped to structure a particular imagination of war—a set of expectations and a popular understanding of what war both looked and felt like. This imagination of war, in which nationalist violence is understood and experienced as sensational entertainment and moral mandate both, is evident across the terrain of contemporary popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Like the Wild West show attractions they frequently referenced, for instance, the genre of western action painting was organized around the melodramatic appeal of pathos as well as the thrilling spectacle of violence and action. The kinship is unsurprising, given the show's broad cultural influence and the fact that Wild West attractions often provided direct models for Eastern painters who had not themselves traveled to the Western frontier. These paintings help to suggest how a sensational mode of representation came to define images of war across a range of media by the beginning of the twentieth century—the extent to which the cultural imagination of war itself was brought into focus through the iteration of "thrilling" scenarios of victimization and violence.

Though such paintings often collapse the moments of assault and rescue into the same frame, it is the impulse to visualize violence as a thrilling melodramatic spectacle that nonetheless serves to animate them. We can witness this impulse in the work of Charles Schreyvogel, a member of the so-called School of Remington who was recognized primarily as a painter of the Indian-fighting US Cavalry, though before ever traveling west his knowledge of the Indian Wars was gained through regular attendance and extensive sketching at the Wild West show. Like the Wild West attractions which influenced him, Schreyvogel's images of conflict circulate around moments of intense action laced with the image of innocent suffering. While they could

not reproduce the temporal rhythms of Wild West melodrama—the angst of "too late" held in suspenseful tension with the promise and possibility of "in the nick of time"—his paintings often relied upon the collapsing of these poles into one affecting image.[10]

In Schreyvogel's *Summit Spring Rescue, 1869* (1908), for instance, the intensity of melodramatic suspense is displaced onto an emphasis on motion, the dramatic use of color, and the graphic representation of violence as the action is frozen in a teetering balance between the moments of attack and rescue. Here the artist references an historical event featuring the heroic efforts of none other than Buffalo Bill himself. Like the Wild West reenactment that preceded it, the painting reproduces the rescue as thrilling spectacle, representing violence at its moment of greatest impact.[11]

Rather than induce a state of contemplation or intellectual or spiritual revelation, such paintings hail their viewers in an aggressive and often direct fashion, aiming to invoke a more immediate visceral response. In the center of the frame of *Summit Spring Rescue,* for instance, Buffalo Bill charges on a white horse into the midst of a frenzied battle scene, firing a close-range shot at the menacing Indian figured in the painting's left foreground. The raised tomahawk is still clutched in the Indian's hand, even as his neck bends back in an agonizing death throe; in his other hand, he grasps the hair of an ashen-faced white woman, a casualty of the attack ("too late"), while crumpled at his feet, face cradled in her hands, is the woman's presumed daughter, who will be spared a similar (or worse) fate ("in the nick of time").

The significance of melodrama to the imagination of conflict could also be more subtle, as in the example of Frederic Remington's *Opening of the Fight at Wounded Knee* (1891). In contrast to Remington's famous Last Stand compositions, in which the subjects are collected into the center of the frame and face forward for the viewer's regard, here a sense of assault is heightened by placing the viewer within the space of the action itself. Positioned just behind the lines of fighting, the viewer's sights are aligned with those of the soldiers and their rifles (a convention that will come to dominate Hollywood representations of Indian War). The defensive line of the soldiers is broken by a figure who falls backward toward the viewer, toppling over onto another who lies dead in the lap of his comrade. That the tumbling body of the soldier, the face of his dead comrade, and the crumpled figure of another soldier lying just beyond, represent the only visible casualties within the frame is important to note, as this is the representation of a massacre of Native American men, women, and children at the hands of a well-armed US force.

In its composition, *Opening of the Fight at Wounded Knee* encourages identification with the soldiers as both the victims and the agents of violence—a melodramatic convention that would become even more emphatic with the emergence of the western as a film genre. Ben Vorpahl has argued that this

kind of composition becomes particularly prevalent in Remington's work just after Wounded Knee and interprets its significance in relation to the implied presence of Remington himself as observer. The shift is also highly suggestive to consider in relation to Williams's argument about the function of melodrama in American culture, however, as the impulse to align the viewer's gaze with the soldiers' violence—and to cast this violence as essentially defensive—seems to intensify in the face of white culpability, brutality, and aggression (a point to which I'll return below).[12]

While the Wild West show and western action paintings participated centrally in producing a melodramatic imagination of war, it is through the cinema that the melodramatic conventions of war representation would become most fully naturalized. Like the Wild West show, the cinema was able to produce thrilling large-scale spectacles emphasizing motion and speed, while like western paintings it was able to orchestrate the angle of vision through which such action was organized and perceived. At the same time, the formal and technological resources of cinema allowed for an intensification of the melodramatic rhythms of war representation, deepening identification both with the position of those under assault and with the heroic violence that would save them.

As suggested above, however, male-identified film genres like the western and the war film have often been cordoned off from discussions of melodrama and considered instead under the rubric of realism, their emphasis on externalized action and violence cited in explicit contrast to the heightened emotionality, domestic conflicts, and hysterical *mise-en-scene* of the women's weepies and family melodramas. In this context, noting the presence of melodrama within representations of war has often meant noting the intervention of domestic narratives or familial conflicts into a terrain otherwise dominated by action and violence.

In contrast, film historian Ben Singer has emphasized the centrality of sensation to the American melodramatic tradition, tracing the prominence of "blood and thunder" melodramas on both stage and screen in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Singer points out, the emphasis on sentimentality that would later come to dominate critical consideration of film melodrama falls outside the common usage of the term in this earlier period, when melodrama signaled an "attempt to commodify strong stimulus," and "to package the sensory and emotional excitement" of rapid action and violence, scenic spectacle, and suspense.[13]

According to Steve Neale's research into the film industry trade press, this association of melodrama with sensational action persists up until 1960 at least, as the designation of a film as a "meller" continued to signal an emphasis on thrilling action; rather than cordoning melodrama off from associations with the masculine, the reference to "virile," "vigorous," or "he-man" melodra-

mas was in this context quite common.[14] In light of this history, the melodramatic status of genres like the war film or the western comes more clearly into focus, their conventional emphasis on sensational action and violence best understood not in contrast to but as an essential aspect of their melodramatic structure and appeal.

Even in the earliest of war films—the "military actualities" of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—we can trace the symptoms of a melodramatic imagination at work. The military actualities take as their subject contemporary conflicts such as the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars, the Boer War, and later the Russo-Japanese War. The category was a broad one and elastic enough to encompass documentary footage of soldiers disembarking from transports or engaged in military drills or the domestic routines of camp life alongside staged battle reenactments, naval fights filmed with toy boats in a bathtub, or the extremely popular subgenre of the charge film. Shots of unscripted live events were often combined in this period with reenacted or "reproduced" footage within a single film or across an evening's program. Contemporary audiences did not require exhibitors to draw a clear distinction between these groups of films.[15] In general, as Vanessa Schwartz has noted, as a category the actuality was neither intended nor received as a register of "commonplace reality," but rather "built on a certain repertoire in which people were accustomed to a mediated and spectacularized version of reality."[16]

The military actualities participated in these conventions by emphasizing the spectacular and sensational appeals of war while associating these appeals with the virtues of the real. In keeping with the sensational conventions of the contemporary stage, the authenticity of such attractions was not measured as an inverse of their degree of manipulation but rather by the affective intensity of their "thrilling" address. Film historians like Charles Musser have noted the participation of the actualities in the early function of the cinema as a "visual newspaper." In making this point, however, it is important to emphasize the extent to which contemporary newspapers themselves were shaped through the conventions of spectacular realism—the "re-presentation of reality as a spectacle," in Schwartz's phrase—and the degree to which yellow press coverage of imperialist ventures like the Spanish-American War already relied upon the appeals of sensational melodrama.

We can track the influence of melodrama on the military actualities in a variety of ways, attending to both formal and contextual elements. The point of view constructed by an image like *Opening of the Fight at Wounded Knee,* for instance, reappears in the Spanish-American War battle reenactment *Advance of the Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (1899), in which the camera is positioned directly behind a line of US soldiers as they rise up out of the foreground of the frame to advance upon a line of encroaching Filipino rebels. As the

rebels approach the camera, firing their rifles directly out toward the audience as they come, the sense of assault conditioned by the directness of their fire intensifies the spectator's identification with the position of the US soldiers under attack. When the soldiers emerge, as if from the space of the audience itself, their interruption of the rebels' gunfire functions as a kind of rescue.[17]

Here, too, the gunning down of the color guard as the US soldiers advance produces the film's only casualty, mirroring the falling soldier in Remington's rendering of Wounded Knee and adding an element of pathos even to this brief a film. Contemporary catalog copy emphasizes this moment when, "The bearer falls, but the standard is caught up by the brave Sergeant Squires and waves undaunted in the smoke and din of the receding battle."[18] That this film—though it consists of only a single shot and lasts less than a minute—rehearses in its simple movements a scenario of victimization and retributive violence attests to the influence of the popular melodramatic imagination of war. The point-of-view structures at work in the film invite an engagement with the image of battle by encouraging identification with US soldiers defending themselves against the aggression of savage others; the historical conditions (of massacre and imperialism, for instance) in which these structures emerge return us to Williams's arguments concerning the "alchemy" of melodrama in American culture more broadly.

Even the more rudimentary charge films can be understood within the broader context of melodrama. These films, in which a mounted cavalry races toward the camera, were a popular category of early film production, displaying as they did both the ability of the nascent technology to represent motion and the harnessing of this technological novelty to an image of white masculine and American national mobility.[19] The films were experienced as particularly thrilling in their aggressive mode of direct address, as "the audience makes an involuntary effort to move from their seats in order to avoid being trampled under the horses," according to contemporary catalog copy.[20] In their emphasis on the appeal of the cavalry as a popular attraction, the charge films recalled the Wild West show's headlining act, the Rough Riders of the World. A film like *Roosevelt's Rough Riders* (1898) was particularly resonant in this regard. In its representation of the advancing cavalry, the film both anticipates and compensates for Roosevelt's mythic "charge" up San Juan Hill, providing a thrilling image of the Rough Riders in motion that, due to fighting conditions and technological limitations, the war in Cuba could not itself provide.[21]

By combining popular melodramatic scenarios of war with an aggressive, direct mode of address, the battle reenactments and charge films intensify the impact of both, aligning the kinesthetic thrills of the new medium of film with morally endowed structures of identification and feeling. The charge films, for instance, drew their force from the melodramatic discourse of imperialism, in

which a maidenly Cuba, subject to the rapacious appetites of a decadent and lecherous Spain, awaited rescue by the heroic American cavalryman. Their power to move contemporary audiences relied upon this context. While the early military actualities already circulate as part of a broader melodramatic discourse of war, however, the developments of narrative cinema would deepen both the thrilling appeals of motion and violence and the identification with the image of innocent victims under assault.

As the cinema continued to develop its formal resources, the familiar scenarios of Indian War could be elaborated and extended; the use of extreme long shots and wide-angle lenses alongside the convention of the close-up generated a spectacle at once more sweeping and more intimate than the Wild West attractions, in which a closer relationship between violent action and the imperiled space of home could be represented and exploited for its emotional impact. Through the innovations of cross-cutting and parallel action, shots of large-scale violence alternated with close-ups of individual protagonists in moments of empathetic suffering, drawing the agonizing pull of "too late" into increasingly intricate relation with the thrilling possibility of "in the nick of time." Though it already circulated within the melodramatic discourse of imperialism, for instance, the image of the cavalry charge could be made more affecting when cross-cut with a brutal Indian assault upon a white homestead, interweaving the thrills of onscreen action with the morally-implicated agitations of melodramatic suspense.

Among the popular Wild West attractions revisited through such techniques was the story of General Custer and the Last Stand, around which a number of productions were either explicitly or more impressionistically based.[22] As Scott Simmon has argued, it was the resonance of such films with the Wild West show that impressed contemporary audiences with their realism; citing iconic images like Remington's and basing their narratives directly on Buffalo Bill's popular Last Stand reenactment served paradoxically to mark the authenticity of these films' representations of war. But if these films represent Custer as, in Roberta Pearson's phrase, "the archetypal martyr on the alter of manifest destiny," it is important to ask why the alter of manifest destiny requires such a martyr, and why the figure thus offered up is not an Indian but a white man. The answer to this question returns us to the requirements of melodrama itself and its central function in determining moral legibility within American culture. Like the Plains War films more generally, the Last Stand films tend to end on a note of extended pathos, often encapsulated in a static long take at the graveside of the self-sacrificing hero. These tableau shots reproduce the conventions of nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama, in which the sensation scene concluded with a frozen tableau staged to emphasize the public or private recognition of virtue. The investment in producing such pathos-rich images relates to a specifically American kind of

insistence, "as if American national identity required a constant assertion of innocence." It is just such an assertion that compels the Last Stand films to sound the pathetic register of melodrama with particular force, within narrative contexts that seek to justify and, more importantly, to exonerate a national history of racial genocide.[23]

That the hidden or misunderstood virtue in these films is that of the white protagonists themselves—metonymic as it is of the guilt or innocence of the nation—is suggested more explicitly in D. W. Griffith's *The Massacre* (1912). This is a film which has been heralded for its moral and semantic fluidity, as the titular massacre makes a double reference to the initial attack by the US Cavalry on an unsuspecting Indian camp as well as to the subsequent and much more extensive attack by the Indians on a wagon train and the cavalry unit assigned to protect it (the events at the Little Bighorn shadowed and conditioned, however anachronistically, by those at Wounded Knee). In its representation of a seemingly unmotivated assault of whites against an Indian community, the film resonates with Griffith's earlier sentimental Indian pictures, in which Indian characters figure as the noble and often mistreated protagonists. This initial massacre sequence destabilizes any simple assignment of moral authority to the film's white protagonists, complicating the function of melodrama in this instance.

The morally suspect nature of the initial assault is established through medium shots of an Indian family in their teepee just before the massacre begins. The shots rhyme with a previous sequence featuring the film's white heroine and her husband and baby, thus underscoring the association of the Indian family with domesticity and innocence. The massacre sequence itself recycles formal conventions generally reserved for the representation of white massacre by Indians, as shots of the approaching cavalry are intercut with interior shots of domestic space; and high angle shots of the assault, and of the Indians fleeing their attackers, are intercut with individualized moments of suffering and death.

Ultimately though, the project of the film in taking on the burden of bad conscience is to reassert, rather than to qualify, the moral status of the white protagonists as victims; it is their lives that the film details from the beginning, and—the briefly intercut presence of the Indian family notwithstanding—it is they who continue to provide the individual dimension and scale through which the spectacles of large-scale action and violence are interpreted and experienced. In comparison to the initial attack's three minutes of screen time, the second attack sequence comprises nearly half of the film and articulates the anguish of its victims far more fully, detailing the virtues of the nascent white community and the heroic sacrifices which their prolonged "last stand" entails. Though citing the history of white violence against the Indians serves to contextualize the Indians' subsequent attack on the white wagon train, it is

nonetheless the pathetic representation of the whites under assault in which the film overwhelmingly invests itself.

The representation of large-scale battle alongside the intimate image of individual suffering would form the core of Griffith's famous 1915 epic, the Civil War film *Birth of a Nation,* in which his concern with the redemptive power of war would reach its zenith. And if, as Linda Williams has argued, the "fundamental impact of *Birth* is as a melodramatic spectacle eliciting an affective response of sympathy" for its racist heroes, then the broader history of war representation is key to this function. Noting the ubiquity and popularity of "horse opera" sequences in which "the old US Cavalry would gallop to the rescue," Griffith mused: "Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one poor little Nell of the Plains this would be a ride to save a nation."

Thus, Griffith recasts the familiar "Attack on the Settler's Cabin" with a band of marauding Blacks in the role of the Indians, while the "settler" whites maintain their conventional status as innocents under assault. The film's famous race to the rescue sequence cross-cuts between thrilling shots of the Klansman's ride and pathetic images of white innocents under assault (Elsie Stoneman fending off the leering Silas Lynch, the besieged national family of united Southern and Northerners gathered together in the cabin). The sequence underscores the melodramatic foundations of cinematic action by revealing how identifying with the position of those under assault can authorize and intensify spectator pleasure in the representation of violence.

If the "whitewashing" of the screen as the Klansmen sweep across it appears here as "a natural process of heroic rescue," however, the process of naturalization itself cannot be considered outside of the popular and cinematic history of the image of the charge.[24] The familiar conventions through which Griffith shapes the assault sequence cue the audience to this broader frame of reference and the subtext of the cavalry charge intensifies identification with the Klansmen's ride as one of national relevance. As Amy Kaplan has noted, "views of the climactic ride of the Klan echo on a grander scale films made of the Rough Riders on their way to rescue Cuba"—images which (as Kaplan also notes) themselves refer back to the popular attractions of the Wild West show.[25] The power of the film to compel conviction rests not just with Griffith's sophisticated artistry with the form but in the ideological and visual history of attack and rescue sequences and the melodramatic imagination of war they encode. If Griffith's reliance on the sensational appeals of the charge suggests the enduring legacy of the Wild West and the early military actualities, however, it also gestures ahead in powerful ways, as *Birth* itself would become one of the most lasting and influential representations of war in American culture.

The melodramatic representation of war would continue to influence American cinema across the twentieth century, in a World War I film like Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918); in World War II and Korean War pictures like *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) or *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1954), which participated in the broader cycle of family melodramas of the Cold War era; and—perhaps most relevant for this discussion—in the spectacular appeals of the Vietnam-themed Rambo films of the 1980s. The introduction of the figure of the Vietnam veteran in 1980s action cinema provides a context for the intensification of both the sensational thrills of onscreen action and the identification with victimization which both authorizes and qualifies such thrills. The figure of the vet represents a reallocation of guilt and innocence in the wake of Vietnam, encouraging allegiance to an image of white masculine aggression while struggling to solve—as Linda Williams has so aptly noted—"the overwhelming moral burden of having been the 'bad guys' in a lost war." The moral burden of having been the "bad guys," however, is a dilemma that has long served to animate the melodramatic representation of war in American culture, as the discussion of earlier representations of the Indians Wars suggests.[26]

As part of the updating of this project, the Rambo films return time and again to the spectacle of the hero's bodily suffering and abuse; and as the franchise develops across the 1980s, these spectacles of suffering become increasingly ornate and extended, animating ever more effusive sequences of sensational, explosive violence. The effort that the Rambo films make to maintain the innocence of their hero in the face of his escalating violence works to contain the larger sense of Rambo's guilt and complicity—a complicity toward which the films at the same time gesture. This instability is suggested in *First Blood* (1982) in the vacillation between the assertion of Rambo's essential innocence—maintained through the emphasis on his suffering as well as in his desperate, repeated insistence that he "didn't *do* anything"—and the acknowledgment that it is precisely what Rambo *did* do in Vietnam that animates his present anguish—an acknowledgment voiced by Rambo's old commander, who highlights more than once the genocidal impulse that underscored Rambo's official mission in Vietnam.

More spectacularly in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), complicity is inscribed within the image track as a kind of return of the repressed, as Rambo's return to Vietnam to rescue a groups of POWs allows for the reiteration of images of the war itself, including a rather astonishing sequence featuring Rambo's spectacular destruction of a village whose inhabitants (including women, children, and a crying baby on the soundtrack) the film has previously made a point to highlight. Despite such images, or indeed through them, it is the project of *Rambo* to move away from any explicit acknowledgment of the moral instability of Rambo's violence in order to reclaim this violence as unambiguously heroic. Even as *Rambo* works to reinscribe the prob-

lematic visual signifier of Vietnam within a narrative of moral and masculine righteousness, however, the persistence with which the film returns to the tortured image of Rambo's body—the public image of his suffering, in the terms Williams has laid out—belies its own security in the moral authority of his violence.

The melodramatic framing of war extends into our own time, and to track its persistence into the more recent past, we might usefully turn to the rhetoric surrounding the so-called war on terror. In considering the ways melodrama works to move its audience, Ben Singer has stressed the significance of the visceral thrills of action as they operate alongside the "agitation of observing extreme moral injustice." It is through this kind of interweaving that film and television images of the war on terror have been shaped, offering spectacles of violence and destruction within overarching narratives of righteous injury.[27]

The ease with which such representations took hold after 9/11 speaks to the longer history of melodrama and American war representation which I have been tracing. To appreciate the kind of shorthand provided by George W. Bush in his promise to get Osama Bin Laden "dead or alive," for instance, it is necessary to turn to the melodramatic staging of the Indian Wars, in which the promise of violence is always wed to the assertion of a virtuous victimhood redeemed through decisive retributive action. That Bush's comment was widely understood to signal both the moral authority and the inexorable impact of American violence is a testament to how deeply threaded are the affective strands of melodrama in the fabric of the American national imaginary; that this unfolding appears an almost inevitable articulation of the American experience of war is evidence of the prominence and persistence of the cultural casting of war in melodramatic terms.

The rhetoric of commemoration surrounding the attacks of 9/11 resonates with both the pathos and the violence of popular cultural representations of war—representations which have themselves functioned as commemorative gestures around which an imagined national community may take shape. In a Presidential Proclamation marking the first observance of Patriot Day in 2002, for instance, Bush assured the nation that we would not forget the events of the morning of September 11, 2001, and would "always remember our collective obligation to ensure that justice is done." He went on: "Inspired by the heroic sacrifices of our firefighters, rescue and law enforcement personnel, military service members, and other citizens, our Nation found unity, focus, and strength. We found healing in the national outpouring of compassion for those lost . . . From the tragedy of September 11th emerged a stronger Nation, renewed by a spirit of national pride and a true love of country." In September 2003, marking the second observance of Patriot Day, Bush proclaimed that in the events and aftermath of the September 11 attacks, "we saw the greatness of America in the bravery of victims," and promised that we in America "will continue to bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to them." In the

easy conflation of victimization with virtue and the quick movement from victimization to the promise of violence, Bush's comments here speak to the convention of melodramatic representations of conflict in American culture and politics.[28]

By attending to these comments, we can begin to apprehend how the political as well as the popular rhetoric of war continues to rehearse and repurpose the narrative conventions and affective logics of melodrama. For what Bush's comments on the occasion of Patriot Day serve to underscore is how often in the United States a sense of national identity and pride have derived from a sense of injury and loss. The nation is unified, in Bush's statement, through the shared experience of suffering and compassion, and a sense of national belonging is consolidated through an identification with the position of the victim and with what Bush designates as the greatness adhering to that position. The insistence upon remembrance and the oft repeated refrain that "we will not forget" resonate with past appeals—the call to "Remember the Alamo," to "Remember the *Maine*," and, of course, to "Remember Pearl Harbor."

In such contexts to "not forget" is to strike a defiant pose, as the commemorative gesture is inextricable from the promise and the threat of violence. A commitment to violence thus emerges as a form of "remembrance," in Bush's proclamation manifesting as our "collective obligation to ensure that justice is done." In order to understand the efficacy with which this kind of framework took hold in the early days and months following the attacks of 9/11, we must attend to the history of melodrama and its place within American popular culture. For it is there that the conjunction of virtuous victimization and righteous retribution has been fully conventionalized, the pleasures of identifying with both victimhood and violent agency naturalized as a mainstay of the popular representation of war.

Notes

1. For particularly influential accounts, see Linda Williams, including, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres,* ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and *Playing the Race Card* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Christine Gledhill, including, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is,* ed. Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), "Signs of Melodrama," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire,* ed. Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), and "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies,* ed. Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000); and Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

2. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 14–15.

3. David Mayer, "Theater, Melodrama," *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema,* ed. Richard Abel (London: Routledge, 2005), 912.

4. Daniel Gerould, ed., *American Melodrama* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1983), 7.

5. Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 50.

6. Tom Gunning, "The Horror of Opacity," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen,* ed. Bratton, Cook, and Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), 51–52.

7. Quoted in Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 63, 67, 77.

8. Ken Burns's PBS documentary *The West* notes the centrality of white victimization to a wide range of Wild West attractions, observing, "This is a show about conquest . . . yet everything the audience sees is Indians attacking whites . . . it's a celebration of conquest in which the conquerors are the victims . . . what is going on when you celebrate a conquest and you only see yourself being victimized?" Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* 43–44.

9. Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 80–81.

10. The impulse to attribute an element of temporal suspense to these images is nonetheless strong, as evidenced in a present-day description of Schreyvogel's *Downing the Nigh Leader* (1907), in which the representation of a stagecoach attack is described in patently melodramatic terms as, "the Indian has driven his lance into the falling left horse. . . . The other horses will be down in a moment, the stagecoach will crash to a halt, and all will be at the mercy of the attacking Indians. They haven't a chance." Peggy and Harold Samuels, et al., *Techniques of the Artists of the American West* (Secaucus, NJ: The Wellfleet Press), 179.

11. Edward Buscombe discusses Remington's work in similar terms. As Buscombe suggests, the tendency toward narrativization in western paintings of this period relates in part to their contemporary journalistic function. "Painting the Legend," *Cinema Journal,* 23 (1984): 17.

12. Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *Frederic Remington and the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 104–126.

13. See Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity,* 149–188.

14. Steve Neale, "Melo Talk," *The Velvet Light Trap,* 32 (1993): 66–89.

15. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 4. For a discussion of early exhibition practices, see for example Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990).

16. Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 190.

17. *Advance of the Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (Edison, 1899).

18. Cited in Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900* (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 500.

19. Amy Kaplan and Kristin Whissel have both incisively analyzed the appeals of the image of imperial mobility in relation to ideologies of gender, race, and nation. See Kaplan, "Romancing the Empire," *American Literary History,* 2 (1990): 658–90; and Whissel, "The Gender of Empire," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema,* ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

20. Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures,* 589. The thrilling sense of collision that made contemporary audiences cringe in their seats is represented with particular force in this film, as a cut covers over a moment of actual impact between one rider's leg and the camera itself—a moment which attests visually to the speed, force, and proximity of the charging horses.

21. Like the other cavalry units, the Rough Riders were dismounted at the outset of the war, though the image of the Rough Riders as a mounted cavalry persisted in the popular imagination, essential as it was to their melodramatic casting. *Roosevelt's Rough Riders* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1898).

22. Roberta Pearson notes at least nine such films produced between the years 1909 and 1926. Pearson, "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face?," in *The Birth of Whiteness,* ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 273–99.

23. Quoted in Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 52, 81.

24. Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* 128.

25. As Kaplan notes, the representation of warfare in *Birth* also resonates with the early military actualities, a point which further suggests the influence of these films. Kaplan, "The Birth of an Empire," 1074.

26. Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 61.

27. Singer, 40.

28. George W. Bush, Proclamation, "Patriot Day 2002," September 4, 2002, and Proclamation, "Patriot Day, 2003," September 4, 2003.